Killer Whale Hat Back in Tlingit Hands

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After holding it for 100 years, the National Museum of Natural History has returned an antique killer whale hat to its former Tlingit owners in Sitka.

In a ceremony at the museum last Sunday, the hat was received by the head of the Killer Whale House, Mark Jacobs Jr. 81, who is a patient at the hospital. In accordance with Tlingit tradition which calls for members of the opposite tribe to dress as leaders in such ceremonies, the well-preserved hat was placed on Jacobs' head by David and Herman Davis of the Raven clan.

Tribal members performed a traditional Killer Whale hat song to celebrate its return.

The repatriation came after the Smithsonian responded to reports from Sitka about Jacobs's serious medical condition, speed up the process began when Kootanawacwo of Angoon originally filed for the hat in 1997.

As head of the Killer Whale House, Jacobs bore the honorary title of gushit'lheen, meaning "spray behind the dorsal fin."

The Museums of Natural History Web site says the hat, carved in the shape of a killer whale with a detachable dorsal fin ornamented with women’s hair, was once of several items purchased in Sitka in 1928 by John Swanton of the Bureau of American Ethnology.

Swanton reported that the hat was "worn as a true emblem of gushit'lheen" of the Dakhwaa’ clan (Angoon). It had been in use for four years at the time he acquired it.

The hat was sold to Swanton by the owner of the Whale House.

With a repatriation staff of about 20, the NMNH has the largest such group of any museum in the country, which has enabled it to complete the most repatriation work. The Smithsonian has been conducting this repatriation work to the Smithsonian.

NGAPRA has been a strain on museums, since detailed research is often needed to clarify ownership, and few museums have staff dedicated specifically to dealing with repatriation cases, Holtinger said.

"It can be very tough for tribes" as well, he said. Research costs incurred by the need to visit the archives or investigate direct relations might be beyond a tribe's means.

While there are NGAPRA grants - administered by the National Park Service - which aim to meet this need, tribes often spend thousands of dollars to locate documentary evidence that can mean the difference between a claim being granted or denied.

After having spent years in the climate-controlled environment of the NMNH, the Killer Whale hat will remain in the Jacobs’ house as long as the owner resides there.

The process aims to restore legal rights to the rightful owners," Holtinger said, adding that sometimes upon repatriation tribes will choose to leave items in the NMNH’s archives or in museums where they can be professionally preserved and displayed for public audiences.

Harold Jacobs is still hoping for the return of a couple of beaded or beaded wooden walls which bordered fire pits and separated house leaders from other members of a house. He began working on their repatriation prior to retiring his efforts to reclaim his hat.

"I’d just like to see the things returned that we could still use in our ceremonies," Harold Jacobs said. Yet now, "tribes have a better understanding of what it is museums do and how many of these things we do of interest to them," Holtinger explained.

Hollinger emphasized the mutually beneficial exchange of anthropological information between museums and tribes brought about by NGAPRA and NMAI.

"Museums have been agents that removed things from the context," Holtinger said. Yet now, "tribes have a better understanding of what it is museums do and how many of these things we do of interest to them," Holtinger explained.

"Tribes have always wanted to present their cultural objects. We have presented repatriation work and now have come back into tribal use. If we didn’t do that ... these would not exist today. The tribe would be without their cultural traditions.

The process "took too long, but I am glad it’s back," Jacobs said. "If we could have had it back when (my father) could have danced in it."
BACK WHERE IT BELONGS - Mark Jacobs, Jr. wears a Killer Whale Hat during a repatriation ceremony at the SEARHC Mt. Edgecumbe Hospital cafeteria Sunday. The story of the hat's return to Alaska, after 100 years, is told in today's Sitka Weekender. (Sentinel Photo by James Poulson)