

Case 6: Forbidden Knowledge

The following case was sent by a reader of the Anthropology Newsletter:

"In my research on the language of the _____, a small group of Indians dwelling in the Southwest, I obtained a good deal of ethnographic information as windfall from my intensive linguistic study. There has been only one ethnography written about the _____, a master's thesis written in the 1930s. Not only is this work difficult of access, it is also incomplete. Because no major ethnographic work has been done on the group, it is generally assumed in the literature that their culture is identical to a larger group with whom they were associated in the 18th century. I have found out that this is not so, and that they have (or had, as their culture is rapidly westernizing) a distinctive culture, especially in the areas of religion, ritual, and the supernatural. My dilemma is this: Although the group does not object to descriptions of their former material culture, they are strongly opposed to any discussion of their nonmaterial culture. I was told outright that these beliefs and practices were not the property of non-Indians, and that I had been told about them only because I had found out about certain aspects of these ideas, and they did not want me to be in error about them. In conclusion, I was told that these things should not be published.

"Because of the opposition of my consultants, I have done little with my ethnographic notes. At one point I had begun to write an article on their culture, but abandoned it because I felt moral qualms about going against the expressed desires of my consultants. My question is this: Do the wishes of my consultants override the need of science for an ethnographic description of a little-known culture that is becoming westernized? Would it be ethical to produce a work that would appear only after all of my consultants are dead, which could be 20 or 30 years? Or does the right to privacy, which my consultants insisted on, have to be observed as long as the _____ people maintain their independent existence?"