

Equitable Anthropological Research through Knowledge Sharing

Rósa Rut Þórisdóttir

Ph.D Candidate, visual anthropology, University of Paris 7, France

My discussion involves the role of anthropology, the importance of knowledge repatriation and sharing. For some time now, we have been talking about Inuit rights to their own land. We pride ourselves in giving independence to former colonies and providing them with financial aid, but still we prefer to hold on to their cultural treasures (Shaw, 1986). For the last couple of decades the world has witnessed an increasing number of disputes over cultural property ownership. More than ever before, ethnic groups and nations are fighting to regain control of their own future, their lands, their lost cultural properties and ancestral human remains, and often these disputes result in claims for repatriation.

As early as 1913 the Greenlandic people expressed their longing to preserve objects of cultural, historical and archaeological value of Greenlandic origin in their own museums. In 1966 the National Museum of Greenland was established although the first objects, 204 pastels painted by two Greenlandic artists, Aron from Kangek and Jens Kreutzmann from Kangaamiut, were not returned from Denmark until 1982. It wasn't until 2001 that all 35000 items promised by the Danish National Museum had at last arrived in Greenland, leaving around 65000 Greenlandic objects in Denmark (Berglund, 1994).

Thanks to the repatriation of 1158 ethnographical objects, 28000 archaeological objects, a good fine arts collection and a copy of all recorded drum-songs made from the 20th century, Greenlanders have been able to restore their own history and prehistory by their own means in a National Museum, enabling research as well as exhibitions. One of many positive outcomes of the repatriation process was the establishment of the Greenland Research Centre, giving a boost to scientific cooperation between Danish and Greenlandic researchers on archaeological and cultural historical topics. The repatriation is also important from the point of view of cultural viability as already pointed out during the first Northern Research Forum, held in Iceland in the year of 2000 (see e.g. Brekke, Langlais, 2000).

Despite the obvious benefits of returning cultural property to its original owners, the process is not so obvious at all. As curators of museums that actually hold these objects point out, access to cultural objects that belong to other civilisations is crucial in the multicultural societies we live in today. Big museums such as the British Museum or the Louvre where objects from all over the world have been collected in one place are important for cultural education today, both for cultures represented in the museum as well as for people of different cultures visiting. The question of repatriation of cultural property is thus not about emptying actual museums and shipping all items to the original cultures as some have feared but as Amadou-Mahtar M'Bow former director of the UNESCO points out, it is about returning objects that are essential for the comprehension of a nation's history and to the establishment of a cultural identity.

UNESCO is thus not only calling for the restitution of vases and statues, but also appealing to universities and libraries that actually hold important foreign collections of documents, originating from cultures that in many cases do not hold a single copy themselves anymore (M'Bow, 1979). M'Bow is pleading with those libraries to again share with them the treasure which was once theirs. He claims that restitution of documents to the cultures which produced them, allows people to recover a part of their memories and identity (Idem).

If cultural property is thus to be found in knowledge it should also be found in writings, not only written by the people but also documents inspired by them. As we know the Inuit cultural identity is largely based on how they differ themselves from other cultures, especially the culture of the *qallunaat*¹, the white people's culture. Distinguishing between what is typically Inuit and what is typically *qallunaat* is thus an essential feature for creating an identity which is historically distinctive. Knowledge seems thus to be a vital aspect to the comprehension of the history of Inuit peoples and the establishment of their cultural identity. Many Inuit believe that those best fit for such a task are the elders, living on the land before the creation of western style villages (Searles, 2006). How often have we heard that when an elder dies in the Arctic a whole library disappears with him?

¹ Greenlandic word meaning « white man »

However, the Inuit are amongst the best studied cultures in the world (Graburn, 1969). The collection of studies dedicated to their ways of living and being are the results of decades of research made by scholars with different backgrounds and vocations. Numerous books based on observational participation have been written. Musical recordings, corporal measurements, photographs and films have been produced ever since the first contact with the white man and carry the traces of all the things the white man could not carry back home with him. These documents are the memories of the intangible and the local philosophy. Consisting, in many cases, of the complete works of a specialist's observation in a given culture over an extended period of time, they are what we call, ethnographic descriptions (Kirshenblatt–Gimblett, 1998). Contrary to museum objects that represent the stagnation of a traditional past (Sontag, 1978; Grognet, 2007), the ethnographic knowledge is the process of observation of identity under constant change (Grognet, 2007).

All these historic ethnographical descriptions that exist in western publications, combined with the knowledge of the elders, holds a key to a better understanding of the past and thus the future. Yet it seems as though these studies have not benefited the Inuit themselves as much as they could have as most of the early ethnographical studies, such as those of Ludvig Kumlien, Franz Boas, Edmund Peck and Knud Rasmussen, have never found their way back to the populations studied (Oosten, Laugrand, 2002), which partly explains the distrust that has emerged between anthropologists and locals.

Restitution of ethnographic documents sometimes referred to as *knowledge repatriation* (Krupnik, 2000; Krupnik, 2005) has already been tried in limited areas with good results (Krupnik, 1999). Nevertheless we can not ignore the fact that the importance or use of written ethnographic descriptions, for the societies inspiring those same studies, can be questionable as they are usually not written in the local language and require certain language knowledge of its readers. As translating all these descriptions into the smallest languages is not a feasible solution, written text is always going to benefit only a small portion of local scholars having learned the language of the writer. Visual documents such as films and photos, on the other hand, need no special linguistic skills to be understood. Provided we know who made the images, when, where, why and for whom, they can communicate trans-culturally and tell a story unique to every single viewer. Contrary to books and museum objects, films are not only for the scientists and the elite, but also for the public.

Clearly a photograph that can be countlessly reproduced does not have the same material value as the Greek Pantheon Marbles actually held by the English, or the fragment of the Sphinx's beard. Images nevertheless carry cultural importance for the people represented. They carry socio-cultural values and can be a testimony for their subjects' understanding of their origins as a people. Collier and Collier have shown how whether an image presents a person or an object both can release the memory and initiate an interesting conversation. Using photographs to freshen people's memories is a method they call «exploring the photographs together » (Collier and Collier, 1986).

To the general Inuit population it seems that the sentimental values in particular are of most importance. Old photos, which originally could have been taken as simple snapshot photographs of a *qallunaat* visitor to show those at home what he had seen, might just be the only photo of a lost friend.

The value of visual documents is becoming clearer and films and photos have been returned with great gratitude to those receiving them. Still, only a small amount of the photos have found their way back to the Arctic and even fewer examples of the films. Of the 9 films Professor Jean Malaurie made in the Arctic during the period from 1969 to 1976, whose images we see in the slide show: 4 were filmed in Greenland; 2 in Alaska; 1 in Canada; 1 in north-east Siberia; and 1 is a summary film of the whole area, none to my knowledge have found their way into an Inuit cultural centre, archive or museum in the Arctic. Still those films hold important information in various domains. Apart from the sentimental value already discussed, these films take on subjects such as the family, the role of women and the custom of sharing so strong in the Inuit way of being. They offer ethnographic information on eating habits, clothing, decorations and hobbies, and carry visual testimonies of gestures and expressions. Large parts are also dedicated to the Inuit hunter and the relationship between man and animal. In his films, Jean Malaurie never tries to hide the injustice of the Inuit political history but rather criticises the hypocrisy colonisers and rulers from more southern locations convey. The collection of films can thus be an input to the discussion of the difficult situation many Inuit communities find themselves in today as they can be homage of the Inuit woman, described as strong and wise, or the Inuit man described by Jean Malaurie as resourceful and inventive but exploited for decades by the white man.

Made for French national television, Jean Malauries' authority is imposing in the films but nevertheless he gives the people filmed a margin to communicate. He declares the production of the films as being in collaboration with the local population at a given moment, and that the films themselves are collective property. The troubling part is that the sharing and the collective part of the deal have until now only extended to the production. Preserved under the strict rules of the French television archives INA, copies of these films are for eventual sale to institutions only for important sums of money.

Scientific value of visual documents is still largely ignored in our academic world as we have ourselves experienced here during these last few days. After our two film sessions no breakout groups were formed for discussion. Probable reason; films are looked upon as entertainment rather than anything else.

Cultural knowledge conveyed in images is more important than we have wanted to admit until now, though many scholars still ignore the importance of photos and films as scientific documents, (see : Monreal, 1979 ; Gathercole, 1986 ; McIntosh & McIntosh, 1989 ; Kinzer, 2001 ; Kowalsky, 2005). Local scholars should thus have a right to a closer collaboration and much better access to the knowledge they communicate involving their own culture; not only in recent research but in all research done in their region or amongst their people. Equitable anthropology is a step towards a better balance in a changing North and sharing the knowledge visual documents preserve could be one of those steps. To make a fair trade in anthropology and show our gratitude towards people who so generously shared their lives and culture with us. The return of visual documents to the Arctic, to its academic institutions, museums and their own archives might just be the appropriate thing to repatriate. How or even if, these documents are used after they have been returned is not ours to decide. Our goal should simply be to share and hope for intellectual discussion, opening up new dimensions in anthropological knowledge seeking and collaboration between anthropologists and their "subjects".

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