June 6, 2022, Stockholm, Sweden: A signing ceremony was held in the afternoon of June 3rd, 2022, at the residence of Mexican Ambassador to Sweden Francisco del Rio Lopez formally authorizing the transfer of the sacred Maaso Kova back to the Yaqui Nation and its cultural leaders, the culmination of a 19-year struggle by the Yaqui and the International Indian Treaty Council (IITC) to achieve its repatriation. The document was signed by representatives of the Swedish and Mexican Governments, the Yaqui Traditional Authorities, the Maaso Kova Cultural leaders committee, and the International Indian Treaty Council, as well as the UN Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Francisco Cali Tzay as an international witness. The Maaso Kova will be accompanied by a collection of other cultural items which were acquired in Mexico in the 1930's by the Swedish Museums of World Culture.
The Maaso Kova (ceremonial deer's head) was found on August 11, 2003, on display in the Museum by IITC Executive Director Andrea Carmen, member of the Yaqui Nation, following an event hosted by the Sami Council of Sweden commemorating the International Day of Indigenous Peoples. The Yaqui cultural leaders and the IITC, with the support of the Sami Council and Parliament of Sweden immediately begin a campaign to bring the Maaso Kova home.

The UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, the Expert Mechanism on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and the UN Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, as well as Indigenous Peoples from around the world supported this repatriation effort and the Rights of the Yaqui to repatriation of this item of highest spiritual and cultural significance, based on Articles 11 and 12 of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. The Swedish government announced on May 5th, 2022, its agreement to support the repatriation, following the Museum's agreement in March 2020 as a result of a “country engagement” carried out by the EMRIP, as requested by the IITC and the Yaquis in 2019.

Juan Gregorio Jaime Leon, representative of the Traditional Authorities of Huirivis Pueblo, Rio Yaqui, member of the Kolensia (the Yaqui spiritual society related to the deer dance) and a Board member of IITC was one of the Yaqui delegates who participated in the signing of the document of agreement on behalf of the Yaqui Traditional Authorities. He stated “the Maaso Kova which has been used in the deer dance is a living being for us of highest spiritual value. The Yaqui Traditional Authorities have stated that it must be returned to the Yaqui Traditional Authorities and cultural leaders directly, not through any intermediaries including the Mexican Institute of Anthropology. They have also stated that it should not be displayed again in any museum or university. We are very pleased that the Mexican Secretary of International Relations has agreed to support these positions”.

Also attending in representation of the 8 Yaqui Pueblos of Sonora Mexico were the second governor of Yaqui Vicam Pueblo, Dolores Gonzalez Buitimea and Felipe Alvarez Garcia, Vasario (Elder advisor) of Potam Pueblo. Juan Luis Humo of Pascua Yaqui Pueblo in Arizona, Co-chair of the Maaso Kova Committee, and Andrea Carmen, focal point for communications with the States and United Nations for the Yaqui Authorities and the Maaso Kova Committee, were also designated to attend. Saul Vicente Vazquez, Director of International Affairs for the Mexican National Institute of Indigenous Peoples, accompanied the delegation in a support capacity. Representatives of the Sami Parliament and Sami Council of Sweden, who have offered unwavering support to the call for repatriation of the Maaso Kova from the beginning, also attended the signing ceremony.

The Yaqui delegation accepted the offer by the Mexican Secretary of External Relations to send the items, which were packed by the museum in two large metal cases, directly to Rio Yaqui in Northern Mexico by diplomatic envoy to ensure that they will arrive safety without being opened by anyone or inspected by customs. This process will be underway in the coming days. Representatives of the Yaqui Authorities will meet the Maaso Kova and other items when they arrive in Mexico City in the coming days and will accompany them home to Rio Yaqui.

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