Drawing Lines in the Museum: Plains Cree Ontology as Political Practice

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Abstract: This article examines how a Plains Cree elder "develops protocol" with an extensive collection of Plains Cree sacred materials. Protocols—both political and ceremonial acts that govern through laws of exchange and reciprocity—involve humans and the sacred items in a relational system of agents. Taking Glenbow Museum's storage room as a meeting place for two distinct ontological engagements—the state via museological practice, and the Cree through the protocols of one elder—conflicts in how each approaches sacred subject matter are identified. While the state assumes bureaucracy must prevail, the Cree elder requires protocols to guide the process.

Keywords: Indigenous peoples, Plains Cree, museums, ontology, traditional knowledge, repatriation, Aboriginal-state relations, sacred materials

Résumé : Cet article étudie comment un aîné Cri-des-Plaines « élabore un protocole » avec une importante collection d'objets sacrés des Cris-des-Plaines. Les protocoles – des gestes à la fois politiques et cérémoniels qui s'imposent par le biais de lois d'échange et de réciprocité – associent les humains et les objets sacrés dans un système relationnel de rôles. Le fait de choisir un entrepôt du Glenbow Museum comme lieu de réunion pour deux engagements ontologiques distincts – l'État par le biais de la pratique muséologique et les Cris par les protocoles d'un ancien – est en contradiction dans la manière dont chacun approche et identifie le caractère sacré des sujets. Alors que l'État suppose que la bureaucratie doit avoir préséance, l'ancien Cri exige que les protocoles guident le processus.

Mots-clés : peuples indigènes, Cris-des-Plaines, musées, ontologie, savoir traditionnel, rapatriement, relations autochtones-État, objets sacrés

Introduction

Across Canada, the Federal Government has gradually come to recognize and is slowly acknowledging the intergenerational impact of harsh assimilative policies on the country's First Nations Peoples. Among the myriad factors influencing alienation from ancestral ceremonial practices experienced by many First Nation communities, is a strong disconnection from cultural materials originating from those communities. Across the country, museums hold vast collections of First Nations artifacts: collections that are firmly rooted in the assimilative goals of the colonial process. Over the past two decades, many of Canada's museums have been working closely with First Nations to appropriately address how these materials should be treated. In some cases this involves developing clear guidelines for storage and handling of these items within the museum; in other cases this involves a lengthy process of working towards repatriation policy, leading to the eventual return of materials to their source communities.

The process of repatriating First Nations cultural materials, though successful in many cases across the country, evokes a torrent of issues that arise from a collaborative procedure in which the approach favoured by the Federal or Provincial Governments is often prioritized. When bureaucratic processes are imposed on First Nations people, they may become less willing or interested in working with the government and, in this context, associated museums. Recent anthropological explorations of museums have focused on issues of ownership, repatriation, autonomy and control within the broader context of Aboriginal-state relations in Canada (Asch 2008; Glass 2004; Kramer 2004; Mauze 2003; Noble 2007, 2008; Saunders 1997). These anthropologists explore the political implications of First Nations' struggle for recognition of autonomous control over cultural materials within the context of state-derived policies and regulations that continue to claim authority over those materials. This

article looks at a particular case of relationship-building where a Cree elder was working with two Albertan museums, the Glenbow Museum in Calgary and the Royal Alberta Museum (RAM) in Edmonton, to address future directions to take with an extensive collection of Plains Cree sacred materials. Here I argue that in spite of the conflicting ontological assumptions underlying this elder's ceremonial practices and the museums' bureaucratic process, the elder's practices enact a system of actants[1] (see Latour 1999) that continues to operate despite the state's presumption of holding authority.

Clammer, Poirier and Schwimmer describe ontology as "an account of a way of being in the world and a definition through practice (and not only through cognition) of what that world is and how it is constituted" (2004:4). They continue that since "ontologies are basic to the construction of culture, then it is reasonable to assume that differing conceptions of being-in-the-world necessarily enter into conflicts between systems (societies or cultures) based on different ontological premises," (Clammer et al. 2004:4). As Poirier explains, since the world enacted by modernity "strongly advocates an absolute dichotomy between nature and culture, animality and humanity, matter (body) and mind, instinct and reason, and so on, then worlds that do not advocate such a dualistic mode are viewed as non-modern" (2005:9). While the museum's bureaucratic process can be understood as enacting modernity, the non-modern world enacted by this elder is performed as "authoritative against other ways of knowing the world. It functions in other contexts (including Western) with, against, and sometimes despite other local authoritative epistemologies" (Bird-David 1999:S69).

Mekwan Awasis, the Plains Cree elder I focus on in this article, was recommended to Glenbow employees based on the work he had done at the Canadian Museum of Civilization (CMC) in Ottawa. He apprenticed under elder Gordon Rain for about 20 years and explains: "if he didn't guide and teach all those ceremonies, what they meant, I wouldn't have known anything what to do with the sacred artifacts that they have" (Awasis, personal communication, 30 June 2007). When his teacher passed away he was asked to take over the work of developing protocol in the museum for appropriate storage and treatment of the materials. The project at CMC took about 15 years to complete.

Mekwan Awasis[2] began travelling to Calgary's Glenbow Museum in the summer of 2005, where he had been invited to "develop protocol"[3] with the museum and its extensive collection of Plains Cree sacred materials. My own involvement in this project began in September 2005, when I moved to Calgary to take up an internship in Glenbow's Ethnology Department. The opportunity to participate in this project was the primary motivation for my move. For two weeks that fall, I assisted the curators, technicians and Mekwan with moving and handling sacred materials, and with finding information in the museum's database. I returned to assist again in January of 2007, this time as a graduate student in social anthropology, and asked Mekwan if I could visit him in his community that summer to carry out my fieldwork. Between July and September of that year, I spent a total of six weeks on his reserve conducting interviews with him, engaging in ceremonial activities, and spending time with his entire extended family and members of his community. That summer we made two more trips to Glenbow and I also accompanied Mekwan on his first visit to the Royal Alberta Museum in Edmonton.

Over three years of my involvement in this process, through my inclusion as both observer and participant, I came to understand the Plains Cree "protocols" enacted by Mekwan to be a mode of socialization and communication whereby the sacred materials *themselves* are granted the agency and authority to govern. Mekwan refers to the process of interacting with the materials through protocol as "horizontal and vertical socialization." In this process, the participant follows a linear sequence of actions that constitute the horizontal axis of socialization. In strictly abiding by protocols and acknowledging them as laws that pertain to both ceremonial and political governing authority, one becomes socialized along the vertical axis, where the behaviours of ancestral beings become recognizable. According to Mekwan, protocols are fundamental to Cree ceremonial life and outline Cree ethical praxis.[4] It is the role of ceremonial acts to govern,[5] even when they take place within non-traditional settings such as the museum, a Western institution with deep roots in colonial processes, practices and policies. In what follows, I discuss how Mekwan sought to achieve this. I begin by describing the historical and contemporary circumstances surrounding the collection at stake, I will then discuss the conflicting approaches enacted by Mekwan's protocols and by the museums' bureaucratic process as they pertain to repatriation policy. Subsequently, and to show the way these protocols hold their own authority, I will discuss Mekwan's process of horizontal and vertical socialization as it relates not only to the sacred materials, but also to Aboriginal intentions in treaty-making. I follow with three key examples that took place during my time in the museum in order to explicate the interplay between ontological conflict and compatibility.

Plains Cree Sacred Materials at Glenbow Museum

Most of the materials in question were collected from the area of Treaty Six, signed in 1876, which extends from the western border of Alberta to the eastern border of Saskatchewan, and from the Athabasca River in the north to the South Saskatchewan River in the south. During the 1860s, the Plains Cree faced many changes: food resources became over-exploited; the population was reduced by European diseases; violence erupted with other Native and non-Native groups for competition over diminishing bison herds; and Euro-Canadians were encroaching on their lands. It was under these conditions that the terms of Treaty Six were negotiated with the British Crown through representatives of the Queen. Terms were negotiated for economic support through the transition to an agriculture-based economy (Grey 1997:23; Pettipas 1994:63-68). For the Cree, equally important to their freedom to select lands and settle on reserves with minimal interference, "were governmental promises that their cultural autonomy was not a point of negotiation. For them, the treaties were guarantees that they could continue to live in their territories according to their customary ways" (Pettipas 1994:68). Harsh assimilative policies prevailed, however, and as a result many ceremonial items fell out of use. Hugh Dempsey, a Glenbow employee from 1956 to 1991, told me that people were quite willing to sell sacred materials with the attitude that they were no longer relevant or useful, and that those in possession of them often did not know how to properly use them (Dempsey, personal communication, 7 September 2007).[6]

Today, the collection of Plains Cree sacred materials constitutes about 20 large wooden cabinets in the ethnology department's storage room at Glenbow. All of the sacred materials are housed toward one corner of the large space, furthest from the room's entrances so as to allow for minimal disturbance. Though they currently reside in an Alberta museum, most of the items, when collected by Glenbow staff in the 1960s, were purchased from reserves in Saskatchewan, according to Gerald Conaty, a Glenbow employee since 1990 (Personal communication, 4 February 2008).

A few requests for repatriation have come from Plains Cree communities, but the requests came from Saskatchewan and, as Conaty explains, "there is currently no mechanism that will enable the return of material to people who reside outside Alberta" (Conaty, personal communication, 4 February 2008). Conaty has worked extensively on the repatriation of materials to Blackfoot communities in southern Alberta, and while the current First Nations Sacred Ceremonial Objects Repatriation Act (FNSCORA) applies to all material in provincial collections in Alberta, thus far the regulations for the FNSCORA have been worked out only for Blackfoot collections. The regulations are in the process of being developed for Treaty Six First Nations including Plains Cree, however, Glenbow employees as well as the Alberta government recognize it cannot be assumed that what works for one First Nation will work for another (Conaty, personal communication, 24 November 2008). Given the sensitivities surrounding museum ownership of sacred and ceremonial materials that originate from Aboriginal communities, here I will focus not the materials' physical properties but on the circumstances surrounding the collection. I give one key descriptive example, but only in relation to the item's associated protocols.

Bureaucracy and Protocols

Alberta's process for developing repatriation policy is relatively progressive in Canada. However, the state maintains control over what kind of relationship First Nations can legally have with sacred materials (Glass 2004) through a bureaucratic process that continues to emphasize "property as a commodity capable of individual ownership and alienation for the purposes of resource use and wealth maximization" (Noble 2008:2). As a state-run institution, the museum enacts a modern ontology through which, as Bird-David explains, one views the world as "a totalizing scheme of separated essences" that dichotomizes the environment and turns attention to an "otherness," which "highlights differences and eclipses commonalities" (Bird-David 1999:S77-78).

FNSCORA reflects a modernist perspective which assumes a clear separation between people and objects. This is evident in Part 2, Clause 4(2), where it states:

> A society may make an application for the repatriation of a sacred ceremonial object only if the society has received a request from an individual who has agreed to put that sacred ceremonial object back into use as a sacred ceremonial object. [FNSCORA 2004:2]

The Act carries the assumptions that one particular sequence of actions will satisfy both the ceremonial and policy requirements for putting an object "back into use," and that ceremonial practices have not changed since an object was last used in ceremony. The possibility of dialogue with the sacred materials *themselves* is not acknowledged.

Mekwan's ceremonial protocols, in the context of the Glenbow Museum, involve a gradual process of socializing with the sacred artifacts. As Mekwan later told me, it is

not customarily appropriate for him to be explicit with those present, including myself and the museum workers, about what those protocols involve. Rather, it is in the process of relating, through observation and participation, that one comes to play a role in the socialization process. Giving cloth and tobacco, smudging with smoke from sweetgrass, sharing berries and tea, and placing tobacco next to the sacred materials[7] are all acts of protocol intended to reinforce the relational, reciprocal connection between and among human and non-human agents. In acts of protocol, all facets of the wider collective of agents—both human and non-human—are engaging in reciprocal exchange. The giving of tobacco, very common among First Nations peoples, engages "humans not only in a web of meaning, but also in a wider other-than-human community." In such exchanges, "the tobacco participate[s] in the greeting" (Harvey 2006:44).

"Always get your protocol ready over here: cloth, tobacco. Always have those ready at a museum. Because they represent protocol. It is about protocol" (Awasis, personal communication, 15 August 2007). In Bird-David's relational or animistic epistemology, one comes to know the world "by focusing primarily on relatedness, from a related point of view, within the shifting horizons of the related viewer" (1999:S77-78). Mekwan, through a non-modern or relational ontology, approaches the ceremonial items from within "webs of relatedness" (Bird-David 1999:S77) which are an extension of the role he plays in his community. He regularly holds ceremonies in the sweat-lodge on his property, and he promotes Cree spirituality as a way of life in his ongoing work with Native youth, teachers, psychologists, linguists and students attending the Alberta Justice College. Mekwan also draws attention to the significance of the connections between his work in the museum and his entire extended family: "the museums, that's...a bigger protocol, 'cause I have children, I have grandchildren, so I have to do my protocol before I leave" (Awasis, personal communication, 30 June 2007). Appropriately carrying out protocol in museums is crucial to maintain and safeguard not only his contemporary community and familial network of ceremonial connections but also, as we will see, the intergenerational kinship ties that continually govern through the laws of protocol.

Protocols are prescribed actions and behaviours, forming a system of rules and laws that enable a process of communication and socialization whereby participants may become oriented to learn about or discover the sacred. These acts, passed on through generations of spiritual commitment, form a method of ceremonial respect that promotes intergenerational kinship ties, acknowledges not only the imminence but also the agency of non-humans (see Poirier 2008:79), and honours the authorized powers that prescribe and uphold protocols as laws. Abiding by protocols engages humans in a reciprocal relationship with non-human agents. These relationships operate on the premise that ceremonial acts of exchange, understood to enact and maintain laws, have properties that govern the connections made between humans and the non-human beings that are associated with a particular ceremony. As a process of socialization, protocol opens up the ontological possibility of "delinking from modern rationality and building other possible worlds" (Mignolo 2007:498) where people become intrinsically linked to other people, to things and to ceremonial beings such as *Pakakhoos* (discussed below).

Mekwan explains why protocol is so important, in connection to the caution with which information is shared:

> When we come for protocol, we want to do that the way of the old people, how they did that, their value system, their belief system, their customs, their traditions...a long time ago a lot of elders were reluctant to share a lot of ideas or answers to a lot of people...But we like to refer to protocol as an offering and to acknowledge those stories, our ancestors and most of all to acknowledge the spirit part of it...The old people said when you see someone...coming to your house, with their hat off, with their tobacco and cloth in their hand, it's telling you that person is humble and that person is telling you that he or she is sincere and true in their protocol. [Awasis, personal communication, 30 June 2007]

What makes knowledge traditional "is not its antiquity but the way it is acquired and used" (Oguamanam 2007: 35). Gaining access to information within a traditional knowledge system depends on abiding by particular protocols to acquire that information. The offering of cloth and tobacco to an elder when making a request is a means of acknowledging the source of that elder's knowledge. In the offering, generations of ancestors who perpetuated and accumulated a wealth of sacred knowledge and ceremonial practices become immanent through the act of exchange. Following through with acts of protocol demonstrates that the one requesting information understands and respects the sacred nature of that knowledge and the laws of exchange and reciprocity that guide the process. Within this relational system of knowledge sharing, the acts of protocol themselves are equally as important as the information acquired.

Ontological Conflict

There is conflict between the ontological assumptions that underlie Mekwan's practices, and those that underlie the bureaucratic process. While Mekwan's protocols engage Glenbow's sacred materials in a relational dialogue that is open-ended and uncertain, the state's bureaucratic process predicts a particular trajectory that assumes a pre-determined outcome. While on the reserve, I met a Cree woman who works with artifacts in a small cultural centre. Curious about whether the cultural centre had any items similar to those at Glenbow, I asked her what kinds of "things" she had been working with. As a response, rather than telling me about the *material* aspects of the centre's collection, she told me a story about an experience she had *relating with* the items. In her story the material aspects are not accorded primacy; rather, it is the process of socializing with them that is most significant.

The state is primarily concerned with the *material* aspects of the sacred items—where they are currently held and where they might physically end up is based on the museum's legal requirements as the items' legal owners, and reflects Western property transactions and colonial state practices that assume control over First Nations' cultural heritage and resources (Asch 2008; Glass 2004; Kramer 2004; Noble 2008). From a Cree perspective, it is not the *material* aspects of the collection but the *relational* aspects that are most vital to the perpetuation and reintegration of ceremonial and political structures. In this relational perspective the material components—the bundles, pipes and regalia—are constituent elements of the entire living system of what is considered sacred.

At the policy level of the Alberta Government, Cree protocols, as they are practiced by Mekwan, are not validated to operate as a form of authority. However, as Bird-David explains, "relational epistemologies function in diverse contexts where other epistemologies enjoy authority" (1999:S78). In Glenbow's space of encounter, all participants become mutually engaged in following Mekwan's process of socializing with the sacred materials. They cede to the authority of his knowledge concerning sacred subject matter, look to him for answers and suggestions, and comply with those suggestions to the extent that is possible with the resources available in the storage room. Glenbow's employees intentionally partake in a productive negotiation between the restrictions of museum practices and Mekwan's protocols. While the technicians and curators are constricted by the organizational function of the museum's database system, the storage cabinets, and somewhat arbitrarily applied taxonomies, this place of mutual engagement allows for compatibility through practice. No one is excluded from the act of smudging with sweetgrass or placing tobacco next to the artifacts. Detailed notes record Mekwan's knowledge of ceremonial items and his recognition of particularly powerful objects and, under his direction, certain sensitive items were moved from the non-sacred storage area to a cabinet designated for sacred materials.

Far beyond the confines of the museum, Mekwan continued to engage in this productive negotiation by acknowledging museum workers in his own ceremonial practices. He explains he always had a ceremony in his sweatlodge after returning home from Glenbow or the museum in Ottawa to "ask for guidance [for us] and for the ones that work in the museums" (Awasis, personal communication, 30 June 2007). Mekwan's practices hold complete authority on his property and they continue to operate in the museum despite the ontological conflict underlying his protocols and the bureaucratic process.

Horizontal and Vertical Socialization

When I first expressed my interest to Mekwan in learning more about the sacred materials in the museum, he told me I had to "learn about protocol." Only in giving him tobacco could I ask further questions about sacred subject matter. When I gave him tobacco, my research inquiry began. This was my first act of protocol.

That day we sat around a table drinking tea in Glenbow's ethnology department. Mekwan said to me: "There's horizontal socialization and there's vertical socialization," his hand first making a circle on the table's surface, then spiraling upward into the air. "It's in the vertical that we'll come to work together." Only later did I come to understand that he was outlining his knowledge practice and that I had become an active participant. He added: "We'll start drawing some lines."

As Mekwan demonstrated to me through his knowledge practice, the process of horizontal and vertical socialization orients the participant along two axes of experience. On the horizontal axis, the participant follows through with acts of protocol—they socialize with human and non-human agents by engaging in interactions of a finite nature, with a defined beginning and end:

> When we prepare those ceremonies and even when we prepare a sweat everything is over here horizontally. It's horizontal, it's on the ground. Everything is laid out here, the rocks...in all our different ceremonies...when you socialize even with people, well that's the same thing you do with these, whether they're artifacts...you socialize with them, you're socializing with them. [Awasis, personal communication, 25 June 2007]

The vertical axis becomes revealed or discovered through adherence to acts of protocol, but it is up to the participant to decipher the vertical axis for themselves. Mekwan explains this with an example from a Sundance we had attended:

> We socialize, see like those helpers for example at that ceremony you went to...when the Sundance maker gets their grounds, their sacred Sundance grounds, he goes there with all his material that he's going to use, like the cloth...And going back to horizontal now, that ceremony, everything's over here [gestures across the ground]. You prepare everything, that's horizontal. But they go from here, from A to B [makes a vertical gesture with his hand]. To get all those elements, all that stuff they're going to use, the material, the tree and they'll make that teepee and wrap it up with canvas. It's horizontal on the ground over here, then when they lift it up its vertical, it becomes vertical. And that pole that they go get...when you go find it its vertical. They don't go find a dead tree or some tree that's already chopped. There's scouts that'll go that are asked with protocol to go get that pole, there's two guys that will go chop it down. When it lands its horizontal. They bring it, it sits horizontal, they bring it and they rest it facing the leaves, facing north on a tripod...and soon as they're done while that thing's sitting horizontal, it becomes vertical. So we use those kind of teachings. [Awasis, personal communication, 25 June 2007]

Preparations for the ceremony are made with tangible materials on the horizontal axis, where "you socialize with them." Much as Ridington says of the Dunne-za that "experience flows sequentially but is meaningful hierarchically" (1990:125), here a linear sequence of actions, such as those culminating in the raising of the Sundance pole, lead to a hierarchical recognition of the habitual movements and patterns of the non-human, intangible actants in the collective. Ingold explains that in the Ojibwa view of the world, "different beings, whether or not they qualify as persons, have characteristic patterns of movement—ways of being alive—that reveal them for what they are" (2004:38). For James Bay Cree, Feit tells us that "the world is volitional, and the perceived regularities of the world are not those of natural law but, rather, are like the habitual behaviour of persons." Such behaviour is predictable at times, but being that this is a very complex intelligent order, it is "not always knowable by humans" (Feit 2004:103). In Mekwan's knowledge practice, socializing on the horizontal axis causes the world to become volitional and knowable as being constituted by patterns of behaviour. It is on the vertical axis that these patterns become apparent through the participant's lived experiences in an expanding perception of what is knowable about the world's regularities. An individual's power stems from their ability to discern the behavioural patterns of communally recognized non-human actants, though the patterns come in an individualized form. Through visionary experiences, one with power comes to perceive the potency of particular colours, numbers, songs, symbols and images that are associated with specific ceremonies, seasons, directions and myths, and to comprehend the interplay between linear and non-linear orientations to time. In vertical socialization, "pattern dominates process" and "hierarchy dominates sequence" (Ridington 1990:128).

Cree sacred materials, though they are being held in a Western museum, still follow a pattern of habitual movement, which, as we will see in the next section, is prescribed by the movement of the sun. Ingold explains that the sun "has its own regular pattern of rising and setting," (2004:38) which is viewed as habitual in the same way that the movements of humans and of animals are viewed as habitual. These movements are not conceived as taking place against the backdrop of a separate environment, Ingold continues, as "living beings do not move upon the world, but move along with it" (2004:38). Despite their 40-odd years in a museum storage room, the sacred materials continue the "move along with" the world. As the materials are acknowledged through acts of protocol on the horizontal axis, their patterns of behaviour begin to become apparent to some of those human actants in contact with them through a hierarchical recognition of patterns on the vertical axis.

Patterns of Movement

First Nations negotiations surrounding materials held by museums are intrinsically tied to Treaty (Glass 2004:116). Most of the written Treaty documents reflect European interests and intentions, and it has been noted that the texts of Treaties were not properly translated into Aboriginal languages for Aboriginal signatories. A phrase that was incorporated into the Treaty Six document to reflect Aboriginal intentions are the words that the agreement would last "as long as the sun shines and the waters flow" (Venne 1997:194). There are numerous interpretations of the meaning of this phrase to those Aboriginal representatives present at the Treaty negotiations (IWGIA 1997; Venne 1997). An elder spoke about the value of this phrase at a Treaty Six forum:

> The way the negotiations proceeded, the way the Treaty was finalized: it has its own unique interpretation in our own language...The whiteman wanted to tell the ultimate truth. But our ancestors knew the meaning.

> *The sciences behind the sun, the sacredness of the sun.* And with this meaning, our ancestors told the Crown's representatives that it would last this long. [IWGIA 1997:60]

As this elder implies, for the Cree and Dene signatories of Treaty Six, the habitual movements of the sun were the foundation of the political relationship they were agreeing to. For the Cree of Treaty Six, just as the natural order of the world depended on the sun's patterns of rising and setting, so would maintenance of the Treaty relationship, which had been understood not to interfere with traditional and customary practices. This perspective was imperceptible to Euro-Canadian representatives, whose imperialist assumptions about the superiority of their Western viewpoint depended on the dualistic split between nature and culture, who guided assimilative practices and policies aimed at erasing indigenous practices.

The sun's place in traditional politics is also evident in Mekwan's explanation of how the bundles in the museum connect to forms of government:

> Well the old scientists, meaning the old people that were immersed in spirituality, they would have called that the ancestral, spiritual...form of government that would be linked to those bundles. And the other form of government is...the eastern sky, where the sun and the earth meet, that would be a directive, that would be another form of government. Same with the southern sky, that would be another form of government. And over here the same thing, the western sky, that would be another government. Same thing over here to the north, that would be another form of government. [Personal communication, 28 August 2007]

Mekwan speaks of the natural laws that stem from the sun's pattern of movement as forms of government. Each directive he speaks of is associated with a particular ceremony, which is constituted by particular protocols. In abiding by these laws or prescribed behaviours, the ceremony governs the people by maintaining strong connections with many generations of ancestral beings. These beings are immanent in the immediate environment during ceremony just as they are within the museum's storage room. The laws are upheld not only through ceremonial practice but also in everyday life. While on the reserve, Mekwan and his family stressed that everyone must be inside after dark, once the sun has set in the West. When I asked why, he responded: "because that's the law."

The bundles and other ceremonial materials in the museum still have the capacity to govern, and through protocols, are slowly brought back into governance. Cree relationships to non-human actants, as in many other indigenous views of the world, are based on principles of relationality and reciprocity. Feit tells us that for the Cree, "a hunter enters into a reciprocal relationship: animals are given to hunters to meet their needs and wants, and in return hunters incur obligations to animals" (2004:102). The same reciprocal relationship applies to those who engage in ceremonial practices and protocols, which are derived from the habitual action of the sun. At a Sundance, people must walk clockwise around the Sundance pole. During a sweat ceremony in Mekwan's sweatlodge, which takes place at noon when the sun is highest, people must move clockwise around the mound of tobacco, cloth, sage and sweetgrass in the centre of the room. Those offering tea move in the sun's direction around the circle of people to pour. His son, learning to properly do a pipe ceremony, always moves the pipe in a clockwise circle. These protocols determine the obligations and responsibilities in traditional Cree social, political and governmental structure, as well as kinship and gender roles, which all relate back to the fundamental movement of the sun. In turn, abiding by these prescribed protocols in ritualized settings acknowledges those habitual movements not only of the sun, but also of all other beings, human and non-human, who habitually move according to the same patterns within "networks of social relationships" (Poirier 2005:91). The non-human actants in the Cree collective, recognizing that humans engaged in ceremonial activity are carrying out obligatory duties, the materials housed in Glenbow's storage room, though largely untouched and unseen over the past few decades, still hold the authority to govern. Horizontal and vertical socialization is a practice through which, with the guidance of elders such as Mekwan, the participant becomes oriented to perceiving these beings. Through the socialization process, protocols become a means of communication and activate a system of non-human agents into a reciprocal relationship with human agents. Acts of exchange between Mekwan and employees of Glenbow Museum mark the beginning of an open-ended dialogue in which Mekwan's practices are granted authority.

Giving Tobacco: The Politics of Knowledge Exchange

For Mekwan, that which is sacred is animate, active and influences the flow and outcome of events. Knowledge is discovered experientially. Bird Rose noted that the paradigm shift "from visions of deterministic prediction to an awareness of uncertainty and probability" marks a shift in the way knowledge is perceived. She remarked that the incumbent challenge lies in enabling this shift by

moving "from the proposition that incomplete knowledge is an obstacle to be overcome, to the proposition that incomplete knowledge is a condition of participation in a living system" (Bird Rose 2007:2).

The museum and the modernist systems on which it depends take the stance that incomplete knowledge is a problem that should be resolved. Mekwan, as demonstrated by his protocols, acknowledged that humans are part of a living system and can only have partial knowledge. This is the essence of the sacred: knowledge is revealed through acts of protocol, but not everything is knowable. What guides the exchange of sacred knowledge within the museum? How far can the authority of protocols be acknowledged in the museum's storage room?

Bird Rose noted that "knowledge emerges from dialogue" (2007:13). Acts of protocol, from a Plains Cree perspective, must be understood as engaging in a process of communication and socialization. Before initiating a dialogue with Mekwan, he stressed that I had to give him tobacco. When I gave tobacco to Mekwan I entered into a dialogical engagement with the question: "What is 'knowable' about the Plains Cree sacred materials stored in Glenbow's cabinets?" Early in my research, I expected this dialogue to emerge verbally, in a pointed question and answer interview format. It was only by engaging in acts of protocol that I began to learn that these acts were, indeed, communicative and dialogical.

Knowledge emerges from dialogue. Dialogue requires communication. Acts of protocol are a particular mode of communication. Thus, protocol leads to particular knowledge.

Acts of protocol, carried out in the museum, are inherently political. The museum, a Western institution with a mission to collect objects and information that "are said to belong to a Canadian heritage held in trust 'for us all'" (Doxtator 1994:59), expects all knowledge to be "knowable." If information is not yet "known," it is not because it is considered "unknowable"; it is because it has yet to be "discovered." Involving employees of Western institutions into acts of protocol is a demand for recognition that humans are part of a living system over which they do not have ultimate control. Recognizing this through relationship-building with First Nations has vast political consequences.

Oguamanam writes that "what is traditional about traditional [or indigenous] knowledge is not its antiquity but the way it is acquired and used" (2007:35). This is a crucial point in discussing the knowledge being exchanged in the museum, since engaging in acts of protocol is the only way to gain access to the traditional Cree knowledge in question. I recall that early on in the collaboration, Conaty did not know that Mekwan had to be given tobacco on the morning of each day that he arrived to work at the museum. Having given him tobacco once for a three-day visit, Conaty noticed Mekwan was sharing less and less information as the days went on. He often remained silent, rather than discussing the materials in detail as he had been doing on the first day. Only when a close friend of Mekwan's, who had a familiarity with the necessary protocols, shared this with Conaty did he realize his mistake. When Mekwan next visited the museum, about a year and a half later, he was given tobacco each morning of his three-day visit, as well as cotton broadcloth in four colours on the first day. These protocols are essential for the exchange of information. That which he shares with the museum interacts dialogically with the living system from which his knowledge emerges.

This example demonstrates the highly politicized nature of information exchange between keepers of indigenous knowledge and Western institutions. Conaty sought information on behalf of the institution and in its goal to accumulate knowledge about the collection. Mekwan required daily acts of protocol in order for that knowledge to be given. Protocols are a form of communication, derived from natural law. If those laws are not upheld, the dialogue becomes one-sided and knowledge will not be exchanged. In this instance, compatibility came through the act of exchange, since Conaty was quite interested in abiding by and respecting the necessary protocols.

Acts of protocol provide the link between realities derived from drastically different ontological orientations. For Mekwan, requiring tobacco is a political demand, as it is a way of protecting sacred knowledge and re-instilling the Cree demands in Treaty Six. The significance of this demand extends far beyond the "horizontal" action that has a defined beginning and end: the giver extends the tobacco towards him in an open palm, stating why it is being offered; he decides whether to accept it, and if he does, reaches out to take the tobacco; he then engages in the ritualized behaviour of opening the package and smelling it.

Moving into the "vertical" axis, the implications of daily tobacco-giving expand as an acknowledgement of the authority held by the Cree system of agents. In giving tobacco and cloth to Mekwan, Conaty recognized that the information he sought was is ancestral knowledge, derived from generations of adherence to ceremonial practices and related back to the fundamental movements of the sun. In this relational system of knowledge sharing, the acts of protocol were themselves as important as the information acquired. Traditional Cree knowledge, as part of a living system, must be exchanged according to the

same laws that dictate how to behave in a Sundance lodge, how to perform a pipe ceremony and how to socialize with sacred objects.

Resocializing the sacred materials with their habitual patterns of movement through acts of protocol is a way of recognizing their autonomy as a system of agents. By engaging in acts of protocol, the museum and its employees were acknowledging that Mekwan's knowledge is part of a living system. That protocols were taken quite seriously in the museum invited a number of questions: to what extent can the museum give up its control and authority over Plains Cree sacred materials? How far can Cree protocols be ceded authority in the museum's efforts to determine future directions? What can the museum know or claim to know about the authoritative structures derived from Mekwan's protocols?

Giving Ribbons to Pakakhoos: Acknowledging a System of Agents

In Glenbow's cabinets are many figures in the form of a doll, made to represent the ceremonial being known as Pakakhoos. During my time at Glenbow, I saw several such dolls of all sizes, some made of cloth, some of wood and some of braids of sweetgrass. Here I discuss Pakakhoos' role in ceremony and begin to explore the question of how far Mekwan's protocols associated with this being could be carried, given the constraints of repatriation policy.

One particularly stunning Pakakhoos doll has a body of stuffed cloth and hide, with a carved wooden face stitched onto the head. A lock of human hair extends down the doll's back. The detailed ornamentation indicates that the doll, for an extended period of time, had a very significant role in ceremonial life. Small beads outline the edges of a miniature satchel and sash, and strings of beads hang from one wrist. On each wrist dangle two metal jingles in the shape of long triangles. Four jingles were once hanging from each ankle, but a bare thread remains where one has gone missing. Four brass bells are attached to the centre of the back, and a brilliant array of coloured ribbons are draped and tied around the body. The doll's long-time use in ceremony is made evident by its faded clothing, intricate decoration, and the different degrees of wear on the layers of ribbon. As we will see, these ribbons represent protocol.

Pakakhoos is just one example of figures and images that appear repeatedly in the collection of sacred materials, showing the consistency of ceremonial practices among the Plains Cree prior to the Federal Government's targetted annihilation of such practices. The government's goal of cultural erasure gradually caused these items to fall out of use. The museum's collection, despite claims that items were not confiscated but were sold voluntarily to museum employees (Conaty 1995:405), were created under radically asymmetrical power relations.

Pakakhoos, a ceremonial being believed to have been a human boy at one time, governs laws of exchange and reciprocity through a Giveaway ceremony. As a boy, this being froze to death in the winter and then became associated with food, hunting and survival. In his material form, the doll will often carry an item such as a rifle, bow and arrow or, as one other example I saw in the museum, a tiny fork. Mekwan explained to me that people engage in ceremony with Pakakhoos when family members die in certain ways, and then they become "kinshipped in" through the ceremony as a means of healing (Interview, 2 July 2007). Carrying out acts of protocol in the ceremony brings an individual into a reciprocal relationship with Pakakhoos. The individual gives ribbons and clothing to the being and, in return, the individual's kinship ties are strengthened and their family is assured of health and being well-fed. Protocol, as a mode of communication, engages the individual in a dialogical exchange.

The traditional or ancestral knowledge associated with this ceremonial being is part of a living system and therefore must be acquired through the proper laws governing that knowledge. Mekwan was limited in what he could tell me about Pakakhoos. He said to me: "there's a story that you could get through protocol from an old lady that I know" (Interview, 2 July 2007). Stories about Pakakhoos, as a being in the Plains Cree system of agents, must come through protocol. The authority of the laws that determine what is knowable, and through what means, must be followed. Given that I only carried out protocols through Mekwan, I only had access to his knowledge of Pakakhoos and could not gain access to the story known by this old lady. He continued:

> the people that are going to do the ceremony, that have pledged to do the ceremony, it's related to life in general, good luck and good hunting and so that they don't starve their children or some of them will combine all of it so that they'll be warm in their household, that nobody will get cold. And it's related to when somebody freezes to death, that spirit is related to when somebody drowns, and related to when somebody burns in the fire, and there's one more, that I'm not sure, I'm going to have to do protocol myself to ask. [Interview, 28 August 2007]

Again, to gain access to knowledge associated with Pakakhoos, one must abide by the necessary protocols. Mekwan discussed Pakakhoos as a form of government, indicating the potency of agency accorded to this being.

This reflects Lyons' powerful assertion that "the primary law of Indian government is the spiritual law. Spirituality is the highest form of politics, and our spirituality is directly involved in government" (1984:5). Despite the fact that these dolls are still sitting, largely untouched and unseen in the museum's cabinets, they are still powerful and have the strength and capacity to govern.

The museum, though individual employees play roles as active negotiators to protect the interests of First Nations, is constricted by and dependent on the state's bureaucratic system and Western conceptions of ownership. Through Mekwan's practices we see that from a Cree perspective, observant of the authority held by a ceremonial being such as Pakakhoos, a pre-determined bureaucratic process runs counter to the role of such a being in ceremonial life. For the Cree, the role of the ceremony is to govern. The secular state is constructed dichotomously against the possibility that sacred or spiritual subject matter can have authoritative agency (Bhargava 2006:2). Can the state recognize that ceremony and ceremonial materials have the capacity to govern, even within a Western institution?

Ruling that an item can only be repatriated if it is going "back into ceremonial use as a ceremonial object" (FNSCORA 2004:2) denies the possibility that Pakakhoos, through a gradual reintegration, may play an active part in the governing role of a specific ceremony. It also denies that Treaty Six communities would benefit from having access to a powerful kin-making and politics-binding being such as Pakakhoos, as well as the other sacred materials in Glenbow's cabinets, before reintroducing them to a ceremonial context. Cree protocols and forms of government, not the bureaucratic process, are meant to determine whether and when an item such as a Pakakhoos doll returns to use in ceremony, who is in charge of putting on that ceremony, and where the doll should be kept while not in use. Can the laws of exchange and reciprocity involved in relating to a being such as Pakakhoos be drawn into the development of repatriation policy?

The Hunt for the Root: A Model for Correspondence

Approaching the Glenbow Museum one morning, Mekwan told me he had an idea. We entered the museum and began the day's work of looking through the Plains Cree "non-sacred" materials with the two curators and a technician. At some point about mid-morning, when he and I were standing before a storage cupboard, he pointed to a mass of tangled roots, about the size of two fists put together, and said to me, "Hey, look at that root. Very interesting." He said it was a type of medicine and that we might want to look for it again later on. I thought nothing of it and we carried on.

At the museum the next day, Mekwan expressed an interest in finding the root again. The two of us, being the only ones who saw it the day before, tried to remember where we had seen it. He thought it was in the far end of the room in a portable storage cupboard, while I remembered seeing it at the other end of the room. We checked both places and could not find the root. I began to get a sense that his "idea" the day before had everything to do with this root, or this "medicine."

Determined to carry on until we found the root, Mekwan drew the museum workers into the hunt. The two curators and technician joined in the search, playing their own part by deciding where to look according to the cues Mekwan had given them. Mekwan recalled that he might have seen the root next to a whip, so the technician printed off a list of whips in the collection and began to look for them. The search carried on relentlessly, the curators, Mekwan and I looking again and again in every drawer of the entire row of cupboards. We turned nothing up, but reconvened several times saying "I know we saw it," prompting Mekwan to continue searching.

In the museum storage room, Mekwan's practice was infiltrating its colonial confines by engaging us all in a subtle, accessible process of horizontal and vertical socialization that did not stray too radically from the everyday awareness of all those who joined in the search. Horizontally, Mekwan and I engaged in the linear acts of seeing and speaking about the root, and the museum workers, in helping us look for it, were joining in on the horizontal axis. Drawing all participants into *the hunt*, a relational perception began to operate as authoritative.

To "put something vertical" is to reorient perception in a manner that makes one open to *interacting and relating with* items such as the root. By engaging in the search, the Glenbow employees, having been invited into Mekwan's ontological practice, became willing participants in this subtle reorientation of perception through the vertical axis. The search was working on the premise that we had actually seen the root, and that it was possible for the root to be animate. Acknowledgement of this possibility, which does not stray too radically from the museum workers' everyday awareness, drew them into Mekwan's political collective.

By *interacting with* the root on the premise of it being animate, we also became relationally engaged with all the other materials. Acting as the sun in the museum's environment, the root, shifting about according to its own patterns of behaviour, was drawing us into the search on the assumption that we would find it again, as sure as the sun

will continue its "regular patterns of rising and setting" (Ingold 2004:38) and "return to the eastern horizon" (Ridington 1990:131). However, the habitual movements of the root, unlike those regular patterns of the sun, are unpredictable. As Feit explains, "habits make action likely, not certain" (2004:103). Our attempts to predict the root's location proved unsuccessful, but through Mekwan's insistence that we find it again we began to engage with it relationally.

The state's approach is to incorporate indigenous practices into an existing pre-defined bureaucratic process. This process is based on principles of Western property transaction that assumes cultural property to be alienable, and pre-supposes that the goal of the process, for sacred materials to be reincorporated into ceremonial use, will satisfy state objectives as well as those of the First Nation. Turning to Noble's notion of "radical correspondence," derived from "translating one socially embedded form of transaction into another" (2007:338), an intriguing question arises: what happens if things work the other way, with the museum's practices being incorporated into an indigenous system of transaction? Revolving actions in the museum setting around an animate root, pulling the museum's practices into the Cree system of acknowledging the habitual movements of the root, and also of the materials in the sacred storage area, the potentiality for radical correspondence between these divergent modes of transaction becomes evident.

Conclusion

Though this paper only documents its beginning stages, the collaborative project at Glenbow opened up the possibility for recognition of "radically different ontologies" in the same state (Clammer et al. 2004:15). While modernist assumptions underlying the bureaucratic process set clear limits on how far Mekwan's protocols can be carried out, Glenbow provided a space where those protocols could operate according to the system of agents they enact.

The requirement that materials must go into "active ceremonial use" in order to be repatriated reflects a Western, modernist assumption that sacred materials will follow a specified, pre-determined trajectory, and denies the possibility that new knowledge may be generated in the process (Oguamanam 2007). The material aspects of repatriation are assumed to be the most vital components of revitalizing cultural practices, and Western bureaucratic processes are held as authoritative in resolving issues surrounding First Nations cultural property. It is assumed that knowledge associated with sacred materials has been stagnant and unchanging since they were last used in ceremony. These assumptions are opposed to the Cree understanding of the items as animate, deny the possibility that these materials may hold authority, and fail to recognize that the sacred materials, in a "permanent state of flux" (Blaser 2010:36), are already in a process of unfolding that depends on the practice of Cree protocols such as Mekwan's, not on the museum's bureaucratic system.

In addressing how to move forward in any actions concerning sacred materials, Cree laws must be followed. These laws, which operate to acknowledge the governing role of non-human agents, in addition to human agents, and the imminent presence of ancestral and ceremonial beings, stand in stark contrast to the linear and separationist policies of the state. Expectations and assumptions about a predictable path or outcome for the sacred items to follow run counter to the role of protocols. This set of laws, based on promoting intergenerational kinship ties through acts of exchange, accepts that humans are only one component of an entire system of agents. This system, comprised of animate beings that govern through reciprocal relationships with humans, is not knowable in its complete form. Any attempt by Alberta repatriation policy to predict a specific outcome assumes this system to be fully knowable, determinate and, therefore, disrespects the governing role of protocols as a means for engaging always emergent actions of humans and non-humans.

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Notes

1 I borrow the term *actant* from actor-network theory, where it is used to refer to any human or non-human entity that has the ability to act (see Latour 1999). I use the term to indicate that agency is distributed equally across entities, and that those entities include both humans and non-humans.

2 This elder's English name is Joseph Deschamps, however, here I will refer to him by his Cree name, Mekwan Awasis, or Feather Child.

3 This was the first time I was exposed to the term *protocol* in this context. Since it had come from Glenbow's curator, I assumed it referred to museum protocol. I soon learned that in this project, the term actually referred to Cree protocol. I use the term *protocol* in this paper the way Mekwan uses the term to refer to his own practices.

4 For ease of presentation, here I discuss Mekwan's practices as constituting *a* Plains Cree perspective. In other words, I am not suggesting that he represents Plains Cree communities or that his practices are representative of other Cree ceremonialists. Based on fieldwork in his community and in the museum, I can attest that his authority to perform ceremonies is recognized in both places. I participated in a few ceremonies Mekwan had been asked to perform. I also witnessed members of his community come to his house with tobacco and cloth to make requests for naming ceremonies, healing or protection, and one woman asked him to perform a Tea Dance ceremony.

5 I use the term *govern* to refer to the agency accorded to and enacted by non-human actants, specifically ancestral and ceremonial beings, with whom humans directly engage through ceremonial protocol.

6 Dempsey also told me about some materials associated with the collection that remain in the Ethnology Department's records: reports from the two fieldtrips he took with other long-time Glenbow employee Doug Light in 1961 and 1962, and sketches of Plains Cree sacred items Dempsey made when they first came to the museum in case pieces became scattered or missing.

7 Placing tobacco directly on the storage shelves was common and welcome at Glenbow, however, the curators at RAM did not encourage the introduction of foreign materials into the cabinets.

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