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10 CO-PRODUCING KNOWLEDGE ABOUT WESTERN MUSEUM COLLECTIONS: AN AVENUE FOR SIBERIAN COMMUNITIES' ENGAGEMENT

Erich Kasten, Nadezhda Mamontova, Dmitriy Oparin, Vera Solovyeva, Liliya Zdor and Mark Zdor

PROJECT AIMS AND OUTCOMES

Erich Kasten

In early 2022, my proposed Nanai collection project at the Ethnological Museum in Berlin had to be canceled following the outbreak of the war in the Ukraine. It meant that yet another of the projects described earlier (see Kasten et al. 2024a: 225) fell victim to the political and military conflict. Since then, several alternative ways of adjusting to the changed situation in Russia were explored. Eventually, our efforts to keep relationships with civil society partners in Russia attracted the attention of the German Federal Foreign Office, which supported a new project, "Narratives on Siberian Objects in Western Museums."[1]

This chapter includes contributions and reflections of the project participants, who are introduced below. It also addresses certain challenges, as well as some encouraging prospects to maintain rewarding relations with Indigenous communities in the Russian North to stimulate the co-production of their cultural heritage.

In this *Digital Museum of the North* project, Indigenous knowledge on museum collections in France, Germany, Hungary, and the USA is documented by Indigenous partners from Siberia. Although traveling to Russia is still an option, it proves even more complicated than earlier. Therefore, we used photographs of objects, made available to knowledge holders from the communities of the objects' origin through electronic channels. Their recorded narratives about the objects are presented together with photos of the objects and additional information on the Web. This way, Indigenous communities for the first time can access these important parts of their material cultural heritage, annotated and contextualized. This can spark interest, especially among young people, into world views and skills connected to the respective museum

1 Its main result are a website named *Digital Museum of the North* (mu-north.org) and a catalogue publication (Kasten 2025). We gratefully acknowledge the support by the Program "Eastern Partnership and Russia" of the Federal Foreign Office of the Federal Republic of Germany.

objects that have been documented here by community knowledge holders. Modern information technologies and social networks will enhance the sharing of this knowledge among Indigenous peoples of the North, as well as with museums and with the general public in the West. Such collaborative discourses regarding electronically-linked knowledge on museum collections that document the cultures of the peoples of Siberia, which are widely dispersed over the world, will trigger more interest in sustaining cultural heritage for the future.

Only a limited number of sample objects from various collections on the main regions of Northern Siberia could be selected so far for the *Digital Museum of the North* initiative, which has to be understood as a pilot project, considering that it had to be executed within half a year. What it can deliver is a blueprint, to being further enhanced in the future. The multi-lingual website (see footnote 1), is above all directed at Indigenous communities in the North, our primarily targeted user group. They can easily download the contents, provided in Russian, and can access these even on smartphones, an especially attractive option for young people. For the general public and anthropologists, a printed catalogue was produced in German, with parallel online editions in English and Russian; it is available (open access) on the website.

The *Digital Museum of the North* website also includes links to additional texts and publications on the featured objects. While these are mostly in non-Russian languages, by virtue of the electronic formats of their presentation they can be easily translated into Russian using AI. Thus important information is made conveniently available to the communities of origin. In the print catalog, a QR code facilitates easy access to the materials. In the electronic versions, these materials and further sources and information can be accessed directly via hyperlinks.

One particular endeavor of the *Digital Museum of the North* project is to provide information on the objects that is not only as comprehensive as possible, but that also reflects different views. Bias can be introduced when a researcher is recording information about an object in the field, and compounded in the organization, filtering and interpretation of the object. The distortion begins even with the kind of objects the collector chooses. In the past, collectors were instructed to look for "old" items. During this project it became clear, e.g., from the example of the transformation of bag (*lepkhe*) weaving with new materials among the Nymylan (Coastal Koryak) in Kamchatka, how important comments by the manufacturers are in revealing the inherent dynamical processes that lie behind each object. Focusing on "old" objects may also ignore how contemporary artists elaborate traditional cultural ideas in their work in creatively transformative ways, e.g., as is illustrated in the fireboard figure (*kalak*) by the Koryak artist Anatoly Solodiakov (Figs. 2-5).

Therefore, our approach of recording Indigenous knowledge holders' narratives about the objects appears to be useful. Based on these recorded texts and related activities in form of annotated video films, our subsequent analysis and interpretation can rely on largely unbiased and authentic information.

Fig. 2 Evdokiia Nesterova talks about the use of new materials in the manifacture of her *lepkhe*-bag. Lesnaya, 2002 (see also Kasten 2025: 99).

Fig. 3 Woven bag (*lepkhe*) used by Vera Yaganova for collecting berries. Lesnaya, 2001.

(Lesnaya is one of the few places in Kamchatka, where the basketry tradition survived mostly due to the innovative use of new materials.)

Fig. 4 Fireboard, used by Chukchi reindeer herders in Chukotka, commented on by Liliya Zdor and her team (see also Kasten 2025: 69).

Fig. 5 Anatoly Solodiakov talks about his *kalak*-figure (see also Kasten 2025: 88). His inspiration for this creation was the illustration of a fireboard in Jochelson's book *Koryaki* – which underscores the project's aim to return images of collection items to communities of origin. Palana, 2002.

Fig. 1 (on top) Banner of the website https://mu-north.org

The Team

The Digital Museum of the North project was executed by Stephan Dudeck, Roza Laptander, Nadezhda Mamontova, Dmitriy Oparin, Vera Solovyeva, Liliya Zdor and Mark Zdor, and myself (as PI). Many of these scholars are from Russia; some have been living in the West for years while others have arrived more recently, since the outbreak of the war against Ukraine. Some still make trips back to Russia. They all have closely monitored how initial dreams after *perestroika* eventually fell to ashes. A continuing close, even emotional, involvement with Russia and its people means their homeland can't just be excised from their souls and minds. So we all look for small embers in the ashes from which we hopefully might ignite our former initiatives again.

The project participants still maintain communication with their family members, friends and partners in Siberia, including those who executed the project and the recordings at the local level. For good reasons some of these individuals want to remain anonymous. We are most grateful to all of them, including those not mentioned by name or shown in the videos produced as part of the project's outputs.

Implementing the project

One museum collection of this project is in the Musée d'ethnographie de l'Université Bordeaux. Here, Dmitriy Oparin (see below) coordinated the work of Roza Laptander, Nadezhda Mamontova, and Stephan Dudeck, who each contributed on objects of the Indigenous people with whom they have worked most: the Nenets, Evenki, and Khanty, respectively. Roza Laptander drew on her Nenets relatives and close associates in Yamal for knowledge about cultural items; Nadezhda Mamontova relied on connections in Evenkiia.[2] Stephan Dudeck, in addition to his own contacts from decades of work, recruited new ones for this collaboration, to help with the documentation of museum objects he selected for this project. Vera Solovyeva worked with knowledge holders in Sakha Republic on collections of the American Museum of Natural History (New York) and the Linden Museum (Stuttgart). Liliya and Mark Zdor explored with former friends in their home communities objects in the Fünf Kontinente Museum (Munich) that probably had been collected by Nikolai N. Gondatti in Chukotka. Because obtaining recordings at a distance and transferring video materials has become more difficult, I largely relied on documentaries that I had made previously in Kamchatka, when compiling my collection of objects for the Foundation for Siberian Cultures. Nanai objects in this Foundation and in other museums in Germany have been described and explained by Anatol Donkan, an Nanai knowledge holder who lives in Germany, as well as in audio materials from

2 Nadezhda Mamontova also worked on objects in the collection of the Musée des Confluences (Lyon) and with items from the Ethnological collection of the Georg-August-Universität (Göttingen).

collective publications on Nanai tales with Tat'iana Bulgakova from St. Petersburg, which in some cases relate to shamanic objects.[3]

Difficulties, obstacles and prospects

During our work we met both anticipated and unexpected obstacles. From the beginning we were aware about the risks that work with partners from the West posed for our local participants. We carefully tried to minimize these. Dudeck expands on this complicated issue in his chapter (Dudeck, *this volume*). We felt that prospects for future collaborative research under increasingly difficult circumstances could be fruitfully explored.

Serious obstacles arose unexpectedly, from multiple property claims on museum collections and their objects. Even physical restitution of objects to the countries of their origin can cause new dilemmas, where public access to them is often no longer given, including to descendents of those who in some cases had been involved in the complex histories of those objects (Kasten n.d.).

In our case, we were confronted with situations in which museum curators denied access, even to representatives of communities of the objects' origin. One museum in France refrained from cooperating, apparently aiming for its own publication on that collection. Yet the given objects could have been included in this project in a meaningful way without precluding such a publication.[4]

The Museum Fünf Kontinente Staatliche Museen in Bayern refused access to members of our team from Chukchi communities to inspect items from its collection, specifcally to examine the backs and details of several object for a better understanding (see Liliya Zdor's and Mark Zdor's contribution below).[5] Moreover, it seems ironic, that members of those communities have to pay from project budgets for the photos of objects from their home territories, while German museums receive generous public funding for their decolonization and repatriation projects. Restricted access to the objects means that the knowledge associated with them cannot be explored as fully as possible, in the way envisaged in knowledge co-production. Yet, the more complete knowledge that results from co-production is important not only for Indigenous communities, but also for museum research and the interested public in general.

In spite of the complicated conditions that now face efforts to co-produce knowledge with Indigenous communities in Siberia, much positive feedback encouraged us to proceed and to further develop this approach. It was gratifying to see how many museums immediately understood our purpose and shared enthusiastically our

3 For more information on the authors see the list of contributors (*this volume*).

4 Glenn Penny (2019) had a similar experience with the Ethnological Museum in Berlin.

5 Correspondence with Dr. Grahammer from 30.07.2024, which is a violation of the ICOM Ethical Guidelines for Museums (https://icomdeutschland. de/images/Publikationen_Buch/Publikation_5_Ethische_Richtlinien_dt_2010_komplett.pdf)

initiative. While the full results of this project are still pending, other museums have expressed their strong interest in participating in the next phases; some of them will show parts of the outcomes of this project in their forthcoming exhibitons.

THE GONDATTI COLLECTION AT THE MUSEUM FÜNF KONTINENTE IN MUNICH: THE VIEW OF CHUKCHI PEOPLE (LYG'ORAVATL'AMEL CHIMG'UK)

Liliya Zdor and Mark Zdor

In October 2022, Erich Kasten invited us to participate in transcribing interviews in the Chukchi and Russian language collected by him in Kamchatka and Chukotka. The collaboration proved fruitful. In the spring of 2024 Kasten contacted us about a project to describe the collection assembled between 1894 and 1897 (allegedly) by Nikolai Gondatti, who was then the "governor" of Chukotka. The collection is held in the Fünf Kontinente Museum (Munich).[6] Kasten proposed to make a video description of the collection in the Chukchi language that focused on how Chukchi knowledge holders see it today. Our first reaction was pessimistic. In today's Chukotkan villages, the mother tongue has receded in use for the past couple of decades. It survived longer in reindeer herding camps and in some coastal communities of sea hunters, but even there it has been displaced by Russian in daily communication. Similar trends occurred in the production of traditional equipment and daily objects. Some household and hunting items are now cheaper to buy than to make. Synthetic ropes have supplemented leather lines, and waterproof insulated suits and rubber boots have replaced fur- and skin clothing and footwear. Climate change has also affected the types of gear people use today. For example, traditional snowshoes are no longer used in most villages due to changes in sea ice. Nevertheless, curiosity and thoughts of our Native language helped overcome our doubts and we agreed to be involved in Kasten's project. Items of Chukchi material culture from a century ago are stored in a distant country; it would be fair to "return" them, at least in digital form, and to investigate their significance to today's Chukchi cultural heritage.

Our research plan was as follows. Irina Nutetgivev (Velvyne) and Liliya Zdor (Tlecheyvune), the lead co-researchers, selected several items that were most likely to be described in detail by the villagers. Here we encountered the first problem. The museum provided only low-resolution photos of the objects and only a front view, so that it was impossible to see details and all sides of the object. Kasten proposed to the museum that Tletegyn (another Chukchi team member living in Germany) should

6 Its attribution to Nikolai Gondatti (1864-1946), which is given on the museum's website is tentative and cannot be confirmed by the museum accession documentation (Kasten 2025). See also Rousselot (2002) for a more detailed description of the history and composition of the collection.

take additional photos of the objects from that collection, but the museum refused to allow this. Therefore, Velvyne had to collect information from the villagers based on inadequate, low-resolution photos.

Although many of our consultants spoke Chukchi and could at least provide Chukchi terminology for the objects, the primary language of consultation was Russian. Tlecheyvune consulted with traditional knowledge holders and cultural experts about each object, then put together a narrative, on how the Chukchi see the object. We translated the text into the Chukchi language, checked this interpretation of the objects with our consultants, and then proofread it, with input from experts in Chukchi grammar. The Chukchi language and worldview revealed to us sometimes unexpected properties of the objects. We regret if we were not able to reflect this uniqueness to the fullest extent.

Throughout the study, our priority was to avoid any risks to our consultants, which reduced the range of information we sought. The lack of a Chukchi-speaking environment slowed the study, as it required our consultants to take extra time to recollect the appropriate Chukchi terminology and to talk about the objects in Chukchi. Technical issues presented no less of a challenge to our research. We had to find ways to compensate consultants for their information and communication costs. The lack of quality internet connections and computers in today's Chukotkan rural settlements forced the team to conduct the work via smartphones and social media. All these circumstances complicated our communication. It was difficult to transmit the museum images of the objects to the villages and to receive the audio and video recordings describing them from the villages. Looking at and studying images on the phone screens was quite a task. We had to discuss the consultants' text information literally sentence by sentence, which made it more difficult to understand the overall picture. We found a compromise by discussing the texts in sections.

In addition to the above complications, the experience of the first audio and video recordings of museum objects revealed that experts sometimes omitted important information about the items in their stories. Therefore, we developed a protocol that greatly facilitated the research. It involved gathering information about the object depicted in the photograph, analyzing the collected information, and summarizing the text. We then structured the text into themes and codified them. For example, one section in our codification was about the materials used to produce an object. Structuring the information greatly facilitated our discussions, translations, proofreading, and audio recording of the text. The narrator also found it easier to tell the story in Chukchi, by following the established themes. Recording the story in parts greatly reduced the size of the files to be sent via social media for final editing.

Despite all the difficulties, the results exceeded our expectations. We were impressed by the richness of our people's knowledge embedded in seemingly ordinary things. Traditional snowshoes, *velvyegyt*, have not been used in our village since around 1980-1990; therefore the technology of their manufacture was practically for-

gotten. The information we collected was scant, and we were forced to return to the object again and again, adding bits of information little by little. At one point we were studying a photo of snowshoes, which led us to the question: what is the purpose of the wavy rise in the middle of the skids, which is lowered in the heel part of the snowshoe? After another series of consultations, a consultant told how his grandfather while making snowshoes, once explained to him that the lowered sharp heel worked as a braking mechanism on slopes. Then Tlecheyvune recalled her hikes in her grandfather's snowshoes. She had noticed that, as the snowshoe was lowered onto the snow cover, the foot barely touched the snow, thanks to the instep; and when the snowshoe was lifted off the surface, the netting vibrated slightly. It is logical to assume that the rise on the snowshoe is necessary to prevent touching wet snow, and the vibration releases the net from the adhered snow. This example indicates how important detailed photos of the objects could have been, if the museum had allowed us to take such.

Fig. 6 Snowshoes of Yuri Netepkir, the late grandfather of Mark Zdor. Neshkan 1970s.

Researching traditional knowledge of museum objects is a challenging but inspiring process. We are grateful to our consultants and are happy to share their knowledge of Chukchi culture with both our fellow villagers and the general public. This project was made possible thanks to Galina, Oleg, Eduard, Victoria, Gennady, Vladimir, Yuri, Yuri, and other Chukchi villagers who generously shared their knowledge of Chukchi cultural heritage. The study would be incomplete without the advice of Vladislav and Nikolai and the careful proofreading of the Chukchi texts by Irina.

"EVENKI OBJECTS ARE LIKE THE SMELL OF CURRANTS:" ON REMOTE CORRESPONDENCE WITH EVENKI MUSEUM COLLECTIONS

Nadezhda Mamontova

I begin with a personal statement on the importance of maintaining relationships with research participants from Siberia. Since February 2022, conducting research in Siberia has become increasingly challenging, not only due to physical obstacles – such as limited access to the field – but also because of institutional restrictions and external pressures. Travel-related and other obstacles have made it nearly impossible to secure financial support and ethical approval from universities for research in Siberia or, in some cases, even for remote collaboration with Indigenous communities from the region. The pressure of potential symbolic exclusion from the research community for maintaining contacts has made the situation even more problematic.

Given these challenges, many colleagues outside Russia have understandably chosen to extend their geographical research focus by including border regions like Mongolia and China, where Indigenous communities related to those in Siberia also reside.[7] Others have decided to cease any collaboration with Indigenous people from Siberia. From the outset, I found myself among the researchers who continue to engage with Siberian Indigenous communities, as I believe it is our professional duty to examine, understand and document the evolving landscape of Siberia, regardless of our own opinions or judgments. Personally, I also found it difficult to distance myself from the people I have worked with for nearly seventeen years, since my first fieldwork in the Evenki District in 2007. Despite pressures and constraints, I remain convinced of the critical importance of collecting expert knowledge in the field of Siberian Studies. I also believe it is important to approach the Siberian field with an appreciation for its full complexity, avoiding simplified views or distancing ourselves from Indigenous communities based on expectations they may not align with.

With this in mind, I reflect upon my remote work with Evenki Indigenous participants as part of this project.

Evenki Siberian collections in France

The Evenki are one of the most geographically expansive Indigenous communities in Siberia, which contributes to the richness of Evenki collections in both Russia and the West. The items selected for this project came from Joseph Martin's collection, which he acquired from the Evenki of the Stanovoi Highlands of southestern Siberia in the 19th century. Martin was accompanied on his journeys by an Evenki guide, Boris Gryaznukhin, though little information is available about him. Today Martin's collection is housed in France and is split between three institutions: The Musée du Quai

7 See, e.g., Takakura et al., 2024 and Stammler and Ivanova, *this volume – eds.*

Branly in Paris, the Musée des Confluences in Lyon, and the Musée d'Ethnographie de l'Université de Bordeaux in Bordeaux. Thanks to the assistance of local curators, I was able to work with the collections in Lyon and Bordeaux during the summer of 2024. My work included photographing Evenki objects and discussing them with community members via WhatsApp. This allowed Evenki research participants to choose the objects they found most meaningful, rather than me selecting them.

Coincidentally, the Evenki summer festival, *Bakaldyn*, was taking place. At this festival, people normally wear their traditional outfits and engage with Evenki arts and crafts. My Evenki interlocutor, Vera, who also coordinated all the work in the Evenki District, sent me several photographs from the festival showing objects identical to those I had sent her from the museum. Among them was an amulet made of bear's teeth.

Fig. 7 The Evenki summer festival *Bakaldyn,* Tura. 2024.

From Vera (25/06/2024, 11:07):

> This is my sister; she surprised me at the festival by wearing such an amulet. I started asking her about it, and she began feeding me with boiled (reindeer) tongue and flatbread. They seated her by the *chum*, next to the pot with meat. I hadn't seen her in almost a year, and we hardly communicate. She said her son made it for her and even made up a story about my talisman. I started asking questions with a sandwich in hand, and she kept saying, "Eat." The other sister, standing away from the pot, hurriedly said, "I've forgotten everything." I showed them your photo; they could barely see it in the sunlight, but they confirmed that it's *amikan iktelvi* (bear's teeth). And the owner of the *chum*, a man, also said it was *iktel amikana*. My sister started to worry about the evil eye and began rubbing her amulet with her hand. I asked her, "Why are you sitting with it around people if you're so worried?" It turned out that the man (who made the amulet) was trying to get a job as a bone carver and was asking for bones to work with, and they are friends. I immediately became suspicious that something wasn't right about the amulet.

This led to the idea of recording the first video, where Vera interviewed her sister, who was wearing a necklace made of bear's teeth, mirroring one of the museum artefacts.

Technique

During our discussions and listening to the interviews and messages Vera recorded for this project, I realized that we may see objects differently. Even among the same community members, objects can generate multiple meanings depending on personal experience and perspective. Whereas my focus was mainly on the purpose of the object, my Evenki interlocutors emphasized technique and meaning. For example, a little pouch from the Lyon collection has been identified as a pouch for tobacco or powder. However, Vera suggested it might be a *chempuli* for storing hunting luck (*kutu*), as one can still see a strip of fish skin on it. According to Vera, the *chempuli* was always blessed by the shaman, who would ask for luck for hunters from the Mistress of the Universe. She can be seen on the Moon with a *chempuli* pouch. The elders used to wear them on their necks, and the *chempuli* was prized as a symbol for its role in the reproduction of moose.

Another two pouches, images of which I shared, provoked much discussion. Female interlocutors were particularly interested in the stitching and material of these pouches.

Fig. 8 Pouch from the collection of the Bordeaux museum (900.28.17), 2024.

The first pouch is from the Bordeaux collection. One of the participants suggested that the object might be a men's pouch for tools, made from loon skin turned inside

out. Women used to sew such pouches for their husbands. While drying, the loon skin was immediately shaped into a pouch; then a neckpiece made from the softer part of the skin was attached, often with an antler pendant. The size of this pouch would correspond to the size of the bird itself. In contrast, a male interlocutor in his 90s identified it as a tobacco pouch (*kapturgay*). This identification corresponds to the museum label. However, he noted that in their settlement, tobacco pouches were typically made from caribou skin. The skin was first soaked in kefir and then in milk with flour, to make the skin soft.

The other pouch from the Lyon collection, made of fish skin, similarly generated multiple suggestions. Initially, it was suggested that the object might be a *turukaruk* – a pouch for salt – or a *tamngatyvun* – a tobacco pouch (Irkutsk Evenki). However, the initial photograph did not clearly display the size or contours of the item. I sent a higher-quality image for further assessment, which led to new suggestion that it could be an *arivun* – a butter churn. Traditionally, the Evenki would pour reindeer milk into such a vessel, hang it on a saddle, and by the end of the day's journey, the milk would churn into butter (*ari*). My Evenki interlocutor mentioned that to confirm whether it is an *arivun*, the vessel should be smelled or touched: if it is greasy, it is likely an *arivun*. However, given that the object is more than a hundred years old, it is improbable that it retains any residual smell or traces of its original use.

This conversation made me reflect on the significance of tactile experience in identifying objects and, more broadly, on the concept of embodiment in my remote work.

(Dis)embodiment

In addition to bureaucratic and ethical concerns, many discussions about the challenges of continuing work in or on Siberia focus on the issue of physical presence. If you are not in the field, a significant part of the social reality remains hidden. Yet Dmitri Arzyutov and Sergei Kan (2013) discuss in their article on debates among Soviet ethnologists in the 1920s and 1930s the overemphasis on embodied experience. They point out that the performative nature of researchers' discussions about fieldwork positionality highlighted the "field" as the central activity of ethnographers. The distinction between ethnology as theory and ethnography as practice was framed by the necessity of fieldwork as a research methodology. Similarly, in the West, since Malinowski's time, the "field" has been considered the core of ethnography. Thus, the inability to conduct fieldwork *in situ* challenges not only our primary method – participant observation – but also the identity of the professional community. This situation is tied to the internal hierarchy of knowledge, often summarized as follows: only field ethnographers can speak authoritatively about and testify to what happens in the field. However, as Tim Ingold (2014:386) notes, "the field is never experienced as such when you are actually there and caught up in the currents of everyday life – it only stands out when you have left it far behind and begin to write about it." Ingold

proposes the concept of correspondence as a form of attentive and evolving engagement with research interlocutors, which is a continuous process and not simply "doing ethnography" in the form of formal interviewing. In this regard, ethnographic engagement can take diverse forms.

In 2013, while conducting online research on how the Evenki integrate digital spaces into their practices of identity construction and performance, I discovered that their forms of mobility and communication extend beyond physical boundaries (Mamontova 2014). People actively used Google Maps and online groups to "travel" together, communicate, revitalize their language, and coordinate activities. Since then, messaging has become a dominant form of communication, which is especially useful given the vast expanse of the Evenki's habitat. All my activities and communications with research partners within this project were conducted through WhatsApp; geographically this included the Irkutsk Oblast, Buryatia, the Evenk Raion of Krasnoiarsk Krai, and the Republic of Sakha.

In the shamanic cosmology of the Evenki, ways of corresponding with humans and non-humans extend beyond physical presence. For example, one of my Evenki interlocutors recalled a shaman placing a fox pelt on his back during a trance to locate a polar bear. Through the fox's eyes, which are believed to have superior vision, the shaman was able to track the bear's footprints and eventually hunt it. The use of trance states to connect the living and the deceased or to "catch up" with others in dreams underscores the importance of non-physical forms of interaction in Evenki culture. This form of correspondence suggests a complex understanding of relationships that transcends the material world. I am convinced that corporeal correspondence is an integral part of Evenki society. I offer this slightly provocative assertion for further discussion.

Regarding museum objects located far away from the Indigenous communities they were once taken from, the question arises: what is the value of these objects if they cannot be touched, smelled, or engaged with? I addressed this question to Vera. She responded:

> There is a strong connection between objects and people. In objects, there is the journey of a person, and this cannot be changed. They are their possessions, and they [people] recognize these objects even in the afterlife. My mother forbade me to touch or handle other people's belongings, as it could make a person ill. There are myths where a girl is promised beautiful combs, leatherworking tools, but she is advised not to take them, or else she won't return home. So, the girl argues and says that they are not combs but rib bones, not leatherworking tools but spines.

Vera added that the owner, whether in the human world or the afterlife, still knows where these objects are housed and would probably appreciate it if no one damages them in the museum.

Concluding remarks

This is still an ongoing project; more results will follow. For my Evenki research participants, this project was not about correct identification or labelling of the objects, but rather a way of reconnecting with the past, making sense of it, and narrating it. Considering that the objects were collected more than a hundred years ago and that most of my research participants were not from the region where the objects originated (though given the impact of the Soviet period, with its relocations and collectivization policies, I doubt that would have helped), it is not appropriate to talk about "returning knowledge" or "correct object identification." The same objects generated multiple meanings and stories; perhaps the most significant outcome would be to show this complexity and integrate the objects into a novel network of relations.

I conclude with Vera's reflection upon her experience in this project:

> Yesterday, when we were walking in the forest, I smelled red currants. We have a place where currants and other berries grow. It is an old Soviet dump, there's cardboard, iron, and other stuff underground. Over time, this place got covered with moss, and currant bushes grew on it. We go there to pick berries in the summer. I thought that for us, those Evenki objects are like the smell of currants.

DOCUMENTATION OF MUSEUM OBJECTS BY INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES OF ORIGIN – THE SAKHA PERSPECTIVE

Vera Solovyeva

These days, when many anthropological departments and their ethnographic collections face difficulties due to ethical dilemmas stemming from colonial legacy, critical questions concerning cultural artifact ownership and representation are raised worldwide. The Foundation for Siberian Cultures' project "Documentation of Museum Objects by Indigenous Communities of Origin," where Indigenous communities explain museum objects in their cultural context, using their own video recordings, is a significant step to overcome this problem. Given current political conditions, this project is even more important when building understanding and collaboration is now possible mostly only via virtual communication.

This project was not the first attempt at museum collaboration with Indigenous communities in which I have participated. Previous collaborative efforts involved the National Museum of Natural History (NMNH) of the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, DC and the American Museum of Natural History (AMNH) in New York. The AMNH Siberian collection was created during the Jesup North Pacific Expedition (1897–1902) with the purpose of documenting the cultures and languages of Indigenous people before they would ostensibly disappear due to globalization

and assimilation pressures (Kendall and Krupnik 2002). This collection is one of the largest and most comprehensive in the world. It includes more than 5 000 cultural artifacts from Northeastern Siberia, of which 878 items are of Sakha (Yakut) origin (Ivanov-Unarov and Ivanova-Unarova 2002).

Since first visiting the Smithsonian Institution in 2008, I wanted to bring Sakha traditional masters to American museums to study Siberian collections, to learn of their heritage objects, and later – to use this knowledge to revitalize and recreate our ancestral heritage in our homeland. These visits were essential because some traditional items in our homeland were lost and had never been seen by today's people; they do not exist in museums in the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia) (Ivanov-Unarov and Ivanova-Unarova 2002). In 2012, with the support of Laurel Kendall and Katherine Skaggs from AMNH, I helped organize a visit to the AMNH of the first group of Sakha craftsmen and Indigenous experts. After that group, a few more teams from the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia) visited the AMNH, including ethnographers, traditional jewelry makers, and artists. They all examined Sakha historical artifacts in the AMNH collections and offered information to the AMNH conservation staff about cultural background of the historical objects.

Unfortunately, current political circumstances, have made such visits unlikely in the near future. Thus, the "Narratives on Siberian Objects in Western Museum Collections" project offered an unprecedented opportunity to develop creative ways of connecting museums and Indigenous communities. It allowed anthropologists from Russia living abroad to reach Indigenous communities in the very places where ethnographic collections were once made and to gain Indigenous insight to historical objects in museums in the West.

Obstacles had to be overcome for this project to succeed: first and foremost, today's political barriers. In such a complex situation, even the first message to invite local people and to convince them to participate in the project had to be precisely and carefully worded. Second, in the project's proposal, while translation and transcription preparation were to be done locally, payments for such could not be provided. If a community moderator translated from Sakha to Russian, the transcription could not be produced locally using special software (Adobe); given its cost it was impossible to buy in Siberia. The same software was needed for editing video clips, since many traditional craftsmen are not trained speakers. We needed to take multiple shoots, to be later edited into one video. The help of my computer-savvy husband in editing was essential.

Another obstacle was the distance to the place where the actual interaction with the object occurred, both for the anthropologist living abroad and the local community moderator. Often, the latter had to travel long distances to reach an Indigenous expert. Technological demands posed yet another challenge. Special equipment was needed for quality video presentations: a big screen, light, microphones, stands, a vehicle to drive, etc.. Finally, we had to drop plans to involve young people to record

elderly experts. Many experts and masters who agreed to participate in the project wanted to ensure quality recordings: some specifically asked for professionals to record their presentations, and understandably so. They embody this knowledge, transferred into the traditional items they create using age-old technologies. They literally breathe new life into the forgotten objects and rituals; of course, they want this knowledge to be respected and recorded with the highest quality.

All of this made the role of community moderator crucial to the project success. Community moderators are key partners in reaching out to Indigenous experts, by providing equipment for quality video production, documentation, and helping with translation and other tasks. My community moderator, a seamstress of traditional clothing, fulfilled her duties exceptionally well. Together we shaped the explanation of our project:

> Many Sakha historical artifacts are stored in museums around the world and are therefore not available for direct acquaintance. Our people do not even know in which countries and exhibits the items related to the Sakha culture are. This project lifts the curtain on this mystery and offers an unprecedented opportunity to see in detail the collections that in other circumstances would not be seen. Only the bearers of the culture can explain a true meaning of the objects. Museum curators can only tell facts about the acquisition, such as where the item was acquired and when. Scientists can speculate what it could mean in its traditional homeland, but only the bearers of culture know its cultural significance. Even if they do not use such items anymore, they can remember stories from their parents, grandparents, or legends and epics related to these artifacts. Posting information on the Internet will open new opportunities for studying clothing, household items, and other traditions of Indigenous people.

Thanks to the excellent work of the community moderator, previous collaborative work with Indigenous knowledge experts, and continuous strong ties with my compatriots, we were able to engage traditional masters, museum specialists, scientists, and Indigenous knowledge experts, the true holders of our Sakha culture.

The project gained a lot of interest and positive responses among Indigenous people in the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia). It was a rare opportunity for traditional craftsmen living in both the villages and the capital city of Yakutsk. They could see in detail our ancestors' heritage, stored in museums abroad. For them if it was difficult to travel to these distant countries prior to 2022, it is almost impossible today. Many participants greatly appreciated this amazing opportunity.

Due to recent historical events, some of which were truly dramatic to the Sakha people, numerous items of our material and spiritual legacy were lost. In the course of colonial expansion, when many early ethnographic collections were made, precious items were removed. During the Soviet era, many material and spiritual objects were intentionally destroyed. Other items were repurposed in difficult times: for example,

fur coats were cut into hats and mittens for children, and silver and gold jewelry was melted down to exchange for what people needed to survive. Today, when interest in Sakha cultural heritage is on the rise, many people do not know exactly how historical items look like, even if they know about their existence. Museum collections are thus of great importance, to reconstruct forgotten techniques and to revive the material and spiritual culture of the Sakha people.

This project had multiple positive outcomes, the importance of which is difficult to overestimate. First, it shows that Sakha culture is alive and vibrant. Enduring traditions, ongoing scientific research, and revitalization of lost or forgotten objects and techniques are based on museum items. It would be very beneficial to involve young people in all future efforts. To qualify for this project's standards would require special training and quality equipment for video shooting. If such 'advanced' training is not possible, young people may be involved in documenting storytelling or knowledge sharing during household chores. Indigenous children commonly gain knowledge from their parents by working together, which require an intimate and relaxing atmosphere without demands of videos with high shooting standards.

Fig. 9 Sakha women near Yakutsk, 2004.

The project not only provided a better understanding of the artefacts' histories, but gave insights into traditions, customs, and spiritual beliefs. It evoked the feelings of pride and connection to our ancestral heritage and helped build continuity between generations. It supported our Sakha language and amplified Sakha people's voices by giving them the opportunity to explain the meaning of objects in distant museum collections. It also showed that a strong interest in our cultural heritage continues in my homeland.

Finally, as many Sakha people living abroad cannot visit their home areas, this virtual project allowed them to connect to their roots. It gave the sense of "home" in this big world and enabled sharing our cultural heritage with the next generation. The continuing of this unique project is vital to provide emotional and other support to people divided by political circumstances. It will increase Indigenous peoples' resilience and enable museums to express gratitude to Indigenous people and their heritage by collaborating with them.

"MORE-THAN-THING". EMOTIONAL BIOGRAPHIES OF MUSEUM OBJECTS

Dmitriy Oparin

Any human-made object (as well as a natural object in a cultural context) is loaded with social meanings and implications. These meanings are not static – in different situations the same object plays different roles, gives rise to different associations, and has different functions. The biography of an object can be understood as its movement in the space of social meanings, and the study of biographies allows us to trace how exactly a material thing, receiving support in the world of social meanings, becomes a "more-than-thing" (Kopytoff 1986; Hoskins 1998; Vakhshtain 2006). The arrival of an object in a museum may deprive it of its spatial mobility, but by no means does this event end the biography of the object, and the exhibition and academic contexts offer the exhibit an abundance of new meanings. For example, rural local history museums and museum collections of large Siberian cities contain many ritual objects of Indigenous peoples of the North and Siberia. Each of them has its own "pre-museum" biography and history of getting to the museum. But, as studies show, especially in rural museums, the museification of an object does not lead to its "freezing" (Bulgakova 2023; Liarskaya 2010; Pimenova 2019). Various objects of power from different Siberian cultures receive offerings from visitors and museum workers: these exhibits are talked to, something is asked of them, things even express their will.

Each museum exhibit has its own non-linear biography. A significant part of the items in the Siberian collection of the Musée d'ethnographie de Bordeaux consists of household items of Indigenous peoples collected in the last quarter of the 19th century by French explorers Charles Rabot and Joseph Martin. However, the life of each of these objects began before it was acquired by a French traveler. The object was made and, if not specifically for sale to Europeans, was probably used for its intended purpose. The biography of an object begins even before the moment of its material embodiment. The object is created by a craftsperson (or craftspersons) with skills; it is often fabricated from several materials, sometimes both manufactured and of autochthonous origin. This object then takes part in economic activity, becomes a full-fledged instrument of a family household or, more widely, of a community. Its sale, its journey to France, its cataloging, its possible exhibition, its distribution to a museum, its transfer from one collection to another (the Siberian collection of the museum in Bordeaux was once part of the Musée d'Éthnographie du Trocadéro in Paris), its restoration, its cataloging and re-attribution, its presence in the storerooms – these are all important milestones in the biography of an object in an exhibit.

Siberian ethnographic objects of French museums rarely leave storage. For example, I consider the Siberian collection of the ethnographic museum in Bordeaux as "frozen." Although among the 219 objects brought from Siberia there are interesting and artistically attractive items stored in Bordeaux (Les Collections de l'Eurasie

arctique 1996: 46), they are virtually unknown to anyone. However, if we return some objects to the context of relations (e.g., start to clarify attribution, prepare them for exhibition, or simply publish a photograph or send an image of an object to an interested researcher or local expert), these objects find themselves at the center of building new social relations. Returning from storage to the context of relations, the previously "frozen" objects, often outdated and irrelevant to the modern life and contemporary culture of Indigenous peoples, are filled with new social meanings, and their artistic and functional characteristics recede into the background. The object in museum optics ceases to be itself and becomes a symbol. Anna Bottesi (2021) describes the curatorial decision of the Weltmuseum Wien to exhibit the sacred and secret musical instruments of the Yurupari (Amazonian region) – these instruments could not be seen by women, children and uninitiated men. The museum staff decided to display them in the hall and at the same time close them off from the public, leaving only audio-musical accompaniment. The sacred Yurupari flutes in a new space sensitive to Indigeneous taboos became symbols of secrecy and sacredness in the Indians' cosmology, as well as a respectful coping with the trauma of the colonial movement of material possessions from the New World to the Old. The museum did not exhibit specific flutes with particular material and artistic characteristics, but rather the very notions of cultural taboo and secrecy specific to a particular group of the Amazonians.

Marisa Karyl Franz (2021), in her chapter on the Chukchi shaman Scratching-Woman costume, brought by Vladimir Bogoraz to the American Museum of Natural History (New York) in the early 20th century, draws the reader's attention to the complex and contradictory relationship that developed between the ethnographer and the gender-fluid Chukchi shaman, the material evidence of which is the shaman coat. This item is exhibited as an example of a Chukchi shaman's clothing. However, behind the dry and simply boring attribution, a dramatic, intimate and emotional story remains hidden.

Ethnographic objects of the Siberian Indigenous world in Western museums are "frozen" not only because they are often in storage or remain unnoticed by curators or visitors, but also because these objects are unknown to the Indigenous people concerned. Siberia and the West are not situated in the context of colonial (and then postcolonial) discourses that could provide the impetus and grounds for building new relationships and revising existing practices. These objects either serve to fill a geographical lacuna in museums of world cultures (one has to show the north of Asia somehow) or play the role of an exotic object from distant Siberia. My idea is that an ethnographic object will begin to "work" and be filled with new meanings, provided that it begins to "speak not directly", to become a "more-than-thing," more than an example of a ritual outfit of a Chukchi shaman of the early 20th century. An object becomes visible if it is placed in the context of social relations and is described not in the language of a classifying catalog but in affective language; if, simply put, a person or a relationship between people – sensual or colonial, a relationship of

inequality or a relationship between humans and nonhumans – can be seen behind the object.

Not all objects have such a rich biography as the Scratching-Woman shamanic costume. However, in relation to each object of the "frozen collection", there should be an attempt at deanonymization – that is, an attempt to find the person behind the object. De-anonymization inevitably leads to de-exoticization: a century-old shaman's costume ceases to be a sacral garment of mysterious ritual experts of a distant Arctic people, but turns into a material occasion for a story about the relationship between two people. And if the researchers have no local names in the archival records and cannot "de-anonymize" the object, there is always the possibility of constructing a relational context around the object. The audio-visual project to which this collective article is dedicated includes predominantly anonymous, "silent" objects in a context of new relationships for them, the actors of which are museum workers, anthropologists, and Indigenous experts. The last, through video commentary and narrative, create a rich text around a particular object. The emotional and interpersonal facets of the object's biography pull it out of a dry and historically colonial catalog, deconstruct its objective materiality and include the object in a subjective context, giving agency not only to Indigenous experts but also to the object itself.

The most mundane object has the potential to "change its speech," to go beyond the classical ethnographic description and to be included in a new, currently relevant narrative and context of new relations. In the end, each object has the potential to become a symbol and material embodiment of the intangible – the relationships of the different actors who have dealt with it throughout its biography, colonial trauma, the skills of its maker, collector and researcher (whether anthropologist, museum worker or Indigenous expert).

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Erich Kasten

The *Digital Museum of the North* project has elaborated another approach for Indigenous communities to access their cultural heritage that is currently stored in museums outside Russia. In contrast to current debates on decolonization of museum collections (Kasten n.d.), for example, Sakha people demonstrate in their narratives for this project an alternative approach to how to deal with their cultural heritage that is found in foreign museum collections (Kasten 2025: 35–47, see also Solovyeva, *this chapter*). Their view is based on self-confidence and pride about their culture. While for some repatriation appears as an act of decolonization, it can turn a blind eye to neo-colonialisms and new cultural imperialisms.[8] Listening to the narratives

8 According to the current German Feminist Foreign policy (cf. Martenstein 2024)

of original knowledge holders – as pursued in this project – can provide us wider perspectives.

To this day, museum collections often continue to be treated according to a particular *zeitgeist*,[9] as was the case during the colonial and Nazi era, when museum collections were used to justify superiority over other peoples and for racial theories of the time. In contrast, Kerstin Volker-Saad (2022) emphasizes a much-needed multi-perspective view and complete incorporation of different narratives on the objects as opposed to any one-sided appropriation, including those encouraged in the current debate on postcolonialism.[10]

We need to be aware of the special value of these objects as materialized forms of knowledge of humankind. Adolf Bastian (1860) was one of the first to systematically create comprehensive ethnographic collections for this very purpose. Since then (and to this day), such collections have been instrumentalized and abused for various political purposes. It is only when the Indigenous knowledge associated with these objects is recorded and shared (i.e., made accessible), that the actual value of these collection objects is fully realized: i.e., to gain a better understanding and appreciation of other cultures. Franz Boas had the same issues in mind, when he struggled with how to properly present his collections from the First Nations of the Canadian Northwest (Joseph and Kalinowski 2023:124). Yet he never did provide the full original texts communicated by his Indigenous partners together with the objects he collected from them – which is one of the intended outcomes of this project.

With this project another approach had been elaborated to maintain connections in museum research in the Russian North with Indigenous knowledge holders in difficult times. By this sincere co-production, Indigenous knowledge holders are given a voice (see Kasten 2025), before their authentic views might be condensed and interpreted later by foreign anthropologists according to their own perceptions and research paradigms of the given time.

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9 Balzer 2022; 2024.

10 „Mit der Würdigung der Arbeit der produzierenden Künstler, Handwerker, Schnitzer, Schneider und Schmiede können die verschiedenen Kontexte der Begegnungen erörtert und unrechtmäßiges Handeln eingebettet in eine multiperspektivische Betrachtung aufgearbeitet werden“ (Volker-Saad 2022:60).

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