

# MENDOCINO COUNTY INTERTRIBAL REPATRIATION PROJECT

## AN INTERVIEW WITH POLLY GIRVIN

*Historical Roundhouse*



*If you humiliate and treat people like savages, then you don't have to consider their humanness. If native people aren't human, you can rob their roundhouses and take everything under the name of science. Although anthropologists may have felt that they were trying to preserve a culture, that is not done by stealing its objects. That is a lie. As we enter the next millennium, we have an opportunity for a great healing. . . .*

### THE LAW

Under the Native American Grave Protection and Repatriation Act of 1990 (NAGPRA), native people are allowed to bring home ceremonial objects and ancestral human remains from museums funded by the federal government. These museums are under federal obligation to go through their collections and list items they feel should be returned and which tribes would be most likely to receive them.

This great law was the result of a continual struggle by many religious leaders for years. Since the late 1800s, the Iroquois had been attempting to get back their wampum belts, which they needed to teach them the laws of their culture and the way to live their lives. They had been fighting consistently and adamantly in the New York courts. The Hopi had also been claiming it was essential for their war god masks to be returned, as these were necessary for the continued initiation of the young men and women into the Kiva societies of their tribe. In California also, the tribes were asking for the return of their sacred materials.

### CALIFORNIA TRIBAL ACTION

I wrote a grant on behalf of the tribal chairs of Mendocino County to collectively approach the museums and to do the research necessary to create, inventory and save the claims. Our work includes searching through access files, collectors' correspondence and the collections themselves, and filming items with their catalogue numbers when possible. We have now filmed over 3,000 objects at UC Berkeley as well as Pomo items in the Los Angeles County Museum of Natural History, the California Department of Parks and Recreation, the Field Museum in Chicago, the Milwaukee Public Museum and the Brooklyn Museum. Our representation includes the following tribes: Point Arena/Manchester, Hopland, Guidiville, Pinoleville, Coyote Valley, Redwood Valley/Little River, Sherwood Valley, Potter Valley and Yokayo. We are also creating a statewide organization, consisting of about thirty-eight tribes joined together to offer mutual assistance and support in implementing NAGPRA.

The law is silent about what happens once the materials are returned to a tribe. Sacred objects will be reintroduced into ceremony according to the discretion of each tribe. Human remains will need to be brought home in a safe way, and we are receiving guidance from the roundhouse leaders about how to do this. They feel that they have the right songs and the proper ceremonies to do it in a good way. The intertribal project relies on select groups of religious people to help them when necessary.

The burden is on the tribes to stake their claims for materials that should come home. The museums' only responsibility is to create a summary of their ethnographic collection—not even an entire inventory. We started our research at UC Berkeley. When I got there two years ago, they had done nothing to comply with the law, and their personnel were quite resistant to the project. They had ignored the law, gotten an extension, requested another and recently had been given another grace period. Coming to UC Berkeley with about sixteen elders seemed to startle the museum staff. They were dealing with live Indians wanting to look at and research items of their culture. This was not an anthropology class or a group of visiting scholars. This was the people themselves. As the elders viewed the vast items from their predecessors—their

grandmothers and grandfathers, aunts and uncles—there was a sadness: “Why is this here in a basement? Why aren’t the baskets back with the people?” The law allows us to bring some things back, but the real feeling was, “It should all be home.” Many items were purchased during times when the starving people had to sell objects that were dear to them. But the museum staff at Berkeley don’t see it that way. They have not provided us with an easy list to work with. Maybe we needed to start in the darkest place first, in order to find the light to show the way for the others. The rest should be much easier.

We will soon be examining the ceremonial collections at the Harvard Peabody Museum, the Denver Art Museum and the University of Pennsylvania.

### THE TEAM

I am doing the archival research, and Carmen Christy from the Yokayo Rancheria is doing the filming. Our cultural liaison is Donald Duncan of the Guidiville Rancheria. He is a regalia maker, a singer in the roundhouse, and a trainer of young



Modern Pomo dancer Photo by Liz Haapanen

people in singing and dancing. He has a very diplomatic manner, and hopefully will win the hearts of the museum people. Dotty Theodoratus, a professor at Sacramento State, is our ethnographic assistant. Her work has been dedicated to protecting Native American sacred sites. As an anthropologist, she uses her skills to speak on behalf of the Indians in legal forums and to the academic world.

### THE HEALING OPPORTUNITY OF THE MILLENNIUM

This is a tremendous breakthrough opportunity for healing—for both the colonizer and the colonized. In going face-to-face with Indian spiritual people, the collection managers of the museums can realize that returning sacred objects can bring about a peacemaking. The Indians’ rebirth of joy in the roundhouses will restore pride in their culture.

On the whole, the museum people we have encountered at UC Berkeley have a possessive attitude toward the objects in their collections, even those of sacred and ceremonial import. They see them as scientifically interesting but not as imbued with spirit. Conveying the spiritual aspect of the project will not be a matter of words or paperwork. Ultimately, it is a matter of the heart.

The ancestor spirits are here with the project. The past hurt and anger over what was done to the Indians can be transformed by bringing the sacred materials home for ceremony. Some of these are pre-conquest materials that can be instrumental in bringing the spirit of the old ceremonies to a new generation. This is a millennial project. It is going to be within the year 2000 that claims will be made, but overall this is about a ten-year project.

### SONGS OF PROTECTION AND HOMECOMING

Prior to working on the Native American human remains, the elders sang a protection song. This was done

on behalf of both the museum staff and the project staff. The coming-home song was also sung. The elders said this brought them a great sense of happiness. I was glad to hear this, because I had been worried about the disarray of the skeletal collection and thought the sadness might be too great for them. The spirits as well as the singers were happy. While the roundhouse people sang to the ceremonial objects, the spirits of these objects seemed to leap into the songs. As they sang to the baskets, one roundhouse practitioner saw the basket spirits dancing around the room. The Indian people love these objects so much, and want them to come home. They love their culture and their ceremonies.

The songs were sung in various private basement rooms at UC Berkeley. The baskets are in a separate room in the basement; the ceremonial items are in another portion of the museum; and the human remains are underneath the women’s gymnasium. They were brought out of drawers and bins and sung to, spoken to, and prayed to in the Pomo languages.

### RESOURCE PROTECTION ADVOCACY

Once the objects are brought home, we will need to create an intertribal archival center to house them. We will also need a cultural resource



Victoria Bradshaw of Phoebe Hearst Museum UC Berkeley Photo by Louis Knight

protection foundation where all the tribes can go for assistance. Other issues have been brought to the project, such as the protection of sacred sites from excavation and the protection of natural resources such as sedge (a material used in basket-making). Our staff has received grants for four years. As we have learned about other laws (the California Environmental Quality Act, Archaeological Resource Protection Act, Executive Order for the Protection of Sacred Sites, the American Indian Religious Freedom Act, etc.) we have become resource-protection advocates. In the past we didn't have the staff, the time or the money to do this. Indians have had to focus on day-to-day operations, development of their homes and issues of basic survival. So this project is giving us a basket for catching the cries for cultural protection.

### THE MENTALITY OF CONQUEST

This is a sacred time for healing, and should not have to be a battle. So much was lost in the invasion of this continent. There are well-meaning spirits and good hearts in all cultures, but the conquest was expressed through the supreme arrogance of

the invading people's religion. Many of the settlers wanted to express their relation to the Creator in a free and a good way without domination, yet it is very troubling that the Indian religion was at best viewed as a curio—certainly not as being of the same status as the white man's religion.

Some of the cruelty and barbarity of the settlers is still in evidence. It is reflected in the hardened hearts of those museum people who do not want to give back the sacred objects. They can say, "We are not rapists or disembowelers of Indian women; we are not smashers of Indian children's heads on rocks." On the other hand, they don't greet the spiritual people of the Indian tribes and say, "We are honored that you have survived. We can give you these items and your ancestors' human remains. This is the least we can do. We don't need to just study you and have your sacred items in our vaults." It is barbaric that some of them are fighting to hold on to these items.

### COLLECTING AND RETURNING

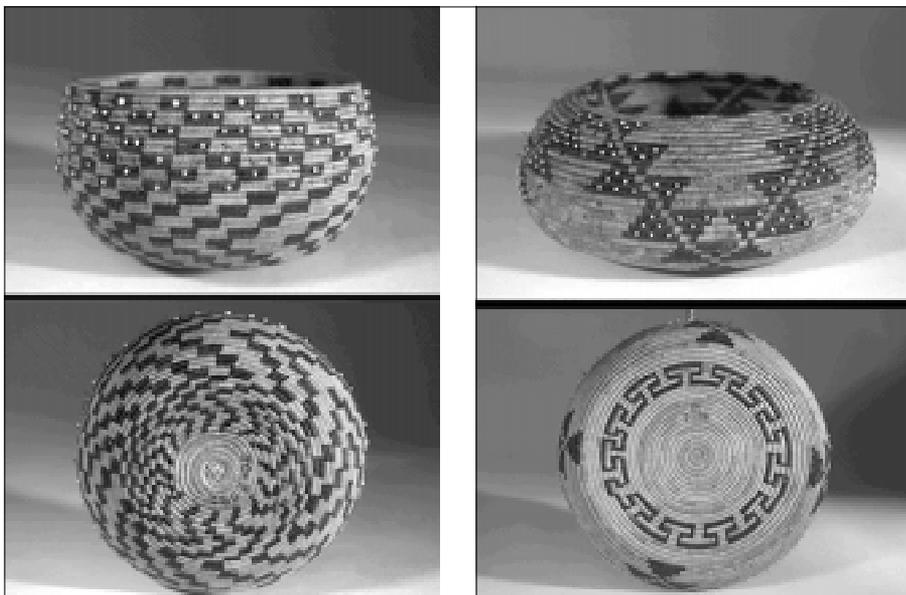
Many collections were made at a time when the Indian people were poor, starving and or in great sorrow and pain. Selling their ceremonial items

indicates how depressed and demoralized the people were. Yet, even under these circumstances, the anthropologists thought their purchases were valid. How sad that is. This is a hard project because all of these issues have to be looked at. How did these items go out of the culture, and how much resistance is met at their returning? For instance, one archaeology professor at Berkeley feels that his first-amendment right is being violated by this project because he won't be able to continue to use Pomo remains in his teaching.

Every person deserves to be laid to rest in ceremony, yet there are no reburial songs. This is a big challenge, yet I know the spirit will prevail. It has been a project of mixed feelings. Old anger is being stirred, and at the same time many of the elders are delighted to discover how much has been preserved. Archival materials exist such as unedited films of people from our area. Some casino tribes wanted to buy copies of films, reports, tapes, and everything Pomo. I created a NAGPRA discovery request for these items, which is still pending.

### FORGOTTEN BASKETS

Pomo baskets are beautiful and bring so much happiness to the people who see them. They are created with so much spirit and Creator-blessed intelligence. Many of the patterns are complex, with different designs on the interiors, outsides and bottoms of the baskets. All of these weaving patterns work together in an incredible way. Carmen Christy, our videographer, worked to create the Native American Studies Department at UC Berkeley years ago. She was coming home to Ukiah to study basket-making with Elsie Allen and didn't know that 500 yards away from the ethnic-studies division was a basement that contained 2,000 baskets. She could have reveled in all the different patterns and learned



*Pomo baskets (w/ beads & woodpecker feathers), American Museum of Natural History Photos provided*

about this art, but no one told her that the collection existed. That is strange, don't you think?

### CULTURAL SCRUTINY AND OWNERSHIP

Have you ever been to an anthropological conference and heard papers presented by non-Indians? I don't want to be disrespectful to anthropologists, but imagine how very strange it is to be the object of study. Wouldn't it be odd if an Indian went to white families and asked, "What do you do when you wake up? How do you cook? What have you done today? What does that mean to you? What is this word in your language?" After she was interviewed one woman told me, "Polly, I felt I was abused by them." The anthropologists didn't spend any time getting to know her before asking all sorts of personal questions. Another man told me that when he was a little boy, his family told him to go hide in a tree when the anthropologists came. When they left, he would come home.

The anthropologists and scholars had the power to scrutinize the Indian culture. Now we have the power to scrutinize their



Delma Eyle, Pomo elder, Coyote Valley Reservation  
Photo by Liz Haapanen

collections and reclaim what they took. There are still many questions to be explored in regard to intellectual property rights. For instance, when a basket pattern discovered in an interview is used in a book, or a song in teaching materials, does the author need permission from the person interviewed to duplicate them?

We were asked to sign a document saying we could not reproduce or use for commercial purposes any of the materials that we filmed. I told them I was putting the pictures we took onto a CD so that each tribe could review them for their research. The museum claimed property rights. One young Yuki man was excited to hear that when God created the world he was singing. He said, "Are you claiming that you own the Yuki song, "When God created the world he was singing?" They said, "No, we don't own the song; we just own that singer's tape of the song."

All these issues need to be looked at. The objects are under property law, so if an object is under cultural patrimony—if it could not be alienated from tribal custom and tradition by an individual—this federal law says it will be honored as belonging to the tribe. In effect, the law says, "White people never had a right to possess cultural items that could not be conveyed outside the Pomo cultural context by an individual." This right of possession is inalienable, which means it cannot be obtained legally by anyone besides the tribe.

If you take a picture of a ceremony or of the singing of a religious song in ceremony, and if those things are supposed to belong to the culture, then who owns it? I think that cultural patrimony can expand. The museums and libraries are frightened by



Horns used in men's ceremonial regalia  
Grace Hudson Museum



Pomo topknot of magpie feathers  
Grace Hudson Museum  
Photos by Elaine Quitiquit

a concept of property that threatens the Anglo-Saxon Bill of Lading, a receipt or contract that generally gives bonafide, good-faith purchaser rights. They think in terms of contracts. These are two different worldviews. One says, for example, "We own this land because we paid money and bought it," and the other says, "There is no way you can own Mother Earth. There is also no way you can own a sacred song that is to be sung in ceremony, no matter how you got it. It's not yours. It's ours, to be lived within a sacred context."

At UC Berkeley, when I saw the drawers and files of human remains up to the ceiling, I thought, "Oh, my God. Most people don't see something like this in a lifetime." They had a whole world of skeletons there under the women's gymnasium. Here were the Pomo, and across from them

was Teotihuacan and Tenochtitlan. Then there were Egyptian mummies near the Pomo ceremonial objects. If you believe in ancestor spirits, do you think they would be upset by these practices? A person's skull is in one box and their other bones are in other boxes. The remains are put under fluorescent lights for display purposes. Most people with any sensitivity toward ancestor spirits would have reservations about the sciences they call osteology, physical anthropology and archaeology.

### OPEN DIALOGUE & COOPERATION

As long as we keep going for the heart and spirit and as long as the museum people can face the concerned Indian community eyeball-to-eyeball, then there is hope for healing. The energies of the elders, the bird singers, the roundhouse dancers and the bear dancers are being focused to burst free the spirits that are trapped right now. They say repatriation will revitalize the ceremonies, and that there will be a rebirth of Indian culture. It is sad to have to keep telling the Europeans that their contract law cannot conquer spirit or change our love for our Earth Mother. There is a way this path can be very joyful for everyone. We just have to touch the hearts and the

spirits of the collection managers so they can get beyond their fear and confusion.

The love the Indian people have for their ceremonial items and baskets is so strong. This will bring joy to their communities, and spirit will prevail. Those who walk with the Indians on this reclaiming journey will also walk toward the light and toward joy and revitalization. What a great dialog and interchange! What a great honor to work together in this way.

To make the claims for repatriation, the Indian tribal government officials have to work with the traditional roundhouse practitioners or other native religious practitioners. What a good thing that is. This puts the spirit not only into the museums but into the tribal governments. It mandates that spiritual and tribal leaders be given standing, under law, to approach the museums. Ultimately, this supports sovereignty.

### FUTURE GENERATIONS

It will mean a lot to our local community to have the baskets back, and to have the spirits home and happy and dancing with the Indian people. The Indian community will delight in the ceremonial items coming home. Good energy will be

prayed from the roundhouses again. It will be a blessing for the entire country when the aboriginal peoples' traditions are honored in this way. We are the returners; the next generation will dance with these sacred objects in their ceremonies. It is for the next generation to celebrate. That is why this is a project of joy. It is hard now, but think of the children dancing!



*Christine Hamilton,  
Pomo basket maker carries on tradition*



Repatriation provides healing for the colonizer, and a rebirth for the spirit of the people who were colonized. Using golden eagle-feather dance regalia, condor capes, bull lords to pull down the creator spirit, pre-invasion ceremonial wands and other ceremonial items to call home the spirits—all this is very profound for future generations. This will bring happiness to the whole community as we walk forward into the next millennium. What a gift! Ultimately, for world harmony for all the cultures of the world, I feel that repatriation needs to happen. This is a project of joy born out of pain. It's the best of work to do. ~



*Polly Girvin and Carmen Cristy* Photos by Jerri-Jo Idarius