MEG Guidance notes on Ethical Approaches in Museum Ethnography
Revised September 2016 by Antonia Lovelace and Emma Martin

1 Introduction
The aim of these guidance notes is to inform the conduct of workers in museums who have responsibility for world collections, to create an awareness of areas of particular concern when working with such broad-ranging material. These guidelines should also be helpful to those with general or particular responsibility for such collections, such as museum trustees, collection managers, conservators, registrars, stores managers, learning and access officers, designers and marketing staff.

The notes are designed to help reduce potential sources of ambiguity in consideration of ethical issues, particularly those which relate to the histories and sensitivities of originating communities abroad and local migrant communities of international origin in the UK. They are intended to encourage good practice in project planning, policy development and responding to specific situations, rather than being prescriptive. There is often no easy resolution to ethical issues raised in everyday museum work but it is important to highlight problems and suggest possible courses of action as well as to provide further sources of advice for particular cases. These notes include a commentary on the newly revised Museums Association Code of Ethics (November 2015) and a current bibliography. MEG sees the guidelines as outlining an approach which can be used, even by non-specialists, to support appropriate planning and procedures, eg concerning both practical issues (such as storage) and wider perspectives (such as acknowledging the rights of originating communities).

2 General statement
Older Ethnographic or World collections have usually come into UK museums as part of a broader colonial history with its own well known disparities of power and attitudes of prejudice. The Museum Ethnographers Group was set up in the 1970s to combat these prejudices and stress the importance of working with originating communities to rejuvenate collections and displays. With the global reach of digital information in the 21st century comes additional responsibilities for museums to represent and involve the interests of descendants of the originating communities across the web as well as inside UK museums. We also have a responsibility to represent the breadth of diversity reflected in our own local communities, and the complexity of its history.

Over the last 300 years or so, many originating communities have been physically separated from their material heritage, much of which now exists in museums far from those communities. For them, aspects of history, heritage, identity, and elements of culture, can be embodied within artefacts. Even knowledgeable and skilled elders who retain cultural knowledge comment that working with historic artefacts is like interviewing ancestors, whose lives and even greater knowledge are bound up in the artefacts being studied. For such communities to go forward into the future knowing who they are, they must understand their histories and must have access to their material heritage. Reviving craft techniques through the study of historic collections may be tied to revival of language, or cultural knowledge about harvesting plant materials, or spiritual knowledge required to
understand and use artefacts. For these communities, access to museums and to collections is not simply a desirable social issue; it is a matter of survival. Museum collections of world cultures thus represent a tremendous accumulation of knowledge and a highly significant and often unique resource. The curatorship of such collections presents great challenges and opportunities, a foremost responsibility being the need to take into account the sensibilities of originating communities and local migrant representatives. A good level of cultural relations and consultancy with these communities is of great importance. Very often originating communities do not have easy access to aspects of their material culture and art held in museums. It is important that access should be provided as freely and cheaply as possible so that, for instance, communities may use those collections to develop or recreate their identities and to include material from UK collections in projects to maintain or revive art and craft traditions.

Consultation with originating communities may also relate to the acquisition, documentation, storage and use of old and new world collections. The manifold relationships between present-day members of originating communities and the great wealth of their heritage which is being looked after by museums in the UK are constantly evolving. Our commitment to developing and revising these guidance notes is a way of acknowledging and responding to this continuous state of change.

3 Elements in the MA Code of Ethics of particular relevance to museum
Ethnography [Please have the MA pdf open as you read below]

1. Public engagement and public benefit

1.1 Involve culturally relevant contacts and experts in the research, development, presentation, and evaluation of your projects. Where possible co-curation is an ideal to aim for, for example Papua New Guinea Phd student Andrew Moutu, now director of the National Museum in Port Moresby, worked with Anita Herle on the Sepik exhibition and booklet, 2004 at MAA Cambridge. The Benin curator Joseph Eboreime’s was a guest curator for the redisplay of Benin pieces in the Horniman’s Africa gallery of 1999. Australian Aborigine artists and community representatives were involved in the Indigenous Australia exhibition at the British Museum and broader project for the later exhibition in Canberra, 2015.

1.2 Take advice on balancing different political and religious interpretations of historical and current issues. For example from Sharing of Faiths groups or UK wide faith councils as well as particular local representatives for a city museum faith project.

1.3 Try to make your interpretation multi-voiced to give a range of opinions within the framework of your organisations own values

1.4 Check information for accuracy with a range of sources

1.5 Give credit on acknowledgement and interpretation texts and in collection databases to the different sources, local and international who have helped with particular projects.

1.6 A regular review of the cultural make up of your local community audience will allow you to highlight new avenues of engagement and revisit previous community partners to keep them involved.

2. Stewardship of collections
2.1 Aim for a regular improvement in digital access and balance the physical requirements of preservation with the need to physically examine and display in order to engage, share and research. Consider international tours of key world exhibits as part of partnerships for better long term understanding. For example the Blackfoot shirt project undertaken by Laura Peers at Pitt Rivers Museum Oxford with Alison Brown and others, go to https://www.isca.ox.ac.uk/about-us/staff/academic/prof-laura-peers/

Be aware of current practice and developments in the treatment, storage and publication of human remains and sacred items. These may also be the subject of repatriation requests. The Human Tissue Act also requires an audit of human remains and moves towards appropriate storage. Develop a human remains policy and regular meetings on this issue. For example Liverpool Museums has its human remains policy online at http://www.liverpoolmuseums.org.uk/about/corporate/policies/human-remains-policy.doc

2.2 Be aware of local and international responsibilities when collecting. It is good practice to deposit physical copies of the results of fieldwork, list of objects collected, photographs taken, etc with representatives of the community in which the fieldwork was carried out, local museums, and with the relevant national museums or research centres, as well as making an agreed selection available digitally on the web. Parties need to agree copyright of designs of objects, and photographs and conditions of shared use. Contemporary project often set up facebook pages for the sharing of photos and information, for example the Fijian Art project undertaken by MAA Cambridge, Sainsbury Research Institute UEA and others used https://www.facebook.com/fijianartproject

2.5 Due diligence is especially important when considering items collected during periods of war, sacred items or human remains

2.7 Have a published policy on repatriation and be aware of the history of this in the UK, and current debates. A well-published example of repatriation in the UK is the return of the Lakota Ghost Dance shirt from Glasgow Museums in 1999, which took several years to process. A replica Ghost Dance shirt was presented to the museum to display and use to tell the story.

2.8 Try to take part in any regional or UK wide reviews of particular cultural material and be aware of who the national experts are for particular areas of world culture and history

3. Individual & institutional integrity

3.1 Avoiding any private interest / public interest conflicts of interest in terms of collecting and any trading. If you have a personal collection or are making one clear this with your public institution first and when offered gifts by students or project partners explain you will be offering them to your work, and cannot just keep them for yourself or your family.

3.6 Sponsorship offers from trading and energy multinationals provoke well-known ethical debates which may have a particular currency in a specific area of the world you might be working with. Sponsorship from governments with poor corruption and human rights records also brings with it an ethical dilemma. Local partnerships may be undermined by broader government support in situations of local rights resurgence.

4. Contacts for further information and guidance

These museums have significant world collections and experienced staff:

– 0121 348 8198: Ask for Curator of World Cultures
Brighton Museum & Art Gallery  http://brightonmuseums.org.uk/brighton/
– 01273 290900: Ask for Curator of World Art & Anthropology.

5. Bibliography


Conaty, Gerald T. ed. 2015 We are Coming Home. Repatriation and the Restoration of Blackfoot Cultural Confidence. AU Press, Athabasca University, Canada


Human Remains SSN website has links to a good range of UK wide policy documents, and Human Remains policies of individual institutions at http://www.humanremains.specialistnetwork.org.uk/resources


Pickering, Michael 2015. ‘Rewards and Frustrations: Repatriation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Ancestral Remains by the National Museum of Australia’, in Coral


Sleeper-Smith, Susan (ed) 2009. Contesting Knowledge: Museums and Indigenous Perspectives, University of Nebraska Press.


PLEASE REFER TO THE PREVIOUS MEG GUIDANCE NOTES ON ETHICAL APPROACHES, 2003, now in the MEG online archive, for earlier Bibliography references.