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Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/iss/3447>

DOI: 10.4000/iss.3447

ISSN: 2306-4161

Publisher

ICOM - International Council of Museums

Printed version

Date of publication: 18 December 2021

Number of pages: 150-158

ISBN: 978-92-9012-446-7

ISSN: 2309-1290

Electronic reference

Alyce Sadongei, "Connectedness and Relationship: Foundations of Indigenous Ethics Within the Tribal Museum Context", *ICOFOM Study Series* [Online], 49-1 | 2021, Online since 18 December 2021, connection on 08 January 2022. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/iss/3447> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/iss.3447>

Connectedness and Relationship: Foundations of Indigenous Ethics Within the Tribal Museum Context

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ABSTRACT

The museum field has long been guided by professional ethics designed to articulate shared values related to the core functions of museums. Ethics provide standards for operations and define the goals and expectations of the museum professional as well as the museum institution. Indigenous ethics defy codification and are realized by lived experience informed by generational transmission of language and culture. Indigenous ethics are derived from worldview and epistemology. A foundational goal of Indigenous ethics is to become fully human, knowing one's relationship to land, family, village and self. Drawing on a career history of working tribal museums, this paper will demonstrate how Indigenous ethics are applied in a tribal museum context. By having an increased awareness of Indigenous ethics, mainstream museums can be better equipped to honor those ethical expressions when they work with tribal researchers, curators and collaborators.

Key words: Indigenous ethics, lived experience, tribal museums.

RESUMÉN

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El área relacionada con los museos se ha guiado desde hace mucho tiempo por una ética profesional diseñada para articular valores compartidos relacionados con las funciones básicas de los museos. Esa ética proporciona estándares para las operaciones y define las metas y expectativas de los profesionales del museo, así como de la institución misma del museo. La ética indígena desafía esa codificación y se realiza mediante la experiencia vivida, informada por la transmisión generacional de su lengua y su cultura. La ética indígena se deriva de la cosmovisión y la epistemología. Un objetivo fundamental de la ética indígena es llegar a ser plenamente humano, conociendo su relación con la tierra, la familia, el pueblo y el yo. Basándose en una historia profesional de museos tribales en funcionamiento, este documento demostrará cómo se aplica la ética indígena en un contexto de museo tribal. Al tener una mayor conciencia de la ética indígena, los museos convencionales pueden estar mejor equipados para honrar esas expresiones éticas cuando trabajan con investigadores tribales, curadores y colaboradores.

Palabras claves: ética indígena, experiencia vivida, museos tribales.



Introduction

Ethics and how they are applied to museums focuses on adhering to standards for governance, programs and collections care. This is reflected in the code of ethics established by the American Alliance of Museums (2021). Tribal museums strive to provide standards in the same area. However, the ethics they follow extend beyond museum practice to include unique applications based on lived experience and Indigenous realities. Over the course of my professional museum and cultural arts career, I have observed firsthand a broad spectrum of distinct ethically informed behaviors being applied formally and informally in a variety of settings. As a Native American person, I am intimately aware of how these behaviors draw upon cultural ways of knowing and, at the same, I understand their potential to further illuminate the diversity of our deeper human experience. The museum field can benefit from being aware of Indigenous ethics particularly when entering into collaborations

with tribal communities regarding exhibition development, repatriation and program development. In this paper, I will contextualize the tribal museum regarding Indigenous ethics providing three examples that relate to collections, exhibits and museum development. I will close by describing how an awareness of Indigenous ethics can be used by mainstream museums to create a more inclusive, enriched experience for both tribal collaborators and museum visitors. Throughout this paper, I use the terms Indigenous, tribal and Native American interchangeably. These are not prescribed terms as each individual or community chooses what term is best to identify by. When I share examples of tribal museums, I use their specific tribal name. The museums and examples described are all from the United States.

Background

My professional experience, now spanning over 30 years, is primarily oriented on providing training to tribes in the area of museum practice and cultural programming. My first professional museum experience was working at the Smithsonian Institution where I was charged with creating a training program specifically for Native American tribes interested in developing their own museums or cultural centers. During the course of my tenure at the Smithsonian Institution, which included working at the National Museum of the American Indian, I heard firsthand numerous accounts from tribal members describing their aspirations related to maintaining their culture and lifeways. I witnessed each of the challenges they faced, especially the difficult task of balancing and incorporating—and ultimately defining for themselves—diverse cultural knowledge systems never before formalized. My next position at the Arizona State Museum (ASM), at The University of Arizona, was highlighted by an eight-year grant I co-managed with the Arizona State Library. Funded by the Institute of Museum and Library Services, the purpose of the grant was to increase Native American tribal access to library, archive and museum services. Because of this project, I became aware of tribal library and archive activity. While still at the ASM, the museum conservator, Dr. Nancy Odegaard, and I worked together to shed light on the issue of pesticide residues on objects subject to repatriation. Prior to our work, the issue and its relevance to repatriation was virtually unknown. In my current position at the American Indian Language Development Institute (AILDI), also at the University of Arizona, my knowledge of Indigenous language revitalization and reclamation has increased. Through these experiences with Indigenous language revitalization, tribal archives, libraries and museums, repatriation, as well as my own cultural knowledge, I have seen firsthand the application of Indigenous ethics to decision making, communication, language learning and collaboration.

Indigenous Ethics

As a basic premise, Indigenous ethics are expressed through the cultural values, attitudes and beliefs manifested in tribal societal epistemologies that include religion, language, family, kinship and community organization, social norms and the phenomena of both the natural world (land, plants, animals, insects, natural elements) and the spiritual world. A central tenet of Indigenous ethics is that our human presence in the world requires establishing a good relationship to all the living things that we share an existence with. Within this cultural framework, individuals adhere to the notion that one must live responsibly and competently. The realization of this responsibility is dictated by intrinsic codes of conduct that are passed on from one generation to the next primarily through language and communal cultural and ritual activity.

The degree to which tribal cultural ethics are transmitted depends on the status of active cultural practice and knowledge. During the course of implementing the tribal museum training program at the Smithsonian Institution and my subsequent related work, I observed that there are some tribal nations whose intact cultural values have managed to survive the onslaught of colonialism while other tribal nations were in varying processes of re-discovery and reclamation.

Hopi scholar Dr. Sheilah Nicholas, whose area of research includes the intersection of language, culture and identity, asserts that knowing the language is key to the transmission of cultural values. In the face of language shift however, her research indicated that cultural values can be learned when using English, but this method of transmission lacks the deep understanding that only Indigenous language can convey. She points out that without language, the ability to satisfy one's obligation to become a fully realized human being cannot be manifested (Nicholas, 2010).

The need to express lived cultural values by tribal nations, even if it involves using English, is driven by an innate recognition of a consciousness unique to tribal nations. Dr. Wendy Peters, a Native Hawaiian scholar, calls this “unconscious embodied knowing” (2016, p. 34). Drawing on research related to epigenetics and memetics, she asserts that the human body is the living vessel of collective ancestral memory and knowledge. **Developing a tribal museum is a vital means towards recognizing the compelling need to honor cultural lifeways, knowledge, and experience. As we are seeing, tribes have been resilient in their adaptations to a largely Western concept of what a museum represents to better reflect their world-forming aspirations.**

Tribal Museums and Indigenous Ethics

Relationship

In my experience, I have observed that some tribes who have established a tribally controlled museum or cultural center do not necessarily view it as a

site where the actual transmission of deep cultural knowledge is made. Rather they have conceived their museum as a vessel of tangible resources (collections, exhibits, archives) that can aid in restoring and re-activating ancestral memory. It is a place where the experiential is emphasized over the expositional displays of cultural information, one where tribal members can discover, reflect, and evaluate for themselves their own unique, intangible cultural principles. Janine Ledford, director of the Makah Cultural and Research Center (MCRC) in Neah Bay, WA, expressed it this way:

The MCRC provides each Makah tribal member the opportunity to learn about their family history, the history of the Makah Tribe, as well as how to incorporate traditional cultural values into their contemporary lives. Some Makah people were fortunate to have knowledge passed to them in a traditional context (from one generation to the next), but some may have lost grandparents before they learned all they hoped to learn, and this is where the MCRC serves a crucial role for individuals and families. While interpreting Makah history and culture to interested visitors is important, even more important is sustaining a strong sense of Makah identity. (as cited in Sadongei & Norwood, 2016, pp. 205-206)

”

The MCRC was the site of the first Smithsonian Institution tribal museum training program that I managed. The MCRC experience left an indelible impression on me because it was here that the experiential dimensions of ethically informed decision making became immediately apparent. The Makah worldview affected the ways in which the physical structure of the museum, the permanent exhibit, governance structure and collections management system could be directed to reflect an Indigenous knowledge system.

The role of family, its structure and systems in Makah society is an important cultural principle. During the workshop, staff shared that the MCRC was designed to resemble a house, thus honoring the right and proper context of the bulk of their collection, which was unearthed during an archaeological excavation conducted in the 1970s. Several coastal longhouses had been covered in a mudslide and their discovery includes some of the best-preserved examples of pre-contact material in the world. Since it was evident that the objects in the collection came from inhabited structures, the Makah conceptualized their exhibits to reflect the reconstructed house, and its beachfront environment as well as the attendant marine life. This same organizational Makah principle was applied to the collections data information and collections storage arrangements. It was only through this culturally organized structure that attention to gendered distinctions and gendered restrictions could also be internally applied. Museum tribal staff further shared that their museum governance

structure was redefined to include local descendant family representation, acknowledging that this cultural principle is still in practice today.

At the end of the five-day workshop, a Makah potlatch was held where gifts were given, songs were sung, a feast was shared, and speeches were delivered. The cultural protocols of potlatch behavior were observed when I had to be granted permission to speak on behalf of the workshop participants when thanking our Makah hosts. This was done by the generosity of a young Makah boy who granted me ceremonial permission “to ride in his canoe,” thereby providing me with a platform to speak. This act of generosity was in itself an ethically informed cultural behavior that conformed to Makah social norms and acknowledged my being an “outsider.” With this recognition, I was able to fully participate and engage with the living descendant population of Makah peoples.

Ancestral Knowledge

The Ak-Chin Indian Community’s tribal museum, located in central Arizona, was established in response to the discovery and excavation of an archaeological site on their tribal lands. My work with the community began when I was still an arts administrator and has continued to the present day. I witnessed firsthand the developmental phases of their project and was privileged to report on the progression of their work at several mainstream cultural conferences. Driven by the tribal community’s concern for the welfare of the unearthed cultural objects, the Ak-Chin Indian Community applied a cultural principle that recognized the existential continuum of the objects and how this continuum extended uninterrupted into contemporary community life. In other words, the archaeological collections were not merely physical objects, but rather they were viewed as an embodied extension of themselves representing the lives of their ancestors. Thus, the rationale of care not only considered how the objects were to be treated, but, in addition, took responsibility for how such care might impact future generations. The eco-museum model, presented to the community by a consultant, resonated with their cultural values, and they embraced the eco-museum values of a museum without walls that considered the past, present and future of the community and its surrounding local environment (Sadongei & Norwood, 2016). Further, acknowledging their cultural ethic of consensus, the staff contacted each and every tribal member to seek their input on where the museum should be located, what it should be named and what its primary function should be. As a result, the museum was called the *Ak-Chin Him-Dak* which, when translated into English, means “way of life.” The Ak-Chin Him-Dak was one of the first tribal museums to use their tribal language in its name. The Ak-Chin Him-Dak chose to create a museum that was founded on a cultural principle that regarded the collective respect afforded to ancestral memory. Even though the objects and sensitive material that were excavated were many generations removed from contemporary tribal members, that did not diminish the relevance of ancestral knowledge embodied in the archaeological collections to their contemporary reality.

Language

The Huhugam Heritage Center (HHC) located near Phoenix, Arizona, seeks “to ensure that the cultures of the Akimel O’tham and PeePosh and that of their ancestors will survive and flourish for future generations” (2021). Recognizing that language is an expression of knowledge and the foundation for the transmission of culturally ethical behavior, the HHC incorporates language teaching and learning within their mission, and, as a result, their staff includes a fluent speaker as well as a linguist. The American Indian Language Development Institute (AILDI) where I currently work, partnered with the HHC to offer a series of workshops on how to use traditional ecological knowledge to aid in developing language teaching materials. Because the HHC has an extensive basket collection, plant knowledge became the focal point of elicitation sessions with fluent speakers that were conducted in traditional cultural landscapes on the reservation. The sessions revealed a hierarchy of relationships between and among plants commonly used for both sustenance and utility that affirmed their living qualities were similar to the Akimel O’tham’s own social structure (Barragan, 2015). This knowledge re-awakened an appreciation for the natural world, particularly for second-language learners who did not grow up with the language. Building on their experience, the HHC staff held consultations with fluent speakers who also were basket weavers. What emerged from the sessions included terms in the language that were later used in their collections database to describe basket types, weaving techniques and materials. Further, the sessions included descriptions of attitudes ascribed to basket makers that later became valued principles to convey to the younger, non-fluent basket makers who also participated in the consultations. The HHC included the botanical information as well as the basket making terminology in their collections database, thus enriching their understanding of culturally ethical behavior particular to their community.

To summarize, the potential problem for tribal members to not use or even be aware of ethically informed methods of museum practice and development as I have described does exist. For example, random access to or handling of tribal collections by community members and outside researchers may result in varying degrees of cultural risk to the community. It has also been my ongoing observation from working with numerous tribal cultural communities that the basis for identifying this risk actually goes hand in hand with identifying ethically informed behaviors. In fact, for some tribal communities, it may be preferable to identify cultural risk(s) at the outset when ethical cultural norms are not clearly delineated due to the endangered status or loss of cultural knowledge.

In the first instance of the Makah Cultural and Research Center, the act of “riding in the canoe” of the young boy reduced the risk to the community of my being a stranger, who may not be trusted to actively engage in formal reciprocity within the cultural and ceremonial context of the potlatch. Organizing the archaeological collections by family symbolically reduces the risk of

inappropriate access to material while simultaneously reinforcing respect for Makah family structure. Restricting access to collections by gender also reduces the cultural risk of the objects being mishandled and potentially desecrated by unauthorized people.

At the Ak-Chin Him-Dak, refusing to acknowledge the grief that the archaeological excavation precipitated would have objectified the knowledge embodied in the artifacts instead of confirming the contemporary connection to their ancestors. Proceeding with the museum's development without first establishing consensus on its purpose would have contributed to isolated actions without regard for communal consequence.

If the Huhugam Heritage Center had not re-awakened plant knowledge with assistance from fluent speakers, they would have missed the opportunity to glimpse into the ancestral mind of the Akimel O'tham where reverent relationships to plants and ecology are revealed. This essential link is necessary as a life affirming respect and obligation to the plants as well as to their own social behaviors.

Indigenous Ethics and Collaborations

Culturally responsive collaborations between museums and tribal communities can be a process of discovery. Such collaborations can reveal deeper Indigenous realities that both contribute to the formation of new knowledge and potentially lead to the formation of culturally informed museum practices. If mainstream museums were aware of how central Indigenous ethics are to the contemporary expression of tribal cultural knowledge, the active process of collaboration could be seen as a vital avenue to sharing authority, building solidarity, overcoming social injustice, and allowing communities to heal.

Dr. Amy Lonetree's book *Decolonizing Museums* provides an in-depth examination and critique of exhibit collaboration involving tribal museums. Her research and experience confirms what tribal members know intuitively, "Objects in museums are living entities" (Lonetree, 2012, p. xv). Her key conclusion is that recognition of this value statement should be at the core of all engagements between museums and tribal communities.

The challenges to collaboration, however, are how best museum policies can begin to accommodate applied Indigenous ethics when treating objects as "living entities." Naturally, mainstream museums can understand how object context, meaning and care are enhanced by tribal cultural knowledge. But the deeper aspects of meaning associated with "how" tribal community engagements with living objects have the potential to activate cultural obligations or unmet needs on an individual and/or communal level. Such engagements will require at least a greater sensitivity to Indigenous values and their social processes, the recognition of which may ultimately lead to strengthening and healing Indigenous realities and experiences. Thus, each instance of engagement

with tribal communities enacted in the museum realm presents a profoundly unique opportunity to see ethically informed beliefs and practices at work.

Conclusion

Drawing on my work with a variety of tribal museums and communities, I have demonstrated the unique ways in which tribal museums have applied Indigenous ethics as a practice. What I refer to as Indigenous ethics is grounded in epistemology and worldview. Unlike the code of ethics for mainstream museums in the United States, Indigenous ethics extends beyond professional behavior into larger cultural realms that are premised on the notion that one can become fully human in a profoundly changing world. I am convinced that collaboration can lead to reclamation, revitalization and a re-awakening for both mainstream museums and tribal communities.

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