

<p>Institution: University of Oxford</p>
<p>Unit of Assessment: UOA 24A Anthropology</p>
<p>Title of case study: Learning from the Ancestors, Strengthening Cultural Identity: The Blackfoot Shirts Project</p>
<p>1. Summary of the impact</p> <p>Five historic Blackfoot First Nations hide shirts held in the Pitt Rivers Museum (PRM) since 1893 were lent to two museums in Alberta, Canada, to promote cross-cultural exchange of knowledge. Under historic assimilation policies (1885-1970), most heritage objects had been removed from Blackfoot communities to museums, contributing to the destabilization of Blackfoot cultural identity and poor mental and physical health typical of indigenous populations. For the first time in a century over 500 Blackfoot people were able to handle objects made before the assimilation era. This provoked the sharing of cultural knowledge within the Blackfoot community, led to improved self-esteem, and intensified interest and pride in cultural identity. In exchange, Blackfoot people shared cultural knowledge about the shirts with museum professionals from all UK museums with significant Blackfoot collections, trained them in new approaches to museology, and co-curated exhibitions sharing Blackfoot perspectives in Alberta and Oxford reaching over 50,000 people.</p> <p>2. Underpinning research</p> <p>Context: The Blackfoot Shirts Project is related to other innovative PRM projects using museum collections to work with communities of origin to stimulate the production of new knowledge for the community ('knowledge repatriation') and for the museum. Harris' digital 'Tibet Album', Morton's Luo Visual History project, [see Section 3: R2] the 'Recovering the Material and Visual Cultures of the Southern Sudan' project, and Peers' Haida International Network have all made collections accessible physically or digitally to public, academic, UK immigrant, and overseas 'source' communities as the basis for research on material and visual heritage. [R1,R2] These projects have deepened our understanding of the role of heritage in stabilizing diaspora and formerly colonized communities, adding greatly to museum knowledge about collections. They have also pioneered new methods of collaborative research, museum practice, and dissemination of research.</p> <p>Building on previous work on relations between museums and indigenous communities, [R3] Peers and Brown (Aberdeen) were funded by the AHRC to conduct a collaborative photo-elicitation project with a Blackfoot community. [R4] This project revealed the urgent need for work with Blackfoot communities focused on Knowledge Exchange (both within Blackfoot communities, and between museum professionals and the public).</p> <p>Project Scope: The project involved Laura Peers (Reader in Material Anthropology; Curator, Americas, PRM); Alison Brown (Lecturer, Anthropology, Aberdeen; project-community liaison); four Blackfoot Nations (Kainai, Siksika, Piikani, Blackfeet); and the Glenbow and Galt Museums in Alberta. The five shirts were shipped to Glenbow in spring 2010; project staff facilitated small-group handling sessions (to ensure the shirts' preservation) with 500 ceremonialists, elders, artists, teachers and youth. Associated educational programmes were held in four Blackfoot high schools and two community colleges, and the shirts were made more accessible through public exhibitions (Alberta, 6 months, 2010) and Oxford (8 months, 2013). 33 follow-up interviews were conducted with participants. A training/knowledge dissemination conference involving Blackfoot people and UK museum professionals was held in Oxford in 2011.</p> <p>Project Findings: This project provided the first community contact in a century with iconic heritage objects; globally, it was only the second project involving the handling of fragile historical museum objects by large numbers of people. Research findings are therefore entirely new and constitute a baseline for further studies. Two major findings emerged. First, the stimulus of touch, the sense of being in the presence of the ancestors who made the shirts, and the sociality of the handling sessions was therapeutic on several levels for Blackfoot participants (see section 4), and strengthened identity and culture by provoking the transmission of cultural knowledge amongst participants. [R4,R5,R6] Second, while established handling projects in museums, hospitals, and old-age homes use reproductions, or less fragile objects, the research indicated that it is possible to facilitate the use of fragile historic objects in certain situations—and worthwhile to do so given the potential for museum objects to act as catalysts for postcolonial social healing in indigenous communities. [R4,R6]</p>

3. References to the research

Work underpinning current research

- [R1] Clare Harris & Michael O'Hanlon 2013. 'The Future of the Ethnographic Museum' *Anthropology Today* 29(1): 8-12.
- [R2] Chris Morton & G. Oteyo 2013. 'The Paro Manene Project: Exhibiting and Researching Photographic Histories in Western Kenya' in A. Coombes & R. Phillips (eds) *Museum Transformations: Art, Culture, History*. Wiley-Blackwell.
- [R3] Laura Peers and Alison Brown (eds) 2003. *Museums and Source Communities: A Routledge Reader*. Routledge.
- [R4] Alison Brown, Laura Peers, and members of the Kainai Nation 2006. *Pictures Bring Us Messages/Sinaakssiiksi Aohtsimaahpihkookiyaawa: Photographs and Histories from the Kainai Nation*. University of Toronto Press.

Outputs from Blackfoot Shirts project

- [R5] Alison K. Brown & Laura Peers 2013. 'The Blackfoot Shirts Project: "Our Ancestors Have Come to Visit"' in A. Coombes & R. Phillips (eds) *Museum Transformations: Art, Culture, History*. Wiley-Blackwell. (Available at: <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/book/10.1002/9781118829059>.)
- [R6] Laura Peers 2013. "Ceremonies of Renewal": Visits, Relationships, and Healing in the Museum Space' *Museum Worlds* 1(1): 136-52. (doi:10.3167/armw.2013.010109)

Project website: <http://web.prm.ox.ac.uk/blackfootshirts/>

Blog: 'Brave New World Curator' <http://pittrivers-americas.blogspot.co.uk>

Evidence of research quality: Research was funded through an AHRC Standard Research Grant, AH/G010455/1, £183,431 (1 August 2009, original end date 31/3/2012, extended to 30/6/2012). This grant was peer reviewed at the point of application and the project was monitored throughout by the AHRC. The project was awarded the American Anthropological Association, Council on Museum Anthropology, Michael Ames Prize for Innovative Anthropology, 2011. Items [R5] and [R6] are submitted in REF2, item [R4] was submitted for RAE2008.

4. Details of the impact

2,000 Blackfoot Elders, ceremonialists, teachers, and youth (c.5% of a tribal population of approximately 42,000), and over 50,000 museum professionals and visitors in Alberta and across the UK, benefited from project impacts. Impacts derive from knowledge about Blackfoot culture transmitted as the result of research activity (a) within Blackfoot communities and (b) from Blackfoot people to museum professionals and visitors. What is important about the impact is not simply the numbers of people who participated in the project, but the fact that the project activity was the first of its kind, enabled access to early heritage objects after a century of their absence, encouraged change in museum procedures and policies to facilitate future projects involving object handling, and that Blackfoot perspectives were communicated to over 50,000 non-Blackfoot museum visitors (via exhibitions) and to museum staff from all major UK museums with Blackfoot collections (via the conference).

Impacts on Blackfoot people

47 handling sessions with heritage objects were arranged across all four Blackfoot communities, involving 500 people. None of these individuals had ever seen, much less touched, pre-1850 heritage items before these workshops: there are few early objects in regional museums. The provocation of touch and the presence of iconic heritage objects (also understood as ancestors) enabled participants to share with each other knowledge about Blackfoot history, arts, rituals, and social practices. Given the assimilation policies from 1885-1970, which fostered the removal of heritage objects to museums, such knowledge is held patchily across Blackfoot society, and traditional arts (quillwork, tanning) are endangered. Handling sessions facilitated learning about heritage, affirmation of narratives of shared history, confirmation and dissemination of cultural knowledge—thereby strengthening personal identity and well-being, and increasing social cohesion among participants. [C1-C5 in section 5] That such reconnections and strengthening processes happened at all after a century of absence of such objects, and were felt by participants to have profoundly important results, was highly significant and symbolic to Blackfoot people.

- Youth: all four Blackfoot-run high schools, and both Blackfoot community colleges, participated in the handling sessions. For youth, touching ‘the real thing’ during these sessions prompted engagement with traditional arts, discussion of values and gender roles, and pride in heritage. **[C1(Whitford interview), C2, C3, C4]** The development of associated educational programmes teaching tanning and quillwork to high-school and college classes **[C3, C6]** has contributed to the survival of these endangered arts and further strengthened Blackfoot culture: these associated programmes involved c.1500 students, approx. 50% of students in each Blackfoot school as well as students from four urban schools with Blackfoot student enrolment. All ten (100%) Blackfoot primary and secondary schools used posters and the project website for their own art projects (ongoing work 2010-13). Blackfoot community colleges developed courses and video lectures, 2010-13 (c.80 students in 2 community colleges). The shirts have also become a focus for degree credit courses at Blackfoot community colleges. **[C4]** In communities with high unemployment, low educational levels, and high rates of mental health issues, students were inspired to continue higher education: “It was like a life-changing event... made me want to further my education, and to research First Nations archives and I may someday be the head of a First Nations museum!” (follow-up interview with college student, handling session participant). **[see also C2 (same individual); C5, p.147]**
- Adults expressed grief at cultural loss and determination to preserve culture. In a follow-up interview, Robert Rides, a Blackfoot participant stated: “These war shirts, they stimulate the memory that some of our people have put away in a closet and closed the door on.” As indigenous scholar Sherry Farrell Racette (2008, p. 60) notes, “The process of rediscovery and recovery [from colonization] includes work with museum collections.” This addresses psycho-social problems stemming from unresolved grief from historical events. Shared affirmations of grief and determination to retain culture supported strengthened identity and relationships. **[C5, esp. pp. 143-5]**
- All participants: the project prompted an unusual level of discussion about cultural heritage amongst community members from different families who otherwise seldom interact. Access to ceremonial leaders with specialist knowledge about culture and history was increased (especially important for families affected hardest by residential school); collective historical experience was affirmed (in opposition to mainstream historical narratives); **[C1, Pard interview]** and participants experienced life-enhancing inspiration (e.g. students deciding to become museum curators, artists deciding to focus on Blackfoot-only designs in their work). All of these benefits strengthened social relationships, community cohesion, and Blackfoot identity. **[C1-C6]**
- Ceremonial revival: Contact with shirts resulted in Blackfoot people reviving a ceremony to transfer the right to own sacred shirts after decades of dormancy following colonial suppression in 1920. Such processes of reclamation also fulfil the purpose of moving from mourning to action in decolonization. Two ceremonies to transfer the right to own hairlock shirts were held in the Galt Museum (June 2010), with c.175 participants. This stimulated significant interest in further ceremonies by the wider Blackfoot population. **[C3, C5]**

Impacts on museum professionals and museum audiences

Through (a) three public exhibitions in both the UK and Alberta (at the Glenbow and Galt Museums, April-Sept 2010, and the PRM, Feb-Sept 2013 (with total visitor numbers of over 50,000); (b) the Blackfoot Shirts Project Conference, March 2011, Oxford (involving Blackfoot people, UK museum professionals, and postgraduates); and (c) the 'Making Museums' award-winning (UK national Clore Award for Museum Learning, 2010) schools event at the PRM (Feb-March 2010), involving 300 schoolchildren. Through these opportunities, Blackfoot knowledge, culture, and perspectives were shared with museum staff and public audiences, resulting in considerable impacts, including:

- The development of new techniques for the conservation of porcupine quills and hide in preparing fragile objects for handling; and the development of new ways of facilitating handling sessions with fragile objects. **[C7]**

- Museum professional training: the UK conference involved 12 Blackfoot people and 15 curators and conservators from 10 UK museums with Blackfoot collections, enabled the dissemination of cultural perspectives and knowledge gained from the research and influenced museum policy and procedures nationally, [C7, C8, C9] as demonstrated by the Senior Organics Conservator, National Museums Liverpool, who stated in an email following the conference: “It will certainly impact on my approach to all First Nations material but also gives me pause for thought about the potential for engagement with all of our collections by relevant communities locally as well as worldwide.”
- The project was used as a national model for UK museum engagement with source communities in the Museums Association’s ‘MUSEUMS CHANGE LIVES’ campaign. This is the UK national Museums Association’s forward plan ‘for the increased social impact of museums’ on society. [C9] It has also led to a follow-on Leverhulme-funded project bringing Blackfoot people together with museum collections at Cambridge and Exeter, and further training of museum staff. Thus it generated relationships which led to further research and motivated museums in the UK to better care for and interpret their collections.
- Visitor feedback: There was an unusual amount of positive visitor feedback on the exhibitions, e.g.: “Reading and looking and listening to the story of these shirts returning to the Blackfoot community almost brought me to tears. This is a wonderful project and I hope inspires many similar connections with the peoples and cultures that the objects in museums like Pitt Rivers represent.” [C10, see under 27/3/13]

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

There are many pieces of corroborating evidence, of which these are only a representative sample.

- [C1] Video interview/handling session documentation, and interviews about project with participants: See Blackfoot Digital Library, <http://blackfootdigitallibrary.com/> and search for Lea Whitford, Allan Pard, and Pitt Rivers Museum. [Allen and Charlene Pard interview regarding the Blackfoot Shirts Project, Blackfoot Digital Library, at: <http://blackfootdigitallibrary.com/en/asset/allen-and-charlene-pard-interview-regarding-blackfoot-shirts-project.>]
- [C2] Post-handling session interview transcript attesting to impacts on Blackfoot youth/students with Blackfoot tribal member, community college student (held on file).
- [C3] Post-handling session interview transcript attesting to impacts on Blackfoot youth/students and ceremonial renewal impact with Blackfoot tribal member, Vice Principal, Tatsikiisapo’p Middle School (held on file).
- [C4] Blackfeet Community College recruitment poster for credit course on shirts associated with project (held on file).
- [C5] Laura Peers 2013 ‘Ceremonies of Renewal’: reference [R5] above, documenting social healing effects of information sharing during handling sessions with Blackfoot people
- [C6] Video documentary by Kainai videographer Narcisse Blood (held on file).
- [C7] Heather Richardson, ‘The Role of Conservators in Reconnecting a Collection of Historic Blackfoot Shirts with the Community,’ ICOM-CC 16th Triennial Conference Preprints. Lisbon 19th-23rd September 2011. *output on CD, ISBN 978-989-97522-0-7.
- [C8] Letter attesting to the impact of the project on UK museum profession from the Curator of the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, Cambridge (held on file).
- [C9] Project used as case study for the UK Museum Association’s campaign MUSEUMS CHANGE LIVES: <http://www.museumsassociation.org/museums-change-lives/01072013-pitt-rivers-museum.>
- [C10] Visitor comments on PRM exhibition (held on file).