

Boma Johnson

Regular Session Presentation

Title: A Lesson in Stone: The Sears Point Petroglyph Sites, Lower Gila River, Arizona

The author's research orientation as an archaeologist has taken two dramatic changes since leaving the University setting in 1975. The first resulted from accepting a position as an archaeologist for the U.S. Bureau of Land Management in Yuma, Arizona. The new region of responsibility centered in Western Arizona, along the Colorado River. Two conditions are present in this region that caused the first orientation change. First, this region has one of the largest concentrations of Earth Figures known in the world, as well as many petroglyph sites. Second there exists in the region three Native American tribes, (Quechan, Cocopah and Mohave) who have their ancient heritage on the Colorado River.

During the authors early research concerning the large Earth Figures in the region, many questions arose as to the origins and meanings of these figures. In due time the author learned that the local native peoples hold considerable knowledge about these figures, and also about the petroglyphs along the rivers. This new information was in stark contrast to what many professional people had taught -- that the Native Americans knew little or nothing about either the Earth figures or the petroglyphs.

The second major change in orientation came directly from the native peoples themselves. Over the years, many native persons have helped the author gain a better awareness about how they feel about the work of their ancestors on stone, on the earth, or where ever their "art work" appears. The lesson learned is that the Native Americans do not consider their earth figures or petroglyphs as "art" in the Western concept. Nor are they meaningless "doodles". Almost without exception, the native people say that the pictures made by their ancestor are simply their form of communication.

Perhaps the most notable native person the author has learned from is the outstanding Hopi teacher, Thomas Banyacya. In early 1982 the author and Mr. Banyacya spent a day together at the Sears Point site. The author cannot recall any other day where as many "windows" of knowledge were opened. At several panels of petroglyphs Mr. Banyacya shared an incredible amount of knowledge about the meanings of individual elements and panels. That day was the beginning of many years of new learning about why and what can be learned from native people. There is little doubt now about the function of the images or symbols on the rocks and on the earth. They are intended to communicate information to other people of their culture who understood the meanings of the various elements or symbols. The lesson is simple - we will not really understand their culture until we gain a greater understanding of what they expressed to each other in ancient times.

The author's presentation will highlight what has been learned over the years from the native peoples about the panels at Sears Point. Certain panels concentrate on the spiritual aspect of the "Creation" and the "Great Journey" of mankind through past, present and future ages of our existence. The author will attempt to integrate the aspect of "Place" with the native concepts of myth and legend, image and symbol, and ritual and ceremony. These concepts merge into a very beautiful expression among the Quechan known as "Icama", which means "The Spirit of the Creator in all things."