

Review

Hopi Oral Tradition and the Archaeology of Identity

Wesley Bernardini. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2005. 250pp.

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Native American activists of the civil rights era leveled heavy critiques at archaeology and anthropology for their prior support of colonial legislation and lack of sensitivity towards Native viewpoints. Archaeology in particular was taken to task for the destruction of numerous burial sites and the theft of thousands of Native American bodily remains and cultural items for over a century. The decades-long efforts by Native Americans and their non-Indian allies (which included some archaeologists) to secure the return of these remains and objects paid off in 1990. The passage of the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) mandates that all federally funded institutions possessing Native American remains and artifacts return them to tribes able to demonstrate historical and cultural connections to the items. As a consequence of Native American opposition to the racial and cultural insensitivities within archaeology, social scientists in general have learned that Native people can no longer be counted on to passively sit back and accept what outsiders say and write about them. Today, archaeology is a much more collaborative effort between archaeologists and Indians, with

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Native viewpoints often serving as focal points underpinning studies rather than as quaint addendums or trivial postscripts.

Wesley Bernardini's *Hopi Oral Tradition and the Archaeology of Identity* is an excellent demonstration of this shift in attitude. Bernardini incorporates Hopi oral narratives into his examination of the various Pueblo (Hopi ancestors) population shifts along the Colorado Plateau from 1275–1400 C.E. Migration as a theme of creation and identity formation figures prominently in most southwestern Native traditions. The manner in which contemporary Hopi understand themselves historically and geographically is contained in their oral traditions, which reference numerous population shifts over vast stretches of time. While previous archeologists attempted to chart out the historical development of what became the modern Hopi people utilizing oral traditions (which in this case includes creation accounts, ceremonies, and songs), they overlooked the most appropriate manner of using traditional Hopi knowledge alongside Western methods of historical analysis. One shortcoming of using oral narratives for strictly historical purposes in the Western sense is that over time they are often prone to chronological and detail alterations. That is not to say that oral traditions lack any historical value, but Bernardini feels that “the greatest strength of oral tradition may be as a source of *theory* about the past, rather than as a source of raw historical data” (7; emphasis in original). Essentially, Bernardini feels Hopi oral narratives are most helpful in demonstrating the “general *processes* of prehistoric migration and identity formation, rather than focusing on historical details” (7; emphasis in original).

This is a helpful approach to take and allows Hopi traditional knowledge to demonstrate its usefulness on its own terms. The key to properly incorporating oral traditions into the archaeological record requires examining the way Hopi society is organized. The Hopi people do not share a single collective history and are instead comprised of many different individual clans and sub-clans. This method of arranging the larger group into smaller units is not unique to the Hopi and is found among most Native American tribal nations. However, each clan maintains its own distinct social identity. As a result, each individual clan possesses unique accounts of their journeys that differ from other pueblo communities.

The historical experiences of these individual groups moving across the Colorado Plateau resulted in each of them acquiring a unique perspective on migration. Thus, Hopi migration narratives must be examined as individual, cumulative experiences

of each Pueblo clan. While different clans came together to form villages and establish trade and ceremonial ties, most relations never lasted long enough to develop into culturally homogenous societies. As a result, each village and neighboring community throughout the region contained groups with different clan histories without any substantial shared history up to their temporary meetings.

Realizing that Hopi identity is actually an amalgamation of different clans with their own histories of migration helps reconcile why archaeological accounts of migration are often at odds with what the Hopi say in their oral histories. Archaeology traditionally views “migration as a singular event associated with the departure from or founding of a village or region, a perspective that fragments the migration process into discrete episodes associated with each ‘abandonment’ event” (8). The Hopi, however, traditionally understand their migrations as encompassing each clan’s movements all the way back to their formation. Bernardini refers to each clans’ movements, comprised of linkages among different clans amidst longer journeys, as *serial migration*, echoing the Hopi’s own accounts of their movements and identity formation.

To verify the trajectory of Hopi migration from their own oral traditions, Bernardini focuses on the Homol’ovi and Anderson Mesa settlements, which are believed by archaeologists to represent sources of widespread immigration during the time period under consideration. By examining art work, petroglyphs, and ceramic styles at these sites, including Hopi Mesa (present-day Hopi residence), Bernardini verifies the Hopi’s accounts of migration. The material remains at each site indicated that villages were in fact comprised of heterogeneous communities (clans) that resided together for a time before moving on to separate destinations. The findings show population levels fluctuating and the incorporation of diverse clans at different times at each location under study. Bernardini also used neutron activation to analyze Jeddito Yellow Ware ceramics to examine how diverse these clan populations were at the end of their migrations.

Bernardini’s use of Hopi traditional knowledge as a hypothesis to examine pueblo migrations along the Colorado Plateau is a good example of how fruitful archeological endeavors can be when they use Native oral traditions responsibly, acknowledging that contemporary indigenous people possess useful and accurate knowledge about their pasts. Bernardini recognizes that Hopi oral traditions suffer limitations if evaluated by Western ways of history alone, but rather than dispense with them entirely, he found a way to use them for their strengths—as ways of speaking about

broad processes of migration and identity formation that includes a variety of different clans. His serial migration model is also a useful way of examining other community's migration patterns globally, with an emphasis on the dynamic patterns of identity formation at the village level, how these communities maintain these kinship ties, and the manner in which they later come to understand themselves while residing among substantially larger societies. Benardini's work is to be commended for its contributions to southwestern archaeology and the creative and responsible use of Native American oral traditions to reexamine the migration patterns of the Hopi.