

ARTIFACTS AND THEIR STORIES

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This past weekend, I was watching a humorous movie called *The Mexican*. It was a romantic comedy tale of a man who needs to find a specific, antique special gun (called the Mexican) and return it to some bad guys he was working for. Throughout the movie, there are clips about the folklore of this special gun, each one being a slightly different narrative of its existence.¹ This movie got into the gun's oral history, which was passed down from one generation to another in a small Mexican town. Depending upon the narrator of this tale, the story would change quite a bit. This movie explored the concepts of both folklore and ownership. Who did this gun belong to? The answer at the end was that it belonged to the original family who made the piece over 100 years prior.² Watching *the Mexican* reminded me of the PBS television show, *the Antiques Roadshow*. This show is a long-running broadcast where people come on to the show and ask appraising experts what their item is worth.³ Many times, the participants brought in objects that were passed down to them through family members.

While studying oral history, both the movie, *The Mexican*, and the *Antiques Roadshow* brought to mind, what stories are passed down and why? In addition, when artifacts are part of the story, what is the real value of an artifact? In the movie, *The Mexican*, the artifact's value turned out to be sentimental, because it was passed down to the family who originally made the gun and needed to remain in that family. On the *Antiques Roadshow*, the values are given in terms of retail, insurance, and auction values.⁴ Although sometimes there is a discussion between the object's owner and the *Antiques Roadshow* expert concerning the object's sentimental values, that is not the focus. There are times where a person will come onto *Antiques Roadshow*, and regardless of what the artifact's financial worth is, they explain how through the sentimental value that they would never sell it. Yet, oral history is used in this show, to help determine the provenance of an artifact. A participant, for instance, will state my great-grandfather obtained this item and passed it down to me, and as part of showing the item, they will have a photograph of their great grandfather. This appears to excite the appraisers and adds to the value of the item.

What is the value of artifacts owner by people who are not the original owners? In another PBS show, *History Detectives*, there is a case of an artifact where it is obtained by a person who was not the original owner. In this *History Detectives* episode, a Dawn Peterson

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purported to have singer/songwriter Bob Dylan's guitar—the one he played at the 1965 Newport Folk Festival where he was booed off the stage.⁵ She also had handwritten lyrics to some of Dylan's songs that he wrote during that time. The oral history in Dawn's family states that these items Dylan gave to Dawn's father who passed them down to her. Who did those items actually belong to? However, a legal dispute ensued, whereby Dylan claimed that this guitar might have been stolen from him in 1965. This was settled out of court, and the owner of his guitar and his papers, (which was said to be Dawn Peterson) sold them at auction about a year later.⁶

What about artifacts created by different cultures than their owners? What is their worth and who actually owns them? Should they be repatriated back to that culture? In 2014, respected Zuni elder, Octavius Seowtewa went to a museum in Paris, France and, one in Germany, trying to persuade those museums to return certain sacred Zuni objects that they acquired.⁷ These objects, known as the Ahayuda, are considered more sacred than other Zuni objects on display in these museums. The Zuni people believe that the Ahayuda (Ahayu:da:) are there to preserve harmony, and since they were taken wrongfully from the Zuni tribe, it is paramount that these objects be returned to the tribe.⁸ This is a clear-cut situation whereby oral history and tradition states ownership. However, in this instance, these museums have been reluctant to repatriate these artifacts, fearing that this might set precedence for further removals.⁹

What happens when a private individual, and not a museum owns an artifact from another culture? How about if that item was obtained nefariously? Do we use and trust oral history about the significance and ownership of an item? Whose oral history do we trust? In the case of the Zuni people, they state that the Ahayuda artifacts belong to the whole community not owned by one person.¹⁰ The Zuni also states that these items specifically were illegally obtained. In the case of these Zuni objects, they were collectively, not individually owned as more like cultural property (reflecting the collective cultural experiences, not individual ones).¹¹ For instance, instead of Bob Dylan's guitar, which involved ownership of one person, it is the community who "owns" the Ahayuda. Because of that communal ownership, things can get sticky legally speaking. For most objects are obtained from a capitalist culture, artifact ownership is pretty clear. You buy it, you own it. However, how does that translate into something like the Ahayuda? The answer might lie in NAGPRA.

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NAGPRA (Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act), became federal law in 1990, addresses objects (and human remains) that are considered sacred by the Native Americans. In other words, both “cultural significance and collective ownership” are equally fundamental to this law.¹² NAGPRA gives museums and federal agencies a way to return certain items that have value to Native American tribes. These items include “human remains, funerary objects, sacred objects, or objects of cultural patrimony—to lineal descendants, and culturally affiliated Indian tribes and Native Hawaiian organizations.”¹³ This act, helps repatriate certain sacred objects, but not without issue. It is only applicable in the United States. In other words, if a sacred object (or burial remains) are found outside of the United States, then it does not have to be repatriated by law (although confusingly enough, NAGPRA does have jurisdiction over such items if they are lent to a museum outside of the United States).¹⁴ Despite its limitations, NAGPRA does use oral histories and traditions to help tribes who are looking to repatriate specific sacred artifacts and/or human remains.¹⁵

Can oral history be used to determine ownership and value with artifacts? I think so. Although it was done in a comedic, fictional manner, the movie *The Mexican*, was also a moral tale about provenance. That despite the gun’s value to the “bad guys,” and its obvious economic value, the gun truly belonged to the family that created it. Like in the case of the Zuni, this gun was owned collectively. We can also use oral history to determine the sacredness of an artifact as well. Through oral history narratives, both antique dealers and NAGPRA can find out the origins and the value of an object. However, that is only if we adhere to these values. If we continue to place emphasis only on economic value and ignore both the cultural and the historical value of an artifact, we will have lost something meaningful.

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Notes

¹ *The Mexican*, directed by Gore Verbinski (March 2, 2001: Universal City, CA: DreamWorks Studio, 2013). DVD

² Ibid.

³ *The Antiques Roadshow*, executive producer, Marsha Bemko (Boston, MA: WGBH, 2015).

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ History Detectives, Episode 1 Season 10: “Bob Dylan’s Guitar” segment, *History Detectives* video, directed by Josh Mensch (July 17, 2012; New York, NY: Lion Television, 2012).

⁶ New York Post, “Dylan’s Legendary Electric Strat Headed to Auction.” *New York Post*, published: October 31, 2013, <http://nypost.com/2013/10/31/dylans-legendary-electric-strat-headed-to-auction/>

⁷ Rachel Donadio, “Zuni Ask Europe to Return Sacred Art,” *The New York Times: Art and Design*, Published April 8, 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/04/09/arts/design/zuni-petition-european-museums-to-return-sacred-objects.html>

⁸ William L. Merrill, Edmund J. Ladd, T. J. Ferguson, Elizabeth Cruwys, Alan S. Downer, Christian F. Feest, Charlotte J. Frisbie, Joyce Herold, Schuyler Jones, Robert Layton and Larry J. Zimmerman, “The Return of the Ahayu:da: Lessons for Repatriation from Zuni Pueblo and the Smithsonian Institution,” *Current Anthropology*, 34, no. 5.1993: 523-567.

⁹ Rachel Donadio, “Zuni Ask Europe to Return Sacred Art,” *The New York Times: Art and Design*, Published April 8, 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/04/09/arts/design/zuni-petition-european-museums-to-return-sacred-objects.html>

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Sarah Harding, “Cultural Property and the Limitations of Preservation,” *Law & Policy*, 25, no. 1, January 2003.

¹² Ibid., 20.

¹³ US Department of Interior: National Park Service, “National NAGPRA,” *US Department of Interior: National Park Service*, Accessed on April 14, 2015, http://www.nps.gov/nagpra/FAQ/INDEX.HTM#What_is_NAGPRA?

¹⁴ Ora V. Marek-Martinez, “NAGPRA’s Achilles Heel: The Disposition of Culturally Unidentifiable Human Remains,” *Heritage Management*, 1, no. 2, fall 2008:243–260. <http://www.maneyonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1179/hma.2008.1.2.243>

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¹⁵ John A. Neuenschwander. *A Guide to Oral History and the Law* (Oxford Oral History). Oxford, England. Oxford University Press, 2009 page 32.