Review: "Tell Them about the Suicide" A Review of Recent Materials on the Reburial of Prehistoric Native American Skeletons

Reviewed Work(s):
- Planning Seminar on Ancient Burial Grounds by Duane C. Anderson; Maria Pearson; Alton Fisher; Debby Ziegłowsky
- The Study of Ancient Human Skeletal Remains in Iowa; A Symposium by Duane C. Anderson; Debby Ziegłowsky; Shirley Schermer
- Wanagi Is Gone by Bruce Baird
- Reburial of Human Skeletons; Perspectives from Lakota Holy Men and Elders by Jan Hammil; Larry J. Zimmerman
- Conference on Reburial by United States Air Force
- Science or Sacrilege? The Study of Native American Remains by Phillip L. Walker

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“Tell Them About the Suicide”
A Review of Recent Materials on the Reburial of Prehistoric Native American Skeletons

by
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Iowa City: Office of the State Archaeologist of Iowa, 1980. 46 pp., Appendices. Copy available at cost.

Iowa City: Office of the State Archaeologist of Iowa, 1983. 84 pp., Appendices. Free paper.

Baird, Bruce (Producer). Wanagi is Gone.
Vermillion: South Dakota Public Television, 1980. 58 minutes, color, ½ inch VHS. $15.

Hammil, Jan and Larry J. Zimmerman (Editors). Reburial of Human Skeletons; Perspectives from Lakota Holy Men and Elders.

Vermillion: University of South Dakota Archaeology Laboratory, 1985. iv + 62 pp., Illustrations. Reprint $2.50 paper.

Santa Barbara: University of California Television Services, 1983. 41 minutes, color. ¾ inch U-matic, ½ inch VHS or ½ inch Beta. Purchase $100, Rental $40 for 3 days.

“Tell them about the suicide. Tell them they are causing the suicide. The Indian has no place left to run, so tell them of the suicide. And for myself, I will also be cremated and maybe then I will be free of the white man.”

These are the words of Lakota holy man Vernal Cross, concerns voiced to Jan Hammil (1985:7), Director of American Indians Against Desecration (AIAD), and relayed to an audience of anthropologists at a session on the treatment of Native American burials at the 1985 meeting of the American Anthropological Association in Washington, D.C. Cross was showing the concern of his people who in great number
are apparently making arrangements for cremation of their bodies because of their fear of ending up in cardboard boxes, paper sacks and plastic bags. Cremation is not the traditional Lakota way of "burying" the dead and is believed to be an end, a spiritual suicide. These words tell the despair of many Indian people at their perception of anthropological treatment of Indian skeletal remains. They indicate the intensity of feelings about the conflict between anthropologists and Indians over control of Indian bones and grave goods, and to some extent, control of the past.

Since the mid-1960s control of Native American skeletal remains has been disputed by Indians and anthropologists. Many Native Americans contend that the dead should not be disturbed, but if they must be, they should be reburied. Anthropologists, especially archaeologists and physical anthropologists have contended that the skeletons have scientific value and deserve study and retention in laboratories. The issues are complex with arguments running the gamut from academic freedom to religious freedom.

In the early years of the dispute, and during a time of greater Indian militance, excavations were occasionally disrupted. During the last decade, however, there has been a greater willingness by many on both sides to discuss the issues and to reach compromises. At very least, attempts have been made by each to understand the position of the other. In the process, several important documents have been produced. Six of them will be examined here; four are printed works and two are videotapes. All are important documents representing the spectrum of concern by all parties, from adamant refusal to compromise to the compromises wherein archaeologists and Indians excavated, in some cases studied, and eventually reburied, skeletons. A chronological approach may be the best way to understand the works, though the events all happened so close to each other in time that the order may be insignificant.

*Wanagi Is Gone* is a documentary produced for South Dakota Public Television about the excavations, controversy, and reburial at the Crow Creek Massacre in central South Dakota. The site received international media coverage, and *Wanagi* was broadcast on PBS regional networks across the country. In 1978, human skeletal remains were eroding from the end of a fortification ditch surrounding the Crow Creek site along the Missouri River (Zimmerman and Whitten 1980). After looters harmed the site, the Corps of Engineers contracted to have the site excavated. Excavations uncovered the remains of nearly 500 individuals, all killed in warfare and mutilated by scalping, decapitation and other methods. Dated to the early 14th century, the village was of a culture ancestral to the historic Arikara. The video
documents the excavation, study of skeletons and the controversy surrounding it.

The video was directed by former SDPTV Minority Affairs Director, Bruce Baird, a Chippewa. His hope was that, beyond documenting the archaeology, the Indian concern with the project would be shown. What Baird developed is a compelling work that details not only the archaeological project, but how the archaeologists arrived at their interpretations of what happened at the site. Into this tale he weaves Sioux beliefs about the site, the *Wanagi* or potentially malevolent spirits who guard burial sites, and how the archaeologists handled the problems by dealing with a holy man and the tribal council. Especially good is a sequence with Mark Swegle about how an osteologist looks at bones to tell age, sex, cause of death and other information. Also good is a sequence with Dr. John B. Gregg, a paleopathologist, on what one can tell from bones about nutrition, disease, and trauma. These are some of the few sequences available that actually tell what it is that “bone people” actually do. In that sense, it is very good that Indian people see the film so that some of the stereotypes about physical anthropologists and archaeologists can be dispelled.

What is interesting, but not so good, is that Baird placed Indians and archaeologists in a position opposite each other in interpretation, when actually Indian opinion about the project and interpretation were on a continuum from support to rejection of the archaeological ideas (Zimmerman and Alex 1981:10). Some Indians will also be offended by showing the bones of the ancestors, but this could not be helped if such a generally fine video was to be effective. Another good point is that the tape is an exceptional bargain. Because of South Dakota law, the tape is available for the cost of a replacement videotape, a small copying fee and postage (about $15).

The first significant reburial law pertaining to Indian skeletal remains was passed by the Iowa state legislature in 1978. This law was passed as a result of several incidents in the state where archaeologists were involved in handling ancient skeletons. At least one incident in 1971 near Glenwood, Iowa, solidified Indian opinion, was instrumental in passage of the Iowa law, and tended to place archaeology in a bad light (Deloria 1973:32–33). Another, at the Lewis Central School Site, showed how effectively the Iowa law could work if Indians and archaeologists could compromise (Anderson, *et al.* 1978). The latter brought about a series of discussions between Indians, archaeologists and physical anthropologists sponsored by the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Iowa Humanities Board and the University of Iowa through the Office of the State Archaeologist of Iowa. The first session was entitled *Planning Seminar on Ancient Burial*
Grounds and was held in March of 1980. Position papers about treatment of skeletons were given by several individuals from anthropology and from Iowa's Indian Advisory Board. Much discussion followed and is presented as edited transcript. The intriguing matter is that all parties to the issue accepted that reburial had to occur under Iowa law, and there were no attempts by archaeologists to fight rear guard actions against reburial itself. Much of the discussion focused on how much and what kinds of study should be done and how long it should take. Actually, relatively little planning is present in the document, but there is a great exchange of diverse views and a demonstration of how compromise can work.

A second Iowa session was held in 1983 to continue the dialogue of the 1980 session. During the interim, state cemeteries had been used to reburial Indian dead and a number of problems about what archaeologists did with remains surfaced. In particular, there had been a widely reported story that a physical anthropologist had discovered that ancient Indians had syphilis, causing considerable bad reaction toward and from the Indian community in the state. The group discussing the problems was comprised of a larger group of Indians than the earlier session, but much the same group of archaeologists. In the three year interim the Indians had become much more sophisticated in their knowledge of what anthropologists do with remains, and much more concerned with what happened to Indian dead in general. At the same time, there appeared to be little change by anthropologists in their understanding of the Indian view. Many of the statements or positions of both groups had changed, but the physical anthropologists had changed their views the least and made little effort to simplify rather complex, jargon-laden, material for their audience. Still, the atmosphere was generally cordial, and to an individual, the group seemed to feel that the discussion was worthwhile and much was learned.

The strength of the two Iowa transcripts is that they present a variety of Indian views and concerns most eloquently. Several groups were represented including Mesquakie, Ponca, Athabaskan, Cherokee, Sioux, Winnebago, and Potawatomi. Their views show that though tribes may differ, their concerns about the propriety of reburial are uniform. Such uniformity lends less credence to the views of some archaeologists that only a few tribes or individuals are concerned for primarily political reasons.

Science or Sacrilege?: The Study of Native American Remains was produced under the direction of physical anthropologist Phillip Walker for the Office of Instructional Consultation at the University of California—Santa Barbara. The tape documents the reburial controversy
in California, but gives important insights into the feelings of many physical anthropologists and archaeologists as well as some Indians. The dispute erupted in 1981 after the California Department of Parks and Recreation allowed Indian groups to reclaim that department's collection of 871 skeletons and associated grave goods and rebury them. The Native American Heritage Commission, an Indian rights group, organized the drive to get the bones reburied. Many California anthropologists condemned the reburial and formed the American Committee for the Preservation of Archaeological Collections (ACPAC). ACPAC argued that scientific information would be destroyed that could teach scientists about nutrition, disease, life span, demographics and culture of Indian peoples. ACPAC eventually stalled further reburial with a court order until the issue could be resolved.

While the video is interesting for professional anthropologists, it is not an especially effective use of the medium. The format is essentially a series of interviews or statements about the reburial issue, whether scientists should be allowed to retain skeletons for extended study or whether they should be returned to Native American groups for ceremonial reburial. When introductory physical anthropology and archaeology classes at the University of South Dakota were shown this tape their interest flagged after about 15 minutes. The various views were both redundant and eventually boring. The quality of taping also proved to be a problem. Some was done in controlled settings and is of high quality. Other segments, such as testimony before a Department of Parks and Recreation hearing, are of poor sound quality. Views of a theologian are added to those of archaeologists, government officials, and students and to some degree, though they are interesting, they tend to confuse the issues. As in the Wanagi Is Gone, there is a tendency to place Indians in nearly complete opposition to archaeologists, which does not help compromise. Too, one is left with an opinion, perhaps derived from poor taping or editing, that the Indians seen are somewhat less fairly treated than the anthropologists. Academics, as one might expect, are smoother, and because of experience, they seem more "appealing," which translates into more "logical" in the minds of some. Careful attention to the message shows that they are not. The producers also fall into a somewhat insidious trap. They tend to show the archaeologists as uniform in their opinions while the Indians are shown as more divided about theirs. Actually, archaeologists, too, are divided on their opinions about reburial. One might well be given false impressions about the issue. On the whole, if one listens carefully, the entire range of opinions about reburial are stated, and in that sense the tape is useful. But, except as an historical document, Science or Sacrilege? generally does not do its job well.
Both *Wanagi Is Gone* and *Science or Sacrilege?* tend to show reburial as a polarized issue, but more recent printed works show that some communication between Indians and anthropologists about reburial is possible. *Reburial of Human Skeletal Remains: Perspectives from Lakota Holy Men and Elders* is a transcript edited from tapes of a session held in 1983 at the 41st Plains Conference in Rapid City, South Dakota. With increasing contention and concern about the reburial issue on the Plains by both Indians and anthropologists, Jan Hammil, Director of AIAD, requested a dialogue between the groups at a professional meeting. In particular, Hammil had been working with the Lakota and asked that several of their holy men and elders be allowed to address the group. The session was very well attended by the anthropologists at the conference (about 200 people). After opening statements by the Lakota, questions were taken from the floor. What transpired in both the statements and dialogue, demonstrates that the anthropological community is not monolithic in its approach.

One of the most commonly phrased opinions by anthropologists is that the reburial issue is simply a way for younger, militant Indians to get attention and that it is a political issue. It is apparent, when 90 year old Lakota chief and elder Matthew King speaks that he is neither young nor political. His long opening statement, edited considerably for publication, is oratory in traditional Lakota fashion, attempting to generate consensus in the audience. It is quite apparent that his concerns are as much spiritual as anything. Roger Byrd, a younger holy man, is more direct in his disgust that "the ancestors" are treated as they are. But again, the matter is approached on a spiritual level. With additional statements by Hammil and Vernal and Darlene Cross, audience members were asked for questions or their own statements.

The impression given is that many members of the audience had never dealt directly with Indians on the matter before and were genuinely shaken by a shattered stereotype. The questions were good ones: What do I do if I encounter bones? How do we handle it if we have no legal authority over bones on private lands? Would the Indians rather have looters and vandals deal with the bones or trained archaeologists? While certainly not all had their opinions changed, it is apparent that the audience and Indians felt less threatened by each other. Abundant humor is shown by both sides throughout the dialogue. That alone is evidence that understanding and compromise are possible.

The volume is really more a 25 page pamphlet than a book, and it is inexpensively produced and sold. The volume has had distribution to numerous archaeologists, federal agencies, and Indian groups. It does have some drawbacks in that it is an edited transcript. Some
statements are cut short, like Matthew King’s. This may decrease utility for some people. The pamphlet does note that tapes are available of the entire session. Too, audience members were apparently not asked to identify themselves and their identities might have been useful to determine their background, and perhaps, biases, on the issue. Some segments of the tape were inaudible and could not be transcribed. Despite these minor shortcomings, the volume is most educational and is the first time that a group of Indians was able to present their views on reburial to a professional anthropological conference.

A second opportunity for an exchange of views came nearly two years later because of planned construction of the Peacekeeper MX missile by the U.S. Air Force. AIAD filed suit against the Air Force contending that the Air Force had violated the consultation clause of the American Indian Religious Freedom Act of 1978 by failing to consult with traditional Indians on lands in Wyoming to be affected by Peacekeeper construction. To establish consultation, the Air Force agreed to invite Lakota, Cheyenne and other Plains groups to a meeting at the University of South Dakota. Held in September of 1984, the conference was attended by over sixty people including representatives of several tribes, especially holy people and elders, the U.S. Air Force, archaeologists and physical anthropologists, federal and state agencies, and students. The first day of the conference was a closed, unrecorded meeting of Indian representatives. The second day dealt specifically with the Peacekeeper project and its impact, while the third was an open discussion between Indians and anthropologists. The Air Force agreed to transcribe and publish the proceedings of the second two days.

During the conference, the Air Force specifically agreed to allow a Lakota holy man to walk the routes to be disturbed by cable-laying activities between missile silos. They further agreed to rapidly exhume without study and rebury any skeletal remains found during construction and to avoid sacred sites if discovered in advance. While these agreements were certainly precedent setting, the exchanges between the anthropologists and Indians were quite frank and in many cases extraordinarily eloquent and emotionally appealing. Of special note at this conference was the presence of Chief Frank Fools Crow who offered a prayer with the Crazy Horse pipe which had never been shown to white men before. Too, Arvil Looking Horse, who is the keeper of the Buffalo Calf Pipe, Wallace Black Elk, and Matthew King were present. The National Advisory Council on Historic Preservation, the National Park Service and the Society for American Archaeology were also represented along with anthropologists from South Dakota, Wyoming, Iowa, Illinois, and Minnesota.
The transcript records what must certainly be considered a historic conference. The Air Force issued only two hundred copies of the transcript, but with Air Force permission, the volume has been reprinted in cooperation with American Indians Against Desecration, the International Indian Treaty Council and the University of South Dakota Archaeology Laboratory. While the reprint has a less expensive cover and binding, it is unchanged from the original.

The documents discussed here traverse the complete continuum of views on what some consider a polarized issue. The California tape in particular shows the more adamant archaeological and Indian views while the transcripts show efforts to work out problems between the opposing groups. Wanagi Is Gone, too, shows the opposing views, but also shows a particular site and how compromises can work. Perhaps the most important factor of all six documents is a demonstration that discussion is necessary and possible. In that sense, the Science or Sacrilege? tape is the most frustrating because it portrays the issue as an all-or-nothing, science versus religion, us-versus-them issue (c.f. Meighan 1985; Zimmerman 1986; King 1986). That is something of a disservice to the complexity of the issue. There is a variety of opinion on the Indian side of the issue, some demanding reburial, indeed demanding that no excavation be done at all, while others support excavation, study and curation to learn more about their ancestors. On the anthropological side, some archaeologists support Native American concerns about repatriation of skeletons and sacred objects and actively work with them, while others refuse to cooperate at all, citing reasons like academic freedom and professional ethics (Meighan 1984; 1985; Cheek and Keel 1984). Detailed examination of the transcripts, on the other hand, is more revealing and points to a fundamental dilemma anthropologists should recognize, but apparently have difficulty seeing when their own discipline is part of a conflict. That dilemma is a failure in cross-cultural communication.

Examination of specific statements demonstrates that many Indians, especially traditionalists, and archaeologists view both the past and the law in different ways (Zimmerman 1986). The difference is essentially that many Indians see the past as something that is known because it is manifest in the present. Archaeologists tend to view the past as a linear series of starts and stops that is knowable only through discovery (see Meighan 1985 for an excellent example of this approach). The law, too, is viewed differently. Archaeologists see the law as a means to resolve disputes. Archaeologists who oppose restrictions on the excavation of burials and reburial frequently cite statutes as a defense for their position. The transcripts, and to a lesser extent, the videotapes, abound with references to abandoned cemeteries, rights
to exhumation, ownership rights, academic and scientific freedom and historical preservation to justify excavation study and perpetual curation of skeletal and grave materials. Most traditional Indians believe that burials cannot be abandoned or disrupted and that no individual can own the remains of another person. They rely on a "natural" law which is god-given and is a source of guidance rather than a way of conflict resolution. Statutory law is not a valid defense for excavation and study of remains. In fact, the reliance of archaeologists on "invalid" laws is often interpreted as another form of discrimination. An example from the Lakota Holy Men and Elders session may suffice to demonstrate the point. Ninety-year old Lakota elder Matthew King (Noble Red Man) summarizes it well:

"Let the people sleep in peace. It is a burial ground and also a church for our Indian people. We cannot change it, because God give us this country and he give the laws to govern our people. We cannot change it. We cannot make laws. Sometimes those laws are made, it's more prejudice" (Hammil and Zimmerman 1983:4).

In the end, there is a great gap in communication to overcome, and failure to understand it leads to immense frustration. Archaeologists resort to arguments that Indians see as racist. These "ploys" include everything from suggesting that the reburial demands are just political and will pass, to raising the weary question of who represents whom among the Indians (Zimmerman 1985). The Indians on the other hand, tend from their frustration, to resort to rhetoric redolent of the late 1960s. Neither groups seriously listens to the other, and neither group seriously tries to educate the other. Archaeologists need to document for the Indians the importance of skeletal research for Indians, in places where Indians will read or hear it, in terms that a lay audience can understand. And, they need to stop relying on what many Indians consider racist tactics. Indians need to demonstrate the sincerity of the spiritual concern for protection of the skeletons without the rhetorical postures which confuse archaeologists about intent and spiritual need.

The *Science or Sacrilege?* videotape shows well how each group talks past the other and in that sense documents the worst of both groups. *Wanagi Is Gone* does a great deal to show how archaeologists and physical anthropologists can try to educate about what they do in understandable terms and at the same time be sensitive to the spiritual concerns of Indians. The Iowa and Plains Conference transcripts document the views of both groups well and demonstrate how they understand the world differently. The Peacekeeper transcript is a portent of what will happen if archaeologists fail to compromise
with Indians. The Air Force agreed to reburial without study, a position, if taken by other agencies, that would seriously damage archaeology. The six documents thus represent an impressive historical collection on the issue of treatment of Native American human skeletal remains.

The end of the issue is not at hand, however. Recent attempts have been made to continue communication. The Summer of 1985 saw a conference sponsored by the Society for American Archaeology and the Society of Professional Archaeologists (Dincauze 1985) with representatives of several groups including AIAD, National Congress of American Indians, and Native American Rights Fund, among others, invited to discuss key concerns. A transcript of that meeting is available (Quick 1986). A session of anthropologists, archaeologists, museum specialists, religious studies specialists, and philosophers supporting compromises leading to reburial was held at the 1985 annual meeting of the American Anthropological Association (Miller and Zimmerman n.d.). Papers in that session pointed out the need and possible benefits of compromise between the groups. These papers are now being prepared for publication. Finally, the Society for American Archaeology 1986 Annual meeting held a plenary session on the reburial issue with both presentations and debate, the proceedings to be published.

In the end, from directions or trends visible in the transcripts, archaeologists and Indians will eventually be forced to compromise on the issue. In all probability, the issue will be settled at the local or regional level rather than at the national level in much the same fashion as it now seems to be working. Such an approach might even be the best solution to meet the issue’s complexity (Anderson 1985). The Peacekeeper transcript suggests that if compromises are not reached, archaeologists will lose, because agency and public sentiment are on the side of the Indian. What the documents reviewed here offer is an intriguing question of professional ethics for the profession of anthropology, and a challenge to their future. For Indians, they reflect a spiritual quest which crosses tribal boundaries, and a challenge to their future as well.

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