



Merging Traditional Indigenous Curation Methods with Modern Museum Standards of Care

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Introduction

In an effort to address criticism that current museum practice is insensitive to the cultural and religious significance of sacred objects, many museums which hold ethnographic collections have begun responding to the demands from cultural groups for increased attention to the spiritual needs of sacred objects.

Traditional care or indigenous curation describes the care, treatment, and handling of sacred or religious objects in the manner prescribed by the culture for which the object has ritual significance. In museology, it defines the care that an object is to receive in addition to or in lieu of standard museum care. The concept of traditional care has most often been applied in American museums to Native American sacred objects, but this approach is being applied to the ritual objects of many other cultural and religious groups.

Some museum professionals would argue that museums as scientific entities should not be vehicles for religious expression and should manage collections in a strictly objective manner. However, anthropologists believe that an ethnographic object is most valued for what it can say about the culture that created the objects. Therefore, incorporating the religious and ritual meaning of an object into its care and preservation enhances its informational value.

The incorporation of traditional care methods into standard museum storage and handling practices has been controversial. Conservators, with good reason, have been concerned that traditional care methods could compromise standard museum care, affecting the stability of an object or an entire collection. However, many traditional care treatments can be safely incorporated into standard museum collections management practices and with forethought and

careful planning, it is possible to arrive at a solution that is beneficial to both the object's physical and spiritual preservation. While all objects cared for by a museum should be treated with respect, there may be various levels of sacredness that may require very different levels of traditional care intervention. These treatments have differential levels of conservation risk and necessitate a range of investments of time, expense, and supplies to implement. In order to mitigate risk and address requests fairly, a policy for the implementation care program needs to be developed.

There are various types of traditional care treatments that can affect how an object should be stored, handled, accessed, used, or preserved. Storage issues can include the orientation of an object in its storage unit toward a sacred site or a cardinal direction, the covering of sensitive objects, or the segregation of objects from other cultural items. Handling and access can range from restrictions on access to the removal of objects from safe storage to the outdoors. Use issues can include the ceremonial feeding of objects, the wearing of objects for ceremonies, or the smudging (smoking) of objects for ritual cleansing. Preservation issues can include the deliberate avoidance of preservation or the use of indigenous preservation techniques.

Traditional Care at the National Museum of Natural History

Because the National Museum of Natural History (NMNH) at the Smithsonian Institution is a repository of one of the largest and most diverse collections of ethnographic objects in the world, it makes an excellent case study of the implementation of a traditional care program. The

development of a traditional care policy for the NMNH holds unique challenges due, in part, to the size and diversity of the collection, but most significantly due to the museum's status as a federal institution, and its compliance with federal anti-discrimination legislation, the Freedom of Information Act, and the 1st Amendment restriction on government establishment of a religion. Some traditional care requests are easily implemented and create no ethical or legal dilemmas. Other requests must be evaluated in terms of their conservation risk and their legality.

In order to address requests for modifications to the storage methods of its objects in a consistent and nondiscriminatory manner, the NMNH has developed procedures for implementing changes. An alteration in the storage or handling of an object is generally initiated at the request of a visitor to the collection who is culturally affiliated with the object in question. Collections Management staff record the request, noting the name of the requestor, the date the request was made, the suggested treatment, and the catalog numbers of the objects in question. The Anthropology Department curators are notified of the request. Traditional religious leaders of the culture from which the request came may be consulted, particularly if the treatment request is in conflict with previous instructions. They will also be asked to give input on the need for and/or the feasibility of designing special mounts or storage containers in order to safely carry out the treatment request. Once changes are implemented, they are recorded in a traditional care logbook and are also recorded with the object.

While it is not always possible due to space limitations, conservation restrictions, or federal regulations to implement all requests, we have found that many requests can be implemented if all parties are flexible and alternative options are considered. Each of the

various treatment categories is discussed below using examples from NMNH cases.

Change of Storage

Some treatments merely require the covering of an object or a change of storage location. For example, although actively engaging in the legal repatriation of human remains to Native American Tribes, the NMNH still holds a number of scalp locs¹. Due to the sensitive nature of scalp locs in general, all scalp locs have been consolidated in storage units by culture area, wrapped with tissue, and labeled so that people do not come across them inadvertently. Native American objects that are identified as medicine bundles have been removed from regular storage and placed in “special units” that are labeled as such which can only be opened with a special key.

During consultation with NMNH staff, representative of the Hopi Tribe requested that masks be removed from plastic bags that they had been stored in since a pest infestation was discovered in 1980s. In Hopi culture ceremonial masks are considered living breathing entities which could suffocate if covered in plastic. Because the masks were determined to be pest-free at the time, the Tribe made the request the masks were removed from the plastic. The museum can now offer the option of storage units with screened vent holes for the storage of “living” objects.

While the majority of traditional care requests come from Native American tribal visitors, other cultural and religious groups are beginning to make requests for the special treatment of objects. While on a tour of the museum’s storage facility, an Asian visitor noticed a Buddha statue stored on the bottom shelf of a storage unit with secular objects stored above it. The

visitor felt that in order to show respect to the Buddha, it should be moved to the top shelf. In another Asian example, some Philippine visitors suggested that boar tusks stored with Moro cultural objects be moved. They explained that because the Moro people are Muslims and pigs are considered unclean in Islam, keeping them with other Moro objects might give offense.

Object Orientation

Other changes in storage have been a matter of reorienting an object within its storage unit. Recently, the NMNH received a recommendation that a Dream Dance Society drum should be oriented in its storage unit with the red painted stripe on the drum head facing south as this is the direction in which it is stored traditionally². Hopi religious leaders have stated that ceremonial masks should be stored facing the back of their storage unit, as that is how they are stored in the Kiva when not in use. Visitors from Jemez Pueblo requested that Jemez objects be oriented toward the pueblo. A Navajo tribal member recommended that Navajo “wedding” or ceremonial baskets that contain spirit line breaks in their designs, be repositioned in the storage unit with the spirit line facing east because the baskets would face that direction during ceremonies.

Requests for the reorientation of objects occasionally require the building of mounts to hold the objects in the correct position. For example, a religious leader from the Southern Cheyenne Tribe of Oklahoma requested that a Sun Dance buffalo skull be oriented facing east when in storage and that, if it could be safely accomplished, the skull should also be stored

upside down, to signify that it was not an “active” sacred object. While the request for the east facing orientation of the object could be implemented immediately, the upside storage position required the building of a special mount for the skull, so that in storing it in this position, it would not be resting on its fragile horns. The conservator felt that it actually might be safer to store the skull in this manner, as the crown of the skull is its strongest point and it would no longer be resting on fragile teeth and occipital bones. The Hopi Tribe has advised the museum that for long term storage, lion fetish altar pieces should be stored standing upright. In order to ensure that the fetishes do not topple over and become damaged when drawers are opened or that they are not inadvertently placed back on their sides after they have been handled, mounts have been designed to keep them upright.

The challenge with the reorientation of objects is to find a way to ensure that when the next researcher or staff member takes the object out of storage it is returned to storage facing the correct direction. To facilitate proper storage, units are labeled with instructions for the correct storage position for the object.

Access Restrictions

There has been discussion in other publications about restrictions on access to certain objects (Wolfe and Mibach 1983: 4, Mibach and Wolf Green 1989: 61, Welsh et. al. 1992, Rosoff 1998: 40, Goldberg 1992: 4, Drumheller and Kamintz 1994: 2, and Anderson 1990: 172).

This issue presents a difficult dilemma for the NMNH. Because it is a public institution

receiving federal funding, it is precluded from discriminating, restricting access to the collections under the Freedom of Information Act, or supporting any particular religious point of view. However, the NMNH has found a way to accommodate the wishes of the cultural and religious groups to which these taboos are important, while avoiding a violation of the law. In instances where groups have advised the Museum that there is a cultural restriction on access to certain objects, we have labeled the storage units with that information, thereby allowing those who wish to obey that restriction, the opportunity to do so. For example, at the request of members of Jemez Pueblo, two objects are segregated in a drawer which is labeled “Caution Jemez visitors: the Jemez people feel that only men over the age of eighteen should look at objects in this drawer.”

Offerings and Ceremonial Feeding

One of the most challenging traditional care issues is the leaving of offerings or the ceremonial feeding of sacred objects. Offerings are typically of plant material, such as tobacco, sweet grass, sage, cedar, or corn pollen. Other organic materials, such as feathers, are sometimes offered. These organic materials can harbor or attract pests and the introduction of them into a collection facility is risky. The object to which the offering is made is not the only object in danger of suffering pest damage, but the entire collection is placed in jeopardy. In a large natural history museum such as the NMNH, this not only means anthropological collections, but rare and irreplaceable botanical and zoological collections as well.

The solutions to this potential hazard are not simple nor is there unanimous agreement about how to proceed with implementing them. The goal is to eliminate the risk of pest infestation while still permitting offerings to be left in the collection's storage area. There are a number of options that could eliminate or reduce the risk. Offerings can be enclosed in sealed polyethylene bags. However, some Native American visitors have expressed the desire to have offerings placed in open containers. There is the option of freezing or fumigating offerings prior to their introduction into the collection area. This option may be viable, but consultations with religious leaders concerning their feelings about this treatment of religious offerings need to take place. Another alternative that could allow offerings to be placed in open containers is to allow visitors to send offerings prior to a visit so that they could be monitored for pests prior to their introduction into the collection area. However, fumigation, freezing, and advanced inspection of materials do not preclude the possibility of the offering attracting pests and providing them with a medium for developing and breeding. The introduction of new organic material into a collection's area requires constant vigilance and should not be considered without having an integrated pest management program in place.

Catherine Sease discussed the segregation of collections that require offerings in a separate room (Welsh et. al. 1992). In fact, the Field Museum had an unfortunate incident where ceremonial objects on open shelving had been segregated behind muslin curtains and a moth infestation broke out. One object was completely destroyed before the infestation was discovered and other objects were also damaged (Haas 1999). The Field Museum is now developing a new storage system for these objects that involves the use of special curtains, which moths cannot cling to, and closed, vented cabinets (ibid; Welsh et. al. 1992). Rather than

curtaining off the shelves themselves, a larger area will be curtained off.

The National Museum of the American Indian is currently experimenting with the use of jars with screened lids for the containment of offerings. This may be an excellent solution but further investigation needs to be done to ensure that small pests cannot exit or enter the jar through the screen holes.

Hopi tribal representatives recently requested that the NMNH permit them to sprinkle corn pollen offerings directly onto sacred objects, rather than placing offerings in containers next to the objects. This poses new challenges for collections' managers and conservators, and consultations between the Hopi Tribe and the NMNH are still underway regarding this issue. Questions concerning when and if the offerings can be removed and what should happen to the offerings once they are removed must be answered. The placement of offerings directly onto the objects would require an even more vigilant pest monitoring program and the assignment of a qualified conservator who could clean the object. In the past, the NMNH had permitted corn pollen to be sprinkled directly onto objects and during the move to the new Museum Support Center, the move project Conservator discovered a Dermestid beetle larva living on an object (Goldberg 1992: 5). She found the hair of the object to be partially digested and full of frass.

Currently, the NMNH allows offerings to be left with objects but requests that offerings either be bagged or placed in a box next to the object. The name of the person making the offering, the date the offering is made, and the type of material offered is recorded along with the catalog number(s) of the object(s) to which the offering was made. Visitors are asked to provide information on how long the offering is to remain with the object and the preferred method of disposal.

Burned Offerings or “Smudging”

Native American visitors may request that they be permitted to “smudge” sacred objects. This process requires the burning of the offering, usually tobacco, sage, or sweet grass, to create smoke that can be allowed to “wash” over the object. While smudging could theoretically be done in the storage area, it is not the optimum solution as it is a potential fire and safety hazard. Other visitors and staff may be adversely affected by the smoke, particularly tobacco, and the smoke may cover not only the chosen object, but all other objects in the vicinity. In its new Cultural Resources Center, the National Museum of the American Indian has built a ceremonial room in which burning can take place. This room, in addition to being spectacularly beautiful with a full window view to the outdoors, is fitted with a fire pit and separate ventilation unit that allows smoke to be directly vented out of the building. The National Museum of Natural History, with funding provided by the Smithsonian’s Repatriation Review Committee, has developed space at the Museum Support Center that can also be used for such purposes.

Some institutions have permitted objects to be taken outdoors for the performance of such ceremonies (Haas 1999), but there are numerous environmental problems that cannot be controlled in such a situation and the NMNH has historically not considered such requests. The most difficult issue for a delicate object is the sudden shift in temperature and relative humidity. Other concerns include ultraviolet light exposure, pest infestation, and vandalism or theft. Proponents of this option have made the argument that an object survived this treatment while in the custody of the culturally affiliated community and that permitting it now will do it no harm.

However, many objects have been stored in a relatively stable environment for extended periods and a sudden change in environmental conditions could cause rapid de-stabilization. It must be remembered that deterioration is cumulative and irreversible and exposure to light and fluctuations in relative humidity hasten it.

Use of Objects

There has been a trend recently to allow objects to be used in ceremonies (Rosoff 1998: 36). It has been argued that some objects must be used in ongoing ceremonies or they lose their sacred nature. However, there are serious problems with this practice. During the last century, many objects held by the NMNH and most other museums were treated with poisonous chemicals such as arsenic, cadmium, camphor, mercuric chloride, naphthalene, nicotine, and strychnine used as pesticides (Goldberg 1996: 23-43). While objects can be cleaned, there is no way to be absolutely certain that all traces of these poisons have been removed, particularly on wooden objects, such as masks. Masks, because they cover the mouth and nose, are a significant health concern. But clothing, especially those made of skin or wool, may also have been treated and it may be inadvisable to wear them. There is also the issue of damage and deterioration to the object. Body oils, saliva, and perspiration can stain costumes. Costumes used in dance can also be torn. If an object is required to be used in an ongoing ceremony needed for the continuation or reinstatement of a traditional religious practice, then that object would normally fall under the repatriation legislation and once it is repatriated the Tribe may use it as it pleases.

However, that does not mean that full disclosure of its previous chemical treatments shouldn't be made.

The NMNH can lend objects to be present at ceremonial events if it is determined that it is safe for the object to travel, but it does not lend objects for use. In 1999, in anticipation of a consultation with the Southern Cheyenne Tribe of Oklahoma, the museum was preparing to send a Sun Dance buffalo skull to Oklahoma where discussions were to take place concerning whether or not the skull should be repatriated. After a conservator prepared a condition report on the object, discussions began with the Tribe concerning the fragility of the object and the potential for damage to occur during its transport. The Tribe then determined that the object should not travel, and instead photographs were taken to the symposium. Recently, Cheyenne traditional religious leaders came to Washington to perform a ceremony to reduce the residual power in the skull so that it would be safe for it to be stored³.

Indigenous Preservation Techniques

One area of traditional care that is emerging is the use of traditional pest management techniques, in particular the use of herbal insect repellents (Drumheller and Kaminitz 1994: 2). Mibach mentions alpine fir, sage⁴, or poplar fungus being used traditionally as insect repellents (1986: 98). Mibach and Wolf Green discuss the use of sweet grass smoke as a fumigant (1989: 64)⁵. Rosoff also refers to the potential for “smudging” and aromatic botanical sachets to be used as repellents (1998: 38). All recommend further investigation of these treatments.

However, at this point in time no data has been published on the efficacy of these treatments. In fact, while various publications on herbal remedies describe other plants as having repellent properties, none list sweet grass and sage as having such traits. Before beginning discussions about the introduction of herbals into the integrated pest management system at the NMNH, we feel that three areas of investigation need to be undertaken. Documentation of the chemical composition of these herbals needs to be done; experiments need to be done on the effectiveness of these treatments; and a survey of their uses by indigenous cultures needs to be completed. It is critical that research is undertaken on these methods before they become incorporated into standard museum collections management practice. There is danger in assuming that they are helpful and not harmful. For instance, although nicotine sulfate, a derivative of tobacco, is a potent pesticide; nicotine, in its pure form, is now a restricted substance that is known to cause acute systemic toxicity, central nervous system damage, and is also a suspected teratogen (Goldberg 1996: 24). Furthermore, while there is anecdotal evidence that tobacco smoke acts as an insect repellent, tobacco in its solid form is highly attractive to pests, in particular the tobacco moth, the cigarette beetle, and the drugstore beetle. The tobacco moth, in addition to eating tobacco, feeds on other dried plant products (Manual for Pest Control 1983: 138-139). The cigarette beetle is also a serious pest for book bindings and paper, herbaria specimens, dried fish, silk, straw, flax, and can even live on pyrethrum powder (Story 1986: 49-50). The drugstore beetle will infest almost any animal and plant product and will even eat strychnine (Manual of Pest Control 1983: 138). Dried sage or sweet grass offerings may also attract various vegetal and grain eating pests.

One natural product that is used as a common insect repellent is cedar. However, cedar

only works as long as it retains its scent and, if used as a repellent, should be monitored and replaced or rejuvenated regularly. Other plants that have been used as insect repellents include alecost, big sagebrush, camphor (which is poisonous), feverfew, garlic, lavender, lemon balm, pennyroyal, peppermint, santolina, southernwood, tansy, and wormwood (The Reader's Digest Assoc., Inc. 1986: 397-398; Ody 1993: 78-79; McVicar 1994). McVicar also lists white horehound and pyrethrum (poisonous) as insecticides (1994: 113, 192). Both the Reader's Digest *Magic and Medicine of Plants* (1986: 425) and McVicar's *Herbs for the Home* (1994: 177) give directions for creating moth repellent sachets.

It may be possible that, like the modern use of traditional medicinal plants in the treatment of illness, traditional preservation treatments may be highly effective. In the push to identify safer and less toxic treatments for the preservation of objects, they may hold promise. It is an area of research that deserves the increased attention of the museum community. However, if a museum maintains a clean pest-free storage facility, the need for any insecticide or repellent is probably negated. Due to health concerns, the NMNH ceased using chemical fumigation in the early 1980s (Goldberg 1996: 36). Currently, the museum uses an integrated pest management program that does not include any pesticides or fumigants (Wilcox 1995: 18-20).

Avoidance of Preservation

The final category of traditional care is the deliberate avoidance of preservation or the active promotion of deterioration. Funerary objects in many cultures are not routinely preserved.

In European cultures the funerary assemblage usually consists of the deceased clothing and personal effects, such as jewelry or hair ornaments, but in many other cultures these burial items can be quite elaborate. Native American examples include pottery, baskets, dance regalia, and medicine bundles. Certain Native American sacred objects are also traditionally allowed to deteriorate as part of the ritual process. Many funerary and sacred objects were removed from burials and shrines to be preserved in museums. One such sacred object is the Zuni Ahayu:da, or twin god. This wooden god figure is meant to reside in an open air shrine and be permitted to disintegrate (Merrill et. al. 1993: 526, 546-547). Instead many twin gods were accessioned into museum collections where they were carefully preserved. The NMNH repatriated two twin gods to the Pueblo of Zuni in 1987 after which they were once again placed in an open air shrine, albeit a secure one, that would allow their deterioration.

Conclusions

I have outlined above some of the major areas of traditional care that are currently the subject of discussions between indigenous peoples and the museum community. It is very likely that the future holds an even wider variety of traditional care issues. The challenges of addressing them, particularly as indigenous cultures from other parts of the world gain access to collections held by America's large anthropology museums, will greatly enrich the process.

In addition to the ongoing implementation of requests for traditional treatments, the NMNH is continuing research on the traditional care of religious and sacred objects from

cultures around the world.

Notes

1. While all tribes have been notified of the existence of scalp locs in the NMNH collections inventory, not all tribes have claimed them as of this time.

2. Although this drum is identified in museum records as Winnebago, the Dream Dance Society member viewing it suggested that it might be affiliated with another Great Lakes tribe.

However, a change of cultural affiliation would not affect its treatment, because the Dream Dance society is a cross-cultural society. Drums were often made by one society and given as gifts to another and the rules for drum handling remained the same. (Snowball 1999) (Spindler and Spindler 1971)

3. Although the Sun Dance skull is recognized as a sacred object by the Cheyenne, they do not plan to request its repatriation at this time.

4. While sage, native to southern Europe, is described in herbal medicine books as having some medicinal value as carminative, it is not described as an insect repellent (The Reader's Digest Assoc., Inc. 1986: 289). It's possible that sage has been mistaken for big sagebrush, which is native to the western United States and does have repellent properties (Ibid: 97).

5. Sweet grass also does not contain fumigant properties in its list of Native American uses, although it was used by early settlers as a deodorizer (Ibid: 314).

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