Indigenous Views of Research on Traditional Farming

Jim Enote, A:shiwi A:wan Museum

In the early 1960s, while helping at my family's cornfield, I overheard my grandparents talking with an old Anglo man about farming and gathering teas, herbs, yucca, and other wild plants in and around our field. He said he was working at an "old ruin" down the road and studying Zuni pottery. I don't recall his name or if he was even an archaeologist, but I am still impressed by his interest not only in how my family farmed but also in what we did while we farmed.

Over the past thirty years or so, scholars—many of them friends of mine—have questioned me about Zuni farming, but only about the particulars of farming, such as planting depths and maintaining soil fertility. These friends were interested in the practice and systems of farming. I have always thought a comprehensive understanding of farming, and especially ancient farming, requires attention to the behavior and performance of today's traditional farmers. These include opportunism, reciprocity, ritual, language, and their views on the place of farming in maintaining the cosmological process.

When I was asked to be a discussant for this group of scholars presenting papers about early agriculture in the Southwest, I was apprehensive. I have been in similar situations before, and afterwards felt that the distance between the practitioners of cultures and scientists studying those cultures was too wide to mediate and make relevant to my work at Zuni. However, this particular event was a positive and constructive encounter. I asked questions, challenged assumptions, and occasionally affirmed a presenter's ideas, citing my experience as a Southwestern indigenous farmer. This was beginning to feel like déjà vu: rewind to the old man I met in my family's field.

Prior to the event, I was beginning to feel that Southwestern archaeology is a discipline very fussy about its "traditions," yet misunderstanding the essence of those traditions and neglecting to have a broad-minded approach to learning about the past through the present. Interestingly, a common misconception relegates tradition to the domain of the past. Then, tradition is naturally perceived as something antiquated. But I think tradition should breathe, in our lives and in our work.

Many tribal people today live with distinct philosophies that life is a razor's edge of critical decisions, opportunism, and ethics that persist from the philosophies of our ancestors. Archaeologists ask whether our ancestors cultivated crops and gathered wild plants as my grandparents did. Knowing how my grandparents experienced hunger in their lives, I certainly think so. As a member of a community being represented, or at times misrepresented, by outsiders I believe a new task for archaeology is to synthesize the global indigenous view and that particular science; to understand the particular in a global perspective; and to achieve a global perspective that is based on the particular.

The conversations between archaeologists and tribal governments that, by federal mandate, must precede archaeological projects are sometimes conversations in name alone; convention and tradition are not the same. From my experience at this gathering, I am hopeful that new archaeological studies will continue to move toward a new contact zone with tribal individuals and scientists, and that these studies will include ideas about how to reduce the complexity of mediating science and indigenous knowledge to a practice that respects and serves every contact situation.

Jim Enote was a participant, a discussant, and the only true farmer present at the Colton House advanced seminar that discussed the first farmers in the American Southwest. This seminar was held in advance of the Pecos Conference, on August 6 and 7, 2008. Enote is a farmer and "interrupted" artist. He has explored to a large degree such varied subjects as cultural pattern languages, Zuni architecture as fluxus art, Japanese art after 1945, and, from 1999 to 2004 indigenous community-based mapping. Born in Zuni, New Mexico, Enote considers his career an odyssey of hitchhiking, watermelon picking, and writing. Enote is also known for his painting and photography and has shown his work domestically and internationally. Besides currently serving as Executive Director of the A:shiwi A:wan Museum and Heritage Center, he is a Senior Advisor for Mountain Cultures with the Mountain Institute. Enote is now camped out at his work-in-progress home in Zuni.