Knowles, Chantal (2013)
Interwoven histories and new legacies: working with the Tlicho Nation.
In Global Ancestors: Understanding the Shared Humanity of our Ancestors
Published by: Oxbow Books (ISBN: 9781842175330)

http://repository.nms.ac.uk/1098

Deposited on: 13 January 2014
Chapter 10

Interwoven Histories and new Legacies: working with the Tliı̨cẖo Nation

Chantal Knowles

Abstract

This paper discusses the ‘knowledge exchange’ project between National Museums Scotland (NMS) and the Tliı̨cẖo Nation of the Northwest Territories, Canada. This exchange was the result of a six year partnership programme, starting in 2003, between NMS, Tliı̨cẖo Nation; University of Dundee, Scotland, and the Prince of Wales Northern Heritage Centre (PWNHC), Yellowknife. The outputs of the project included exhibitions in Yellowknife, Ottawa and Edinburgh, an outreach programme to three of the four Tliı̨cẖo communities and a published catalogue. In this chapter I will reflect over the project and identify some key principles that guided it and may be useful to facilitate future partnerships with other communities and individuals.

Introduction

The main partner within the project was the Tliı̨cẖo Nation (formerly known as the Dogrib). The Tliı̨cẖo are a part of the wider Dene cultural group and Athapaskan language group and live in the Northwest Territories in the sub-arctic region of Canada. Traditionally nomadic and moving through their territory according to the seasons and the migration of the caribou, the population of around 3,000 currently reside in four communities with residents numbering approximately 200 in the smallest (Wekweti) and nearly 2,000 in the largest (Behchoko/Rae), which is connected by road to Yellowknife, the capital of the Northwest Territories. In 2000 the Tliı̨cẖo signed an Agreement in Principle with the Canadian Government to settle a land rights and self-government claim and, in August 2005, the first Tliı̨cẖo Government was inaugurated. The Tliı̨cẖo were the first indigenous group in Canada to succeed in combining a land claim with self-government. In reviewing the partnership it is important to recognise that the Tliı̨cẖo were at a particularly significant point in their recent history and were in the final stages of their land claim. They therefore took a very specific view of their objects and this may change in the future. Since the end of the project a continuing
dialogue has been necessary to create a shared role in the collections curation and interpretation, which is beneficial to both parties.

Another feature of the project that influenced attitudes and approach from the outset was the context of the historic material in the National Museums Scotland. The National Museums Scotland indigenous Canadian collections include series of Inuit, Inuvialuit and Dene artefacts collected in the mid-nineteenth century and compiled by Hudson Bay Company (HBC) workers, many of whom were Scots or of Scots descent. The collections were sent to the museum, with detailed lists, attributing them to specific communities, with the date and location of collection and, often, with summary descriptions of their purpose or context of use. For the Company men, who were based in remote trading posts in the arctic and sub-arctic, their isolation and the long winters meant collecting – whether natural history specimens or ethnography – became an important vocation or pastime. Some artefacts were made to order, others were models commissioned, whilst others were acquired when the opportunity arose. As a consequence, they provide a rich representation of several communities at a time when the permanent settlement of the region by Europeans, either through the fur trade or church missions, had begun and a period of profound change for the indigenous inhabitants of the region and their traditional way of life was underway. These historic ties between Scotland and the Tliı́chǫ́ are represented in the names of features on the land (the Mackenzie River, Rae – a Tliı́chǫ́ town) and in the surnames of some Tliı́chǫ́ e.g. Mackenzie. This shared history was viewed by all partners as making the collection relevant to both Scots and Tliı́chǫ́ and part of the histories of both regions.

The project was initiated over a long period as interest in the collections gradually gathered pace amongst the Tliı́chǫ́. As they researched their land claim, the Tliı́chǫ́ developed both the Traditional Knowledge Project and Trails of the Ancestors (Legat 2005; Zoe 2005) and, through these projects, discovered that NMS held one of the earliest and largest collections of their ancestral artefacts. In the 1990s, early enquiries from academics, indigenous researchers and curators requested detailed information regarding NMS’s Dene (Athapaskan) collections. Of the 280 sub-arctic objects in our collections, requests tended to focus on 40 Tliı́chǫ́ artefacts. This material, along with related items held by the Smithsonian Institute in Washington, is the earliest collection associated with the Tliı́chǫ́ and, with its contemporaneous documentation, was acknowledged to be of great value and significance by the community, scholars and the museum.

Those early enquiries received by NMS regarding the Tliı́chǫ́ artefacts came from individuals working with or employed by the Tliı́chǫ́. Allice Legat, employed by the Band Council (the governing body of the community) as an anthropologist and Director of the Traditional Knowledge Project, worked with elders to record traditional stories regarding land use. This was key to documenting oral histories for future generations, but also helped substantiate the Tliı́chǫ́ land claim. Legat introduced Gavin Renwick, a PhD student from Dundee University, and he worked with the Tliı́chǫ́ regarding their concept of a traditional home. Further correspondence was received from Tom Andrews, Territorial Archaeologist at the Prince of Wales Northern Heritage Centre, in Yellowknife. In essence, it was the Tliı́chǫ́ and their research partners that approached the museum to work collaboratively and NMS’s willingness to openly discuss various suggestions for potential projects that enabled the partnership to be formed and the work to flourish.
The museum has always held these collections in high esteem, both as important representations of a nascent museum’s early collecting policy and as a testament to Scotland’s central role in the work force of the fur trade companies (Kerr 1953). In 1974, a partnership between the Canadian Museum of Civilization (then the Museum of Man) and NMS led to the touring exhibition *Athapaskans: Strangers of the North*. Dene collections were exhibited in venues in Canada and Scotland along with early twentieth century material from the Canadian national collections. The publication of a catalogue for the exhibition (Clarke and Idiens 1974), and a subsequent catalogue documenting all Dene material held in Edinburgh (Idiens 1975), put information about the collection in the public domain. Thus a partnership initiated from groups external to the museum was only possible as the museum had already researched and made public this part of their collections. Without this information being in the public domain it is less likely that various researchers would have found the collection and drawn it to the attention of the Tličho.

An opportunity for Tličho elders, scholars, teachers and translators to visit the museum arose in 2002 when Edinburgh hosted the 9th International Conference on Hunting and Gathering Societies. The delegates participated in the conference and visited the museum to see the collection. Two delegations attended, the first led by Legat consisted of contributors to, and employees of, the *Traditional Knowledge Project* accompanied by Gavin Renwick. The second comprised Tom Andrews, Ingrid Kritsch, Rosa Mantla and Karen Wright Davies; their interest was more broadly associated with the entire Dene collections but with special interest in Tličho, Gwich’in and Slavey material.

The excitement over the range, quality and age of the collection inspired and opened a dialogue about the possibility for all Tličho to have the opportunity for a similar level of access. Given the distances involved this could only be achieved through the loan of artefacts for display to an, as yet, unspecified venue. It was clear at this early stage that interest was high and community engagement with the collection was on the agenda. The timing was significant as many research journeys were converging and the settlement of the land claim was about to be realised. It was a moment for reflection, celebration and looking beyond the boundaries of the Tličho landscape that had been a major focus during the compilation of land claim documentation. With these hopes and aspirations in mind, the Tličho delegates returned to Canada and began to formulate ideas, seek opportunities and funding and to set up an advisory body. At this stage, ideas were broad and unfocussed and included temporary exhibitions in all communities, schools exchanges, online blogs and replicas. The common theme of all these ideas was that they would provide an opportunity to bring elders and youth together to discuss objects; thus using objects as a way of passing on cultural knowledge about the past, the land and the Tličho way of life. The emphasis was on physical access to the material past and knowledge exchange between generations.

**Historic encounters, modern partners**

In order to understand how the partnership developed and the basis on which it was forged we have to reflect upon the historical relationships which led to the compilation
of the collection more than a century ago. These relationships between Tlı̨chǫ and Europeans influence the assessment of the collection by the museum and the Tlı̨chǫ today. Indeed, the shadow of early entanglements between representatives of two nations was cast over the whole project and influenced the terms of the partnership and project outcomes.

Regular European contact with the Dene began with Alexander Mackenzie’s canoe voyage through the region in 1789. This voyage marked the beginning of the European encroachment into the land and traditional life of the Dene. Mackenzie, an employee of the Hudsons Bay Company, paved the way for the establishment of trading forts. Yet, for the Tlı̨chǫ, direct engagement would not come until after 1821 when forts were founded further north. The establishment of Fort Rae in 1852, within the Tlı̨chǫ traditional land, saw regular direct contact occur for the first time (Helm 2000).

Dene engagement with the fur traders after this time was voluntary, if unequal, as up until this period they had lived without the need for trade (Helm 2000, 8). The land provided for all their needs. Until World War II, only traders and missionaries built permanent structures. These provided a loci where Tlı̨chǫ could congregate and trade at certain times of the year, thus coming into regular contact with Europeans. During the rest of the year people were highly mobile, travelling in kin-related communities who moved seasonally between hunting or fishing sites.

The nature of the historic acquisition and acceptance of legal title to the collection does not preclude a stake in the collection by the descendants of the makers. The circumstances under which this collection was acquired influenced attitudes to the collection today. These were not contested artefacts but items freely traded by the Tlı̨chǫ in order to procure trade goods, particularly metal tools which eased their life on the land. I highlight the following to emphasise that HBC relationships with Dene were complex and dealings between the groups were not always honest or fair. There was a sense that the NMS collection had been compiled through an open transaction, where ownership had passed legitimately from the Tlı̨chǫ owner/maker into the hands of the museum. Additionally, the NMS collection consists mainly of utilitarian items such as tools, clothing, domestic items; it does not include material that was regarded as sacred or restricted. These factors may well have led to the acceptance of ownership resting with the museum and the view that the manner in which it was acquired was free and fair.

Kramer (2004) has discussed how physical repatriation of artefacts can have unexpected and, potentially, unsatisfactory outcomes for source communities. Legal frameworks that enshrine artefact ownership as property and objects as alienable, even when enacted in order to regain control of an artefact by a community, can lead to unexpected consequences which transform objects. As an alternative, Kramer uses case studies to show how ‘figurative repatriation’ can provide a challenging alternative; bringing indigenous artists into museum spaces to provide their own interpretations and messages for the museum viewer which may jar with, or contest, existing museum interpretations. In working with the Tlı̨chǫ on knowledge repatriation similar forces were at play. The Tlı̨chǫ were able to assert their emerging national identity through the museum displays. They used traditional museum means (object labels, panels and images) and encouraged the museum curators and academics to lead the display designs
10. Interwoven Histories and New Legacies

and methods of interpretation, using their knowledge of museum audiences in order to pitch interpretation appropriately. They were able to use the authoritative museum space to emphasise their cultural identity and their national identity. The use of both historic and modern artefacts in the Edinburgh exhibition (including the published land claim documents) emphasised the continuing presence of the Tli’ch’o on their land and their right to it.

In order to manage the process, and give equal voice to all stakeholders a Steering Group was formed. The Steering Group was mandated to consider the practicalities of taking forward the partnership project. The Group comprised John B. Zoe, the Chief Negotiator for the Dogrib Treaty 11 Council, and Rosa Mantla, member of the Educational Board, who together represented the Tli’ch’o communities. Gavin Renwick represented the University of Dundee and provided a valuable physical link between NWT and Scotland as he travelled several times annually between the two regions; Tom Andrews and Joanna Bird represented the Prince of Wales Northern Heritage Centre, the Territorial Museum in Yellowknife and I represented National Museums Scotland. Judy Thompson from the Canadian Museum of Civilisation in Ottawa was co-opted as an academic expert in the region’s material culture. Between the members was a range of experience in developing successful partnership projects with museums and working with historic objects. Tom Andrews and John B. Zoe had collaborated on the Ida’a trail, moose skin canoe project and the caribou skin lodge, which included the repatriation of the only extant Tli’ch’o caribou skin lodge from the University of Iowa to NWT (http://www.pwnhc.ca/exhibits/lodge/pageone.html). Judy Thompson had collaborated with Suzan Marie on two projects which revived the techniques of making watape baskets and babiche bags (2002, 2004). This track record of successful partnership working was essential for developing proposals and successful funding applications.

The composition and weighting of the Group was important to instil confidence and trust between participants and within the communities. The success of previous projects listed above meant trust had already been established between communities and Group members. Conversations were, therefore, predicated on a track record of working together. Although NMS was a new partner, in engaging with representatives of previous and successful projects we were affirming our willingness to pursue similar goals. Meetings with elders allowed us to build up further trust and engagement. Through introducing the museum, its history and role in commissioning the historic collection, and by explaining the role of museums as well as their systems of knowledge that underpin the care and curation of artefacts, we were able to provide elders with the necessary context to discuss the aims of the project and any constraints.

The primary aim of the project as discussed earlier was to temporarily reunite objects and source communities in the region where the objects were first acquired. This was distinct from previous approaches which had brought selected individuals to museums (Marie and Thompson 2002; 2004). The main thrust, therefore, gradually developed as an exhibition to be shown at the territorial museum in Yellowknife, combined with a smaller travelling exhibit that would be placed in each community. The timetable was fixed to provide the inaugural temporary exhibition for the newly refurbished museum in Yellowknife. NMS already had experience of designing and producing travelling exhibits with integral cases; however, the historic value and rarity of the Tli’ch’o
collection, the remoteness of the communities and the lack of available venues meant that we had to think differently about the parameters of the community exhibits.

Working practice had to overcome the challenges of working over two continents, as well as working with a community in a physically remote part of Canada. The members of the Steering Group were spread over a wide geographical area and, as a result, never met in person. Instead, consultation was carried out to ensure all members contributed to the process and were able to advise and approve ideas. A core team, comprising Tom Andrews, Gavin Renwick and Chantal Knowles, worked closely in person to develop and take forward the project. In addition to the Steering Group input, round table meetings were organised in 2003 and 2005 between NMS and elders. Underpinning this work was regular dialogue that was maintained between Andrews, Renwick and the key Tłı̨chǫ representatives, Zoe and Mantla. Other individuals were co-opted into the process to provide specific sets of expertise. In particular, conservation needs and considerations were discussed by Charles Stable (NMS) and Rosalee Scott (PWNHC) (2008). Wendy Stephenson, head of education at PWNHC, was instrumental in creating the very successful outreach programme which eventually replaced the community exhibitions strand of the project, as conservation and security concerns made these exhibits too costly to implement.

In order to re-establish connections and confirm NMS’s commitment to the partnership it was important that I visited the communities. Over the duration of the project I made an annual visit to the region to conduct face-to-face discussions. My first visit, in September 2003, consisted of several media interviews, a public presentation in Yellowknife and a visit to two communities. The media interviews focussed on the absence of the objects, the length of time it would take to bring them to Canada for display and that their return would not be permanent. In many respects, this interview tactic was expected yet took no account of the particularity of the project, the aims and desires of which had been expressed cogently by both the Tłı̨chǫ and the museum. In response to frequent questions regarding repatriation, raised by non-Tłı̨chǫ, indigenous reporters, the Tłı̨chǫ publicly expressed in their interviews that this was not an aim of the partnership. The importance of this first visit for the partners was that it demonstrated the real commitment of NMS to the project and our desire to explore and discuss openly the different possible outcomes with the communities.

The two community visits were of particular significance. In Rae, we met members of the Dogrib Treaty 11 Council and Grand Chief Joe Rabesca. In Gameti, Gavin Renwick organised a meeting with elders with Tony Rabesca, acting as interpreter. The elders gave their time, knowledge and advice at this meeting freely, to show their commitment to the aims of the partnership. This was a significant gesture as elders are normally paid to participate in knowledge sharing activities. The elders were introduced to the project through an initial presentation of the museum, the collection and an outline of the project’s intentions and aspirations. The elders responded to the images of the artefacts, provoking a lively discussion amongst them. Elders voiced concern regarding potential damage to artefacts if they travelled long distances and requested that any objects that posed any anxiety, regarding their condition and conservation, should not be brought over as part of the exhibition, as long-term preservation continued to be their main concern. These community visits, combined with various meetings, helped
to focus my work on behalf of NMS. I understood that there was an openness and flexibility regarding the outcomes of the project that went beyond the views of the Steering Group and reflected the wider community. In practical terms, it had become clear that an NMS conservator needed to become involved, to visit the region to view potential venues for exhibitions and look at the wider implications of transporting objects to remote areas with a specific climate (Stable and Scott 2008).

Reflections on knowledge exchange

During the course of the partnership many different outcomes were considered. The specific outputs were eventually determined due to care and conservation needs, priorities of the community, staff time and funding. Funding for the exhibition was gained from the Canadian Museum Assistance Programme, supplemented by sponsorship – in the form of free shipping and air travel – from Canadian North airline, as well as travel and research funding from National Museums Scotland. Other state funding, through grants, supported the associated publication and outreach programmes. Staff at PWNHC were instrumental in raising this money in order to realise the many ambitions and outcomes of the partnership. In Yellowknife, interpretation was left to Tom Andrews, Gavin Renwick and others to compile and they used quotes from many Dene in the exhibition text. Their role was vital, as they were in daily contact with the Tłı̨chǫ when necessary, understood the museum audience in Yellowknife and the likely interest from other local indigenous communities. In order to give other communities a sense of the range of collections in NMS some non-Tłı̨chǫ material, including a Slavey dress and Gwich’in outfit, were included in the exhibition; this framed the Tłı̨chǫ material as part of a larger collection with wider regional scope. It indicated that there were potential opportunities for other communities to undertake collaborative projects, with regard to their collections held in NMS.

In Yellowknife, as the majority of visitors were local and were viewing material from a region known to them, the focus was on the object detail, particularly for obsolete artefacts, and the history of the collection. In contrast, in Edinburgh, NMS led the interpretation and combined historical and modern material to show a community, both then and now, and the strength of continuity of that community on the land. In addition, the museum was able to present the Tłı̨chǫ story of self-government and land claim, which resonated with a Scottish audience that less than a decade ago had gained devolved government. The Steering Group looked to NMS, with its knowledge of its audience, to pitch the interpretation appropriately. NMS looked to Tom Andrews and John B. Zoe to proof and approve the text in the exhibition (Figure 10.1). Judy Thompson also contributed, providing expert advice on the collections through her knowledge of comparative material and her own research in the region.

In reflecting on the project there are two key factors: knowledge and its exchange and flexibility, a willingness to grow the project together, abandoning goals where they became unacceptable to one or other party and exploring new goals where a need or desire arose. This flexibility created greater opportunities for sharing our systems of knowledge enabling each community (the Tłı̨chǫ and museum) to have
greater understanding of the objects, their history, their care and their long-term future. Understanding these different views of the artefacts enriched the artefacts in the museum’s care for both communities.

Clearly the Tličho had a deep cultural knowledge that related to many of the artefacts yet, nevertheless, they were eager to know what information the museum records held. It was incumbent upon me to explain the historical context of the documentation, its source and the fact that it was only an interpretation of events and objects at a particular time. In this way, we exchanged and evaluated the knowledge that each party was willing to share; creating a greater depth of interpretative material for the museum and broadening the Tličho’s knowledge of their history, hitherto experienced through the oral histories and the land, rather than material markers (Figure 10.2).

Another strand to the knowledge exchange was the role of the museums. At each event or venue – whether elder’s meeting, public lecture or school visit – I outlined the role of the museum. It was museum practice that had led to the acquisition and preservation of the material and it was the curatorial and conservation praxis that would enable their safe return for exhibition, and through the outreach programming, an intimate engagement with the community. Through museum knowledge and its skills of care and preservation this could take place without jeopardising similar opportunities for future generations. The responsibility incumbent on the museum – to provide access yet continue to preserve – was at the forefront of many community engagements and the community members looked to the museum to guide discussions and decision-making, when considering use of the artefacts in this partnership and preservation for future generations.

**Legacies**

This partnership was of fixed duration and with a series of outcomes, whilst the funding was linked to specific components. The conclusion of the project came with the closing of the National Museums Scotland exhibition in September 2008; this closure marked an end to a period of intensive engagement with our partners and, in particular, with the Tličho Nation. It also marked an end to a period of intensive activity for the objects through research, conservation, exhibition and outreach. The finality of the closure of the exhibition did not terminate the relationships that the museum had built; rather it concluded a period of regular dialogue and ‘knowledge exchange’. We now have a more informed community regarding NMS collections, its artefacts and the museum’s role in the care of artefacts and in providing access to them. NMS has a greater understanding of each object and its importance to the community today. A catalogue online and in print creates a tangible legacy for both (Andrews 2006).

Although regular face-to-face contact is concluded and the Steering Group disbanded, the result is that the museum and the Tličho now have a set of contacts and links that enable ongoing dialogue, should the need arise. The Tličho have an actual rather than a nominal stake in the collection and decision-making. With curating ethnographic collections, there is always an acknowledgement of a source community’s stake in the collection. However, until a community has been contacted and a dialogue established
(something that can be difficult considering the distances involved), this stake is intangible, as the community’s opinions and attitudes are not yet known. If contact can be established and a framework for dialogue created, the source community’s involvement becomes something that is not only acknowledged but undertaken through continued consultation and collaboration. For example, in 2011 NMS opened
a series of new *World Cultures* galleries, which include Tličho material, and the Tličho are represented and their opinions were sought and digested, in order to continue to represent the Tličho in a way that they recognise and approve. The widespread use of email and access to the internet in all of the Tličho communities means that this dialogue, based as it is on an established relationship, can be relatively swift and inexpensive.

Not all debates on collections focus on ownership in terms of property law. Rather, what may arise is how ownership is understood in relation to access, who does the collection specifically relate to, what does it represent and who has the rights to interpret and present it to non-Tličho audiences. The museum, in understanding the collection in terms of Scottish law and museum practice (that we legally own the artefacts and have established codes of practice as to how they can be used and cared for), could have taken a stance that created an unequal relationship predicated on very different legal frameworks and cultural notions of ownership. Yet, at no point, did NMS seek to establish this legal right or impose a framework for the project. Instead, these issues were worked through by both partnerships as ‘knowledge exchange’; we both wished to continue to see the objects preserved in perpetuity and both hoped to learn from our respective cultures (museum and Tličho), in order to establish a greater wealth of knowledge associated with the collections. Some of that knowledge would remain exclusively Tličho, to be discussed within their communities, yet other information could be re-connected with the artefacts themselves, through enhanced documentation and be made known to a wider public. Therefore ownership was understood in more prosaic terms, which deemed the museum’s role as custodian for the objects, holding them in trust for its multiple stakeholders (in addition to the Tličho this would include visitors, researchers and the Scottish public) yet, nevertheless, acknowledging the unique right of the Tličho to be involved with any decision-making in regard to the artefacts.

Whilst the museum’s open approach was key to establishing trust and dialogue, the real success of the project was due to Tličho involvement, led by individuals from a coherent and cohesive community. The Tličho’s recent negotiation of the land claim with the Canadian government meant that they had a track record and systems in place for enabling individuals to represent the community. This is not always the case (and may not be the case in the future) but both Rosa Mantla and John B. Zoe held the confidence of the community to make decisions on their behalf. NMS, in turn, had to be comfortable with whom it was working with and confident that they did indeed represent the community. In addition, it was important to be a presence in the wider community through elder’s meetings, schools visits and, finally, the outreach programme. Public lectures and media interviews also provided an opportunity for the museum to respond to wider issues (e.g. repatriation, return of artefacts and ownership) and putting the Tličho collection and partnership project into a wider context that interested other Dene communities in the region. These events put a face and voice to the museum and encouraged questions.

In this way the museum has established a working partnership, within which we have been encouraged to continue to care for and display the Tličho collection, but we cannot predict the future. Relationships between the museum and the community follow a specific form at this particular moment in time. Whether the museum, or the Tličho’s, attitudes and approach will remain the same for the next five or fifty years
is unpredictable, as both are dynamic entities with shifting priorities. As such, no partnership project – even with specific outcomes – can be seen as a conclusion or end point for these collections.

**Bibliography**


