
Structural Fills: Preservation and Conservation in a Museum of Living Anthropology

by Tony R. Chavarria

In eras past, the study and interpretation of Native Americans was conducted on an uneven playing field. Genuine interest and respect concerning indigenous cultures notwithstanding, the relationship between these groups was primarily one of authority/subject. Native groups in the American Southwest served as producers of material culture, practitioners of exotic ceremony, labor for excavations, and custodians of museums. I wish to share some thoughts and observations on museum practices and the always-evolving relation to the indigenous tribes of the Southwest. As a non-conservator, I hope to create discussion and dialogue among conservators and between sometimes-disparate groups. Through this, differences of worldview and training can occasionally merge into common goals.

For nearly a century, the Museum of Indian Arts and Culture/ Laboratory of Anthropology (MIAC/LAB) in Santa Fe, New Mexico has been a catalyst in the study and interpretation of Southwestern Peoples. Its mission is to be a place of relevant education, research, and exhibition by utilizing neighboring tribal communities as resources of culture and knowledge to be applied in all areas of museum practice.

Given past relationships there continues to be an initial barrier of mistrust when it comes to museum consultation. Based in the heart of the nineteen pueblos and the Navajo and Apache nations, and an institution whose past is steeped in Southwestern archaeology and anthropology, MIAC/LAB is in an ideal position which it has yet to take full advantage of. To an idealist, a museum can be a prism where the diverse spectrum of knowledge, lifeways, and practice exist from a shared light.

The Participant/Observer.

I am a curator of ethnology and a member of a Southwestern Pueblo tribe. These identities merge, compliment, and clash. As a museum person it is my role and responsibility to preserve, curate, and educate using the holdings and resources of the institution. As a Kha'pong or person from Santa Clara, I also have responsibilities and obligations most severe. Conflicting worldviews create a dissonance within.

Joyce Begay-Foss, Director of Education at MIAC/LAB has said on varying occasions, "I am an Indian first and a state employee second." This statement expresses the tightrope walked by the native museum/preservation professional. The line passes through minefields of suspicion, internal schisms, family conflict, and religious restriction. Once an anthropologist told me that I could be "the next Alfonso Ortiz." Though Dr. Ortiz is respected and held in some esteem in the anthropological community, the comment was somewhat terrifying to me. What I knew was that Dr. Ortiz became to a degree ostracized and was often criticized within the Pueblos. Acceptance in a profession at the expense of losing a connection to my home seemed too great of a price. Yet, Dr. Ortiz also heralded the evolution of indigenous peoples having roles in academic interpretation and the broader realm of identity, which continues to this day.

As Charles Cambridge, Ph.D. and Dine' stated, "Since European contact, American Indians have socially flowed through multi-tribal and ethnic cultural settings within the reservation, rural, and urban areas. Indians are faced with modernity and the race to meet the standards of material well being. Progress, political reality, materialism, and development set limits upon and individual social identification within a tribal setting. In this light, the exporting of alien cultural values is challenging the traditional concept of tribal cultural boundaries. This tends to redefine the Indian self in new forms of identities that are not within the traditional fixed characteristics of a traditional culture."(Cambridge, *American Indian Identity: The Never Ending Story*).

What I believed I could do, and continue to believe, is that by using my advantageous position as a resource from the museum to the native communities and from the communities to museums, I can try to educate both sides to the other's perspective. And this is a long, difficult, and frustrating process. Being Pueblo and curator is not the best match. In performance reviews I have been taking to task for not displaying enough "leadership," that is assuming projects, giving orders, and taking on a dominant role over subordinates. Exhibiting traditional leadership roles of self-sacrifice, group management, and quiet discussion does not meet American expectations.

Evolving Ideas

If a museum is to act in consultation with indigenous groups, there must be a shift in how these interactions develop and how success is mapped. As Nancy Mithlo has advocated the use of Indigenous Knowledge Systems in academic thought, these systems can also be applied in a museum. By recognizing the validity of traditional use and care, and the cultural constructs behind these practices, a deeper knowledge and potential for education and collaboration can be achieved. This will become increasingly important in the future as the MIAC/LAB regains the physical custody of human remains and re-associated funerary objects.

Past consultations have largely been in the realm of ceremonial objects. It will take a sensitive and delicate touch to work with affiliated groups. An attitude of, "hey, we have all these bones of yours, come and get 'em" will not create the relationships desired. Repatriation in this case cannot be the goal, meaningful consultation must be. Results must be measured in how comfortable a tribe is in working with the museum. Elements of conservation, preservation, and interpretation are shared. We only need to find a shared level to communicate.

In the past four years I have slowly initiated consultations with several conservative Pueblo groups and have let them proceed at their own pace. I have made the decision to follow a community timeline and not push the issue. In these informal discussions, I have not necessarily acted in a curatorial role but have allowed my self to be naïve. By seeking dialogue rather than repatriation, our interactions turn from being between a museum and tribal authority, to a quiet talk

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of common interests. I try to find the appropriate persons to speak to depending on the area of consultation. These people can be artists, government officials, or keepers of religious knowledge, and in some instances, all of these roles can be found in one person.

Federal law (NAGPRA) dictates that consultation and any repatriation can only occur via official tribal representatives. In the Southwest, many Pueblos have strong systems of external governance and internal religious organization, not always in confluence with each other. Yet in many instances, it is only in these internal ceremonial structures that the knowledge is to be found to identify accurately objects and make recommendations for disposition. It requires a determined effort and finesse on the part of the museum staff as they seek genuine keepers of knowledge while working through governments. They must know when to be active and when to sit back and let things proceed of their own accord.

Progress should not be measured in results such as repatriations, but in the ongoing dialogue with tribes. The consultation process can be a method to establish a level of trust and understanding; the prospect is to create ongoing relationships with governments and people. The experience is symbiotic. Over time, tribal representatives will have a deeper insight into the museum, its mission, staff, and collections; and the museum will gain a deeper understanding of the cultures it represents. By open and quiet dialogue, respect and a fragile trust can be built and must always be nurtured. Repatriation is not always a conclusion. Consultation and beneficial relationship is the ongoing hope. The tensions of the past combined with the Pueblo adaptation of secrecy can be a formidable barrier. But it can be overcome by opening up buildings and minds.

Excavating a New Century

In a museum that exhibits culture, a visitor can learn from what is not exhibited as much as by what is. By an open examination of conservation, issues of cultural property, cultural perspectives of rights-of-knowledge, and preservation, restrictions become opportunities. This establishes a base for consultation to occur beyond the realm of NAGPRA. By reaching out to tribal government officials and traditional religious leaders (whom I consider curators and preservationists) and establishing open dialogue regarding all elements of the museum, we can create symbiotic investments in each other.

Working together on programs, exhibitions, and storage, it is possible to learn about the roles of anthropology, archaeology, arts, and conservation. As many tribes seek revitalization, we can create a value in western models of information gathering, conservation, and preservation. In turn, a museum can explore different modes of interpretation. As the human animals we are, we can adapt to the new environment we have created for ourselves. By seeking an honest appreciation of the cultures which birthed the objects we care for, we fulfill the goals of our visions.