

PAPERS FROM THE THIRD, FOURTH, AND SIXTH

NAVAJO STUDIES CONFERENCES



*Naadaáá' nihi ch'iyáán at'é.
Nihíí nahaghá bit naazt'i'.
Binahjí' óhoo'aah dóó
na'nitin. 'Éigi 'át'éego
naaltsoos hadiilyaa.
Bits'aa doo óhoo'aah dooleet.*

PRESERVING NAVAJO TRADITIONAL LIFE

REPATRIATION OF SACRED LIFE

Elizabeth A. Sackler

The American Indian Ritual Object Repatriation Foundation



Reuben Snake wanted to know, not long ago, why I am organizing (founding, if you will) the American Indian Ritual Object Repatriation Foundation. I answered: I don't know. Tapestries of life are intricate. I awoke from a most incredible dream one morning and four days later walked into Sotheby's Auction House in New York and purchased three "masks" to return to their home, two Hopi and one that Sotheby's described as "probably Navajo."

Newspaper articles across this country headlined my comments: it is the right thing to do; there is a difference between that which is sacred to the ceremonial life of a living culture and that which we call "art." Sacred material culture, life spirit, is not art, cannot be bought and sold. The phone calls, letters and telegrams of thanks that I received in the weeks that followed were extraordinary. One man from Brooklyn, New York, sent \$50 saying he wanted to be part of the return. Indeed, many said that if they had the money, they would have done the same. Practically everyone expressed joy at the "morality" of the act. As I absorbed the expressions of gratitude that came pouring in, I felt inspired; many people want to participate in whatever ways they can in the repatriation process, and they want to know how.

The American Indian Ritual Object Repatriation Foundation exists for people to work together to bring spirit home.

PURPOSE, GOALS, AND FUNCTIONS

The American Indian Ritual Object Repatriation Foundation is a partnership of Indian and non-Indian people committed to the repatriation of sacred objects to American Indian nations.

Our organization will be available to collectors, art dealers, individuals, corporations, and other donors as a conduit for accepting gifts of sacred material culture to be returned to their American Indian nation of origin. Donors will receive tax deductions allowable by law. The foundation will ensure that each return is made in accordance with necessary ceremonial requirements of the receiving nation. The donor will receive a work of art by a contemporary Indian artist as a special thank you, an exchange.

The foundation will need regional advisors who will assist us in making contact with the appropriate clan, council, or spiritual group and when necessary continue to be a liaison throughout the repatriation process. In some geographic areas, because of either numbers of tribes or the sensitivity required to facilitate the process, there will be a standing representative or representatives for the tribe to the foundation.

A.I.R.O.R.F. will also help to educate the general public about the significance of sacred material culture and the importance of their return home. This will be accomplished by publishing pamphlets and books as well as sponsoring seminars and conferences. A corporation in New York has agreed to underwrite the publishing division of the foundation. Our first book will introduce the importance of and challenges inherent in the repatriation movement. The foundation is currently discussing a joint venture with the American Association of Museums to distribute this book, the first of its kind. Thus, it will be available not only to the general public but to museum personnel who are fast approaching repatriation of sensitive material currently in their possession.

Acting as a liaison, the foundation will be able to assist museums with repatriating sensitive material, and locating and contacting American Indian individuals who are going to be needed to authenticate and escort home sacred objects identified for repatriation.

A travel fund will provide matching grants to share costs of travel, room, and board from nation to museum for individuals needed to participate in the repatriation process.

The provenance committee is being organized by Lynne Harlan (Cherokee), curator at the Institute of American Indian Arts in Santa Fe. This committee will consist of twelve research associates, American Indian specialists from across the country. An associate will do research and provide collectors in possession of sacred material with the historical provenance, the cultural and spiritual significance that can be shared, and any pertinent curatorial information.

The purpose is to educate people to know and understand as much as possible about that which they possess. Knowledge and understanding often leads to respect and a desire to do what is right. Collectors who participate in the repatriation of that which they hold, as well as refuse to purchase sacred objects, may alter the market for sacred material that the art market is currently exploiting.

The Repatriation Foundation will be a resource to American Indian nations preparing to receive sacred material culture from both the private and public sectors. Rick Hill (Tuscarora), Museum Director of the Institute for American Indian Art; Reuben Snake (Winnebago), Spiritual Leader, Dean of the Center for Research and Cultural Exchange and past Executive Director of the Congress of American Indians; and Walter Echo-Hawk (Pawnee), Senior Staff Attorney for the Native American Rights Fund, are members of the Board of Trustees of this new foundation. As respected religious, legal, and organization leaders, their consideration and advice will be invaluable in solving problems and answering questions that will be faced by all nations as repatriation begins.

Rick Hill has spoken to me about the priority of publishing guidelines, models, and approaches for American Indian nations faced with the enormous challenge of preparing for repatriation. In October of 1991 I submitted to the State of New York the application for the not-for-profit incorporation for this foundation. Shortly thereafter an invitation was extended to us to become an organization provisionally chartered by the State of New York. In five years time we will have the opportunity to be reviewed for an absolute charter, which is normally reserved for museums, libraries and historical societies.

What this means is that New York State recognizes the American Indian Ritual Object Repatriation Foundation as an institution of education and transition. The New York State Education Department will be looking toward us to help establish standards and procedures for the repatriation of sacred objects belonging to the American Indians. These standards and procedures have the potential to become a model for organizations across the country. This appears to be a turning point.