

**INDIAN HISTORIANS EXAMINE THE PREHISTORY AND HISTORY OF
THE IROQUOIS: PROBLEMS IN METHODOLOGY AND RECORDS****RICHARD HILL and DONALD A. GRINDE, JR.**

When gathering evidence to study the prehistory and history of the Iroquois people, a methodological commitment to keep the culture in its natural state must be the first priority. Since the culture is an interdependence of many objects, concepts, people, and traditions, it can only be completely understood and respected when viewed in its entirety. Separation and isolation of so-called artifacts such as human bones, wampum belts, and false face masks by themselves cannot explain the viable culture of past and contemporary Iroquois society. The insensitivity to the complete physical and spiritual environment mars the dominant culture's perception of Iroquois culture. Many of the errors and abuses of interpretation can be avoided in the future by the respectful examination of the ongoing Iroquois society without disruption or separation from its crucial and vital elements.

On-gwe-onh-we or "Real People" feel strongly about the dead. The Creator bound the Iroquois to their ancestors and their children of the future. Iroquois people feel the pains and pleasures of their grandfathers. When they die, they are returned to their mother, the earth. The Creator provided a lasting home for the dead and the birthplace of future generations in the earth. Violation of sacred burial grounds by any scholar denies the rights of the dead, the present generation, and future Iroquois people. The earth suffers from the wounds of archaeological rape and theft. Can a discipline ignore the values and traditions of the people that it studies?

But disturbing graves is not all, owning human bones seems to hold an even greater and macabre fascination for some. Is not the owning of another man's remains a form of spiritual slavery? A recent press release from Wittenburg University in Ohio states that "College foot-ball's weirdest prize, an ancient and battered Indian skull, will be up for grabs when Wittenburg invades Ohio Wesleyan . . . for the 45th renewal of the skull game." Are there not laws in white society against graverobbers? Do they only apply to the dominant society?

Displaying Indian bones in a museum or on a football field has a dehumanizing effect upon the society. Why do children and adults have such a fascination with death, dismemberment, and destruction? Does the public display of Indian bones serve any useful educational function beyond appealing to the bizarre and violent side of man? Are not there other ways to show burials and their deep spiritual meaning? Perhaps the sanctity of death and the role of life in preparing one for death makes for a more peaceful culture. Certainly, a culture that ignores death or twists it into macabre concepts has a tendency towards violence because it does not understand itself. In order to live, one must be responsible for the dead, otherwise life has no dignity.

All this is not to say that scholars, and especially anthropologists, should stop studying prehistoric Indian peoples, but rather to point out that knowledge and education sometimes bear little or no relationship to museum displays and the sheer joy of robbing graves! Let the sacred and the rational be the guide instead of the sensational and the bizarre. Respect for the past, present and future of the existing Iroquois culture and its values should be the watchword of any scholar. When "Indians of All Tribes" occupied the Southwest Museum recently, they stated:

We are not dead. We are a people with a rich and beautiful heritage that keeps our spirit alive in spite of all measures used against us which can only be viewed as a conspiracy to exterminate us.

We want the symbolic return of sacred objects which are a part of our present religion, not just our past.

In another case, the New York State Museum offered to return certain objects at the request of the Associate Commissioner of Cultural Education, Dr. John Broughton, but Dr. William Ritchie, the State Archaeologist, disagreed, saying that "I think they have a proper place in a popular, scientific institution."

Already there are laws being passed to police the activities of scholars since they are unwilling to do it themselves. In the State of Michigan, the Governor has recently signed into law an act to protect Indian cemeteries and burial grounds. Desecration of burial grounds constitutes a felony punishable ". . . by imprisonment for not more than ten years, or by fine of not more than 55,000."

Is a museum or discipline justified to exploit and deny the culture that it attempts to explain? If the deceased is not a relative or removed in time, does this give a member of another society the license to desecrate his grave and make his remains the object of curiosity? A person who dies with no known relatives is returned to the earth, not handed over to a museum. Graverobbing is against the law. Why should Indian graves be less honoured? The objects placed in a grave are sacred and necessary for the dead.

Other objects such as wampum belts are dishonoured, stolen, or interpreted out of context. Since 1898, the Onondaga Nation has argued with the New York State government over the possession of Iroquois Confederacy's wampum belts. Repeatedly, the Onondagas have illustrated the illegal surrender of the belts and the resultant loss of cultural heritage. The belts are a living, viable medium of communication. A Mohawk upon seeing the sacred wampum belts on display at the New York State Museum opined: "It would be like we locked up your bible and cross several hundred years ago." In light of such controversy, many scholars like Anthony Wallace of the University of Pennsylvania feel that ". . . times change and there are interests in addition to those of science and the state which deserve to be accommodated."

Dr. William Fenton believes that the Iroquois wampums are as "American as apple pie." Moreover, he asserts that the ". . . return of even a portion of the New York State Wampum Collection to the Onondaga Chiefs poses a threat to the integrity of museum collections **everywhere.**" In 1971, the New York State Legislature passed a bill for the return of five of the twenty belts if the Onondagas provided a fireproof building for storage of the belts. Fenton and others fail to see that wampum was, and is, among the many symbols and documents of Iroquois sovereignty. Frankly, the wampum will never really advance the field of anthropology as long as they are treated through insensitive and legalistic eyes. Without the human element in their interpretation, they may be even more misinterpreted in the future than just to call them "American as apple pie."

Earlier generations of white men at Albany and Brantford knew the nature and symbolism of wampum. At the Albany Councils, wampum was a symbol of sovereignty and good faith. At the Six Nations Reserve in Ontario, it was seized by the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, led by Colonel C. E. Morgan, in 1924. According to the Brantford, *Expositor*, the wampums were forcibly seized and Colonel Morgan laid the Five Nations Council Fire Wampum before the newly *elected* council to grant the elected chiefs power.

Graves have been desecrated and robbed for "cultural treasures." Bones of dead people are

placed on view to unsympathetic eyes and impressionable minds that do not understand what scholars have done. This is a great crime against the Iroquois, all people and the Creator. Indian people ask that it be stopped. What scholar or group is willing?

Wampum belts and strings that are necessary to complete meetings, ceremonies and histories are isolated in glass cases or vaults in Albany, New York, Washington, D.C. or Ottawa, Canada. They are there by duplicity, coercion and theft. Is anthropology and archaeology to play a further part in the subjugation of Indian nations or will it place these objects in the proper hands that can help to interpret them from the heart and culture of the Iroquois people? Isolation and separation of objects and bones from their rightful environment only causes confusion and misunderstanding. Perhaps Iroquois people can cooperate on a co-equal basis to further the study of all people once these issues are settled. Iroquois culture is for everyone who seeks peace. Scholarship is destroying the opportunity of many to understand this peace.