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**Author**

McPherson, Robert S.

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## From Dezba to "John": The Changing Role of Navajo Women in Southeastern Utah

ROBERT S. MCPHERSON

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In 1939, Gladys A. Reichard published *Dezba: Woman of the Desert*, a fictional account based on the author's sixteen years of anthropological work among the Navajo. Although the characters were imaginary, the events and feelings portrayed in the book showed depth in understanding the struggles of a "traditional" mother. Shocked at the younger generation's adaptation to Anglo-American culture and their growing unfamiliarity with Navajo customs, Dezba remained outwardly passive yet emotionally torn and frustrated as she watched the old lifestyle start to melt before her eyes. Reichard, through Dezba, outlined this dissolution when she wrote, "A reservation mother had no means to cope with white man's customs which led girls first to change dress and personal appearance. Next, children began to scorn social customs and became fastidious about food and the Navajo custom of sleeping on the ground. At worst, they took to drinking and became loose in morals."<sup>1</sup> Since Dezba's time, this process of change has intensified and assumed new directions, as contact with the dominant society has increased. Perhaps it was not by chance that this important character was named Dezba, translated as "Going to War."

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Robert S. McPherson teaches at the College of Eastern Utah-San Juan Campus in Blanding, Utah. He has published two books concerning Navajo history and culture and is currently writing a centennial history of San Juan County.

Reichard was writing about the Navajo in the 1930s, sixty years or about three generations ago, when the most serious inroads of acculturation had just started. What has happened since that time on at least one part of the reservation is the subject of this article, which looks at the changing roles of Navajo women. While there has been some commentary about transitions in specific communities and general trends among female Navajo, little attention has been paid to the Navajo women of southeastern Utah.<sup>2</sup>

Before starting, however, I will clarify three important elements. The first centers on the term *traditional*. Because culture is always changing, what is one day new and innovative may, in a few decades, be considered old and traditional. This creates the need to establish a baseline from which change can be measured. For our purpose, the Navajo woman's lifestyle practiced in the 1930s will serve as a point of reference.<sup>3</sup> By this time, the culture had adopted many material objects and some values of Anglo society, but it was not until the advent of stock reduction and the increasing availability of motorized transportation that the floodgates of change opened. Prior to this period, the Navajo enjoyed a primarily matrilineal culture, the women controlling much of the wealth and local resources.

A second concern lies in pegging down the slippery eel of change. The question quickly becomes not whether change occurred but the direction and rate that it took. Obviously, change is not a homogeneous movement that sweeps through a population over night, since governmental, geographic, local, and individual elements enter in to either speed or slow the process. Also, it is difficult to determine when a majority of people have accepted a certain practice, since records of this nature are not systematically kept. Therefore, I will make use primarily of four censuses: 1931, 1960, 1980, and 1990.<sup>4</sup> The last two, because of computers, provide the most detailed outline of existing circumstances in the Navajo Nation, while the two former censuses give only a baseline of information with which to work. For example, when the tribe took the 1931 census, the reservation had been divided into districts. Southeastern Utah was lumped together with the Shiprock, New Mexico area, so while the data give some very detailed information, the geographic area includes part of the reservation that is not our concern.

The third problem is that of gaining a qualitative dimension. To add a more human side to facts and figures, questions were derived from the numerical data and then presented in formal

interviews to Navajo women from the area. Since these women were of varying ages and from different parts of southeastern Utah, it is still difficult to say that they were totally representative, although general patterns of expectation and concern ran throughout.

In writing this article, I draw upon eighteen years of experience in working with Navajo people. Many of the interviews that have provided information herein were collected in 1984 when this project started, but, over the past ten years, these observations have been corroborated. Because of the personal nature of this material, all informants will remain anonymous unless already appearing in a published source.

From this investigation will come a clearer understanding of the elements that have wrought change and, more importantly, created internal cultural pressures. There are obvious problems in comparing data over time, some of which do not distinguish between Navajo males and females and come from different parts of the Navajo Nation. Where possible, distinctions are made. What does become clear, however, is that there is a move away from the Dezbas of the 1930s to two broad classifications of younger-generation Navajo women in the 1990s: for lack of better terms, those who are "progressive" and those who are "Johns." How this has come about is our point of departure.

Utah's Navajo population is concentrated in San Juan County, the southern third of which is part of the reservation. According to the 1990 census, the county population can be divided roughly in half, there being 5,501 white residents, 6,859 American Indians, and 261 Blacks, Hispanics, and Asians. A small Ute community (approximately 350 people) is established outside of Blanding, but the vast majority of Native Americans are Navajo, four-fifths of whom live on the reservation and 52 percent of whom are female. The importance of this demographic spread lies in the clarity it offers for comparative purposes. Living conditions, employment, and education are defined with precision in the census. Thanks to the detailed information now collected through computers, the changing role of Navajo women has become more apparent.

The 1930s brought stock reduction, eliminating many of the traditional forms of wealth and livelihood. Since the Navajo could no longer depend on animals as their major source of wealth and because motorized transportation provided greater accessibility to the wage economy, the 1940s and 1950s saw an influx of Navajo

into the San Juan region in search of jobs. This flow, along with natural increase, has continued to the present, giving rise to many of the predominantly Navajo towns found on the fringe of the reservation. The discovery of oil and uranium on the Navajo's land, plus the opening of Peabody Coal Mine just south of the Utah border in Arizona, acted as a magnet to draw those looking for work. The end result has been a steady increase of the Indian population in San Juan County.

A look at the demography of the Navajo in this region illustrates this dramatic growth. In 1960, there were 2,668 Navajo residents; 1970 showed an increase of 77.7 percent (4,740 people); in 1980, 110.7 percent (5,622 people); and in 1990, 157 percent (6,859 people). In early reports, the age characteristics of the Navajo, like those of many other underdeveloped/rural groups in the world, depicted a youthful population with few middle-aged and elderly people. According to the 1990 census, this trend is starting to change. For example, the age distribution of males and females according to the censuses from 1931 to 1960 shows a high percentage of the population being below the age of twenty-four. In 1931, 68.9 percent of the Navajo fell into this category, while in 1990, only 56 percent belonged to this group, underscoring the trend of a people in transition.

Still, the small number of those older than sixty (8 percent) accentuates the impact that cultural change will have on the young. As one of the last viable repositories of the traditional lifestyle, the elders play an increasingly critical role in passing along the older Navajo worldview. When they are gone, a different set of standards will emerge. Whereas, in the 1930s, the forces to bring about a transition were present but diluted due to isolation and the adherence to traditional culture, in the 1990s, forces reach far beyond the reservation and Navajo custom to inculcate a different orientation among the youth.

Another concern in this process of change is the family, which, in Navajo society, revolves around the woman. Gary Witherspoon, in *Navajo Marriage and Kinship*, sees the role of motherhood as a central theme expressed in everything from ceremonies to dwellings and from language to deities.<sup>5</sup> Although he may overstress the female principle, few deny that, in a traditionally matrilineal society, the mother played an important role in social and economic affairs. In 1942, Solon Kimball and John Provinse studied Navajo social organization and summarized the woman's responsibilities as follows:

The hogan and its vicinity represents her major locale of action. She is responsible for the preparation, serving and cooking of food; for the cleanliness of the hogan and her children; for the making of clothing, and for the general comfort of the members of her family . . . . Just as her husband seldom interferes in the domestic arrangements except where there is gross neglect, she too avoids interference in the duties and privileges of her husband. Though primarily engaged in household duties, her contribution to the economic welfare of the family is as great as that of any other member of the family. The most direct contribution comes from the weaving and sale of rugs, but she is equally competent in the care of the sheep and goats and assists her husband in the light work in the fields when necessity arises.<sup>6</sup>

In 1931, Navajo families were basically self-sufficient, growing crops and herding sheep and cattle for their livelihood. Today, wage work has drawn those who can compete for the jobs to towns or places where commuting is practical. Those who are not fortunate enough to live near a job site maintain their extended family structure with aunts, uncles, and grandparents in the same house or settlement, but this is done at the expense of economic independence. Unemployment, welfare, and part-time jobs result. Young people who want to earn a steady income must give up the social comfort of being near to their next of kin and adapt to a nuclear family structure.

This conflict of interest creates uncertainty among younger Navajo women concerning where their allegiance should lie. There is no doubt about their desire to help mother and father with economic and moral support, but there is a question regarding where they should live in order to be more effective in earning money. One woman, when asked where she wanted to settle in relation to her parents, said, "I could go back and teach computers, but it is important to live close to my parents. Perhaps I could get a job there [near home], but if not, then I would go where the job is. I will need the money, but I will still visit my parents as much as I can."<sup>7</sup>

As these young women move away from the security of their extended families and the assurance of a traditional economy, they become more dependent on their husbands, who, according to historic Anglo values, become the breadwinners. In Navajo culture, the woman has always been the stable, dominant force; although a husband might come and go, the wife still shouldered

many of the economic and familial responsibilities. Now, the wife who has moved away from kin must either live on what her husband has earned, must provide income herself, or must return to her family and hope that they can support her. The 1990 census indicates that only 53 percent of the women sixteen years of age or older are part of the labor force, while 30 percent of the household owners on the reservation are female and have no husband present. This, of course, would include older widows, as well as women in various circumstances other than divorce, but it also does not include those who have returned to their parents. At any rate, 30 percent is a significant proportion of females feeling the force of economic pressures. Many do so without the "shock absorbers" of extended kin to cushion problems that arise.

Another way of looking at the issue of marital status is to point out that 79 percent of the people who fill the census categories of "separated, widowed, and divorced" on the Utah part of the reservation are women. While there are many cultural and economic reasons for this disparity, it is obviously easier for a male to obtain companionship.<sup>8</sup>

A primary concern of Navajo religion and beliefs has always been health. Traditionally, physical and spiritual harm came to those who broke the taboos and transgressed divine laws as proscribed by deities. Another side of Navajo health was concerned with using plants and minerals to heal the sick. Very few women serve as chanters in the long, complex ceremonies, but many medicine women have a vast knowledge of healing through plants and other natural remedies. Deeply rooted in mythology but sharing some of the tenets of Western society's medicinal practices, this strictly physical healing was not as concerned with spirits and the maintenance of harmony.

Following the introduction of the Indian Health Service (IHS) on the reservation, a desire grew among the Navajo to use both traditional and Western medicine. Health care facilities were located only in the more developed areas of the reservation such as Shiprock and Kayenta, so many of the Utah Navajo were forced to either travel long distances for help, enroll in expensive Anglo hospitals, or do without medical attention.

The solution to this problem lay with the creation of a Navajo-controlled and operated organization in San Juan County that either provided or contracted to provide services in health, education, agriculture, and housing. The Utah Navajo Development Council (UNDC) was incorporated in 1971, funded primarily by

oil royalties from the Utah portion of the reservation. Senate Bill 391, passed in 1968, made this revenue available by amending Act 47 Statute 1418 of 1933, to allow money to be used

for the health, education and general welfare of the Navajo Indian residing in San Juan County. Planning for such expenditures shall be done in cooperation with the appropriate departments, bureaus, commissions, divisions and agencies of the United States, State of Utah, the County of San Juan in Utah, and the Navajo Tribe insofar as it is reasonably practicable to accomplish the objects and purpose of this act.<sup>9</sup>

The UNDC's programs started in 1971-72; although it was designated to help the Navajo in general, many of the health services were especially applicable to women. Operating from three clinics located at Navajo Mountain, Montezuma Creek, and Oljato, nurse practitioners offered programs such as health education, well-baby clinics, prenatal and postpartum care, family planning, and special clinics for screening cancer, treating tuberculosis, and teaching handicapped children. The results were impressive. In fiscal year 1971-72, Navajo people made 8,421 visits to the three clinics; by 1983, this figure had doubled (16,845).<sup>10</sup> UNDC instituted a program that further decentralized services and brought health care into the hogans of some of the remotest camps. Navajo community female health nurses traveled over rutted dirt roads in the back country, bringing medicine and advice to the homes of those not able to reach the clinics. In 1982, these nurses reached a peak of 2,700 visitations.<sup>10</sup>

The clinic at Navajo Mountain expanded its capacity in an innovative program during the summer of 1983. Assuming the title of "Hogan Heroes," the full-time health personnel trained female Navajo high school and college students who were home for the summer to give instruction to the old, the disabled, and the housebound on subjects as varied as first aid, fitness, drug use, and accident prevention. As a result, 122 of the 135 families the clinic identified as needing such help were contacted and instructed, giving rise to a final report that boasted, "Every family now has someone who can take a temperature."<sup>11</sup> Thus, even the most rural part of the reservation has been affected by health care, so that diseases like tuberculosis or infant mortality are no longer the scourge they once were.

The single most important tool of change that affects Navajo women today is education. Although traditional society had its



methods of acculturating its members, a sharp contrast exists between the way the older people were raised and the way younger women have been brought up. For the former, the use of example and informal methods stressed the individual's need to choose and accept Navajo practices. One older woman explained it this way:

They [mother and father] were the only ones to teach me these things. They said this is the way you walk through life. I found out it was true. "I will sit here and set examples for you," she said, "until you can stand up. With my breath of life [for I gave you life] you will be like that throughout your years." I think sometimes that this is true. I always hang on to the old words said by her.<sup>12</sup>

Yet, according to the Treaty of 1868, the government was to provide formal education through schools and teachers sent to all parts of the reservation. This program got off to a slow start, but by the mid-twentieth century, large numbers of Navajo children were enrolled—either willingly or by force—in some form of educational program. Three general types of schools were available: the federal boarding school, the Navajo community boarding school, and the Anglo or Navajo community day school. To serve Utah residents, the BIA located boarding schools in Shonto and Kayenta, Arizona; Navajo Mountain and Aneth, Utah; and Shiprock, New Mexico.

There are no complete studies of these institutions, but information compiled about the impact of this kind of school is instructive. Ann Metcalf, in "From Schoolgirl to Mother: The Effects of Education on Navajo Women," mentions that

nearly every Navajo child born on the reservation after 1940 has spent some time in federal boarding school. During any given year, approximately 50 percent of all Navajo children are living in dormitories. The Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) estimates that 83 percent of the elementary pupils in federally operated boarding schools are Navajo.<sup>13</sup>

Metcalf further points out that although many parents encouraged their children to go to school to get a "good education" and later a "good job," many of the students were ill-prepared for the trauma they encountered when Anglo clothes, hairstyles, and language were forced on them. One woman said her experience

was so bad that she had mentally blocked it out. Recently, when she was asked to write her life history, she broke down in tears as she forced herself to remember some of those experiences. This response may not be the rule, but it also is not the exception; although Metcalf's informants resided in Oakland, California, and were limited in number, there is abundant anecdotal evidence on a more local level that supports the idea that many Navajo women found their boarding school experiences difficult, if not traumatic.

Metcalf saw other ill effects from the boarding school experience. Among the twenty-three Navajo women she interviewed in an urban setting in 1970–72, she found that those who had attended boarding schools experienced more anxiety than other Navajo parents, were less decisive, had lower self-images, were more likely to seek help from "experts," and manipulated their children more.<sup>14</sup> Boarding school for many did as much harm as good.

Another option available for Navajo children was the placement program of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS). Because Utah was predominantly Mormon, many of the Indian children who were Mormon remained in the state and attended school in the Salt Lake area, while others went to California for their education. The program was strictly voluntary, yet selective, based on ability and church membership for those Navajo who chose to attend. It is difficult to measure the impact of the program, because the church has not released reports concerning its success or failure, but, in 1945, Alexander and Dorothea Leighton made an observation that perhaps can serve as a comment on the effectiveness of any of these past off-reservation programs. They believed that 95 percent of the Navajo students who left the reservation for education returned to their old way of life and that it had proved more of a handicap than an aid to the children.<sup>15</sup> After that time, the program became increasingly smaller and more selective. By 1990, the LDS placement program had ended. Again, no statistics are available.

Still another option was not to attend school at all. A study conducted in 1969 found that the parents of many Navajo students had avoided formal education for one reason or another. Whether they were caught in the web of familial responsibilities, blocked by transportation problems, or simply lacked desire, these parents were sending their children off to an experience they had never had. The study points out that 40 percent of the fathers

and 59 percent of the mothers of the Navajo students attending San Juan High School had no formal education. Only 5 percent of these parents completed twelve years of school; 2 percent of the fathers and 1 percent of the mothers held college degrees.<sup>16</sup> According to the 1990 census, 35 percent of the Utah Navajo population twenty-five years or older now hold a high school diploma or higher, and 4.4 percent have a bachelor's degree or higher.<sup>17</sup>

For the Utah Navajo, education did not always come easily. As mentioned previously, the northern two-thirds of San Juan County contains the majority of the white population as well as private businesses, state and federal agencies, and schools. For those Navajo living on the reservation, alternatives beyond boarding schools and the LDS placement program—especially for high school students—lay in traveling to Blanding for an education.

Busing was the only reliable, daily means for getting students to school, but it came at a terrible price. Indian children, depending on which part of the reservation they lived on, were transported anywhere from eighty to 166 miles (round trip) each day just to get to classes.<sup>18</sup> Translated into travel time, this could mean as much as five or six hours by the time they had walked or been driven by parents out to their bus stop. Interviews with women who endured this busing confirm that it was a trial to get chores done, eat breakfast, and reach a pickup point for transportation, not to mention the effect this schedule had on extracurricular and study activities after school.

In 1975, parents took steps to help the more than two hundred students who found themselves in this situation. Believing these children were products of educational and racial discrimination, forty-eight individuals, many of whom were women, filed notice with the DNA (Dinebeiiina Nahiilna Be Agaditahe—roughly glossed as “Winning a Case for the People’s Rights”) office in Mexican Hat. DNA, an agency that provides legal aid for the Navajo people, in turn filed suit under the title of *Sinajini v. the Board of Education*. While Jimmie Sinajini was just one of the students, his case represented both the Oljato and Red Mesa chapters’ fight against the school district. Navajo read pertinent documents at chapter meetings, insuring local involvement.<sup>19</sup>

The San Juan School District sat down with lawyers from both sides and discussed emotionally charged issues. The committee pointed out that as late as 1958, only 120 students—4.4 percent—in the district were American Indian and that the BIA schools had

responsibility for the others. By 1974, the figure had changed dramatically. Indian students now numbered 1,235, or 46.5 percent; of these, 431 were involved in secondary education, and 220 were being bused. Comparative distances traveled by Indian and non-Indian students showed that the high schools were located in such a way that the average Navajo student traveled four times as far as his or her white counterpart. Many Native Americans spent the equivalent of 120 school days physically sitting on a bus just to attend classes for 180 days. For students at the end of the longest bus routes, these figures rose to 30,000 miles each year and an equivalent of 240 school days on a bus.<sup>20</sup>

The school district eventually came to terms. Both parties agreed that high schools were needed in Montezuma Creek and Monument Valley. The former opened in 1978, the latter in 1983, and each has had a larger attendance than the projected 150-person enrollment initially anticipated. The school district also improved the three elementary schools on or near the reservation in Bluff, Mexican Hat, and Montezuma Creek and initiated bilingual/bicultural programs at each institution. The Utah Navajo had claimed a partial "place in the sun."

The significance of these events is highlighted by information from the 1990 census. Never before had San Juan County had so many Navajo students enrolled in elementary and secondary education—to the tune of 1,600 on the reservation alone, while 332 others attended some type of college. These figures support the general trend established in 1980 of dramatic increases that spiral upward toward more and higher education.

Fluency in English is another important indicator of the effects of formal education. Unfortunately, the 1960 and 1970 censuses do not give detailed information concerning languages spoken in the home and proficiency in English, but the 1980 and 1990 censuses show that about one-third of the reservation population speaks only Navajo, while the large majority are bilingual and can communicate on at least an elementary basis in English. A recent study of the Head Start program completed by the Navajo Division of Education found that 54 percent of the 682 children observed were monolingual English speakers, 18 percent were monolingual Navajo speakers, and 28 percent were bilingual.<sup>21</sup> The preschool teaching staff, composed predominantly of women, spoke primarily English, even though most were bilingual. Thus, younger generations of Navajo women and children are becoming more fluent in the language of the dominant society. In the

future, they will become ever more competitive in the job market, but often at the expense of their native tongue.

On a more personal level, Navajo females, both old and young, seem to favor education. An interview in 1977 with Nedra Todich'ii'nii, an elderly woman who spoke little English, netted the following response:

I always wish that my children would handle these things that you call papers, strong papers of higher education. This also pertains to everybody, boys and girls. The boys will start thinking about women. If you think of a woman, think of one who is well-educated and has had a lot of schooling.<sup>22</sup>

Another, more recent interview revealed that a traditional mother was very much in favor of education. She told all her sons that they had to go to school to learn all they could. She warned, "If you don't get educated, it is like being deaf because you cannot live in a world where everybody is going in the direction of the white men." She had never been allowed to go to school, because she had to stay home to herd sheep and weave. She realized now that education was important for her children to become self-sufficient in a changing world. "Navajos have to learn the Navajo way and use the white man's way. If we lose our way of life, it is something we will have to live with, but we are handicapped if we don't know English."<sup>23</sup>

Younger Navajo women reflect similar feelings towards education, expressing an urgency to change their situation. The values of the dominant culture are infused in their philosophy; they equate education with upward social mobility and material wealth. One woman, who counseled high school students in Monument Valley, believes that women are more aggressive because of their cultural heritage, which places them in a position of power. The following statement sheds an interesting light on younger Navajo females' attitudes, as reflected by this counselor:

I find that the women are more eager and they take a challenge more than the men do. The men are more unstable. Maybe that is because of the culture. The women can identify with their role but as far as the men, what's their role? A long time ago they were the hunters; they were the providers, but now a lot of that is taken away. So where do they stand now? ... Ladies around here have more guts, are more determined,

will step out and say I'll take it . . . They are tired of feeling like they have not accomplished anything.<sup>24</sup>

This desire to "accomplish" has been translated into the values of Anglo society—jobs, money, and influence. In the 1930s, wealth was counted in sheep, rugs, and silver work; today it is signified by pickup trucks and technology as much as in food and employment. Navajo women are abundantly aware of the material wealth around them that can be acquired for comfort and ease, yet many are also frustrated by their inability to obtain it. This is particularly evident when one reviews the unemployment and poverty of the Utah Navajo.

To place the economic situation of Navajo women in perspective, we need to look for a moment at the general Utah employment scene. According to the 1983 *Report to the Governor: Poverty in Utah*, "San Juan residents with incomes seventy-five percent of the poverty level comprise a larger proportion of the county population than in any other county in Utah."<sup>25</sup> The same is still true in the 1990s.

The report also mentions that "[ a] Utah American Indian's chance of being poor is nearly four times that of a white individual."<sup>26</sup> In terms of Navajo employment, this means that, because of isolation, lack of job training, language barriers, and unfamiliarity with Anglo work values, many older men and women are cut off from gainful employment. Statistically, in 1990, 52 percent of the reservation Navajo in southeastern Utah were below the poverty level, surviving on an average family income of \$11,732. Of those people sixteen years of age or older, 55 percent of the men and 57 percent of the women capable of working were unemployed. For many Navajo, the chance of economic prosperity in the near future looks remote.

In an interview, the director of the state employment office in Blanding reflected on his twenty-three years of working in job placement with Navajo people and offered some impressions.<sup>27</sup> First, many of the figures generated by state agencies are not totally accurate because of the definition of eligibility for unemployment and welfare. In Utah, if a family has an employable father, he cannot receive state welfare, but if he is a Navajo, he is eligible for tribal welfare. This has the effect of keeping the unemployed on the reservation and away from employment agencies.

A second problem is that job service statistics are based on those who come in and apply for work. After being turned

down for employment a few times, a person is not likely to continue to travel the many miles to keep trying; thus the number of registered applicants is reduced in comparison to those who actually need work. Navajo who have not worked for at least five months in a year are not eligible for unemployment insurance and so cannot call on this source of income. Many Navajo are also not adequately prepared to compete for employment, because they lack the education and skills needed in the job market. Those who do find work often start at minimum wage.

A final impression is that Navajo females are more stable and responsible on the job than men, which the interviewee attributed to their cultural role of controlling much of the economy. A BIA work force profile showed almost one-and-one-half times as many Navajo women employed as men.<sup>28</sup>

As a result of unemployment, the material welfare of the Utah Navajo is nothing short of impoverishment. A brief synopsis of living conditions on the reservation presents some rather depressing figures: houses with one or fewer bedrooms—61 percent; houses with four or more bedrooms—2 percent; no bathrooms—69 percent; homes heated with wood—70 percent; homes with no telephone—80 percent.

What, then, do Navajo people do with the little money they have? A study conducted in 1974 showed they spent 23 percent of their income on food and 23.5 percent on transportation—a lifeline on the reservation.<sup>29</sup> Hauling water, wood, and groceries is a matter of survival. The Navajo have always been a mobile people, and, with the expansion of the reservation and the shift from herding to wage work, the pickup truck has grown in importance. Yet transportation is only part of what is needed to solve the problems of unemployment, poverty, and cultural barriers.

Moving toward a synthesis in understanding the Navajo woman of today, we find that there are three general types. The first is the "Dezba" of Gladys Reichard's day. She will be found in any community on the reservation, herding sheep, weaving rugs, and running her homestead with decisiveness. She understands little English and follows deeply ingrained Navajo customs: Sings, squaw dances, and herding activities play an important part in her life. The "Dezbas" are respected by young and old and are often viewed, along with medicine men, as the repository of the old ways. Their lifestyle and their beliefs have changed little; they are traditional.

At the other end of the spectrum are the young Navajo women who have become increasingly aware of the Anglo world and its materialism. From an outsider's point of view, they are "progressive," in that modern trends and values are infused in their worldview and in their goals. Many of these women attended boarding school on placement, or day schools where they learned to appreciate the ease and physical comforts of white society. Television, radio, movies, videos, books, and magazines advertise possible lifestyles, with graphic illustrations and an accompanying promise of wealth and prestige not found on the reservation. A nice home, a good job, an education—these are the things young women seek. Independence, not familial ties, is its fruit.

In response to the question, "Would you be happy with a large herd of sheep, your sisters living nearby, and a fine loom outside your hogan?" one progressive woman replied,

I probably would be if that is all I knew—if I didn't have anything else to do or had not been exposed to books and the world. But that is not the case now. You've got to do more; there is no life in that. You can't get anything out of herding sheep and a loom. From the time I used to watch my mother weave up until now, her rugs used to cost maybe \$300. Now they cost \$50. It's a zero; you can't market in that or get anything out of that. Most people's view is that they [Navajo] live on the res in a hogan, they don't pay their taxes and rent . . . but I can do it myself . . . I want to get places and I want to do it how everybody else is doing it. I want to get an education and go out there and do it and not have it done for me. I want to be somebody.<sup>30</sup>

It would be inaccurate to give the impression that this woman, or hundreds like her, disparage the old ways. Many of them say they would either like to, or at least would not mind, going back to the reservation to "help their people." They expressed respect and even delight for traditional ways, although many of the women had only a rudimentary knowledge of customs and beliefs. Mothers and grandmothers are the ones consulted if a question about tradition arises.

One girl, when asked if she would like to learn more about the Navajo way, replied, "Maybe someday I would, but right now I have college; maybe after that I could look back into it."<sup>31</sup> When asked what she would do to hold on to her culture, she said, "Well, I am now holding a title of Miss Northern Navajo and I think that



will be a kind of traditional thing, like weaving, and that will really help to keep my traditional background. Also, language is important." It is ironic that securing a title from a contest can be compared with traditional beliefs, but, for some Navajo women, it has become synonymous. Dezba would probably only grimace.

Another woman commented on her future marital plans. She adamantly insisted that she did not want to marry a Navajo man because she perceived them as generally unstable and undependable when it came to earning money and raising a family. In her words, "Marrying into your tribe is like falling back down or a step down instead of going up. That's what I think . . . It seems like things would never change for you in life. Marry an Anglo, that would be a really neat change, I think."<sup>32</sup> She subsequently did.

While these views may not be representative of all Navajo women's attitudes, many appear to be somewhat discontented with how Navajo males act. This feeling is difficult to quantify, but many years of working with Navajo women have provided a strong impression that they feel the men just do not shoulder responsibilities on the home front with the same fervor that women do. Recently, a woman commented on the above quote by saying, "We [Navajo women] were there all the time with our mothers, getting lectured about our responsibilities. The boys had too much freedom and were off herding sheep or doing other things . . . We were always lectured about having a place for our children and that if we were stupid, dumb, and lazy, we would have to live off other people, which is not the right way. I want to find a man who cares and thinks about tomorrow. Many older women say the same thing."<sup>33</sup>

As intimated earlier, education has been accepted as the key to social and economic improvement. Career planning, which, as late as the 1960s, was not a factor for most, is now a major consideration for many. A study completed in 1974 stated, "Neither the Navajo or the Papago are accustomed to thinking in terms of 'careers' or jobs. Most work is viewed as a temporary activity for the purpose of raising money quickly. There are few jobs on the reservation; many of these are temporary or seasonal."<sup>34</sup> At least in Utah, this statement is only partly true.

Today, more than ever, young Navajo women are taking the education and training offered on or near the reservation and using it to lay a foundation for careers. Many Utah Navajo attend the College of Eastern Utah (CEU)—San Juan campus for their first

two years of higher education. Statistical averages from the fall quarters of 1992 and 1993 indicate that 76 percent (303) of the Navajo student body (399) were women.<sup>35</sup> Many of them later went away to school and received four-year degrees. As one Navajo graduate said,

I'm a real career person. I want to get ahead because I've seen too much tragedy right down here in a relationship between man and wife. I'm a survivor. I want to accomplish what I want. If I'm going to survive, it is going to be me that puts me through. I never had the attitude of relying on anybody . . . . I have a mind and it is up to me to develop it, to learn as much as I can; it is my responsibility. Just like anything else, you exercise your mind like you exercise your body . . . . So it is very important to me to learn to get ahead. Education helps you get in a lot of places and get good jobs and a good life. I don't like to be anybody's underdog. I like to voice my opinion and be a little important—at least be recognized—to say "I have an opinion and I want to be heard."<sup>36</sup>

Much of what this student said is substantiated through quantitative measurement. In the spring of 1991, 66 percent (66 females and 33 males) of the Navajo student population on the CEU-San Juan campus answered a fifty-seven-response questionnaire concerning lifestyle and work aspirations.<sup>37</sup> A brief summary of their replies shows how these progressives feel. For example, in three different categories, 92 percent of the Navajo women felt it was either very important or extremely important to advance to higher level positions in a job, to be paid well enough to live comfortably, and to work with and meet new people. Only 24 percent believed it important to live near relatives and 39 percent to stay home; 17 percent wanted to do the same thing most of the time, while 80 percent wanted to be creative and have work that required skill; 65 percent felt it very/extremely important to work with computers. When asked, "If by chance you had enough money to live comfortably without working, do you think that you would work anyway?" 100 percent said yes, compared with 66 percent of the Anglo females. Whether traditional or progressive, Navajo women have a strong work ethic that is still very much a part of their values.

Many of the old people are ambivalent toward the young, progressive Navajo who obtain skills and aggressively seek change. In one respect, the elders encourage this idea of receiving an

education in order to improve life on the reservation, but, on the other hand, they are sad to see the former lifestyle go, and they are unnerved by the departing respect for tradition and self-discipline. One woman, reflecting on the differences between past and present, said, "Nowadays, things are a lot different. The younger generation is too lazy because it did not have a severe struggle to survive. They [young people] have had too many conveniences. But in those days, the kids were well-disciplined and obeyed their parents and that was part of the Navajo way."<sup>38</sup> While part of this view may be attributed to the "good old days" syndrome, there is still a large measure of truth to it, since survival required a greater rigor and self-control than is necessary today.

The old ways also present barriers to achieving a career. Clyde Kluckhohn, a noted anthropologist among the Navajo during the mid-1900s, called some of these obstacles "leveling mechanisms."<sup>39</sup> Redistribution of wealth, confining social attitudes, and threat of witchcraft were all ways of keeping tribal members on a relatively equal economic and social plane. These practices still exist to hold people down in their aspirations. For example, one woman told of how, when she and all her sisters were in college, neighbors became jealous of the girls' accomplishments. Indications of witchcraft began to appear, including one incident involving a "skinwalker," and sorcerer's materials were discovered near her home. Her father had an increasingly hard time economically and socially; when he died of a heart attack while hunting, the family attributed his death to witchcraft.<sup>40</sup>

Another woman provided a less dramatic but equally instructive view:

Our family is known for its education. We are all known to have good schooling and to do well, so other Navajo people look at us and say we are not learning traditional ways and they get really jealous . . . . People in Blanding, especially the Navajo people, are kind of mean to our family; they don't want us to get ahead so they put lies and rumors on us. It really makes our family upset and frustrated. Sometimes I don't want to go home because of all that conflict down there. I don't want to face it.<sup>41</sup>

Thus, it is not easy for some people to accept education and its accompanying change.

Not all young Navajo women have the desire to become acculturated to Anglo ways. Many are not thinking of careers but are

content with being wives, with finding part-time or full-time employment in service industries both on or off the reservation, or with herding the family livestock. This group of women used to be the majority; given the increasing number and types of programs brought to the reservation, however, many have found change a more desirable quality.

For those who have not taken steps toward the Anglo world, a term has been coined that is often used by progressive Navajo people to describe those on the reservation who are caught between two worlds. The word *John* denotes either a male or female who speaks little English, is socially unskilled in an Anglo setting, remains on the reservation, and is more traditional than modern. While it usually carries a negative connotation, many Navajo people, both old and young, are not offended by its use but see it as an in-group name that describes a real, if not funny, situation. The best single definition of *John* was given by a woman who prided herself in her ability to communicate in Navajo with old people, who knew the traditions, and yet who could operate in an Anglo world to earn a living and obtain an education. She was not casting aspersions at traditions per se but only poking fun at those who have not yet learned to operate in the dominant society. She said,

*John* is used the same way you would use the word *hick*. It has that kind of a connotation to it. They are just reservation kids—Indians through and through. They have an accent, but it is not too bad. They wear old Levis, cowboy boots, have never been away from the reservation, and go to town once in a while, but that is all they do. They don't have any other views of what the world is like outside, or opinions of any type—just their own little world. Somebody that has never been anywhere. They don't do much for themselves; they just live on the reservation, herd sheep, and eat mutton stew. They have no desire to travel or get acquainted with the outside world. They just live from day to day . . . . A *John* is a zero, I guess.<sup>42</sup>

An important point in understanding the use of the term *John* is that it is highly situational, depending on how, when, and by whom it is used. For instance, if a friend, relative, or peer uses it, the person being referred to would not take offense but would view it more as a joke. If an Anglo uses the word and does not know the person, or if a Navajo uses it to denote self-superiority,

then it becomes offensive. In the latter case, the offended person might think, "Where did this person come from? He is just as John as I am. He probably came from worse conditions than I came from—he probably came from a hogan, too."<sup>43</sup>

It is interesting that older, traditional women are regarded with respect and deference for following the Navajo way, but when younger women stay home on the reservation and herd sheep, they are regarded by some as Johns. The importance of this paradox lies in the fact that education, material wealth, and values have entered into the Utah Navajo's views, creating an "in-house" pressure for group modification. In the past, change has been foisted on the Navajo by outside sources—the government, the BIA, and the state—all taking part in regulating affairs. Now, there are pressures for change from within as women—the core of economic and social control in traditional culture—shift their emphasis to accepting more and more of mainstream American culture.

Women returning from school are no longer satisfied with a one-room house for a family of six, with no plumbing, no central heating, and no telephone. One wonders if these women will even return to the reservation. In talking with many Navajo over an eighteen-year period, my general impression is that family ties are important enough to encourage these women to live either on the reservation or close enough to it that they can visit their relatives frequently. Jobs with schools, industry, oil companies, and government services are constantly offered to those qualified; it is for these jobs that an increasing number of Navajo are training.

Thus, the shift from "Dezba" to "John" is only a transitional stage, a part of the movement away from traditional society into a crucible of change. As desire increases for material wealth and social mobility, many of the old bonds that held the people to Navajo culture will loosen; in turn, the internal pressures to enter the mainstream of Anglo culture will grow. When this happens, there will be a dramatic shift, both quantitatively and qualitatively, toward a modernization of the roles of Navajo women in southeastern Utah.

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NOTES

1. Gladys A. Reichard, *Dezba: Woman of the Desert* (Glorieta, NM: Rio Grande Press, 1939), 28.

2. See Christine Conte, "Ladies, Livestock, Land and Lucre: Women's Networks and Social Status on the Western Navajo Reservation," *American Indian Quarterly* 6 (Spring/Summer 1982): 105-23; Mary Shepardson and Blodwen Hammond, "Change and Persistence in an Isolated Navajo Community," *American Anthropologist* 66 (Fall 1964): 1029-50; Laila Hamamsy, "The Role of Women in a Changing Navajo Society," *American Anthropologist* 1 (February 1957): 101-11; Kendall Blanchard, "Changing Sex Roles and Protestantism among the Navajo Women in Ramah," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 14 (March 1975): 43-50; and Mary Shepardson, "The Status of Navajo Women," *American Indian Quarterly* 6 (Spring/Summer 1982): 149-69.

3. See Dorothea C. Leighton, "As I Knew Them: Navajo Women in 1940," and Charlotte J. Frisbie, "Traditional Navajo Women: Ethnographic and Life History Portrayals," both in *American Indian Quarterly* 6 (Spring/Summer 1982): 11-51.

4. The statistical information for this article is taken from federal government censuses derived from research done at the beginning of each decade. Copies of these are available in most research libraries; the closest microfilm collection available for my use is at Brigham Young University. Thus, the following reels were consulted: Navajo Census-1931, microfilm #579,714, Genealogy Library, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah. The 1980 and 1990 census materials came directly from the state capitol. This information may be located under the following titles: Census of Population and Housing-1980, summary tape file 3A-Oljato and Red Mesa Divisions, San Juan County, on file in Office of State Planning Coordinator, State Capitol, Salt Lake City, Utah, pp. 1-10 and 229-40; Census-1990, file 1A, and 3A County Subdivisions located in the Demographic and Economic Analysis Section, State Capitol, Salt Lake City, Utah.

5. See Gary Witherspoon, *Navajo Kinship and Marriage* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975).

6. Solon T. Kimball and John H. Provinse, "Navajo Social Organization in Land Use Planning," *Applied Anthropology* 1 (July 1942): 21.

7. Younger Navajo woman, interview by author, 24 February 1984, tape recording in possession of author.

8. Larry Rodgers, *1990 Census-Population and Housing Characteristics of the Navajo Nation* (Scottsdale, AZ: The Printing Company, 1993), 42.

9. U.S. Senate, Public Law 90-306, United States Statutes at Large-1968, 82 (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1968), 121.

10. "Annual Report of the Utah Navajo Development Council-1978-83," on file at UNDC's main office, Blanding, Utah.

11. *Ibid.*, 10.

12. Kitty At'iinni, interview by Fern Charley and Dean Sundberg, 13 July 1977, OH 1224 Utah State Historical Society and California State University, Fullerton-Oral History Program-Southeastern Utah Project, 8.

13. Ann Metcalf, "From Schoolgirl to Mother: The Effects of Education on Navajo Women," *Social Problems* 23 (June 1976): 535.

14. *Ibid.*, 543.

15. Alexander Leighton and Dorothea Leighton, *The Navajo Door* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1945), 46.
16. Kent D. Tibbits, "A Study of Parental Factors Affecting Success or Failure of Navajo Indian Students" (M.A. thesis, University of Utah, 1969), 25.
17. Rodgers, 1990 *Census*, 48.
18. *Sinajini v. Board of Education* case materials on file at the DNA Office, Mexican Hat, Utah.
19. *Ibid.*, "Agreement of Parties," Civil Number C-74-346, 7.
20. *Ibid.*, 2.
21. Paul R. Platero, "Navajo Head Start Language Study," final report, first draft, 23 March 1992, Navajo Division of Education, Navajo Nation, Window Rock, Arizona, 1.
22. Nedra Todich'iinii, interview by Fern Charley and Dean Sundberg, 12 July 1977, OH 1223, Utah State Historical Society and California State University, Fullerton—Oral History Program—Southeastern Utah Project, 12.
23. Older Navajo woman, interview by author, 8 March 1984, tape recording in possession of author.
24. Younger Navajo woman, interview by author, 7 March 1984, tape recording in possession of author.
25. Irene Fisher, Shirley Weathers, and Ann Kagie, "Report to the Governor: Poverty in Utah—1983," State Community Services Office, Department of Community and Economic Development, State Office Building, Salt Lake City, January 1984, 10; Harold Lyman, Director of Job Service—Blanding, telephone conversation with author, 29 July 1992.
26. *Ibid.*, 97.
27. Harold Lyman, telephone conversation with author, 29 July 1992.
28. "Report on Minorities in Utah—San Juan County," Utah Department of Employment Security, August 1980, n.p., in possession of author.
29. David C. Williams, "Spending Patterns of Navajo Families," *New Mexico Business* 28 (March 1975): 4.
30. Young Navajo woman, interview by author, 24 February 1984, tape recording in possession of author.
31. Young Navajo woman, interview by author, 19 March 1984, tape recording in possession of author.
32. Young Navajo woman, interview by author, 12 March 1984, tape recording in possession of author.
33. Middle-aged Navajo woman, conversation with author, 30 March 1994, notes in possession of author.
34. Nancy Belding, Tamara Sparks, and Guy Miles, "Perspectives of Adjustment: Rural Navajo and Papago Youth," *Report for the Manpower Administration* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Labor, 1974), 22.
35. Information on file in the Registrar's Office, College of Eastern Utah—San Juan Campus, Blanding, Utah.
36. Younger Navajo woman, interview by author, 8 March 1984, tape recording in possession of author.
37. This survey was part of the doctoral research project of William L. Olderog, "Variations in Value Orientations and Work-Related Values: A Study of Navajo and Anglo-American College Students" (Ph.D. dissertation, Brigham Young University, 1991). The major focus of this study was to compare and contrast Navajo and Anglo values rather than explore gender differences.

Olderog, however, was gracious enough to provide for me the rich raw data with which to explore variations between Navajo males and females as well as Anglo males and females. What follows is a brief overview of what his survey indicates.

38. Older Navajo woman, interview by author, 6 March 1984, tape recording in possession of author.

39. See Clyde Kluckhohn, *Navajo Witchcraft* (Cambridge, MA: Beacon Press, 1944).

40. Young Navajo woman, conversation with author, 25 January 1985.

41. Young Navajo woman, interview by author, 16 February 1984, tape recording in possession of author.

42. Young Navajo woman, interview by author, 6 March 1984, tape recording in possession of author.

43. Middle-aged Navajo woman, conversation with author, 30 March 1994, notes in possession of author.