

Repatriation at the Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History

by William T. Billeck



In August 1868, at Walnut Creek near Fort Larned, Kansas, a Cheyenne child died and was placed on a traditional burial scaffold near a recently abandoned Cheyenne Sun Dance lodge, together with a variety of offerings and remembrances. Soon after, U.S. Army soldiers tracking the Cheyenne came upon the site. They took the child's remains and accompanying burial objects and sent them to the Army Medical Museum in Washington, D.C., a practice encouraged by the Army Surgeon General of the time. The burial frame and grave objects were subsequently transferred to the National Museum of Natural History (NMNH). The child's remains have long since been lost. The 36 objects in the funerary assemblage accessioned into the NMNH included the burial frame, buffalo hides, beaded cradle covers, trade blankets and cloth, beaded bags, and several articles of clothing (NMNH, 1996:18).

Under the federal repatriation laws enacted in 1989 and 1990, museums throughout the United States must return Native American remains and burial objects in their collections to tribal groups with which they are culturally linked. In July 1993, the remains of over thirty Cheyenne were returned by the National Museum of Natural History (NMNH) to the tribe and re-interred according to traditional burial practices. The Cheyenne repatriation and the reburial of the remains received widespread media coverage. Many other tribal representatives who have visited the NMNH Repatriation Office have seen the film coverage and newspaper accounts that documented the repatriation and consider it a model.

The story, however, did not end there. In August 1996, Cheyenne elders and repatriation representatives called a meeting of traditional and ceremonial leaders and tribal members to voice their concerns about repatriating the 36 burial objects from Fort Larned, Kansas, including the heavy trade blankets and several buffalo calf robes and hides. The items deposited with the child would have undoubtedly been highly prized given the circumstances of the times, with the Cheyenne tribe facing extreme hard

ship, deprivation, and the coming winter cold. The modern Cheyenne representatives knew these objects would be reburied or burned upon their repatriation to the tribe. Therefore, they questioned whether this act would be the best way to uphold their people's values and pass them on to the next generation. Connie Hart Yellowman, former Cheyenne-Arapaho Tribes Supreme Court Judge and deputy director of the Cultural Center, expressed her sentiment this way:

Think of the sacrifice that [the child's] burial represents...the Cheyenne couldn't go out and buy new blankets. Those things show how much our people loved that child. There's nothing I could do today to equal what they did for her...I do not want to be part of the generation that is part of the destruction of these objects. For nearly 130 years, no Cheyenne saw [these objects]. And I've learned so much from them. A hundred and thirty years from now, this Cheyenne child's burial

On December 5, 1996, in a quiet, moving ceremony, Gordon Yellowman, on behalf of the Cheyenne and Arapaho Tribes of Oklahoma, and then-Museum Director Robert W. Fri signed an unprecedented document, stating that the "36 burial objects of Cheyenne origin in the Museum's collections are to be retained by the Museum for preservation, and for research and education to be conducted by scholars and the Cheyenne people." The agreement further stated that any publication of photographs or exhibition of the objects required the written consent of the designated Cheyenne representatives (see Appendix Three, Bray 2001). The museum is currently working with tribal representatives on a proposed exhibit of the objects.

The Cheyenne story recounted at the beginning of this chapter is an unusual one but each of the Smithsonian repatriations that have taken place in the last 12 years has had its own unique story. In 1991, soon after the first repatriation law was passed, the

Smithsonian Institution established a Repatriation Office at the National Museum of Natural History. Today the NMNH has the most active repatriation program in the nation. Of the museum's original count of approximately 32,000 sets of human skeletal remains, about half were Native American.

In the last several years, extensive information regarding these collections has been provided to the approximately 500 federally-recognized tribes in the lower 48 states, 300 Alaska Native villages and corporations, and Native Hawaiian organizations. Information on the human remains and archaeological objects were organized by state, county, and site location and consisted of object name, count, collector, date acquired by the museum, and tribal affiliation, when noted in the museum records. Information on the ethnological objects was organized by tribe and included object name, location, collector name, a brief background on the collector, and date acquired by the museum.

As outlined in legislation passed by the U.S. Congress, a tribe must submit a claim to the museum in order to initiate a repatriation. The Repatriation Office staff then conducts research using multiple lines of evidence, including biological, geographical, historical (both written and oral), genealogical, archaeological, linguistic, folkloric, ethnological, and archival. Expert opinion or any other relevant information can be used to evaluate the claim, and all the evidence is then summarized in a report. In order for the human remains to be recommended for repatriation, they must be culturally affiliated with the requesting tribe. Objects must also be affiliated with the requesting tribe and must fit the definitions of funerary object, sacred object, or object of cultural patrimony. The report that documents the repatriation assessment is sent to the tribal representatives and becomes part of the museum's permanent record.

Repatriations 1991-2003

To date, the human remains of

approximately 3,600 individuals and thousands of objects have been offered for repatriation to 84 tribes. Forty-eight repatriations have been completed, resulting in the return of the remains of approximately 3,300 individuals to 48 different tribes. In addition, 87,000 archaeological objects have been returned to 20 tribes during 13 repatriations, and 159 ethnological objects were returned to 10 tribes in 10 repatriations.

The remains of approximately 300 additional individuals have been offered for repatriation to 31 tribes, and we await decisions by the tribes on how they wish to proceed. The museum currently has 18 pending claims from 30 tribes to address. In the next year the museum will complete the reports that respond to seven of these claims in which the repatriation status of 1,500 individuals and 20,000 archaeological objects are evaluated. As new claims arrive at the museum, they will be addressed in the order in which they have been received. The tribes have no deadlines to make repatriation claims; repatriation will continue into the future.

The Repatriation Office has hosted more than 250 visits by tribal representatives to the museum to discuss repatriation, to examine collections and records, and to repatriate human remains and objects. Sixty-four of the visits have been supported by grants sponsored by the outside Repatriation Review Committee. This review committee is an independent, congressionally-mandated outside group of seven members (including two Native traditional religious leaders), which is advisory to the Secretary of the In-

stitution, and monitors the repatriation activities of the Smithsonian, primarily at the Museum of Natural History. The Committee also reviews repatriation disputes.

During the course of their visits to the collections, several tribal representatives expressed concern about the ways in which some sacred, religious, and ceremonial objects were stored by the museum. In response to these concerns, the



Signing of Funerary Object Agreement between the Southern Cheyenne and NMNH.

museum now incorporates traditional care in the storage of objects. This may be as simple as changing the orientation of the object or rearranging the storage location so that associated objects are stored together and objects that should not be near each other are separated. Sometimes objects are smudged (traditional cleansing with smoke) and tobacco offerings placed with them.

The Army Medical Museum Collection

Most of the repatriation claims to date have been for the return of human remains, a large majority obtained during archaeological excavations. However, there are remains of individuals whose names are known; some of these remains come from the group of 100 individuals killed during the Indian Wars, between the 1860s and 1880s. They were collected by the Army medical staff for the Army Medical Museum and transferred to the Smithsonian in about 1900. The Army Medical Museum collection continues to be one of great sensitivity. The collection contains about 2,300 sets of remains, many of which date to historic periods and are explicitly identified with regard to cultural origins. The Army Medical Museum was founded in 1862 to perform biomedical and pathological studies on the Civil War dead. At the close of the Civil War, the Army Medical Museum began collecting Native American skeletal remains. By the late 1890s, the museum stopped collecting Native American remains.

Because the Army Medical Museum collection has been of special concern and has special significance to some tribes, return of the remains from this collection has been made a priority. Museum policy prior to the repatriation law was that named individuals would be returned to lineal descendants, but in many cases, no lineal relatives were known. Lineal descendants still have first standing under the repatriation laws.

Ishi

One of the most prominent repatriations for a named individual at the Smithsonian involved Ishi, a Yana Indian from northern California, who was the last member of his tribe to come into direct contact with Americans in 1911. Ishi lived at the University of

California's Anthropology Museum for a few years until his death in 1916. After his death, Ishi's brain was removed during an autopsy. Alfred Kroeber, an anthropologist who had worked with Ishi, considered him a valued friend and wanted his remains cremated following Yana tradition. However, Ishi died while Kroeber was away on travel. When he returned, Kroeber found that Ishi had died and had been cremated, his brain had been saved. Not knowing what to do in this unusual situation, Kroeber sent Ishi's brain to the Smithsonian in 1917.

Ishi was often referred to as the last Yana because many in California believed that with his death, all Yana ceased to exist. No family members who would have been able to make a claim for his remains as a lineal descendant are known. The affiliation study by the Repatriation Office found that, contrary to general opinion, the Yana had not ceased to exist with the death of Ishi. While Ishi was the last of the Yana to come into contact with Americans, there were many Yana who had come into contact with the outside world before Ishi, and these individuals had been placed by the United States government on nearby reservations. Today the Yana descendants live among the Pit River Tribe and on the Redding Rancheria in California. Ishi's remains were repatriated to these groups in 1999.

The Cheyenne Case Study

The repatriation of Ishi is but one example of the thousands of human remains that have been repatriated by the museum and all of them have their own histories. It is impossible to present them all here or to even summarize them. The repatriation experience of the Cheyenne, described at the beginning of this chapter, illustrates some of the potential of repatriation and the new ways in which museums are working with Native Americans. The Cheyenne have been leaders in the repatriation process and are by no means typical in their repatriation experiences. Their tribal representatives are very interested in what museum collections reveal of their history and are concerned about the preservation of their heritage. The Cheyenne interactions with the museum have resulted in the repatriation of many human remains. But the positive relationships also have brought about changes

in storage conditions of significant cultural objects and development of alternatives to repatriation and reburial of objects.

For example, a buffalo skull used by the Southern Cheyenne in the 1903 Sun Dance ceremony in Oklahoma fits the definition of a sacred object and could have been returned to the tribe if they wished. Instead, because of its ceremonial significance, the skull was removed from exhibit upon the request of the Cheyenne Sundance Priests. The Cheyenne representatives then elected to leave the skull at the museum because it is so fragile but asked that it be specially stored in an upside-down position. In consultation with Cheyenne tribal representatives, a special base was constructed by the conservation staff to support the skull. To cover the buffalo skull, a 12-sided box with 12 painted panels that symbolizes the shape of the Sun Dance lodge is being designed by Cheyenne artist Gordon Yellowman, in consultation with the repatriation and museum staff. The buffalo skull will now be stored in the museum collections in a way that the Cheyenne representatives and Sundance Priests have deemed appropriate.

Further Consultation

The Repatriation Office staff has become a source of expertise for tribal representatives to consult about the repatriation process beyond the Smithsonian. Often this may involve discussion of the law or the identification of the sources of archival records and expert opinion. The staff of the Repatriation Office has become very knowledgeable in assessing affiliation through the study of the skeletal remains. This expertise is available on a limited basis to tribal representatives if they wish an assessment of human remains that are not part of the Smithsonian collections. For example, Cheyenne tribal representatives have asked the Repatriation Office staff to examine for their cultural affiliation the skeletal remains of one individual believed to have been killed during the Fort Robinson outbreak in 1879 and two individuals from burials in Montana. These studies are ongoing, and the results will be used by tribal representatives in making decisions on how to proceed in the repatriation process.

Tribes have been considering the proper ap-

proaches to repatriation, and many only now are beginning to act. To date, nearly all of the repatriations have resulted in the reburial of human remains and associated funerary objects. From the museum perspective, repatriation has led to the loss of scientifically and historically significant collections, but it has also increased the positive interaction between Native Americans and the museum. Native Americans have shared their knowledge about the objects in the collections, particularly ethnological objects, and this knowledge has been added to the museum's records.

Repatriation now is a major contact point between tribes and the museum. It is an opportunity for both the museum and tribes to not only complete repatriations, but to find common interests that can result in increased knowledge and educational values and opportunities. Museums also hold many Native American collections that will not be subject to repatriation. With much to learn about these collections, it would be a major loss to all if the interactions between museums and tribes ended at repatriation. Dialogues begun during the repatriation process should be the starting point for future positive relationships.

Further Reading

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