



HAL
open science

From a museum of Others to a museum of Selves

Ksenia Pimenova

► **To cite this version:**

Ksenia Pimenova. From a museum of Others to a museum of Selves. *Journal of Ethnographic Theory* - HAU, 2023, 13 (1), pp.159-178. 10.1086/725428 . hal-04413136

HAL Id: hal-04413136

<https://hal.science/hal-04413136v1>

Submitted on 23 Jan 2024

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.



ARTICLE

From a museum of Others to a museum of Selves

Repatriation, affective relations, and social values of archaeological human remains

Ksenia PIMENOVA, *Université Paris Nanterre*

The mummy of the Altaian Princess is one of the best-known cases of repatriation of human remains in Russia. Drawing on a comparative ethnography of two Siberian museums that conserved her body before and after the return, this article approaches the museums as arenas of affective relations to heritage and as key sites of the enactment of heritage social values. It unpacks the museums' politics in the Princess's display to show how and why some affective relations are transformed into "front values" available to audiences, while others remain on the back stage of museum life. It also argues for a more symmetrical approach to sending and receiving museums, which provides important nuances to the analyses of repatriation in terms of power structures and colonial legacies.

Keywords: museums, values, heritage, human remains, repatriation, Siberia

In September 2012, a 2500-year-old mummy of a young woman from the Pazyryk archaeological culture¹ returned to Gorno-Altai, capital of the Altai Republic, from Novosibirsk, the Russian capital city of Western Siberia. After a welcoming ceremony organized by the Altaian authorities, the mummy was placed, with great fanfare, in the new building of the Anokhin National Museum of the Altai Republic. The return of the Altaian Princess² marked the end of tense negotiations between the Altaian authorities and cultural elites, on the one hand, and the Institute of Archaeology and Ethnography of the Russian Academy of Sciences (IAE), on the other. The first group had relentlessly pressed for the return. They argued that the Princess belonged to the sacred

land of Altai where she had been buried, and that her removal from the ground exposed the inhabitants to her wrath, which would take the form of natural disasters. Conversely, Novosibirsk archaeologists resisted the repatriation by using the arguments of conservation and research. They claimed that the mummy's body carried invaluable data on the ancient populations of Eurasia, which could only be extracted and analyzed at the Institute's Museum of History and Culture of the Peoples of Siberia and Far East (the MHC hereafter). The controversy over the fate of the Princess triggered for the first time a heated debate on the return and reburial of archaeological human remains, on the ownership of heritage, and on the need for its conservation.

Previous research on the Altaian Princess has developed roughly in two directions. On the one hand, the Altaian claims for return and reburial have been inscribed into a body of ethnographic analyses of ontologies and relations to the sacred land (Halemba 2008; Broz 2009; Tyukhteneva 2009; Doronin 2016; Maslov 2017). On the other hand, the Princess's story has been contextualized through the lenses of power structures

1. The traces of the Pazyryk culture (6th–3rd centuries BCE) are found in Altai and adjacent Mongolia and Kazakhstan. The Pazyryk were one of the eastern branches of the Scythians, nomadic populations living in the Eurasian steppes from Siberia to the Black Sea.
2. I follow here the naming practices of my Altaian informants.



that shape heritage management in the Russian Federation. For instance, her complicated return shed light on the dominant position of positivist archaeology in Russian academia, on the entangled interests of Russian federalism and Altaian political actors, as well as on deficient legal frames (Plets et al. 2013; Plets 2016).

In this article, I would like to shift the focus beyond the return as a political and legal process, and to extend the time frame of what happens in “sending” and “receiving” museums to before and after the moment of return. Following debates on museum responses to repatriation (Tythacott and Arvanitis 2016), I use the Princess’s case as a prism to comparatively explore the two museums’ politics in the areas of her scenographic contextualization and her display. I suggest approaching them as sites where affective relations to heritage are expressed and where values of heritage are enacted, or “realized” (Robbins 2013, 2015). While both values and affective relations inform repatriation, their interaction inside the sending and receiving museums often remains on the margins of repatriation studies. By developing a comparative ethnography of how the MHC and the Anokhin museums have realized different values and developed different relations with the Princess, my purpose is to connect studies on repatriation with the anthropology of museums, affect, and values.

I distinguish the affective relations that different actors (museum staff, archaeologists, spiritual leaders, as well as visitors) develop towards human remains, from the social values conveyed by their display in the museums. Human remains are relational entities, since “they come to be defined and shaped within relations of various sorts—relations which can be at once material and social, emotional and political, and which develop and change over time” (Hallam 2010: 468). However, I argue that different relations are not equally ranked in the different institutional contexts, such as the museums, and not all of them are communicated to audiences. The comparative study of the museums’ politics of contextualization and display here aims to explore the connections and the disconnections between these relational and axiological levels.

My approach entails three methodological shifts regarding repatriation studies, which come from my ethnographic experience in the museums concerned. First, I recenter the focus from repatriation itself to broader museum lives of human remains before and after their return. Second, I introduce a methodological symmetry in studying sending and receiving museums. Third, to understand how museums transform affective relations

to heritage into heritage values, I propose examining the processes by which concrete decisions are taken.

This comparative method is key to a more unbiased approach to sending and receiving museums and their communities. The current asymmetry is a part of our anthropological habitus. Those who resist the repatriation, such as curators in some Western museums or archaeologists in Novosibirsk, exercise the authorized heritage discourses (Smith 2006) and tend to be perceived as “bad guys” with much power and little consideration for indigenous claims. By contrast, anthropological sympathy goes to the dominated populations, such as the Altaians who had been integrated into the realm of Russian settler colonialism since the middle of the eighteenth century. I agree that the colonial legacies and persistent inequalities in heritage management are extremely important dimensions to repatriation in Russia and elsewhere (see Turnbull and Pickering 2010). In this article, however, I suggest that symmetrical ethnographies of the micropolitics of affect and values in sending and receiving museums are useful in thinking about repatriation as a matter of attachment and values.

Such a symmetry, I argue, uncovers complexities of repatriation in a more nuanced way. Firstly, it reframes the power relations between the museums and the indigenous communities with regard to shifting political agendas that tend now to support indigenous rights more than in the 1980s and before (Morphy 2010). In Russia, political support for cultural rights of indigenous communities is weak; there is neither a legal framework for repatriation, nor ethical incentive to decentralize heritage.³ Yet museum curators—both in indigenous contexts and in “mainland” Russia—are themselves a dominated group: they are entangled in power relations with institutions on which their museums depend and accept decisions that sometimes are at odds with their professional ethos or personal feelings. Secondly, the affective relations to contentious heritage informs both indigenous claims for return and curators’ resistance. They are the “elephant in the room” (Smith and Cambell 2016) that has to be taken into account both in repatriation studies

3. In multiethnic Russia there is no law similar to NAGPRA in the United States and no “soft laws” akin to international and national regulations on archaeological practice and museum ethics. All known repatriations, the Princess’s included, result from negotiations and arrangements between local politicians and federal actors (Plets 2016).



and in museum ethnographies. Repatriation between the museums, the making of exhibitions, as well as the practices of coping with the “loss” of repatriated objects, can be analyzed as relations of attachment or detachment, which unfold in particular institutional, cultural, and political contexts. Depending on these contexts, some of these relations can be either transformed into the values conveyed by the museum’s settings and narratives, or remain disconnected from these values.

The distinction between relations people have with human remains and the values people attributed to them is therefore central to this symmetrical approach. In my fieldwork I was puzzled by what at first seemed a discrepancy between the relations to the Princess of both museums’ employees, and the practices of her contextualization through exhibition design and supporting texts, which staging in French is sometimes called scenography, a term I will use here. On the one hand, the Princess was entangled in affective economies in both museums. The curators’ attitude to the Princess was tinged with memories and emotions, such as compassion, pride, nostalgia, scientific excitement, or fear of the dead. These multiple relations made of the Princess a particularly “polyvalent” set of human remains, using Bonnot’s concept of *valence* as “multi-layered bonds of attraction and repulsion that develop between subjects and objects” (Bonnot 2014: 188). On the other hand, the museums contextualized the Princess in very different ways. The MHC displayed her in a quite dispassionate way, as a material witness of a remote past. The Anokhin museum, on the other hand, acknowledges the diversity of contemporary relations to the Princess and invites visitors to enact them compassionately. How do comparable economies of attachment articulate in such radically different museum settings? Why in one case are affective relations communicated to the audience while in the other they remain hidden in the background?

In the next section, I introduce the concepts of museums of Selves and museums of Others (de l’Estoile 2007) to explain how different institutional logics have led the contextualization of the Princess in the two museums to almost opposite outcomes. However, I also argue that while these concepts are useful to explain the results of the contextualization, they tend to leave out of the picture its processes, and its actors and their relations to the Princess. I will draw on Erving Goffman’s distinction between “back stage” and “front stage” (Macdonald 2001) to unpack the dynamic relationship between affective relations to heritage and their transformation into publicly representable “front values.”

In the rest of the article I will apply this approach to reconstruct the phases of the Princess’s social life. I will use first-hand ethnography and secondary sources to show how an anonymous body hidden underground for more than two thousand years was unearthed, named, and attached to different communities in Altai and Novosibirsk through different sets of affective relations. I will then show how the relations in the back stage informed decisions about the Princess’s scenography and impacted the politics of her display or concealment. And finally, I will analyze how these relations were transformed (or not) into front values available to museum audiences.

Museums as arenas of relations and values

According to Benoît de l’Estoile, museums can be distinguished “from the point of view of their relationship to identity” (2007 :12). From this perspective the “museums of Others do not refer to an Us, but precisely to those who are defined as different . . . The museum of Others exhibits the ‘things of the Others’; objects that . . . have been brought back to us by those who had gone to the Others for various reasons: military expeditions, missions, trade, explorations, administration, travel” (de l’Estoile 2007: 14).

As with other ideal-typical oppositions, the terms of the “museum of Others” and of “Selves” should certainly be understood contextually. In settler colonial countries such as Russia, the indigenous “Others” tend to be integrated into a multiethnic national and political “Us,” though this process does not dissolve ethnic identities.⁴ Yet, the concept is useful to grasp the essence of the MHC’s institutional history and its relation to the populations it represents. The MHC was created to value archaeological collections of long-extinct cultures and to highlight contemporary ethnic diversity with the ethnographic artifacts of the populations who inhabited Siberia before Russian colonization. Located in Akademgorodok, a satellite of the Siberian capital city Novosibirsk, the museum is a product of a large-scale Cold War political endeavor to bring Soviet science and modernization to “backward” Siberia (Tatarchenko 2016). The whole town

4. In Russia there are at least two regimes of (self-)identification: that of citizenship and that of ethnic identity. Thus, an individual can be a Russian citizen (*rossijanin*) without being Russian (*russkij*) in terms of his or her ethnic self-identification, mother tongue, or religion.



was built from scratch in the late 1950s in the middle of the taiga. More than thirty institutes of the Russian Academy of Sciences are now concentrated there; an atmosphere of a science town densely inhabited by intellectuals characterizes the place.

The MHC is not an independent museum, but a department of the Institute of Ethnography and Archaeology (IEA), located a few blocks away. Since its creation by the academician Aleksei Okladnikov, the main mission of the MHC has been to curate and keep available for IEA researchers the collections that they gathered across Siberia and the Russian Far East. The Altai, known for its rich archaeology and located only five hundred kilometers south of Novosibirsk, has been considered a priority research field by the Institute. This focus is well represented in the MHC collections. The museum displayed the Princess between 1995 and 2012, together with a second mummy, the Pazyryk Man, unearthed in 1995, and several other skeletons from Altai and elsewhere.

By contrast, the Anokhin national museum in Gorno-Altaiisk can be described as a “museum of Selves” since it represents several close ethnic groups related to one regional identity.⁵ Founded in the 1920s to represent the newly created Oirat Autonomous Region, it has been one of the main cultural institutions of Soviet and post-Soviet Altai (Belekova 2010). Thanks to the financial intervention of Russian oil and gas company Gazprom, which had economic interests in Altai located on the Chinese border (Plets 2016), the Anokhin museum has now moved to a renovated building, whose architectural plan had already included a large space to host the Princess after her return. The curators and scenographers have created there an immersive installation quite different from other, more Soviet-style parts of the permanent exhibition. In this room Altaian museum-goers are expected to identify with the Princess and to “assist” at her burial; some even feel her presence and conduct rituals (Pimenova 2021). However, they cannot learn as much detail about research on Pazyryk culture as at the MHC, and they also have much less chance of seeing

her body. The body was indeed totally concealed after the return, and since 2016 is shown only at certain dates.

The opposition between museums of Others and museums of Selves helps here to understand the main messages conveyed by the two museums. The Anokhin museum settings are centered on the Altai and present its nature, archaeology, history, and ethnography to mostly Altaian visitors who consider themselves connected to the Pazyryk as their ancestors. The MHC, on the other hand, presents various archaeological and ethnographical cultures of Siberia and the Far East to Russian-speaking students, schoolchildren, and tourists. Most of the MHC visitors do not feel a connection either to Pazyryk culture or to any other culture represented, yet they admire these well-curated and diverse collections.

However, this opposition fades when one shifts the focus from the front values embodied in the verbal narratives, and the visual and architectural settings, to the back relations that museums’ employees entertain with heritage. The Princess does not seem to be an Other either at the Anokhin museum or at the MHC. She is named differently in written documents and in public occasions: she figures as “The Princess” at the Anokhin museum, and as “The mummy of the young Pazyryk woman” at the MHC. However, both museums’ employees colloquially nickname her “our Girl” or “our Lady”⁶ and regularly address her with greetings and apologies for disturbance.

Front values and back relations coexist as the two faces of the same coin, but they are also linked by the diachronic processes that lead from the latter to the former. Sharon Macdonald (2001) drew our attention to the differences between the front stage of the museum life, and the back stage hidden from the public eye. Back stage operations, such as the making of exhibitions, are often unpredictable and messy, for they involve internal negotiations and the intrusions of actors external to museums. Yet when the exhibitions are finally opened, they are stabilized around one or a few “front values,” which end up being the most important, through the negotiations shaped by different institutional and political configurations.

Museums are therefore sites of politics (Abélès 1983). Not only do they offer to their audiences what Benedict Anderson called a “totalizing classificatory grid” (1983: 184), but they also construct their settings through continuous back stage negotiations between

5. The Altai Republic has approximately 55 percent Russians and 38 percent Turkic-speaking Altaians (Census 2020, see https://rosstat.gov.ru/vpn_popul#). The “Altaians” are not one but several close cultural and linguistic groups, such as Altai-kizhi, Telengit, Kumandy, etc. (Donahoe et al. 2008). As the main museum of the Altai Republic, the Anokhin emphasizes these Altaian groups, but represents also the Russian dwellers of the republic.

6. I would like to thank an anonymous reviewer for attracting my attention to this in an earlier version of this paper.



the curators, the directors, and the “outsiders.” The latter, in our case, are archaeologists, politicians, public intellectuals, spiritual leaders, and elders, and also, sometimes, the audience whose opinion is anticipated in the exhibition-making decisions. In this process, affective relations to heritage are selected and transformed into the front values.

The progression from back to front stage relates to the debate on the forms of existence of social values and on their hierarchical arrangements (Robbins 2013, 2015). Anthropological approaches to values located them in different value forms and on various social arenas. Values can be embodied in exemplars: real or legendary persons with a socially approved or disapproved behavior (Humphrey 1997; Robbins 2015). Collective rituals are arenas of values too, since they perform ideal kin structures from their societies, which do not exist in a pure form in everyday life (Graeber 2013). The art historian Carol Duncan (1995) developed a similar approach to museums as ritual sites that elevate their audiences to something bigger than the exhibits, such as patriotism or nation.⁷

The connection between back relations and front values implies a methodological movement between the study of the material settings and the analyses of relations that informed the exhibition-making processes. My two sites of fieldwork at the Anokhin museum and at the MHC roughly followed this route. I first observed the design of the exhibition spaces at the two museums, their contrasting ways of displaying human remains, as well as the verbal, visual, and sensory elements of the settings. Though the Princess was no longer at the MHC at the time of my research, it was possible to study her scenography there, as the MHC did not change its Pazyryk room after her departure. Her former display glass case was still in the middle of the exhibition space, in perfect symmetry with another glass case containing the second Pazyryk mummy found in 1995, known as the Pazyryk Man. I then reconstructed how the settings had been conceived and put together through interviews with the two museums’ directors and employees, asking

7. Some repatriations can be analyzed as an enactment of values of justice and indigenous rights, which come to be shared by “sending” and “receiving” parties (Turnbull and Pickering 2010; Peers, Reinius, and Shannon 2017). The repatriation of the Princess, however, could hardly be interpreted as such. IAE archaeologists and the MHC employees perceived it as imposed on them, and many still regret her departure.

about their opinions on the final display, issues that may have occurred during the making of the exhibition, and choices in scenography.

The mummy’s relational entanglements

Since her discovery in 1993, the Princess’s mummy has been entangled in multiple relations that made her “our Girl” in both museums and their communities. Archaeologists and curators at the MHC as well as the curators at the Anokhin museum and inhabitants of the Altai republic consider her as belonging to them on various grounds.⁸ As Ian Hodder has shown (2012: 23–26), legal ownership is only one among many other relations of ownership that draw upon diverse affective and cognitive operations, such as naming practices, the investments of care and labor, and objects’ entanglements in individual and collective memories. The diversity of these relations are key to understanding the polysemy of the Princess’s bodily remains and her persona.

The “Lady” from permafrost: A scientific database and a person to care for

The first set of relationships to the Princess were activated in the very moment of her discovery. The story begins in 1993 on the Ukok Plateau in the south of the Republic of Altai, in a virtually uninhabited mountainous area of permafrost. The search team, directed by the archaeologist Natalia Polosmak, a senior researcher at the IAE, was digging a modest-looking burial mound of the Pazyryk archaeological culture (6th–3rd centuries BCE). As my interlocutors stressed, the choice to excavate this mound among many others on the Ukok Plateau seemed strange since it looked plundered. Yet Polosmak’s intuition and good luck paid off, as the team discovered under the mound a burial chamber filled with ice. The extraction of the body took several days. The suspense grew as the archaeologists melted the ice with warm water and body parts emerged, as a participant recalled, “in a thick atmosphere filled with the expectations for the great scientific event to come.” The excitement came notably from the possibility of finding organic matter well-preserved in the permafrost

8. Unlike international repatriations, the Princess’s return took place within the same national space and did not entail the change of legal ownership. In Russia, heritage belongs to the state represented by the Russian Ministry of Culture.



of the Ukok Plateau, an almost unexploited and promising new terrain for Pazyryk archaeology.⁹

Layer after layer, the mummy of a woman in wool and silk clothing, topped with a high headdress, appeared. As Polosmak (1994) described the scene, “the fabric gradually revived around her limbs, softening the outline of her legs, the swell of her hips. And somehow, at that moment, the remains became a person. She lay sideways, like a sleeping child, with her long, strong, aristocratic hands crossed in front of her. ‘Forgive me,’ I said to her.” Of relevance here is what Thomas Laqueur (2015: 56) calls “the human equivalent of geological forces” that pushes corpses buried thousands of years ago into the present. An anonymous dead becomes engaged in new relations and acquires names. The “Lady” was the first nickname given to the mummy by Polosmak herself (1994). The “Princess” appeared in Altaian media publications in Russian and become ingrained in colloquial use in Altai and in Russia,¹⁰ although the archaeologists qualify it as inaccurate due to the lack of signs indicating royalty.

The excavations formed a community of shared experience amongst the archaeologists and their assistants. Several of the MHC employees participated in the digs. They all speak of these expeditions with an acute sense of endonostalgia (Berliner 2012), recalling their hard work, the charisma of the team’s director, and the beauty of the event. One of the participants now working at the MHC said, “Natalia [Polosmak] lives the excavations with all her soul, and she contaminated us with this attitude. The unearthing of our beautiful Lady was a moment of deep emotion. It was beautiful when we took her out, in that solemn environment of the Altai Mountains. We lived this moment deeply in our guts.”

Other relationships to the Princess and through the Princess emerged after her transfer to Novosibirsk. The first community of archaeologists grew to include multiple other communities of practice in Akademgorodok and beyond. First, the task of preserving the body was addressed thanks to the specialists from the Moscow-based Institute of Medicinal and Aromatic Plants

(VILAR) who were already working on the conservation of the bodies of political leaders, such as Vladimir Lenin (Yurchak 2015). These specialists created an original chemical solution and elaborate conservation protocols to prevent mold, which are still used at the Anokhin museum (Kozeltsov and Romakov 2000). They also clarified her skin, which had quickly darkened on contact with air, to discover rich tattoos made in a characteristic Scythian animal style. Later on, these tattoos were compared to those of other Pazyryk mummies preserved in the Hermitage museum, to explore technical and social aspects of Pazyryk tattooing (Polosmak 2001; Barkova and Pankova 2005). Chemical and forensic analyses on the Princess’s body, as well as on the second mummy of the Pazyryk Man also found on the Ukok Plateau, shed new light on the techniques of artificial mummification. This research suggested that the Pazyryk valued the preservation of their dead and opened a window onto their unknown spiritual life. Pluridisciplinary networks grounded in the IEA extended beyond Novosibirsk and Russian academia (Molodin, Polosmak, and Chikisheva 2000).

Archaeologists preserve and study human remains as unique sources of information on life conditions, genetics, dietary regimes, epidemiology, and material culture of ancient populations (Landau and Steele 2000). Such an approach made it possible to exploit the two mummies as peculiar “databases” containing exceptional knowledge on the Pazyryk who have left almost no other material traces than their burials and their bodies.

Yet, it would be inaccurate to reduce the attitude toward the mummies of the researchers at the IEA and of the employees of MHC to the mere exploitation of a database. There is a deeper relational dimension. Studying a body requires competencies, time and energy, and this investment creates an affective attachment to an archaeological human remain as an object of care. Furthermore, human remains explicitly refer to personae, to whom one can feel empathy and with whom one can identify. Physical anthropological measurements and facial reconstructions gave the Princess the features of a young European-looking woman.¹¹ The tomography probed her biography before her death. Before

9. The Pazyryk culture had been studied since the nineteenth century. Some other mummies had been unearthed in Central Altai in the late 1940s, but they were more damaged due to the moderate climate conditions there.

10. Altaian surnames such as Ochi-Bala (a mythical female warrior protecting the Altaians) and Ak-Kadyn (White Lady) are used in spiritual contexts.

11. The facial reconstruction was conducted by Tatiana Balueva at the Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology of the Russian Academy of Sciences, Moscow, using methods elaborated by the Soviet physical anthropologist Mikhail Gerasimov.



dying in her late twenties of breast cancer, the Princess had poor health and suffered from bone traumas due to horse accidents common to her nomadic life. The pain literally retrieved from flesh and bones elicited sympathy and compassion among researchers. As a curator of the MHC recalls, “I always pitied her, because she never asked to be unearthed. Then the research showed that she was very sick. So I pitied her even more: not because we had to conserve and to display her body, but because she had a hard life.”

The Princess created therefore multilayered relations in Akademgorodok and beyond. Her remains first became an object of attachment to those who shared the experience of the digs and who still feel the nostalgia for that moment of their lives. The operations of conservation and research produced affective relations to her body as an object of science, to be cared for, but they also shaped other relationships to the Princess as a person. As we will see later, some of these relations have informed the making of the exhibition at the MHC. But they also add much to the understanding of the archaeologists and the MHC employees’ resistance to the repatriation, which cannot be reduced solely to the arguments about her scientific value and conservation needs.

The Princess in Altai: Dangerous ancestor and local heritage

The Altaians also developed relations with the Princess as soon as when the archaeologists extracted the mummy from the soil. However, these relations developed on different grounds and were shaped by preexisting conceptions of the dead as a danger, relations to sacred land and the concepts of ancestry they entail, and the post-Soviet appropriation of the Pazyryk culture as a part of Altaian history. These concepts have fueled Altaian definitions of cultural and political sovereignty in the 1990s and the 2000s (Mikhajlov 2013). They also led to concrete political actions, such as the prohibition of digs in southern Altai adopted by the Altaian parliament in 1997 (Plets et al. 2013). In this context the Princess became a particularly polyvalent “political dead body” (Verdery 1999).

The unearthing of the Princess awakened fears of the harmful agency of the dead towards the living, fears widespread across Eurasian shamanist cultures (Delaplace 2008). For the Altaians, danger emanates both from the material remnants of the dead and from the vital essence of the person that turns into a life-threatening revenant (Broz 2018). To limit the danger, numerous ritual prescrip-

tions and prohibitions must be respected (Tadina 2013). While the Pazyryk wanted to preserve their dead forever through the mummification, Altaians sought to erase any trace of a death as quickly as possible (Toshakova 1978). Under the Soviet regime, traditional burials in shallow graves were replaced by Russian-style deep graves. These cemeteries and more ancient burial sites are still avoided as “cursed,” inhabited by revenants who trick the living and steal their lives. Relating to the Princess as a danger created challenges to her museification. Some of my informants declared they would avoid the area of the museum after the Princess’s return and warned me of the dangers of falling ill because of my work on the premises of the museum.

The danger represented by the Princess created affective communities of potential victims operating at a larger scale than ordinary revenants do. Out of love, the soul of the “ordinary” dead usually comes back for their closest relatives, neighbors and friends. Yet, as Agnieszka Halemba has shown (2008), the Princess’s agency quickly extended beyond the groups of Telengits who live next to Ukok Plateau, to include other inhabitants of the republic, such as Kazakhs and Altai-born Russians. An earthquake in 2003 and a flood in 2014 were interpreted in Altai as the consequence of the removal of the Princess from the plateau and her anger, and crystallized the claims for return and reburial (Halemba 2008; Doronin 2016; Maslov 2017).

The sacred land of Altai and the concepts of ancestry and continuity that are entailed are another key element of Altaian relations to the Princess. Every Altaian is indeed related to their ancestors through their “land-water” (Alt. *jer-su*), a multiscale concept that refers to the spirited land of one’s patrilineal kin, but also to the whole Altai (Tyukhteneva 2009). The unearthing of the Princess has been perceived as a violation of Altai as a supreme spiritual being. Discussing Ingold’s (2000) genetic and relational models of indigeneity, Broz (2009) has argued how for the Altaians the sacred land mediates the continuity between the dead and the living: a continuity understood in a genetic or in a spiritual sense. The land also underlies a conceptualization of Altaianess as a moral code of conduct (Broz 2009). This is why the violation of the land could not be seen only as the result of external archaeological “aggression”; it also had a moral dimension. Akaj Kine, an Altaian religious leader and fervent proponent of reburial, explained why the inhabitants of Altai suffer from the Princess’s anger even if they did nothing wrong to her grave: “We are the guardians of this territory, but we were unable to protect her



from the digs. That's why we are the first responsible . . . Yes, it was our politicians who gave the archaeologists the authorization to dig, and we as people were not convincing enough in our resistance. The earthquakes and the floods are lessons in morality that we all have been learning for two decades." In this perspective, the return of the Princess and, ideally, her reburial, symbolizes the conditions for a traditionalist utopia, in which the dead and the living would occupy their due places (Pimenova 2019). These relations to the Princess as a dangerous deceased being and as an ancestor both explain the strong wish for reburial that emerged since her unearthing in 1993. Reburial is still seen as the best way to soothe the restless dead, but also to pay respect to an ancestor.

Yet, parallel to these relations colored by fear, respect, and moral responsibility, there are other relations to the Princess in her form as a token of local Altaian heritage. In a way similar to other post-Soviet contexts where archaeology has been used by nationalist movements (Shnirel'man 2013), post-Soviet Altaian elites mobilized the Pazyryk culture to root the origins of Altaians much deeper in the past than the academic consensus among the Russian archaeologists and historians would admit (Mikhajlov 2013). Altaian appropriation of Pazyryk heritage draws on cultural similarities, such as nomadism, horse breeding, and elements of material culture. The Princess's remains and the accessories found on her embody this connection.

On the affective level, there is no opposition between relations to the Princess as a dangerous revenant, as an ancestor, and as heritage. More often than not among my museum informants different affective relations converged, as stressed by a young Altaian woman curator: "I am happy that our Princess is back and that we can take care of her. We created good conditions so that the researchers might continue to study her. If she was reburied . . . how could we secure her conservation for us and for the researchers? Yet as an Altaian myself, and from a human point of view, I would like her to be reburied one day. And yes, one might see a contradiction here." Not surprisingly, many museum employees and other members of the intellectual and political elites stressed how the Anokhin museum was a good place for the Princess, since it allowed for her conservation rather than her destruction through reburial. The museification *at home in Altai* appeared to them as a satisfying compromise in the situation of return-without-reburial.

Relations to the Princess as a form of heritage that has to be preserved are exemplified in the following ep-

isode. In 2015, the Anokhin museum had to defend itself in a court case initiated by Akaj Kine who sued for the Princess's release from the museum and her reburial. The case, won by the museum, mobilized the museum employees, most of whom are Altaians, against an Altaian religious leader. Their mobilization shows the heterogeneity of indigenous communities with regard to the questions of heritage and religion.

This analysis of relations from both sides of the repatriation process reminds us of the importance of overcoming the clear-cut oppositions between archaeologists or curators versus "indigenous people." These oppositions arise, as reciprocal critique, in many tense cases of reburial or repatriation. Yet ethnography shows the Princess has been entangled in affective relations in both sending and receiving communities. I will show now how these relations are negotiated in the two museums, how some are integrated as front values through the exhibition-making processes, while others are discarded.

From back relations to front values

According to Barbara Kirschenblatt-Gimblett, ethnographic objects in museums "are made, not found . . . They *became* ethnographic through processes of detachment and contextualization" (1998: 3). Exhibiting them is both an art of excision from the original field and an art of recreation of a new whole one by the means of metonymy, mimesis, or conceptual reframing. The problem here is to understand how multiple relationships to the Princess, developed by both museum employees and broader communities, informed the exhibition-making processes and how they were prioritized in final settings, comparatively, in a museum of Others and in a museum of Selves. I will focus here on two parts of these processes: the politics of display of the human remains, and their (re)contextualization through other visual, verbal, and sensory means.

The MHC: Relational issues and values of open display

At the MHC, everything, human remains included, can be seen at a very close distance and virtually at any angle. The visual means of communication, which have long characterized classical museum media (Buggeln, Paine, and Plate 2017), are here the main foundation of the visitors' experience. Visual elements are supplemented by abundant verbal explanations. In addition to written labels, several screens continuously broadcast presentations

on the excavation and on the post-excavation analyses. This politics of display goes hand-in-hand with a strong control over visitors' interpretations. Even individual museum-goers visit the MHC by appointment only and are guided by MHC employees who provide them with information gathered from their colleagues' publications or from their own first-hand archaeological experience.

Until 2012 the Princess (labeled as "the mummy of a young Pazyryk woman") lay in the Pazyryk room together with the mummy of the Pazyryk Man, found by the team of Vyacheslav Molodin, at the time vice director for research at the IAE and Natalia Polosmak's husband. The Pazyryk Man is still on display. While the Princess's body has been gone since 2012, the glass case in which she was displayed still sits in the middle of the exhibition space. At the beginning of a visit, guides

start by presenting the funeral artifacts restored at the MHC, such as the original wooden sarcophagus of the Princess, her wool and silk clothes, jewelry, and horse saddles (see Figures 1 and 2). The restoration of these 2500-year-old artifacts and the unique competences of the MHC restoration lab's employees are highlighted. Then the attention shifts to the mummies. Both coffins are transparent and covered with a dark fabric that the guide removes in an almost automatic gesture while commenting on the Pazyryk techniques of mummification and tattooing, on their funeral practices and lifestyles, and on the state of the bodies. In the same way as the Princess before 2012, the Pazyryk Man lies now in the middle of the exhibition room in his transparent display case, almost entirely naked, a thin gauze covering his pelvic area. Visitors can observe him in detail, with



Figure 1: Two modern glass cases covered with dark fabric, and the original wooden sarcophagus of the Princess (in the middle). MHC, Akademgorodok. Photo by Ksenia Pimenova, 2017.



Figure 2: The Princess's clothes restored at the MHC: shirt, skirt, felt stockings. MHC, Akademgorodok.
Photo by Ksenia Pimenova, 2017.

his long braided hair, the cut on his belly, and his tattoos (see Figure 3).

In explaining the decision of the open display, Irina Salnikova, archaeologist, curator and director of the MHC for many years, put it this way: “The display is a part of general concept. We create a model of the Pazyryk culture. Since mummification was one of crucial aspects of the Pazyryk culture, we simply have no right to conceal the mummies. But we had first to build this model, visually and verbally, before showing the bodies, to avoid curiosity.”

After the departure of the Princess to Altai, the MHC continues to “display” her. Salnikova had the idea of putting a full-size picture of the Princess's body into her former display sarcophagus. The picture of the Princess is shown to visitors in the same way as the Pazyryk Man, as if she were there, allowing the guide

to tell the story of her find, but also to evoke her return to Altai from the perspective of the Institute: an unfortunate event resulting from political and media pressures and preventing future research. For Salnikova, the decision to keep displaying the absent Princess is a way to maintain her appearance for the visitors and sustain the visual symmetry of the room. But it is also a powerful sign of her attachment to “our Girl” and of her disagreement with her departure.

The open display has been shaped by the museum's traditions. As explained by a MHC curator, since the creation of the museum by the academician Alexei Okladnikov, the “owners of the collections” have always closely participated in the making of the scenography for their finds. By the owners the curator meant the archaeologists Polosmak, whose team found the Princess, and Molodin, whose team found the Pazyryk



Figure 3: The Pazyryk Man after a regular conservation procedure performed by the museum curator Marina Moroz. MHC, Akademgorodok. Photo by Ksenia Pimenova, 2019.

Man. They insisted on showcasing the bodies, and reserved for them a place of honor as a way to value the process and the results of their scientific endeavor. The archaeological human remains are expected here at the MHC to “belong” to those who unearthed them, in the same way scientific laws “belong” to those who discovered them (Callon 2017: 162). Altaian relations to the Princess and the conceptions of ownership they entail were simply not recognized here, as they had no legitimacy within the dominant conceptions of human remains as a “database” for research and an object of conservation.

However, back stage ethnography shows that the open display was not a straightforward and unproblematic choice. Discussions with MHC staff revealed issues of respect toward the dead and the audiences’ sensitivities similar to those raised by human remains

elsewhere (Jenkins 2011). The open display could invite a morbid curiosity among the audience: an attitude that felt wrong to MHC employees and offended their feelings of attachment to the mummies. Salnikova herself, despite her connections with Polosmak and Molodin and her role as main curator of the Pazyryk room, considered, for instance, that children do not have the cognitive capacity to observe the mummies: “Death is an intimate moment. Have you ever seen someone you loved dying? You certainly know then how it is uneasy to look at the dead. I was personally offended to see children staring at the mummy [of the Princess] as a curiosity, like a three-legged dog. I would show no Pazyryk mummies to them, because they don’t grasp that mummification was a marker of social status, and implied profound respect.”

The open display also created embarrassment among the audience and among the archaeologists from the Institute. Another curator at the MHC stressed how the presence of flesh on human remains “animates” them much more than bare bones do: “When the Princess was put on display in the museum [after her restoration], some of our IAE employees ran to see her immediately. But many refused, on principle. They didn’t want to see a *living* body [sic]. It is one thing to see skulls and bones, and another thing the whole body, even more if it is the naked body of a woman.”

In other terms, the employees of the MHC acknowledged their relations to the mummies as personae and the ethical issues raised by their open display. However, from their perspective these relations and issues had to remain on the back stage of museum life; the occasional blurring of boundaries between back and front stage was problematic. For example, several MHC employees speak to “our Girl” and “our Boy” when they perform conservation procedures on the bodies. For Salnikova, these conversations with the dead could not be more natural for a curator for whom “even the artifacts are spirited, let alone the people.” Yet she was upset when local journalists disclosed her confidences about such talking to the dead to a broader audience. For her, their dissemination depicted herself and other MHC employees as devotees rather than scientists. The pilgrimages to the Princess are yet another example of the problems raised by the blurring of boundaries. When the Princess was still at the MHC, some Altaians were traveling five hundred kilometers to Akademgorodok to pray next to her body. Even more disturbing for MHC employees and archaeologists, some fellow researchers from Akademgorodok were also coming to meditate. One of the curators qualified these intrusions of spirituality into the museum as “media-driven collective hysteria,” and connected it to the fading authority of science in post-Soviet Russia.

The bottom line of the rejection of “other than scientific” relations to the mummies is a certain idea about the archaeological science to which the MHC was intended to be a showcase. Part of the conflict around the Princess can indeed be explained by the positivist roots of Russian archaeology and its rejection of indigenous conceptions of relatedness (Plets et al. 2013). Following their colleague archaeologists, the museum curators here put into play a hierarchization between what one can feel or do, and what one can communicate to a broader audience. This hierarchization can additionally be understood as a form of endonostalgia (Ber-

liner 2012) based on the MHC employees’ pride of belonging to a scientific community and on their fear of losing the *genius loci* of Akademgorodok, a key site of the Soviet modernization project. This longing for the authority of science has been a core part of the affective economy towards the Princess developed at the MHC. Nostalgia prevents the “other than scientific” relations from being authorized in the museum space. They cannot be part of the museum rituals (Duncan 1995) that the MHC exposes to visitors, and are thus discarded from the front values conveyed through display and contextualization.

The Anokhin museum: Rituals of reburial and dilemmas of concealment

The spacious “Ukok Plateau” room at the Anokhin museum is the final part of the museum’s permanent circuit, which comprises exhibitions of the nature and cultures of the Altai. The “Ukok Plateau” was built for the Princess during the museum’s renovation project (2008–2011), generously financed by the Russian oil and gas company Gazprom (Plets 2016). The return of the Princess was the driving force for the renovation and improved the conditions of conservation for all the collections (Erkinova 2013).

The “Ukok Plateau” room has a particular atmosphere due to its architectural and sensory characteristics. Unlike other rooms of this imposing three-story building, it has no windows and is situated in a distinct passage under a triangular roof whose shape is intended to “recall the Pazyryk burial mounds” (Erkinova 2013). To reach the Ukok Plateau, one has to take a long staircase from the third floor down to the first floor (see Figure 4). The descent towards a dark space with only weak artificial light creates an overall feeling of being under the ground, an impression amplified by the low temperature maintained in the room. Sergei Kireev, an Altai-born Russian archaeologist, curator, and the “Ukok Plateau” scenographer, explained that the cold was intended “both to secure the conservation of the body and to serve as a scenography technique.”

The production of this staging illustrates the entanglements between the museum and the Altaian political actors. Vladimir Kontchev, at the time Minister of Culture of Altai and one of the main negotiators of the Princess’s return, strongly suggested that the two mannequins of the Princess displayed in the room should have the features of a young Altaian woman (see Figure 5). This



Figure 4: The staircase leading to the “Ukok Plateau” exhibition space. Anokhin Museum, Gorno-Altaiisk.
Photo by Ksenia Pimenova, 2017.

suggestion was at odds with the opinion of some museum employees who preferred European-looking mannequins based on reconstructions according to the Gerasimov method (see footnote 11), “both for their scientific accuracy and for their aesthetic power.” Yet the final decision was in favor of the black-haired mannequins that looked like contemporary Altaians. The mannequins embody museum rituals of identification between the Altaian audience and the Pazyryks and transform this relation into the front value.

The “Ukok Plateau” is a place of ritual in another sense, as well. From the beginning of designing the exhibition, Kireev’s idea was to create for the visitors a “structured experience” (Duncan 1995: 12) of a burial rather than a classical museum exhibition. The narrative of the scientific exploration of Pazyryk culture is minimal here, while sensory experiences are enhanced.

The feel of the burial was materialized for instance in the slow and mysterious soundscape of the room, created by Kontchev, both Minister of Culture and a professional musician. The key element of the experience is a diorama in which a standing man—an imaginary Pazyryk clan leader or a priest—performs a ritual next to the dead Princess. The diorama takes place in a replica of an open burial mound and can be observed from the front, but also, quite unusually, from above, as if the visitors were saying their farewell to the Princess (see Figure 6).

The employees and the visitors call the room a mausoleum, referring to the Moscow mausoleum where Vladimir Lenin’s body has been preserved to incarnate the eternal power of the Communist Party (Yurchak 2015). Yet the Anokhin museum staging puts an emphasis on the burial, and, therefore, on the symbolic destruction of



Figure 5: The Altaian-looking mannequin representing the Princess. Anokhin Museum, Gorno-Altaiisk.
Photo by Ksenia Pimenova, 2017.

the Princess's remains. The museum here reaches two quite different goals. It realizes the moral value that the Princess's reburial has acquired in the Altaian society, in a way to soothe the dangerous ancestor and to create the conditions for a utopian society driven by traditional values (Pimenova 2019). Yet it keeps the real body preserved, respecting its commitments toward the federal Ministry of Culture which legally owns the Princess, and the MHC, which remains its technical manager, and also the specialists from the VILAR Institute who supervise the conservation of the mummy.

Despite this arrangement between relations to the Princess as an ancestor and a part of heritage, the presence of the Princess's body in the biggest museum of Altai opened a Pandora's box of dilemmas. From the early stages in the preparation of the exhibition, many employees felt uncomfortable with the idea of displaying

the Princess. According to the first proposal for the exhibition space written before the return, the body was supposed to be displayed behind a wall of curved glass meant to "keep the visitors as much as possible away in order to counter the idle curiosity toward the dead."¹²

Yet this initial idea to use distance to reduce visibility and intimacy seemed inadequate. Sergej Ochurdyapov, director of the Anokhin museum at the time of the Princess's return, together with the Altaian Ministry of Culture, chose to "display" the Princess in a closed case. As Kontchev explained during a press conference: "The Altaians do not attend cemeteries. That's the tradition of our people" (Postscriptum 2012). From 2012 until 2016,

12. S. Kireev, *Detailed conception of the exhibition "Ukok Plateau"* (6.12.2011).



Figure 6: The burial, diorama (view from above). Anokhin Museum, Gorno-Altaiisk. Photo by Ksenia Pimenova, 2017.

visitors could only observe the display case covered permanently with a dark fabric. On the one hand, this total concealment was intended to protect the visitors and the employees from the Princess's dangerous agency. On the other, it was consistent with the conceptions of the ancestry and the respect the dead body entailed. According to Kontchev, the decision drew on consultations made before the Princess's return, in which Altaian elders, shaman-like ritualists, and the larger audience "stated themselves almost at 100 percent for concealment, arguing that it was unthinkable to see their grandmother on display."

Consulting the public on a decision that could have been made internally bears testament to the political importance of the Princess in Altai. One of the issues that museums of Selves have to deal with is precisely their quality as "contact zones" (Clifford 1997) and their responsibility to acknowledge relationships to local heri-

tage. But since local communities are far from being homogeneous and develop different, sometimes contradictory relations to heritage, which relations should be prioritized?

If the Princess's concealment was accepted by most visitors, it raised a growing discontent among others. Tourists from mainland Russia, confronted with a covered Princess's body, wrote complaints in the guest book and asked for their money back. More importantly, Altaians protested against the concealment, too, yet for different reasons. Some expressed doubts as to the reality of the Princess's return to Altai: "If we never see her body, how can we be sure that she is really here?"¹³ Others criticized the museum for showing the mummy privately to high-ranked visitors, such as the Russian guests of the Altaian government. These visits came to

13. Interview with R. Erkinova.

be known and produced a sense of exclusion among the Altaian audience. The possibility of seeing the Princess, although being at odds with Altaian relations with the dead, turned here to be a proof of her return, while her concealment created discrimination. These debates show how complex the decisions on display or concealment are, even within indigenous societies.

In 2016, four years after the return of the Princess, the Anokhin museum eventually changed its politics for an alternation between partial display and total concealment. From then on the Princess's body would be uncovered a few mornings per month, on the "favorable" dates of the lunar calendar¹⁴ announced in advance on the museum website. The decision was taken under the director's mandate by the Altaian art historian Rimma Erkinova and was framed as a compromise between "traditional Altaian values" and respect for "the constitutional right of every citizen to access objects of cultural heritage of Russian Federation."¹⁵ To promote this decision, Erkinova had to overcome significant resistance inside the museum: "And me to ask my colleagues: why did we fight such a long time to return her here? What for, if we do not display her? We should be proud of her and of ourselves rather than hiding her . . . Everyone must have access to our cultural heritage, if they want to see her."

The new politics were not intended to make the Princess visible in the same way that she was at the MHC. On the dates of display, only her head, her tattooed arms, and legs below knee can be seen, while the torso and the hips remain covered.¹⁶ Yet her display creates the possibility for new museum rituals and relation-

ships. According to a museum guide, on the days of display visitors tend to ask more questions on the Pazyryk culture, mummification, and tattooing than on the days of concealment. The visitors engage therefore with the Princess more as an opportunity for knowledge than as a dangerous ancestor.

The alternation between display and concealment deflects the responsibility of choosing the date of visit to the visitors, allowing them to opt for the relations with the Princess that they want to pursue. Such a choice, although being a product of the local Altaian cultural, spiritual, and political configuration, has much in common with some European museums' strategies that consist in displaying human remains in semi-closed niches where one has to step into the niche to see them. However, the possibility of this choice remains contentious. The Altaian ethnographer and museum's employee Vera Kydyeva made an important point: "[By alternating display and concealment] the museum seems to convey a message that it is acceptable to see dead bodies at certain moments, which is totally false from the traditional point of view." Indeed, the principle of lunar cycles does not apply in the case of human remains that are objects of permanent rather than temporary prohibitions.

This policy ultimately results in acknowledging the polyvalence of the Princess, embodied in the different attitudes of employees and visitors. Employees shared with me their avoidance tactics (e.g., not turning their backs to the sarcophagus) and their self-crafted formulas of greetings and apologies to the Princess. Some Altaian visitors, depending on their ritual status, either avoid the Princess or ritually engage with her through offerings or communication (Pimenova 2021). Other Altaian visitors, as well as Russian tourists, can see the Princess as archaeological heritage, or simply satisfy their "idle curiosity," which clearly is at odds with the Altaian relations to the dead. Yet they do so under the watchful eye of the room's permanent guardian Anna Meketchinova. This Altaian woman in her sixties sees her mission as containing behaviors that she considers disrespectful to the Princess and dangerous for the visitors, such as overly prolonged stares at the mummy, loud conversations, and laughter. With the alternation between display and concealment, the relations to the Princess as Altaian heritage, as something one can observe, learn from, or be curious about, are introduced at the level of front values. This recognition of polyvalence makes the museum a hybrid space where multiple and contradictory relations to the Princess can coexist.

14. In continuity with Altaian pre-Soviet traditions, shamanist rituals are organized in two different phases of the lunar cycle, depending on the nature of the spirits addressed. The benevolent deities are more receptive to rituals during the period of the waxing moon until the full moon, while dangerous spirits are more active after the full moon and in particular on the darkest days before the new moon. The sarcophagus is uncovered during the waxing moon, such a policy assimilating the Princess to benevolent spiritual beings.

15. <http://www.musey-anohina.ru/index.php/ru/homepage/grafik-eksponirovaniya-mumii.html>

16. Editor's note: The editors of *HAU* and the University of Chicago Press asked that the author not include an image of the mummy out of respect for the view, held by many indigenous people of the Altai Republic, that the mummy should not be publicly displayed.



Conclusion: Plural relations and hierarchies of value

This paper explored the role that museums play in establishing distinct relational and axiological regimes. At the MHC, the scenography, the politics of display and the communications with the audience enacted a single set of relations to the mummies as objects of research. The archaeologists' and the museum employees' affective memories of the digs and their pride in the extraordinary data extracted from her body became the front value. These overshadowed other relations, well present though among the museum staff in the back stage, such as compassion to the Princess, embarrassment for her nakedness, and the fear of transforming mortal remains into objects of morbid curiosity. MHC employees distanced themselves even more firmly from the "other-than-scientific" relations to the Princess as an animate being whom one can worship or speak to, even though many of them do in fact entertain such relations with her.

The return of the Princess to Altai made possible a different relational and axiological regime at the Anokhin museum. The "Ukok Plateau" room was conceived as a mausoleum, where the Altaian relatedness to the Princess could be legitimized and enacted. Initially, those in charge of the exhibition created museum rituals to convert into its front values only the Altaian relations to the Princess as a respected ancestor and a dangerous being, leaving little space for the archaeological narratives produced by Russian archaeologists. Later on, however, the decision to display the Princess on certain dates created conditions for other relations, allowing visitors to approach her as an object of heritage and science. The relational and axiological regime ended up encompassing plural relations to the Princess, making the "Ukok Plateau" room a living place of tensions and compromise.

The purpose of this article was to create more dialogue between repatriation studies, and the anthropology of museums, affect, and values. I have suggested approaching the museums as arenas of relations and values. Museums do not necessarily process all the relations to heritage into normative messages for their audiences. The museum practices in curation, the decisions on display and supporting texts, and many other things that the museum directors, curators, and other employees discuss, reject or implement, can thus be seen as a politics of affect and its transformation into values.

Repatriation practices are often analyzed in terms of the tension between universalist values of heritage (typically science) and its more localized, particularist values (such as spiritual relations). Repatriation puts museums at the heart of difficult debates on what is more "valuable" (Bienkowski 2016). The ethnography of sending and receiving museums and the attention to longer lives of repatriated objects shows that values evolve over time. While the MHC clings to its universalist perspective, the Anokhin museum creates, not without problems and internal resistances, a cohabitation of values. In other terms, the ranking of relationships and their transformation into values has followed two dynamic paths in the two museums: a progressive recognition of plurality versus a persistent hierarchization. Recognizing this has implications for an anthropology of values. Seen from the museums, the debate between monistic and pluralistic approaches to social values (Robbins 2013) cannot therefore be solved in absolute terms. We should rather address the ranking of values as ongoing processes, situated in given contexts, operated by concrete social actors, and potentially reversible.

Attention to relations and values adds a processual dimension to museum ethnography. As stressed by Macdonald, museums are often analyzed from the perspective of their final settings, and little attention is paid to the agencies of the employees, disagreements, and complex decision-making processes that precede them "behind the scenes" (2001: 117). The distinction between the back stage and the front stage allows us to approach museums as places of politics, where different relations to heritage are taken into account, negotiated, sometimes discarded from the public eye, and eventually made into one or more front values communicated to audiences.

Finally, I have called for a more symmetrical approach to museums that receive heritage and to museums that send it away. Symmetry gives a relational and axiological perspective that can complement the repatriation studies predominantly focused on power relations, colonial legacies, and legal frames (see also Tythacott and Arvanitis 2016). It sheds light on the relational reasons for indigenous demands, but also for museums' and scientific communities' rejection of repatriation. Museum ethnographies after repatriation open therefore two underexploited fields. The first is the strategies of coping with the loss of "departing objects," often colored with nostalgia and colonial resentment. The second is the longer political and spiritual lives of the repatriated objects. For the source communities



and the museums that receive the heritage, the return is indeed not just the happy ending of negotiations. It is the beginning of a new cycle, in which repatriated objects elicit new political issues and beget new forms of creativity inside the museums and in their communities.

References

- Abélès, Marc. 1983. *Le lieu du politique*. Paris: Société d'ethnographie.
- Anderson, Benedict. 1983. *Imagined communities: Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism*. New York: Verso.
- Barkova, Ludmila, and Svetlana Pankova. 2005. "Tattooed mummies from the large Pazyryk mounds: New findings." *Archaeology, Ethnology & Anthropology of Eurasia* 2 (22): 48–59.
- Belekova, Emilija. 2010. *Istorija muzejnogo dela v Respublike Altaj*. PhD dissertation, Altajskaja gosudarstvennaja pedagogiceskaja akademija, Barnaul.
- Berliner, David. 2012. "Multiple nostalgias: The fabric of heritage in Luang Prabang." *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 18 (4): 769–86.
- Bienkowski, Piotr. 2016. "Authority and the power of place: Exploring the legitimacy of authorized and alternative voices in the restitution discourse." In *Museums and restitution: New practices, new approaches*, edited by Louise Tythacott and Kostas Arvanitis, 37–52. New York: Routledge.
- Bonnot, Thierry. 2014. *L'attachement aux choses*. Paris: CNRS Editions.
- Broz, Ludek. 2009. "Substance, conduct and history: 'Altaian-ness' in the 21st century." *Sibirica: Interdisciplinary Journal of Siberian Studies* 8 (2): 43–70.
- . 2018. "Ghost and the other: Dangerous commonalities and twisted becomings." *Terrain* 69. <https://doi.org/10.4000/terrain.16623>.
- Buggeln, Gretchen, Crispin Paine, and Brent Plate. 2017. *Religion in museums: Global and multidisciplinary perspectives*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Callon, Michel. 2017. *L'emprise des marchés: Comprendre leur fonctionnement pour pouvoir les changer*. Paris: La Découverte.
- Clifford, James. 1997. *Routes: Travel and translation in the late twentieth century*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- De l'Estoile, Benoît. 2007. *Le goût des autres: De l'exposition coloniale aux arts premiers*. Paris: Flammarion.
- Delaplace, Grégory. 2008. *L'invention des morts: Sépultures, fantômes et photographie en Mongolie contemporaine*. Paris: EPHE.
- Donahoe, Brian, Joachim Otto Habeck, Agnieszka Halemba, and Istvan Santha. 2008. "Size and place in the construction of indigeneity in the Russian Federation." *Current Anthropology* 49 (6): 993–1020.
- Doronin, Dmitrij. 2016. "Chto opyat' ne tak s 'altajskoj printsessoj'? Novye fakty iz njuslornoj biografii Ak Kadyn." *Sibirskie Istoritcheskie Issledovanija* 1: 74–104.
- Duncan, Carol. 1995. *Civilizing rituals: Inside public art museums*. New York: Routledge.
- Erkinova, Rimma. 2013. "Iz istorii naciolalnogo muzeja: Kak pomogla Princessa Ukoka." In *Anokhinskie chtenija*, edited by Emilia Belekova and Tatiana Polteva, 132–36. Gorno-Altajsk.
- Graeber, David. 2013. "It is value that brings universes into being." *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 3 (2): 219–43.
- Halemba, Agnieszka. 2008. "What does it feel like when your religion moves under your feet? Religion, earthquakes and national unity in the Republic of Altai, Russian Federation." *Zeitschrift für Ethnologie* 133 (1): 283–99.
- Hallam, Elizabeth. 2010. "Articulating bones: An epilogue." *Journal of Material Culture* 15 (4): 465–92.
- Hodder, Ian. 2012. *Entangled: An archaeology of the relationships between humans and things*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Humphrey, Caroline. 1997. "Exemplars and rules: Aspects of the discourse of moralities in Mongolia." In *The ethnography of moralities*, edited by Signe Howell, 25–47. London: Routledge.
- Ingold, Tim. 2000. "Ancestry, generation, substance, memory, land." In *The perception of the environment: Essays on livelihood, dwelling and skill*, 132–51. London and New York: Routledge.
- Jenkins, Tiffany. 2011. *Contesting human remains in museum collections: A crisis of cultural authority*. New York: Routledge.
- Kirschenblatt-Gimblett, Barbara. 1998. *Destination culture: Tourism, museums, and heritage*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Kozeltsov, Vladislav, and Yury Romakov. 2000. "Novyj sposob sokhraneniya chelovecheskih mumij." *Archaeologija, Etnografija i Antropologija Evrazii* 4: 103–106.
- Landau, Patricia, and Gentry D. Steele. 2000. "Why anthropologists study human remains." In *Repatriation reader*:



- Who owns American Indian remains?*, edited by Devon A. Mihesuah, 74–93. Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press.
- Laqueur, Thomas. 2015. *The work of the dead: A cultural history of mortal remains*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Macdonald, Sharon. 2001. “Behind the scenes at the Science Museum London: Knowing, making, using.” In *Academic anthropology and the museum: Back to the future*, edited by Mary Bouquet, 117–40. Oxford and New York: Berghahn.
- Maslov, Denis. 2017. *Lokalnye muzei i reprezentacii etničeskoj kultury altajcev*. PhD dissertation, Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology, Russian Academy of Sciences, Moscow.
- Mikhajlov, Dmitry. 2013. “Altai nationalism and archeology.” *Anthropology and Archeology of Eurasia* 50 (2): 33–50.
- Molodin, Vyacheslav, Natalia Polosmak, and Tatiana Chikisheva. 2000. *Fenomen altajskih mumij*. Novosibirsk: IAE SO RAN.
- Morphy, Howard. 2010. “Scientific knowledge and rights in skeletal remains—dilemmas in the curation of ‘other’ peoples’ bones.” In *The long way home: The meaning and values of repatriation*, edited by Paul Turnbull and Michael Pickering, 147–62. New York and Oxford: Berghahn.
- Peers, Laura, Lotten Gustafsson Reinius, and Jennifer Shannon. 2017. “Repatriation and ritual, repatriation as ritual.” *Museum Worlds: Advances in research* 5: 1–8.
- Pimenova, Ksenia. 2019. “Un paradis à reconquérir : Critique sociale et utopie traditionnaliste dans les discours sur la Princesse altaïenne.” In *La Sibérie comme paradis*, edited by Dominique Samson Normand de Chambourg, and Dany Savelli, 269–96. Paris: École Pratique des Hautes Études.
- . 2021. “Human remains and indigenous religiosity in the museum space: Ritual relations to the Altaian mummy in the Anokhin national museum of the Altai Republic.” In *Contemporary indigenous cosmologies and pragmatics*, edited by Françoise Dussart and Sylvie Poirier, 253–84. Edmonton: University of Alberta Press.
- Plets, Gertjan. 2016. “Heritage statecraft: When archaeological heritage meets neoliberalism in Gazprom’s resource colonies.” *Journal of Field Archaeology* 41 (3): 368–83.
- Plets, Gertjan, Nikita Konstantinov, Vassili Soenov, and Erick Robnsson. 2013. “Repatriation, doxa, and contested heritages: The return of the Altai Princess in an international perspective.” *Anthropology and Archeology of Eurasia* 52 (2): 73–98.
- Polosmak, Natalia. 1994. “A mummy unearthed from the pastures of heaven.” *National Geographic* (October 1994): 80–103.
- . 2001. *Vsadniki Ukoka*. Novosibirsk: Infolio-Press.
- Postscriptum. 2012. “‘Princessa Ukoka’ v avguste vernetsya na Altai.” *Postscriptum*, August 8, 2012.
- Robbins, Joel. 2013. “Monism, pluralism, and the structure of value relations: A Dumontian contribution to the contemporary study of value.” *Hau: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 3 (1): 99–115.
- . 2015. “Ritual, value, and example: On the perfection of cultural representations.” *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 21 (S1): 18–29.
- Shnirel’man, Victor. 2013. “Nationalism and archeology.” *Anthropology and Archeology of Eurasia* 52 (2): 13–32.
- Smith, Laurajane. 2006. *Uses of heritage*. New York: Routledge.
- Smith, Laurajane, and Gary Cambell. 2016. “The elephant in the room: Heritage, affect and emotion.” In *A companion to heritage studies*, edited by William Logan, Mairéad Nic Craith, and Ullrich Kockel, 443–60. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Tadina, Nadezhda. 2013. “No iron exists that will not break, no living creature exists that will not die. (The concept of death in the context of Altai worldviews).” *Archaeology & Anthropology of Eurasia* 51 (3): 51–62.
- Tatarchenko, Ksenia. 2016. “Calculating a showcase: Mikhail Lavrentiev, the politics of expertise, and the international life of the Siberian science-city.” *Historical Studies in the Natural Sciences* 46 (5): 592–632.
- Toshakova, Ekaterina. 1978. *Tradicionnye cherty narodnoj kultury altajcev (XIX-nachalo XX veka)*. Novosibirsk: Nauka.
- Turnbull, Paul, and Michael Pickering, eds. 2010. *The long way home: The meaning and values of repatriation*. New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books.
- Tythacott, Louise, and Kostas Arvanitis. 2016. “Museums and restitution: An introduction.” In *Museums and restitution: New practices, new approaches*, edited by Louise Tythacott and Kostas Arvanitis, 1–16. New York: Routledge.
- Tyukhteneva, Svetlana. 2009. *Zemlya. Voda. Khan Altai : Etničeskaja kultura altajcev v XX veke*. Elista: Izdatelstvo Kalmyckogo Universiteta.
- Verdery, Katherine. 1999. *The political lives of dead bodies: Reburial and postsocialist change*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Yurchak, Alexei. 2015. “Bodies of Lenin: The hidden science of communist sovereignty.” *Representations* 129 (1): 116–57.





Ksenia PIMENOVA is Associate Professor of Anthropology at the Université Paris Nanterre and a member of the Laboratoire d'ethnologie et de sociologie comparative (LESC UMR 7186). Until 2021, she was a Postdoctoral Researcher at the Fonds de la recherche scientifique (Belgium) and affiliated with the Laboratoire d'anthropologie des mondes contemporains (LAMC, Université libre de Bruxelles). Her research interests include religion, materiality, heritage, and ethnography of the indigenous peoples of Siberia. Additional information about Ksenia Pimenova can be found on her web page: <https://u-paris10.academia.edu/KseniaPimenova>

Ksenia Pimenova
K.pimenova@parisnanterre.fr

