

SECTION I

Chapter 2. MUSING ON TWO WORLD VIEWS

by TESSIE NARANJO (*Santa Clara*)

Two different ways of seeing the world come together at meetings of the NAGPRA Review Committee, with tribal members and museum representatives often on opposite sides of the room. Charter member Tessie Naranjo addresses the reasons why Native Americans do not share the assumption behind what museums do.

ONE FALL DAY IN 1991, I received an unexpected phone call from Dr. Francis P. McManamon, chief of the archeological assistance division at the National Park Service. Dr. McManamon introduced himself and began to ask a few questions. Given the reason for his call, I responded in detail.

Several weeks before, the governor of Santa Clara Pueblo had received a letter requesting applications for a position on the review committee for the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act. This letter was forwarded to my office—the Santa Clara cultural preservation program—along with a request from the governor that I respond.

I sent the necessary paperwork and was surprised when Dr. McManamon called requesting additional information. After several questions about my role in the community, he asked would I be willing to serve a five-year term on the committee. I said yes. My world has changed dramatically since that day.

In the course of my involvement with NAGPRA, I have read the statute many, many times. I have had the opportunity to discuss its meaning with a wide range of both traditional Native Americans and non-tribal people. One thing that has struck me is how differently these two groups define relationships.

Traditional Native Americans believe that everyone and everything exist in an integrated and pervasive system of relationships. One resident of Santa Clara Pueblo puts it this way: “We are part of an organic world in which interrelationships at all levels of life are honored. Our relations to the place we live—the land, water, sky, mountains, rocks, animal, plants—is tangible. Our sense of social relationships leads us to respect all who have gone before and all who will follow, our elders as well as our youth.”

Traditional Native Americans see an essential relationship between humans and the objects they create. A pot is not just a pot. In our community, the pots we create are seen as vital, breathing entities that must be respected as all other living beings. Respect for all life elements—rocks, trees, clay—is necessary because we understand our inseparable relationship with every part of our world.

This is why we honor our ancestors and the objects they created. This honoring allows us to remember our past and the natural process of transformation—of breathing, living, dying and becoming one with the natural world. Not even in death are we unrelated.

My understanding of relationships has been hard to reconcile with the non-tribal view. Consider museums. Human remains and cultural items are treated as non-living entities. Unacknowledged are the enduring relationships that traditional Native Americans maintain with their ancestors and their world.

I have come to realize that the staffs of most museums and agencies do not share our basic values and philosophic views. Museums certainly have had a great impact on traditional Native Americans and our perceptions of who we are. But we do not share the assumptions underlying what museums do: collection, preservation, documentation, and exhibition.

This difference in viewpoint surfaces in most of the activities surrounding NAGPRA. Encouragingly, this has led to a growing awareness among all those with a stake in repatriation.

Nowhere is this more apparent than at meetings of the committee. From the very first one—when six members were asked to nominate a seventh—decisions have been by consensus. This is the way of my people and the one with which I am most comfortable. The meetings are often more like open discussions than formal conferences. Decisions are made only after all members, as well as the public, get a chance to air their views. Thus far, all of our decisions have been unanimous.

When the committee held hearings in Hawaii on the remains of Pacific islanders, member Dr. Martin Sullivan, head of the Heard Museum, asked Indians in the group to talk about accepting spiritual testimony. Dr. Sullivan was sincerely trying to understand how we should assess this evidence.

During our Phoenix meeting last year there was animated discussion in which the public questioned the validity of scientific study. Leigh Jenkins, cultural preservation officer for the Hopi, stood up and in a gentle but certain voice talked about how his program works with archeological community to clarify issues about the past.

NAGPRA has brought together two completely different worldviews in a forum where people freely discuss their differences. This relationship, like any human relationship, is sometimes awkward, sometimes caring, and sometimes difficult. But it is a relationship that will continue.

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