

Zuni Cultural Heritage Materials in the American Folklife Center: The Potential of Return^{*}

Guha Shankar and Cordelia Hooee

Abstract: This article focuses on an ongoing collaboration between the American Folklife Center (AFC) at the Library of Congress and Zuni Pueblo, in New Mexico, that seeks to make recorded cultural heritage materials accessible to Pueblo residents. Authors Guha Shankar, AFC folklife specialist, and Cordelia Hooee, director of the Zuni Public Library, who have been centrally involved in this process, focus attention here on the critical issues of forging and sustaining partnerships in order to facilitate the return or repatriation of cultural and linguistic documentation to communities of origin. Their reflections direct attention to the cultural and institutional contexts and technologies that both set the limits and exert pressures on the planning, production, and execution of such initiatives.

[Keywords: *Cultural Repatriation*, Doris Duke American Indian Oral History Project, *Ethnographic Archives*, Representation. Keywords in italics are derived from the American Folklore Society Ethnographic Thesaurus, a standard nomenclature for the ethnographic disciplines.]

This community needs this as a reminder of who they are and where they come from. To hear about our ways of long ago and why and what could be if we are reminded of our historical surroundings...especially if it comes directly from our own people. It gives us all a renewed sense of pride in who we are and how far we have come, especially when all odds were against us and we have always, always prevailed over hardships, atrocities, and political turmoil. Allow us the opportunity to renew our spirits and bring peace of mind.

- Zuni Pueblo community member (response to Zuni Library survey, *Summer 2009*)

The Doris Duke Zuni Storytelling Collection: Then and Now

Cordelia (Codi) Hooee: In 2004, while working as the library assistant at Zuni High School, I began work on a project with Amy Nevitt (then the school library media specialist) to make a recorded collection of stories, personal narratives, and history [in the Zuni language] widely available to the students of Zuni High School and to the community. Our interest in making use of the materials was directly tied to our daily interactions with students and the direct evidence of

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the continuing decline in the use of the Zuni language among them. We thought that the stories would both be a good way to supplement efforts in the school to improve the language skills of the younger generation and also provide an important cultural resource for the broader community. While the tapes were housed in a tribal cultural resources office [at Zuni Pueblo], Nevitt and I decided to contact the American Folklife Center (AFC) at the Library of Congress (LC) in Washington, DC, because our information indicated that the recordings had originated there. Also, the recording formats, which consisted of reel-to-reel tapes and listening copies on audiocassettes, were impossible to work with because we had no such playback equipment. Guha Shankar, AFC folklorist, made a visit to Zuni to meet with us in fall 2004 and discuss how to make the project a reality, and thus began an initiative that continues to this day. Shortly after that visit, we decided to enlist the aid of two individuals: Arden Kucate, Zuni tribal councilman and religious leader, to provide guidance based on his deep knowledge of Zuni culture and religion; and Shankar, to provide assistance with technological and collections development issues.

Shankar: Over the last several years, the AFC at the LC has engaged in discussions with community members, educators, and leaders in Zuni Pueblo, New Mexico, regarding the development of technologies and projects that will support the return of digitized cultural heritage materials presently held at the LC to the Zuni, or *A:shiwi*, people. These materials, titled the *Doris Duke Zuni Storytelling Collection*, consist of audio recordings digitized from 238 analog reel-to-reel audiotapes documenting the oral tradition and history of Zuni Pueblo.¹

A brief history of the collection's provenance will provide some context for the reader: The Zuni themselves started the collection in the 1960s when the tribal government received funding to record Zuni oral history and collective memories. The collection initiative was aided by the Doris Duke American Indian Oral History Program, a privately funded effort by the heiress to the Duke family's tobacco fortune to record and preserve American Indian oral traditions that were thought to be in danger of disappearing. In 1966 and 1967, historian C. Gregory Crampton (1911-1995), director of the American West Center at the University of Utah, coordinated the recording of a variety of oral traditions at Zuni Pueblo; his research team was one of several such university-based field recording units that carried out documentation for the Doris Duke project in various Native communities.²

The recordings that Crampton's team collected in Zuni consisted of traditional stories told in the tribal language by 19 Zuni community elders. These respected tribal members, some of whom were then more than 100 years old, contributed more than 800 stories, community legends, and folktales, totaling more than 400 recorded hours. The recordings resulted in the publication of selected English translations that were later collected in the book, *The Zunis: Self Portrayals* (Zuni People 1972). While the University of Utah retained reference copies of the tapes, Zuni Pueblo retained custody of the original recordings. Thus, the Zuni became the only tribe in the Doris Duke project to maintain such control over its intangible cultural heritage.

The tapes remained in the possession of the Pueblo and were stored in Zuni until 1990. At this time, folklorist Andrew Wiget, of the New Mexico Heritage Center at New Mexico State University in Las Cruces, came across the tapes in storage and alerted the Zuni Tribal Council to the danger that the originals, which had been recorded on reel-to-reel audiotape, were deteriorating and in danger of becoming unusable. The Tribal Council and its then-governor,

Robert E. Lewis, determined that they should transfer the recordings to the AFC in order to preserve this invaluable cultural/linguistic resource. The Zuni people sanctioned the transaction in the form of a council resolution (M70-90-L094), and the AFC received the master tapes for the Zuni Collection in 1996 (the collection is now designated AFC 1996/073).

Moving into the present, while long-term preservation of the documentary record is an obvious concern for the LC, there is an equally compelling interest in finding ways and means of providing access to the materials for the benefit of the community. This latter issue is the basis for the partnership that the LC has developed with the public library at Zuni.

For many Zuni elders, administrators, and cultural activists, making practical use of these historical materials as cultural and educational resources is also paramount. They have expressed a keen interest in using the recordings for cultural and linguistic preservation efforts, in particular projects focused on school-age audiences. The various efforts, particularly the grant applications that Hooee has developed to provide access to the Duke collection, have maintained this focus.

Hooee: The sole reason for taking on this project is to “bring back home” an invaluable cultural resource. What better place to have this collection than in our tribal library so that access could be had by all? The idea is simple but the process has been somewhat difficult.

From my perspective as the Zuni librarian, it was clear from the outset that we had to secure funding to carry out the project. Working with Kucate, Shankar, and Curtis Cook, a non-Zuni specialist in the Zuni language, I put together a funding proposal. One of the things that we wanted to include in the proposal was how access to the collection was to be handled when it came to the Zuni Public Library. We wanted to make sure that we would not be in violation of any cultural taboos or restrictions as far as the stories were concerned. This was our main concern. We also knew that there would be a question of how much access would be allowed. We thought of every possible scenario and addressed each.

We also needed support from the community for the project. To get a sense of the community’s interest, I conducted a survey in 2009 asking people their thoughts about the story collection and what it would mean to them to have this collection available. The survey also was meant to determine the importance of this cultural resource for Zunis. I distributed the survey as an e-mail attachment, handed it out to library patrons and others at community events and also left them at key locations in the community. Out of the 1000 surveys that I distributed, about 550 were returned. The responses were for the most part anonymous, but some did provide their names. Those questionnaires that were returned overwhelmingly supported the project. Here are 13 responses that are a representative sample of the surveys that were completed:

- “It would mean having another chance to get to know my history from a different perspective. We would have the chance to hear the past by our ancestors, our elders, some that are no longer here with us. Give them the chance to speak to us and teach us once again. Their words are very precious to generations to come.”
- “These would be very beneficial to the community. I personally grew up listening to stories. Nowadays people don’t take time out from their busy schedules to sit down with their children to pass down this knowledge. This would be a highly inspirational asset to

the community because it would enable us to relive the past through the eyes of our elders.”

- “Yes! This project is definitely needed! It would mean “lost” stories come home! It would benefit young and old alike. Have the old relive their childhood and more. How the young appreciate what they have and also (hopefully) instill these readings in life. A MUST TO HAVE BACK IN OUR COMMUNITY!!!”
- “As a community we are always doing so much to keep our culture alive and this is another step to enhance [that effort]. Of course it will benefit the community and it is extremely needed. As a community member who left for a while to complete further education, I was not able to always be available to learn about the religion/culture.”
- “Yes it is definitely needed. It would help us and our children in enhancing our language and history of our ancestors. Would be very awesome to get to listen to old stories and just understanding the words, as I believe most words we use today have been ‘modernized.’ ”
- “Such recordings being made available to us would be great and very beneficial, especially to those who no longer have grandparents. Too many of our children in this community do not speak or understand our own language so these recordings may be beneficial in this area. I believe it is needed in Zuni.”
- “To bring back the storytelling recordings would be exciting. This project would preserve an important part of our culture—language. This project would benefit young and old. It is sad that many of our young children don’t speak the Zuni language and we may lose the language if something isn’t done now to preserve it. We as a family would want the next generation to share the love of storytelling as some of these stories have a lesson to learn.”
- “This is very much needed. Since our history is based only on oral accounts, this would give our community an opportunity to learn more. We would learn not only the history, but also the pronunciation of words and grammar. The younger generations are no longer speaking their Zuni language at home. There has been too much emphasis on learning English in the schools. With this opportunity, the community will have a very vital link to our past which is only three or four generations removed from our most traditional way of life.”
- “I believe that this is what we really need around our community because it seems as though our younger generation (like myself) don’t really know much about our heritage and religion. If there were something around here... I’d go and try to learn as much as I could. Our religion is the most important thing for us and if people hear these ancient stories, I believe it’ll definitely catch our attention and make people realize the importance of having these types of programs available. This type of project would mean more than a lot to me. I want to learn more through stories. That way I can tell them to my children and grandchildren.”

- “I believe this project will be valuable to the community because our Zuni people need to know and understand who we are as “A:shiwí.” This would benefit the community because currently these types of resources are not available to the community. It will help enrich, educate individuals from young to old of how our ancestors lived.”
- “Having been personally involved on this project has a lot of meaning. The benefits I see are two issues toward our youth—that of the progress made toward modern technology and also of the traditional way of relating stories and fables.”
- “This project means a lot to me. My grandparents were my storytellers. I wish the same to our community. This would benefit those who might not have elders to recite stories. Very much needed.”
- “It would help so many youth that may not have elders that know enough about the cultural and traditional values, taboos, and things that have significance to the Zuni people and why we have survived to the present. Things like this need preservation for the future.”

Preservation and Access: The Uses of the Past in the Present

Shankar: Enabling Zuni people to have broad-based local access to the stories is the central concern of this project. Since 2004, there have been ongoing conversations among and between the AFC, the Zuni library, and tribal officials about developing the means and mechanisms to do so. The discussions, as noted earlier, center on the use-value and practical utility of the stories in the Duke Collection. The range of potential uses of the collection resonates with cultural revitalization and sustainability projects that other indigenous and culturally distinct communities are carrying out world-wide, especially when such efforts involve the recovery or repatriation of materials in libraries, archives, and repositories.³

In fall 2004, following up on introductions by Hooee, AFC staff met with Kucate, one of five elected Zuni Tribal Council members (and grandson of one of the storytellers recorded for the collection), regarding collaborative initiatives based on the “repatriation” (regarded here as a problematic category) of the digital files to the community. Kucate articulated the deep interest of Zuni leaders in finding ways to aid language retention among the younger generation of Zunis. He also expressed concerns about the loss of cultural and historical memory in the community as the older generation of storytellers and living repositories of communal knowledge passed away.

Several projects discussed at the fall 2004 meeting and elaborated during subsequent conversations over the years remain viable means of providing access to Zuni cultural materials for community use. These include:

- Development of a website hosted by the Zuni Public Library that would allow Web-streaming of audio files and presentation of multi-media materials for use by teachers to teach language skills and cultural history. Pending approval by the

Tribal Council, the library site would feature streamed audiovisual materials of historical and contemporary significance.

- Using the recordings as the basis for skills training in field documentation methods for youth and other community members. This would entail training community members to document the persistence and circulation of traditional stories, the production of new stories, and more broadly, cultural practices of other kinds extant on Zuni Pueblo.
- Curriculum development in local schools focused on oral histories found in the Zuni Storytelling Collection and on other resources.

Audio recordings and the spoken word are instrumental in the various projects of cultural sustainability and the maintenance of cultural memory that Zuni people are undertaking. However, the visual record also plays an important role in such initiatives. To that end, there has been some discussion of developing educational projects in visual literacy and ethnographic documentation of community life that could be undertaken by young people and other interested community members. At base, this project would involve the use of the modest but rich photographic record that Cook, the linguist, generated during the 15 years that he lived in and around Zuni Pueblo, from approximately 1963 to 1978. The AFC now holds Cook's donation of photographs, audio recordings, and manuscripts, which is identified by the collection number, AFC 2004/10.

One idea that has emerged through discussions with the project principals is to re-purpose Cook's now-decades-old photographs to generate community conversations and after-school programs concerning subjects in the photographs, such as bread-making or occupational traditions such as shepherding. A photo exhibition in the public library using those images could provide material for a program in which Zuni youth would interview elders about change and continuity in everyday life, subsistence patterns, work culture, and so on.

The Challenge of Return: The Technical and the Cultural

Hooee and Shankar: What are the prospects for the return of the Duke Collection to Zuni Pueblo? In this section we assess the situation and offer some insights that may prove useful for similar efforts elsewhere. The conjoined effort to (re)repatriate the Zuni collection to its community of origin have brought into high relief the essential truth of Jane Anderson's statement: "Fundamental questions about access and control, ownership and authorship test rationalities of library and archival management" (2005:4). Keeping this formulation in mind, we focus on two broadly-defined dimensions of the repatriation challenge, which are the *technological* and the *cultural*.

Shankar: With regard to the first aspect, it is worth noting that over the last 20 years, Zuni Pueblo and the AFC have undertaken several measures intended to both preserve and provide access to the recorded materials, which are related to the "use-case" scenarios noted above. All along the way, both the community and the AFC have remained mindful that the outcomes that technologies of various kinds promise to deliver all too often remain locked in the realm of potentiality. Another way of articulating this point is that technology can *prevent* rather than

enable access to cultural heritage materials. Such cases can occur if, on the one hand, the technology is obsolete, or on the other, it is too complex to be managed in a local cultural institution's existing technical environment.

Two distinct aspects of the preservation aspects of the project will make this point regarding the limitations of technology clearer: First, stepping back into the past, it is important to note that when the LC acquired the Zuni collection in 1990, it provided funds to the Pueblo to generate reel-to-reel and audiocassette reference copies from the originals at local technical facilities. The original reel-to-reel tapes were then deposited at the LC, with the copies remaining on the Pueblo. Given the fact that the Zuni *had* retained copies of their recordings, it must be noted that the notion of "return" with regard to the Duke Storytelling Collection is a loose construction. The prevailing process of return or repatriation in most other circumstances means *giving back* materials—original artifacts or surrogates of the same—that have been absent from the community by virtue of historical circumstance. In both scenarios, however, providing community access to the materials remains the crucial issue.

As noted earlier, my visit to Zuni in fall 2004 to consult with tribe members on using the recordings for educational projects made it readily apparent that the technological obsolescence of analog playback machines (reel-to-reel and cassette decks) meant that the Zuni no longer had the means to play back the recordings that had been copied from the master recordings. This lack effectively stymied any broader dissemination of the stories in the school environment, which was one of the principal goals of the public library staff and educators in the Pueblo.

The second and related aspect of the Zuni collection preservation story concerns preservation activities at the LC: In 2003, through grants received from federal preservation funds and also from the Rex Foundation, which is the philanthropic arm of the rock group the Grateful Dead, the AFC processed, documented, and digitized the entire run of the 238 tapes. The master reels were transferred to the controlled environmental repository of the LC's National Audio-Visual Conservation Center at Culpeper, Virginia, to ensure the long-term preservation of the original analog materials. The digitization process of the Zuni storytelling tapes, keeping to the standards that the LC established for digital reformatting of analog audio recordings, resulted in very large, multi-gigabyte digital files. These file formats include both high-resolution preservation masters (96khz/24bit master files) and lower resolution (44khz/16bit) listening copies that are stored on the LC's digital servers. The extent of the aggregated high-resolution master files is around 300 gigabytes in all for the more than 200 individual digital objects.

Accordingly, when the authors began discussing the issue of providing access to the recordings following Shankar's initial visit to the Pueblo, all the focus immediately shifted away from the problem of the analog materials (such as making tape copies, serving them to patrons in the library, and achieving wider distribution in schools and other learning environments) to the challenges of digital storage systems, server/storage capacity, metadata to enable access to the digital content, technical support, and other issues related to the management of content in the digital domain. With regard to servers and information technology (IT) infrastructure and the mechanisms through which to get these recordings back to Zuni, copies on CDs and DVDs have been rejected as an option by the tribal library, given the challenges to both security and physical storage of optical media, which can become damaged or lost all too easily. If the AFC were to burn CDs of the materials, it would need approximately 300 to 400 CDs or 65 to 75 DVDs. From

the perspective of the professional library community's focus on preservation methodologies and sustainability of digital materials, optical media are not a long-term preservation strategy. Thus, the subsequent funding proposals that Hooee, the project director, has developed for eventual submission to various federal agencies (there have been three such attempts as of the present writing) have sought to address the core challenge of augmenting the Zuni Public Library's information infrastructure in order to serve the story-telling materials to a broader public.⁴

Over the course of the last five years, Codi Hooee and I have engaged with Zuni Tribal Council members and elders to determine their attitudes and secure their support for versions of the projects detailed above. Unsurprisingly, the most critical challenges that have emanated in response to the proposed project have gone some distance beyond the merely technical or logistical and reflect, in a very fundamental way, the politics of identity, representation, and power, in short, the *cultural* dimension of repatriation. The local political, institutional arrangements, and ethical requirements complicate negotiations and plans such as those detailed above. Hooee's first-hand recounting of the community-level negotiations to develop funding proposals to repatriate the Duke collection to Zuni demonstrates the extent to which local politics, the social context, and personal perspectives govern the return and circulation of cultural heritage materials in a given community.

Hooee: Unfortunately, not everyone has supported the digital repatriation project. It must be understood that any proposals/applications for funding have to be approved by our governor and tribal council. At the time that I developed and circulated the proposal in 2009, I came to find out that several of our tribal government officials were not in support of our proposal.

Our project was very well planned. It had to be because we knew it would be questioned no matter what, and we had to be prepared to answer those questions. But while we were able to anticipate those challenges and secure widespread support from the community, in the end, the views of individuals in power won. Opinions of those who objected to the project were based on political, personal, and traditional/religious views. As hard as we tried to "plead our case" focusing on the overall benefit for the community, we were not successful. Our proposal wasn't approved. It was very disheartening and a very hard lesson learned.

The project team, however, has not given up on the initiative. We will wait until tribal officials finish out their term of office, and we will re-present our proposal when the new administration is established. All we can do is hope that the new leaders will be more open to our proposal and share the understanding of the Duke Collection as an invaluable cultural resource that is very much needed in the community.

If I had to give advice on working on a project dealing with cultural materials, it would be to be prepared to deal with tribal officials and their views and opinions. It can get ugly. Having a good project team is very important, and it goes without saying that including local people who are knowledgeable about the history, culture, and religion of the community is very important. That component *has* to be there, as I think the biggest hurdle to overcome is the culture/religion issue.

Moreover, we can't carry out projects such as our story project without the involvement of outside agencies. Our project proposal involved people at many levels and from both in Zuni and outside of Zuni. But here, too, personal and cultural issues became a challenge as, unfortunately,

some people didn't want the involvement of outside agencies. But such collaboration is very important. There is no way you can exclude the "outside world."

We Native people talk about losing our culture, religion, and language and about how important it is to teach these things to the younger generation, but in the next breath, someone in authority tells you that you can't do this—all because of personal or political views. We have to find that middle ground and compromise. We've already lost so much, and if attitudes don't change, we stand to lose a lot more. I hear a lot of tradition-keepers talk critically about how our young people don't know their cultural and religious practices, but how are they supposed to know if knowledge is not shared with them?

Conclusion

Hooee and Shankar: It is instructive to note the extent to which the challenges in Zuni Pueblo detailed above strike a familiar chord with a seminal initiative of the federal government from 25 years earlier which also sought to repatriate recordings to Native American communities. Between 1978 and 1985, the Federal Cylinder project, centered at the LC, set out to return copies of around 10 thousand cylinder recordings that it had obtained from private individuals and from other agencies of the U.S. government and housed in the LC, to more than 100 communities of origin. The project achieved that goal to a large extent. However, there were several instances where the initiative faltered. Judith Gray, AFC's head of reference, was involved in the process and provides insights as to why tensions arose:

[Community] members sometimes suspected hidden costs or "strings" would be attached to the gift. Also, sometimes their enthusiasm waned when members of the community actually heard the recordings. Cylinder recordings do not gain charm and patina like old photographs do. Further, some individuals cherished the hope that certain specific songs and narratives were recorded, only to be disappointed to discover that such recordings do not exist.

If disappointment was great enough, if we had not reached those most interested in trying to work with the cylinder recordings, or if there was some controversy attached to the recordings themselves or to the fact that they were coming back, the cassettes might simply remain on the shelf, untouched, after being presented to the community—or they might disappear completely. Whether cylinder recordings have a role to play in contemporary Indian lives is a matter for Indian people and communities alone to decide. Such matters cannot be settled by outsiders, nor can the impact of dissemination efforts be measured in the short run. [Gray 1996]

The technological components and challenges entailed in the present return initiative are but a part of a complex of projects, programs, and achievements that are desired by many in the Zuni community and by the LC. For the moment, the initiative lies in the realm of potentiality that will, we hope, be realized in due course. In the meantime, the story we have presented highlights

one crucial fact: While the architecture of the information systems and delivery mechanisms that are in development at Zuni is certainly critical to resolve the “how” question (the technical and logistical dimensions), it is essentially secondary to the more compelling issues of ownership, community sensitivity, and local politics that lie at the heart of the “who” question, as in, “Who decides when cultural materials may ‘return’ home?,” and, “Under what circumstances is such a return possible?”⁵

Notes

1. The major sources for the background to the project are Hardin and Taft (2003) and ongoing personal communications with Judith Gray, head of reference, American Folklife Center.
2. Readers interested in the details of the Duke Program’s initiatives will want to consult the articles compiled for the special issue of the Journal of the Southwest, “Oral History Remembered: Native Americans, Doris Duke, and the Young Anthropologists” (Penfield 2005).
3. We refer specifically to case studies of repatriation of intangible cultural heritage and linguistic materials and *not* to those that treat the return of items and artifacts of material culture and funerary remains, as guided by the North American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) of the U.S. Accordingly, for example, see Gray (1996); the [Alaska Native Language Archive](#) program; the Dane-zaa or Doig River Nation’s work with folklorist Amber Ridington ([The Ridington/Dane-zaa Digital Archive](#)); and the collected essays presented at the Fifth Annual Stabilizing Indigenous Languages Symposium in Louisville, Kentucky, in 1998 (Reyhner et al. 1999; <http://jan.ucc.nau.edu/~jar/RIL.pdf>).
4. The development of the [Mukurtu Content Management System](#) offers an efficient, user-friendly, technological solution to the problems of access for Indigenous community cultural heritage materials noted in the text, although the issue of funding that is needed to establish the base IT infrastructure that the product requires remain to be resolved, as do other questions raised in the essay.
5. Michael Brown’s various publications, notably, *Who Owns Native Culture?* (2004), address many of the same questions, albeit reaching different, less ambiguous conclusions about the issue of self-determination and representation than we do.

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Guha Shankar is a Folklife Specialist focused on Research and Programs at the [American Folklife Center](#) of the Library of Congress.

Cordelia Hooee is the Librarian and Director of the [Zuni Public Library](#), an organization serving the people of Zuni Pueblo since 1975.