



AIATSIS

Return of Yawuru artefacts to Country

**Return of Cultural Heritage Project:
Repatriation of Yawuru cultural heritage
material from the Manchester Museum**

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AIATSIS acknowledges and thanks the Yawuru Nation and the Manchester Museum.

Cover image: View of Broome from the beach.

Image credit: Iain Johnston, AIATSIS.

Warning: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander readers should be aware this document may contain sensitive information, images or names of people who have since passed away.

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Executive Summary

Between 2018 and 2020 the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) partnered with Senior Yawuru Cultural Leaders to repatriate significant cultural heritage material from the Manchester Museum (MM). This partnership was part of the Return of Cultural Heritage (RoCH) project, where AIATSIS facilitated and secured the return of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural heritage material to Country in order to support those Custodians to maintain their cultural practices. This report describes the partnership, collaborative research and ultimately the success of AIATSIS and Yawuru’s efforts to repatriate their material. It also demonstrates how the repatriation of cultural heritage material strengthens communities and culture, and promotes reconciliation and healing.

Acronyms

| | |
|--------------|--|
| AIATSIS | Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies |
| COVID-19 | Coronavirus Disease of 2019 |
| FPIC | Free, Prior and Informed Consent |
| GERAIS | AIATSIS Guidelines for Ethical Research in Australian Indigenous Studies |
| ISM | Illinois State Museum |
| KALACC | Kimberley Aboriginal Law and Culture Centre |
| MM | Manchester Museum, The University of Manchester |
| RoCH project | Return of Cultural Heritage project |
| UNDRIP | United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples |
| WA | Western Australia |
| WAM | Western Australian Museum |

Key Terms and Definitions

| | |
|--|--|
| Ceremonial Leaders | A male / female knowledge holder within an Aboriginal community, who has responsibilities for culture, law, ceremonies and to make important decision on behalf of the community. |
| Collecting institution | Museums, universities, libraries, galleries and archives – organisations or institutions which hold and care for all forms of cultural heritage material. |
| Country | For the purpose of this document, the term 'Country' means an area of land or body of water to which a community, organisation or individual has a cultural and/or spiritual connection, and in which they have rights or interests. |
| Cultural heritage material (material) | Things, or their remnants, which have been created or modified by the efforts of humans. In the case of the RoCH project, all forms of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural heritage material, including but not limited to objects, audio visual, artwork and documentary cultural heritage material. |
| Custodian | An individual with cultural authority or knowledge which is recognised by the relevant Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander community. |
| Elders | Knowledge holders within a community, some of whom are ceremonial leaders. |
| KALACC | The Kimberley Aboriginal Law and Culture Centre is the Kimberley Region's Peak Indigenous Law and Culture Centre. Based in Fitzroy Crossing, KALACC supports the traditional cultural practices of the 30 language groups of the Kimberley Region. Incorporated in 1985, KALACC has a proud history of advocating for culturally based self-determination for the Kimberley. |
| Native Title Bodies, Aboriginal Corporations, Native Title Representative Bodies | Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander owned corporations, peak bodies and organisations that represent or work with or for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Please note that these terms have specific meanings but are used generally within this document. |
| Traditional Owners | Members of an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander community. Within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, some cultural heritage material is owned by individuals, while other material is the responsibility of the community, who are stewards of that material to ensure it is looked after for future generations. |

Acknowledgements

This report would not have been possible without the generous support and contributions of the Yawuru Cultural Leaders, in particular Thomas Unda Edgar (Senior), Ronald Wade and Neilø McKenzie (Senior). Special mention should be made of the contributions of Naomi Appleby and Lloyd Pigram from Nyamba Buru Yawuru Limited who went above and beyond to help the project. The work of Ingrid Button of IAS Logistics was invaluable. We'd like to acknowledge the time, support and hard work of Esme Ward, Stephen Welsh, Gillian Smithson, Mark Furness and Alia Ullah of Manchester Museum, The University of Manchester and AIATSIS staff. Finally, we must make a special thank you to Neilo McKenzie for his wisdom and guidance, who made the Yawuru return possible.

All mistakes and errors are our own.

The AIATSIS-led RoCH project was funded by the Australian Government as part of the measures to mark the 250th anniversary of James Cook's first voyage to Australia.

Partners

To repatriate cultural heritage material is a large undertaking and AIATSIS could not have achieved this without the generous support and partnerships of:



Australian Government
Department of Agriculture,
Water and the Environment



Australian Government
Department of Infrastructure, Transport,
Regional Development and Communications
Office for the Arts



Australian Government
Department of Health



Australian Government
Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade



**Australian
BORDER FORCE**



WAM WESTERN
AUSTRALIAN
MUSEUM

MANCHESTER MUSEUM

1 The Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies

The Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) is Australia's only national institution focused exclusively on the diverse history, cultures and heritage of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australia. We conduct research to the highest ethical standards, directly benefiting the communities we work with. Our partnerships span the globe, including government, academic, corporate, cultural and community sectors. Its unique and dynamic convergence of knowledge, resources and expertise enables us to tell the nation's story and enhance the lives of all Australians. The functions of AIATSIS were established under the *Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies Act 1989 (Cth)* (AIATSIS Act). They are:

- to develop, preserve and provide access to a national collection of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture and heritage;
- to use that national collection to strengthen and promote knowledge and understanding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture and heritage;
- to provide leadership in the fields of:
 - Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander research; and
 - ethics and protocols for research, and other activities relating to collections, related to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples; and
 - use (including use for research) of that national collection and other collections containing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture and heritage;
- to lead and promote collaborations and partnerships among the academic, research, non-government, business and government sectors and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in support of the other functions of the Institute; and,
- to provide advice to the Commonwealth on the situation and status of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture and heritage.

AIATSIS has a growing collection of over 1 million items encompassing archives, films, photographs, audio recordings, art and artefacts, published and other resource materials. The Institute publishes award winning books, journals, CDs, DVDs and apps that engage people with the stories of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australia.

The vision of AIATSIS is a world in which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge and cultures are recognised, respected, celebrated and valued.

2 Introduction

The Return of Cultural Heritage (RoCH) project was part of a suite of initiatives funded by the Australian Government to mark the 250th anniversary of James Cook's voyage to the east coast of Australia, henceforth Cook 2020. The legacy of Cook's voyage continues to impact Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and is generally regarded as being the catalyst for the widespread removal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural heritage material. These items were stolen, collected or purchased and then transported to overseas collecting institutions, thereby removing the material from the culture and lives of the present day Custodians. Thus, Cook 2020 was a poignant time to intensify the effort to return cultural heritage material to its Custodians and Owners for the purpose of cultural maintenance and revitalisation.

In 2019 and 2020, AIATSIS scoped, facilitated and secured the return of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural heritage material to Country in order to support those Custodians to maintain their cultural practices. In doing so, AIATSIS contributed to a global discussion about the repatriation of cultural heritage material, a discussion that many nations around the world have been involved in for decades. It is hoped AIATSIS' efforts will inform and intensify this discourse in the future.

Overview of the Return of Cultural Heritage Project

The RoCH project supports the Australian Government's commitment to Articles 11 and 12 of the United Nations *Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* (UNDRIP) and the aspiration of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to have their cultural heritage material held in overseas institutions returned.

The RoCH project formed part of a larger *View from the Shore* narrative which AIATSIS fostered during the Cook 2020 anniversary to support the cultural resurgence of Australia's First Nations peoples and signal to the nation and globally that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture is respected, celebrated and valued.

The RoCH project goals were to:

- Facilitate and secure the return of cultural heritage material from overseas collecting institutions to Country or a nominated keeping place.
- Build relationships between overseas collecting institutions and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.
- Develop an appropriately accessible database of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural heritage material held in overseas collecting institutions.
- Prepare a business case for a future work program.

The RoCH project ran for 2 years (July 2018 to June 2020). The team comprised Lyndall Ley (Executive Director), Christopher Simpson (Director), Tamarind Meara (Research Manager), Jason Lyons (Research Manager), Alana Harris (Community Liaison Manager), Dr Iain G Johnston (Senior Researcher) Rose Rutherford (Research Officer) and Diana Quadri (Research Officer). Jasmine Tearle (Research Officer) and Jeffrey Paul (Research Officer) were also contracted for a short period to undertake research on collections and data entry.

The RoCH project team drew upon AIATSIS' unique and irreplaceable role within Australia's research framework and its reputation for rigorous and independent research across the breadth of Indigenous studies and affairs. Key to AIATSIS' work is cultural competency. For the RoCH project team this involved acting in ways which supported the diversity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and acknowledging that colonisation still affects Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. The RoCH project aimed for the community partnerships to help all Australians to feel proud of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture and promote each community's sovereignty.

The real powerful part of self-determination, indeed sovereignty, is the freedom to define ourselves and our context and our situation. So projects like this that build and rebuild and support our culture and give us, in a sense, access to our values, and give us the ability to exercise self-determination, the power to define and articulate our own identity are really, really important. I think that's an aspect of self-determination that we haven't really come to grips with as a country. And in many ways even as Indigenous Australians we're still fronting up to that and that's why institutions like AIATSIS are so important, because we help support and facilitate that process.

Craig Ritchie, AIATSIS CEO

Ethical Review of the Return of Cultural Heritage Project

AIATSIS recognises Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have the right to be fully engaged in any processes, projects and activities that may impact them. Indigenous repatriation programs, whether involving cultural heritage material or data and knowledge, must proceed on this basis. The AIATSIS *Guidelines for Ethical Research in Australian Indigenous Studies* (GERAIS) establishes a frame work for designing and carrying out ethical research, including research involving collections. GERAIS is informed by the rights of Indigenous peoples as articulated in UNDRIP.

In the implementation of the RoCH project, AIATSIS employed a staged engagement approach based on the principles of GERAIS and Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC). The five Aboriginal communities involved in the project (Aranda, Bardi Jawi, Gangalidda and Garawa, Nyamal and Yawuru) were engaged at the earliest possible stage process and at the centre of the all decision making processes.

The RoCH project's research methodology underwent review by the AIATSIS Research Ethics Committee to ensure it conformed to appropriate ethical standards for research involving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. The project was approved by the AIATSIS Research Ethics Committee on the 13th of March 2019.

3 Success of the Return of Cultural Heritage Project

Returning cultural heritage material to Country for purposes of cultural maintenance and revitalisation is a key aspiration of First Nation communities across the world and the RoCH project demonstrated how this aspiration can be achieved for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Fundamentally, the project demonstrated how to successfully partner with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to return their cultural heritage material.

In the course of the RoCH project, AIATSIS identified 199 overseas collecting institutions with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural heritage collections (see also Cooper 1989; Kaepler & Stillman 1985). In the course of the RoCH project:

- Over 100,000 Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander objects have been identified in overseas collecting institutions (this excludes private collections);
- 124 institutions expressed a willingness to share information regarding their collections (at the time of preparing this report we have received information from 108 institutions);
- 73 expressed an eagerness to establish a relationship with AIATSIS and/or First Nation communities in Australia; and
- 45 expressed a willingness to consider a repatriation request.

AIATSIS is continuing to work with 124 institutions to establish the preliminary geographical provenance and cultural origin of collections / objects. Information gathered will be documented in an appropriately accessible database of cultural heritage material held overseas (currently under construction).

Based upon this research, six case studies (returns) from two collecting institutions, Illinois State Museum (ISM) and the Manchester Museum, The University of Manchester (MM), were selected for further investigation. The case studies included cultural heritage material from five Nations. These comprised:

- Aranda³ (ISM and MM),
- Bardi Jawi (ISM),
- Gangalidda and Garawa (MM),
- Nyamal (MM), and,
- Yawuru (MM).

AIATSIS engaged with representatives of these First Nations to confirm custodianship of the material and to explore partnerships.

In collaboration with, and on the authority of Aranda, Bardi Jawi, Gangalidda and Garawa, Nyamal and Yawuru Nations, AIATSIS prepared formal requests for the unconditional repatriation of 85 culturally significant objects. Requested items were secret sacred, ceremonial and secular objects (including but not limited to: boomerangs, shields, spears, clap sticks, body ornaments and necklaces). The requests were assessed and approved by the ISM and MM on the 9th of September 2019 and 2nd of October 2019, respectively.

³ Aranda / Arrernte, the Senior Aranda Elders and men requested we use the former spelling throughout the RoCH project.

Infographics displaying some of the results of the RoCH project.



In October 2019, AIATSIS staff members, Christopher Simpson (Wakka Wakka Nation) and Jason Lyons (Wiradjuri Nation), along with representatives from the Aranda and Bardi Jawi Nations travelled to Springfield, Illinois in the United States of America (USA) to collect 42 objects. An official handover of the material was held at the ISM on the 22nd of October 2019.

I am extremely honoured and fortunate to have supported the Aranda and Bardi Jawi peoples to return their cultural heritage material to Country. The repatriation from Illinois State Museum was the first under the RoCH project and the official handover was one of the proudest moments of my career. As a Wiradjuri man, I think the repatriation of material is significant. It is essential to Indigenous peoples' wellbeing and cultural strength – it promotes truth telling, healing, reconciliation and the preservation of our enduring cultures.

Jason Lyons, RoCH project Research Manager

Following the return of the material to Australia, AIATSIS facilitated its return to Country. These events were marked with small on Country celebrations with Aranda at Mparntwe (Alice Springs) and with Bardi Jawi at Ardyaloon (One Arm Point, Cape Leveque).

In November 2019, AIATSIS along with representatives from the Gangalidda and Garawa Nations travelled to Manchester, United Kingdom (UK) to collect 18 objects. Nyamal representatives nominated AIATSIS to act on their behalf. An official handover of the material was held at Australia House, London. AIATSIS facilitated the direct return of materials to Country, and celebrations occurred with Nyamal at Marapikurrinya (Port Hedland) and with Gangalidda and Garawa at Mougibi (Burketown).

In March 2020, the third and final delegation with representatives from Aranda and Yawuru Nations was scheduled to collect the remaining 25 objects negotiated for unconditional return. Owing to the Coronavirus Disease of 2019 (COVID-19) global pandemic and following consultations with Aranda, Yawuru and MM, AIATSIS decided to cancel the delegation to Manchester. Because of the extenuating circumstances the material was collected by an IAS Logistics partner and returned to Australia without a delegation travelling to Manchester. This was a difficult decision for the Senior Aranda and Yawuru men but their trust in AIATSIS and partnership with the RoCH project team helped them to make the safest choice for their communities. Shortly after, the Yawuru material was returned to Country at a private ceremony near Rubibi (Broome). In contrast owing to border restrictions, the Aranda material, under the direction of the Senior Aranda Loremen, was placed in temporary storage at IAS' climate controlled secure facility in Mascot, New South Wales. The material will be collected by the Aranda men and returned to Mparntwe (Alice Springs) in late 2020.

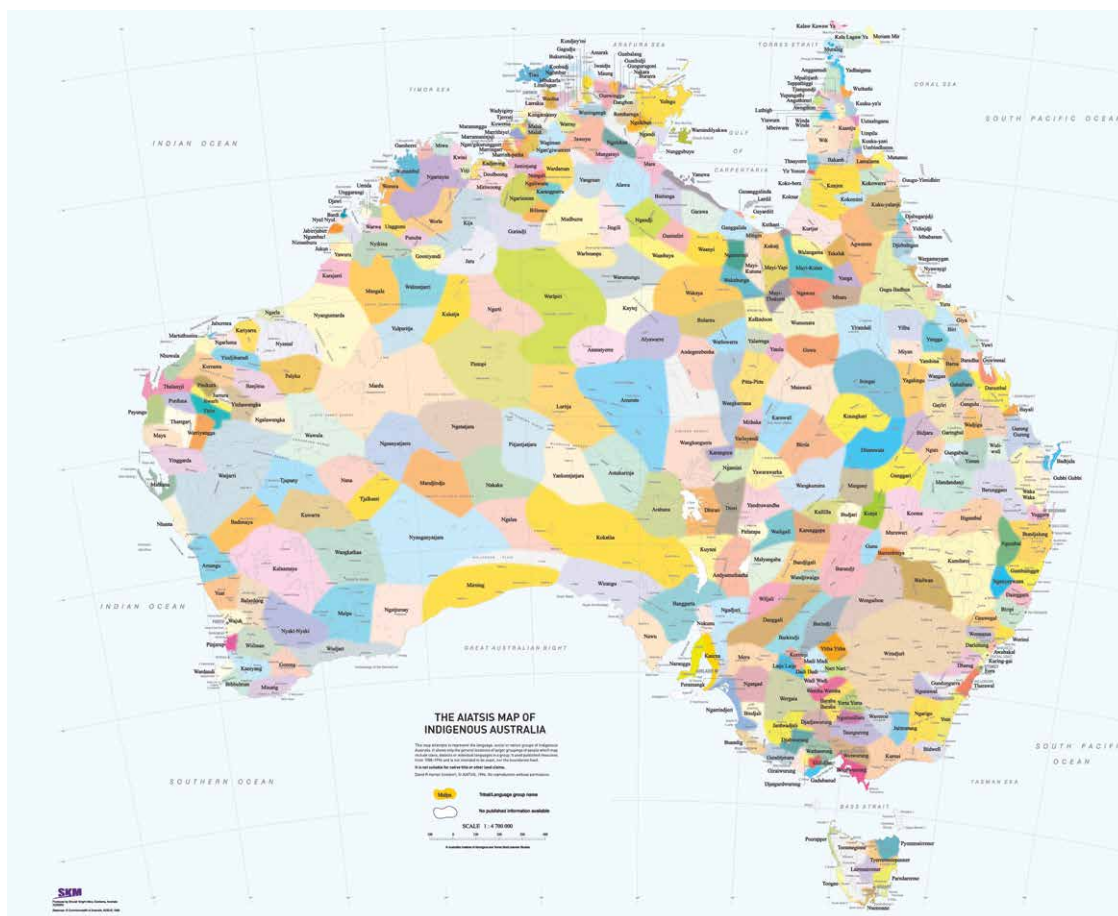
The successful returns by the RoCH project are evidence that overseas collecting institutions, irrespective of the complexity and difficulties associated with repatriation, are willing and able to unconditionally repatriate cultural heritage material (including secular material). The returns are a major step forward for overseas collecting institutions in at least two respects: because they extend the process of return from ancestral remains to cultural heritage material and because the returns were repatriations, instead of a loan, which has been the primary method for returning cultural heritage material previously.

4 The Yawuru and AIATSIS Repatriation Partnership

The collection of material returning to Yawuru are ceremonial objects of the highest significance and the Yawuru people are very glad that they are coming home.

A statement from the Yawuru Ceremonial Leaders

The Yawuru people are the Traditional Owners of the lands and waters in and around Rubibi (the town of Broome). Their Country extends from Bangaragara to the Yalimban (south) to Wirrinmirr (Willie Creek) to the Guniyan (north), and Banu (east) covering Roebuck Plains and Thangoo pastoral leases, in the Kimberley region of northern Western Australia (WA). As all the materials returned to the Yawuru from MM are secret sacred restricted men's objects, there is no discussion of the nature of the material in this report.



This map attempts to represent the language, social or nation groups of Aboriginal Australia. It shows only the general locations of larger groupings of people which may include clans, dialects or individual languages in a group. It used published resources from 1988–1994 and is not intended to be exact, nor the boundaries fixed. It is not suitable for native title or other land claims. David R Horton (creator), © AIATSIS, 1996. No reproduction without permission. To purchase a print version visit: <https://shop.aiatsis.gov.au/>

Yawuru Material Repatriated from Manchester Museum

The Yawuru material repatriated from MM was donated to the museum between 1938 and 1945 by Frederic Wood-Jones. Wood-Jones was an anatomist, anthropologist and naturalist who resided in Australia between 1919 and 1937. He was active in the Royal Society of South Australia and participated in preliminary expeditions with the Board for Anthropological Research (which he founded in 1926). Wood-Jones likely donated this material to MM after he took up the Chair of Anatomy at The University of Manchester in 1938.

Wood-Jones did not record travelling to Yawuru Country, although a number of early anthropologists and collectors were undertaking research around Roebuck Plains before 1937. These include:

- D Bates at Roebuck Plains Station between 1901–1902;
 - Bates regularly collected, traded and sold sacred objects.
- A.P. Elkin in Broome from 1927–1928; and
 - Some material from this expedition is held at the University of Sydney Nicholson Museum.
- E. Worm in Broome from 1930–1938, a German Pallottine missionary and researcher who wrote extensively on Yawuru religion and ceremony.

(See Burke 2011:104)

Any one of these researchers could have collected the Yawuru objects and handed them on to Wood-Jones. It is also possible another researcher, pearl master or station owner collected and traded them to him or an institution he was involved with while in Australia.

Developing the Repatriation Request with Yawuru

Christopher Simpson and Iain Johnston of AIATSIS first met with the Yawuru to discuss the material at MM on the 20th of June 2019. This meeting was the culmination of three prior planning meetings with Kimberley Aboriginal Law and Cultural Centre (KALACC) and Yawuru representatives attended by Lyndall Ley, Christopher, Iain and Tamarind Meara. The archival research suggested Yawuru were Custodians of the five secret sacred men's restricted objects at the MM. On the 6th May 2019, AIATSIS sought advice from Neil Carter, KALACC's Repatriation Officer, and Tom Putuparri Lawford, KALACC's Senior Law and Ceremony Advisor as to whom AIATSIS would be best placed to consult with. They advised that Yawuru were the appropriate Traditional Owners to approach about this material. On the 9th of May 2019, Christopher and Iain met with Sarah Yu and Naomi Appleby from Nyamba Buru Yawuru Limited, Special Projects team to discuss the RoCH project and to seek advice for organising a meeting with the appropriate Yawuru knowledge holders. As the material related to men's ceremony they recommended AIATSIS meet with Lloyd Pigram, Special Projects Trainee Coordinator. The meeting with Lloyd took place on the 9th of May 2019, where he viewed photographs of the material and advised that a meeting with Yawuru cultural leaders would need to be scheduled to provide direction and clarification.

In the first meeting with the Yawuru cultural leaders about the material (20th of June), three Senior Yawuru men were in attendance, Thomas Unda Edgar (Senior), Neil McKenzie (Senior) and Ronald Wade as well as Yawuru men Jason Richardson (Yawuru Ranger) and Lloyd Pigram. In this meeting the Yawuru cultural leaders confirmed four of the objects in the MM collection were made by Yawuru and are ceremonial objects. A fifth object, not part of the Wood-Jones collection but collected in Broome, was analysed and confirmed not to be a Yawuru object; and therefore, not requested for repatriation.

A key step in the AIATSIS partnership building phase was establishing relationships between Traditional Owners and overseas collections managers. On the 3rd of July 2019, the RoCH project team facilitated a phone conference between Yawuru Cultural Leader Neilø McKenzie and Stephen Welsh, Curator of Living Cultures and Honorary Research Fellow in Social Anthropology, University of Manchester. The phone conference enabled Neilø to describe, in his own words, the significance of the objects and the importance of them being returned to Yawuru. This phone call supported AIATSIS' advice to MM to put in place new protocols for looking after their Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander materials and helped build trust between the Yawuru and MM. The phone conference occurred during the 2019 AIATSIS National Indigenous Research Conference, at which Neilø presented a paper with the RoCH team.

The second on Country meeting with Yawuru was held over the 15th and 16th of August 2019. The Senior Yawuru Cultural Leaders discussed the objects in great detail and focused on how they could be safely transported back to Yawuru Country and where they would be stored once they were returned.

At the culmination of the meetings, the Yawuru endorsed AIATSIS to submit a repatriation request to MM on their behalf. The repatriation request was assessed by The University of Manchester's Board of Governors on the 2nd of October 2019 and was unanimously accepted. The external repatriation request reviewer, a requirement of MM's repatriation policy, Dr Emma Martin, Senior Curator of Ethnology National Museums Liverpool, wrote:

Reviewing the repatriation claim and the research provenance documents it is clear that the claim to ownership has been proven and that there are no competing claims against the items selected for return. With this in mind, I fully endorse the request for the return of these items to the originating communities in Australia.

The significance of MM's decision to repatriate material to Traditional Custodians was felt around the world with the story covered by local and international media outlets, including but not limited to the BBC, the Guardian UK, The Australian, Mancunian and many others. Following the announcement, The Hon Ken Wyatt AM, MP, Minister for Indigenous Australians, travelled to Broome to speak with Neilø about the significance of the return decision for Yawuru.

This is a journey that all of us as Australians should partake in, it's our history... it belongs to everybody. It's a new beginning.

Neilø McKenzie, Yawuru Senior Cultural Leader



The Hon Ken Wyatt AM, MP, Minister for Indigenous Australians speaking with Neilø McKenzie, Yawuru Senior Cultural Leader, about the Manchester Museum decision to repatriate the Yawuru material.

AIATSIS National Indigenous Research Conference

At the 2019 AIATSIS National Indigenous Research Conference Neilø presented a paper with Christopher and Iain. The paper focused upon the importance of repatriating material to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and the partnership approach AIATSIS adopted to undertake repatriation for the RoCH project. Stephen provided a pre-recorded video explaining MM's perspective of repatriation, as the returning institution.



Neilø McKenzie presenting with the AIATSIS RoCH team at the 2019 AIATSIS National Indigenous Research Conference (ANIRC).

My job is to oversee this and bring them back and put them in a keeping place. The ceremonial objects will have to go back to the ceremony grounds where we do our ceremonies for the young men. I am sitting with a handful of powerful and influential men folk but there are also women folk who have their own law that we don't interfere with... these things [the Yawuru objects] are intrinsic and spiritual and they are connected to this [Yawuru] Country and make us who we are, the Aboriginal people. [They are] how we get our strength, where we know where we belong. And that's the thing, whether its cultural things or [Ancestral] remains they gotta come back, they gotta go back where they come from, where they belong..

We can't own this Country, they [the Yawuru items] belong to this Country they create everything, they create the rain, the winds and they chase away the cyclones in part of our Country. These things are created from stories that have been handed down by spiritual beings, [they are the] creators of who we are. [These items are] very special it comes from here [points to heart] it comes from the soul, what we say in our language, Liyan, the life giving source of who we are and that's what we are today, the living form of this land, the Country, the earth.

Neilø McKenzie, Yawuru Senior Cultural Leader



Neilø McKenzie presenting with the AIATSIS RoCH team at the 2019 AIATSIS National Indigenous Research Conference (ANIRC).

Preparations for Returning the Material from the Manchester Museum

The repatriation planning meetings occurred over the 11th, 15th 16th of August 2019. In these meetings, the Yawuru discussed who should travel to Manchester to collect the material, where and how the material would be cared for at their Keeping Place and what assistance AIATSIS could provide to ensure the material could be best incorporated into Yawuru cultural practices. Yawuru decided to send one Yawuru and one Karajarri delegate to collect their material because of the ceremonial nature of the material and because Yawuru and Karajarri share ceremony.

Yawuru decided Neilø would travel to Manchester to represent the Yawuru people and Mervyn Mulardy would travel to Manchester to represent the Karajarri people at the official handover ceremony. Unfortunately, Mervyn had to withdraw himself from the delegation because of Sorry Business.

AIATSIS' Work with the Manchester Museum

AIATSIS began working with MM in late 2018, when the Institute wrote to the Museum to inform them of the RoCH project. In February 2019, AIATSIS followed up on this correspondence to confirm if the MM would be willing to consider a request to repatriate material to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in Australia. Stephen Welsh responded explaining MM was keen to establish a relationship with AIATSIS and would be willing to discuss the repatriation of material held in their collection to communities in Australia.

After The University of Manchester's Board of Governors approved the request (2/10/2019), AIATSIS started working in earnest with MM to prepare the material for repatriation. As the Yawuru material is ceremonial men's restricted, MM had only male staff members create the storage boxes for the safe and secure transportation of the material.

5 Freight and Logistics

While collaborating with overseas collecting institutions and relevant Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, AIATSIS organised the required import permits in accordance with the Biosecurity Act 2015 and all relevant letters of exemption to transport the material home. This included permits and permissions issued by the:

- Department of Agriculture for the import of Australian native plant material back into Australia;
- Department of Health for the import of human material (hair) into Australia; and
- Department of Immigration and Border Protection for the import of sensitive material, including weapons (spears) into Australia.

AIATSIS submitted an Import Permit Application to the Department of Agriculture in August 2019. The application was approved shortly thereafter.

To administer and manage the logistics and freight for the return of the repatriated cultural heritage material from overseas, AIATSIS engaged IAS Logistics.⁴ IAS had extensive experience in handling sensitive and fragile freight, an understanding of the complex nature of the repatriation process and had demonstrated cultural competency through past experience. Kingsley Munday AM, an Aboriginal man and Managing Director of IAS Logistics, explained their role in the process:

IAS Logistics is a family business but more importantly we are an Indigenous family. The work we do in our daily lives involves moving valuable, delicate and secure objects across the country and around the world but there are times when we have the privilege to do things which have a higher meaning.

The removal of Indigenous cultural objects from their land to be taken thousands of kilometres around the world into foreign land places them in a state of unrest. No matter whether we are black or white, the reuniting of these objects with their community and with their land, with their place of origin, is to bring them to their natural resting place and to their ultimate place of peace.

To return them to Country is of immense significance to the communities, but it also gives to us and our people a tremendous sense of accomplishment and satisfaction. Once each task is completed we too feel a sense of calm and peace – it was meant to be.

⁴ International Art Services (IAS) Logistics is a Supply Nation certified business.

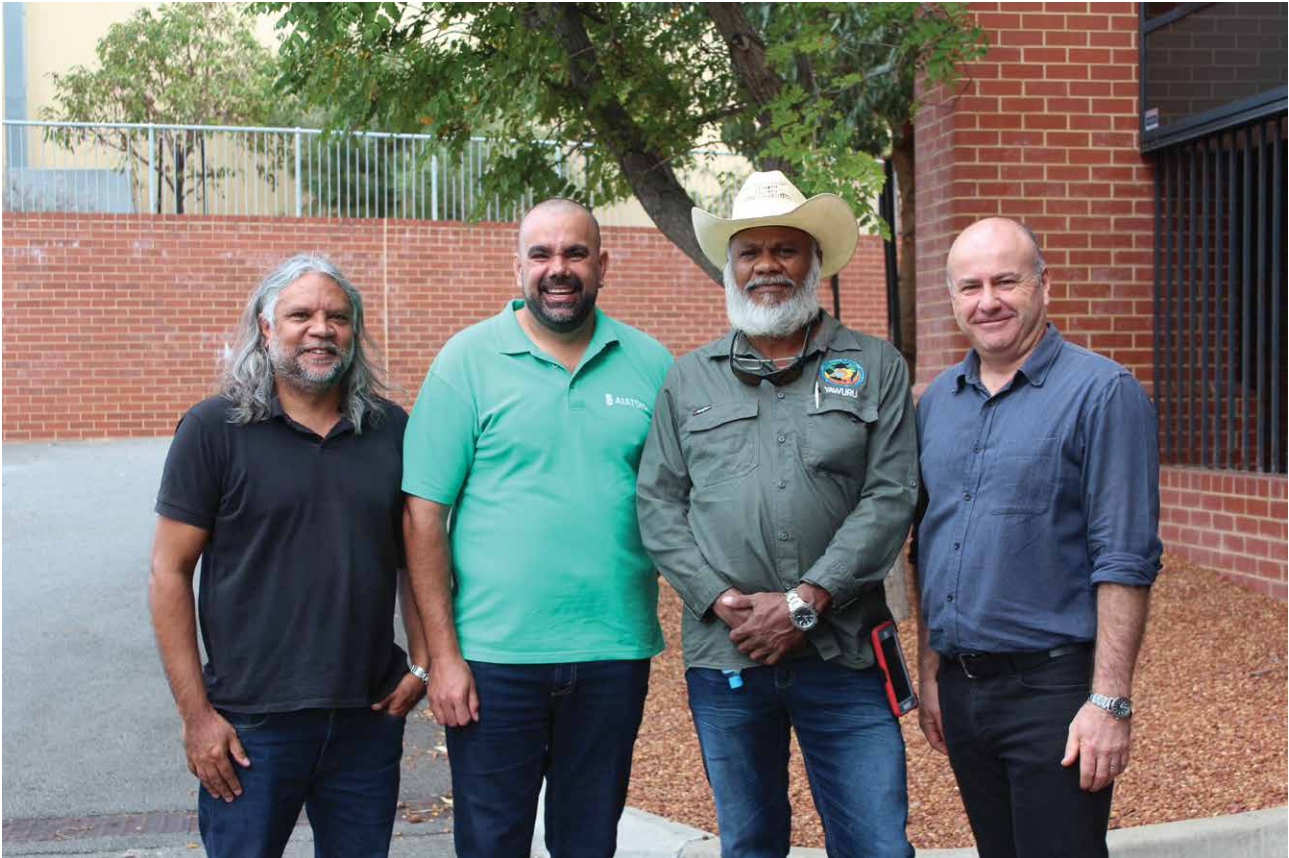
6 Return of the Yawuru Material From the Manchester Museum

The COVID-19 global pandemic had a massive impact upon Australia and the world in 2020, with implications to RoCH project work and travel arrangements being felt from March 2020. After much consultation with Neilø McKenzie, who engaged with Yawuru and Karajarri Law Bosses, it was decided Neilø would not travel to MM in March 2020 as he could not safely travel to the UK to collect their material. Owing to the global pandemic and following consultations with Yawuru and MM, AIATSIS decided to cancel the entire delegation to Manchester. It was a difficult decision to not have Custodians escort the material home but doing so demonstrated the trust built between Yawuru, AIATSIS and MM and the shared knowledge that this material could only be properly cared for back on Yawuru Country.

The Yawuru material was packed by Stephen Welsh on the 10th of March 2020 and IAS organised for the material to be collected and safely transported to Australia. The material arrived in Perth on Friday the 13th of March and was temporarily stored at the Western Australian Museum (WAM) in their secret sacred store.

Returning the Material Back to Yawuru Country

Neilø collected the Yawuru material from the WAM on the 17th of March 2020 and transported it to Rubibi (Broome) with Christopher the following day. Neilø and Christopher were assisted by Brett Nannup from WAM. Neilø and Christopher returned the material to the Yawuru Keeping Place on the 18th of March 2020.



(Left to Right) Brett Nannup, Christopher Simpson, Neilø McKenzie and Ross Chadwick at the Western Australian Museum.

Further Impacts of COVID-19 on the RoCH Project

A further ramification of the COVID-19 global pandemic on the RoCH project was the cancellation of the final 'follow up' research phase with each community partner. In this phase, AIATSIS intended to meet with key individuals involved in the repatriation, particularly Elders and other knowledge holders, to discuss the material and the impact of its return for their community. This research phase was intended to inform the next section of this report and to document each community's perspective on the significance of repatriating cultural heritage material to First Nations people for the purposes of cultural revitalisation and maintenance.

7 The Significance of the Yawuru Material Coming Home

Our past represents our future. Aboriginal societies are unbroken and returning our sacred cultural artefacts and ancestral remains back to Country brings them and us a peace of mind. Thanks sincerely to the museums abroad, AIATSIS and the various other government departments of Australia who helped with the return of the material.

Neilø McKenzie, Yawuru Senior Cultural Leader

In our discussions, Neilø McKenzie explained the material has been returned to its proper ceremonial use in order to support Yawuru to maintain their cultural practices and spiritual connection to Country. This process began almost immediately upon the return of the material in March as Neilø had organised for the material to be returned to Yawuru's traditional ceremonial grounds. To do this, he contacted Senior Karajarri Cultural Leaders, with whom Yawuru share ceremonies, to accompany him and Christopher Simpson on the journey. Together the Yawuru and Karajarri Cultural Leaders returned the material to their ceremonial grounds where a small private ceremony was held. This event pointedly demonstrates how the repatriation of cultural material brings Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge holders together to support them to maintain their cultural practices, as well as the impact returning material can have upon other communities not directly involved in the return but who share cultural practices.

AIATSIS' research supports and facilitates Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural resurgence in ways which shape the national narrative for all Australians for the better. For those directly involved in the RoCH project it was also very significant as explained by Christopher:

Delivering the Return of Cultural Heritage project is an extremely culturally grounding and humbling experience. Witnessing senior men sharing stories, holding these items, listening and singing to these items and seeing their spirit being revitalised by having these items home is something I will never forget. Returning items not only brings hope to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples but it also brings hope to First Nations people all over the world to have these items returned home to where they belong, to keep the stories going and to keep culture strong.

Christopher Simpson, RoCH project Director

The Significance of the Return for Manchester Museum

This section was contributed by Esme Ward, Director of MM, and Stephen Welsh, Curator of Living Cultures and Honorary Research Fellow in Social Anthropology at the MM.

Like many museums we have been active in returning ancestral human remains to their communities of origin since 2003, but this marked the first return of secret sacred and ceremonial material to Australia's First Nations peoples. The other distinguishing factor was the unconditional nature of the repatriation (without conditions or limitations). It did not move the objects from one institution to another, but instead fully acknowledged that Aboriginal people have the primary and sole right to the ownership and control of all forms of their heritage. I believe that repatriation shifts the processes, language and thinking of the past towards a context of possibility and action for the future.

Esme Ward, Director of MM

The unconditional repatriation allowed us to further challenge, disrupt and transform western colonial modes of curation, which were established to analyse, catalogue, display and preserve Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural heritage in isolation and without consent from Australia's First Nations peoples. It facilitated a deeper understanding of how such practices continue to inflict loss, trauma and exclusion on those Traditional Owners and places most intimately connected with secret sacred and ceremonial objects. The trust that has been built will only encourage a deepening commitment to healing, reconciliation and inclusion.

Stephen Welsh, Curator of Living Cultures and Honorary Research Fellow
in Social Anthropology at the MM

8 Conclusion

The return of these objects is part of unlocking the rich history of this Country stretching back beyond the 18th century and for the Country that's got to be a valuable thing. It's got to add richness to our sense of who we are as Australians. It's got to add something of just different ways of looking at things.

Craig Ritchie, AIATSIS CEO

The vision of AIATSIS is to create a world in which all Indigenous peoples' knowledge and cultures are recognised, valued and respected. By returning the Yawuru material to Country, AIATSIS achieved this vision and also created opportunities for people around the world to encounter, engage with and be transformed by the Yawuru story. As of equal importance, the return of the Yawuru material will support the Senior Yawuru Cultural Leaders to continue and pass on their cultural practices now and in the future.



(Left to Right) Iain Johnston, Neilø McKenzie and Christopher Simpson at the 2019 AIATSIS National Indigenous Research Conference.

Thanks heaps for your support, assistance, backup and everything, to all at AIATSIS, I sincerely thank you all...

Neilø McKenzie, Yawuru Senior Cultural Leader

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