

Introduction

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An Approach of the Info-Forum Museum: To Create a Source Community-driven Multivocal Museum Catalog

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Introduction

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- 1 In 2014, the National Museum of Ethnology, JAPAN (Minpaku) launched a project named “Info-Forum Museum” to form international collaborative research teams consisting of Minpaku, other museums and research institutes worldwide, and members of the source community (people who created ethnographic objects or used them and their descendants) (Kishigami 2015; Sudo 2016; Yoshida 2017).
- 2 The objective is, briefly, to simultaneously achieve (1) advanced sophistication of ethnographic data (additional information on the museum objects), and (2) establish a collaborative environment for records disclosure and sharing of access with the source communities as primary users.

- 3 Twenty-one individual projects were launched under the framework of Info-Forum Museum from June 2014 to March 2020. The individual project “Documenting and Sharing Information on Ethnological Materials: Working with Native American Tribes,” also commonly known as the “Reconnecting Project,” was one of the very first projects started in June 2014, and has often been regarded as a pilot project of all the Info-Forum Museum projects that work on various issues. The “Reconnecting Project” emphasized the reconnection of the objects collected in the past – and now possessed by the museum in the form of ethnographic material – and the members of the source community meeting, as intermediated by the task of collections review.
- 4 This special theme focuses on the journey of the “Reconnecting Project,” which was in collaboration with the Hopi people from Arizona in Southwestern United States and aims to broadly share the following three points by interweaving not only texts but also video and audio.
- 5 The first point is an overview of issues raised at the international conferences held so far. The articles referred to here are documentation issues related to ethnographical objects (Chapter 1: Kelley Hays-Gilpin, Atsunori Ito, Robert Breunig), questions about the comprehensibility of collection databases that are constantly referenced in the course of museum activities such as exhibitions and researches (Chapter 3: Robin Boast), and the challenges and prospects of collaboration with source communities at museums and in museum anthropology (Chapter 4: Chip Colwell). These articles lead to the question of how to realize self-representation and self-empowerment of the source communities and permanently reflect that in the museum’s activities. Therefore, this helps to understand not only the “Reconnecting Project” but also the perspective of the entire Info-Forum Museum, as well as to share the problems associated with it.
- 6 Second, we introduce through a film the procedures and principles of collections review research, which is one of the approaches to collaborative catalog creation (Chapter 2: Jim Enote and Cynthia Chavez Lamar). The descriptions of collection information in anthropology museums have been based on scientific classification and representations by cultural others. If people from the source community were to see the same object, they might gain deeper and more accurate knowledge rooted in the local culture. The collections review for a collaborative catalog is nothing other than an opportunity to tell one’s own culture and is significant for reflecting the voices of source communities in subsequent museum activities. Hopi participants who collaborated in the “Reconnecting Project” were neither cultural anthropologists nor museum professionals; they were mostly artists and religious practitioners engaged in the production and usage of items subject to collections review. Enote and Chavez Lamar, who have a Native American background, shared their expertise of collections reviews cultivated at museums around the world with new Hopi reviewers and recommended that attention be paid to the power balance with museums. The style of object narrative presented by them, which places the intentions of the source communities first, was accepted by the Hopi and became the core methodology for the accumulation of culturally reanimated collections information in the “Reconnecting Project.”
- 7 Third, we present our working collections catalog put together as part of the “Reconnecting Project” (Chapter 1). Since October 2014, our team has reviewed approximately 2,450 silver

jewelry and other objects labeled “Hopi” from the collections of 14 museums and 2 private collectors in Japan, the United States, and the United Kingdom. The accumulation of new information has resulted in a valuable and irreplaceable narrative documentation of people’s memories and experiences that puts a spotlight on the diversity of the source community and the individualities of the objects. It is not necessary for a collection review transcript to just be a museum collection reference database. It could be a tool to document and understand a complex, diverse, and changing body of knowledge about the source community by incorporating their views of individual objects held in the museums. We focus on what is important to the community members. It is a robust record of their personal connections, to be handed down to their descendants.

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