

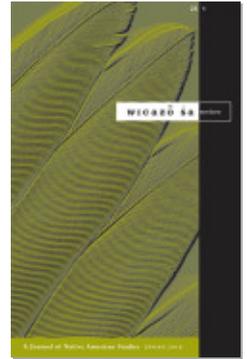


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Mediating Knowledges: Origins of a Zuni Tribal Museum
(review)

Chip Colwell-Chanthaphonh

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theoretical and practical analyses. The evidence is survey, interview, case study, history, and more. This is reflective of indigenous knowledge. The appendices serve as primary sources: interviews with Chad Smith and Brad Carson, actual compacts, treaties, and the Indigenous Government Survey. The goal of all of this is to see the continuation of Native nations as distinct peoples.

N O T E

1 Angela Cavender Wilson and
Michael Yellow Bird, *For Indigenous
Eyes Only: A Decolonization*

Handbook (Santa Fe, N. Mex.: SAR
Press, 2005).

REVIEW ESSAY *by Chip Colwell-Chanthabonh*

Mediating Knowledges: Origins of a Zuni Tribal Museum

by Gwyneira Isaac
University of Arizona Press, 2007

"**M**useum" is a dirty word in some parts of Indian Country. And not without good reason. We now know too well the stories of pilfering and misrepresentations. The movement to transform museums, this instrument of colonialism, into a device for self-determination is thus in some ways contradictory and incongruous. And yet, over the last two decades, we have witnessed the birth of the National Museum of the American Indian, the opening of major museums to more collaborative and inclusive agendas, and a surge of local museums run by and for tribes. Why and how have museums become a site of affirmative power for some Native Americans?

Gwyneira Isaac's new book is the story of one community's efforts to make a museum of its own, the Pueblo of Zuni's A:shiwi A:wam Museum and Heritage Center. (A disclosure: I have personally known Dr. Isaac as a colleague for several years and I have worked with the Zuni museum on several small projects.) Although she gives a thorough history of the museum's politics and economics, Isaac's focus is on the question of knowledge: how knowledge is made and transmitted in Zuni and museums and what happens when different ways of seeing the world meet and collide. This book narrates the Zunis' struggle with reconciling different ways of transmitting knowledge and the Zunis' attempt to define their museum and, in turn, themselves.

In 1997, Isaac began her ethnographic fieldwork at Zuni and relatively quickly came to see the museum as a place where Zunis could

negotiate their history and culture on a daily basis. This insight led Isaac to the thesis that the Zuni museum uniquely serves as a kind of meeting ground. She argues that the museum itself is a mechanism that “negotiates the use and maintenance of cultural knowledge both within its own constituency and across cultures, and it consequently takes on the role of mediator between internal and external expectations about Zuni history” (6). The notion of “mediation” is the main theoretical lens for Isaac. She states that “a mediator is an intermediary agent that, through the negotiation or control of disparate meanings, promotes an accordant relationship between different elements or perspectives” (17). However, a mediator is not necessarily value-free. Rather, to be a mediator entails bringing together different strands of understanding, even if one kind of value dominates in the end.

Zuni knowledge must be framed on its own terms, Isaac writes, and describes “vernacular” Zuni knowledge, highlighting the tension between esoteric (or secret) and exoteric (or public) knowledge. Isaac picks apart two popular though fallacious anthropological arguments. First, Zuni is not really an egalitarian society. Within Zuni are different levels of influence, and knowledge is attached to each rank. Specific religious and ritual authorities tightly control knowledge. Second, secrecy at Zuni did not wholly spring from Spanish incursions but is intrinsic to Zuni concepts of power. Anthropologists say something is powerful because it is secret, but Zunis say something is secret because it is powerful. For Zunis, the potency of knowledge is lessened when it is used carelessly or irresponsibly. Secrecy is a burden and obligation to ensure the well-being of the community and world at large.

Zunis have long been troubled by outsiders who document and duplicate sacred knowledge. As Isaac recounts, a string of researchers arrived at Zuni with a singular fascination for Zuni religion. While Zunis see much of their religious life as embedded in esoteric knowledge, anthropologists have largely behaved as if all Pueblo knowledge were exoteric. The results have not been innocuous. Over the last century, these intrusions have fanned the flames of discord. Much divisive debate at Zuni has circled around the questions of commodifying Zuni culture and the rights of insiders and outsiders.

Conflict over knowledge, and the taking of knowledge, is the backdrop to the development of the Zuni museum. The idea for the museum was conceived in the 1960s, but it was not born until the late 1980s. Significantly, the Zunis saw their institution as a community-based “ecomuseum,” which would replace “salvaging and recording” with “discovering and interpreting” (98). While even the museum creators acknowledged that having a museum at Zuni was a foreign concept, they envisioned how the ecomuseum model could convert the institution into a viable vehicle for celebrating and perpetuating Zuni

culture. Every Zuni was to be an intrinsic part of the place. As one director said, "Everyone in this community is a curator and maintains their portion of the community's treasure" (102). So was the birth of the A:shiwi A:wam Museum and Heritage Center, meaning a place "belonging to the people."

One of the museum's first exhibits illustrated how different a locally driven approach could be. In 1992, "The Pueblo of Zuni as Seen through the Eyes of Pioneer Photographers from 1879–1902" was shown; it included images from the Smithsonian Institution. While Smithsonian curators wanted to make every image available, Zuni religious leaders helped select suitable images and set up controls for access to photos bearing secret and sacred information. The approach to exhibits and programs has continued to evolve. In another exhibit, a set of murals illustrating ancient ancestral migrations went unaccompanied by lengthy text. The paintings need to be explained, verbally, by museum staff or elders. In this way, the exhibit itself was made with built-in knowledge controls, as the teller can alter the story depending on the audience; Zuni schoolchildren hear a different version from the one told to tourists who just stop by the pueblo for the day.

This is a strategic use of "ambiguity," Isaac suggests, which allows the Zuni museum workers to balance overarching religious hierarchies with individual needs and beliefs. "The tensions that arise from this process can be both divisive and dynamic," Isaac writes (131). "In the case of the Zuni museum, they force people to question both the original context or meaning of concepts and the processes that either facilitate or prevent the circulation of meaning." The Zuni museum does not replace traditional learning but supplements it. Despite the success of previous and new projects, such as "Pathways to Zuni Wisdom" and the "A:shiwi Map Art Project," there remain some uneasy feelings about the role of the museum in cultural and religious education, access to knowledge, and the position of outsiders in shaping agendas. Still, the Zuni museum is a hugely exciting endeavor precisely because it is a site where these discussions and debates can unfold.

Isaac is a gifted writer. Her analysis is historically grounded, theoretically sophisticated, and subtly tuned to the intricate cultural dynamics at Zuni. In telling this story, it would have been easy for Isaac to fall back on the tired dichotomy of "progressives" and "traditionalists," but instead she paints a nuanced and complex portrait of Zuni. Isaac sees not a clear division of politics but an ongoing, unresolved, and vitally important struggle to come to terms with a clash of cultures. This book should be widely read and discussed, for, although it is a single case study about a corner of New Mexico, this book powerfully speaks to the more sweeping histories and transformations of museums across Native America.