IT'S A FAMILY AFFAIR:
Stó:lō Experiences in Repatriation

Extract from a Presentation at the Symposium "Indigenous Perspectives on Repatriation: Moving Forward Together," Kelowna, 29–31 March 2017

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T'xwelátse (Herb Joe), Tzeachten First Nation

Schaepe: I'm not from here. I'm not from British Columbia. I'm not from Canada. And yet I look around the room and I see a lot of family members. And I say, how is that possible? How is that possible? I see in the back corner I've got Aunty Leona [Leona Sparrow, from Musqueam First Nation] and I've got sister Sue [Sue Rowley from UBC/LOA] and I've got Aunty Martha [Martha Black, from RBCM], a nephew over there – Jordan [Jordan Wilson, Musqueam First Nation/ UBC], my brother Sonny [Albert "Sonny" McHalsie, Stó:lō Nation], and my great-great-grandfather Dalton Silver [Dalton Silver, Sumas First Nation] ... There's family here in the room today and the question is – How did that come to be for a xwelítem like me who's not from this place? Ultimately it comes from the work that we're doing. Contact with those things that are the focus of repatriation brings people together. It has the power to create bonds. I was going to give you an overview of Stó:lō Nation's experiences in repatriation but I'd like to recast that as an overview of our growing family tree. When you look at the bonding that occurs through this work, ask yourself if you're part of the work of repatriation – are you family or are you not family? And if you're not family in that situation, I suggest you're not doing the work.

One aspect of the experience that we've had over the years is international repatriation, working across borders and having to deal with Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA), which was very problematic. That US legislation set up some major hurdles that we had to figure out how to navigate. The repatriation of Stone T'xwelátse took from 1991 until 2006; it took fifteen years to accomplish and a good chunk of that time was our efforts to work with people who weren't in fact family members. It took persistence to continue to work with the Burke Museum to get to a point where

Figure 1. Stone T'xwelátse – a transformed ancestor and part of the Stó:lō Constitution – back home among his family and Stó:lō community. Photo by David Campion, 2006.

people understood what we were talking about and open up to us and attach themselves to what we were doing. And through that process they effectively became family and remain so today, very closely connected to all the people involved in the repatriation of Stone T'xwelátse.

How would we cast that stone ancestor? As an object of cultural patrimony as defined under NAGPRA or as ancestral remains? Stone T'xwelátse is a man turned to stone. He's living, he's alive, he's part of a broad family linked back to the first man of the Ts'elxwéyeqw Tribe of Stó:lō. He's a transformed ancestor and we approached his repatriation as the repatriation of ancestral remains. This was not agreed to by the NAGPRA board but we were able to achieve his repatriation as an object of cultural patrimony and that was fine for doing what needed to be done. But ultimately Stone T'xwelátse is a living man in stone form and he is part of Stó:lō sx̲wóx̲wiyám.

Herb Joe, who carries the name T'xwelátse, says this: "The return of my ancestor Stone T'xwelátse. The loss of a part of one's soul, that is how I felt about the impact of losing our ancestor and being informed that after a hundred years he was found. From all that I heard from other family members, they felt that same way. One of my cousins described that feeling after seeing our ancestor for the first time as like having a great heaviness lifted off our shoulders. A teenager from my Nooksack

family in northern Washington State (where the first step of the bringing home of Stone T'xwelátse took place) told me that his grandmother told him that they were going to the hall for the return-home ceremony. He didn't want to go but his grandmother told him that he didn't have a choice, he had to go. At the ceremony, when he first saw our ancestor, he realized that he didn't know that he had a hole in his heart and at that same moment he knew that he was healed. I didn't have any understanding of the cultural, family, community, or tribal expectation that went with carrying the family name T'xwelátse, and how that related to bringing my ancestor home. My family is matrilineal, so we are led by our grandmothers. When I asked them what we were going to do about bringing our ancestor home, one of my grandmas simply told me, "Grandson, you carry the name, you bring him home." That was the only direction I ever received from anyone in my family. From there it took all of us fifteen years to bring him home to his family, to his people. In 2006, Stone T'xwelátse was brought to the Semá:th Longhouse as a transformed ancestor and connected with his family. My family is so happy and content that our ancestor is back home and once again doing the job he was transformed into stone to do. He is here to remind us that we must learn to live together in a good way."

Another aspect of repatriation is virtual, digital repatriation. We see a real relevance and a real connection to the knowledge, the intangible aspects of what's out there and being stored in museums around the world. We had the opportunity to be involved in the development of the Reciprocal Research Network (RRN). Again, that was a long process. It began in 1999 and really got under way from 2005 to 2010. The RRN is a computer network bringing together information from museums around the world. It's not just providing connection or access to images and information about objects held in museums, although that's part of it. The important part is that it's a two-way flow of information. It's not just bringing things home or returning knowledge to where it comes from; information flows back again through the family system to those who are taking care of these things on behalf of the people they come from, to whom they belong. It's that family connection. And like Herb Joe said in the context of being given a name, carrying that name and learning what that meant – the obligations that go along with that, the understandings, the knowledge – I think that flows back to the museums. It's important for museums to understand the obligations that come with the caretaking of those objects that have fallen into their collections. There are obligations that come with that. There are obligations of caretaking

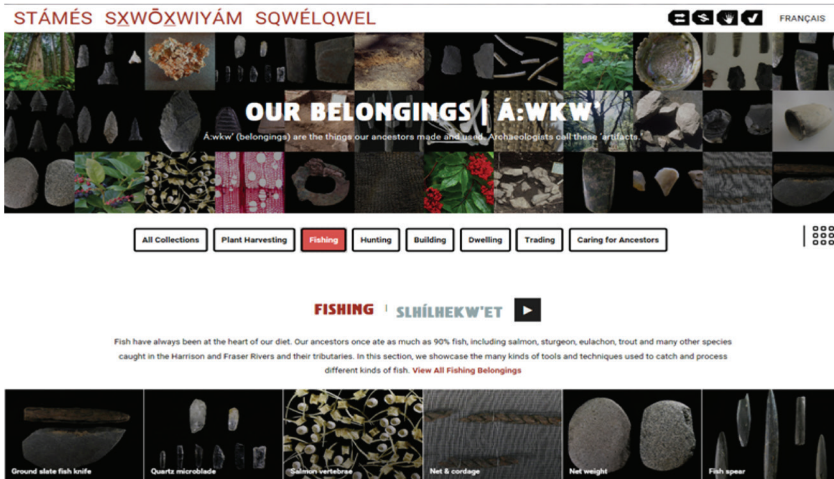

Figure 2. Digital Connection to Belongings, Intangible Heritage and Knowledge – www.digitalsqwelets.ca

and a need to know that you may have the material but may not have the intangibles of it. The RRN is a means of providing a mechanism to share information and provide that knowledge flow through repatriation to both aspects of the family involved. On the RRN there are currently collections from twenty-seven institutions – over 500,000 items, 300,000 photographs, and all sorts of member discussions and digital project spaces where people can work together.

More recently, we have had another long-term project, *digitalsqewlets.ca*, with the Sq'éwlets First Nation, one of the Stó:lō Tribes in the central Fraser Valley. It took four years to complete and is founded on a decade of significant archaeology work done in the community in the 1990s at the request of the community. The way archaeology works: all of the objects, artefacts, and so on, were taken away to repositories elsewhere. The project was a means of reconnecting the community to all of that material, recasting and resetting the artefacts recovered through archaeology in a context of belongings – the language is important – and using a virtual, digital technology to do that: to give context, to use this as a way of connecting the elders and the youth, as an avenue for maintaining, carrying, and transferring knowledge between the generations.

We have had the great opportunity to work with ancestors through the *Journey Home Project* linked to the Laboratory of Archaeology at UBC, working with Sue Rowley of UBC and the Museum of Vancouver, and also with regard to the found human remains that Stó:lō receives through

Figure 3. Ancestors in boxes. Photo by David Campion, 2010.

the Coroner's Office. That was, again, a long-term process based on partnerships. We were asked what Stó:lō wanted to do concerning the ancestors housed at the Laboratory of Archaeology. We were able to put together a guiding group, the Stó:lō House of Respect Caretaking Committee, to work on that. The answer was, we want to bring our ancestors home. The question was how to do that. Look at the length of time it took – 2006 to 2014 – when you're not fighting over whether this *can* happen, you're dealing with the process of how to do it. A substantial amount of effort is involved in working through process. After all of that work, all of those dialogues, all that discussion, all of that input into process, we were able to put together a booklet on guiding intangible knowledge production in the analysis of human remains, the analysis of what we'll call technical rights. We needed to find out who these individuals were, where they came from, details about them as individuals to enable us to link them back to the family who would be the caretakers and be responsible for taking the final step of that journey after having the ancestors brought to the midway point of the Stó:lō Resource Centre. Some of the points of policy that we are working under are set out in this framework to bring the ancestors home, to take care of and utilize this as a way of implementing Stó:lō heritage policy and developing Stó:lō heritage legislation. Again, language is very important as a foundation for situating, understanding, guiding what we are doing.

Sqwélqwel is the personal histories and stories and things of individuals or families, the true facts, the true news. The Billy Sepass canoe from 1913 was not repatriated in the sense of ownership – that's not necessarily all that important at times. The family came forward and wanted to have

Figure 4. Members of the Sepass Family with their ancestral canoe at the Stó:lō House of Long Ago and Today. Photo by David Schaepe, 2015.

that canoe brought to the Stó:lō House of Long Ago and Today. We were able to achieve that through a relatively short process, a couple of years of figuring out a long-term loan with the Chilliwack Museum and Archives to bring that canoe back, resituate it within our interpretive centre, and make the family happy. They wanted to have it closer to home and that's what we were able to do. It lives within the interpretive centre today as part of our interpretive pieces: sqwélqwel.

We have learned a lot from this. There are all sorts of back stories to everything, all of these experiences. But in this – I use the term "work" – if you're not part of the family then you're not doing the work. This is what I've learned from Gwen Point, from Sonny McHalsie, and others. Work – I keep hearing this term. It's not something to be taken lightly. It requires good reason and a right time for it to happen, and it's holistic in nature. It affects the mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual health and well-being of individuals and communities. That's why we become family. If you're not doing the work, you're not connected that way, and so that's key to what we're doing as part of the process. It requires guidance, wisdom, and protocols developed through cultural input and for practical reasons. It requires planning before and after bringing home (continuity over time is very important), capacity, resources. Family has to be rooted beyond the individual. It has to be rooted in an institutional relationship at the same time.