

“NAGPRA and Tribal Diversity within the Repatriation Process”

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When following the regulations of the 1990 Native American Graves Protection & Repatriation Act, it may seem confusing and daunting as to how to proceed. The law is pretty straight forward: there is a legal mandate in place that any institution that receives, or has received in the past, ANY FEDERAL FUNDING must repatriate the Native American human remains, funerary objects, sacred objects, and objects of cultural patrimony that they currently hold within their collections.

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However, NAGPRA does not explain how that process is to be handled. What are the protocols? What is the best way to reach out to an institution or a tribal community? And how do we make sure that “faux pas” do not occur? What should we do, and what shouldn't we do?

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These questions are not easily answered due to the fact that no one answer is going to work for *all* tribal communities. For tribes are extremely diverse – in their culture, their languages, their belief systems, and their rich knowledge of how to live life in a good and meaningful way. And specifically, how to care for and handle ancestral remains, the grave goods that were buried with them, the ceremonial objects of individuals, and the sacred objects that exist for the community as a whole.

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The best that we can do, to make sure that the repatriation process is followed in a careful and mindful manner, is to share some of those philosophical differences, and to be aware of some of the questions that need to be asked.

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The few examples that I will be sharing are my own understanding of various tribal cultural protocols specifically surrounding the issue of repatriation – some of these are

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from my own Anishinaabe cultural knowledge, and many others have been shared with me by members of other tribal nations.

It is my own onus if my interpretation of these protocols are skewed, or if I am not entirely correct in my description. I will only share what I know as appropriate, and I will not be sharing information that has been relayed to me but should not be public knowledge.

But even then, if I am incorrect in my explanations, I beg forgiveness from my friends and colleagues across North America, and I will act quickly to change this lecture; I have vetted this information through many people, but you never know.

And, in this important and imperative work, we all need to keep an open mind and be receptive to changing the way that we do things to make the process more appropriate, respectful, and positive.

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Which brings us to a theoretical methodology, a technique, that will aid you in the process. We utilize Oral History Research Methods, Collaborative Models of Project Planning, and other methods of preparing for the repatriation of human remains and cultural objects from museums and other institutions back to their originating communities.

But this process is demanding – both intellectually, and mentally. Through the Institute of American Indian Arts Museum Studies Program, both faculty and students came up with RHP – a technique to help us in both community-based research projects, and in the act of repatriation.

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RHP stands for: Respect, Humbleness (or Humility), and Pride. And if we keep these three techniques, these ways of living, in mind, it helps us to get through some difficult work. RHP is based upon some extremely ancient traditional theories – which are utilized by many tribal nations today and are embodied in many teachings. They seem pretty basic, but as with all deep and meaningful philosophies, they are multi-layered, and act as guidelines on many levels...some, yes, very basic, but some very deep and intricate.

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Respect:

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Always go into a situation with deep respect for the community that you are interacting with – whether this is with an individual, a tribal community as a whole, or a museum institution.

And part of this methodology is the need to conduct some research on that individual, community, institution. KNOW who you are talking to. Know some history, some background. You may not realize how important that person is – they may be following the technique of humbleness themselves!

Understand some of the protocol in place – do you bring a gift? Do you shake hands? What are the welcoming protocols of that culture, whether it be a tribe, or an institution? Who do we reach out to, first? What should we wear? Should we be prepared to don lab coats and wear gloves? Should we have our shoulders covered?

To know your host is to be respectful. And to go into a situation open-minded and ready to learn is the absolute height of respectfulness.

Make sure to listen. If your host is somewhat quiet, give them time to respond to your questions or comments. Our cultural differences may present themselves even in the way that we interact verbally with each other. Be aware of how your hosts are talking...louder or quieter than you are used to? Slower? Faster? Be aware, and allow others to interact the way that they are used to.

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Humbleness:

Be humble. Do not take it for granted that you know more than the person or persons standing in front of you. Like, ever. An 8-year old child will know more on some topics that we do. Even on the topics that we feel that we know quite a bit about. Again, it circles around to being open-minded to learning.

Now, a part of this technique is one that may be hard to follow, and it has a lot to do with historical “happenings” that we had nothing to do with. You may come into a community – tribal or institutional – where the interactions between the two groups has not always been copacetic, or healthy, or friendly, to put it mildly. You may find yourself a target of some hostility, due to the position that you are holding in this instance. For those of us who are both Native American, AND museum professionals, we get it on both ends, at times.

It's OK. Understand that a part of a healing process is anger. It's just how it is. Do not take it personally, and attempt to have some compassion and empathy for the person or persons who are lashing out. It's not you. There have been some very horrible things that

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have been conducted under the guise of science, of archaeology, of religion. And there are some strange preconceived notions about who we are as Native American people. Very strange. BUT. And we come to the third part of the RHP methodology...

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Pride:

On the other hand, be proud of who you are. *If* you are being careful not to disrespect others – by using the power of authority that you have to hurt your host and their community in any way – then do know that you, also, deserve respect.

Always hold your head up. Don't get flustered. Learn from the greatest of our leaders, and be graceful, and calm, and "keep it together"...even if your heart is beating a mile a minute. They didn't call us "stoic" for nothing. For this is also a way to respect others.

Allow them to see the amazing, kind person that you are, and that you are certain and dedicated in your commitment to make the museum field better, the archaeological field better, the voice of your community to be heard, and your commitment to work together to heal past pains and current injustices.

Be proud. Because we need you.

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OK. I'll now climb down off of my soapbox-slash-museum pedestal and quit preaching, and we can carry on...

There are many ways of looking at human remains, burials, ancestors, and sacred and ceremonial objects. If we have a basic, working knowledge of some of these ways, and why, we are then prepared to ask some intelligent, guided questions before we begin the process of repatriation.

For some cultures, once a person has gone on to the other realm, the body is simply a shell. This is true for many European and Western cultures. And this is why Native American beliefs surrounding remains is not always understood, nor respected. Or, why Native American people cannot understand what they see as the desecration of humans when those remains are disinterred (meaning, removed from their original burial site).

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For other cultures, such as the Plains tribes, to have an ancestor NOT buried on their traditional lands, means that the spirit cannot rest. That a Beloved is forced to be unhappy

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and lost for eternity. It is why the Lakota, and Cheyenne, and many others were such brave warriors in that they would go back in the midst of fighting to retrieve their fallen.

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And for other tribal communities, such as the Puebloan people of the Southwest or the Northwest people, those that have left this life are buried in specific ways depending upon their clans...and as with the Navajo (or Dine) people, through days upon days of ceremonial activity.

So, for many, many tribes, the re-interment (meaning, reburial) of an ancestor is highly problematic...WHERE do you bury the remains? WHO can do this? HOW? For such a thing is not a traditional event...there are no re-interment ceremonies in place. Well, elders and ceremonial leaders of some tribes are actually working on this due to necessity. For culture is adaptive. And tribes are actively working on how to appropriately handle the repatriation process.

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The same is true for burial objects. These were not meant to be taken away from their owners. What to do, then? For the museum collections records do not always state which objects were taken from which remains.

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Ceremonial objects: can they be brought back into use? Or have poisonous and toxic materials been applied to them...arsenic and lead-based insecticides, that were the cause of museum personnel's early deaths in the mid-1900s before it was realized how toxic these applications truly are, and were outlawed? If they are repatriated, will they do harm to the community in ways not thought of?

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But even beyond that, even if an object is not to be repatriated, there are objects that only women should handle, or only men should handle. There are objects that should only be brought out during specific times of the year, and those that should never be put on display.

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A dialogue needs to happen between all parties involved. And it can be an extremely slow process. Tribal leaders and knowledge holders are forced to make some really hard

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decisions...decisions that will effect the well-being of their communities, and future generations. At times, the repatriation process cannot move at a quick pace. Discussions, prayers, searches for answers, all need to happen first at the community level.

It's OK. Important things take time.

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Until then, institutions can act as repositories, or storage places, for these things. And alleviate the pain somewhat by caring for these objects and remains in the most appropriate manner possible based upon the originating community's ethical and philosophical needs.

Some may need to be removed from the rest of the collection and held in a highly secure space, where access is not available other than to tribal members. Or, they may need to be handled due to tribal protocols – as stated before, by only male or female staff members. Or, they may need to be “fed,” with offerings of tobacco, or corn meal, or prayer bundles, laid next to them.

All of these can be easily accommodated for, by using best practices of both museum collections and tribal protocols and techniques.

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We are treading in new territory, all of us. We are learning, and thinking, and doing things in different ways.

And we are not alone. Across the United States, and Canada, and South America, and the world, indigenous peoples are working to change the ways that museums collect and “tell” the stories of the cultures of the world.

And professionals in various fields – in archaeology, anthropology, osteology, archives, museology, conservation – are working on these same things. These fields are becoming something very different; richer. More inclusive. Deeper. Something new.

And we are here to be a part of this movement. To be actors on a new stage. Welcome, colleagues. We've been waiting for you.