

Maasai in Oxford to request sacred item return

Christina Lamb

When Dr Laura van Broekhoven took over as director of the Pitt Rivers Museum eight years ago, she knew it would be challenging. The museum has been described as “one of the most violent spaces in Oxford”, its Victorian cabinets crammed with items from Britain’s colonial past, including its collection of shrunken heads which has now been removed from display.

The professor, 52, did not, however, expect to find herself herding 245 cows across rivers in Kenya and Tanzania. “That was not part of the job description,” she laughs. “Health and Safety had a complete meltdown.”

Over the past week, there has also been a bonfire on the front-green and herb potions sprinkled over museum artefacts as part of a “healing” visit from a delegation of Maasai.

The six women and two men have come to discuss what to do about objects they say are so sacred they could have been taken from their ancestors only by murder.

Four are from families from whom the artefacts were stolen. Seeing them, they were so overcome that one almost fainted and another said he was rendered deaf. “When I saw the *olkatar* [bangle] from our kinsman, I lost all feeling,” said Kumari Mpaïma, from Tanzania. “Thank God our traditional leaders had warned me to bring herbs to quench our feelings, otherwise I would have fainted.”

Naipaa Sayialel, whose family had an earring given to girls in circumcision ceremonies stolen, said:

“Seeing the objects made me so emotional I couldn’t even swallow my own saliva.” Back home, she walks six miles a day to collect water and firewood and is one of six of the group to have never left their homelands.

The project is supported by a charity, The Staples Trust, funded by the Sainsbury family, which also paid for the cows and the flights.

The encounter could have been acrimonious, particularly as the Maasai believe the looting of these sacred objects cast bad luck on their community. All of them have been evicted from their homelands, first by British colonialists, then by Tanzanian authorities wanting to use their land for trophy-hunting Gulf princes. Yet instead it has become a model for the issue of repatriation of looted culture – providing the museum with new knowledge and unifying the Maasai in a way they have not been for decades.

The museum had no idea the collection of 188 Maasai artefacts, mostly jewellery, was controversial until seven years ago when Samwel Nangiria, a Maasai activist, came to Oxford on a scheme for indigenous leaders.

The Pitt Rivers, which has a collection of about 600,000 items, brought out some objects from their cultures for them to see. Nangiria reacted with horror. “I couldn’t understand what these things were doing there,” he said. “These were items that can never be borrowed, sold or given away. The only way they could have been obtained was by force, by killing their owners.”

The five offending items, dating from the late 19th century, include an *engonokonkoi narok*, a necklace of blue beads, worn by senior leaders in initiation ceremonies and passed from father to son; an *emonyorit* – an earring worn by girls after circumcision; an *olkatar* – a hereditary bracelet passed

from father to son; an *isikira* – a headdress worn by newly circumcised girls; and an *isurutia* – a hereditary woman’s marriage necklace.

When Nangiria got home and showed photographs to their leaders, they sent a video to the museum. In it, a woman called Kootu Tome says: “We are annoyed, annoyed, and annoyed. We want to know who has taken our sacred cultural objects and why?”

It was the start of a process, the Living Culture Project, which has resulted in two more visits by the Maasai to Oxford, including by the son of the spiritual leader to trace the families by shaking a sacred calabash of stones. Last year, the museum paid a return visit to hold healing ceremonies, giving 49 cows to each of the five affected communities.

Naipaa pointed out that since losing the ceremonial earring, her family had been evicted repeatedly. Yet the mood yesterday at the final ceremony of the trip in the Pitt Rivers was harmonious.

“Whether or not we take artefacts back, this issue has prompted a social movement,” said Eve Merin, one of the delegation’s leaders. “It has united our community of 25 groups across East Africa, and revived our traditional



leadership council that was
banned by the British.”

YOM PILSTON FOR THE SUNDAY TIMES



The Maasai group at the Pitt Rivers Museum. They blamed the removal of sacred objects for the evictions they had suffered, but their “healing” visit to Oxford had been harmonious and constructive

