Current Keyohwhudachun, Petra A'huille *(centre),* **with two of her daughters, Charlotte Munroe** *(left)* **and Seraphine Munroe** *(right),* **moments after opening the Maiyoo Keyoh exhibition opening.** Photograph by James Doyle.

"My Precious"

Museum collections and repatriation of cultural objects

Chad Hellenius, Assistant Curator, The Exploration Place

Repatriation has become something of a buzzword in the media these days; however, it's important to move past empty words when we have these conversations. As Jordan Coble from the Sncewips Heritage Museum summarized, "Repatriation is not just a word, but a call to action."[1]

Some in the general public might be confused as to why it is so important for museums to return cultural objects to the communities to which they belong. After all, aren't museums safeguarding these cultural treasures and doing a valuable service by educating the masses about various cultures around the globe? Well, the truth of the matter is yes—sometimes, sort of—but all too often, the answer is, sadly, a resounding no. More importantly, it's essential to keep in mind how these pieces of people's culture were obtained in the first place and how they are presented to the public.

Museums and colonialism

For many of us who work in museums and love what they can be for the communities they serve, the sad and undeniable reality is that museums have their roots in colonialism. With colonialism came land surveyors, missionaries, anthropologists, fur traders, botanists, and a slew of other scientists and settlers who collected

Indigenous belongings with wild abandon.[2] The justification for creating these collections was based on the notion of salvage ethnography, which specified that Indigenous material culture and stories must be collected for science because they were on the verge of disappearing.[3]

However, motivations for the collection of Indigenous cultural objects can't be viewed as a completely noble scientific exercise for the benefit of humanity. There was definitely fame and fortune to be had by collectors and museums alike. Much of this collecting was occurring at a time when traditional cultural ceremonies were being banned and Canada's residential school system was being enacted.[4] Therefore, museums became a cog in the colonial machine and, in a way, worked to separate Indigenous communities from their traditions.

The Tsik'usdzai (headdress) belonging to the Keyohwhudachun (head of the keyoh) of the Maiyoo Keyoh provides an important lesson on the dark history of the collection of cultural objects in British Columbia. This history illustrates a prime example of the dubious motivations of a notable collector, which has led to the loss of context for this cultural item. This case ultimately raises a very important question. Namely, is the preservation of a cultural object more important than the preservation of the knowledge systems represented by that cultural object? In other words, have museums become so obsessed with conserving things that we've lost focus on what's really important?

The Maiyoo Keyoh

The Dakelh territory of Central British Columbia is divided into keyohs, which predate colonization and the colonial creation of First Nations (formally known as "Indian Bands"). It is important to realize that keyoh owners have never ceded their lands to First Nations, or to provincial and federal governments.

"The keyoh is defined by specific boundaries, ownership, and authority. Ownership of the keyoh rests in the chief or noble, the head of his large extended family that uses the keyoh. The chief (keyohwhudachun) directs and manages the keyoh on behalf of his extended family, which consists of smaller nuclear families."[5]

Our Lady of Good Hope church on Nak'al Bun (Stuart Lake), in the village of Nak'azdli Whut'en. This was Father Morice's base of operations for missionary work. N993.11.1.7096.5

Photograph by Wally West

The Maiyoo Keyoh have a strong attachment to their land and continue to be keepers of Indigenous traditions and the management of their keyoh. The Tsik'usdzai is the physical symbol of hereditary title by the Keyohwhudachun over the territory and the responsibility of stewardship. It is made from 499 two-ply, twisted tresses of human hair from the keyoh's women of nobility, and from whale baleen, depilated skin, plant fibre, sinew, and dentalium shells.

In the mid-nineteenth century, the Keyohwhudachun George A'Huille wore the headdress as a symbol of his title. By the late nineteenth century, Father Morice, an Oblate Mary Immaculate missionary, had acquired it and donated it to what would become the Royal Ontario Museum, (ROM), curiously without acknowledging whom it came from.[6] This may have been intentional, as Father Morice craved power among the Dakelh people he missioned to, and he took it upon himself to settle disputes over territory while ridiculing the traditional political systems of the Dakelh.[7] Morice went so far as to refuse to take confession from participants in balhats (potlatch).[8]

Father Morice also portrayed himself as a leading Americanist ethnographer and explorer of a great wild frontier, with collections of cultural objects and then donations to prestigious museums that likely contributed greatly to his reputation.[9] This was especially true if the missionary could regale the masses with tales of converting the "pagan natives" to Christianity and forcing them to give up paraphernalia of their idolatry.

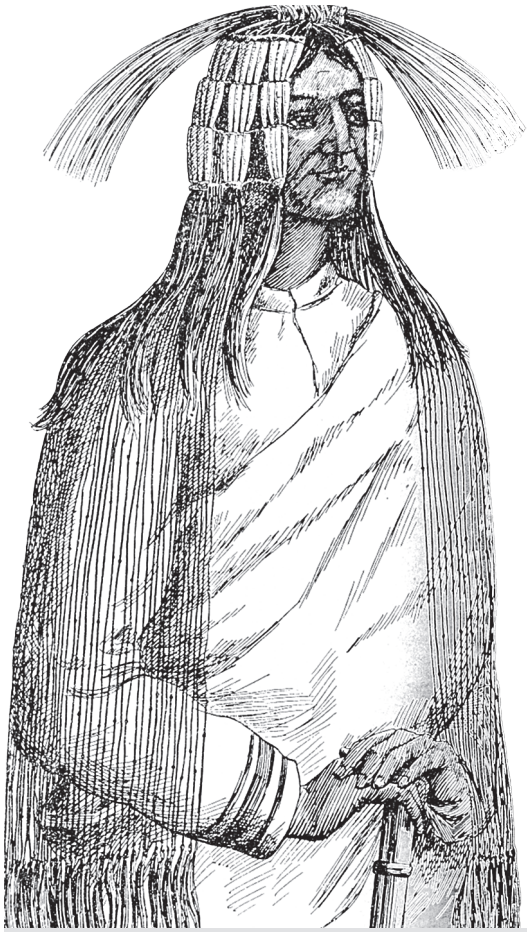


Illustration by Father Morice of George A'huille wearing the headdress in the 1890s.

By removing the headdress from the keyoh and stripping it of its heritage, Father Morice detached it from its context. The stories of people and their stewardship of the land weren't told, and the headdress was reduced to an "artifact" central to the ROM's Indigenous gallery. Beautiful, yes, but it had lost all of its meaning, and the public was deprived of learning about the headdress's significance. Unfortunately, this is a common story in museums worldwide; cultural materials are sanitized of their history and life, reduced to being merely neat things on display without meaning.[10]

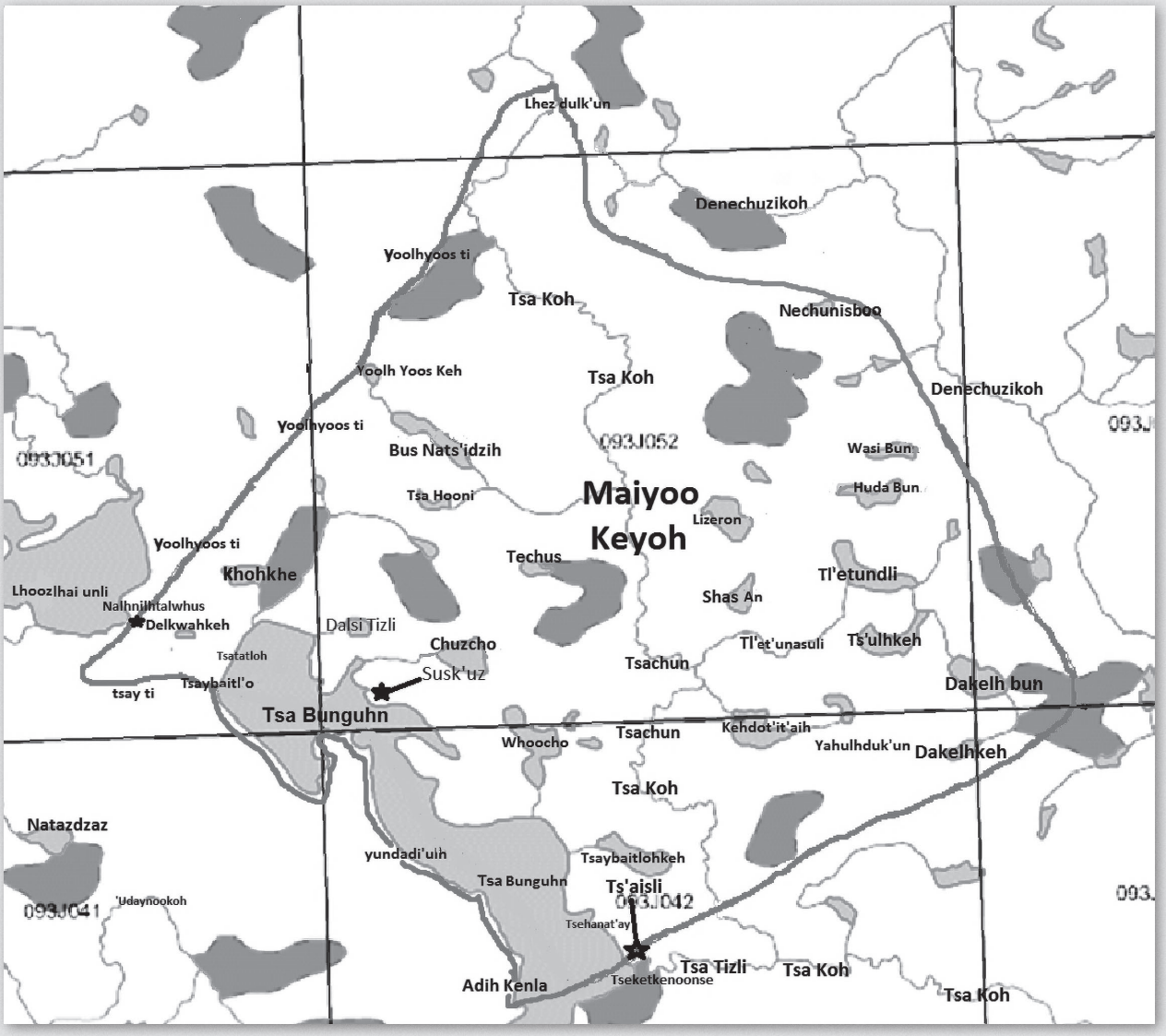
Conclusion

In a perfect world, museums would repatriate collections that have been taken from communities, and it would be up to the community what happens to them. If these objects are to be displayed, it is the community who knows the stories and how to handle and display these items with proper respect. Yes, this may mean *not* wearing gloves.

On the other hand, maybe the object should be used by the community for its intended purpose and allowed to live out its life, and then a new object should be prepared, therefore preserving the knowledge and not our sterilized concept of the thing.[11] Either way, it's the community that the cultural object came from who should be in control of this decision.

At the very least, curators need to open their vaults to communities so that they know what is being held. All too often, cultural objects lack provenance and get relegated to general terms of little meaning, like "subarctic" and "Athapaskan," which lack any real context. By opening up these collections, we can learn more about the stories behind these cultural objects, such as who made them, why they made them, and what they truly mean. It just takes asking, being willing to listen, and readiness to hear that we were wrong.

The title of this article is a bit of an inside joke at The Exploration Place. When we're talking about repatriation and the many museums unwilling to return cultural objects to their communities, we're comparing these curators and their collections to Gollum from J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* and his murderous obsession with the One Ring, and we all know how that story ended.



A map showing the boundaries of the Maiyoo Keyoh with toponyms in Dakelh. Map: Maiyoo Keyoh.

Chad Hellenius is the assistant curator at The Exploration Place and enjoys finding and telling the fascinating stories behind seemingly everyday events and people.

Endnotes

1. Jisgang Nika Collison, Sdaahl K'awaas Lucy Bell, and Lou-ann Neel, *Indigenous Repatriation Handbook* (Royal BC Museum, 2019), 1.
2. See Jane Mt. Pleasant, "Indigenous Perceptions of Biocultural Collections," in *Curating Biocultural Collections: A Handbook*, ed. Jan Salick, Katie Konchar, and Mark Nesbitt (Kew, UK: Royal Botanic Gardens, 2014), 246; and Linda S. Bishop, "Native American Perspectives on Biocultural Collections and Cultural Restoration," in Salick, Konchar, and Nesbitt, *Curating Biocultural Collections*, 259.
3. Annette B. Fromm, "Ethnographic Museums and Intangible Cultural Heritage Return to Our Roots," *Journal of Marine and Island Cultures* 5, no.1 (2016): 90.
4. Collison, K'awaas/Bell, and Neel, *Indigenous Repatriation Handbook*, 7.
5. John Dewhirst, "The Historical and Cultural Contexts of the Central Carrier Keyoh, a Family Ancestral Territory, with Reference to the Maiyoo Keyoh at Great Beaver Lake, B.C." (unpublished manuscript, 2009).
6. Renel Mitchell and Lillian Sam, *Treasures of the Carrier: An Introduction to Carrier Material Culture and Research Findings on the Parks Canada Athapaskan Collection* (Prince George: Fraser-Fort George Museum/ Nak'azdli First Nation, 2002), 43.
7. David Mulhall, *Will to Power: The Missionary Career of Father Morice* (Vancouver, UBC Press, 1986), 49.
8. Mulhall, *Will to Power*, 50.
9. Mulhall, *Will to Power*, 95.
10. Bishop, "Native American Perspectives on Biocultural Collections and Cultural Restoration," in Salick, Konchar, and Nesbitt, *Curating Biocultural Collections*, 260.
11. Miriam Clavir, *Preserving What Is Valued: Museums, Conservation, and First Nations* (Vancouver, UBC Press, 2002).