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Formal Schooling among the Ancient Ones: The Mystique of the Kiva

JOHN W. FRIESEN

The perseverance of North American native cultures has finally focused attention on the durability of their lifestyles and on the mechanisms they employ for effective cultural maintenance. These nations represent clear examples of successful cultural adaptation and transformation in terms of both morphostatic and morphogenetic processes. Although native peoples struggled with the complexities of these challenges through time, their persistence is clearly indicative of durability, not simply as the result of social maintenance but as clear evidence of the amazing adaptability built into their processes of socialization and education, both formal and informal.

In the initial period of European contact with native peoples, little consideration was afforded the subject of aboriginal cultural structure and operation, because these cultures were targeted for a quick takeover and/or annihilation. Differences between European and aboriginal lifestyles were summarily dismissed by explorers who were propelled by a strong ethnocentrism. From the European perspective, if a culture was different, it was simply inferior. What use could there be in investigating an alternate (and inferior) way of life when the primary goal was economic pursuit? No questions were asked about the origins or history of the native

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lifestyle, nor did anyone inquire as to its remarkable tenacity and persistence. From first contact, there was a unilateral campaign of conquest. The Indian was expected to listen, and the newcomer talked. In some cases, it was an uncontested conquest, because the natives were favorably inclined toward the newcomers and because they recognized aspects of the imported religion as similar to their own, and they readily bought into it.¹

While the natives sought to incorporate the invading philosophic systems into their own, the promulgators of reform were too busy to spend much time musing about incepting successful adaptive techniques. Eager to make over the aboriginal cultures, they failed to recognize or simply ignored any divergences of cultural structures they encountered and quickly wrote them off as irrelevant or nonexistent. This applied equally to government, religion, economic, or family life, and the invaders certainly gave no thought to investigating other forms of cultural adaptability. They did not recognize the educational or socialization processes at work in native communities, since the structure of the systems was not immediately apparent and varied from tribe to tribe and from location to location. The institution worked, however, and "was successful in its objective of preparing children for entry into the particular aspect of their home culture, e.g., hunter, fisherman, warrior, chief, medicine man or woman, or parent."² This was also the case with regard to the Anasazi culture, long considered one of the oldest of American lifestyles.

THE ARGUMENT

Based on the assumption that cultures universally foster and project their continuance through the education and training of their young, this paper conjectures that a fairly elaborate and detailed educational system functioned among the Anasazi people. Philosophers of education conceptualize educational systems as comprising a series of standard subsections, such as objectives, curriculum content, and methodology; analysis of the system of the Ancient Ones identifies a fairly explicit parallel with these components. In addition, the ruins of former Anasazi villages reveal that physical structures, principally the kiva, were developed to fulfill basic educational objectives. This observation is at least partially supported by the assumption that practices among present-day Pueblo peoples provide clues to Anasazi operations.

This is a fairly safe proposition, since there is little else to do in pursuing this kind of research.³ In general, information about Anasazi cultures has, at best, a dubious and conjectural base, partially because of the methodology employed to derive data. For example, selection of Anasazi sites for study has been arbitrary; investigators of Anasazi culture have chosen to work in particular locales for idiosyncratic reasons or because a particular area was scheduled for land modification activity.⁴ Still, most observers would generally concur that the great settlements of the Anasazi were established as ancestral to the modern pueblos, and a kind of lineal relationship can therefore be assumed.⁵ Against this archaeologically genealogical background, it does not seem unreasonable to project that the Anasazi had in operation a workable educational system that met the needs of their society.

The Spanish invasions of 1540 comprised a campaign to "civilize the Indian" as a means of easing the challenge of cashing in on new wealth via lands and resources. Thus the newcomers concentrated on the externals of native culture and denigrated the internal beliefs and workings. The agenda-laden invaders failed to recognize that native cultures had sufficient structures to hold them together. In an effort to "form a new country" and make it grow, the invaders soon saw that the aboriginal peoples were an inconvenience, and a spirit of paternalism developed. This attitude persisted in the guise of a myriad of slogans, including development, growth, and even national security.⁶ Then, as now, the objective, at least from a European and Euro-American perspective, has remained singular—to make over and assimilate native cultures into the mainstream. In some cases, the objective was to destroy the aboriginal cultural system, by force if necessary, particularly the religious elements, even though some would-be reformers adopted a milder, albeit assimilative stance.⁷

Committed to the enlightenment of the Aborigines, missionaries never embraced a theory that would doom the object of their good works, and thus the good works themselves. They never faltered in their belief that the Indian could be saved.⁸

The Pueblo peoples targeted by Spanish conquest had a long institutional history based primarily on a set of very detailed religious presuppositions and supported by a series of intricate substructures. Elaborated in fundamental educational terms (schooling in its formal sense) and assuming a strong religious

input, the system featured many parallels with what today are perceived to be the essentials of a good educational system, i.e., educational objectives, curriculum content, methodology, selected teaching staff, and performance evaluation.

THE MANDATE OF EDUCATION

For the purposes of this analysis, the principal components of a formal educational system will be defined as follows: Educational *objectives* may be described as the aims of a group incorporating the values defined by the group as worthy aspirations to be attained. *Curriculum* consists of "packages of knowledge" geared to the various age levels, which the school is charged with offering students to qualify them for graduation or certification or for entrance into a professional or vocational field. *Methodology* refers to the procedures by which the teaching-learning process is to operate as well as the theory backing it in terms of its nature, place, and kind. *Instructors* are recognized individuals who have been designated to guide and direct students' learning experiences. Finally, *performance evaluation* implies a process of ascertaining or judging the value or amount of a particular phenomenon (learning, in this case), by an approved method of careful appraisal. Operationally, these components come into play in a specifically designated physical plant commonly known as a school.⁹

LURE OF THE KIVA

Recently, fresh attention has been drawn to the kiva, resurrecting a lively debate about its exact historical function. Traditionally, anthropologists endorsed the interpretation that the kiva was basically designed for ceremonial purposes, with adjunct domestic functions. Over the last two decades, it became fashionable to label the kiva as purely ceremonial and standard village rooms as domestic. More recent evidence suggests that the latter interpretation may be too restrictive, being based on a technique of "truth through inspection."¹⁰ Allowing that the larger kivas were probably used strictly in a ritual and communal fashion, contemporary evidence from sites in the Yellow Jacket area and Mesa Verde indicates a wider use of the kiva. The evidence includes metate bins (known to be used for domestic purposes) in the kivas at

Yellow Jacket, a conspicuous lack of fire hearths in room blocks, and a relatively high number of kivas per room blocks.¹¹ It has also been argued that Anasazi culture sites in the Virgin River area that contain kivas could have served as centers for the redistribution of agricultural and wild resources both on a regular basis and in times of shortage. These "bins" could have proved important, since the northwestern portion of the Southwest is quite marginal for agriculture.¹² Thus the function of the kiva may have been economic as well as social and ceremonial.

The appearance of the kiva is striking because of its difference from the rest of Anasazi structures and the consistency of its construction. The kiva stands apart from the other rooms of its unit in setting or position.¹³ By extension, this contextual definition shifts the functional emphasis from ritual associations to village integration. Viewed from this perspective, the kiva may be perceived as the architectural correlate, marked by its unique context and formal characteristics—a village-integrating ceremonial association.¹⁴ Interestingly, this function is paralleled by the common school in North American society.

Larger kivas, though more widely viewed as constituting a primarily religious edifice, are versions of the smaller kivas.¹⁵ At their peak (around A.D. 1120), Chacoan Great Kivas were very large, round semisubterranean structures, containing a set of highly formalized interior features and furniture. In addition, three Great Kivas have been identified that are not associated with large buildings: Casa Rinconada, Kin Nahasbas (in Fajada Gap), and another near Shabik'eshchee. Great Kivas in Chaco Canyon are generally considered to have a common organizational definition.¹⁶ All are substantially larger than the individual pithouses and surface rooms of the villages with which they are associated, and all are architecturally central to a settlement. It is generally believed among archaeologists that the function of the Great Kivas was unique from that of the smaller kivas, being more specifically religious and ritualistic. However, it is not unreasonable to speculate that, in many cases, similar kinds of activities were carried out in both small and Great Kivas.¹⁷ These differences may further reflect the ingenuity of their builders in adapting structural forms to meet cultural needs.

For the past one half century, the kivas have been used by Pueblo peoples as meeting places for both male and female members of curing societies, as workshops for making ritual equipment, and as sleeping places for boys while they are receiv-

ing religious instruction. In one sense, they may be considered clubhouses and lounging places as well as workshops with weaving being done in them. However, their primary purpose is still for religious ceremonies, and in this context they also function as places of retreat for those who, for a time, must avoid profane contaminations. On occasion, selected sacred ceremonies are held in them that must be kept secret from the uninitiated public.¹⁸ Against this background, some critics contend that contemporary practices are not necessarily reminiscent of traditional ways.¹⁹ Still, this argument does not eliminate that possibility. Thus the contention that a formal education system functioned in Anasazi culture is not entirely without substantiation. Also, even if the argument projected in recent archaeological literature is valid in delineating the purpose of the kiva as purely religious, that does not rule out the possibility that religious education among the Anasazi was the primary *modus operandi* of their formal education system. Traditionally, native peoples, including the Anasazi, spent the majority of their time in religious/spiritual festivities or activities of one kind or another.²⁰ Thus one would expect that they would want to train their young people in what today would be labeled "religious education." As one observer put it, "From the beginning, the American Indian was a god-haunted man."²¹

THE KIVA AS SCHOOL

As is commonly believed by scholars, the religious life of the Anasazi centered in the kiva, which was primarily the domain of the men.²² Each clan maintained its own kiva, and young men were initiated into the various religious practices of the kiva when they reached puberty. Kivas were under the direction of religious leaders or priests, who guided most of the ceremonies and served to confirm the truth of tribal beliefs.²³ Celebrations and dances were important parts of the ceremonies, and musical instruments were used for accompaniment. Dance was particularly important in communicating with the gods of thunder, lightning, and rain. Some dances, such as the snake dance (among the Hopi, for example), were performed in honor of particular gods. Rhythm was important to the dances and mirrored the complexity and regularity of the culture.

In delineating the purposes (*objectives*) of their educational endeavors, ancient societies made no distinctions between sacred

and secular knowledge. Knowledge was passed from one generation to another for the purpose of cultural maintenance. The ceremonies were probably designed to benefit the entire community and revolved around the seasonal cycle—renewal and rebirth at the winter solstice, fertility and growth in the spring, rain during the summer, and thanksgiving in the fall.²⁴ If modern Pueblo practice is representative of past traditions, each ceremony involved months of preparation, with secret parts of the ceremony lasting several days and culminating in a public performance by men elaborately garbed to represent various supernatural beings. The ceremonies involved large numbers of both participants and spectators and, in addition to perpetuating cultural knowledge, served to unite the community.²⁵

Specialized religious knowledge was intended to link civilization with natural forces, in order that the neonate would come to understand the forces of order, disorder, growth, and change.²⁶ This knowledge also had an individual purpose in sensitizing students to their surroundings. Their sensitivity opened them to the metaphysical forces of the world and to the possibilities of mystical learning experiences, which were considered the only way to grasp certain intangible laws of the universe. In this analysis, three major learning objectives emerge: (1) to gain knowledge about the tribe and the universe; (2) to understand possible linkages between the two; and (3) to apply this knowledge and related experiences to personal awareness.

The *content* of traditional native education, including the Anasazi, likely was detailed and complex. Relying on the oral tradition, it was difficult to grasp everything that was required for successful attainment, and the process was less subject-specific than is now the case. Unfortunately, with the passing of many traditional ways and the decay of the old religion, the inner meaning of much Indian spiritual practice has been lost; in some cases, new meanings have successfully replaced the old. This further testifies to the adaptability of Indian culture. Still, some would contend that much of what is still known of the old way is probably as incomprehensible to native peoples as it is to outsiders, since, following the tenor of the oral tradition, they have continually built new aspects of meaning into their rituals. Researchers have been fortunate to discover that, in a few locations such as the Southwest, where the framework of traditional Indian life has to some extent persisted in the old forms, the literal magic of the Indian arts still persists, albeit in modified form.²⁷

It is not easy to understand Pueblo religion; many Pueblo secrets are formulations that, to the outsider, may appear as mere rituals, when, in essence, their contained secrets are a vital part of philosophical formulations.²⁸ Traditionally, rituals denoted a specific pattern and content. Religious leaders engaged in preparing paraphernalia for their enactments, recounted legends, chanted what would seem to the outsiders as endless prayers, made offerings to the gods, and performed various prescribed ceremonial acts.²⁹

Probably the most formal aspect of the ceremonials was the initiation of the young into clan life. The purpose was to engage the young people in the rituals essential to making them feel part of the community, to help them master the underlying meanings of these enactments, and to lead them to make a commitment to clan ways. Each clan had its own rituals. During the most sacred ceremonies, each child was admonished not to betray to uninitiates what went on.³⁰ There were differences in the ways clans operated. For example, Zuni clans cut across boundaries and emphasized common ancestry. Clan loyalties were maintained by special insignia and ceremonies, use of the same name, and a shared mythology and clan history. Zuni clans also named a different totemic animal or plant for each clan, which provided the foundation for the development of insignia. Marriage between members of the same clan was prohibited. The very fact that two Zuni belonged to the same clan was sufficient to prove their kinship, even though an actual blood relationship might not be known. Clan beliefs were nearly always regarded as secret knowledge kept by religious elders and not necessarily expressly known or understood by the ordinary pueblo resident. In essence, a large part of the body of socioceremonial information and specialized religious knowledge was controlled by these officers, the underlying beliefs of which formed a broad substructure on which the complex ritual and multideity system of Pueblo religion was built.³¹ It was a position of power and control that, as tradition has it, was violated rarely.

Edward Curtis observed that kivas were named for the ceremonial groups that met in them. He stipulated three characteristics about their operation: (1) traditionally, Pueblo Indians traveled in groups, which later became known as clans; (2) at birth, each male child was dedicated to a particular group, and not necessarily that of his father; and (3) the groups were definitely associated with certain kivas and with the ceremonial chambers. This was not

necessarily true for clans per se, although the word *clan* is later used interchangeably with *group*.³² In some cases, female children were also dedicated to a clan, but their duties were primarily to keep the kiva in repair and in order.

Special paraphernalia, unique to each clan, were manifest during the kiva ceremonies: face decorations, clothing designs, and symbolic patterns painted on houses. The influence of the clan reached beyond the actual process of the initiation ceremonies to the maintenance of agricultural fields, burial rites, and other clan behavior patterns. Among the Isleta and the Hopi, a four-year initiation was required to learn the beginnings of ritual. The Hopi also had graded initiates (Paiutes), who were not regarded as fully initiated and who therefore could not lay claim to full knowledge of the conventional meanings of Pueblo symbols, however insightful they were as informants. From the native point of view, they were "informed guessers."³³

When the process of initiation was completed, the student-participant acquired more power as a tribal member. Reliance on the oral tradition made the process very difficult, since curriculum content was committed to memory and not to paper. A built-in advantage was that subject matter was less specific and thus subject to interpretation by the learner at a later occasion. Even then, the power of the oral tradition in maintaining accuracy and in assuring cultural maintenance cannot easily be overestimated. This was borne out in the work of Charles Fletcher Lummis, who claimed a century ago, based on the oral tradition, that Mesa Encantada, near present-day Acoma, had once been occupied by the ancestors of Acoma Pueblo. After inciting considerable public controversy, Lummis was vindicated by F.W. Hodge of the Smithsonian Institution, who verified Lummis's claims in a letter dated 5 September 1887, citing archaeological evidence accumulated and corroborated by that institution.³⁴

The role of women in the kivas has been the subject of considerable debate. Some speculate, for example, that women were more involved in ceremonies in the Great Kiva than in the regular kiva.³⁵ While the exact role of women cannot be determined, it is safe to say, based on today's procedures, that women at least brought food to the men who slept and ate in the kiva when ceremonies were in progress. Since the site and process of some of the ceremonies were sacred to the performers, they left the kiva only to perform errands related to the ceremonies.³⁶ Among the Hopi, women have been known to impersonate kachinas for

special purposes at the time of the bean dance. These same women also dance as maskless equivalents of female kachinas in the Hopi maskless dance.³⁷ For the most part, however, these Hopi practices are considered atypical.

As in every traditional society, the later training of young Anasazi males and females differed somewhat from the early years, when both sexes were left to participate in and to enjoy a period of relatively ungoverned play. At a certain point, however—most often puberty—one was expected to know a great deal more than one did as a child, and with knowledge came responsibility. This could be called the beginning of the formal period of education, after which one was to use one's knowledge and talents for the needs of one's family and community.

When one sits in one of the Great Kivas and visualizes a great fire in the center lighting the faces of other spectators dressed in their finery and watching the masked dancers appear through several doorways to the beat of drums, it takes little imagination even today to envisage the formal training process of the Ancient Ones. It is a scene similar to the festivities of more contemporary cultures, sometimes culminating in the initiation of the young to full responsibility in their society.

In every native North American tribe, there are specialists (*instructors*) who are charged with the responsibility of passing on to the young the religious knowledge central to the functioning of their particular society. These instructors go by various names: elders, teachers, priests, medicine men and women, caciques or shamans. As in today's world, each traditional native culture elaborated a formal process for the certification of these instructors through the sacred societies operated by the clans. The specialists learned what they knew by watching their own teachers and by experimenting with the forces in nature.³⁸

There is considerable variation among North American Indian tribes as to selection of their religious teachers or elders. In some tribes, they simply emerged,³⁹ thereby perhaps reflecting a fundamental adaptability. In others (the Zuni, for example), they worked their way up a specified series of ranks through a very hierarchical system, ultimately becoming top-ranked religious leader-instructors.⁴⁰ According to one source, among the Hopi, the position was handed down from one generation to the next.⁴¹ The Tiwa followed a similar pattern, with the priest usually naming his son as successor; if he had no son, or if his son was not fit for the position, another member of the clan was selected.⁴²

Regardless of the nature of the appointment or attainment, the responsibilities of the office bore a remarkable similarity among the tribes. While one of the principal functions of religious instructors was to assure the perpetuity of cultural knowledge, their role was complicated by the additional exigencies of their involvement in the personal truth-seeking process. They were charged with keeping themselves spiritually attuned to the cosmos and maintaining a high degree of ritual purity by consciously emptying themselves of offending ideas. Thus the responsibility of tribal teachers was multifaceted. Some were also specialists in the spiritual, educational, medicinal, and even musical aspects of the culture. Other than the part played by clan relatives in providing day-to-day information about tribal life or in disciplining the young, the transmission of the bulk of cultural knowledge was in the hands of the religious instructors.

Too often in today's society the formal education process comes to an abrupt halt at a certain age. The measure of an educated person is his or her career status or income. It is believed that, among traditional native peoples such as the Anasazi, the evaluation of one's training was less specified and much more personalized, because trainees were evaluated by both their mentors and their communities.⁴³ A successful (religious) education was validated by one's practice as well as by one's continuing personal search for understanding of the great mysteries of the cosmos. To be well-educated in the tribe's spiritual knowledge, public as well as secret, implied marked personal growth as well as fulfillment of a community need.

The completion of religious training may also have had other implications in traditional native societies—for example, in recognition received from the local community. An element of prestige may have been gained by the successful individual, paralleled today among the Navajo, who admire religious initiates who show off good memory and oratorical skill in telling legends.⁴⁴ In this, as in other traditional educational substructures and procedures, it is reasonable to conjecture that the Anasazi's means of educating their young was appropriate to and relatively successful within their particular cultural configuration. It supplemented other ongoing processes, both morphostatic and morphogenetic, which were attuned to perpetuity. What is unique about the Anasazi, and what intrigues and perhaps confounds the student of their lifestyle and legacy is the mysterious Anasazi school—the kiva.

CONCLUSION

Despite warnings against trying to squeeze too much out of Anasazi history⁴⁵ or drawing too many analogies between their way of life and that of the contemporary Pueblo peoples,⁴⁶ the researcher of today requires little imagination to conclude that Anasazi culture, like other such configurations, aimed at maintaining some degree of intactness. This includes the design or evolution of cultural objectives and priorities, as well as specific maintenance structures and techniques. For the Ancient Ones, this was primarily achieved through the kiva, which was a morphostatic mechanism of effective cultural maintenance. The effectivity of Anasazi cultural perpetuity was undoubtedly supplemented, not without some measure of conflict, by parallel morphogenetic adaptive processes.

The juxtaposition of paradoxical contemporary North American educational values is a well-known and much-debated undertaking. On the one hand, we promote the values of brotherhood, sharing, and community; on the other hand, we greatly esteem the ideology of individualism, free enterprise, and competition.⁴⁷ A "correctly" socialized individual will know exactly how to survive in the inevitable maze of paradoxical demands encountered after graduation. The tradition of the Pueblo cultural ancestors similarly prognosticated divergences, in that they probably believed that everything in the cosmos was knowable and essentially controllable. Effective control came from letter-perfect attention to detail and correct performance; thus the strong emphasis on formulas, ritual, and correct performance in training. Conversely, while knowing was good in Pueblo theory, knowing everything was suspicious, and knowing nothing was shocking.⁴⁸ Undoubtedly, a correctly initiated individual would know how to maneuver his or her way through this culturally concocted maze. This educational parallel can likely be matched by others in the two systems and supports the contention that educational systems reflect the mainstream of their particular cultural configuration.

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