

# The *Ilivliaq* Returns to Gjoa Haven: Interrogating Objects from Roald Amundsen's Collection in the Nattilik Heritage Centre

## L'*ilivliaq* revient à Gjoa Haven : Interroger les objets de la collection Roal Amudsen du Centre Nattilik Heritage

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Résumé de l'article

La collaboration des musées et le retour d'objets ont été largement discutés et examinés dans la pratique et la littérature au cours des dernières décennies (Fienrup Rordan 1998 ; Peers and Brown 2003 ; Basu 2017). Cet article examine l'exemple d'un retour d'objet : un bol en bois. Le bol faisait partie de la collection Roald Amundsen/Gjoa Haven, conservée au musée d'histoire culturelle à Oslo, en Norvège, qui est retournée au Centre Nattilik Heritage de Gjoa Haven, en 2013. À son retour à Gjoa Haven, le bol a fait l'objet d'interrogations et de discussions visant à déterminer son lien avec le patrimoine et les savoirs traditionnels. L'objectif de cet article est d'explorer comment ce cas particulier de travail mémoriel pourrait contribuer à notre compréhension des processus en jeu dans les activités de rapatriement ou pour citer Basu à la suite de cet examen particulier, des « enchevêtrements d'enchevêtrements sociaux, spatiaux, temporels de la société Bow et trajectoires et relations matérielles, dislocations et délocalisations » (2017, 2) du point de vue de Gjoa Haven.

# The *Ilivliaq* Returns to Gjoa Haven: Interrogating Objects from Roald Amundsen's Collection in the Nattilik Heritage Centre

Tone Wang<sup>i</sup>

## ABSTRACT

Museum collaboration and object return has been discussed and examined widely in practice and literature in recent decades (e.g. Fienup-Riordan 1998; Peers and Brown 2003; Basu 2017). This paper examines an instance of object return, a wooden bowl. The bowl was part of the Roald Amundsen/Gjoa Haven Collection held at the Museum of Cultural History in Oslo, Norway, and returned to the Nattilik Heritage Centre in Gjoa Haven in 2013. Upon its return to Gjoa Haven, the bowl became the focus of interrogations and discussions to determine how it might be related to local heritage and traditional knowledge. This paper explores how this particular instance of memory work might contribute to our understanding of the processes at play in repatriation activities, or, to quote Paul Basu, the bowl's "entanglements of ongoing social, spatial, temporal and material trajectories and relationships, dislocations and relocations" (2017, 2) as seen from the perspective of Gjoa Haven residents.

## KEYWORDS

Object return, material culture, museum collection, shared knowledge, memory work, collaboration, Gjoa Haven

## RÉSUMÉ

*L'ilivliaq* revient à Gjoa Haven: Interroger les objets de la collection Roald Amundsen du Centre Nattilik Heritage

La collaboration des musées et le retour d'objets ont été largement discutés et examinés dans la pratique et la littérature au cours des dernières décennies (Fienrup Rordan 1998 ; Peers and Brown 2003 ; Basu 2017). Cet article examine l'exemple d'un retour d'objet: un bol en bois. Le bol faisait partie de la collection Roald Amundsen/Gjoa Haven, conservée au musée d'histoire culturelle à Oslo, en Norvège, qui est retournée au Centre Nattilik Heritage de Gjoa Haven, en 2013. À son retour à Gjoa Haven, le bol a fait l'objet d'interrogations et de discussions visant à déterminer son lien avec le patrimoine et les savoirs traditionnels. L'objectif de cet article est d'explorer comment ce cas particulier de travail mémoriel pourrait contribuer à notre compréhension des processus en jeu dans les activités de rapatriement ou pour citer Basu à la suite de cet

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examen particulier, des « enchevêtrements d'enchevêtrements sociaux, spatiaux, temporels de la société Bow et trajectoires et relations matérielles, dislocations et délocalisations » (2017, 2) du point de vue de Gjoa Haven.

### MOTS-CLÉS

Restitution d'objets, culture matérielle, collection muséale, partage du savoir, travail de mémoire, collaboration, Gjoa Haven

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As Nicholas Thomas (1991) and many since him have suggested, objects are never innocent. The exchanges of which they are part, the memory work they are involved in, and the knowledge practices they enter are always part of the power dynamics and political projects surrounding them. Museums, under the same kind of scrutiny, are places where Western systems of classification and knowledge have been used to structure the world (Edwards, Gosden, and Phillips 2006, 17), but also places where space has been made for self-expression and resistance. As a visitor from the past to the present, the returned object, and the differing forms of intense scrutiny and disconcertment its presence might occasion, is situated at the very crux of this shifting field of discourse and practice.



**Figure 1.** The *iliviaq*, photographed at the Museum of Cultural History before it was returned to the Nattilik Heritage Centre in Gjoa Haven. Photo: Eirik Irgens Johnsen. Courtesy of the Museum of Cultural History, University of Oslo.

In June 2013 the work to complete the exhibitions in the brand new Nattilik Heritage Centre in Gjoa Haven was in full swing. The new exhibitions would include a group of objects from the Roald Amundsen/Gjoa Haven Collection, held at the Museum of Cultural History in Oslo, returned to Gjoa Haven for display. A group of respected community Elders and an experienced interpreter gathered to prepare the labels for the objects that were to arrive from Oslo. The Elders studied photographs of the bowl (Figure 1). At first there was complete silence. Then, an intense discussion broke out between them. After a little while, the interpreter turned to me and said, “They [the Elders] have no idea what this is...perhaps...they are thinking that it is...made to be a plate?” In the fall of the following year, these same Elders were part of the workshop discussion where the bowl was finally labelled to their satisfaction as an *iliviat*. This paper traces this journey of initial disconnect, exploration, and its aftermath.

The issue at stake here is not so much an object biography (Gosden and Marshall 1999), as there is no attempt made to follow the bowl through time. Rather, three particular engagements with memory and materiality centring around the bowl in the repatriation context are examined: the bowl in terms of its materiality, its social life (Appadurai 1986), and its labelling. The paper thus follows these instances of memory work (DeSilvey 2013).

As a museum object being returned to its source community, the artefact in question was expected to contribute to local memory work, fitted into traditional knowledge and heritage contexts in Gjoa Haven. People locally interrogated the bowl to see how and if they could engage it in conversation. All artefacts in the new heritage centre were expected to contribute to memory work in the community (DeSilvey 2013; Edwards, Gosden, and Phillips 2006), the connecting of past, present, and future. The bowl posed a very particular challenge to these expectations, and the particular disconcertment its arrival occasioned led to intense investigation (Verran 2012; Edwards, Gosden, and Phillips 2006; Geismar and Horst 2005).

## **The Setting: Returning Objects from the Roald Amundsen/Gjoa Haven Collection**

Before the label-writing session at the Nattilik Heritage Centre in June 2013, the bowl had not been singled out for attention in any way. It had been part of the discussed object return from the museum in Oslo from the very beginning of the process. By this time, it was in transit to Gjoa Haven, to become part of the planned heritage centre displays.

Returning objects from the Roald Amundsen/Gjoa Haven Collection held at the Museum of Cultural History in Oslo to Gjoa Haven had been discussed as a possibility and a hope for the future since at least the early 1990s. Professor, and then keeper of the Arctic collections at the Museum of Cultural History, Tom G. Svensson did fieldwork in Gjoa Haven in 1993 (Svensson 1995). As a

consequence, awareness of the potential for further collaboration increased in both Oslo and Gjoa Haven. When, in 2010, it was clear that the plans for the new heritage centre facility in Gjoa Haven were to be realized, it became possible to move forward.

In May 2011 Professor Svensson and I were able to visit Gjoa Haven to discuss object return with the hamlet council and the community (Svensson 2015). The bowl was part of the selection that formed the basis for these conversations, but, as noted, it was not singled out for attention. Two main concerns were accorded particular attention: the hamlet council was concerned with the future care and safety of the objects to be returned, and with how the objects could contribute to traditional knowledge and cultural heritage work in the community, particularly with regards to education and youth.

Alongside the formal consultations with the hamlet council, we discussed object return and possibilities for object choices with a lot of people in the community during our visit in Gjoa Haven, both in formal and informal settings. The photos of displays and artefacts were examined and discussed repeatedly. People studied the photographs of the objects carefully and discussed how they related to their own experiences and stories told by older family members. Like other communities in the Canadian Arctic, Gjoa Haven is a relatively young settlement. A lot of the people living here moved to the settlement in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Before that, they lived, as people in Gjoa Haven now refer to it traditionally, out on the land, travelling and hunting. At the time that Amundsen traded for them, the objects in these photos were mostly the supremely unexceptional minutiae of everyday life. By the time of our consultations, the objects in the photographs had become unique visitors from the past. What concerned people as they examined the photos were specifically what objects they recognized and how they related to their own memories of family and life before.

Norwegian explorer Roald Amundsen assembled the Amundsen/Gjoa Haven Collection during his two-year stay in Gjoa Haven from 1903 to 1905. During his stay, he traded extensively with Inuit and made friends in the area. Upon his return to Oslo in 1906, the collection became part of the then Ethnographic Museum at the University of Oslo (today the Museum of Cultural History). The catalogue documenting and describing the collection was written in 1907 and 1908 (Etnografisk Samling, KHM 1908). Amundsen's journals from the expedition, held at the National Library of Norway, and his two-volume publication from the Northwest Passage expedition, describe not only the objects but also the context of their use (Amundsen 1908). From a museum point of view, the documentation for this collection is considered thorough. It has also been studied and published since (Taylor 1974). At the time of collection, the artefacts were considered matters of everyday life, important, but not exceptional or singular. This is mirrored in the documentation. The collection contains several bowls similar to the one discussed here, described as blubber dishes.

The consultations and discussions between the community of Gjoa Haven and the museum in Oslo in 2011 and 2012 focused on the importance of return and the conditions of return. They took place against the obvious challenges of long-distance communication and bureaucratic constraints. Thus, it was only as the individual objects were to be labelled for presentation to the community in the heritage centre displays in June 2013 that the bowl made its challenging presence in the artefact group selected for return felt.

## **The Social Life of the Bowl I: Interrogating the Bowl and Its Presence in Gjoa Haven**

By fall 2014 the bowl was well established as a conundrum in the display case dedicated to the Amundsen/Gjoa Haven objects at the Nattilik Heritage Centre. That it became the focus of discussion among some of those present at our last Tuesday evening community event in September was unexceptional in every way. The bowl stood out in the display case, with its size, the oval shape, the way the bottom, carved from solid wood, was joined to the wooden band forming the rim, its polished and shiny appearance, and its burnished golden colour. The bowl was very much an object that drew people's attention, that made them look, and look carefully (Dudley 2012, 2014).

The community Tuesday evenings at the heritage centre in Gjoa Haven drew a varied audience. Invited Elders shared stories about a topic related to culture, language, and tradition, and people gathered around and contributed their own observations. This particular Tuesday, community members were arriving bit by bit, talking and looking in the exhibition, as we all waited for the program to start. One of our invited Elders was standing with his brother, looking at the display with the returned artefacts, especially the bowl. It was obvious from across the room that the two men had concerns about it.

The staff, me included, were standing around chatting and minding the food preparation, when I was called over to the display case at the other side of the room. A group was gathering with the two Elders at the centre. The Elders wanted to talk about the bowl, and asked the question this piece consistently occasioned: What is this?

Neither he nor his brother knew anything about the bowl, one of them told me. This artefact did not make sense to them. Another Elder, a woman, was called over to consult. As she was older, she was expected to know more. The three Elders examined the bowl and discussed what it might be doing in the displays at the heritage centre. The rest of us stood on the sidelines listening. Translation is a constant part of group conversations in Gjoa Haven, as people in the community do not share a common language. One of the people standing next to me who spoke both Inuktitut and English turned to me and explained that the woman thought the bowl might go with the *kudlik*, the stone lamp, underneath it to collect the drips of seal fat, but she did not know for sure.

The three Elders on this particular September evening did not find between them an answer to the question they, and everybody else, kept asking of the bowl. The “what is it?” was an inquiry not about practical function but about the bowl’s material presence, cultural belonging, and relevance. The answer to the other immediate question—“What is it for?”—was obvious to all. This was a bowl, a container that would hold stuff. Its beauty and craftsmanship was commented upon regularly, and its general practical purpose were obvious and not worth discussing.

While the mundaneness of general purpose—it being a container—was straightforward and obvious to all, this didn’t resolve the “what is it?” question that everyone wanted answered. None of the locals who came into the heritage centre could recall ever having used or seen anything like this bowl. It seemed that no memories, references, or stories could be attached to it with any kind of certainty. This artefact’s presence in a place dedicated to presenting Nattilik cultural heritage occasioned acute discomfort and questioning. As a consequence, no other object in the heritage centre was interrogated and doubted the way this bowl was. Considerable effort was invested in this memory work while the bowl proved to be elusive and hard to pin down. Any relationship between the community and the artefact based on ideas of a shared past seemed ungraspable (Bell and Geismar 2009; DeSilvey 2013).

The interrogation was consistent and repeated, again and again, by people from Gjoa Haven and nearby communities during their visits to the heritage centre. The initial “what is it?” would be followed by, where does it come from? And why is it here? As the basic story of return from Oslo was established, more specific questions arose. For answers, they looked to the bowl in the display case.

## **The Material Reality of the Bowl**

The making of any traditional artefact was frequently used as a way of establishing belonging and expertise in conversations about the past in Gjoa Haven. The materials used, the skill needed, the process and steps taken, the context of acquiring those materials and those skills were described and discussed by those in the know and asked about by those who wanted to learn (Ingold 2013; Carr 2010; Verran 2012).

The quality of the craftsmanship was one of the concerns when traditional objects were discussed, and the oft-repeated point about the very impressive skills and abilities of those who had made them was emphasized. The bowl elicited this same response in the sense that people would comment upon its beauty and the quality of its craftsmanship, like they did for other objects in this display case. The difference was that they had difficulties reconciling the materiality of this particular object with what they knew about traditional life on the land in the area.



What was the bowl made from? The colour and shine of the bowl made people take a second and then a third look at it, ask others, and sometimes even double check the display label. The bowl being made from wood was cause for concern and doubt. Access to wood was very limited in this region in the old days, which people pointed out: “We didn’t have wood before, in the old days.” This apparent alienness of the material was reinforced by the fact that the main part of the bowl was carved from one substantial block of wood. This was not a little piece, or several smaller pieces joined together, as was common in other artefacts from the period, but a purposely shaped chunk.

The expertise and workmanship of the bowl were discussed in this context. People commented on how very well made it was, the same way they did about other traditional objects in the displays. But as the type of woodworking the bowl would have entailed was examined and discussed further, people shook their heads. This type of work they did not recognize. The third issue tied in here was that of age. “It looks very new” was a very common comment. People would examine the bowl further and comment again on the workmanship: “And it looks very well made. They did not have tools back then.” This kind of workmanship was not recognized as a traditional and remembered practice.

Where the material—wood—could be established by careful examination, age was harder to determine for a piece in the museum display. Objects were identified as old based on them being recognized as traditional, and on the techniques and materials used to make them. For the bowl, this claim of age—of it in fact being old—was thus particularly challenging. People noted the possibility of a mistake either in identifying where the bowl was made, where it was purchased, or how old it was.

If material culture is what makes up the Amundsen/Gjoa Haven Collection, and “material culture is the name given to the elements of the world with which people work most closely” (Edwards, Gosden, and Phillips 2006, 5), then we are indeed in trouble here. The materiality of the bowl, the answers it provides to the queries raised about it, created acute disconcertment and unsettlement. The bowl seemed too new and too unaffected by time; furthermore, it appeared to be made with foreign materials, using techniques people were unable to recognize. It was its material presence that was relevant (Henry, Otto, and Wood 2013; Ingold 2012). It is also disconnected through its 110-year stay in the museum, and upon its return to Gjoa Haven, there seemed to be no memories available to engage with this artefact. It remained stubbornly disconnected and cut loose, seen as a foreign element in the displays.

## **Establishing Expert Knowledge**

Conversations about and with the bowl in the exhibitions at the heritage centre were a weekly phenomenon. Community members who stopped in, visitors from neighbouring community and from farther afield all commented on the bowl.



The discussions arose with the display as a point of departure, and people would then look to different sources to help answer variations of the “what is it?” inquiry. The conversations that followed open some interesting perspectives on what was considered relevant and valid knowledge to address this issue. In this section, I want to examine this qualification of relevance, with E. Summerson Carr’s (2010) value hierarchies as particular focus.

The object in the display case and the different Elders and community members present at any time in the exhibition were consistently the core of the conversations around the bowl. The label was sometimes consulted. Until November 2014, it read as follows:

▷  $\dot{\rho} \leq \rho \leq \delta \wedge$

[illegible]

URSHUUHIVIK

Dish, Still sticky from use in storing seal blubber. Wood, bone, metal

*From Roald Amundsen's collection from King William Island, 1903–1905.  
Repatriated from the Museum of Cultural History, Oslo, to the Nattilik  
Heritage Centre in Gjoa Haven in 2013.*

Two elements from the label text were frequently brought into further conversation: the Inuktitut name stated for the object, *urshuuhivik*, and the reference made to the Amundsen/Gjoa Haven Collection. The naming of the bowl will be further discussed below. Here, it is the reference to the Amundsen/Gjoa Haven Collection, and the ramifications of this for determining expertise and relevant knowledge, that I want to address.

The exhibition text made claims about the bowl—namely, that it came from the Gjoa Haven area, that Roald Amundsen had purchased it from Inuit he visited with here during his stay 110 years ago, and that it was an Inuit traditional artefact. Most local visitors, as discussed above, found these claims hard to reconcile with the object they were looking at. The label references to Amundsen and to the Museum of Cultural History (MCH) in Oslo made it relevant for people to pull me, as the person with ties to that museum, into conversation.

The resulting conversations followed a recurring pattern. People would very politely but insistently question how the MCH could make these claims about the bowl on display. My attempts to describe the collection and its documentation as applicable information in this setting were unsuccessful. I was not making sense, and obviously not addressing the question of “what is it?” in any relevant way.

The MCH collections' provenance documentation might speak to what this object was. It does so by way of traditional museum technologies, through cataloguing, documentation on provenance, comparative work done on collections from other regions and periods, and scholarly debate through the years.<sup>1</sup> I will return to some of these elements below in the discussion of labelling, but here the main point remains that, in the context of the memory work being done at the heritage centre, traditional museum documentation was mostly inadequate and irrelevant.

The discussion above about the materiality of the bowl is interesting here, as it proved to be the one area where the local concerns to some extent connected with expedition histories written in the south. People in Gjoa Haven were very aware of how limited access to wood had been in the area around King William Island, and they raised this point repeatedly as they discussed the bowl. Notably, however, nineteenth-century polar expedition history in this region is littered with abandoned and broken ships, left by expedition crews who went on to walk home, get picked up by other expeditions, or perish from the harsh conditions. Wreckage would have been available to local Inuit to use and recycle, as Elders in Gjoa Haven have noted in stories of people travelling to the wrecks to collect materials. The possibility that traditional objects were made from remains of the HMS *Erebus*—the Franklin Expedition ship rediscovered off the south west coast of King William Island during the summer of 2014—or the HMS *Terror*, discovered close to shore two years later, was brought up in conversations about the wrecks.

Amiria Henare (2003) discusses the use of objects to create typologies and theories about society and culture over time. In this setting in Gjoa Haven, objects are interrogated from a similar perspective: How does this bowl fit the typologies and knowledge established locally about the difference between the past and the present, life before and life as it is experienced now? The possible access to wood in the form of shipwrecks was not, in this situation, enough to make any dent in the disconnect surrounding this artefact.

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1. The bowl carries the MCH museum number UEM15546, inscribed in black ink on the artefact at the time of its registration in 1907 or 1908, and is part of the number series given to the Amundsen/Gjoa Haven Collection at the MCH. In the catalogue it is described as follows: "Oval, curved meat/blubber dish of wood; bottom beautifully carved in one piece, sides formed of a thin wooden ring, whose ends are secured with copper rivets and furnished with bone fittings. Diameter, length 47,5 cm., diameter, across 28,5 cm., height ca. 12 cm. King William Land." The collection identifies in total ten of these "blubber dishes" made from wood, all photographed and available through the digital sharing site [www.khm.uio.no/gjoahaven/](http://www.khm.uio.no/gjoahaven/). Garth J. Taylor, in his excellent publication on the collection, references the bowl thoroughly: "Similar wooden dishes have been reported from both the Copper Eskimo (Stefansson, 1914, 77, Fig. 24; Birket-Smith, 1945, 200–1, Figs. 165 and 167; Jenness, 1946, 73–4, Figs. 71–3) and the Iglulik (Mathiassen, 1928, 152, Fig. 94)" (1974, 138).

## **The Social Life of the Bowl II: The Elders' Workshops on the Amundsen/Gjoa Haven Collection**

The returned artefacts needed to be discussed and documented in detail by community Elders. The board of the Nattilik Heritage Centre emphasized the importance of the Elders' involvement and input during meetings in the summer of 2013, when further collaboration between the heritage centre and the MCH and research design were discussed. They considered documenting and discussing these objects central to their main objective of supporting and strengthening local Nattilik heritage, culture, and language. It was work that both the heritage centre and the MCH considered crucially important and wanted to support.

Funding was secured through the Canadian Heritage Museums Assistance Program, and the centre had been able to fill the new position of education and heritage coordinator. Work was planned on the displays at the heritage centre in October 2014 and the hope was to combine this work by organizing workshops where the objects could be discussed in detail.

Access to the artefacts for handling during the workshops was an important question. Upon return of the artefacts to Gjoa Haven, ownership was transferred to the Nattilik Heritage Centre. The artefacts were placed in a secure, climate-controlled display case in the heritage centre. Permission to remove them for handling during the workshops could only be granted through a decision by the board of directors.

The board's discussions concerning the planning of the workshops were extensive. From the outset, involving the entire community, and in particular youth, in the work with the objects was an important objective for the heritage centre. For these workshops, the board decided to give priority to Elders, a decision that was very much in tune with the general consensus in Gjoa Haven. Elders should have primary access, it was agreed, as they were the ones with the experience, knowledge, and authority to share with the heritage centre and the community if they so wished. The board discussed appropriate honorariums for the participating Elders to ensure proper respect for their knowledge and contributions to the workshops.

The issue of translation during the workshops also had to be addressed. The board wanted to secure the best interpreter services the community could offer. While Gjoa Haven Elders are mostly unilingual Inuktitut speakers, Gjoa Haven youth have English as their first language. The invitations, conversations, and stories shared would have to be translated into English to secure community access and availability of the knowledge. Even though we were not able to involve youth directly in the workshops, their position as the intended recipients and future caretakers of the knowledge was firmly established.

With the need to document the authority and expertise held by Elders concerning the traditional artefacts as point of departure, the board carefully deliberated on the best approach to circulate invitations to the workshops.

Participant numbers would have to be limited, both for security reasons and to facilitate conversation and exchange. The board decided that radio announcements inviting interested Elders to sign up would be most suitable. Thus, the invitation would be open to everyone.

Two workshops were planned for October 2014, with more to follow at a later date. It was decided to bring together one group of women and one group of men, each with five participants. This way, more Elders would have the opportunity to examine the objects and have different conversations in the two groups. We would be able to bring the artefacts from the display case to the table to be examined one by one. The Elders would have the opportunity to share any comments and stories about them.

On the morning of October 7, we gathered around the table in the boardroom at the Nattilik Heritage Centre, ready to get to work. The hamlet had given our five Elders, all men for this first workshop, rides to the centre, and the community had helped provide refreshments. The tea, sugar, and whitener had been passed around the table, more teaspoons found, and we had discussed the issue of drinking water, as one of the Elders asked that we get fresh cold lake water for them to drink during the workshop. The paperwork was dealt with, and we had discussed the work we were going to do, how food and coffee needed to be kept in the boardroom, and how wearing gloves would be important while working with the objects. The Elders felt that we also needed to discuss the shape of the conversations that were to follow—in short, how we were going to work.

The question raised was, who would speak to the objects first? One Elder presented his concern over his own age. As he was the youngest Elder present, he told the group he would not feel comfortable speaking first. Older Elders, with more years, more experience, and thus more knowledge, should be the first to talk. His point was well received, and the group quickly sorted out amongst themselves the order based on age. The person to talk first was never in doubt, as Jonathan Hiqiniq was present. His position as maybe the oldest person in Gjoa Haven at that time was well known. We could enter the exhibit and get to work (Figure 2).

We had two full days available to work with the returned objects with this group of Elders. After lunch on the second day, people were tired. Examining, documenting, and discussing traditional material culture from nine in the morning until five in the afternoon is hard work. The group was working its way through the artefacts in the display case. Now, the time had come to bring out the bowl.

As with the other objects, the bowl was brought from the display case and placed it in the middle of the worktable. The bowl was by now a well-known stranger, an object stubbornly disconnected from the complex of traditional knowledge we were working within and anchoring other objects in the display case to. The group sat back and waited for Jonathan Hiqiniq to open the



**Figure 2.** Elders discussing the bowl in workshops at the Nattilik Heritage Centre, 2014. Photo by the author.

conversation. As his eyesight was an issue, Hiqiniq pulled the bowl over to study it carefully. He then looked up at the rest of us and said, “It’s an *iliviaq*.” This was the first time the bowl was named, labelled, locally in any sort of definite manner. We finally had the answer to the question “what is it?”

The group took this in stride. Given Jonathan Hiqiniq’s position of authority and respect, both in the community and at this table, everyone listened carefully to his naming of the bowl. The Elders went on to explore what this being an *iliviaq* would imply. How did this naming of the bowl affect it, and how would it affect the way the bowl was understood? Two of the other Elders remarked they had heard this word *iliviaq* before but had not known what it referred to. Leo Hummiqtuq talked about a well-known legend story, the one about Totalak, that only now, having identified an *iliviaq*, did he understand what the story meant. He never did before. In the story, the grandmother of Totalak teaches him to keep his breath underwater for long periods by having him practice with an *iliviaq*. Now, looking at the bowl, he could see how the grandmother taught her grandson. Seeing this object helped him make sense of the story.





The *iliviaq* created excitement. It was, in a sense, the big discovery of these workshops, shared amongst everyone there. For Mary Aqirgiaq, this is a matter of connecting something she knew about, the *iliviaq*, with its material reality, the artefact in the displays. Before the workshop, the bowl did not have a name. No one was able to situate it or connect it to the past and the knowledge of which the Elders are the stewards and transmitters. The naming and the connection, the relationship it points to, made all the difference (DeSilvey 2013; Edwards, Gosden, and Phillips 2006).

The identification of an artefact in the museum context follows different paths. This artefact was established as part of the collection in Oslo through its museum number. The ink inscription of “15546,” originally applied in Oslo in 1907 or 1908, is now part of the artefact. In the museum catalogue it is identified as *spækfad* or blubber dish. In other words, it is its function that provides the label. The first attempts at labelling the bowl for the Nattilik Heritage Centre displays ran into just this issue. Unable to figure out the bowl’s proper name, it was described with the term *urshuubivik*, blubber dish. This was not at all, as the discussion above details, seen as relevant or interesting in the memory work the community was engaging in to see if this artefact could in fact be situated as part of their material heritage.

Other terms have been discussed for these and similar bowls. The Kitikmeot Heritage Society identifies a similar bowl in their displays as *Qiuk Akkiutaq*, wooden dish. Birket-Smith (1945, 97–102) uses the term *bikzak*, blubber trays. Other literature refers to similar bowls from the region as bentwood bowls. While an involved and informed discussion on Inuktitut dialects and terminology is beyond this paper, what is interesting to note here is the importance accorded in the discussions among Elders and others in Gjoa Haven to finding the right term, the label that creates and anchors the connection needed for this object to make sense.

By introducing the *iliviaq* to the community, Jonathan Hiqiniq provided the context and frame of reference the object had been missing, until that time. This was how it was related to Inuit traditional material culture. This is what it took to accept the object and to see it as belonging in the heritage centre, in the displays and in local tradition. It was the crucial contribution that made all the difference in proving provenance and belonging to people in Gjoa Haven.

## Discussion and Conclusion

Artefacts that are part of object-return relationships between museums and source communities habitually have considerable and specific expectations put on them (e.g., Fienup-Riordan 1998; Clavir 2002; Peers and Brown 2003). They are talked about and described as potential agents of change. They are expected to contribute to local efforts in building closer relationships with the past, traditional practices, and identity, and thus strengthen the community and



prepare young people to better handle future challenges by relying on tradition and the past. In short, they are expected to be part of memory work, and to contribute to specific political and cultural projects (DeSilvey 2013).

The term *iliviaq* was established through the workshops as the proper name for the bowl the same week that we were sending the final proofs to the printers for updated display labels at the Nattilik Heritage Centre. The labels bring us back to the beginning of this paper, and the discussion between the Elders about what the object they were looking at on the computer screen could be called. The conclusion then was that the best thing to do would be to label this object an *urshuuhivik*, based on the comments in the catalogue about its relation to seal blubber, and for lack of a better term. It was not its name, though; the Elders explicitly stated that they did not know what this was. As the *iliviaq* was established as its proper name during the workshop in the fall of 2014, we could update the label to indicate that this object now had a name.

An interesting twist to this scenario comes to light if we return to the conversation between the two Elders who were working on the first generation of display labels. After having expressed their complete bafflement, and before they concluded that *urshuuhivik* would be the best solution to the conundrum put before them, they did in fact touch on *iliviaq* as a possible name. The interpreter summarized this discussion between the Elders: “They have heard of the word *iliviaq*, but have no idea what it is. Made for washing hands? But those days they did not wash hands. Perhaps, in ancient language there is such a word as *iliviaq*, which is used for putting objects into and also where leftover food is kept.” The interpreter followed up with his own comment: “It’s beyond me....It’s hard to believe that they could make something like this, without a proper tool, and make it look so neat.”

Between this conversation and the workshop where Jonathan Hiqiniq brought the term up again, things had obviously changed, perhaps because of the artefact’s presence in the community. Looking at an object is a very different experience from looking at photos of an object. Furthermore, the workshops gave the Elders the opportunity to study the artefacts closely, turn them and handle them, not just look at them through the glass of the display case.

With the extensive respect accorded to Elders in the community comes a responsibility to help guide others. Respect is based on experience and knowledge acquired through a long life. When Jonathan Hiqiniq chose to introduce the bowl as *iliviaq*, and other Elders chose to follow him and take up this naming, time and careful consideration were the backdrop.

An *iliviaq* belongs in the heritage centre displays in Gjoa Haven. It is anchored in traditional knowledge and past practice, maybe construed differently from some other traditional objects here (e.g., the seal hunting harpoon), but nonetheless anchored. The process of memory work expected of returned objects in some sense comes full circle with the *iliviaq*, as the direct relationship anchored in a shared past between people and object was recognized (DeSilvey 2013).

After the workshop, with the new case labels up, the conversations around the bowl in the Nattilik Heritage Centre took on a different hue. When the question “what is it?” came up with visitors, others would be quick to point out that this was, in fact, an *iliviasq*, identified as such by Jonathan Hiqiniq and other Elders. The Elders had established the bowl as belonging. The value assigned to the object (Henry, Otto, and Wood 2013), its relevance and the relationship established, was redefined—not through museum documentation or expedition history, but through a thorough and exacting local interrogation into its materiality and engagement with traditional knowledge.

The conversations about the *iliviasq* continue in Gjoa Haven and elsewhere. While the artefact now has a name, and a sense of context and belonging, it is still without the richness of making (Ingold 2013) that surrounds most other traditional objects in the displays. A name indicates belonging. The *iliviasq*’s “entanglements of ongoing social, spatial, temporal and material trajectories and relationships, dislocations and relocations” (Basu 2017, 2) are not at an end with this. What attention and importance the *iliviasq* might require and be accorded in future depends on ongoing processes of memory work in the community. Repatriation is, maybe, best viewed as a continued engagement between people and objects, in all their various entanglements.

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