

A Look At International Repatriation

By Dr. Betty White

When explorers from foreign lands first came into contact with this continent, they became the first to acquire such objects as those identified in recent U.S. repatriation law. Those early visitors often returned to their homelands with some of the oldest and most sacred of objects, as well as human remains and funerary objects. They are now found in museums across Europe, Canada, and Mexico. The current repatriation laws do not apply to collections held outside of the U.S., indicating the need for the establishment of international repatriation law.

The writers of repatriation law envisioned it as a measure to afford Native Americans the most basic of human rights: 1) to bury our dead and know that our graves, and those of our ancestors will remain undisturbed, and 2) to practice our religions, passed down through our traditions over the ages. One hallmark of the law established Native American testimony, oral history,

The American Indian Ritual Object Repatriation Foundation is a non-federally funded intercultural partnership committed to assisting in the return of sacred ritual material to American Indian nations and to educate the public about the importance of repatriation.



Members of the Blood Tribe of Alberta. From left to right: the late Daniel Weasel Moccasin, Rosaline Black Plume, Sylvia Weasel Head, Chris Weasel Head, and Frank Weasel Head. Photo courtesy of Gabrielle Hamilton.

and folklore as equal forms of evidence with the scientific fields of anthropology and archeology.

Not that long ago, museum collectors thought of funerary objects as "grave goods" or "booty." Their monetary value took on primary significance for those acquiring and trading them. Instead of realizing their significance as symbols of respect for departed loved ones, collectors reduced their value to a standard of profitability. Likewise, many objects central to maintaining native religions have long been held by museums, and in some instances, have created a void in the continuing expression of our faithful spiritual practitioners.

Ironically, most Tribal Elders and Medicine People possess greater

knowledge about specific objects than do the institutions. These individuals, because of their status (i.e., bundle keepers or pipe carriers), also may be the only appropriate people qualified to handle certain objects. For Tribes, repatriation often ranks as a high priority, but due to the expenses involved with research and travel to the various museums throughout the country (and soon the world), they often find themselves unable to pursue repatriation activity with the necessary consistency. Meanwhile, there are many life and death concerns each day that demand Tribes' limited resources. Most Tribes in the U.S. deal with unending cycles of poverty, unemployment, homelessness, inadequate health care, high crime, disproportionate imprisonment,

Welcome

I am happy to announce that Jack Trope, Esq., has joined our Board of Trustees.

Jack served as the Repatriation Foundation's counsel from our very beginnings in 1991 when he and I wrote the Constitution and By-laws for the Foundation. Over the years, Jack has submitted, on behalf of the Foundation, many letters of written testimony or comments to the Senate Select Committee on American Indian Affairs, the House Resources Committee, the NAGPRA Review Committee, and others. He has worked closely with our staff regarding legal issues surrounding repatriation. Recently, life has taken Jack to New Mexico, and a new job as Executive Director of the Western Division of Save the Children. The Foundation, however, did not want to lose Jack's expertise and ideas. Welcome as a Trustee, Jack, and thank you for all the years of excellent advice and support.

We are doubly blessed! Jason Harding (Tuscarora), most recently a Repatriation Research Specialist with the National Museum of the American Indian, is our new Repatriation Coordinator. Jason has been involved in the field since 1994 and his Master's thesis from SUNY Buffalo dealt with NAGPRA. Jason's knowledge and experience in repatriation adds enormously to the Foundation's ability to serve Native Nations across the country as well as private individuals interested in participating in the return of ceremonial material and funerary objects. Welcome Jason. Anne Cassidy, our Executive Director, and I are delighted to have you join us.

Elizabeth Sackler, Ph.D., President

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RETROSPECT/UPCOMING

✿ The Board of Trustees submitted formal comments to the NAGPRA Review Committee regarding its proposed Draft Principles of Agreement Regarding the Disposition of Culturally Unidentifiable Human Remains in September, 1999. Comments were considered by the Review Committee at its scheduled meeting in November in Salt Lake City. The full text of the comments may be found on the Foundation's website at www.repatriationfoundation.org.

✿ The Foundation submitted comments in November for consideration by a working group on repatriation established by three organizations in the United Kingdom: the Museums and Galleries Commission, the Museums Association, and the National Conference of Directors of National Museums. The working group met to consider a proposal for a repatriation resource center in the United

Kingdom. Moira Simpson, author of "Making Representations: Museums in the Post-Colonial Era," wrote the original proposal, and approached the Foundation.

✿ Jason Harding (Repatriation Coordinator) spoke to students at the Massachusetts School of Law in March. He discussed the "Kennewick Man" case in the context of the Native American repatriation movement and repatriation legislation.

✿ Anne Cassidy (Executive Director) will chair a session at the American Association of Museums annual meeting in Baltimore in May. The session, entitled "Implementing the Spirit of NAGPRA: Museum Practices Meet Native American Cultural Concerns," resulted from a proposal written and submitted by Pollyanna Nordstrand, Exhibit Planner, Harper's Ferry Center of the National Park Service.

Absolute Charter Granted by the Board of Regents State of New York

By Elizabeth Sackler, Ph.D.

The Repatriation Foundation is happy to announce that we have been granted an Absolute Charter by the Board of Regents of the State of New York. In the fall of 1991, a certificate of incorporation for a new organization, the American Indian Ritual Object Repatriation Foundation, was submitted by the Board of Trustees to the State of New York. When I began the application process with Neal Gantcher, Esq., we assumed that the Repatriation Foundation would be incorporated as a standard not-for-profit corporation, whose certificate of incorporation would be filed with the Department of State. However, the New York State Education Department felt that the Repatriation Foundation's mission qualified it as a cultural and educational resource more appropriately chartered in the manner of museums, historical societies, and libraries. Unlike certificates of incorporation filed with the Department of State, a charter of incorporation granted by the State Education Department is issued only after a careful evaluation of the quality of an organization's contribution to the cultural and educational life of New York.

In October 1991, I met with Drs. Louis Levine and Richard H. Manheimer in their offices at the New York State Museum, and discussed my philosophy and the standards and procedures that the Repatriation Foundation would be initiating in the return of ceremonial material to the First Peoples. They were supportive and excited by this innovative work and desired to oversee our new organization. The American Indian Ritual Object

Repatriation Foundation received a Provisional Charter on April 29, 1992. We were advised that after five years of meeting specific criteria, the Foundation could apply for an Absolute Charter.

The years have galloped by. The Foundation's work has kept staff and supporters busy. The paperwork needed to justify the granting of an Absolute Charter was assembled and filed at the end of the five-year period. In September 1999, we learned that the Office of External Services of the State Education Department had recommended that the Board of Regents replace our Provisional Charter with an Absolute Charter.

The Repatriation Foundation was granted an Absolute Charter on November 5, 1999. This honor acknowledges the contribution we have made to the repatriation movement, and the importance of intercultural partnership.

I thank the Board of Regents and am proud to share this wonderful news with you, our supporters.

In Print

Studying Native America; Problems and Prospects. Russel Thornton (ed.) Madison and London: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1998. Thornton, a Cherokee professor of anthropology, offers a collection of critical essays from Native American and European American scholars that focus upon issues faced by Native Americans that warrant academic study. They critique the flaws and inadequacies of present academic treatments of Native Americans. Thornton's chapter, entitled, "Who Owns Our Past: The Repatriation of Native American Human Remains and Cultural Objects," serves as an excellent overview of the repatriation movement and its implications for, and relationship to, the academic study of Native American cultures. (Review by Ken Lokensgard)

Perspectives

The Repatriation of Land

By Winona LaDuke, Mississippi Band of Anishinaabeg
Founding Director
White Earth Land Recovery Project (WELRP)



Winona LaDuke. Photo courtesy of Keri Pickett.

Making the connection between the return of land and the repatriation of our relatives is simple when one sees how human beings are part of the earth's cycles, in life and death. I live on an Anishinaabeg reservation called White Earth in northern Minnesota, where I work on land, culture, and environmental issues locally through an organization called the White Earth Land Recovery Project and nationally through a Native foundation called Honor the Earth.

We, the Anishinaabeg, are a forest culture. Our creation stories, culture and way of life are entirely based on the forest, source of our medicinal plants and food, forest animals, and birch-bark baskets.

Virtually my entire reservation was clear cut at the turn of the century. In 1874, Anishinaabe leader Wabunoquod said, "I cried and prayed that our trees would not be taken from us, for they are as much ours as is the reservation." In 1889 and 1890, Minnesota led the country in lumber production, and the state's northwest region was the leading source of timber. Two decades later, 90 percent of White Earth land was controlled by non-Indians and our people were riddled with diseases. Many became refugees in nearby cities. Today, three-fourths of all tribal members live off the reservation. Ninety percent of our land is still controlled by non-Indians.

There is a direct link in our community between the loss of biodiversity – the loss of animal and plant life – and the loss of the material and cultural wealth of the White Earth people. But we have resisted and are restoring. Today, we are in litigation against logging expansion, and the White Earth Land Recovery Project works to restore the forests, recover the land, and restore our traditional forest culture. Our experience is shared with many others. But it is not only about Native people.

In the final analysis, the survival of Native America is fundamentally about the collective survival of all human beings. The question of who gets to determine the destiny of the land, and of the people who live on it – those with the money or those who pray on the land – is a question that is alive throughout society.

Human beings exist as the land's relations. The return of land to the White Earth people is no different than the return of our ancestors and our religious items; it reverses a destructive cycle of spiritual, environmental and cultural devastation.

Winona LaDuke, Mississippi Band of Anishinaabeg, is the Founding Director of the White Earth Land Recovery Project (WELRP) located on the White Earth Reservation in Minnesota. In 1987, Ms. LaDuke authored Last Standing Woman, a critically acclaimed account of seven generations of Anishinaabeg. Most recently she published, All Our Relations, Native Struggles for Land and Life, a non-fiction account of how various Native Communities are fighting the environmental degradation of their territories. Winona LaDuke has been on the Repatriation Foundation's Advisory Committee since 1996.

orphans, etc. As a result, there is little left for Tribes to apply to the monumentally expensive and time-consuming tasks involved with repatriation from U.S. museums, let alone international ones.

The next hurdle in moving forward with the well-intentioned repatriation laws based in the U.S. is to coordinate and fund a project that would:

- Support the travel and research expense of Tribes' repatriation efforts with museums across Europe, Canada, Mexico, and the U.S.
- Establish international legislation that would require European, Canadian, and Mexican museums to conduct repatriation with U.S. tribes
- Obtain access to and inventory European, Canadian, and Mexican museums' Native American collections
- Disseminate all compiled inventories to the appropriate indigenous groups
- Prepare and train Tribal technicians to deal with research, legal, and financial resources and needs.

These points won't come as a shock to anyone who has been involved with repatriation in the U.S. within

the past decade. In my experience, the direct consultation of Native people, the face-to-face meetings and honest talk derived from those meetings are truly the best way for repatriation to proceed.

When one of my former researchers and I traveled to Alberta, Canada, to complete a consultation with the Blood Tribe, invaluable exchanges occurred and positive relationships were made. No substitute exists for meetings like the one we had with the Blood and as a result, a very amicable and agreeable return was able to take place. These types of meetings will be critical in dealing with international museums. The above plan illustrates how Tribes may be able to gain a foothold in a historically inaccessible arena.

Dr. Betty White is an enrolled member of the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes of the Flathead Reservation, Montana. She earned her Doctorate in Education from Montana State University and a Masters of Arts in History Museum Studies from the State University of New York, Cooperstown. She has served as the Repatriation Manager of the National Museum of the American Indian, Director of the People's Center, a Tribal Cultural Center in Pablo, MT, and Director of Native American Studies at Salish-Kootenai College. She currently resides in Montana developing an international repatriation project for Native Nations residing within U.S. borders.

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Staff: Anne Cassidy, Executive Director; and Jason Harding, Repatriation Coordinator.

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