



Sacred Claims: Repatriation and Living Tradition (Studies in Religion and Culture)

Greg Johnson

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The Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) of 1990 provides a legal framework within which Native Americans can seek the repatriation of human remains and certain categories of cultural objects--including "sacred objects"--from federally funded institutions. Although the repatriation movement among Native Americans has heretofore received scholarly attention specifically focused on this act, *Sacred Claims* is the first book to analyze the ways in which religious discourse is used to articulate repatriation claims. Greg Johnson takes this act as one instance in a larger context wherein native peoples around the globe must engage legal arenas in order to preserve their heritage.

Methodologically, *Sacred Claims* is based on a close reading of government documents concerning the law and participant observation in a variety of NAGPRA-related events and provides the background and legislative history of the law, the life history of the act's axial term cultural affiliation (the most delicate and least understood aspect of NAGPRA), and several case studies of highly visible and contentious Hawaiian repatriation disputes. Johnson then moves beyond the strictly legal context to analyze NAGPRA discourse in the public realm. He concludes by way of a theoretical treatment of the foregoing issues, arguing that religious language was the chief means by which native representatives ultimately persuaded non-native audiences of the applicability of widely-held human rights principles to their cultural remains. Theorizing modes of cultural vitality in the repatriation context, Johnson argues that living tradition is not found in the objects themselves but is instead located in struggles over them.

With the law on the brink of receiving crucial tests, and repatriation issues making daily headlines in Native American and Hawaiian news, *Sacred Claims* is a timely and necessary examination of these issues.

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