
Thinking through Repatriation

Leslie was fidgeting. She knew she had been delaying the inevitable too long. Her thesis had been approved weeks ago. She should send it to Abraham and his daughter, Edie, who had done so much for her. It had been drummed into her over and over again, ever since the first-year courses, "You have to send copies of your publications back to the field. It is the ethical thing to do. Never neglect this; you owe your informants a debt of gratitude."

Finally, Leslie made up her mind. She took out some stiff packing paper, hunted through a drawer for a roll of sticky tape, and wrapped a copy of her newly finished thesis. She would make sure they received it in one piece, whatever happened. Minutes later she was looking for stamps. She knew she had enough of them to send the package, but could she simply drop it in the mailbox? She decided against it. Too many letters and packages became lost in the mail to the island. She would do the sensible thing and use a courier. She knew of one a few blocks down the road.

Leslie came out of the courier's office disgruntled. Never again! It had taken her thirty minutes to explain to the airhead behind the counter where

to find the island. She expected these people to have at least some basic knowledge of geography. She recalled parts of the conversation, inane as it was, "Where? Never heard of it. You worked there? Doing what? Ah, an anthropologist, that explains it! I'll phone the main office. Maybe they'll know whether this place exists." Anyway, the package was on its way. Now she hoped and prayed it arrived safely.

Eatie walked in on Abraham, who was smoking contentedly. She talked excitedly. "A package for you, father. Jonathan brought it down from the mainland." Abraham stood up and looked bemused at the battered package. Who would send him a package? Then he recognized the handwriting and he knew Leslie! Carefully, he started unwrapping the package, noticing it had been sent well over two months ago. Having removed all the paper he admired the book. This was what Leslie had always been talking about, her book about them. He realized that this was not just meant for him. Leslie had talked to everybody in the village and then some. He would have to show it around.

Glad to be back on the island after years, Leslie walked up the final slope. As always, it had been a difficult climb; some things never changed. She waved to Jonathan from the distance and saw him running off to the village to announce her arrival. She wondered whether the village would look the same. She had finally been awarded a new grant to do further research and come back, as she had promised. She was surprised how much everything still looked the same; some houses had been repaired, others replaced, but still the village looked familiar. Then all of a sudden she noticed the new building. It looked utterly unlike the other buildings, more like buildings on the mainland or at the mission post. She knew she should be looking for Abraham, but curiosity won out. She walked in the open doorway and waited till her eyes had gotten used to the dimly lit interior. Looking around, she immediately noticed the book, her thesis, sitting by itself on a shelf. She chuckled softly and said to herself: "Well, well, that's one for the books: the first public library on the island."



This entirely hypothetical tale raises many important questions. Why did Leslie think she "owed a debt of gratitude" that involved sending back her thesis? Why did she feel compelled to send back just the thesis? Had nothing else been "taken" from the field? Why did the community consider the thesis itself worth saving? A host of similar questions could also be asked. Efforts to repatriate field data, ethnographic knowledge, and other cultural materials express our current awareness of ethical behavior. They also ex-

press the gradual shift in relations between the researcher, the people being researched, and the various audiences that consume the knowledge and publications produced by academia (Rohatynskij and Jaarsma 2000). One result is that the flow of information, knowledge, and ethnographic materials—usually going from the field to the researcher—can become reversed. Leslie's act of returning her thesis to her host community is a simple but increasingly common example. The effects of the return of ethnographic materials have so far received relatively little attention within the discipline.

We cannot address the issues posed by the return of ethnographic materials (repatriation for short) solely from a disciplinary perspective. Our acts as anthropologists are part of a larger pattern of reestablishing rights to self-determination by indigenous peoples. Yet while this focus highlights the "Other" side of the story, what we—as academics and anthropologists—can or should contribute must also be an important part of the discussion. The indigenous peoples we study are within their rights—morally and often legally—to ask us to be circumspect with the information we gather and the knowledge we produce, whether we obtain it as anthropologists doing research for an academic thesis or as ethnobiologists working for a pharmaceutical company.

Not surprisingly, the cases presented in this volume will deal with anthropologists and ethnographic writing in one form or another. Yet it would be a mistake to deem the repatriation of ethnographic materials as strictly an anthropological problem to be dealt with by anthropologists in line with "anthropological tradition" or as a sign of the changing place of the discipline in today's world. While such a narrow focus might perhaps provide for a clear analytical framework, it would ignore the interests of our research subjects—who are curious about what we have written on them—and the librarians and archivists caring for the field notes and audiovisual materials we leave behind, to mention the obvious. The focus used here will essentially be explorative, looking at the possible consequences of the return of ethnographic materials with an aim to develop further debate on the subject. With that particular aim in mind, the volume will not end with a set of conclusions, but with a series of recommendations.

State of the Art

Anthropology's public castigation for its colonial role by critics from inside and outside the discipline has related primarily to the nature of the images it engendered rather than to the commonly held attitudes regarding the disposition of field materials. Perhaps this is because the gathering and

use of research data on Third and Fourth World peoples has been an inherently unequal process for the disciplines involved. Academics have generally approached indigenous knowledge as a resource that could be exploited at will. Like the material resources of these peoples, their cultural heritage has been easily appropriated and estranged for economic profits, political purposes, and personal benefits (compare Stanley 1998; Crocombe 1994b). Not until the end of the 1980s did a move to counter this kind of exploitation gradually gather momentum.

Discussion focused initially on the acknowledgment of indigenous economic interests, but subsequent statements went well beyond this, proclaiming indigenous culture and knowledge an indivisible whole, the rights to which can and should be reclaimed by indigenous people themselves. For example, the "Mataatua Declaration," which was written during the First International Conference on the Cultural and Intellectual Property Rights of Indigenous Peoples (1993), stated that "Indigenous Peoples . . . have the right to self determination and . . . must be recognized as the exclusive owners of their cultural and intellectual property . . . Indigenous Peoples are capable of managing their traditional knowledge themselves" (quoted in Posey and Durfield 1996, appendix 7).¹

Conferences organized by indigenous interest groups, nongovernmental organizations, and academic organizations established a common ground from which to limit the claims by Western commercial interests to indigenous knowledge and resources.² The countermeasures did not aim at putting a complete stop to this process, but rather at establishing a basic awareness that ongoing exploitation was occurring. Indigenous peoples were to be made aware of the economic potential of their knowledge (see Brown 1998, 195). "Native peoples must have the right to choose their own futures. Without economic independence, such a choice is not possible" (Posey 1990, 15). The key concepts foregrounded were self-determination, traditional resource rights, cultural property rights, and community intellectual property rights.³ On the academic side of the equation, professional associations have revised their rules of conduct and their ethical codes to acknowledge the role of indigenous agency in research planning. In anthropology, these ethical revisions are regarded as an ongoing "work in progress" (for example, AAA 1998).⁴

Parallel developments related to museum holdings of indigenous arts, artifacts, and human remains have also affected anthropology's professional engagement with repatriation efforts. The audience for museum holdings has gradually grown and diversified since the 1970s, fostering increased awareness among indigenous peoples of the nature of museum collections.

The 1990s growth market for eco- and ethnotourism lent further impetus to these developments and has moved the issues beyond the immediate surroundings of Western museums into Third World villages (Stanley 1998, 86-87). The growing tide of indigenous nationalism in Fourth World nations also added further stimuli to this discourse.

A landmark was reached with the 1990 passage of the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) in the United States. The negotiation process this law set in motion between museums and Native American and Hawaiian peoples was closely monitored by museum personnel and indigenous rights groups across the world. Discourse on NAGPRA has raised issues about accessibility of knowledge and information in regard to Native American peoples in particular: "Indigenous beliefs about knowledge of the sacred conflict directly with the majority's commitment to the sacredness of public values. This is a classic collision of irreconcilable values. To resolve it, both sides will have to reflect carefully on the global implications of their respective positions in order to achieve a suitable compromise" (Brown 1998, 198). These issues go well beyond a simple recognition of economic, political, or even aesthetic values of cultural resources. Indigenous peoples are becoming increasingly aware that aspects of their culture may need to be safeguarded from unwarranted access, because the value of public access conflicts with the values of privacy and sacredness. Academic use of research information has also come under increasing scrutiny, because "Publishing information, traditionally the hallmark of academic success, has become the means for conveying restricted (or even sacred) information into the unprotected public domain" (Posey 1995, 1-2). Three main factors loom large in all these debates. First, the legacy of past and present exploitation of indigenous resources, both cultural and economic, is widely recognized. Second, indigenous peoples are asserting their rights to control their cultural identity and integrity, implicitly reasserting their ownership of cultural knowledge. Third, sincere efforts are being made to right past wrongs with respect to the first two issues.

What then is repatriation? Clearly, the term can refer to a whole spectrum of actions. At one extreme is our conscientious hypothetical anthropologist. Leslie's one-time donation is the "minimal thing" that most anthropologists feel responsible for doing nowadays—making the products of our research accessible to the people we study. But the other end of the spectrum contains a complex of more involved repatriation possibilities: the "return" not only of our published and unpublished ethnographic writings, but also of the notes we made,⁵ the field diaries we kept, the audiovisual recordings we made, as well as any material items that may directly or

indirectly be relevant to the work we did.⁶ These days the physical return of materials is not necessarily the central issue.⁷ Providing access to the materials we store may be more essential in some cases. In the long run, repatriation may require transferring the rights to control access to those who originally "owned" the information or to their descendants.

Two axioms seem basic in repatriation decision making: (1) we should not harm either the community we have studied or the individual informants we have consulted while in the field; (2) we should not harm the interests of continued academic research.

These axioms are both encapsulated in existing codes of anthropological ethics (see also chapter 3). While most national associations of anthropologists have defined their own ethical standards, these have mirrored in one way or another the spirit of the 1971 code formulated (subsequently reformulated) by the American Association of Anthropologists (AAA 1971; AAA 1998).⁸ As Peter Pels (1999) has indicated, the ethics of anthropology are an evolving debate that actively mirrors the social conditions in which anthropology is practiced at any one time. Thus it is not surprising that the 1998 AAA "Code of Ethics" applies principles different from the 1971 "Principles of Professional Responsibility." Pels notes that ethical codes in present-day anthropology effect a self-control over anthropologists' actions "that may keep—by selective performances to sponsors, or semi-contractual deals with people studied—increasingly larger chunks of the workings of anthropological research out of the public eye" (31). Since repatriation requires taking into account the interests of both indigenous communities and academia, it is to be expected that by challenging and subscribing to this type of "closure," the practice of repatriation will eventually affect the ethical standards applied in anthropology.

From Access to Control

Access is fundamental to any repatriation process and thus forms the core issue in the first section of this volume. The variety of topics covered in "Issues of Access" illustrates the complexity of problems involved in repatriating materials. Providing physical access is only one part of the process. We can go to great lengths to make academic publications available, but as long as it takes a Western education to make sense of them, intellectual access will remain very limited. Chapter 1, by Dorothy and David Counts, draws attention to the increasingly esoteric nature of anthropological narratives and discourse. This stems both from the use of cryptic, often

pedantic jargon and from the highlighting of theory at the expense of ethnographic detail in publications. Since its enormous growth in the 1960s and 1970s, academic anthropology has increasingly engaged in conversation with itself. The Counts describe their efforts to publish the results of their research among the RV (recreational vehicle) community in an accessible manner. Motivated by repeated queries from their research subjects, and by promotional activities from relevant interest groups, the Counts had to participate in extensive media representation of their research and research population. Their chapter illustrates a variety of problems related to access and accessibility, as well as the responsibilities this access invokes.

The physical aspects of access are taken up in chapter 2, where Alan Howard describes his posting of various sources concerning the island of Rotuma on the Internet and considers the tricky question of what material should be made accessible. To this end he introduces James Clifford's distinction (1990) between inscribed and transcribed texts to distinguish material that has been subjected to further analysis by the ethnographer from straightforwardly descriptive materials. He suggests that repatriating inscribed material might, because of the nature of its construction, involve more complications. He ends his contribution by postulating some variables that should be considered in assessing the pros and cons of repatriating various kinds of materials under varying circumstances.

Briefly exploring at the outset of chapter 3 the historical development of the gathering and exchanging of information by anthropologists in the field, I go on to discuss how the issue of repatriation has brought the shifting relations between anthropology, its audiences, and indigenous communities to the fore. Stressing the need for an impact analysis prior to repatriation, this chapter furthermore draws attention to the ethical responsibilities the repatriation process will give rise to now and in the future.

Clearly, we must take responsibility for making our ethnographic materials accessible. Characteristically, scholars do not consider what they need to do with their research materials until the end of careers (see for instance Jackson 1990, 8–10). Some have made prior arrangements, but most of us only leave some general and usually insufficient instructions, effectively dumping the responsibilities on an archivist or librarian. Mary McCutcheon's evocatively titled chapter, "You Can't Die till You Clean Up Your Mess," is drawn from her experience as an archivist. She describes a variety of measures—and in some cases lack of measures—taken by ethnographers to protect their materials and informants. She also gives us a good idea of how this affects (and is affected by) existing archival policies and current

United States' laws on privacy and related issues. The wealth of examples in McCutcheon's chapter is a prelude to the more detailed case studies of repatriation that comprise the remainder of this volume.

"Managing the Collected Past," the second part of this volume, provides us with cases that look at the problems of and possibilities for repatriating ethnographic materials stored in archives and museum libraries. In chapter 5 David Akin and Kathryn Creely describe the disposition of field materials and other ethnographic information produced by the late Roger Keesing during his long research career among the Kwaio of the Solomon Islands. The authors first describe the objectives of the Melanesian Archive, where his family deposited Keesing's materials. Subsequently, they analyze the problems that result from setting access limitations on the materials that will eventually be placed in the control of the Kwaio themselves.

Chapters by Suzanne Falgout and Karen Peacock focus on post-World War II archival material relating to the Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands. Falgout deals with the work of district anthropologist Jack Fischer, who gathered extensive ethnographic material on Chuuk and Pohnpei, material that he later deposited in the Bishop Museum Archives in Honolulu. She provides an overview of the way the material was gathered and of the types of archive materials he deposited. Of particular concern are the restrictions Fischer placed on access to this collection. Falgout provides an assessment of the implications these restrictions have for present and future use of this material.

In chapter 7 Peacock details the case of the Trust Territory Archives, placed in the care of the University of Hawai'i Library for indexing and preservation. While the administrative record of United States' control over the Micronesian area between 1947 and 1994 contains much ethnographic material, the focus in this chapter is not on the return of the ethnographic materials contained in this collection, but on the institutional role of the University of Hawai'i Library in providing access to and distributing the material across the respective national libraries and archives in the region. Peacock describes the work necessary to conserve these archival records, as well as some of the political (and academic) squabbling that accompanies a multinational effort that is still in progress.

The final contribution in this section, by Amy Stillman, evaluates the history of access to the hula collections in the Bishop Museum as set against the background of the Hawaiian cultural renaissance that started in the 1970s. The contents of these collections were organized and indexed, but remained inaccessible to local hula performers. The resurgence of interest in the hula repertoire fostered determined research into these collections, lead-

ing to a deinstitutionalization, which Stillman describes as a "reunification of performers and poetic repertoire" in the 1980s and 1990s. She also describes the consequences of reintroducing old, often sacred materials into a radically changed social situation. Stillman's analysis of the ambiguity of her role as native scholar highlights additional repatriation complexities.

The third part of the volume contains three cases where the repatriation of actual materials is at stake. As the title "Transformation, Interpretation, and Ownership" suggests, the focus of this section involves indigenous assessments of the materials returned. The contributions by Anne and Keith Chambers and Bryan Oles deal specifically with questions of access to genealogical material, looking at the interest in such material within the communities studied and among islanders living elsewhere. Distinct differences between the two cases are also apparent, however. These stem equally from the researchers themselves and the communities they studied. The Chambers discuss their repatriation of a variety of types of ethnographic materials, both on their own initiative and on request from the local community. Because they were engaged in long-term fieldwork, they could manage the process of repatriation to some extent. Oles, on the other hand, found his research threatened by local responses to ethnographic reports by previous researchers that were considered misrepresentations. His own efforts at conducting research were subsequently frustrated by a general distrust of ethnographers within the Mokilese community. While the Chambers and Oles draw different conclusions about the repatriation process, both chapters give useful insights into the interplay between academic and community views on the return of ethnographic materials.

The final contribution, by Nancy Guy, highlights some of the negative consequences of mismanaging access to field materials. Indigenous music has been used as a source of inspiration for Western musicians for some centuries now. Because the potential profits from successful music production are immense, its exploitation potential is also great and may result in considerable abuse of indigenous rights. Guy describes a case in which traditional singing by two aboriginal Taiwan performers found its way through the recordings of an ethnomusicologist to the introductory tracks of a megaselling hit single. Contrary to most such cases, this incident made it to court (and was eventually settled out of court), providing a challenge to the claims of copyright. Guy provides us with an interesting vista on the torturous routes that our ethnographic materials may take. She points out that given current copyright law, we may inadvertently become the de facto copyright holders on some of the material we gather.

It is somehow indicative of the pitfalls surrounding repatriation that I

end this overview on a few legal notes. As copyright is part of Western law, it becomes part of the researcher's responsibility to apply it properly. We can hardly expect our research subjects to have an understanding of the applicable laws. In that respect Darrell Posey's chance remark that anthropologists (among others) will be uncomfortable with a tighter regime on their research material, because they may become obliged to share the profits of their "lifestyles," may be more to the point than we think. "Incomes from published dissertations and other books, slides, magazine articles, gramophone records, films and videos—all will have to include a percentage of the profits to the native 'subjects.' It will probably be negotiated with native peoples prior to the undertaking of initial fieldwork" (Posey 1990, 15).

Several legal layers may apply to our research information, and we may be legally obliged to conceal or to display parts of our research data regardless of what agreements we may have made with our informants. Guy, as an expert witness to the court case she describes, is unable to detail the legal deliberations. While privy to most of testimony given prior to the court case, she also signed a declaration to keep these details confidential.⁹ McCutcheon's consideration of the effects of the Freedom of Information Act and its subsequent amendments (chapter 4), as well as the response made by the American Anthropological Association to Circular A-110 of the Office of Management and Budget (OMB 1999a) are also worth taking into account here. Different laws may apply in different countries, and research data may be (or may become) subject to the laws of both the country where the research was done and the country where the researcher lived at the time of the research. While several of the contributions to this volume touch upon such issues, I do not pretend that we deal adequately with the legal minefield that surrounds repatriation.

Some "Home Truths"

Most of the cases in this volume derive from fieldwork in the Pacific Islands. Nevertheless, the issues they raise are relevant to all of anthropology, and what should be clear from the various contributions to this volume is that the demand for repatriating ethnographic materials, and for an indigenous role in the decision-making process, is certain to grow in the near future (see also Stanley 1998, 87). New Zealand Maori, Australian Aboriginals, and Native Hawaiians all have condemned Western appropriation of indigenous knowledge. While expressions of outrage may be less audible elsewhere in the Pacific, they are nonetheless growing (see Lindstrom and White 1994b). Libraries and archives in the region are taking the lead in

making research materials in their collections accessible or repatriating them locally. Most of the small island nations in the Pacific have a considerable percentage of their population living abroad in major urban centers. They are part of a growing audience interested not only in published ethnographic knowledge on their home societies, but also in any information of this nature available on the Internet.

In sum, the changes that will eventually affect anthropological research and ethnographic writing boil down to the granting of partial or shared control over research to the people who are research subjects. Though we can talk in theory about self-determination of indigenous peoples, this goal can only be reached by giving the people we study the ability to assess the nature of the information we gather and the methods we have used to gather it. This may sometimes result in attempts to force research into "politically desirable" or "ideologically correct" directions (Keesing 1989; Keesing 1991; Trask 1991; van Meijl 2000), but if this an evil it is one we will have to learn to live with. However we proceed, researchers will inevitably have to yield some control over the research process. At the moment, we anthropologists—as members of an academic discipline—largely "police" ourselves and determine the fate of our research materials without much need to consider outside interests. We are subject to laws that vary from country to country, but the only real common denominator is the code of professional ethics drawn up by the discipline. It is doubtful that this will remain the case for long. I expect that a combination of laws protecting research subjects' rights and regulating the accountability of researchers will eventually make us more responsive to outside interests in the way we set up and conduct research. If we do not react responsibly, our hand will inevitably be forced in this respect. Repatriating our field materials, voluntarily or not, is only one aspect of the changes evolving in the relations between our research subjects and us.

Although most of the data we gather in the field, as distinct from its analysis, ought to remain available for future reference, it is not always necessary to expose personally authored materials to public scrutiny.¹⁰ In repatriating ethnographic materials, the interests of the people studied, those of the discipline, and those of the individual researcher should be weighed against each other. In the final measure, as Howard indicates (chapter 2), there is nothing holy about field notes; we should not be afraid to destroy materials if allowing open access to them seems likely to do more harm than good.

We should never lose sight of the fact that what we return as field data (and implicitly its interpretation) may potentially be more incendiary than

what we took out. Whether intentional or not, we often end up overriding indigenous limitations on access to sensitive information. As indicated earlier, our research becomes public domain if we start returning available information or (re-)establishing access and control over it.¹¹ This aspect of repatriation must be dealt with in regard to different cultures in different ways, in harmony with each setting's unique problems and needs. The various contributors to this volume provide a wide range of examples and choices in this respect. There is not one generally applicable, easy solution, however. Repatriation is not an add-on to research already done; it needs to be a part of research projects from the start.

If we take this challenge seriously it will profoundly change the way we work. Theoretical sophistication and exclusionary jargon will no longer be the primary measure of our work, but will be superseded by a demand for clarity and accessibility. Sophisticated analysis, however fruitful in its application, cannot serve any community's long-term purpose if it virtually encrypts the knowledge it produces. In the long run, the production of ethnographic knowledge defeats its own purpose if it does not become available and accessible to a wider audience, including the people we study.

It is not our role as anthropologists to be judgmental or paternalistically protective here. We should feel obliged to comply with expressed indigenous wishes for repatriation, regardless of our perceptions of the damage that may result. While we should avoid causing unnecessary damage, we should also be aware that cultures forever change, and that there is no constructive change without decay. We cannot hold the tide from coming in. Where a written record of land rights might permanently change the oral discourse on land rights and the way land rights are passed on from generation to generation, we should not think that we can stop the incursion of literacy and of written records (see also McCall 2000, 81–83). If our research populations express a wish to have access to the data we collected from them, we should comply for two related reasons: (1) an awareness of the existence of our written records may cause as much if not more damage than actual access to them; (2) a lack of compliance to such a request is not just judgmental, it can do damage itself.

We are basically entrusted with other people's knowledge to use and to work with, but our "ownership" remains limited to what we add as interpretation. The communities we study have equal—if not more legitimate—rights to the ethnographic materials we gather. These rights are only mitigated by our obligation to prevent damage deriving from any access we provide to this material. There is a basic truth here that we dare not neglect and cannot hide from. As academics we have earned the reputation of living

in an ivory tower because we seem intent on impressing one another at the expense of excluding people outside of academia from our conversations. If we do not make ourselves accessible and accountable, we will eventually be forced to do so, if not by legal means, then by diminishing prospects for future research.