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# Museums at the Service of Cultural Relations: The Maasai-Pitt Rivers Museum Living Cultures Partnership

by Carla Figueira

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useums are places where we can experience constructions of our past, including as embodied in collection and preservation practices, as well as reflect and act on the present while imagining the future. Amid pressing global and local challenges, museums are increasingly re-imagining their roles by engaging critically with their stories, practices and relationships with source communities. Critical museology (Shelton 2013) provides a broad framework for this transformation, challenging hierarchical knowledge systems and advocating for inclusive, dialogical practices.

As part of this reassessment, decolonising museums emerges as an urgent task, addressing colonial legacies through restitution, reconciliation and community-driven narratives – and thereby contributing to more equitable global relations.

The project can be viewed as a model approach to issues of ethical care, healing, reparation and restitution for museums, and is also an example of how Indigenous groups can use participatory methods (Participatory Video) and external processes to unify and represent themselves.

In this article, I illustrate the ongoing shift in how museums engage with source communities and develop decolonial cultural relations, examining the case of the Maasai Living Cultures project (2017-2024) that has brought together the University of Oxford's Pitt Rivers Museum with the Maasai people of East Africa (facilitated by the NGO InsightShare), funded by the Staples Trust. I analyse the case from the perspective of an international cultural relations scholar interested in practice and social learning, rather than as a museum specialist. However, I take note of Lonetree's (2012) call to centre Indigenous voices in museum practices, fostering healing and collaboration through shared authority, and Robinson's (2024) critique of museums as carceral spaces, calling for reparative approaches that prioritise relational care and reconnection. Thus, and particularly where living Indigenous cultures are concerned, I want to foreground the museum's responsibility as a cultural relations organisation. Museums are uniquely positioned to serve as sites for cultural relations, fostering meaningful connections and dialogue between diverse communities; this relates to conceptualisations of museums as contact zones (Clifford 1997, building on Mary Louise Pratt). Some scholars also consider museums as actors in (cultural, arts, museum or heritage) diplomacy or as assets in soft power (e.g. Brison and Jessup 2024; Grincheva 2023; Smith and Priewe 2023; Winter 2015), often using a definition of diplomacy that does not specifically relate it to state-led strategies to advance national interests and foreign policy goals, as is traditionally the case in international relations. This may create overlaps and confusion, particularly since it works across academic disciplines and areas of study. For example, Priewe (in Smith and Priewe 2023) acknowledges that the outcomes of cultural relations – described by Gillespie *et al.* (2018, p. 7) as 'greater connectivity, better mutual understanding, more and deeper relationships, mutually beneficial transactions and enhanced sustainable dialogue between people and cultures, shaped through engagement and attraction, rather than coercion' – can be applied to museum diplomacy. Accepting that scholars and practitioners often address the same topic but label it differently, I continue to argue (Figueira 2018) that the concepts of 'soft power' and 'diplomacy' have strong connotations with 'power over' and government involvement. Consequently, the use of 'cultural relations' aligns more closely with the relational, participatory *ethos* I highlight in this article.

I am interested in how museums can re-imagine themselves as part of the more-than-human world (Abram 1996), while remaining critically aware of power relations. How can museums adopt a relational approach oriented by caring, learning and sharing? Such an approach includes long-term 'multiple interactions, characterised by deep listening and mutual respect, within which participants are willing to be vulnerable, to be influenced and change' (Figueira and Fullman 2021, p. 14). This is, effectively, a 'power with' approach. Museums can be role models, shapers and enablers of change in society and across societies, contributing to regenerative futures for humanity (Warden 2021); I demonstrate this potentiality through this examination of the practice of cultural relations and the process of mutual meaningful engagement.

Methodologically, this is a case study presented through what Geertz (1973) termed a 'thick description', focusing on the 'doing' of cultural relations and communicating the complexity of practice, while honouring the voices of different participants. The thick description is used as a means to support reader generalisation: that is, by providing the reader with enough information to allow them to judge the extent to which these findings can be applied to other cases (Guba and Lincoln 1985). Theoretically, to better foreground the caring, learning and sharing components of cultural relations, I use the framework of social learning (Wenger-Trayner 2020) and the concept of systems convening (Wenger-Trayner 2021) in my analysis, meaning that I seek





Fig. 1. The Maasai-Pitt Rivers Museum Living Cultures partners come together for healing ceremonies (2023). © PALCA/InsightShare

to highlight how the partners came together, committed to paying attention and caring to make a difference to how cultural objects are interpreted and displayed in a museum, while developing actions towards reconciliation, redress and self-representation of the communities and individuals involved. I note how the partners sought to learn through the mutual engagement of uncertainty, i.e. by operating at the edge of their knowledges, and thus co-creating new knowledge and (hopefully) transformational practices. The project can be viewed as a model approach to issues of ethical care, healing, reparation and restitution for museums, and is also an example of how Indigenous groups can use participatory methods (Participatory Video) and external processes to unify and represent themselves. Such an approach also allows them to act as non-state diplomatic actors: by engaging with the museum as a foreign actor, Maasai participants were able to re-establish leadership structures to support internal consultation and decision-making, as well as enable external representation. The case has been well covered and reported by the media and involved partners, and I am using publicly available documentation to build my thick description.

## The Maasai-Pitt Rivers Museum Living Cultures Partnership

This partnership exemplifies a dynamic model for cultural relations in the museum sector: one shaped by diverse actors and agendas, which I will now briefly introduce. The main actors in the project are the Maasai people of East Africa and the University of Oxford's Pitt Rivers Museum (PRM). The Maasai live in southern Kenya and northern Tanzania, along the Great Rift Valley on semi-arid and arid lands. They are semi-nomadic, living under a communal land management system, with movement of livestock based on seasonal rotation. The Maasai society is comprised of Sections (known in Maasai as *Iloshon*), with the majority of the population living in Kenya (but since Tanzania does not conduct census

based on ethnicity it is difficult to estimate numbers). Their subsistence economy is strongly based on the trading of livestock and their products. Until the 1960s the concept of private ownership was a foreign concept to the Maasai, but programmes of commercialisation of livestock and land by British colonisers, and later by independent African governments, have led to the Maasailand being subdivided into group and small individual ranches; this has polarised the Maasai. However, the largest loss of land has been to national parks and reserves, in which the Maasai people are restricted from accessing critical water sources, pasture and salt lick. This has resulted in poverty, food insecurity and the erosion of the Maasai culture and way of life.

For needed context, it is also important to note that the Maasai tribal leadership structure, *Orkiaama*, has lost power as a result of emerging western forms of governance, and the *Oloiboni*, a highly regarded spiritual leader in charge of Maasai religious, customs and traditional affairs, is less visible with the rise of external religions in Maasailand (Maasai Association 2024). For the Maasai, engagement with the PRM is part of a larger struggle for survival of the Maasailand nationhood, in the face of threats to their territory and livelihood.

The Pitt Rivers Museum (PRM) was founded in 1884, when General Pitt-Rivers, an influential figure in the development of archaeology and evolutionary



anthropology, gave his collection to the University of Oxford. Like other institutions with collections derived from empire, they are in the process of re-imagining the museum and their practice, acknowledging that they 'relied on colonial ideas that have erased the many ways of knowing and being of people from around the world in favour of promoting one viewpoint' (PRM 2024d). Their efforts, underpinned by the philosophical and psychological concept of Radical Hope, seek to consider 'how museums can change to support humanity, our relationships to each other, to the environment and to things' (Ibid.). To dismantle colonial practices, they have partnered with researchers and global Indigenous communities around the world to rethink the display of human remains, returns and restitution, the equitable interpretation of cultures, inclusive curricula and representation. Thus, for the PRM, the partnership aligns with active decolonisation efforts, coinciding with similar initiatives such as their engagement with the Shuar (Peru). From 2017 to 2020, PRM Director Laura Van Broekhoven led an 'Internal Review of Displays and Programming from an Ethical Perspective', which provided a socially engaged, co-curatorial approach and framework aimed at fostering reconciliation and redress (PRM 2020b).

Two organisations were key in enabling this partnership: a non-governmental organisation and a funding body, respectively. The NGO InsightShare facilitated the partnership between the Maasai and the PRM and assisted with engagement on the ground (PRM 2020a). This social enterprise, co-founded by brothers Chris and Nick Lunch in 1999, supports Indigenous communities to represent themselves on critical issues related to their territories, languages and cultures using Participatory Video (PV). In PV, a group or community shapes and creates their own film: they identify, brainstorm, prioritise and investigate the issues they wish to make a difference on and devise, plan and produce their videos collectively to tell their story. PV can be seen as a tool to engage in social learning, bypassing intermediation and allowing people to speak directly to each other around the world without the danger of having others communicate their concerns and worldviews for them (InsightShare 2017). Starting in 2014 InsightShare began working with Maasai groups from

Loliondo in Tanzania to support them establish PV hubs, such as Oltoilo le Maa's (Voice of the Maasai).

The Staples Trust, part of The Sainsbury Family Charitable Trusts, funded the partnership over its seven-year duration. It was founded by Jessica Sainsbury in 1992; Sainsbury is 'proactive in helping organisations at a critically early stage in development and supported projects in areas such as indigenous peoples, environment, gender and inequality' (Staples Trust 2024). The funding enabled the PRM to work with Maasai representatives from Kenya and Tanzania to research Maasai objects. InsightShare has also received funding for the project from The Staples Trust and Bertha Foundation.

This multilateral partnership is situated in a multi-layered context, and involves issues beyond the ownership and care of artefacts. While my analysis focuses on the partnership from a cultural relations perspective, I briefly touch upon broader concerns. The following sections trace the partnership's narrative and innovative approaches.

### Meeting of the partners and defining shared commitments

In 2017, the 'Stories of Solidarity and Resilience' event took place at the PRM, organised by Oxford University and InsightShare.<sup>1</sup> It brought together community leaders from the Maasai, Naga, Comcaac and Yaqui Peoples (who were InsightShare's Indigenous Associates on their Indigenous Leadership Programme) showcasing their use of Participatory Video (PV) to address local issues such as the following: exposing illegal land grabs and local corruption, strengthening women's visibility, promoting traditional knowledge and improving community wellbeing. As part of the event, PRM Director Laura Van Broekhoven arranged for the Indigenous visitors to meet with curators and view objects in the collection that related to their heritage. During the visit, Samwel Nangiria, a socio-environmental scientist, rural human rights defender and Maasai representative from Tanzania, highlighted inaccuracies in PRM's representations of the Maasai, remarking: 'We are a living culture, not a dead one, and a museum should not be our mausoleum' (PRM 2018). This marked the beginning of a dialogue between the Maasai and the PRM.

Following the event, the Maasai, represented by Nangiria and his community-based organisation Oltoilo le Maa's (Voice of the Maasai), used PV to convey their concerns to the PRM. A video message from the Maasai elders was sent to the director of the PRM, and Nangiria outlined their expectations in an email:

I am imagining a partnership, piloted between your museum and the Maasai around the inclusion of living culture in the bigger framework of the museum. This will accommodate thousands of indigenous peoples around the world and will provide a benchmark for a healing process for the so many damaged hearts, knowledge and cultures of these isolated/ marginalized yet important groups on our planet (PRM 2018).

The above account of the initial encounter between the future partners sets the scene and introduces us to the organisations and people that I see as drivers of this partnership: Nangiria, as Maasai representative and activist, supported by InsightShare, and Van Broekhoven, as PRM Director. As we will see, these individuals remained present throughout the partnership, and this speaks to the importance of forging long-term relationships in which institutional engagement is backed by personal drive and commitment. The role of InsightShare, operating in the background and facilitating this partnership, is also important to highlight, as is the fundamental role of Staples Trust as funder.

The Maasai struggle for survival in the countries where they live, and their claim to being represented as a living culture in Western museums, means that this partnership is in large part about self-determination and representation (PRM 2020a). From an InsightShare perspective, the project was part of their work supporting Indigenous communities to represent themselves on critical issues: in this case by bringing voices of Maasai communities from Tanzania and Kenya into discussions about Maasai artefacts in British museums, addressing how they were cared for and represented. From the point of view of the PRM, meanwhile, the Maasai Living Cultures project was compatible with their ongoing and separate work for the Origins and Futures programme, exploring a





Fig. 2. The Maasai Living Cultures project partners work together at the University of Oxford's Pitt Rivers Museum (2018). © John Cairns

decolonial museum praxis. This programme welcomed artists, elders and researchers to engage with collections and invited co-curatorial engagement with displays (Murphy 2018). The project enabled the curators and Maasai leaders to work together towards changing the way the Maasai living culture was represented beyond the framework of the imperial past, aiming in the long-term to change the narratives UK museums use to display Maasai artefacts and tell Maasai stories (PRM 2018). For the funders, this represented a continuation of their commitment to invest over the long term in projects within their remit of interest.<sup>2</sup>

#### Developing the partnership over time

A partnership with an aim to heal historical and cultural damage cannot be achieved without meaningful long-term engagement between the partners. In this case, the objective of the Maasai was to 'find mutual ground between Maasai communities and to find ways to redress, to bridge the gap between what the museums don't know and what they know' (InsightShare 2020c); this fundamentally relates to the cultural narratives attached to objects, their local names, their purpose, information about who made them, who uses them and in what circumstances. The partnership also initiated a process to 'undo the continued

harm that families were experiencing through the loss of their objects' (PRM 2023). To achieve these objectives, the process had to include opportunities for the Maasai to know which objects were held in the museum collections and how they were described and cared for; further, both Maasai and museum staff needed to get to know each other and their respective systems of knowledge to better support the shaping and development of their partnership: one characterised by openness, respect and trust. Finally, efforts were required from the Maasai communities to reach internal agreement across the Maasailand (over Kenya and Tanzania) regarding decisions to be made around engagement with the PRM.

In the following sections, I chronologically examine the engagement between the Maasai and the PRM in the period between 2018 and 2024, considering the three visits of Maasai delegations to the PRM (2018, 2020a and 2024d), internal Maasai consultations and processes in Kenya and Tanzania (2019 to 2023), and the visit of a PRM delegation to Maasailand (2023). Examining this engagement through a cultural relations and social learning lens, I highlight multiple key interactions, noting the caring approach of each partner in listening to

what each has to share and, accordingly, being open to learn and change – and to co-create new knowledge from the encounter, formulated at the edge of existing knowledge systems.

#### Getting to know each other, and assessing objects within the PRM collection

In November 2018, Maasai representatives returned to the PRM conveying a powerful message from their spiritual leader:

[W]e know that the people in the museums are not the people who brought the artefacts into the museums. Their shame would be if they renounce to collaborate. This would be their shame, and it would put more darkness in this process. If they open up their hearts, they open up their minds [...] Because this is a learning process, we are all learning. We are here on a mission, a peaceful mission (InsightShare 2020c).

During this visit, a delegation of five people (including Samwel Nangiria) worked with the curators to assess the objects held and their accompanying descriptions, thus enabling the PRM to correct records (PRM 2018).



They examined artefacts from the museum's collection of 188 Maasai items. Many were wrongly described and documented but had no additional issues. However, five items (which had never been on display or studied) were identified as significant and culturally sensitive (representing the living culture of the Maasai and related to important ceremonies and/or life events such as marriage and inheritance). These five items presented problems, as they were objects that a Maasai would never lend, give or sell, including secret ornamental relics that are traditionally passed down inter-generationally, e.g. from father to son on the former's deathbed, and thus could not have been obtained by legitimate means. These objects would become the focus of the partnership in terms of the healing and reconciliation process.

### Pursuing land-rights activism

Meanwhile, the Maasai's 10-day stay in the UK also had the objective of bringing awareness to Maasai land rights. It included a retreat in Somerset, organised by InsightShare, with strategic allies to debate and co-create a land-rights campaign and a public event at the Building Centre in London, which I had an opportunity to attend. Land is a sensitive issue that continues to challenge the livelihood of the Maasai, as documented by the Oakland Institute (2024); it notes that the Tanzanian government continues to grab land and evict populations allegedly driven by US interests in the local tourism industry. However, in the subsequent visits of the Maasai to the UK, the issue of land rights was not raised. This is not surprising, as land activism is violently repressed by local governments (see for example Lee 2023); it also attests to the continued structural power and inequities of geopolitics.

However, continued activism around cultural heritage can be a strategic way to pursue the fight for land rights. From a Maasai perspective, culture and ways of life, objects, and their link to the land are viewed holistically. Objects form links across the generations, while also grounding the community in a particular place: cultures and traditions ensure the sustainability of people, lands and resources (InsightShare 2020c). Nangiria noted that 'this journey is not just a journey to see the objects, it is a very holistic process. That has [...] meaning beyond the Maasai people' (InsightShare 2020c).

The words of the Maasai spiritual leader, Mokompo Ole Simel, point in a similar direction: '[W]e are not looking for a conflict but a mutual respect and deeper engagement. I foresee further security of Maasai culture and appropriate education support as a result of this process' (InsightShare 2020b). Thus, one could see the focus on engagement with UK museums – the Maasai also visited other museums besides the PRM in subsequent visits – as a strategic decision to focus on the less problematic and more acceptable issue of cultural heritage, which can indirectly remind us all (including the national governments of Kenya and Tanzania) that a living culture needs a land in which to survive, and (preferably) thrive. However, for many governments culture is considered a 'soft' issue: one that is much less threatening to their sovereignty than claims to land, and thus less likely to raise issues for activists. Whether cultural heritage can indeed provide the Maasai with security remains to be seen, but its potential to spotlight broader struggles for land rights and cultural survival highlights its value as a powerful and less confrontational entry point for advocating change.

Following the Maasai's November 2018 visit to the UK, a widespread consultation across Maasailand began in 2019 to collect views on what should be done in relation to the objects held at the PRM. The Maasai used Participatory Video (PV), radio, community screenings and discussions to engage and capture diverse voices, which helped to strengthen relationships across borders and ensured that different views were included (PRM 2020a). An important element of the consultation was a video documenting the 2018 visit, produced by the Maasai video hub Oltoilo La Maa and screened across Maasailand. This unique community-wide consultation process is estimated to have reached 70 per cent of Maasai in Tanzania and Kenya (InsightShare 2020b). The PV element of this community-led project enabled the Maasai delegations to reach out and remain accountable to the wider community in Maasailand. In parallel, a new regional network emerged in 2019, the Pan African Living Cultures Alliance (PALCA), registered in Kenya as an international NGO by a Maasai team that had participated in the *Living Cultures Alliance* – a network developed by InsightShare in 2017. They currently

represent various Indigenous groups across six African countries and use PV as a tool to safeguard biocultural rights, support inter-generational transmission, preserve Indigenous languages and promote traditional governance of natural resources. This attests to the contributing value of a multilateral partnership in strengthening the representation of Indigenous communities.

With regard to these initiatives, it is important to highlight the role of individuals, networks and NGOs such as Samwel Nangiria, Oltoilo La Maa, InsightShare, and the Pan African Living Cultures Alliance, who work across borders and across systems of culture, knowledge and political power. It is equally essential to acknowledge the Staples Trust for its funding and the PRM for its organisational commitment to this long-term partnership, which has created the conditions for transformational change to take root. Convening systems in the long term lies at the heart of international (cultural) relations, and can be conceived as cross-boundary leadership work for 'people who care to make a difference to challenges with multiple moving parts in socially complex contexts' (Wenger-Trayner 2021, p. 8). Systems convening allows for 'learning that brings people together across different practices, different institutions, different goals, different cultures, different loyalties' (Ibid., p. 21).

This is a crucial type of contemporary leadership, and one that I strongly attribute to those involved in the Maasai Living Cultures partnership. The Maasai elders demonstrated their keen awareness of this cross-system boundaries' work by deciding to undertake an internal consultation supported by Oltoilo La Maa, which allowed for the Maasai Sections to come together (and in the process unite them) to discuss the future of their cultural heritage held at the PRM. The Maasai elders also noted how important it was to learn about the different external systems they were dealing with, as Daniel Lipilosh, a Maasai elder from Kenya, noted: 'We will conduct [research] to understand the laws governing such partnerships and also where our artefacts are held globally; [this research] will inform our engagement and partnership' (InsightShare 2020b). Their stance was one of learning.



Fig. 3. The Maasai delegations used Participatory Video methods to document their visits (2020). © PALCA/Insightshare

### The meeting of knowledges, the importance of women's voices, and starting processes of healing and reconciliation

In 2020, a second Maasai delegation visited the UK, comprising seven community representatives (including two individuals who had participated in the previous visit, one of whom was Samwel Nangiria). They spent two weeks in the UK working with the PRM and other museums, such as the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, Cambridge, the World Museum in Liverpool, and the Horniman Museum, London, to reclaim their heritage and redefine their narratives. The focus of the Maasai-PRM partnership during this phase was on centralising traditional knowledge systems, highlighting the validity of different ways of knowing and the weaknesses of historical sources (InsightShare 2020a). To this effect, Nangiria noted the following:

We would like the museum to know that you are not holding the artefacts. You are holding the communities. You are holding a very horrible history that our people have gone through. You are holding a secret of exactly what happened.

And you are holding the keys to enable the communities to understand. (InsightShare 2020a)

The delegation included Lemaron Ole Parit, the son and heir of the Maasai's spiritual leader, Mokompo Ole Simel, who offered guidance and his blessing to the delegation on the provenance of the five objects previously identified as significant and culturally sensitive, and around what should be done with them. The traditional Enkidon ceremony (see Fig. 3) was performed at the PRM to: a) draw a connection between the artefacts and their Maasai communities and respective clans/families of origin; b) identify how (according to the Maasai epistemology) the objects were brought to the museum and in what conditions (e.g. how many people were involved in the exchanges and if under duress); and c) to seek advice from the ancestors in terms of what should be done with the objects. Should they be left in the museum, or reunited with their families of origin? Was it necessary to perform a ceremony?

The partnership was innovative in its efforts to bring together different knowledge systems: in this case, Indigenous Maasai knowledge and their spiritual leadership system with the museum-based system of gathering knowledge from archives. The documentary produced during the 2020 visit (InsightShare 2020c) shows the Maasai and the Museum staff sitting around a table, comparing notes on objects and discussing how they gather information about the objects – and how the coming together of these systems can be negotiated to shape their partnership into the future. This speaks to cultural relations and social learning theories, in that it demonstrates genuine efforts among partners to show attentiveness towards one another, and to generate knowledge from their encounter by comparing records of provenance from the museum, as well as cultural and spiritual knowledge from the community of origin.

The partnership was also innovative for its inclusion of two Maasai women in the delegation. To highlight the role of women as the traditional keepers of culture – they give birth and teach children, as well as create most cultural artefacts – the Maasai felt it was important





Fig. 4. The Elaata Oo Ngiro ceremonies took place across four sites in Tanzania and Kenya (2023). © PALCA/InsightShare

for their voices to be heard in the project, as part of wider efforts to defend Maasai women’s rights amid a male-dominated society (see InsightShare 2015).

Engaging with the objects was not simply a rationalist matter of getting the details right. This process was also, for the Maasai, spiritual and visceral, since the emotional encounter with the objects ‘was akin to seeing dead bodies lying on the shelves’ in the words of Maasai representative Yannick Ndoinyo (Kendall Adams 2020). For the Maasai partners, it was ‘difficult to understand why no attempt had been made to explore the significance or origin of the artefacts’ (Ibid.). This traumatic encounter raises tensions in the relationships established by the partnership and requires those involved to address the issue further. But while the Maasai demanded accountability for colonial acts resulting in the loss of culturally significant artefacts and associated trauma, they also demonstrated understanding. As the Maasai spiritual leader, Mokompo Ole Simel, remarked: ‘The currently discovered Maasai artefacts reveal connection between previous and current struggles. We are not looking for conflict, but seek a mutual respect and deeper engagement’ (InsightShare 2024a). With regards to the museum, the professional detachment of curatorial staff was confronted with specific stories of violence: for example, one of the objects

is believed to have been forcibly stolen from a mother murdered in front of her child. According to PRM’s joint head of collections Marina de Alarcón, keepers of the collection have experienced feelings of complicity in injustice, alongside the recognition of a need for healing (in Kendall Adams 2020). Capturing the complex meanings of a cultural heritage object displayed or stored in a museum becomes a social learning process, and the outcome of a conversation held in a social learning space (Wenger-Trayner 2020). In such a space, the parties are involved because they care and are willing to come together on an equal basis, bringing their knowledges and experience to the table. They are also willing to pay attention to one another to find acceptable solutions, while remaining aware of reigning power relations. If museums can be social learning partners engaged in inclusive voicing, deep listening and vulnerability, this can represent a transformational change for their praxis.

### Towards accountability and reconciliation

In this experimental project, it is thus important to reflect on the internal processes that take place among each of the partners arising from their engagement. For the PRM, although the partnership with the Maasai was a first, it was part of wider decolonising efforts within the institution. The Maasai call for accountability reinforced the recognition

that ‘[m]useums are bearers of difficult stories and that their collections are continued causes of pain for affected communities’; it also reportedly contributed to re-imagining the museum as a site of healing, reconciliation and conscience: an anti-racist project (PRM 2020a).

For the Maasai, since they took the lead on reparation and reconciliation using the community’s traditional methods of resolving disputes, this also brought them together as a community dispersed over two countries: it thus constituted an effort of transnational representation. It is also important to note the role of InsightShare as an equal partner and enabler of processes championing the use of PV (Fig. 3). The use of PV was critical for communication amongst the partners (e.g. between the Maasai spiritual leader and the director of the PRM), and also enabled the Maasai to control the narrative around the project and consult diverse voices within its own community. These examples demonstrate the importance of recognising Indigenous peoples’ knowledge, and of enabling them to present themselves as non-state diplomatic actors (Figueira 2020); this can in turn have a positive impact on their wider revindications and issues, such as land claims and women’s rights, as I touch on later.





Fig. 5. The *Orkiaama* (Maasai council of elders), which had not met for over 100 years, was revived (2023). © PALCA/InsightShare

Between 2020 and 2021 and amid the Covid-19 pandemic period, the Maasai explored and reported on potential strategies for reconciliation, and a ‘Radical Webinar’ co-hosted by the PRM and InsightShare provided a forum for discussions between the partners. Meanwhile, the PRM developed new educational materials (including Maasai-developed materials) and worked on fundraising for the next phase of the project (PRM 2024b). In 2022, a pilgrimage took place in Tanzania and Kenya to consult the five families linked to the five aforementioned sensitive artefacts, and identified through traditional lineage research (PRM 2023). Subsequently, in 2023 the *Elaata Oo Ngiro* ceremonies (Maa rituals for wrongs committed against humans) took place from 25 June to 5 July, led by the *Orkiaama* – the Maasai council of traditional leaders – and the Pan African Living Cultures Alliance (PALCA), with the support of local authorities in Kenya and Tanzania (Fig. 4). PALCA was responsible for running the ceremonies, including the purchase of cows and all ritual and diplomatic aspects of the process. Each of the five families affected received 49 cows, thanks to Staples Trust funding (PRM 2024b). The ceremonies were attended by an Oxford Delegation which included

staff members of the PRM, members of the PRM Board and the Staples Trust, as well as InsightShare.

The film *Maasai, Kenya: Stolen Inheritance* documents the pilgrimage to the Maasailand, and offers the Maa nation’s perspectives on the ‘mysterious story on the disappearance of Maasai family members and their sacred artefacts that are currently held at the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford, United Kingdom’ (InsightShare 2023). In the film, affected families reflect on the impact of that disappearance and separation, while welcoming an engagement with the museum to catalyse a process of repair and healing. This led to the families subsequently visiting the PRM in 2024 to reconnect with the objects and decide on next steps.

#### Making a decision, planning for the future, and the value created by the partnership

In 2024, seven years after the partnership was initiated, the Maasai group of community representatives and the affected families decided that the five aforementioned objects could remain at the PRM (Kendall Adams 2024). The process leading to this decision was both collective and private. On 1 March

2024, the *Orkiaama* addressed the impact on the families affected by sacred objects being held at the PRM by providing them with time and space to reflect, heal and reconnect with their ancestors, according to a social media post from InsightShare posted on X that day (InsightShare 2024b). Then, in September 2024, a new Maasai delegation from Kenya and Tanzania led by two women visited the PRM. This last visit from 10 people included members of the five families from whom the objects recognised as culturally sensitive were taken.

During the week-long visit the families reconnected with the objects, performed additional rituals (PRM 2024b), and worked with the PRM team to identify possible next steps (including continued care in the museum or possible return to the families). Each family was able to decide on different outcomes, but following discussions and on the advice of the Maasai spiritual leader, Mokompo Ole Simbel, they collectively decided that the objects were well cared for and thus could remain in the PRM. In addition, the families shared more cultural provenance information and provided further cultural guidance on caring for the objects. The PRM



committed to documenting, and making available in English and the Maa language, the story of each object; they also agreed that 'the Maasai nation, families and individuals will have lifetime access to the five ornaments, which can be facilitated online' (PRM 2024b). The families additionally expressed a desire to continue their relationship with the museum 'to make the world a better place for everybody', according to Ruth Sintamei Tuleto of PALCA (BBC Sounds 2024). They framed their decisions as part of a process of peace and reconciliation, and invited other communities to emulate their decisions.

Although one might question the future of this engagement – in granular terms, for example, one might ask whether the suggested online accessibility to the objects is sufficient or adequate – the decisions made by the Maasai families speak to the core of cultural relations, and aim at the maintenance of relationships oriented by caring, learning and sharing (Figueira and Fullman 2021). So, too, do the deep listening and openness to change demonstrated by the PRM, along with its values and principles aimed at fostering open, engaged and sustained relationships to inspire empathy and deepen cross-cultural understanding (as per their 2022-27 Strategy). Those involved in the partnership highlighted the building of trust and of new practices for all partners. The PRM stated that the continued presence of the objects in the museum and the legacy of the process – a Maa-led peaceful process of *Oсотua* (relationship building in peace) – represents 'a bond for life' (PRM 2024b).

The legacy of the project is expected to be long, providing that

Maasai representatives will work with the Museum on future collaborations to decide how the outcomes of this unique process and Maasai cultural traditions can be best represented in the permanent galleries of the Museum, so that as many visitors as possible will learn from this process (PRM 2024b).

The Maasai representatives, for their part, noted 'the importance of cultural healing as one of peaceful unification and reconciliation for the whole Maa Nation', and highlighted 'the innovative conceptualisation of this process as one

led by women', since although among the Maasai, cultural knowledge is transferred by mothers, women's contributions have historically been unacknowledged underrepresented (PRM 2024b). Further, the *Orkiaama*, the traditional Maasai leadership structure (Fig. 5) composed of male representatives from each Maasai Section from Kenya and Tanzania, which last met in 1919, was re-established for the 2023 visit to Kenya and Tanzania. In this instance, for each of the two Sections one man and one woman attended the two opening healing ceremonies as representatives (PRM 2024b). This is one of the most powerful outcomes of this partnership, as it has united the Maasai across Tanzania and Kenya and revived traditional governance systems. Furthermore, the partnership may have a positive impact on other Maasai struggles, such as those regarding women's rights in Maasai society and land rights.

In the publicly available documentation regarding this last visit, InsightShare is no longer listed as a partner; instead the Pan African Living Cultures Alliance (PALCA) is mentioned, with the PRM (2024c) presenting it as an international NGO led by and for Indigenous Peoples of Africa and registered in Kenya. This could be seen to signal a desire to indicate that the partnership is now locally strong and no longer requires facilitation and/or intermediation. However, it is important to note that PALCA is also an alliance of InsightShare's African partners (Lunch 2019). As mentioned earlier, the partner organisation Oltoilo La Maa is connected to InsightShare since it is directed by the Maasai leader and activist Samwel Nangiria, who was trained by the NGO and is one of their Indigenous Associates. Therefore, although InsightShare is no longer mentioned in these later stages of the project, the value and impact of the work it developed in imparting tools and supporting the agency of Indigenous Peoples in the context of this partnership's formation and development is clear and important to acknowledge.

The 'thick' analysis of this partnership that I have proposed demonstrates that its success relied on a complex web of engagements between the different partners, spurred by their overlapping interests in making a difference to how cultural objects are interpreted and displayed in a museum, while developing actions for reconciliation, redress and self-representation. This in turn impacts other areas such as Indigenous peoples' rights and women's representation.

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**A**s I conclude this paper, and in a continued effort to honour the voices of those involved in the partnership, I would like to note the ambitions of the partners. The Maasai activist Samwel Nangiria appeals for radical change in the museum: in his view, museums do not hold objects; they hold communities. They are a place of people rather than artefacts, where you can understand the communities, the feeling, the emotion, to understand their part of history. He looks into the future of this partnership wanting to see more signs of engagements with other Indigenous Peoples from all over the world, 'because the healing is not for the Maasai alone. It is the healing for the whole planet' (InsightShare 2020c). PRM Director Laura Van Broekhoven, meanwhile, recognises a shift in practice over the last decade: one moving towards more equitable and sustained work with Indigenous communities, and focusing on relational preservation care (PRM 2023). InsightShare (Lunch and Jenkins 2020) call for the wider use of participatory visual/digital methods as tools for socially engaged debate on an equal platform in the engagement between Indigenous communities and the museums holding their artefacts.

Only the future will tell whether the long-term expectations of the partners will be met, and what the legacy of the partnership might be. My analysis also has blind spots, such as not identifying enough publicly available material that allowed me to discuss the power relations between the partners in more depth, as well as my decision to limit the scope of this paper by not discussing issues of funding. However, I hope to have demonstrated how this partnership used a caring, sharing and learning approach to curating meaningful engagement. This was achieved through sustained dialogue, characterised by inclusive voicing, deep listening and participatory approaches. The face-to-face engagement in the museum space between staff and Indigenous representatives, the bridging of epistemologies, as well as the digitally enable communications and engagement through PV, highlight the power of the individual<sup>3</sup> to make a difference through the establishment of rapport, commitment and persistence. The project also illustrated how museums and (overseas) source communities can participate in and affect each others' cultural and interpretive practices. The fact that a delegation comprising all partners in the project attended the healing ceremonies in Maasailand was a remarkable cultural relations and cultural diplomacy event, effectively decentring the focus of the engagement from the museum and its collections to the Maasai as a living culture: one currently experiencing a range of socio-political and environmental struggles that are shared with other Indigenous Peoples worldwide. My hope is that the Maasai-Pitt Rivers Museum Living Cultures project might provide an inspiring model for decolonial museum practice, highlighting the importance of cultural relations and social learning in contributing to regenerative futures.



## NOTES

- 1 In 2017, InsightShare developed the Living Cultures Alliance, a network supporting communities spreading the message that Indigenous cultures are living cultures using PV.
- 2 The Staples Trust also funds other NGOs working with Indigenous Peoples (including the Maasai) and land rights. According to data available through 360Giving, a charity that helps organisations to publish open standardised grants data, a total of over £250,000 was given by the Staples Trust to PRM and InsightShare to fund the partnership. It is outside of the scope of this article to look in detail at funding, either from the point of view of the receiver concerning dependency from a particular funder or examining how funders make decisions on funding particular projects. The point I want to make by including these details on funding is that long-term partnerships such as this one carry significant costs, making the commitment of funders crucial.
- 3 While funding lies outside the scope of this article, it is interesting to note the importance of individuals in the funding of this partnership: the Staples Fund does not receive unsolicited funding applications; these are 'generally invited by the Trustees or initiated at their request' (Staples Trust 2024). Founder Jessica Sainsbury (now Frankopan), one of the trustees of the Staples Trust and a resident of Oxford, actively participated in the Maasai-PRM partnership, visiting the Maasailand in the later stages of the project.

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