

Session Review for the ARCS 2023 *Momentum* Conference Travel Stipend- Madisonne Ricks

The session I attended was titled “Repatriation and Change: How the ethical return of objects can create momentum for institutional change”, held by Jennifer Rigsby, Registrar for Permanent Collections at the Indianapolis Museum of Art & Robin Cooper, Manager of Curatorial Affairs at the Indianapolis Museum of Art.

In this session, Jennifer and Robin discussed the processes they applied to their repatriation efforts concerning traditional cultural items from the Mijikenda tribes of Kenya, called *vigango*, and the ways in which they established a workplace culture of ethical collecting within their institution. The cultural items in question, 18 *kigango* (plural: *vigango*) were found to be in IMA’s possession. *Vigango* not only hold the spirit of a deceased elder or loved one, but the process of how they are made and used in cultural traditions is essential to the way the Mijikenda live. For Jennifer and Robin at the IMA, Stephen Nash (who spoke at the forum held directly before this session) was a catalyst for inspiration and change at IMA, as Robin and Jennifer realized from his story, that IMA also held *vigango* that were wrongfully stolen from Mijikenda people. Upon realizing this, Jennifer and Robin immediately started to work on the process of repatriation, with the communication of the affected tribes taking priority in anything they did- they understood that building connections with the communities of origin is the most crucial part of the process. Furthermore, Jennifer and Robin found personal relationships between museums (specifically, they built a relationship with the National Museums of Kenya) can expedite the process of repatriation. Their first steps were to investigate the provenance of the items, and analyze how the *vigango* came to IMA, fact-check Kenyan laws for Protected Items (of which the *vigango* are), and contact the relevant parties to inform them of the Museum’s possession and their eagerness to repatriate. While considering effective ways to return the *vigango*, Jennifer and Robin were cautiously aware of previous failed attempts at repatriation and took measures to avoid the same instances.

As for talking to their board and the public regarding this matter, they stressed that “*Vigango* are considered the physical embodiment of a deceased person’s soul, and Newfields [IMA] ethically cannot retain ownership of human souls.” It was agreed that IMA would hold onto the *vigango* until the source community was able to accept the items, and thankfully, in the span of a few months, the *vigango* were able to return home. It was a fruitful interaction with the Mijikenda people, who were elated to have their ancestors returned. After this successful repatriation, IMA took further steps to analyze their collection more closely, and ensure that the items held are ethically stored- including updating their Collections Policy to reflect the Museum’s holding of human remains, physical directions in Storage for proper handling, methods to incorporate cultural requests and requirements for holding, and image restrictions where necessary on their CMS: engagement notices, disclosure notices, and collections care notices. They are open to and in several ongoing additional repatriation processes, and in one case, got permission from the community of origin that their items may remain at IMA and gave requests for handling, storage, and documentation. They closed their

session with advice for “Ethical Stewardship Beyond Repatriation”; terminology throughout the Museum should be more accurate and culturally-informed, communication and relationships with communities of origin is important, and networks can help foster more ethical stewardship in practice.

This topic was particularly poignant to me, as ethical collecting and repatriation efforts have been a personal interest of mine, even before I decided on a career in Museums. Jennifer and Robin did an excellent job of walking attendees through their process of discovery and repatriation, while maintaining that honoring the host communities should be the most important priority throughout the process. As museums develop more to reflect the social and ethical standards of the modern age, examples like the vigango at the IMA are necessary for others in the field to go through the same processes with a starting point. I believe that the repatriation of stolen or legally filched objects can be very healing and educational to the newest generations of these indigenous cultures that have had their historical items removed from the very spaces that give them cultural context. Proper, accurate education of others that are not in these communities is just as important of course, for the purposes of correcting falsified historical records. As a White person especially, who had no hand in the mistakes my predecessors caused the in course of history, I think it is important to foremost educate myself on the most empathetic and respectful ways to engage with challenging items and host cultures. Beyond that, social activism and honesty have always been tenets of mine, and moving forward with a Museum Studies Graduate program, understanding the balance a registrar must have between housing/storage of items and respecting the communities cultural items have come from is a particularly important skill that can only be learned through experience and understanding. Attending this session gave me a glimpse of what the future of Museum Collections could look like, and it has inspired me to continue my studies with earnestness and integrity.

Above all, this session was a great example of how the process of successful repatriation, no matter what issues an institution might face internally and externally, is possible and has been accomplished before. I am very grateful to Jennifer, Robin, the IMA, and Steve Nash for the work they have done to make the Collections Field a more ethical and inclusive place in Museums.