

The Twilight Zone of Collections. What Do We Preserve when We Conserve?

Ir a la versión en español

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ABSTRACT

In Chile, indigenous communities have identified anthropological and archaeological museums as places that preserve the memory of Western colonization. These accusations exacerbate the crisis of representation and have driven processes of ideological decolonization in these spaces.

Within the framework of the basic functions of a museum, some institutions have explored new museological models and have questioned their procurement policies; the way in which research, communication and exhibitions were approached within their establishments. However, conservation has been the least debated function, because preserving collections to ensure their transmission to future generations seems an immovable agreement.

Through the exposition of three cases of indigenous interest, this article questions conservation and highlights how the discipline is governed by Eurocentric conceptions that emphasize the material dimension of collections without allowing for indigenous epistemologies where, in general, matter and spirit are not separated.

KEY WORDS

decolonization; anthropological museums; Chile; conservation; collections management; indigenous epistemologies; other wisdoms

Figure: Clava, command insignia in the shape of a lizard, native to the Nahuelbuta Mountain Range (Photo: Mariela González Casanova, 2018; courtesy: Museo Mapuche de Cañete Ruka Kimün Taiñ Volil Juan Cayupi Huechicura, Chile).

INTRODUCTION

According to the definitions set out in the Statutes of the International Council of Museums (ICOM),¹ “[a] museum is a non-profit, permanent institution in the service of society and its development, open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity and its environment for the purposes of education, study and enjoyment” (p. 3).

From this definition, the five main functions of a museum can be derived: to acquire, to conserve, to research, to communicate and to exhibit. However, of these five roles, conservation is perhaps the least questioned. There is general agreement on the need to preserve heritage assets in order to ensure their transmission to future generations, and this has become an almost irrefutable truth, even more so when it comes to material objects from ancient cultures.

However, in light of the complex processes of decolonization and critical openness with respect to the epistemological axes on which the museum as an institution had been based upon until the late 20th century (Shelton, 2011; Bustamante, 2012; Lonetree, 2012), some reflections emerge that may be worth considering, as an exercise for change of approach or alterity.² Particularly when it comes to museums with an anthropological focus, that preserve indigenous ethnographic or archaeological collections. In some of these cases, the communities of origin do not necessarily recognize the process of musealization of their material culture, do not share the halo of untouchability conferred by their patrimonialization or differ in their motives.

In the context of the crisis of representation that this type of museum has been experiencing, multiple museological models or exhibition design proposals have emerged as responses to the indigenous claims. For example, in the United States, where after the passing of the *Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act* (NAGPRA)³ in 1990, some museums decided to change the policies regarding their collections, removing human remains from their exhibitions and even voluntarily returning some of these

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¹ Approved by the 22nd General Assembly in Vienna (Austria) on August 24th, 2007.

² Understanding alterity as the philosophical principle of alternating or exchanging one's own perspective for that of another, considering and taking into account point of view, ideas as to how the world was conceived, interests, or ideologies of another, and not assuming that one's own is the only possible one.

³ A public law that requires institutions receiving federal funds to develop an inventory of their collections, consult with federally recognized Native American tribes, and repatriate human remains or cultural items that meet certain criteria.

Intervención

ENERO-JUNIO 2021
JANUARY-JUNE 2021

bioanthropological remains to their communities of origin (Endere & Ayala, 2012, p. 40-41).

That being said, if we think specifically about the context of Chilean anthropological or ethnographic museums, these realities have been seriously hampered by the absence of a legal figure of repatriation. Even so, different exhibition discourses have addressed the issue more or less directly. Whether from “culturalist, historicizing or aestheticizing”⁴ positions (Bustamante, 2012, p. 19), each of these spaces has dealt with the conflict with varying degrees of success. And they have developed proposals aimed at justifying, rearranging, or openly challenging the way in which research, communication, and the exhibition of heritage under custody have been historically treated within their institutions. They have also, by necessity, had to review the history of their acquisitions and delimit their policies in this regard.

However, although the different functions of a museum are intimately linked to each other, it would seem that all of them could be expanded, debated, assembled, permeated and even suspended, except for conservation. This is because the fundamental basis on which conservation as a discipline is structured focuses on the materiality of tangible cultural property and the action on the physical properties of the collections under custody, to “maintain or care for the permanence or integrity of something”, which is how the Real Academia Española (RAE) defines the concept of *to conserve* (DLE, 2021).

But what happens when, for their communities of origin, the objects that the museum preserves have spiritual and ritualistic meanings that supersede the relevance of their material nature? What to do when a community considers that, to ensure aspects of their culture are preserved, certain collections need to leave the museum and return to the “life” from which they were extracted? How to deal with the fear provoked in members of a community when a museum keeps among its collection’s burial objects and bioanthropological remains of their ancestors?

Since the beginning of the 21st century, the Latin American decolonial paradigm⁵ has pushed to break away from the Eurocentric

⁴ Editorial translation. All subsequent translations where the original is in Spanish are also editorial translations.

⁵ Pioneered by thinkers such as Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui, Ochy Curiel and Aura Cumes, but better known through authors such as Aníbal Quijano, Enrique Dussel, Walter Dignolo, María Lugones and Katherine Walsh, among others; all authors linked to the so-called Modernist/colonialist group, one of the best known critical thinking collectives in Latin America in the first decade of the 21st century. The decolonial perspective focuses the discussion on the power relations installed throughout the American continent since its conquest in 1492. It differs from the

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bases of power, to shake off the logic of modernity and open up to other epistemic alternatives (Pachón, 2008; Zapata, 2018). I believe that it is time that these premises also permeate the conceptions of conservation as a discipline, in an exercise that highlights the cognitive and spiritual practices of indigenous peoples, historically silenced by colonialism and Eurocentric thought.

ANOTHER BRICK IN THE WALL. CONSERVATION FROM A CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE

For Ignacio González-Varas, Doctor in Theory of Art, the word conservation derives from the Latin *conservatio*, composed of *cum*, which has the value of continuity, and the verb *servare*, to save (2006, p. 539). From this etymological definition, conservation is then “to save the continuity of something”, which could be applicable to both the tangible and intangible dimensions of a cultural asset. However, conservation as a discipline is defined by the International Committee for Conservation (ICOM-CC) as follows:

All measures and actions aimed at safeguarding tangible cultural heritage while ensuring its accessibility to present and future generations. Conservation embraces preventive conservation, remedial conservation and restoration. All measures and actions should respect the significance and the physical properties of the cultural heritage item (ICOM-CC, 2008, p. 1).

That being said, considering the profound interdependence that exists between tangible and intangible cultural heritage (one of the premises underpinning the 2003 UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage), the most recent version of the *ICOM Code of Ethics for Museums* (2004, p. 34) states: “Museum usage of collections from contemporary communities requires respect for human dignity and the traditions and cultures that use such material.”

This last premise opens the door to the incorporation of more subtle values of tangible cultural heritage, such as its symbolic, social or cosmogonic dimensions, particularly when dealing with objects of a sacred nature. Accordingly, the *ICOM Code of Ethics* does address these concerns and encourages respect for indige-

postcolonial approach of Edward Said, Gayatri Spivak and Homi Bhabha, among others, in that the latter is typical of authors from the former British or French colonies of Asia, Oceania and the Middle East, whose understanding of colonial history is 300 years later and is based on a more culturalist perspective.

Figure: Clava, command insignia in the shape of a lizard, native to the Nahuelbuta Mountain Range (Photo: Mariela González Casanova, 2018; courtesy: Museo Mapuche de Cañete Ruka Kimün Taiñ Volil Juan Cayupi Huechicura, Chile).

Intervención

ENERO-JUNIO 2021
JANUARY-JUNE 2021

nous rights over their cultural material held in museums. However, it does so specifically with respect to the processes of acquisition, research, exhibition and communication of collections.⁶ Again, nothing is mentioned about their conservation.⁷ And this happens because both the function of the museum as a space for the preservation of cultural heritage, as defined by ICOM, and the definition that this same organization makes of conservation as a discipline, point essentially to the tangible dimension of heritage.

On the other hand, when considering the act of removing objects from their spaces of circulation or rest, to store and care for them in museums, I bring to mind the words of museologist and art theorist Martin Schärer, who points out that “objects have no more importance than that given to them by their relationship with human beings and with society; [...] they are often preserved, either because of the function for which they are used (an aspect that does not concern museology) or because of the values attributed to them” (2000, p. 1). These values assigned to them constitute what, in museology, we call the *process of musealization* (Desvallées & Mairesse, 2010), a process that, to paraphrase Schärer himself, is a selective act that responds to the human will to remove certain objects from life in order to preserve them and, paradoxically, delay their physical death.

However, this act of musealization is in itself an act that could be meaningless for many indigenous cultural groups. While it is true that in recent decades museums have been embraced by many communities as a vindictory symbol of their own cultures, the value and meaning that objects obtain when they are acquired and stored is not necessarily the same for indigenous cultures as it is for the Western cultures in which these institutions are based (Bustamante, 2012). In this sense, the British museologist Simon Knell, through an analogy of the second law of thermodynamics, states that one cannot conserve something without losing something else during the process, just as one cannot convert electricity into light without losing heat. His thesis is clear: “to believe we can collect and keep without loss is to suffer an illusion” (Knell, 2007, p. 25).

⁶ It outlines the ethical conditions to be considered in the acquisition of such materials (ch. 2, sec. 2.5, p. 10); establishes the respect for certain beliefs in the research procedures of these collections (ch. 3, sec. 3.7, p. 20); and indicates special care for certain sensitivities in the exhibition of these types of materials (ch. 4, sec. 4.3, p. 25).

⁷ With regards to conservation, Chapter 2 expands on the notion that “Museums that own collections conserve them for the benefit of society and its development”, and from section 2.18 to section 2.26, deals with aspects such as the permanence of collections; responsibility for collections; documentation; protection against losses; security; preventive conservation; conservation and restoration; and the restriction of personal use of collections (pp. 13-15).

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The point is that an object's values do not reside only in the material composition of an artifact, but also in its utilization and social significance. This web of meanings is broken when an object is removed from its cultural environment to be inserted into the museum's retention system, where conservation measures become just *another brick in the wall* that separates it from the life for which it was created. There, it is usually the curators and conservators who decide what losses they are willing to accept in order to preserve these collections. These losses are usually most felt by the indigenous communities of the object's origin, at the heart of their cultural traditions and at the epicenter of their spiritual realities.

In this sense, the Mapuche⁸ museologist Juana Paillalef Carinao,⁹ in her essay "An indigenous woman in the face of heritage", reflected on the cultural material that she called "guarded" and not "safeguarded" in museums:

[...] there are elements in existence that are sacred. They must have forms, directions, ornaments, structures, light, color, etc., which are necessary, since all objects have a soul. If these elements become unknown, or if it is badly exhibited or badly used and badly treated, it can lose its soul and can be punished by its spirit (Paillalef, 1998, p. 78).

Confronted with this reflection, with this other dimension of knowledge, with this other non-Western epistemological perspective, it is inevitable for me to ask: what are we preserving when we conserve? Or, to change the approach, what attributes of the collections are we silencing when we place the objects in sanitized spaces, in aseptic containers, in controlled storages, in air-conditioned showcases?

ATOLE CON LOS DEDOS (SMOKES AND MIRRORS). HERITAGE AND INDIGENOUS LAW IN CHILE TODAY

Chile is in the midst of a complex historical and political moment, and having a thorough understanding of both the management and application of regulations regarding indigenous cultural heritage is complicated due to the uncertainty created by this ongoing process of change.

⁸ Native people from the central and southern part of the territory currently known as Chile.

⁹ Director of the Mapuche Museum of Cañete Ruka Kimvn Taiñ Volil Juan Cayupi Huechicura.

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Intervención

ENERO-JUNIO 2021
JANUARY-JUNE 2021

On the one hand, in March of 2018, a new phase of cultural institutionalization was inaugurated with the creation of the Ministerio de las Culturas, las Artes y el Patrimonio, a process that consolidated into a single entity: the Consejo Nacional de la Cultura y las Artes (CNCA), the Dirección Nacional de Bibliotecas, Archivos y Museos (DIBAM) and the Consejo de Monumentos Nacionales (CMN), all of which had previously corresponded to the Ministry of Education.

On the other hand, as of June 2019, a bill has been under discussion in Congress to enact a new Heritage Law, which seeks to replace the one currently in force, the Ley de Monumentos Nacionales No. 17,288, enacted in 1970. This new law is mainly aimed at improving and renewing the protective mechanisms in place for cultural heritage, in line with the new institutional framework laid out in the recently created Ministerio de las Culturas, las Artes y el Patrimonio.

Finally, the country is going through a complex constitutional process initiated on October 25th 2020 which will, in the space of the next two years, change the current Constitution of the Republic, a constitution inherited from the dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet (1973-1989) and which has been in force since 1980.

In terms of current legislation in Chile, the Ley Indígena No. 19,253, enacted in 1993, establishes that any work generated in the context of the native peoples in ancient times is intellectual property of their living descendants. However, somewhat contradictorily, the Ley de Monumentos Nacionales N° 17.288, which is regulated by the CMN, states that all archaeological artifacts or remains belong to the State and that it is this technical institution the one with the custody and legal authority for their use and intervention.

The same holds true for all their museum collections which, by Supreme Decree No. 192 published in the Official Diary on June 20th, 1987, are also declared Historic Monuments. As defined in its sole article: "The collections of all museums under the Dirección de Bibliotecas, Archivos y Museos of the Ministerio de Educación Pública, are declared as Historical Monuments"¹⁰

As a result, indigenous communities do not really have any authority over their material culture once it has been patrimonialized or musealized. Like archaeological objects, human remains found in excavations or on display in a museum collection, are all National Monuments owned by the State, and this means that any decision

¹⁰ The decree refers to DIBAM, under the Ministry of Education, an institution that is currently called the Servicio Nacional del Patrimonio Cultural (SNPC), under the Ministry of Culture, Arts and Heritage. This nomenclature has not been modified to date.

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Intervención

ENERO-JUNIO 2021
JANUARY-JUNE 2021

taken over these objects depends solely on the political will of their custodians, who, legally speaking, represent the State.

The fundamental point of this provision is that there is no constitutional recognition of indigenous peoples and their fundamental economic, social and cultural rights in Chile. In this sense, Convention 169 of the International Labor Organization (ILO),¹¹ has been the normative body that has emerged to fill the gap in the constitutional recognition of indigenous peoples in Chile.

However, although Chile has ratified this Convention and thereby obliging itself to mold its regulatory framework to the principles established therein,¹² the reality is that the process of implementation of this type of regulation has been trapped in a series of political obstacles which reinforce the conceptual distance between precisely what the bill seeks, that is, the recognition of the autonomy of these peoples and the *agreement* between them and the government, and what the internal regulations define as the right to participation, which is rather understood as indigenous *integration* within the dominant Chilean system (Alvarado, 2016; Román, 2014). All this despite the fact that the majority of Chileans—indigenous and non-indigenous—agree with the indigenous constitutional recognition and the development of a new pluri-national constitution, understood as the acceptance that there are nations that existed prior to the creation of the State of Chile, as opposed to a single national identity, which unifies and denies particular cultural identities.¹³

That said, with the recent creation of the Ministerio de las Culturas, las Artes y el Patrimonio, progress has been made in the search

¹¹ Convention No. 169 on Indigenous and Tribal Peoples in Independent Countries was approved by the National Congress under the Decree 236, as stated in Official Communication No. 7,378, dated April 9th, 2008, by the Honorable Chamber of Deputies. The Constitutional Court, by judgment dated on April 3th, 2008, declared that the rules of the aforementioned Convention No. 169 submitted to its jurisdiction, are constitutional. The instrument of ratification of said Convention was filed on September 15th, 2008 with the Director General of the ILO and, consequently, in accordance with Article 38, paragraph 3, of Convention No. 169, it entered into force as law in Chile on September 15th, 2009.

¹² In very brief terms, this Convention establishes the duty of the signatory states to consult with indigenous peoples to agree on procedures in accordance with their socio-cultural characteristics regarding any legislative or administrative measures that may affect them directly, with a view to reaching agreements or obtaining their consent to the proposed measures. It also regulates matters related to the customs and laws of the native peoples, referring to the preservation of their culture, among other matters.

¹³ According to the 2016 United Nations Development Program (UNDP) Audit for Democracy survey, 85% of the sample was in favor of the Constitution recognizing indigenous peoples, 70% were in favor of indigenous peoples having special seats in Congress, 67% were in favor of them being able to autonomously administer their territories and 63% considered that it was beneficial for the host country that Indigenous peoples maintain their culture, customs and traditions.

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Intervención

ENERO-JUNIO 2021
JANUARY-JUNE 2021

for explicit recognition of indigenous cultural rights,¹⁴ so much so that in recent years the Ministry has led a series of transfers of collections of indigenous origin from the Museo Nacional de Historia Natural in the capital to anthropological museums located in indigenous territories, specifically the Museo Antropológico Padre Sebastián Englert (MAPSE) (Ministerio de las Culturas, las Artes y el Patrimonio, 2018; 2019) on Easter Island, *Rapa Nui*¹⁵ indigenous territory, and the Museo Antropológico Martín Gusinde¹⁶ in Puerto Williams, in the extreme south of Chile, *Yagán* indigenous territory.¹⁷

However, in regards to this, there are two points I would like to make: the first is that Chile lacks a normative framework to determine the conceptual scope, procedures and regulatory applications for restitution, repatriation,¹⁸ or devolution actions, so these actions are more subject to strategies and political will than to legal operations of a binding nature. And secondly, none of these actions directly involve the indigenous communities but are, rather, institutional procedures for the transfer of collections from a national museum to a regional one. Or what the director of the SNPC, Carlos Maillet, defines as “inter-institutional loans” (2019, p. 19).

In summary, when taking a general look at the legal frameworks that determine the cultural rights of indigenous cultural heritage in Chile, as long as the rights of these peoples are not consecrated in constitutional text and consequently reflected in organic laws, then these indigenous communities will continue to be considered and treated as subaltern cultures. No matter how far Chile has committed itself to adapting its internal regulations in this issue and to implement the precepts of indigenous participation and consultation

¹⁴ The National Culture Policy 2017-2022 establishes the recognition of Indigenous peoples as subjects of rights as one of its fundamental principles, committing itself to respecting and promoting them, their history and worldview, their practices and the development of indigenous culture and art, in addition to improved consultation procedures (p. 35).

¹⁵ Rapa Nui refers to the Indigenous peoples that inhabit Easter Island in Chile.

¹⁶ Minister of Cultures performs first restitution of heritage assets to the Yagán community (Ministerio de las Culturas, las Artes y el Patrimonio, 2019); Second restitution of heritage assets to the Yagán community, (Ministerio de las Culturas, las Artes y el Patrimonio, 2020).

¹⁷ The Yaghan or Yamana are Indigenous peoples of the Fuegian archipelago in the extreme south of South America, in the territory of Chile and Argentina.

¹⁸ Regarding the designation of these actions, archaeologist Patricia Ayala specifies that for Moira Simpson, the term *restitution* refers to objects stolen or illicitly appropriated in contravention of international law and the UNESCO conventions of 1954 and 1970. *Repatriation* instead would be the appropriate term for those items that are legally possessed, according to international standards, but are claimed by their original owners, in defiance of national standards and museum policies, who maintain the legality of their rights to the collections. She points out that for María Luz Endere the term *repatriation* is also based on the idea of returning to the original peoples or communities what they have been deprived of by colonial powers or national states (Ayala, 2020)

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in decision-making when it ratified ILO Convention 169, in reality, the political guidelines will always be determined by the epistemological conceptions of the State's institutionality, which are still those of the dominant Western culture. Meanwhile, the inter-institutional loans of collections are publicly treated by the press as "restitutions", bringing government authorities all kinds of praise and recognition. *Atole con el dedo (Smoke and mirrors)*.

WHAT SHOULD I DO WITH THESE FINDINGS?

Bury them underground?

The Museo Arqueológico de San Pedro de Atacama¹⁹ was founded in 1963 by the Belgian-born Baptist priest Gustavo Le Paige Walke, who dedicated 25 years of his life to the search, collection and study of burial sites in the area. Le Paige's intention was to enable a museum to learn about the prevailing culture in the area of San Pedro de Atacama (Pavez, 2012; Morales & Quiroz, 2017), through a valuable collection of Andean archaeology that included objects of various materials (ceramics, textiles, metals, etc.). But also included nearly five thousand skulls and three hundred human remains all of which were excellently preserved, thanks to the climatic conditions in the region (Figure 1).

The problem is that, according to the oldest traditions, still prevalent among many of the country's natives, the pre-Hispanic tombs or "gentilares",²⁰ which is what they call the pre-evangelization burial sites, are places to be avoided. They should not be desecrated because they have the power to make people sick. Even the unearthed objects themselves can carry that power (Pavez, 2012). Le Paige disturbed a large number of gentilares, causing discomfort and fear among the surrounding communities, who in the mid-1990s went public with their feelings of disapproval towards the display of these bodies, requesting their removal from all exhibition spaces (Ayala & Sepúlveda, 2008).

By 2006, after years of pressure and tension, the Instituto de Antropología y Arqueología of the Universidad Católica del Norte, formalized the decision to remove the human remains from the exhibitions, going on to implement this measure definitively by the middle of 2007. The bodies and skeletons were cleaned and placed

¹⁹ Located in the II Region of Antofagasta, Chile. It belongs to the Universidad Católica del Norte.

²⁰ Burial sites of the "gentiles", entities that are associated with archaeological remains and which are respected and feared by the Atacameño communities because they believe them to have the power to harm, sicken and even kill (Ayala & Sepúlveda, 2008).

Figure: Clava, command insignia in the shape of a lizard, native to the Nahuelbuta Mountain Range (Photo: Mariela González Casanova, 2018; courtesy: Museo Mapuche de Cañete Ruka Kimün Taiñ Volil Juan Cayupi Huechicura, Chile).

Intervención

ENERO-JUNIO 2021
JANUARY-JUNE 2021



FIGURE 1. Exhibition of mummies and funerary offerings in the context of the first International Archaeological Congress of San Pedro de Atacama (Photograph: Author unknown, 1963; courtesy: Photographic archive of the Instituto de Investigaciones Arqueológicas y Museo R. P. Gustavo Le Paige S.J. UCN.)

in a deposit built specifically to protect them, considering concepts such as dignity, privacy and rest (Ayala & Sepúlveda, 2008).

However, there are still differences among some members of the community as to how these remains should be treated. There are those who consider that the removal of their bodies from beneath the earth is an affront to their customs and deeply held beliefs, but that the space provided for their safe keeping is sufficient reparation. But there is also a growing group that considers that these bodies should be returned to the land (Ayala & Sepúlveda, 2008; Finola, 2016), as expressed by Carlos Aguilar, an Atacameño indigenous representative, who points out:

Our grandparents are still waiting. At first, the best way we found to approach the situation as a collective was by seeking the withdrawal of the public exhibition, so as [sic] to then, as we the people feel is right, return them to the place where they belong and from [sic] which they should never have been

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removed by human hand: to [sic] the *Patta Hoiri*,²¹ the one that welcomes and cradles us, our mother earth (Aguilar in Ayala & Sepúlveda, 2008, p. 10).

This would make amends for the grievances committed by Le Paige towards the gentiles, whom a part of the community perceives as a defiler, responsible for many of the “evils” that have afflicted their population since his arrival into the town, some which he even suffered himself. In 1980 Father Le Paige died of a cancer that slowly consumed him until he was left “dry as a mummy” (Finola, 2016, p.12).

Sweep it under the rug?

Since the year 2001, the Mapuche Museum of Cañete Ruka Kimvn Taiñ Volil Juan Cayupi Huechicura,²² began a long process of curatorial and display renovation, with the aim of showing the Mapuche people as a people still going strong, promoting the collections as instruments of cultural revitalization and the use of language and the spoken word as a sign of permanence (Valdés, 2010).

Consultations and participation sessions were held to support the process, which were detailed in a document entitled *Primeras Jornadas de Reflexión con las Comunidades Mapuche* (First Days of Reflection with the Mapuche Communities) (2005). The study, carried out by a team of anthropologists, was aimed at assessing the perceptions held by the various indigenous communities about the museum, and to understand what ideas they wanted to be expressed about their own culture and traditions in the new exhibition (Martínez, Menares, Mora & Stüdemann, 2005).

There, among many other ideas, the consulted community showed a negative attitude towards the situation of certain objects that the museum kept in its warehouses. The museum was considered as an institution that blocked the flow of information and led to “secrecy”; therefore, the communities suggested the display of all the material stored in the warehouses or, failing that, requested that they should at least have free access to them.

It is necessary to move from an *elkantuve* museum (that hides) to a *kintunientuve* museum (that cares), that is, to move from keep-hide to keep-care, to ideally have a museum that, both

²¹ Mother earth in Licanantay or Atacameño language.

²² Museum located in the south of Chile, in the province of Arauco, Bío Bío Region. It belongs to the SNPC.

Figure: Clava, command insignia in the shape of a lizard, native to the Nahuelbuta Mountain Range (Photo: Mariela González Casanova, 2018; courtesy: Museo Mapuche de Cañete Ruka Kimün Taiñ Volil Juan Cayupi Huechicura, Chile).

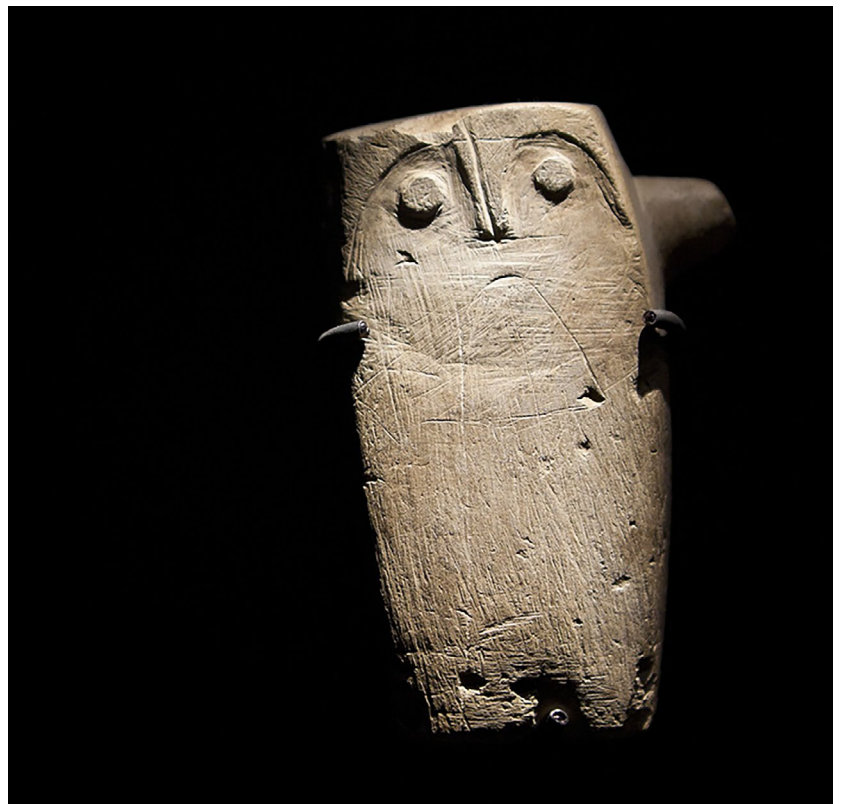
Intervención

ENERO-JUNIO 2021
JANUARY-JUNE 2021

in its image and actions, is a lliwantuleve (absolute dedication caretaker), so that the secret would cease to exist, since the knowledge would be shared by both parties (Martínez et al., 2005, p. 37).

Thinking about the museum's power to show or hide the collections, we can add the fact that, in Mapuche culture, objects are *mogen*,²³ another form of life in the great system, the *itrofill mogen*²⁴ (Obreque, personal communication, March 30th, 2020), so that "enclosing' them in showcases or boxes not only constitutes the interruption of the flow of knowledge, but also a denial of their agency, of their capacity to interact" (Figure 2).

FIGURE 2.
Anthropomorphic pipe (Photograph: Author unknown, 2010; courtesy: Museo Mapuche de Cañete Ruka Kimün Taiñ Volil Juan Cayupi Huechicura, Chile).



In this sense, the Mapuche poet Leonel Lienlaf, curator of the museum's permanent exhibition, said that, during the process of working with the collections for the new display, there were objects that determined when to be shown, like someone who breaks out of his long silence to answer the call of his people:

²³ Life.

²⁴ Mapuche concept that refers to the right to life, in a much deeper way since it does not only refer to the human, but to all things.

Figure: Clava, command insignia in the shape of a lizard, native to the Nahuelbuta Mountain Range (Photo: Mariela González Casanova, 2018; courtesy: Museo Mapuche de Cañete Ruka Kimün Taiñ Volil Juan Cayupi Huechicura, Chile).

Intervención

ENERO-JUNIO 2021
JANUARY-JUNE 2021

Perhaps the most difficult part was to locate the spaces of power and the stones of the *kalkus*.²⁵ Rather, these made themselves present because they kept appearing one by one. They were in fact, always in the museum, but for some reason they had been kept hidden, even from the view of experts who at some point catalogued these power stones as mere pebbles (Lienlaf, 2010, p.11).

Under water?

Francisco Huichaqueo is a Mapuche curator, filmmaker and visual artist, whose work has been a persistent reflection on the idea of the Mapuche as a living culture. Among his relevant works are his curatorship of the permanent exhibition *Wenu Pelon-Portal de la luz* at the exhibition room of the Museo Arqueológico de Santiago inside the Museo de Artes Visuales (MAVI) (2015) and, more recently, at the 11th edition of the Berlin Art Biennale (2020), where he presented a selection of his work which transited between video, installations and exhibitions of Mapuche patrimonial objects, loaned to him by the Ethnologisches Museum in Berlin (Huichaqueo, personal communication, December 23, 2020).

Huichaqueo's work has the fundamental feature of managing to establish a direct link between the artistic creativity and the spiritual dimension of the Mapuche people, using museum collections and museums themselves as a means to break the paradigm that he considers these institutions to embody:

The museum represents platforms on the material plane, one of tangible space, which defines the Mapuche community as bicultural and bi-spatial [...]. Whilst it is true that we are in this space, there also exists a non-tangible space, one that is much larger than this tangible one (Huichaqueo in Sanhueza, Pulgar & Medina, 2020).

For example, at a temporary exhibition hall of the Museo Chileno de Arte Precolombino²⁶ in 2016, Huichaqueo curated and mounted an exhibition on Mapuche silverware titled *Chi Rüttran Amulniei ñi Rüttram* (The metal continues talking). The exhibition included an

²⁵ This is the name given to the Mapuche sorcerer, who presents himself as an evil or destructive force.

²⁶ Private museum located in downtown Santiago. It belongs to the Larraín Echeñique Family Foundation.

Figure: Clava, command insignia in the shape of a lizard, native to the Nahuelbuta Mountain Range (Photo: Mariela González Casanova, 2018; courtesy: Museo Mapuche de Cañete Ruka Kimün Taiñ Volil Juan Cayupi Huechicura, Chile).

Intervención

ENERO-JUNIO 2021
JANUARY-JUNE 2021

FIGURE 3. Art installation recreating a *menoko*.
Work by Francisco Huichaqueo (Photo: Claudio Mercado, 2016; courtesy: Audiovisual Archive of the Chilean Museum of Pre-Columbian Art, Chile).



installation that recreated a *menoko*,²⁷ a wetland surrounded by plants, rocks and earth, in where various silver, ceramic, wood and stone objects were submerged underwater (Figure 3). The artistic object, while breathtakingly beautiful was also unsettling because of the complexities of exhibiting underwater objects in a museum.²⁸ He recently accompanied the exhibited collections at the Berlin Biennale with ancient Mapuche ritual music to summon the ancestors who sleep there. “Through this sound I wanted to send a prayer to accompany and complement the Mapuche objects on loan from the ethnographic museum. I had to intervene urgently with my ancestors, waking them up so that they may return” (Huichaqueo in Sanhueza, Pulgar & Medina, 2020).

This is intimately linked to the fact that one of the artist’s great concerns is the scattered nature of the indigenous collections in museums around the world. The artist poetically moves the place of that which must be preserved, from the object to the subject, from the collection to a nation:

These indigenous objects dispersed around the globe are the very place where wisdom is stored. If they were returned to us, we would be another people and not such a broken people. With these types of gestures I try, or we try, to heal colonial wounds, so that the water that inside our broken pitcher

²⁷ Sacred site that houses a large number of herbs commonly used in traditional Mapuche medicine.

²⁸ Personal testimony.

Figure: Clava, command insignia in the shape of a lizard, native to the Nahuelbuta Mountain Range (Photo: Mariela González Casanova, 2018; courtesy: Museo Mapuche de Cañete Ruka Kimün Taiñ Volil Juan Cayupi Huechicura, Chile).

may stop leaking. Because us indigenous people, we are full of leaks right now (Huichaqueo in Sanhueza, Pulgar & Medina, 2020).

WE ARE CLIMBING THE HILL. SOME REFLECTIONS TO CONCLUDE

In the context of this delicate coexistence between indigenous interests and the interests of heritage conservation in museums, I have often thought that, in the absence of normative frameworks recognizing the cultural autonomy of native peoples, the way to find a point of compromise could be to open up museums to rituality and the expression of ancestral beliefs through the performance of entry ceremonies for collections and reverential acts. Thinking of this as a way of integrating both interests: the symbolic/cultural, of vital importance for the indigenous people, and the symbolic/material, of fundamental relevance for conservation.

However, I do not believe these measures are sufficient when confronted with, for example, the Atacameño notion that the gentiles are upset because they have been extracted from their place of rest. Or the idea put forward by Paillalef (1998), that objects can inflict punishment if they are not treated in accordance with their own traditional conceptions. Even to the idea outlined by Lienlaf (2010), that objects are alive and have certain powers that can affect us.

If the ultimate purpose of museum conservation is to preserve matter for the transmission of knowledge to future generations, then it is time to ask ourselves what knowledge we are constraining ourselves to, because as we have seen in the cases reviewed in this text, the meanings that collections acquire within museums are often not the same as those they represent within their communities of origin. Therefore, the challenge is to accept that some objects can be experienced in other contexts or scenarios, no longer solely conditioned by the preservation of their physical reality, but also through an understanding of the other material dimensions which are prevented from manifesting themselves when objects are trapped under the constraints of traditional museum conservation.

In the absence of normative frameworks recognizing indigenous rights over their own ancestral cultural material, to continue imposing the Eurocentric model of scientific conservation, is to continue operating from a colonial paternalism, denying cultural autonomy and depriving the indigenous peoples to exercise their sovereignty.

Figure: Clava, command insignia in the shape of a lizard, native to the Nahuelbuta Mountain Range (Photo: Mariela González Casanova, 2018; courtesy: Museo Mapuche de Cañete Ruka Kimün Taiñ Volil Juan Cayupi Huechicura, Chile).

Intervención

ENERO-JUNIO 2021
JANUARY-JUNE 2021

In this sense, in Chile, perhaps the budding constituent process is the opportunity for indigenous communities to finally gain their autonomy, however, until this happens, I am convinced that the way forward is the ideological decolonization of museums, including the discussion of conservation as a discipline. This implies that museums should not only open spaces for coexistence and mutual respect, but more importantly, that the indigenous communities themselves, through participation, consultation and reflection on their own terms, should be the ones who decide what, how and why they conserve.

If conservation means freezing the meaning of things, abducting them from their natural passage through time, denying their right to loss, change or even death (which is also part of life), then I believe it is time for the communities involved to determine the specifics around collections, what needs to emerge and resonate in order to connect with past, present and future generations. It is their right to do so, whether we like it or not.

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Intervención

ENERO-JUNIO 2021
JANUARY-JUNE 2021

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