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KERES PUEBLO CONCEPTS OF DEITY

Anthony F. Purley

Until recently, it has been difficult to present a logically consecutive account of the Keres idea of a godhead. In varying degrees Keres worship of its deities has been rationalized as positivist or mystic by theologians and behavioral scientists as well as by other tribal Americans. It has never been certain whether Keres worship is positivist-pagan overly involved with the reality of existence or mystically pagan with uncommon concern with the supernatural.

Upon closer examination of the Keres Indian origin stories, the concept of a Supreme Being as well as a godhead appears throughout the accounts of creation.

... In the beginning Tse che nako, Thought Woman, finished everything, thoughts, and the names of all things. She finished also all the languages. And then our mothers, Uretsete and Naotsete said they would make names and they would make thoughts. Thus they said. Thus they did ...¹

... A long time ago at Shipopu in the north place, underneath there, our Great Mother, Tse che nako, worked miracles. Everything that has been named developed, the sun and the moon, and the stars, and shi wana, and spirits, and Ka'-tsina, and the Cha-yah-ni, and game, and the people were completed, then our mothers said, "How is it," said Naotsete, "Is it not yet done? Shall we not put out our children?" Then Uretsete spoke thus, "No," said he. "First I shall divide water and land." Then spoke our mother, "Go ahead," said she. "Let me try to see," said our father. Then to the mountain top went out our father. Then there above out he below looked around. Then he divided water and land. He shook it. There it was shaking. Then he looked at it. Then said he, "Earth and water have become good," thus he said. Then again he said, "Only they must be ripe." Then the earth he turned inwards toward himself. Then he turned water and sky. Then again there was a light breeze. Then said our father, "Let me look at the earth and at the sky," said he. He was sitting on top of a cloud. Then he said, "Enough," said he. "Now it is good," said he. Then he made writing on something like a stone. There below it was rounded on one side, on the lower side

was square. Then there in the middle he wrote down numbers, seven numbers. As far as six he wrote them down ...²

The Supreme Being

Several concepts regarding Keres Indian deities emerge from the above quotations. The first concept is that Keres Indian religious belief recognizes the existence of one Great Spirit or Supreme Being. The second concept, which may startle many people, is that the Supreme Deity of the Keres Indian people is referred to in the feminine gender. The third concept that emerges is the recognition of the existence of numerous lesser deities in the total scheme of creation. A fourth concept is implied by its conspicuous absence from the story. It is that man is not given absolute dominion over the fish of the sea, the fowl of the air, over the cattle, over all earth, nor over every living thing that moves upon this earth.

The first concept, of the existence of one Supreme Being, Tse che nako, does not differ from the monotheistic concept of Christianity. This similarity of one Supreme Being could be a starting point to bring about a consensus on the position of deity were it not for the insistence of Christianity on defining and restricting the role of its deity and the attempt on the part of the Keres Indian people not to restrict or define the role of the Great Spirit.

An examination of Christian theology reveals a belief in a kind of union of individual personalities into one entity which, in turn, is encompassed in one individual called God or the Father. This insistence by Christianity on individuals encompassed in one individual is difficult for many Keres people to comprehend in the light of Christianity's own scripture according to St. John:

St. John 1:1 & 2—In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God.

St. John 1:14—And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us . . .

Keres Indian thought accepts the monotheistic concept of the Supreme Being as a creator of all beings. The Supreme Spirit is responsible for all of creation, the entire universe as well as that of earth and its inhabitants.

The above quoted scripture of St. John could fit nicely into the Keres concept of its own deity concerning the creation, that is,

that more than one individual was involved in the creation of earth and its creatures, and that those individuals are deities in their own right. St. John confirms the Keres concept of the godhead for earth and its inhabitants, that the godhead is composed of more than one distinct individual.

The quarrel is not with St. John's scripture, but with the interpretation or implied idea that earth and its inhabitants were created by one God, and that God is restricted to have made nothing without the help of his son. At least, according to St. John 1:3: "All things were made by him, and without him was not anything made that was made."

Keres Pueblo Indian concepts, when examined in depth, indicate that since earth and its inhabitants are only a part of the total plan for the universe, it is within the realm of Tse che nako to assist others, such as the Word, in the creation of earth. Of course, it is within Keres thought that the entire plan of earth's creation was conceived by Tse che nako and carried out with the assistance of lesser deities. This idea of Tse che nako's involvement with earth's creation is consistent with Keres Indian belief, especially the idea that she conceived the whole plan of earth's creation. The idea is also consistent with the belief that Tse che nako could have created the whole earth just by her thought. This belief, while entirely possible, has the lesser merit, in that Tse che nako had given to her sisters Uretsete and Naotsete the responsibility of creating the earth and preparing it for habitation by human beings and all other creatures. While Naotsete and Uretsete were responsible for earth's creation, Tse che nako can still be credited as the creator, because she thought of the plan, which again, is consistent with the Keres concept of the godhead.

Tse che nako is all-comprehensive and in no need to be worshipped, therefore she does not demand worship for herself to satisfy "Her Own." "Her Own" includes all life possibilities within herself. That she does not demand self-worship does not in any way mean that she is not worshipped by the Keres people, for indeed she is. Tse che nako is not restricted in her power. The Keres belief is unlike Christianity, which restricts its Supreme God by implying that nothing was made without the Word. That is to say or imply the idea that nothing could be made

without the Word. Keres belief would accept this premise, provided that the Word was present to assist and otherwise carry out God's plan; however, that God, if he had so chosen, could have created the whole earth scheme without being restricted by the Word. If the Word's presence was necessary, then this too, is also acceptable. The Word is accepted as Christianity's deity and he is given all due respect and consideration because he is a sacred being in the thoughts of another group of human beings. Acceptance of the existence and sacredness of deities other than their own can be very well accommodated within the Keres theological scheme.

Tse che nako is Female

Christianity's deity is apparently restricted to being male. Nowhere in its accepted writings or revelations are there stated any remote possibilities that Christianity's Supreme Being might be female, although there may be some references that the church has been called "she." (No effort was made to document this reference.)

The second concept that emerged from an examination of Keres origin stories was the reference to Tse che nako in the feminine gender. The Keres people believe that Tse che nako has more female than male attributes; therefore she is referred to and approached as if she is female.

This belief in Tse che nako being female is wholly within the Keres Indian theological structure. Tse che nako is the all-fertile being, able to produce human beings and all other creatures: "She is the mother of us all, after Her, mother earth follows, in fertility, in holding, and taking again us back to her breast. . . ."

The function of the female, even in the non-Keres Indian society, is that of reproduction and "that in sacredness."⁴ Tse che nako in all "her fullness," has created mankind in her fertility as well as earth's bounty in earth's own fertility.

Tse che nako is not limited to a female role in the total theology of the Keres people. Since she is the Supreme Spirit, she is both Mother and Father to all people and to all creatures. She can function in whichever role she chooses and very often does throughout Keres accounts of their theological principles. She is the only creator of thought, and thought precedes creation. Creation, in this

sense, includes all creation, including individual thought—which is lesser than original thought, which only Tse che nako has the power to create. In this regard, much of Christianity tends to restrict (or assumes that) creation is limited to its deity. An assumption that creation can only be accomplished by one Supreme Being does not wholly agree with Keres thought. Keres Indian thought maintains that Tse che nako created human beings not only for procreation but to create as well. She did not restrict the process of creation only to herself. Tse che nako included the power to create individual thought in all human beings and all creatures. In other words, all living things can create, although it is a matter of degree.

The Keres belief regarding creation as a whole is almost all-inclusive. It implies that living organisms can create thoughts as well as things which assist them to cope with those situations necessary for their existence. While these creations may certainly be on lesser planes, Keres thought presumes that mankind is developing abilities that heretofore have been restricted to the Christian deity. However, the dynamic, all-comprehensive nature of Thought Woman cannot be equaled by lesser deities or mankind, regardless of the progress in their development.

Some confusion is sometimes created concerning Tse che nako and Old Spider Woman, especially in secular discussions. Keres holy men hesitate to mention Tse che nako's name, especially for purely secular discussions; Thought Woman's name is reserved for use only in sacred ceremonies. In secular discussions and teachings, Tse che nako is often symbolically referred to as Old Spider Woman or Spider Woman. As to the reason for the change, it is believed that only the holy men have the answer.

The Godhead

The third concept that emerged from the study of the origin narrative supports a kind of union of three distinct individuals that constitute the head of a structure of deities. Tse che nako is the main character in this union, with Uretsete and Naotsete in supporting roles. Uretsete and Naotsete are sisters of Tse che nako, whom she created by thought to assist her in the earth's creation, and to care for the people and other creatures

she has created and to whom she had already given names.

The origin story quoted previously is a later version of the original creation story and is presently used more often by Keres theologians than the original. In the later version some accommodation was made to the Christian Fathers and their constituents, in that Uretsete is referred to in the male gender. So as not to cause confusion, we will follow the later version in our references here.

Uretsete and Naotsete, with the exception of the power to create original thought, are attributed with the same powers as Tse che nako. Some accounts of the Keres Indian creation story will differ from one Keres Pueblo to another, regarding Uretsete and Naotsete; however, the position and the powers attributed by the Keres concept to their godhead remain constant.

Included in the third concept from the Keres creation story is one group of lesser deities, such as Shi wana, Kat'-tsina, Kupistia or the Spirits, and the earthly priesthood called Cha ya ni. There are a number of other supernatural characters in the whole Keres worship scheme; however, for the purpose of this discussion, noting the number of deities will suffice. The importance of the lesser deities lies in the fact that Keres theology incorporates within the total Keres theological plan the assumption of many lesser deities that have specific functions. In other words, the Keres religion includes many deities within the total life-plan, each deity being subservient to Tse che nako while at the same time coeternal with her. In addition, there are three distinct individuals in the Keres godhead, which truly makes them a trinity rather than one individual.

Mankind Lacks All Dominion

The fourth concept that emerged from the creation story, although implied, is one of the most influential of the basic concepts of the Keres Indian religion. Nowhere in Keres theology is there any mention that man has absolute dominion over the fish of the sea, over the fowl of the air, over the cattle, over all earth, or over every living thing that moves upon this earth. Rather, the instruction is to coexist equally with all creation, which includes all living things as well as the earth and its contents. Ceremonial officials con-

stantly remind all people that all creation is related in one form or another. For example, the earth is our mother, the bear is our brother, and the mountain is our refuge.

... Then Uretsete, said, "It is good," said He, "Let them go now. From now on everyday will be good. You Naotsete, with your power, you Mother Naotsete, you also will help them this way everyday that our children will be happy. With 'our own,' this the earth will always be ripe for all to share, with your power. Everything will be good also with my power, everything, everyday, what we have made," said Uretsete. "It is good," both said. . . .

... "It is well" said She, Naotsete. "Now everything is becoming good. Our children, the people and the game very good are placed in where the sun shines forever. (The earth) they with our power will share, they will together walk nicely everyday . . ."³

The above quote from the Keres origin story suggests very clearly that Uretsete and Naotsete as well as Tse che nako are the only beings that have dominion over the earth and all its inhabitants. Uretsete and Naotsete are specifically charged with the welfare of the earth and all its inhabitants, which includes their assistance as well as the sharing of their powers with mankind and all living things. Coexistence between the deities, mankind, and all other living things is spelled out. Within that coexistence all living things have a function. For instance, animals know that at times they must sustain mankind with the strength of their bodies. But only the body is taken and never "the life" of animalkind.

"The life" of animalkind is coeternal and seeks to return to the "place of origin," unless it is asked to remain on earth; in this way "the life" can be taken. This is hardly ever done, however. In the same way, mankind sustains animalkind by providing food, sometimes shelter, and always song and prayer for animalkind's welfare.

This fourth concept includes the goodness of the earth and everything that was created upon the earth. Little mention is made of evil as it contends with good. The implication in the Keres concept is that evil, while it is a separate, recognized force, is not so strong that it must be blamed for mankind's wrong-doing. Mankind is responsible for its own behavior.

Mankind, then, lacks dominion over the earth and its creatures. Only Uretsete and Naotsete have been charged with dominion over the earth and its creatures. Even they do not have the final jurisdiction; only Tse che nako has that final jurisdiction.

NOTES

1. Literal translation from the Keres Indian language of a portion of the Thought Woman story.
2. Literal translation from Keres Indian of a portion of the origin story.
3. From a Keres Indian Ceremonial Prayer.
4. From a Keres Indian Corn Grinding Song.
5. Literal translation from portions of the Keres Indian origin story.