**CASE STUDY TWO:**

*Blackfoot Collections in UK Museums: Reviving Relationships through Artefacts – International Research Network*

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![Project partners with the shirt of Issapóómahksika (Chief Crowfoot).](image)  
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**Project background:**  
This network brings together Blackfoot people from Canada and the US with UK museums in order to generate and exchange knowledge about Blackfoot artifacts. As few Blackfoot people have had the opportunity to research these historic collections, the network will enable exploratory discussions about their future care and will develop a model for further culturally-engaged research. It involves a series of reciprocal meetings over two years. Blackfoot cultural specialists visited the
University of Cambridge Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology (MAA) and the Royal Albert Memorial Museum, Exeter (RAMM) in November 2013 and the UK-based project partners will visit each of the four Blackfoot nations (Siksika, Piikani, Kainai, and the Blackfeet) in the summer of 2014 to continue the dialogue, and discuss plans for future projects with a wider range of people.

The project has emerged from long term field work with the Blackfoot nations concerning issues of access to historic collections, repatriation and cross-cultural curatorship (Brown 2001, 2013, 2014; Brown et al 2006; Brown and Peers 2013). During these projects Blackfoot colleagues expressed interest in collections from their people in the UK and their wish to open dialogue with appropriate museum staff. In 2011, at a conference related to the Blackfoot Shirts Project, co-directed by Alison Brown and Laura Peers of the Pitt Rivers Museum, staff from MAA and RAMM met with Blackfoot delegates to discuss shared goals and the possibility of applying for funding to support an international visit. Based on our colleagues’ experience of making group visits to North American museums, we addressed topics such as who could represent the different Blackfoot ceremonial societies, representation across the four Blackfoot nations, and the physical and emotional challenges of undertaking visits to museums in unfamiliar cities. We also discussed the constraints on museums, for example, pressure on staff resources, size of available study space, etc. Having talked through these concerns, Alison Brown then researched funding options, and we eventually submitted an international network grant application to the Leverhulme Trust.

Aims and outcomes:
The network’s primary goal is to develop a model for collective cross-cultural curatorship that actively responds to the challenge of geographical and cultural distance. It also aims to build capacity within the museum sector by better understanding the cultural considerations involved in curating historic artefacts. Our activities include:

- Accurately documenting Blackfoot collections in the MAA and RAMM;
- Incorporating Blackfoot knowledge into databases and advising staff on traditional care;
- Discussing how the MAA and RAMM collections might contribute to Blackfoot goals for knowledge transfer and cultural revitalization;
- Generating dialogue about future collaborative research and exhibition projects;
- Developing methodologies for working internationally with multiple indigenous groups.

Our longer term goals are to extend the core network to include other European museums and to provide a ground-breaking model for research partnerships that actively involve indigenous peoples. As this network is experimental, however, future funding applications will only proceed with the support of Blackfoot network partners.

Are/were you merely providing access / information or is this a project with mutual aims and outcomes? We are exchanging information, rather than simply providing it. Our museum partners are planning to use the discussions to address how the collections can be
better cared for culturally, and interpreted in a way that reflects multiple points of view, whereas our Blackfoot partners wish to use the meetings to widen awareness within their own communities about overseas collections. We anticipate that our aims will differ as the project involves three institutions and four First Nations. While we do have overarching aims and expectations, these may shift as the project develops.

**How were the aims/outcomes agreed?**
The initial aims were discussed in person in 2011 during a meeting held during the Blackfoot Shirts Project conference. Brown took responsibility for coordinating the funding application, and sent drafts to all partners for input. Discussions with partners in the US and Canada were mostly by telephone.

**Who are/were the lead personnel on the project?**
Brown has overall responsibility for managing the project, and is assisted by a Network Facilitator (Dr. Peter Loovers, a Postdoctoral Research Fellow in the Department of Anthropology, University of Aberdeen). At the MAA and the RAMM, the curatorial staff responsible for the Blackfoot collections are the named partners (Dr. Anita Herle and Tony Eccles respectively). Each of the Blackfoot partner organisations has named an individual, who will host meetings about the project in his community. They are: Allan Pard (Piikani); Herman Yellow Old Woman (Siksika); Narcisse Blood (Kainai); John Murray (Blackfeet).

**Who are/ were you working with (a whole community, a selected group or an individual)? Please describe:**
We are working with four individual nations: Siksika, Piikani, Kainai in Alberta, Canada, and the Blackfeet in Montana, United States. Collectively, these nations are known as the Blackfoot peoples. Blackfoot partners self-selected which individuals would travel to the UK, to ensure that persons with transfer rights to a wide range of Blackfoot knowledge disciplines participated. Two representatives from each of the Blackfoot partner organisations attended the UK meetings, and we were joined by family members of two of our group, both of whom have transfer rights to a range of the materials we viewed. For the Canada/US meetings, Blackfoot partners will invite other people from their communities, as appropriate. It should be emphasised that although Blackfoot people frequently work together on museum/cultural projects, each nation has slightly different requirements and, due to the long term effects of colonial policies, there are differences in opinion regarding how to address cultural and ceremonial matters. It is for this reason that our partners are responsible for deciding how best to host the reciprocal visits of the UK team and to determine how and if future projects may take place.
Are you clear about why you are working with this selected group and with their role as representative of others? Please comment:

In Alberta The First Nations Sacred Ceremonial Objects Repatriation Act and the Blackfoot First Nations Sacred Ceremonial Objects Repatriation Regulation define who is a First Nation. Each First Nation has named a society to represent it. In the US, many federally recognized tribes have a Tribal Heritage Preservation Officer, responsible for heritage matters on reservation/tribal trust lands. Our partners thus have the recognized tribal and legal authority to work with museums. Moreover, each individual named on the grant has ceremonial authority. We acknowledge that there are other leaders in each community, but are relying on our partners to involve those individuals as appropriate. We also acknowledge that our partners have extensive experience of working with museum and heritage organizations, having been involved in such work for decades, and are therefore in a better position than ourselves to suggest who the most appropriate groups/individuals would be with whom to develop any subsequent projects.

Assessment of authority: why are/were you dealing with this individual or group; how are/were they empowered to speak on behalf of a community? Are/were you satisfied with their ‘credentials’?

See above.

Partners – who are/were they? (Please provide website addresses if possible):
University of Aberdeen (http://www.abdn.ac.uk/)
Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, University of Cambridge (http://maa.cam.ac.uk/maa/)
Royal Albert Memorial Museum, Exeter City Council (http://www.rammuseum.org.uk/)
Blackfoot Crossing Historical Foundation, Siksika Nation
Long Time Trail Society, Piikani Nation
Mookakin Culture and Heritage Foundation, Kainai Nation
Blackfeet Tribal Historic Preservation Office, Blackfeet Nation
Is/was it a museum-to-museum; cultural centre project?
It is a mix.

What are/were the budgets and other resources? (e.g. grant awards, dedicated staff, sponsorship):
The Leverhulme Trust has provided funding of £50,731.

What are/were the timescales?
The project formally began on 1 September 2013 and runs for 24 months.

Ethical considerations – describe what these involved in relation to the project and how they were agreed/adhered to?
The University of Aberdeen has an ethical review process which all funding applications must pass before they are submitted. The Blackfoot also have cultural protocols which must be respected in relation to the handling of ceremonial materials. The network has been developed in a way that respects Blackfoot cultural protocols and we emphasise that each of the four Blackfoot nations has different requirements and ways of providing guidance on cultural matters. We also note that traditional structures for advising on ceremonial/spiritual matters, as well as advisory committees such as Elders Groups, exist within each of the nations; the individuals concerned are active in supporting projects such as this network. The named network partners and visitors are all senior ceremonial leaders within their respective
nations and have the traditional transferred knowledge rights to advise on the care of Blackfoot materials and to handle these items on behalf of their communities. We wish to respect Blackfoot cultural protocols as the network develops, and so rather than create a formal steering committee with oversight for the network as a whole (which was suggested by the application process), we prefer to work within a local Blackfoot framework in which decisions affecting each community are guided by advice from Elders within each community.

Please also describe any compromises, surprises and how the project may have been transformed through the engagement:
We are too early in the project to comment.

What things would you consider if embarking on a similar project again?
One of the main considerations has involved time allocated for the visit of the Blackfoot partners to the UK. We built in as much time as was possible, given that our colleagues were, in some cases, taking unpaid leave from work, or had commitments that prevented them from being away from home for a longer period. We also built in lengthy rest periods each day. Nonetheless, the visit was emotionally and physically demanding, and was very difficult for all participants as a result. We do not have a solution to this problem, though we continue to think about it. Given the nature of the material that might have been located in the collections, our colleagues had to travel as a large group, but perhaps the main lesson for us all is that we need, as a sector, to better appreciate the level of commitment involved in such visits by our colleagues. It is also important for museums to acknowledge the amount of staff time that needs to be allocated to host such visits and develop productive and sustainable relations with originating communities.

It is too early to say more at this point, but the project has allowed us to draw upon lessons learned from previous projects. Three general points can be highlighted here: 1) be cautious how language is used. Terms such as “our collections”, “expert” etc., can be misinterpreted; 2) all project partners should be treated with equal consideration, regardless of whether they are a community partner, or another institutional partner. 3) it is important to be clear about the goals and expectations of all partners involved in the network.

What things would you avoid?
We are too early in the project to comment in depth.

References to publications relating to project (online/in print):
Three co-authored journal articles are to be produced as the Network project develops.

Bibliography

