“Sacred” or “sensitive” objects

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> *“Heritage is not lost and found, stolen and reclaimed. It is a mode of cultural production in the present that has recourse to the past.” (B. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett)*

Particularities of the category “sacred objects” retained for the ECHO database

In *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (first published in French in 1912), Émile Durkheim remarked that anything could be a sacred object (natural objects, pieces of the landscape, artifacts, people, sounds, words, gestures, etc.), even the most insignificant or common things. He went on to add that the “circle of sacred objects” varied considerably from one society to the next. And above all he wrote that “the sacred character of a thing is not implicit in the intrinsic properties of the thing; it is something added”. We wanted to recall these observations at the outset because they bring out some essential points: namely, that nothing is excluded *a priori* from the realm of the sacred, which can use any support, and that what is sacred for a human group is so because of local representations that ascribe this quality to the object. We can therefore underscore from the outset that one of the things which sets the category of “sacred objects” radically apart from “hybrid” objects or “technical” objects: An object is not defined as hybrid because of indigenous representations but because of

properties recognized as inherent in these objects by specialists. Likewise the identification of a technical object, in the sense of an object designed to act on matter, is the affair of technologists and ethnologists. In the case of sacred objects, however, identification is not up to the researcher, whose role is simply to echo the beliefs of the population under study.

To underscore the complexity of the problem, it must be said that the objects defined as "mestizo" (or hybrid) by Serge Gruzinski and as "technical" by Pierre Lemonnier (without these being symbolic techniques for all that), can also be regarded as "sacred" by some communities. This is due, first of all, to the fact that the same criteria are not used to define these categories – as has just been pointed out; and secondly, to the fact that the scope of the notion of sacred object varies not only from community to community, as Durkheim remarked, but also within the same community over the course of its history. For the present-day members of the community of origin, an object held in a European museum, or elsewhere, can have lost its sacred character or have gained a sacredness that it did not originally possess. Beliefs can disappear just as they can spread and become attached to other objects, old or new. In particular, we will see that what we observe in certain communities today is a massive process not of desacralization but of sacralization, as well as an indigenous reappropriation of the notion of sacred. Before examining these points in detail, however, we would like briefly to review the notion of sacred as it is used in anthropology.

Anthropology and the notion of "sacred"

The notion of "sacred" in anthropology had its hour of glory in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, at a time when the discipline became interested in the origins of magical and religious phenomena, and of religion. In his entries for the sacred in the *Dictionnaire de l'ethnologie et de l'anthropologie* (P. Bonte and M. Izard, eds.), and the *Encyclopedia Universalis*, Dominique Casajus rightly pointed to the shaky

epistemological basis of the notion, which researchers used in extremely different ways. This partly explains the present discredit into which the term has fallen for most anthropologists, who are reluctant to consider the sacred as a *single* domain that can be isolated and analyzed as such.

Nevertheless some of the founding anthropological writings contain ideas particularly pertinent for understanding the present attempts by indigenous peoples to reappropriate this notion;[1] these must therefore be borne in mind when constructing the database.

The first text on the sacred was written by Henri Hubert and Marcel Mauss' *Esquisse d'une théorie générale de la magie*, published in 1902–1903. Today we cannot subscribe to the authors' argument that the origin or foundation of sacredness lies in the notion of *mana* (which originates in Oceania) and what are considered to be similar notions in other parts of the world.[2] As D. Casajus notes, the notion of sacred is vague enough in itself for it to be advisable to regard it as "a species of which *mana* is the genus" – to quote Hubert and Mauss. Furthermore, we now know that it was only at the expense of simplifications and overinterpretations that anthropology managed to single out *one* notion of *mana* for the whole South Pacific and to see it as the vehicle for a spiritual force or a symbolic effectiveness attaching to persons and things. Still, several of Hubert's and Mauss' observations on things or beings imbued with *mana* apply to sacred things and beings, and would be taken over ten years later by Durkheim. Here we will retain in particular their remark that the sacred – *mana* as they call it – is "that which gives value to things and to people, magical value, religious value, social value", and that it is "nothing other than the idea of these values, of these differences of

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[1] These must therefore be borne in mind when constructing the database.

[2] *Kramat* for the Malaysians, *hasina* for the Malgache, *orenda* for the Iroquois, *Manitou* for the Algonquins, *wakan* for the Sioux, and even *Brahman* in Vedic India.

potential". In a way, then, the domain of the sacred is actually composed of the values that are important to the members of a community and on behalf of which they act.

In *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, Durkheim goes further, claiming that, through the sacred a society expresses the idea it has of itself in the form of hypostaticized moral forces. He goes on to claim that the sacred object is not only the objectivization of the sentiment the group arouses in its members, but the instrument that enables this sentiment to arise. Another important point: although Durkheim defines religion as the management of sacred things, he implicitly recognizes the existence of sacred phenomena that are not religious. He gives the example of the flag, which the soldier identifies with his country and for which he is willing to die. This flag is only a sign, of no value in itself, but, he emphasizes, it is treated as though it were the reality for which it stands: the homeland. Finally we will retain the connections that Durkheim establishes between the sacred, the notion of respect and prohibitions. "A thing is sacred, he writes, because it inspires, for some reason or other, a collective sentiment of respect", which sets it apart and endows "its representation in the conscious mind with such strength that it automatically prompts or inhibits" certain acts. The taboos that "isolate and protect" most sacred things are designed, according to Durkheim, as much to prevent the failure to respect them as to contain the highly contagious state of sacredness.

We have said that few anthropologists still use the word "sacred" as a noun. Those who have not completely dropped the term now use it mostly as an adjective to designate objects that inspire a collective sentiment of respect, are often hedged about by prohibitions and generally have an absolute value for the members of their community.

Revival of the sacred among North American Indians, Aboriginal peoples and Maori

The notion of “sacred object” has nonetheless made a recent come-back, notably in museum codes of ethics, often drawn up by conservators and/or anthropologists from Canada, North America, New Zealand and Australia. These four countries are all former settlement colonies and home to native peoples – American Indians, Maori, Aboriginal groups – who, as minorities within the country and socially and politically marginalized, are struggling to win recognition for their identity and rights, and in particular rights to their lands. The prohibitions or marks of respect they are asking non-natives to observe with regard to many elements in their culture, with the active support of numerous specialists, are an integral part of their strategy to gain recognition and political power. The idea, advanced by Durkheim, that the sacred serves as a basis for the idea a society has of itself is particularly pertinent in these cases. Through such prohibitions and signs of respect, these peoples are seeking to redefine and obtain recognition for their cultural values in their specificity, in the hope that the dominant society will henceforth take them into account, and that their political and social situation will thus improve.

The texts referred to here, and which we have obtained on the Internet, are varied: for example, an issue of the Studies series of the Committee for Conservation (ICOM-CC) one section of which contains texts by different authors, entitled “The Conservator’s Approach to Sacred Art”; a series of texts on the same subject appearing in the ICOM Ethnographic Conservation Newsletter published by the Smithsonian Institution; Australian protocols for libraries and national archives; an article on the implications of the Internet for native peoples and the same document placed on-line by the New Zealand Maori Internet Society.

In these texts, the adjective “sacred”, used to qualify objects, is often flanked by the adjectives “secret”, “sensitive” and “culturally significant”: notions presented as being linked or more or less equivalent; but they are rarely or diversely defined. These adjectives are frequently used in such combinations as “sacred/secret”,

"sacred/sensitive", or even "sacred/secret/sensitive". Associated in this way, they are used to describe objects having a particular value for members of the originating community, objects which command respect and therefore require special care or the observation of prohibitions; in all events, these are objects whose treatment by museums, libraries and electronic media requires prior consultation. We propose to use the all-encompassing expression "culturally sensitive object", which is less reminiscent of religion and emphasizes the native peoples' values and sensitivities effectively at the heart of the matter.

The problem of availability of "sacred" or "culturally sensitive" objects in the database

One of the guiding ideas of the ECHO project is to introduce and share the European cultural heritage by making thousands of documents now dispersed in museums, libraries and documentation and research centers available on the Internet. Access to the information is to be open and free of charge, with no restrictions whatsoever. It must be stressed that this information will be "available worldwide"; and any Papuan or Amazonian Indian passing through a small town in his country will be able to access them on the Internet the database Web site, whereas there is much less chance of him coming across a European scientific work dealing with his community or even less chance of his having the occasion to enter a museum in Paris or Berlin. But this ideology of democratic and free access to the database runs up against the issue of "sacred" or "culturally sensitive" objects insofar as many of these are subject to restrictions on access.

Let us take the "classic" case of the object surrounded by magical or religious beliefs whose contact and view are restricted to certain individuals or groups in the community; for instance to the ritual expert who alone is allowed to use it; men to the exclusion of women or vice versa; adults or the initiated only, the members of a secret

society or members of a social group who have exclusive control of the object. When these beliefs are still alive, what should be done in the database? Not show photos of the objects concerned? Post a sign warning non-authorized persons in the community that the content of such and such a section of the database is off-limits? In the knowledge that there is no electronic device to prevent unauthorized persons from consulting the database, won't the other members of the community take offense? Furthermore, what we have said about photos of sacred objects obviously applies to the knowledge that goes with them, and therefore to the historical, anthropological and other information to be provided in the database. But it applies as well to the audio documents: recordings of songs, chants, music, words, speeches, that are supposed to be heard in certain contexts and sometimes by only certain individuals; or to the photos and films showing scenes from rituals or others that certain members of the community are forbidden to see.

Certain peoples, or at least some of their representatives, would like to forbid access to these objects not only to unauthorized members of their own group, but to all non-native people. We can cite the case of the Australian *tjurunga*, the recent display of which at the Musée des Arts d'Afrique et d'Océanie in Paris (Marc Couturier, "Secrets", 2001), even under conditions of partial secrecy, unleashed the fury of the Euro-Australian John Stanton, who saw this as more than insulting and a threat to the spiritual and physical well-being not only of Aboriginal peoples as a whole, but also of anyone who viewed the exhibition.

When it comes to North American Indians and Maori, the very feasibility of the database is a crucial question. What can we show, or even write, concerning these cultures without incurring the disapprobation of their present representatives? In effect the scope of "culturally sensitive items" potentially subject to restrictions on access is so broad in the eyes of these peoples that one wonders whether there may be anything that does not come under this heading. The documents consulted lead us to conclude that any object having an historical and cultural importance for a present-day indigenous

community can be defined as “sacred” or “culturally sensitive” (P. Fiori). The display, photographic reproduction and utilization of such objects in electronic media may therefore be forbidden.

The inclusion of culturally or historically significant objects in the category of “sacred/sensitive” accounts for the desire of the native peoples concerned to promote the concept of “cultural property”, i.e. the right of these cultural or ethnic groups to control any expression of the knowledge they have developed over generations,[3] or at least to work in partnership with the museums. The sacred covers much more than the magical-religious domain strictly speaking; it takes in potentially everything that is understood to be part of local history and culture.

Thus technical objects and knowledge also come under the heading of “culturally sensitive”. For instance, Maori consider certain hunting, fishing and agricultural techniques, as well as medical knowledge, to be the collective property of their people and to represent cultural and economic values they wish to protect by setting restrictions on their transmission (H. Frederick). For some North American Indians, any object that is the only one left or is judged to be particularly significant for a group, such as a canoe, a painted tipi or beaded moccasins, can come under this heading. For these people, any “potent” object, even a tool or a utensil, commands respect and can give rise to prohibitions as to who may view, touch or use it (M. Clavir). The harpoon heads used by the Nootka of the Northwest coast of America to hunt whale are also defined as “sacred”, but for a different reason: namely that they are endowed with magical properties (A. Tweedie, 2002).

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[3] The concept of “cultural property” is itself linked to the highly sensitive issue of claims for the repatriation of the objects conserved in museums: this subject is dealt with by Laurent Dousset in the framework of the ECHO project.

Nor does the category of "culturally sensitive" spare the contemporary works by indigenous artists or works produced by Europeans. For Vicki Heikell, Maori Paper Conservator at the National Library of New Zealand, the equation sacred object / ancient object so often made by Europeans does not hold. For her, the Maori sacred domain is far from being limited to the carvings, ceremonial houses or the manuscripts and photographs concerning Maori ceremonies that she cares for. She maintains that the work of a contemporary Maori artist is "sacred" or "culturally sensitive" for the simple reason that it illustrates the history of interactions between Maori and European New Zealanders. In 1996, some Maori even protested against the circulation on the Web of reproductions of nineteenth-century paintings by a European artist (Gottfried Lindauer) portraying Maori chiefs. The "culturally sensitive" value of these paintings lay in the traditional tattooed facial designs depicted by the European artist. The Zuni Indians have asked the Smithsonian to return carved copies of images of their twin gods or war gods made by Boy Scouts in the 1950s. To be sure, these objects had been made by non-Indians, but using the image of the war gods, whom the Zuni regard as belonging to their culture. Lastly, some Maori recently denounced as a form of cultural looting the reproduction of preserved tattooed Maori heads made from resin by an American sculptress.

Language itself can be "culturally sensitive" and can be regarded as one of the immaterial components of the culture to which certain communities claim intellectual ownership. In 2001, the Danish toy company Lego brought out a new game featuring small plastic figures depicting the inhabitants of an imaginary tropical island, Mata Nui, which various heroes were supposed to deliver from a monster. In the initial version of the game, some of the figurines and various components had names taken from several Polynesian languages, among which Maori. For instance, the island's inhabitants were called *tohunga*, meaning "priest", and the game scenario contained Maori words meaning "stone" (*pohatu*), "mask" (*kanohi*) and "land" (*whenua*). After having sent

numerous messages of protest to the game's Web site, Maori from three tribes hired a lawyer, to write to the Lego company contesting the "unauthorized use" of Maori terms.

The question of the availability of "sacred" or "culturally sensitive" works poses itself very differently in the case of a museum or a database. Let us take the case of *taonga* or the traditional "sacred objects" of the New Zealand Maori.

In 1998 the British Museum presented a major exhibition on the Maori, after having ensured themselves of the collaboration of members of the community. Following recommendations by the Maori representatives, certain precautions were taken in displaying these sacred objects – carvings, ceremonial apparel, etc. They were separated from the *noa*, or profane, objects by placing them in different cases, the museum guards made sure that visitors did not bring in any food that was forbidden to come into contact with these objects, and a bowl of water was placed at the exit so that visitors could "symbolically" purify themselves after their contact with a contagious and dangerous sacredness (J. Harding).

The Maori seem much more circumspect about presentation of their objects in a database. In an article devoted to the problems posed by placing elements of Maori culture on the Internet, Alastair Smith, of the University of Wellington, talks about the prohibition of contact between food and "sacred" or more broadly "cultural" objects. He writes: "In a museum or a library environment, it is unlikely that anyone would be permitted to eat in the presence of a cultural object. However, once that object has been represented as a digital image and placed on a network like the Web, that the image may be viewed in situations where food may well be consumed, and indeed prints may well be taken at remote sites and used in ways that would offend the cultural owners." How indeed can an Internet user be stopped from visiting the site of the future database while eating a sandwich or an apple? It could be objected that the same holds for any work containing reproductions of Maori sacred objects for which there is no guarantee that they will not be brought into contact with food. It seems that, in the case of the Internet,

the fear is greatly magnified by the considerable potential number of visitors to sites that may present sacred objects, so that Alastair Smith sees electronic environments, among which the Web, as a threat to Maori cultural values. This does not keep him from considering that the Internet has some positive aspects as well, insofar as it offers the opportunity for "preserving and promoting" information on Maori culture.

In regard to these issues, we cannot help thinking about our own motivations for creating this database. Are we interested primarily in valorizing *our* European heritage of non-European objects or are we instead concerned with virtually returning *their own* heritage to these non-European communities? The two options are not mutually exclusive, of course, but given that we are also and above all interested in virtually returning their heritage to these populations, it is clear that we must ensure that they see this database as a form of repatriation and not as forms of insult, offense and threat to their cultural values.

The documents we have read stress the need to consult with indigenous communities. This is all the more necessary because, as far as we know, no exhaustive list of "sacred" or "culturally sensitive" objects exists for a given community. The absence of such exhaustive lists would moreover be worth looking into. It can be seen as the result of the labile character of the notions of "sacred" or "sensitive"; in effect, these are constantly shifting in accordance with the contexts in which the objects are displayed, handled and preserved, and depending on knowledgeable resource people. Refusing to freeze the "circle of sacred objects" once and for all allows the communities concerned to adapt their discourse to the circumstances, to negotiate and thus strongly to encourage consultation with them. But the lack of such exhaustive lists may also indicate disagreements within the communities themselves, as certain authors acknowledge. This is notably the case of Elizabeth Johnson, of British Colombia's Museum of Anthropology, who is actively working to establish partnerships and draw up codes of ethics between museums and First Nations. She invites us to recognize "the

fact that there may not be unanimity … within any one group as to what kinds of material are sensitive…" A concrete example: in the case of the dispute between the Lego toy company and the Maori, the compromise reached by the representatives of the two parties concerning the words of the indigenous language to be kept or deleted did not prevent e-mails of protest being sent by Maori who were apparently not of the same opinion as their official representatives (K. Griggs). As far as the ECHO project is concerned, it is clear that the question of the choice of dialogue partners and their representativeness will be particularly important and delicate. Furthermore, there is an inevitable risk that certain community spokespersons may want to check everything that is to be shown and written concerning them or may challenge, for instance, historical details that we judge to be objective. But we will not go into these problems here since they will be dealt with in the context of the ethical reflections carried out in the framework of the ECHO project.

It may be helpful to know that a project exists for a "Reciprocal Research Network", which involves three indigenous communities of British Colombia and some fifteen large American, Canadian and British museums holding collections from these communities. Headed by the University of British Colombia Museum of Anthropology, the project aims to offer these communities open Internet access free of charge to the elements of their culture held in these museums as well as to develop research projects in partnership with the communities. At the present preliminary stage of the project, it seems that the researchers involved are less concerned with building the database than with working out protocols, in partnership with the communities concerned, capable of defining the kinds of materials that can be included in the future database (R. Phillips, personal communication, January 2003).

Conclusion

A traditional treatment of the sacred would have allowed us to stress a great number and variety of subjects: religion, magic, sorcery and witchcraft, rites, symbolism, prohibitions, impurity, sacrifice, offerings, priesthood, shamanism, seers, funeral rites, attitudes to death, gender relations, origin myths, creation myths, relations with the supernatural, sacred genealogies, forms of sacralization of political power, political stratifications, exchanges of material and immaterial goods, social relations, esthetic conceptions, technical systems, style systems, and this list is by no means complete. Starting with one category of sacred objects, it is possible to reconstruct an anthropological picture of the society. However we preferred to emphasize what are perhaps less familiar aspects of the contemporary conception of the sacred among some indigenous peoples, to stress the risks for the feasibility of the database inherent in the restriction of access to many sacred objects as well as the need to see that the ECHO project will not be ill-perceived or even contested by some of the communities whose heritage it is intended virtually to repatriate.

Concerning the reference objects proper – in consonance with the terms of the ECHO project, which aims rightly to highlight the dynamism of non-European societies – we cannot overstate the need to emphasize, through the objects selected, the historical processes that have led to important changes in the domain of the "sacred": whether we are talking about the disappearance of traditional objects and beliefs (under the impact of Christianization, colonialism, population movements, societal change, etc.), the desacralization of forms of ritual art that have been transformed into contemporary expressions by indigenous artists, the sudden emergence of new notions of sacredness in recently introduced revealed religions and their local reappropriation – an important point to bear in mind – or the extension and recent instrumentalization of the sacred among some native peoples living in former settlement colonies. By emphasizing these changes, by showing that, in some communities, so-called traditional sacredness, sacredness stemming from major reappropriated religions and a new sacredness

inseparable from indigenous claims now exist side by side, we can avoid a frozen ahistorical view of both the sacred in general and the societies presented in the database in particular, while still giving pride of place to the past and present story of interaction between these societies and Europe.

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