



Indian Affairs - Office of Public Affairs

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The Department of Justice announced today the repatriation of an Acoma Shield and several other important items of historical and cultural significance to the Pueblo of Acoma and its members.

U.S. Attorney John C. Anderson for the District of New Mexico participated in a repatriation ceremony earlier today with Special Agent Franklin Chavez of the Bureau of Indian Affairs and Governor Kurt Riley of the Pueblo of Acoma. Other federal and tribal officials and community members also attended the event at the Sky City Cultural Center and Haak'u Museum.

"The Department of Justice is committed to enforcing federal laws that preserve the historical, cultural, and religious heritage of Native Americans," said Acting Attorney General Matthew G. Whitaker. "This commitment includes ensuring sacred objects like the Acoma Shield are returned to their rightful owners. Today's announcement further demonstrates the Justice Department's dedication to the safety, prosperity, and wellbeing of American Indian and Alaska Native people."

BIA recovered the shield that was repatriated today after learning that it was offered for sale online by an art gallery in Montana. Acoma Pueblo war shields are sacred pieces of cultural patrimony that date back hundreds of years and are at the heart of Acoma Pueblo's heritage and identity. Items such as the war shield are used for ceremonial purposes and are closely kept among traditional leaders of the Pueblo community.

The Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) is a federal law intended to return unlawfully obtained human remains and cultural objects to their Native American homelands. The U.S. Attorney's Office and the BIA-Office of Justice Services Cultural Resources Division are dedicated to stemming the loss and trafficking of cultural patrimony by investigating and enforcing the NAGPRA.

"Today, we celebrate the return of several items of cultural patrimony to their true owners: the Pueblo of Acoma," said U.S. Attorney Anderson. "Our ability to return these items is the result of years of hard work. The Bureau of Indian Affairs, through Special Agent Frank Chavez's dedicated efforts, discovered these sacred and historic items, and we, at the U.S. Attorney's Office, are proud to partner with BIA in facilitating their return. Sadly, we all too often find sacred, religious, and culturally significant items being sold at art markets, flea markets and in galleries. In keeping with federal law, we will continue to do everything in our power to locate such objects and deliver them to their rightful homes."

"I thank the Pueblo of Acoma for their due diligence in locating and reporting these precious objects to BIA and DOJ. I want to acknowledge the voluntarily actions of those individuals who returned the items in their possession once they learned of the cultural significance to the Pueblo of Acoma tribal community," said Assistant Secretary for Indian Affairs Tara Sweeney. "The proactive work demonstrated by Special Agent Chavez in working closely with all involved makes us proud."

"We have raised our voices internationally, in the halls of Congress and the legislative chambers here in New Mexico, drawing attention to the longstanding epidemic of theft, looting, and trafficking of our

sacred items – all in violation of tribal and federal law. During the 2015 attempted sale of an Acoma Shield by the Eve Auction house in Paris, France, the Pueblo also identified a similar shield and other sensitive cultural items being sold here in the United States. The amount of resources and energy, the Pueblo of Acoma has expended in this matter is a reflection of the seriousness with which we treat the protection of items uniquely distinct to our culture. That is why when U.S. Attorney Anderson informed us that these items of cultural patrimony, including another Acoma Shield, were coming home -- our hearts were overjoyed," said Governor Kurt Riley.

<https://www.bia.gov/as-ia/opa/online-press-release/departments-justice-bureau-indian-affairs-repatriate-items-cultural>