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# Ownership of Knowledge

## Beyond Intellectual Property

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## **OBJECTS, KNOWLEDGE, AND MUSEUMS: REFLECTIONS ON THE ENDANGERED MATERIAL KNOWLEDGE PROGRAMME**

Lissant Bolton

In 2018 the British Museum launched a grant program to support ethnographic research, the Endangered Material Knowledge Programme.<sup>1</sup> In this chapter I use this program as a point of entry into questions around knowledge and ownership that are increasingly crucial for ethnographic museums. I explore the politics around museum anthropology collections as they impact on material anthropology—that is, on the documentation and description of knowledge associated with objects. These politics relate to ideas about the ownership and deployment of knowledge—in other words, to epistemology. I explore these ideas with specific reference to Vanuatu, where much of my own research has been focused. In doing so, I pay attention to what I consider to be the significant use of ignorance and forgetting in these arenas.

The Endangered Material Knowledge Programme (EMKP) has been established to enable the documentation of knowledge associated with objects and the built environment, and to make it available through an open-access digital repository. The program is supported by a private charitable foundation, the Arcadia Fund (described below). By focusing on objects, by including collected objects in its remit, and by being based in a museum, EMKP invokes some current issues concerning museums, especially those that hold ethnographic collections. These issues are to do with the kinds of moral work that museums are often now required to do on behalf of wider society. By “moral work,” I mean the work of reparation and restitution for past wrongs, especially wrongs committed in the colonial era. EMKP also draws attention to aspects of how people understand and control knowledge in and around museums. The program provides a lens through which to consider some of the questions of knowledge and ownership faced by anthropology museums today.

In recent decades, museum anthropology has been caught up in the politics of colonialism and postcolonialism. This politics has been made particularly public in France in recent years. In November 2017, President Emmanuel Macron gave a speech at the

University of Ouagadougou in Burkina Faso, in which he said that he could not accept that a large part of cultural heritage from several African countries is in France, commenting further that African heritage should not be just in European private collections and museums but also in Dakar, in Lagos, and in Cotonou. Later, the Élysée tweeted: “African heritage can no longer be the prisoner of European museums.”<sup>2</sup> Macron followed up that speech in March 2018 by appointing two people to make plans to repatriate African artifacts held in French museums: the Senegalese writer and economist Felwine Sarr and the French historian of art Bénédicte Savoy. Savoy was already leading a major research project on issues of provenance and on how the meanings of objects change when they are being transferred into museums often far away,<sup>3</sup> and she had made the politics that can be invested in museum collections very explicit. As was reported in an article in the UK *Art Newspaper*, she told the German newspaper *Der Tagesspiegel*, “I want to know how much blood is dripping from each artwork.”<sup>4</sup> The Sarr and Savoy report, presented in November 2018, has by 2022 resulted in a handful of objects being returned to Africa from France.

In the agreement with the British Museum to establish EMKP, Arcadia stipulated that the cultural knowledge the program would record must be endangered and should be anchored by the made world, by objects and the built environment. In fact, there are few forms of knowledge that are not linked to the material world in one way or another. Studying knowledge around objects does not mean just considering how things are made and used, but also addressing nearly every aspect of social life. The study of objects can focus on knowledge of the properties of materials, and documenting materials can lead to recording knowledge about landscape, plants, animals, and weather. Studying craftsmanship and skill leads to a focus on how skills are transmitted from person to person and through different modes of communication. Learning how objects are made and used leads to a consideration of the habitual practices of daily life, and equally of rituals and other special occasions. Researching objects can also lead to considerations of language, of concepts of design and aesthetics, and so on. Investigating the built environment involves a similar range of areas of enquiry. It is not just a matter of knowledge of materials and construction techniques, but also of knowledge of and adaptation to the environment; of forms of decoration and their significance; of the management of light and darkness; of the different types of buildings people make and how they use them; of how space is divided within and between buildings, and what that says about both social organization and the creation and use of outside spaces such as plazas. All of these areas touch on issues of ownership—not only of objects, but also always of the knowledge that surrounds them.

Anthropology, as a discipline, operates on the principle that the knowledge societies hold, and the way they manage and organize that knowledge, is valuable and should be both documented and analytically described. As Thomas Kirsch and Roy Dilley sum it up, “Cultural and social anthropology has long been driven by an encyclopaedic desire to identify, document, classify and archive to the greatest possible extent what was previously unknown.”<sup>5</sup> Indeed, to quote Jonathan Mair et al., “knowledge is the value that justifies all aspects of academic activity, whether it is desired as a means of promoting other goods (health, happiness, wealth, well-being) or as an end in itself.”<sup>6</sup> This approach characterizes knowledge as open and free to access; it also constitutes ignorance—not knowing—as a negative. The ignorance that comes from *forgetting* is a particularly bad thing, especially as discussed in the context of cultural loss.<sup>7</sup>

Museum anthropology—which focuses on the knowledge that objects reveal and embody—has long been part of that academic project. Anthropology museums collect research and display objects as a way to illuminate the knowledge and practice of the different societies they represent. Objects stand in relation to knowledge in interesting ways because although people can invest new meanings in an object, at the same time, objects embody knowledge in their material form. That knowledge is muted when someone who cannot recognize the materials or appreciate the skills involved views the object, but it is present nonetheless. Of course, what can only be imagined by looking at an object is the nature of the social context around the specific object as it was used—in all the different contexts in which it was used.

## DOCUMENTING OBJECTS

Museums are thus based on the principle that objects illustrate knowledge and practice; that knowledge can be gained by looking at an object itself, and knowledge obtained elsewhere can be illuminated and expanded by studying objects. Before the twentieth century, the knowledge that objects illustrate and illuminate was assumed to be quite straightforward. Objects represented a place or a time, and the societies that produced them. Each object’s very materiality formed a link to that place and time because the object had been physically there, then. Especially before the advent of photography and film, museums provided visitors with an insight into those other places and other times by collecting and displaying objects from them. Most early collections, such as those made during Captain Cook’s explorations of the Pacific (1768–1780), were barely documented at all. The individual object—a club, headdress, or feather cloak—was, in its strangeness and distinctiveness, seen to be sufficient in itself to represent the

societies that produced it. It is perhaps partly for this reason that the development of anthropology as a discipline led for many decades to the denigration of museums and material culture as being a less important branch of research. As soon as it was recognized how much there was to be known about those societies, the characterization of objects as emblems may have seemed to trivialize the new project of anthropology.

In particular, the development of the discipline of fieldwork quickly demonstrated the limits to what can be learned by looking at an object in a museum without any reference to the context that produced it. As Malinowski observed in 1922:

A canoe is an item of material culture, and as such it can be described, photographed and even bodily transported into a museum. But . . . the ethnographic reality of the canoe would not be brought much nearer to a student at home, even by placing a perfect specimen right before him. . . . [Even] the study of . . . its ownership, accounts of who sails in it, and how it is done; information regarding the ceremonies and customs of its construction . . . [do] not touch the most vital reality of a native canoe. . . . [For the sailors] it is . . . a living thing, possessing its own individuality.<sup>8</sup>

I do not need to rehearse here the long history of anthropology's theoretical dalliance with objects, which others have discussed at length. A number of authors have sought to understand how meaning and significance is attached to objects, and how people deploy that meaning in social contexts. Much of this discussion has been focused on the idea of objects as art.<sup>9</sup> In recent decades there has been the recognition that, as Pierre Lemonnier puts it, "the anthropology of objects and techniques allows us to understand aspects of social organisations, cultures, and systems of thought that would be impossible to grasp without studying the most material dimensions of human action."<sup>10</sup> And as Lemonnier also makes clear, it is not only special objects, such as those defined as art, to which people attach meaning, but also ordinary objects—"mundane objects," in Lemonnier's phrasing—such as a garden fence or an eel trap.<sup>11</sup>

If field anthropologists now appreciate the importance of attending to material objects, the recognition of quite how significant objects can be poses challenges for earlier collections. What is now the significance or relevance of an object collected in 1770 or 1860 or even 1920 that is provided with only a geographical provenance or date of collection in museum records? More and more anthropology museums have responded to their ignorance about collections by instituting and developing field research programs that document objects by taking photographs back to the place where those objects were collected or by bringing people from that place to the museum and asking people today what they know about that kind of object. The Endangered Material Knowledge Programme includes a focus on documenting collected objects in this way.

The objective of documenting material knowledge is thus one shared by both Arcadia and the British Museum. EMKP has been set up to document knowledge around objects where there is no other resource available to do so (so, in mostly small-scale societies and often in the global south). Arcadia is a personal charitable fund belonging to Lisbet Rausing and her husband Peter Baldwin; much of their work is achieved through supporting institutions to operate grant programs and related digital repositories. Arcadia approached the British Museum some years ago, seeking to set up a grant program that would document endangered cultural knowledge in digital formats. Arcadia's approach to EMKP, of funding a grant program administered by another institution, is a characteristic mode of operation. For example, they support the Endangered Languages Documentation Programme first set up at the School of African and Oriental Studies, now at the Berlin Brandenburgische Akademie der Wissenschaften, and the Endangered Archives Programme managed by the British Library, both of which award and manage grants for specific documentation projects, and make the results available in online digital repositories.

Rausing and Baldwin set out their objectives for Arcadia in a statement on the fund's website:

Arcadia supports work to preserve endangered cultural heritage, protect endangered ecosystems, and promote access to knowledge. Our aim is to defend the complexity of human culture and the natural world, so that coming generations can build a vibrant, resilient and green future.<sup>12</sup>

Their statement expresses an overall project similar to academic research, and specifically to anthropology's objective of documenting and describing other people's knowledge and practice. However, Arcadia's objective is not to support anthropology itself, in the sense that anthropology is the discipline in which ethnographic data—field data—is analyzed and described. Rather, as their website makes clear, they are interested in establishing a way of recording ethnographic data as a form of knowledge. Of course, it is not possible to organize and store ethnographic information without analytical thinking, but the analysis is not their aim. In this sense, the Endangered Languages Documentation Programme, which they founded in 2002, provides an explanatory model for what Arcadia is looking for in EMKP. The Endangered Languages Documentation Programme records language through the established analytical and descriptive categories of vocabulary and grammar.

Arcadia is explicitly unwilling to fund revival projects—bringing knowledge and practice back into currency. Externally driven revival projects often have an accidentally transformative effect; they sometimes create a hybrid form compelled by the

outside rationale for revival. Thus, performance to outsiders such as tourists, or the sale of objects as art or souvenirs, turns locally specific knowledge and practice into something different from what it previously was. Documentation, however, may revive interest within the community, and local decisions may bring about the restoration and sometimes the transformation of knowledge and practice, for local purposes.

Arcadia is deeply committed to making knowledge available through accessible digital archiving, and to their conception of knowledge as being freely accessible and not owned. They value open access as a means to making such knowledge available to everyone, not least the communities whose heritage it is. Rausing and Baldwin have declared that

access to the materials must be a crucial part of any effort to safeguard the knowledge and memory they contain. Minorities, exiles, the displaced and various first nations who have often been denied access to their own heritage as a result struggle to maintain their cultural identity. Who could lay claim to rescuing their heritage if we digitise it without making it accessible to them? . . . Digitisation may help to preserve the archives, but without open access the impact of these efforts will be limited.<sup>13</sup>

The underlying motivation for all Arcadia funding programs is thus the concept of endangerment. The sense of things being lost arises from the characterization of knowledge not as something that is endlessly transmuted, modified, and remade, but as something specific which, if changed, is thus also in part forgotten and lost. Anthropology often focuses on the knowledge that exists in the present moment. But it is true that much local knowledge and practice is actually being forgotten in the world today. I am personally aware of this in relation to my own work in the Republic of Vanuatu.

### **ENDANGERMENT, IGNORANCE, AND SECRECY**

The anchor of my involvement in Vanuatu has been my participation in supporting the Women Fieldworkers Program at the Vanuatu Cultural Centre for the last thirty years. Vanuatu is a small nation in the western Pacific, comprising an archipelago of over eighty islands that spread over more than a thousand kilometers from north to south. The population (300,019 in 2020)<sup>14</sup> speaks more than 130 indigenous languages as well as the languages of colonialism (English and French) and a lingua franca called Bislama. The fieldworker program is designed to address and support this immense cultural diversity. It aims to train and support voluntary ni-Vanuatu<sup>15</sup> researchers working in their own villages and districts to document and revive local knowledge and practice. A group of male fieldworkers was set up in 1989. I have chaired the annual women fieldworkers' workshops since the group was founded in 1984 and have participated in several documentation and revival projects set up by fieldworkers in different parts of

the Vanuatu archipelago. My own career has thus involved supporting people in Vanuatu who are seeking to document and revive their own knowledge. In that program, we have found again and again that documentation leads to an increased local interest in both knowledge and practice, and sometimes to reviving old traditions. Indeed, this has happened even when revival was not an intended outcome.

Working with this program for so long, I am also aware of the extent to which local knowledge and practice in Vanuatu is rapidly changing. Vanuatu has experienced significant social change since independence in 1980, brought about by factors including population growth and the growth of urban centers, education for employment, the increasing influence of the media (especially social media), new churches, and labor migration to New Zealand and Australia.

Inevitably, these changes have wrought an alteration in epistemology. As has often been demonstrated, and as discussed below, in Vanuatu both knowledge and practice were traditionally deeply tied to place.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, even now a ni-Vanuatu person's primary identification is based neither on kin ties nor on language, but on the place that person comes from, expressed in the Bislama term *manples*. This sees knowledge as being derived from living constantly in a place, knowing its character and history, absorbing the place into oneself by eating food grown on it. Knowledge also comes from an awareness of the place itself embodied in other mostly invisible beings—like people, but not people—who also inhabit the landscape.

As has been argued for different regions of Vanuatu, it is widely held there that knowledge is available—in the sense of being accessible and retrievable—in the landscape. For north Pentecost island, John Taylor has described a place known as *abanoi* (Raga language), a kind of “invisible parallel dimension layered across or threaded within the lived world of human experience,” understood to contain the “true and authentic knowledge of the ancestors.”<sup>17</sup> Writing about the southern island of Tanna, Joël Bonnemaïson observed that people there consider that they belong less to a social order than to a place, so much so that “if their social fabric were destroyed, the Tannese would lose none of their heritage—provided they kept the memory of their places.”<sup>18</sup> In fact, he argued, “in traditional thinking, cultural identity is merely the existential aspect of those places where men live today as their ancestors did from time immemorial.”<sup>19</sup> In the terms of these characterizations, someone coming from elsewhere can, by living in a place and eating food from it, become part of the place and absorb its knowledge. In this epistemology, knowledge cannot be forgotten or lost because it is always there, in that place.

Lamont Lindstrom, also writing about Tanna, coined the term *geographic oeuvre* to describe the way in which knowledge is so much linked to place that there are geographically based restrictions on who can speak about what.<sup>20</sup> He defines the contents of such



oeuvres as “text-like formulaic statements such as genealogical lists, stories, legends, songs, sets of local names for men, women, and pigs, maps of land plot boundaries, medical recipes, spells and magical technologies.”<sup>21</sup> Thus, it might be considered that the kind of knowledge that dwells in a place is not practical information (such as how to plant a yam) but, rather, cultural—with political, intellectual, and spiritual reference.

Education, employment, and long periods of residence in other places all detach people from the knowledge belonging to their place. As people’s links to their place change, so does their knowledge. As a result, many ni-Vanuatu no longer understand traditional knowledge as the existential aspect of place, but instead characterize it as deriving from a time—from the past. There is thus a profound transformation in epistemology happening, a transformation that could well be considered as endangering traditional knowledge in the sense of reducing complexity. You might say that the way people now move from their island to the town and sometimes to other places means that people are becoming ignorant of the knowledge that dwells in that place.

A number of further points about knowledge in Vanuatu are relevant for my discussion in this chapter. Commentators have described certain kinds of knowledge as being subject to a form of copyright. Copyrightable knowledge is generally what Lindstrom describes as the content of “geographic oeuvres”—that is, knowledge belonging not so much to practical matters as to the interests of social life.<sup>22</sup> Kirk Huffman characterizes copyrighted knowledge in north-central Vanuatu as “certain items of material culture, visual art, rituals, music, song, dance, myths and ideas.”<sup>23</sup> Although understood to belong to certain places, in north-central Vanuatu, such forms of knowledge could be, and are, traded from one group to another. Indeed, Huffman argues that some rituals were themselves “thought to have a power and spirit of their own that urges them to get up, move to other areas, to stay there for a while and then move on. . . . The ritual does not (necessarily) disappear from its place of origin, but expands itself spiritually—through the intermediary of men.”<sup>24</sup>

Secrets are disclosed to those who participate in some rituals. The major focus of social life in much of north and central Vanuatu was, at the time Europeans first arrived, a diverse range of status alteration systems, also known as “graded” or secret societies. In most places, men belonged to a central public graded society, and often also belonged to one or more allied secret societies.<sup>25</sup> In all of them, membership involved rising or moving through a series of grades or steps. In most cases, these societies focused on the exchange or killing of pigs. There were a related set of status-alteration societies for women throughout the whole region, sometimes related to pigs, but in other cases focusing on the production or presentation of plaited pandanus textiles. In both men’s and women’s systems, membership nearly always involved the eating of special and

restricted food, and in all of them, key moments of transformation occurred through something being performed, spoken, or revealed in such a way that only the participants experienced its full impact. To know about such a ritual is to have experienced participating in it; this knowledge is absorbed bodily as well as intellectually.

I have personally participated in two such status-alteration systems for women: observing a *huhuru* in the east of Ambae island in 1992, and participating as a grade-taker in a *lengwasa* on the island of Maewo in 1997. Both *huhuru* and *lengwasa* transform the status of the women who take a grade within them. In the *huhuru*, as for so many rituals in Melanesia, the key moment of revelation involves something other than the transmission of information—it involves seeing, experiencing, and eating something spiritually powerful and significant.<sup>26</sup> The rituals are affective rather than informative. In different ways, both involve transformative experiences that are to do with the presence of spiritual power, mediated by physical experiences. By taking part in these rituals, women obtain a new aspect to their identity, a new way in which they are distinguished from other people. The consequence of their new knowledge is ultimately to do with relationships.<sup>27</sup>

A number of recent publications have emphasized the socially constructive work of ignorance and secrecy.<sup>28</sup> Dilley and Kirsch observe that “ignorance is not simply the absence of, or a gap in, knowledge. Ignorance is a social fact . . . [that] has generative social effects, . . . is produced in specific socio-cultural contexts and [has] political consequences.”<sup>29</sup> Secrecy is the deployment of ignorance. Certainly, the secrets of both *lengwasa* and *huhuru* rituals facilitate contexts of emotional power that make distinctions between people. Taking part in those rituals creates enduring social differences between women based on their experiential knowledge of their participation, and those differences have permanent political significance. Both *lengwasa* and *huhuru* also make differences between women and men, but in a way that creates parallels between them, creating senior women in the same way as men’s status-alteration rituals create senior men.

At the same time, a key characteristic of knowledge in many parts of Vanuatu is the idea of it as something that can be acted on, made evident in habitual use or in special contexts. For women in Ambae, a major focus of their lives is making the complex suite of plaited pandanus textiles used in exchange, as clothing, and as furnishings. As well as the ordinary textiles, there is also a category of special textiles known as *singo* that are used in ritual contexts. *Singo* are used in *huhuru* and they are also very important to the Ambae men’s status-alteration society, *huqe*.

*Singo* are made using special distinctive techniques of plaiting and stencil dyeing. Only women who have formally obtained the right to perform those techniques by

paying someone to teach them can use that knowledge. Skilled weavers can work out how to perform those special techniques using their own observation and technical ability, but knowing does not confer a right to perform them. They can make *singo* only when they have earned the right to do so by ritual and payment.<sup>30</sup> Women who know, but do not have the right to act on that knowledge, practice a strategic ignorance. The Ambae women's *huhuru* rituals focus on the making of these special textiles. There are a number of different "grades" in *huhuru*, based on these textiles. Once a woman has performed one *huhuru* grade, she will pretty much know exactly what happens in the others. However, just knowing does not count as performing those other *huhuru*. They still have to be performed and experienced for them to have a transformative impact on that woman's identity.

As I have observed already, across Vanuatu, such rules around how knowledge is communicated and shared apply mostly to intellectual and social knowledge such as songs, myths, genealogies, and ritual practices. By contrast, as Lindstrom remarks about Tanna, technical agricultural and economic knowledge—for example, knowledge of soil types or the productive capacities of various garden sites—is shared widely between people.<sup>31</sup> Ni-Vanuatu have an extensive practical knowledge of this kind, and of plants of all types. This includes knowledge of the plants they grow in their gardens as well as plants that grow wild in the bush. It includes knowledge about everyday matters such as the properties of different kinds of trees for firewood—some burn hot, some give off unpleasant vapors, and so forth. Ni-Vanuatu also hold, as the ethnobotanist Annie Walter has demonstrated, significant knowledge about how to care for fruiting trees.<sup>32</sup>

In the last few years, however, agricultural production in Vanuatu has started falling.<sup>33</sup> A significant number of young people are no longer learning, or are not being taught, the detailed knowledge of agriculture and arboriculture that was held by their parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents. As one ni-Vanuatu woman remarked to me, tartly, these days some young people "don't even know which way up to plant a yam."<sup>34</sup> In other words, a new kind of ignorance is developing in the form of not knowing what was previously well known. Knowledge about growing things is becoming endangered, subject to not being transmitted and thus forgotten.

Ignorance thus takes a number of different forms. There is the ignorance that results from being excluded from knowledge because it is a secret. There is the strategic ignorance of knowing but being unable to act on that knowledge or to reveal it as something one knows. Then there is the ignorance that represents having forgotten something, never having learned it, or never bothering to learn it. In all these contexts, both knowledge and ignorance are almost always generated in, and sustained within, relationships between people.

## MUSEUMS AND MORAL ACTION

Questions of knowledge in relation to ethnographic collections are a key issue for museums today. Museums are a kind of technology—a very simple technology, or aggregate of technologies—that can be put to a number of different uses. At their most basic level, museums enable the collection, storage, and display of objects. The ways in which museum technologies are applied varies greatly along a number of scales—the kinds of objects displayed, the size and location of the museum, the budget at its disposal, and the messages it sets out to communicate. Museums can be used to convey not just information but also argument and ideology. The knowledge they hold and communicate can be structured in particular ways to tell different stories and make different arguments.

For ethnography collections, the way objects hold and anchor meanings has become increasingly important, as research into material culture has brought museum collections back into focus. This is partly because of changing anthropological perspectives, but it is also the result of political and social changes internationally. A key influence on the significance of ethnographic collections has been the impact of decolonization, globally.

In the postcolonial era, from the late 1970s, and especially from the 1990s, partly as a result of improving global communications, more and more small-scale communities have begun to connect with museums. In fact, museums have often become a kind of front line for communities, both for those seeking to engage with the ethnographic documentation of their knowledge and practice and for those seeking to pursue issues around their identity and autonomy. Several now-famous exhibitions and publications—for example, the 1984 Te Maori exhibition in New York,<sup>35</sup> or James Clifford's much-cited 1997 essay, "Museums as Contact Zones"<sup>36</sup>—have introduced the idea that the communities from whose predecessors the objects were collected have an investment in those collections and a series of rights in relation to them. Terms such as *traditional owners* and *source community* have gained significant influence inside the museum anthropology profession. These terms have particular importance for indigenous communities in settler states who have lost control of their land, and whose identity is thus fragily constituted by connections they formerly had to their places. In these contexts, museum collections provide a second ground for identity formation. Through them, a community can become—in some sense—the people of the objects, as well as, or even rather than, the people of the place.

A key text edited by Laura Peers and Alison Brown sets out some of the thinking behind this movement. Peers and Brown observe:

During the great age of museum collecting which began in the mid-nineteenth century, . . . [the relationship between museums and source communities] was a one-way relationship: objects

and information about them went from peoples all over the world into museums, which then consolidated knowledge as the basis of curatorial and institutional authority. . . . Within this context, ethnographic collections, in particular, were built up on the premise that the peoples whose material heritage was being collected were dying out, and that the remnants of their cultures should be preserved for future generations. . . . In recent years, however, the nature of these relationships has shifted to become a much more two-way process, with information about historic artefacts now being returned to source communities, and with community members working with museums to record their perspectives on the continuing meanings of those artefacts.<sup>37</sup>

This kind of reevaluation has rarely arisen around anthropological research findings. With some exceptions, communities have not sought access to the field notes made by anthropologists who have worked with them. Objects, unlike texts, have a particular significance and power for source communities. They provide a very immediate connection to the past generations who made them, offer insight into past skills and knowledge of material resources, provide evidence enabling historical reconstructions, and represent cultural identity.<sup>38</sup> Furthermore, objects provide opportunities for emotional engagement, ceremony, speeches, and songs. Information by itself, written down in field notes or even published in ethnographies, does not make such a direct link to past generations.

A lot of the thinking and a lot of the activity around relationships between museums and source communities has developed in postcolonial settler states, such as Australia, New Zealand, Canada, and the United States, where the museums and communities are physically within reach of each other, and where the state and some of its citizens see museums as offering a way to negotiate moral issues around colonial injustices. Strategies of engagement, consultation, reconciliation, and restitution have been developed around collections and exhibitions. In some cases, museums have ceded ownership of certain categories of objects to communities by returning them or by establishing principles of joint ownership. In most museums in these countries, the perspectives of communities are regularly taken into account when decisions about which items can be put on display and what can be said about those objects are made. In this context, “community” is a locally defined category and can refer to a language group, tribe, or coresident group, represented either formally or informally by a member or members of that group.

In settler states, museums have become an important context in which indigenous communities distinguish themselves from the society that surrounds them and affirm their distinctive identity, making use of the collections in which they have a stake as traditional owners or custodians. The connections people make to collections can be very important for them in constituting their own identity, building their sense of connection to their elders and predecessors.

For settler states, museums are often an equally useful context in which to negotiate the historical maltreatment of indigenous peoples, the loss of land and autonomy. In Australia, for example, it is a fairly widespread popular opinion, albeit an inaccurate one, that all the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander collections in museums were stolen and should be returned—as their land was stolen and is not being returned. I am not suggesting that museums are exempt from the colonial project and its injustices, but rather that it has become common to make museums carry a significant load of the guilt and assume responsibility for a significant proportion of the reparation for the iniquities of colonialism. Museums have become a venue for a kind of moral action; they are being asked to acknowledge past wrongs, to make recompense or at least to demonstrate recognition of what has previously been denied. This is part of what the British historian Sharon Macdonald has described as “the international difficult histories boom.”<sup>39</sup> Bain Attwood, writing about the National Museum of Australia, argues that the international difficult histories boom has been especially marked in settler societies.<sup>40</sup>

Attwood asserts that museums have an important role to play in this because the difficult histories movement places a premium on sentimental feeling. Citing Sharon Macdonald, he observes that museum exhibitions enable affective encounters that “are perceived by many as more authentic than narratives presented in the form of disembodied words.”<sup>41</sup> In other words, Attwood does not identify the existence of museum collections in and of themselves, but rather the museological technology of affective communication through exhibitions utilizing objects, as a crucial element of a nation’s moral work of reparation. The affective communication he is speaking about here is not dissimilar to that which occurs in rituals such as *huhuru* or *lengwasa*, where communication occurs in the context of an immersive experience.

Three issues, in particular, have stood out in community engagement with museums over the last several decades. The first is the issue of human remains—in just about every settler state context, indigenous communities have actively sought for the human remains kept in museum collections to be given back to them. Having dealt with these issues nationally, there has also been a move to secure the return of human remains that are held internationally. In these cases, repatriation claims have generally been made with the support of the relevant national governments. Australia and New Zealand, for example, both have nationally funded bodies that are charged with the responsibility of negotiating the return of human remains held in collections overseas. These claims are almost always focused on remains held in public collections.

The second issue relates to secret/sacred or restricted objects. Many source communities, again, especially in settler states such as Australia and Canada, have asked museums to restrict public access to certain categories of objects in their collections.

These are objects that only certain people within their communities are permitted to see—usually only senior men. The rationale for such requests and exclusions is that within the source communities' framework of knowledge and practice, certain objects are restricted and should not be seen by anyone except for specific categories of people within those societies. In negotiations with museums, communities have often been able to assert their identity and their connection to collections by reimposing secrecy rules on the objects. In some cases, there have also been sustained campaigns for the return of sacred objects from national museums. Claims for restricted objects held internationally have not received similar levels of governmental support and are much less frequently given priority in national policies. This is a much more complicated issue, as some communities do not want these sacred objects returned.

The third issue is the matter of access to collections overall. Members of source communities take pleasure and interest in visiting collections and often ask for the opportunity to perform small ceremonies of respect to the objects—speaking to them, praying or singing in their presence, making offerings, and sometimes holding ceremonies to address spiritual presences attached to the objects, such as ancestral spirits. Often very deeply felt, these ceremonies also act as an assertion of connection to the objects and an affirmation of identity for the community members. The rituals enable the participants to confirm their identity in contrast to curatorial staff and society at large, in a similar way that participating in a *huhuru* or a *lengwasa* ritual enables women to distinguish themselves in relationship to others. Museum collections thus become a useful context for a form of ritually effected self-definition for communities. Indeed, this is a new use for the objects in question, enabling people to modify or enhance their identity in relation to collections in the same way that women on Ambae modify and enhance their identity by performing the *huhuru* rituals in relation to *singo*—those special plaited pandanus textiles.

Both museums and communities have sought to establish relationships in which these issues can be negotiated. Curators find themselves acting personally, while officially representing not just the museum but also the nation-state. Significantly, this has transformed the locus of knowledge in relation to those collections. In the past, the curator was considered to be the expert who knew the most about a collection, but now curators often practice a strategic ignorance in relation to objects, deferring to the knowledge of community members. This can be a genuine ignorance, of course, but there can also be instances where a curator does not contradict the assertion of a community member, even if the curator holds different information about an object. In other cases, it is possible for both to share the knowledge they have, joining it together.

As practices of community engagement have become established and gained traction in ethnographic museum practice, it has also become common for museums to consult communities about the ways in which their culture is represented in displays. Again, this is especially the case in settler states but also increasingly a practice of museums internationally.

All of these developments, including President Macron's initiative, are operating within a context of moralized behavior. Museums are no longer discussed as if they were morally neutral, but rather are regarded and treated as actors that are subject to moral analysis and criticism. Thus, Annie Coombes and Ruth Phillips, introducing a major edited collection on museum transformations, trenchantly criticize the British Museum's Africa Gallery for political inconsistency, for remaining silent about how the museum acquired objects that are now the subject of repatriation claims, and for other "significant omissions."<sup>42</sup> In other words, they are criticizing the museum for failing to do the moral work that they consider museums should do. Bénédicte Savoy adopts a similar moral and political perspective when she asks how much blood is dripping from each artwork.

### DIFFERENT ATTITUDES TO COLLECTIONS

As Paul Basu observes, many of the case studies used to discuss the relations between museums and source communities have been drawn from contexts where there is a high degree of museum awareness.<sup>43</sup> Basu, introducing his Sierra Leone collection digitization project, characterizes Sierra Leone as a place where "indigenous activism has not politicized cultural heritage . . . and where there is little awareness of the cultural materials dispersed in museum collections throughout the world or the possible connections contemporary communities may have with them."<sup>44</sup> He argues that it is not only the case that Sierra Leone is a place where communities are not preoccupied with museum collections. Sierra Leone is also a place where the concept of source community is not "the most adequate or appropriate" way to conceptualize relationships with dispersed collections, given that in West Africa "ethnic identities and territorial boundaries are . . . highly fluid, situational and in a constant process of renegotiation and change."<sup>45</sup> As Basu's discussion makes clear, not everybody from communities whose objects have been collected is seeking a specific relationship with those collected objects.

In fact, outside of settler states, source communities have demonstrated a wide variety of attitudes to collections. To cite another example, in the early 1980s the Australian Museum in Sydney undertook a collaborative project with members of the Abelam community from Apangai village, north of the Sepik River in Papua New Guinea,



mediated by the anthropologist Diane Losche. Losche made a field collection in the Abelam region, and then two senior men from Apangai, Nera and Narikowi, visited Sydney for some weeks in 1982 and helped to build an Abelam men's cult house—a *haus tambaran*—in a large gallery in the Australian Museum. The whole gallery was about the Abelam, and the *haus tambaran* was its main feature. Inside the house, Nera and Narikowi installed a display similar to what would be on display inside a *haus tambaran* to male initiates. Losche reported that when she discussed this project with the Abelam, they said they were happy for women and uninitiated men in Sydney—the general public—to go inside the *haus tambaran*, as long as their own women and uninitiated men could not do so.<sup>46</sup> Thus, the restriction they placed on this material demonstration of their knowledge and understanding of the world was only applied within the context of their relationships with each other, with other Abelam people. They considered it important to control access to knowledge—the specific experience of entering the house—within their community, but did not at that time feel any need to control that access for other people. In other words, they were concerned about controlling knowledge—knowledge-as-experience—only within the matrix of their relationships, not outside of it.

From 2005 to 2010 the British Museum instituted a project seeking to reconnect people in Melanesia with the British Museum Melanesian collections.<sup>47</sup> We brought people to London to visit the collections in the storeroom, and we took photographs and, sometimes, video footage of objects in the collection back to relevant communities across Melanesia. Not everyone was interested in seeing the material we had taken to show people. I have often shown photographs of collected objects to people somewhere in Vanuatu. People were often interested to spend a few hours looking at the photographs and talking to me about the objects represented in them, but they often got up from the encounter to get back to cutting copra or dealing with small children, without developing any further interest. Nevertheless, such occasions did often enable the museum to better document the objects being discussed.

One person who came to London with the Melanesia Project was my ni-Vanuatu colleague Jean Tarisesei, from Ambae. She was deeply pleased to see the plaited pandanus textiles from Ambae in the museum and somewhat amazed that so many of them should belong to the special category I mentioned earlier, *singo*. On seeing the textiles, Tarisesei reflected on the restrictions over making *singo* and recalled a story about those restrictions, which she subsequently included in an essay she wrote for the Melanesia Project. She wrote, “When I was little, my father’s adopted mother got sick and died because of her knowledge and great skill in making *singo*,” going on to describe how that knowledge had caused someone to be jealous of her and to poison her.<sup>48</sup> She commented, “For Ambaeans, both men and women, *singo* is very important. It gives a person an identity, a

place to stand in society."<sup>49</sup> These comments make it clear that the possession of knowledge, skill, and the right to deploy them was powerful and significant in Ambae in the past. Tarisesei, secure in her place-based Ambaean identity, was not concerned about establishing her identity in relation to the collection, but rather in learning from it.

Tarisesei commented further that today only a few women on Ambae have the right to make *singo*, and that their number is declining. She wanted women on Ambae to see the quality of the *singo* in the British Museum collection, wishing that she could take one back to show them.<sup>50</sup> She wanted to return the knowledge physically embodied in that object to those people who could by studying it improve their skills in plaiting new textiles. At the same time, she made no objection to the fact that the British Museum had collected those textiles. Tarisesei did not donate an object to the museum, but other visitors to collections sometimes do. They want to add something to sit alongside objects from their community, or sometimes, they want to ensure that their community is represented in the museum. Likewise, people seeing images of objects in the collection sometimes send objects to represent themselves.<sup>51</sup>

## REFLECTIONS

Even though ethnographic museums and collections are now being used as a vehicle to make reparations for past injustices, there is great diversity in the specific details of each case. A single or easy solution does not exist. More to the point, although connecting source communities to collections is often a rewarding experience for the community, that reconnection does not solve every issue. The Maori curator Paul Tapsell made that point some time ago when he commented that for his tribe, resolving the ownership of their objects in New Zealand museums would not become a priority until other more important issues, such as land ownership, had been sorted out.<sup>52</sup> Although the repatriation or long-term loan of African collections to the places from which they come might be welcomed in some parts of that continent, returning objects will not ensure a forgetting of past wrongs. It will not necessarily even ensure that people thereafter practice a strategic ignorance of past events. In fact, the moral work of reparation that is so often assigned to museums in contemporary Western practice requires the creation and maintenance of ongoing relationships. These relationships are often sustained by the presence of the objects in the very museums accused of holding them inappropriately.<sup>53</sup>

It could be said that the move by source communities to lay claim to objects in museums is based on a concept of ownership—not just a moral ownership of the objects, but specifically an ownership of a knowledge about those objects that enables the knowledge owner to claim specific rights over the objects. In fact, interestingly, this process of

laying claim is a process of making ownable knowledge that previously was constrained not by ownership per se but often by the right to participate in an experience through which the knowledge—broadly defined—was obtained, often in a place- and status-determined context. Both intellectual and social knowledge as well as everyday practical knowledge was, and is, held unevenly within most small-scale communities, generally framed by a shared understanding of which knowledge may and which knowledge may not be acted on by any individual. Arcadia's emphasis on open access and on making knowledge accessible is made at a time when some communities are formalizing the ownership of knowledge in the broader context of international academic interest, and especially the digital realm. The control of knowledge is, in this sense, sometimes a response to this wider context of knowing, a wider set of relationships, and thus sometimes also relates to the politics of indigenous rights. Open-access digitization is not always welcome in this kind of context of control. This means that restricted knowledge cannot be documented for EMKP, although the program does allow a small proportion of documented information to remain closed within the archive.

The Endangered Material Knowledge Project provides an opportunity to document objects in places where there are ongoing transformations in the ways that people now live, and where the pace of forgetting is often increasing. At the same time, the program draws attention to some of the complexities of knowing and owning objects in museums. If there are movements to use objects to make reparation for past colonial wrongs and to establish identities through ownership, EMKP potentially contributes to those by providing more information about what those objects are and have been. In addition, the project acknowledges and celebrates the richness and diversity of human knowledge and practice, keeping that richness in sight, where appropriate, by recording it. The best outcome, it seems to me, happens when the process of documenting objects reminds people about them and encourages the local transmission of knowledge and the strengthening of local knowledge and practice.

### Notes

1. "Endangered Material Knowledge Programme (EMKP)," British Museum, accessed January 27, 2022, <https://www.britishmuseum.org/our-work/departments/africa-oceania-and-americas/endangered-material-knowledge-programme> and <https://www.emkp.org/>.
2. Anna Codrea-Rado, "Emmanuel Macron Says Return of African Artifacts Is a Top Priority," *New York Times*, November 29, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/29/arts/emmanuel-macron-africa.html>.
3. Bénédicte Savoy's project, "Translocations" was based at the Technische Universität Berlin. The project studied large-scale displacements of cultural assets from antiquity to the twentieth century.

Bénédicte Savoy, "Leibniz-Project Cluster Translocations," December 2016, [https://www.kuk.tu-berlin.de/fileadmin/fg309/bilder/Forschungsprojekte/Translocations\\_ENGLISH\\_WEISS\\_FINAL.pdf](https://www.kuk.tu-berlin.de/fileadmin/fg309/bilder/Forschungsprojekte/Translocations_ENGLISH_WEISS_FINAL.pdf).

4. Kate Brown, "The Idea Is Not to Empty Museums': Authors of France's Blockbuster Restitution Report Say Their Work Has Been Misrepresented," *ArtNet News*, January 24, 2019, <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/restitution-report-critics-1446934>. See also Nicola Kuhn, "Berlins verfluchte Schätze," *Der Tagesspiegel*, February 15, 2018, <https://www.tagesspiegel.de/berlin/koloniale-raubkunst-berlins-verfluchte-schaetze/20944002.html>.

5. Roy Dille and Thomas G. Kirsch, eds., *Regimes of Ignorance: Anthropological Perspectives on the Production and Reproduction of Nonknowledge* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2015), 10.

6. Jonathan Mair, Ann H. Kelly, and Casey High, "Introduction: Making Ignorance an Ethnographic Object," in *The Anthropology of Ignorance: An Ethnographic Approach*, ed. Casey High, Ann H. Kelly, and Jonathan Mair (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 1.

7. The United Nations's *Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* includes the right to maintain and strengthen cultures and traditions. See United Nations, General Assembly, *Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*, 61/295 (September 13, 2007), [https://www.un.org/development/desa/indigenouspeoples/wp-content/uploads/sites/19/2018/11/UNDRIP\\_E\\_web.pdf](https://www.un.org/development/desa/indigenouspeoples/wp-content/uploads/sites/19/2018/11/UNDRIP_E_web.pdf).

8. Bronislaw Malinowski, *Argonauts of the Western Pacific: An Account of Native Enterprise and Adventure in the Archipelagos of Melanesian New Guinea* (London: Routledge, 1922), 105.

9. Jeremy Coote and Anthony Shelton, *Anthropology and Aesthetics* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992); Alfred Gell, *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998); Pierre Lemonnier, *Mundane Objects: Materiality and Non-Verbal Communication* (Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press, 2012).

10. Lemonnier, *Mundane Objects*, 19.

11. Lemonnier, 21–62.

12. Arcadia Fund, accessed September 29, 2022, <https://www.arcadiahfund.org.uk/>.

13. Lisbet Rausing and Peter Baldwin, introduction to *From Dust to Digital: Ten Years of the Endangered Archives Programme*, ed. Maja Kominko (Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2015), xxxviii. There is a series of questions to ask about the effect of preserving knowledge in a digital environment, which are very real, but which I do not address in this chapter.

14. Vanuatu 2020 Population & Housing Census Key Indicators Table 1, Vanuatu National Statistics Office, November 17, 2021, <https://vnso.gov.vu/index.php/en/census-and-surveys/census/2020populationhousingcensus>.

15. *Ni-Vanuatu*, a term meaning "of Vanuatu," is used to refer to the nation's citizens. It is mostly used to refer to the majority of the population, descended from precolonial inhabitants, and is rarely used to refer to the handful of naturalized citizens in the country.

16. Lamont Lindstrom, *Knowledge and Power in a South Pacific Society* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution, 1990), 79–81; John Patrick Taylor, "Ways of the Place: History, Cosmology and

Material Culture in North Pentecost, Vanuatu" (PhD diss., Australian National University, 2003); Lissant Bolton, *Unfolding the Moon: Enacting Women's "Kastom" in Vanuatu* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2003), 67–77; Lissant Bolton, "Describing Knowledge and Practice in Vanuatu," in *Social Movements, Cultural Heritage and the State in Oceania*, ed. Edvard Hviding and Knut M. Rio (Oxford: Sean Kingston, 2011), 301–319.

17. Taylor, "Ways of the Place," 114–115.

18. Joël Bonnemaïson, *The Tree and the Canoe: History and Ethnogeography of Tanna*, trans. and ed. Josée Pénot-Demetry (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1994), 323.

19. Joël Bonnemaïson, "The Tree and the Canoe: Roots and Mobility in Vanuatu Societies," *Pacific Viewpoint* 25, no. 2 (1984): 118.

20. Lindstrom, *Knowledge and Power*, 80.

21. Lindstrom, 80.

22. Lindstrom, 64.

23. Kirk W. Huffman, "Trading, Cultural Exchange and Copyright: Important Aspects of Vanuatu Arts," in *Arts of Vanuatu*, ed. Joël Bonnemaïson, Kirk Huffman, and Darrell Tryon (Bathurst, Australia: Crawford House, 1996), 182.

24. Huffman, 190.

25. For example, Peter Blackwood has published a survey of male status alteration systems. See Peter Blackwood, "Rank, Exchange and Leadership in Four Vanuatu Societies," in *Vanuatu: Politics, Economics and Ritual in Island Melanesia*, ed. Michael R. Allen (Sydney: Academic Press, 1981).

26. Lissant Bolton, "Classifying the Material: Food, Textile and Status in North Vanuatu," *Journal of Material Culture* 6, no. 3 (2001): 251–268.

27. See also James Leach, "An Aesthetics of Knowledge: Relations and the Documentation of Traditional Knowledge in Papua New Guinea" (chapter 7 in this volume).

28. Ilana Gershon and Dhooleka Sarhadi Raj, "Introduction: The Symbolic Capital of Ignorance," *Social Analysis: The International Journal of Social and Cultural Practice* 44, no. 2 (2000): 3–14; Casey High, Ann H. Kelly, and Jonathan Mair, eds., *The Anthropology of Ignorance: An Ethnographic Approach* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

29. Dilley and Kirsch, *Regimes of Ignorance*, 15.

30. Bolton, *Unfolding the Moon*, 137.

31. Lindstrom, *Knowledge and Power*, 58, 64.

32. Annie Walter, "Knowledge for Survival: Traditional Tree Farming in Vanuatu," in *Science of Pacific Island Peoples*, vol. 3, *Fauna, Flora, Food and Medicine*, ed. John Morrison, Paul A. Geraghty, and Linda Crowl (Suva, Fiji: Institute of Pacific Studies, the University of the South Pacific, 1994),

33. Ralph Regenvanu, personal communication with author, 2015.

34. Marta Yamsiu, personal communication with author, 2015.
35. See Peter Brunt, "Decolonisation, Independence and Cultural Revival 1945–89," in *Art in Oceania: A New History*, ed. Peter Brunt et al., (London: Thames and Hudson, 2012), 383; Nicholas Thomas, *The Return of Curiosity: What Museums Are Good for in the 21st Century* (London: Reaktion Books, 2016), 136.
36. James Clifford, "Museums as Contact Zones," in *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 188–219.
37. Laura Peers and Alison K. Brown, eds., *Museums and Source Communities: A Routledge Reader* (London: Routledge, 2003), 2.
38. Peers and Brown, 6.
39. Sharon Macdonald, "Post-national Museums?" (Paper presented at the National Museums in a Transnational Age Conference, Monash University, Prato, Italy, November 1–4, 2009), 1, quoted in Bain Attwood, "The International Difficult Histories Boom, the Democratization of History, and the National Museum of Australia," in *International Handbooks of Museum Studies*, vol. 4, *Museum Transformations*, ed. Annie E. Coombes and Ruth Phillips (Oxford: Blackwell, 2015), 61.
40. Attwood, "Difficult Histories Boom," 62.
41. Attwood, 62.
42. Annie E. Coombes and Ruth B. Phillips, "Introduction: Museums in Transformation: Dynamics of Democratization and Decolonization," in Coombes and Phillips, *Museum Transformations*, xxxvii.
43. Paul Basu, "Reanimating Cultural Heritage: Digital Curatorship, Knowledge Networks and Social Transformation in Sierra Leone," in Coombes and Phillips, *Museum Transformations*, 337.
44. Basu, 338.
45. Basu, 347, 346.
46. Diane Losche, personal communication, ca. 1982.
47. This was not an internal British Museum project, but was undertaken with Professor Nicholas Thomas of the Cambridge Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology. See Lissant Bolton et al., eds., *Melanesia: Art and Encounter* (London: British Museum Press, 2013).
48. Jean Tarisesei, "Singo: Textiles from Our Island, Ambae," in Bolton et al., *Melanesia*, 280.
49. Tarisesei, 280.
50. Tarisesei, 280.
51. Paraka of Mondika Tribe, "The Apron Is the Sister of the Bilum," in Bolton et al., *Melanesia*, 111.
52. Paul Tapsell, "Afterword: Beyond the Frame," in Peers and Brown, *Museums and Source Communities*, 246.

53. Lissant Bolton, "An Ethnography of Repatriation: Engagements with Erromango, Vanuatu," in Coombes and Phillips, *Museum Transformations*, 229–248.

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