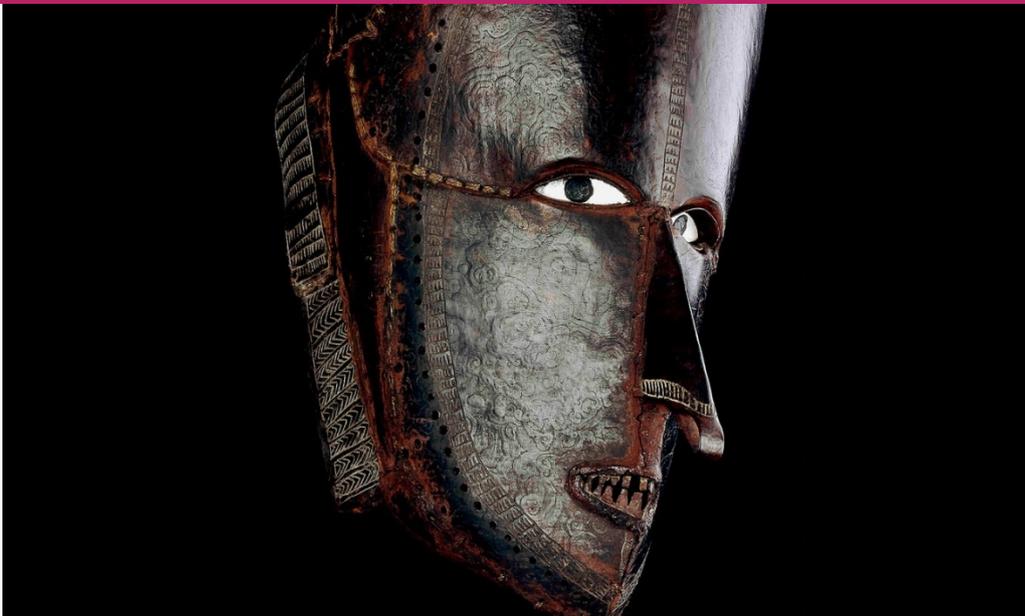


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## Enduring controversy: BP sponsorship ignites new row over British Museum's Indigenous exhibition

*Even before it opened, this landmark exhibition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artefacts was criticised over the acquisition of many of its treasures. Now protesters are focusing on the oil company sponsor and claims about its treatment of Indigenous communities*



This turtle-shell mask from Mer, in the Torres Strait, is part of the exhibition, Indigenous Australia: Enduring Civilisation, showing at the British Museum until early August. Photograph: British Museum

BY PAUL DALEY 21 JULY 2015

Three months after opening an exhibition of treasured items from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, it is clear just how thoroughly London's British Museum has anticipated the potential anger and emotion of Indigenous Australians.

There's nothing quite like a controversy to market a cultural experience, of course. And since well before Indigenous Australia: Enduring Civilisation opened in April at the museum – a repository of colonial loot and treasure from a once mighty empire – this exhibition has been mired in it.

The exhibition has sharpened focus on the very existence of the museum's collection of some 6,000 Australian Indigenous items (only 1% of which is ever usually displayed) and the sometimes violent means of their acquisition. While some were traded with missionaries, explorers, British military personnel and others, a significant number were stolen amid acts of extreme violence that resulted in the eventual deaths of tens of thousands of the original inhabitants after the first European contact and subsequent invasion in 1788.

Some Australian communities want – indeed, have demanded – their possessions be repatriated from the museum. Others, having participated in what the BM and the National Museum of Australia insist was an exhaustive consultation process, have endorsed the inclusion of their peoples' artifacts in the BM show and in another linked exhibition Encounters (featuring the loan from London of many of the same items) due to open at the Australian museum later this year.

Activists have twice disrupted the British exhibition, most recently on Sunday, when the UK-based theatrical protest group BP or Not BP? protested over the sponsorship of Indigenous Australia: Enduring Civilisation by BP. The demonstrators insist that the multinational fuel producer's treatment of Indigenous communities in various parts of the world and its environmental record render it a highly inappropriate sponsor for an exhibition featuring Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artifacts.

The protest group points to the opposition of local custodians to BP's imminent plan to drill for oil in the Great Australian Bight, and to the company's previous and extant tensions with Indigenous peoples in Canada, West Papua and Colombia. The United Kingdom-registered BP International is a major corporate investor in British arts and culture amid recent partnerships worth some £10 million (A\$21m) with the museum, the National Portrait Gallery, the Royal Opera House and Tate Britain.

Tony Birch – a Miles Franklin shortlisted novelist and academic historian – is among the prominent Australian Aboriginal activists opposed to the Indigenous Australia: Enduring Civilisation exhibition. These Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander activists want the museum to return artifacts to Australian custodians where such requests have been made.

Other prominent Indigenous Australian critics include artist and historian Gary Foley and Dja Dja Wurrung elder Gary Murray, who has previously outlined his opposition to both exhibitions to Guardian Australia.

Birch, the inaugural Bruce McGuinness research fellow at the Moondani Balluk Centre at Victoria University, Melbourne, is working on climate issues and Indigenous knowledge.

“The involvement of organisations such as BP in the sponsorship of Indigenous arts, history and culture is disturbing,” he says. “It is also hypocritical. Our lands and cultures are under threat from multinational organisations, determined to extract selfish wealth from the earth, regardless of the environment, emotional and cultural damage caused. BP has an appalling record of environmental degradation. If it was genuinely concerned with the welfare, sovereignty and intellectual knowledge of Indigenous nations, at global level, it would cease its insatiable thirst for extracting fossil fuels from the ground and poisoning our air with them.”

Protests, to which Murray and Foley will be central, are being planned to coincide with the opening of the Encounters exhibition in Canberra in November. Indeed, a banner – Stolen Land. Stolen Culture. Stolen Climate – used in yesterday’s London protest is said to be on its way to Canberra. BP is not sponsoring the Australian exhibition.

The focus of protest at the Australian exhibition will be the repatriation, where individual communities seek it, of Indigenous Australian objects from the British Museum collection on loan to the national museum.

Just how comprehensively the British Museum has anticipated the controversy is evident in a sheath of documents released to BP or Not BP? under freedom of information on 6 July.

The documents show that only two Australian Indigenous communities linked to exhibition artifacts were consulted about sponsorship.

“The British Museum consulted with the communities,” the museum responded, “in the two cases where objects related to those communities were to be used on posters and advertising where sponsorship crediting was included. Both communities were advised of the sponsor and gave permission for the images of objects to be used. The sponsorship arrangements were not discussed with other communities.”

The documents show that before the opening, the museum determined: “Given the sensitivities around the exhibition, the BM will also deliberately control visitor

numbers to ensure that any emotional reactions to the exhibition can be accommodated.”

The museum was “aware that there could be protest activity around BP’s sponsorship of IA (Indigenous Australia), specifically in relation to Australian Land Rights debates”.

Briefing notes prepared ahead of the press launch for the BM exhibition last January, show the museum was anticipating difficult questions about the repatriation of some artifacts.

“Should these objects not be returned to the Indigenous communities that they derive from?” the notes ask and answer: “There are currently no formal requests for return of objects to Australia. It is important to acknowledge that some objects are of high cultural significance for contemporary Indigenous Australians and the British Museum is always keen to engage in dialogue to see where mutual aspirations can be achieved.”

Critically, however, the museum seems to include the possibility of “long term loans” of artifacts to Indigenous communities where appropriate infrastructure (that is, keeping places) exists.

Dja Dja Wurrung elder Murray says he has made repeated formal requests to the British Museum for the return of three culturally and spiritually significant pieces of bark art. In light of the museum’s assertion that “there are currently no formal requests” for repatriation of collection items, he intends to again officially ask the museum to return the barks.

Murray will be central to protests against the National Museum of Australia’s Encounters exhibition. But he has none the less decided to engage the national museum in a public conversation, agreeing to be filmed as part of the exhibition explaining the importance to his people of the barks.

“Just so there’s no confusion,” he says, “I say once more, for the record, that the barks belong to my Dja Dja Wurrung people. We want the British Museum to give them back. That is unequivocal.”

In 2004, Murray, on behalf of the Dja Dja Wurrung, used the federal Aboriginal Cultural Heritage Act to seize the barks while they were on loan to the Melbourne

Museum (now Museum Victoria). After a protracted court case brought by the Melbourne Museum the barks were eventually returned to the British Museum.

Federal parliament passed the Protection of Cultural Objects on Loan Act in 2013 amid scant media scrutiny and with bipartisan support from the major political parties. In the wake of the 2004 barks fracas the legislation was initiated at the behest of Australia's major cultural institutions, which wanted to be able to give a watertight legal guarantee to foreign counterparts, not least the British Museum, that any collection items on loan to Australia would definitely return.

On the question of BP's involvement, the British Museum's pre-launch briefing notes ask: "Why does the BM continue to use BP as a sponsor? Surely it is unethical for an oil company to sponsor the arts? How do you justify taking money from an organisation that has caused an environmental and social disaster of this magnitude?"

The briefing notes' response reiterates the museum's appreciation for BP's benevolence, saying that such exhibitions rely on external sponsorship and deepen "understanding of the world's many and varied cultures".



BP's sponsorship of the arts in the UK has been a focus for continuing protests and demonstrations. The protest here, at the Tate gallery in London in November 2013, was a performance aimed at BP's sponsorship of the gallery. Photograph: Kristian Buus/Corbis

Curiously, the museum also seems to have been involved in a pre-launch public relations strategy for the Australian high commission in London, posing hypothetical questions including: “Why doesn’t the Australian government do more for Indigenous Australia?”, “Why isn’t Indigenous Australia acknowledged in the Australian constitution?” and “How is the Australian government improving conditions, economic opportunity and social justice issues for Indigenous Australia?”

According to the briefing paper, the “Australian government is committed to achieving better results” for black Australians in the key areas of school attendance, adult employment and building safer communities. It continues on to say the “Abbott government is committed to achieving constitutional recognition for our Indigenous peoples”.

But the briefing paper fails to mention the highly contentious federal intervention in the Northern Territory, the forced closure of hundreds of remote Aboriginal communities, the fact that the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australia is widening on some key social and economic indicators, and that Abbott has declared that those in remote communities are exercising “lifestyle choices” and Australia was unoccupied or barely occupied when the first fleet arrived in 1788.