

Sacred Movement:
Dance as Prayer in the Pueblo Cultures of the American Southwest

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I initially became interested in this topic, because I wanted to prove the superior expressive capabilities of dance. I hypothesized that if religion could be considered one of the most valued aspects of life, then only the highest quality method of communication would be appropriate as its language. As a Puebloan, I have always known that dance ceremonies are some of the most important forms of religious expression in Native American cultures. Thus, indigenous peoples must see some special, potent expressive capability in dance, and I wanted to distill and identify these qualities. However, in analyzing the sacred elements of Native American dance in the course of writing this thesis, I came to realize that it was this very analysis that often confuses conceptions of Native American religion. Puebloan religion is a way of life rather than an abstract practice. It is literal, holistic, and implicit in all actions. Before outsiders became interested in it, there were no explanations of the symbolism of floral designs, spatial patterns, and dance steps. Instead, each participant learned the meaning and resonance of their actions in these ceremonies through personal experience. In traditional Native American culture, no action is thought of as separate from a constant worship of the earth and its Creator. Many people do not have the opportunity to experience these dances, so how could I articulate through words to Western minds the subtleties in Puebloan religion without reinforcing the belief that Puebloan religion can be captured and expressed in its details? Hence, I came to understand that there was an inherent contradiction in my project. I decided that celebrating the beauty of these dances was more important than avoiding the pitfall of explaining them.

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Native American tribes have inhabited North America for millennia. In this time, they have developed finely tuned techniques for living sustainably off of the land, advanced democratic forms of government, and a highly functional economy. Today, nineteen tribes of Native peoples sharing a common ancestor live in the southwestern United States: Acoma, Cochiti, Isleta, Jemez, Laguna, Nambe, Picuris, Pojoaque, San Felipe, San Ildefonso, San Juan, Sandia, Santa Ana, Santa Clara, Santo Domingo, Taos, Tesuque, Zia, and Zuni.¹ Due to their common heritage, the religious practices of the Pueblos are relatively the same.²

Native ceremonies embody and convey important messages to both participants and observers in the community.³ Dance is the chosen mechanism of religious expression because of its potent expressive capabilities. This paper will explore Puebloan religious rituals in order to identify the elements that make dance such a powerful tool for sacred action and communication. However, only by synthesizing these elements into a ceremonial experience can one truly grasp the essence of Puebloan religion; the individual components alone are not enough. Understanding the sacral details of dance rituals allows Western minds to appreciate the power of Puebloan religion, but the parts are ultimately only sacred when brought together as a whole.

Many Pueblo dances have been characterized as ritual dramas by Charlotte J. Frisbie, a respected scholar of Native American issues. She offers the following

¹ These nineteen Pueblos can be categorized based on language. Taos, Picuris, Sandia, and Isleta speak Tiwa; San Juan, Santa Clara, San Ildefonso, Nambe, Tesuque, and Pojoaque are Tewa speaking; Towa is spoken only in Jemez and Zuni in the pueblo of Zuni; while Acoma, Cochiti, Laguna, San Felipe, Santa Ana, Santo Domingo, and Zia compose the Keresan pueblos.

² Joe S. Sando, *Pueblo Nations: Eight Centuries of Pueblo Indian History* (Santa Fe, N.M.: Clear Light, 1992), 21, 5, 7-8.

³ Jill D. Sweet, "Tewa Village Rituals," in *The Living Dance: An Anthology of Essays on Movement and Culture*, ed. Judith Chazin-Bennahum (Dubuque, I.A.: Kendall/Hunt Publishing, 2003), 7.

definition: “Ritual drama, in dealing with life itself, is a process which serves to unite humans with other humans, as well as humans with other-than-humans, the revealed with the unrevealed worlds, the visible with the invisible.”⁴ Thus, ritual dramas are a mechanism through which people engage with the spiritual and metaphysical aspects of life. This definition appropriately characterizes how most researchers view Puebloan ceremonials and presents a foundation from which to explore the multifaceted existence of Puebloan dance.

A typical Pueblo dance ceremony begins close to dawn. The costumed dancers gather in the kiva, the main ceremonial space of the village, to adjust and add the final touches to their costumes.⁵ When not impersonating animals or specific deities, the dancers are usually dressed in the following fashion: the women wear some variation of black, or sometimes white, wool *mantas*, which are rectangular shaped, sleeveless dresses fastened over one shoulder and reaching just below the knees. Depending on the season, they may wear colorful button-up shirts or dresses trimmed in lace under their *mantas*. Woven belts cinch their waistlines, and wooden headdresses ornamented with feathers ride their heads.⁶ These *tablitas* are painted with geometric patterns in bold colors of yellow, blue, black, and red. With mixtures of clay and water, the women will sometimes paint red circles on their cheeks and cover their hands in white. Lastly, each woman decorates herself with bracelets, necklaces, and rings of silver, turquoise, and red coral.⁷

⁴ Charlotte J. Frisbie, ed., *Southwestern Indian Ritual Drama* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1980), 3.

⁵ Many of these details are derived from the personal experience of the author acquired over years of participating in certain dances. Hereafter, observations from personal participation are not footnoted.

⁶ Sweet, “Tewa Village Rituals,” 11.

⁷ Paul Tioux, interview by Sarracina Littlebird, Santa Fe, N.M., 27 August 2008.

Male dancers wear white kilts held up by woven belts with long white fringe at the end. They frequently wear strings of bells or shells around their waists and across their chests⁸ and arm cuffs with sprigs of evergreens tied to their biceps. Knee-high moccasins cover their feet, and necklaces, rings, and bracelets of shell, turquoise, and silver adorn other parts of their bodies. If shirtless, the men, like the women, paint their bodies with white clay and paint designs of red clay on their faces. The men will often have feathers in their hair that bounce and float as they dance.

The singers, traditionally all male, wear white denim or cotton pants paired with brightly patterned, flowing button-up shirts anchored around the waist by shining turquoise belts. Their long hair is tied back with wool yarn in an oblong bun at the nape of the neck or plaited in two pigtailed draped over their shoulders. White clay covers their hands, and moccasins adorn their feet.

Once dressed, the dancers and singers complete a first round of dancing within the kiva before moving to the plaza, the central open space of the Pueblo.⁹ The music and steps are simple and rhythmic.¹⁰ Emphasizing the downbeat, the understated movements manifest as musically-accented walks. The active foot steps down and then bounces up with the rhythm as the weight is shuffled onto the other foot.¹¹ As the arms of the dancers mirror the movement of the feet, they are held at ninety degrees to the torso so that the evergreen branches and the rattles, which only men carry, articulate the rhythm in

⁸ Sweet, "Tewa Village Rituals," 12.

⁹ Tioux, interview.

¹⁰ Jill D. Sweet, *Dances of the Tewa Pueblo Indians: Expressions of New Life* (Santa Fe, N.M.: School of American Research Press, 2004), 1.

¹¹ Valentina Litvinoff, "Lessons from the Dancing Ground to the Studio: Implications of the Pueblo Indian Dance for Modern Dance," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 32, no. 3 (1974): 398.

positions of offering in front of the body.¹² The dancers form lines that travel circularly around the plaza, like a snake enclosing the singers and drummers in the center. Also moving with the rhythm of the songs, the singers and drummers cut simpler spatial patterns across the plaza.¹³

The pervasive feeling is one of concentration, reverence, and introspection. The most impressive aspects of the dance are derived from its rhythm and repetition, because the steps and spatial patterns are uncomplicated. Lines of dancers continuously circle the plaza with the repetition of song verses until the circuit of the song has been completed. Then, the dancers and singers move, following the leaders of their lines, to their next positions to commence a new song different only in spatial facings or words, distinctions almost too subtle for an outside eye to perceive.

This pattern is repeated until a set of songs is finished. Upon completion, the dancers and singers return to the kiva to rest until it is time for the whole sequence to be repeated again. Midday, the dancers and singers pause to eat. Then, finally, toward dusk, when the prescribed number of circuits and songs is completed, the dancers and singers return to the kiva to dance a final time there. This act finishes the ceremony.¹⁴ The length of the experience and the repetitious rhythmic quality create the spiritual transformation of the dance participants.¹⁵

¹² Sweet, "Tewa Village Rituals," 9.

¹³ Tioux, interview.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Jill D. Sweet, "The Beauty, Humor, and Power of Tewa Pueblo Dance," in *Native American Dance: Ceremonies and Social Traditions*, ed. Charlotte Heth (Washington, D.C.: National Museum of the American Indian, Smithsonian Institution, with Starwood Publishers, 1992), 98.

Dances are scheduled based on natural seasonal, solar, and lunar progressions, because the ceremonies are prayers to nature and are inspired by the events of nature.¹⁶ Thus, dances in the late winter and early spring have agricultural significance, and the dances in winter are about hunting.¹⁷ In this way, the ceremonies, and hence prayers, focus on the most important form of subsistence at any particular moment in the life of the Pueblo. Dances performed on the equinoxes and solstices often reflect the changes and inversions in the seasons by having certain participants enact roles of reversal.¹⁸ For example, on solstices, certain men will dress in women's apparel to reflect the confusion in the seasonal status.

In this way, each element of the dance has multiple layers of meaning,¹⁹ which all connect to the ultimate purpose of these dances – the renewal of life.²⁰ Thus, the symbols are all phenomena or images connected to fertility, agricultural success, hunting, or favorable weather. The fringe on the white sash of the men represents rain, which is a limiting factor for life in the desert.²¹ Evergreen branches are symbols of life. If the men wear tortoiseshell knee rattles, these embody fertility.²² The designs on the belts, jewelry, and *tablitas* of the dancers represent rainbows, squash blossoms, sun, corn, and other items directly connected to rain and agricultural prosperity.²³ Vibrant colors in the

¹⁶ Don L. Roberts, "A Calendar of Eastern Pueblo Indian Ritual Dramas," in *Southwestern Indian Ritual Drama*, ed. Charlotte J. Frisbie (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1980), 109.

¹⁷ Sweet, "The Beauty, Humor, and Power," 84.

¹⁸ Sweet, "Tewa Village Rituals," 20.

¹⁹ Jill D. Sweet, "Tewa Ceremonial Performances: The Effects of Tourism on an Ancient Pueblo Indian Dance and Music Tradition," (Ph. D. thesis, University of New Mexico, 1981), 197.

²⁰ Sweet, "Tewa Village Rituals," 12.

²¹ Litvinoff, 398.

²² Sweet, "Tewa Village Rituals," 15.

²³ Sweet, "The Beauty, Humor, and Power," 86.

costumes mirror those of the landscape.²⁴ These same symbols are reinforced in the words of the songs.²⁵

The spatial patterns of the dance also have meaning. Reverence for the center, acknowledgment of the four directions, and circles are essential elements in any Puebloan ceremony.²⁶ The center is sacred for two reasons: it is both the place from which everything else is derived and is the place where everything is brought together, the ultimate gathering place.²⁷ Due to its sacred quality, the center can be located in multiple physical places, because it is transcendently symbolic. Thus, each Pueblo considers itself to be the center of the world, yet the sacred places located in various mountains or lakes around the Pueblo are also thought of as centers of the world. To acknowledge the importance of the center, Pueblo dances are performed in the kiva or in the plaza of a Pueblo – the two village centers.²⁸

Originating from the center, the four directions are always acknowledged: east, south, west, and north. In addition to marked gestures in each cardinal direction, a specific color, animal, or mountain represents these four orientations.²⁹ The four directions also represent the four seasons and were additionally important for navigation and astronomy-based calendars before modern technology. They serve to ground the individual in a consciousness of the wider world. Circle imagery echoes this awareness of the larger universe. The circle represents many things including the whole of creation, the interconnectedness of life, the continuum of time, and the harmony of nature. Hence,

²⁴ *Dancing Threads*, prod. Anndrena Belcher and Vince Spoelker, dir. Vince Spoelker, 1 hr. 48 min., The Kentucky Network, 1994, videocassette.

²⁵ Sweet, "Tewa Ceremonial Performances," 197.

²⁶ Spatial awareness is particularly significant for the Tewa Pueblos, because they still inhabit their ancestral lands (Sweet, "Tewa Village Rituals," 18).

²⁷ Tioux, interview.

²⁸ Sweet, "Tewa Village Rituals," 18.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 16-17.

many of the spatial patterns cut out on the plaza or kiva ground are circular. The patterns on the costumes and the shape of the drum also reinforce the importance of the circle through imagery.³⁰

The attention to detail in each aspect of the dance illustrates the holistic literalness of Pueblo religion.³¹ All the actions and traditions of Puebloans are completed with a keen awareness of how they relate to the world around them; actions are never performed thoughtlessly but always as acknowledgments to the interconnectedness of life. Through the thought that goes into the details of these dances, Puebloans honor the cycle of life, the nourishment that sustains them, the gods that govern their world, and their responsibility as participants in the community. The meaning in each aspect of the ceremony necessitates active engagement with the world. Through these ceremonies, Puebloans are both representing and *enacting* the purpose of the ceremonies: to remain in harmony with nature in order to support prosperous life.³² These dances are both active prayers to the Creator for the health of the community and examples of how life is lived on the Pueblo.³³

Many small details of the dance further illuminate this literalness of the Pueblo ceremony. Everything is alive, has a spirit, and shares a place in the harmony of nature.³⁴ Living Pueblo members, perhaps some curious outsiders, and dead Pueblo residents along with other supernatural beings compose the audience.³⁵ Every material obtained for the purpose of the ceremony is believed to have a spirit of its own. These materials

³⁰ Tioux, interview.

³¹ Sweet, "Tewa Village Rituals," 15.

³² Roberts, 103.

³³ Sweet, "Tewa Village Rituals," 12.

³⁴ Larry Littlebird, interviewed by Sarracina Littlebird, Santo Domingo, N.M., 14 August 2008.

³⁵ Barbara Tedlock, "Songs of the Zuni Kachina Society: Composition, Rehearsal, and Performance," in *Southwestern Indian Ritual Drama*, ed. Charlotte J. Frisbie (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1980), 31.

are asked permission for their use, and the energy of their spirits is thought to augment the power of the ceremony.³⁶ For example, the singers offer a handful of cornmeal to their drums as food to show respect and honor the spirits of the drums.³⁷ Dreams can determine dances and their scheduling and are the medium through which much communication with the ancestors and spirit-world occurs.³⁸ In this way, the dance is not a performance, but an actual act of life akin to tilling the soil, bearing a child, or having a conversation with an elder. The dance ceremony is not a symbolic representation of religion; it is life itself.

Further exemplifying the literalness of Puebloan religion, village residents emphasize the importance of participation in ceremonies. Participating in these rituals is often a way of asserting one's Puebloan identity.³⁹ Through the act of participating, reservation members learn about and honor their heritage in addition to recommitting themselves to being part of the Pueblo community.⁴⁰ One Tewa man's statement reflects this Puebloan notion of identity. He affirmed, "As long as the people continue to dance, they will remain Tewa. But if the dances are forgotten, the Tewa will cease to exist as a culturally distinct group."⁴¹ The ceremony is about the whole community, and everyone participates. If one is not dancing or singing, one is cooking, looking after the children,⁴² working in the fields, or being productive in some other sense.⁴³ There is no audience in the traditional sense of the word. Whoever is watching is participating in the communal

³⁶ Sando, 33.

³⁷ Sweet, "Tewa Village Rituals," 10.

³⁸ Tedlock, 11.

³⁹ Judith Lynne Hanna, "Ethnoesthetics of Contemporary Native American Dance," *CORD News* 6, no. 2 (1974): 55.

⁴⁰ Sweet, "Tewa Village Rituals," 7, 14.

⁴¹ Anonymous Tewa man quoted in Sweet, "The Beauty, Humor, and Power," 103.

⁴² Sweet, "Tewa Village Rituals," 7.

⁴³ Tedlock, 31.

prayer. There are no virtuosic steps or stars that allow individuals to stand out from the group. In this manner, the ritual shows that the needs of the individual are secondary to those of the whole community, because in working for the betterment of the whole, each individual is taken care of. This visible commitment to the Pueblo directly contributes to the aesthetics of the dance. If the participants engage with pure intentions, serious concentration, and perform the actions from the heart, the ceremonies are considered beautiful. Aesthetic value stems from the profound reverence emanating from the dancers and singers.⁴⁴

Due to the power inherent in these dance practices, indigenous peoples have used dance in religious ceremonies since the beginning of their existence.⁴⁵ Prehistoric evidence exists of early ceremonies, dances, and musical instruments.⁴⁶ These sacred practices are deeply rooted in the Pueblos' histories, but they are not static traditions. In order to reflect the dynamism of their culture and the fact that they can be both citizens of their Pueblos and citizens of the world, Puebloans have always allowed the outside world to influence their dances.⁴⁷ Native peoples will adapt their ceremonies with changing cultural needs. An example is Taos Pueblo's Scalp Dance. This particular ritual was used in instances of battle against settlers and other tribes and was considered to be very important for success in fighting and the continued health of the Pueblo. Except for a brief revival during the Second World War, this dance dropped out of the repertoire of

⁴⁴ Sweet, "Tewa Village Rituals," 14.

⁴⁵ Hanna, 55.

⁴⁶ Charlotte Heth, "American Indian Dance: A Celebration of Survival and Adaptation," in *Native American Dance: Ceremonies and Social Traditions*, ed. Charlotte Heth. (Washington, D.C.: National Museum of the American Indian, Smithsonian Institution, with Starwood Publishers, 1992), 7.

⁴⁷ Tedlock, 34.

Taos Pueblo with the end of its warring activities.⁴⁸ The use of the Scalp Dance during World War II indicates the seriousness of the Pueblo's commitment to the country's – what Native Americans consider as the larger community's – wellbeing during the war. Initially, the United States government was concerned about the indigenous peoples' role in the war, particularly because most Indians held questionable U.S. citizenships status at the time. Additionally, German propaganda promised to return their stolen lands if Native Americans fought for Germany. Even in the face of pervasive and appalling discrimination against Indians, the Native population proved to be more involved in the war than the Anglo population. They had an impressive one hundred percent registration rate under the Selective Service Act. Then, immediately after the U.S. declared war, many Natives enlisted, and numerous tribes held special war councils. In addition, the involvement of the Navajo code talkers proved invaluable when they provided a language indecipherable to enemy eavesdroppers.⁴⁹ Through these actions, Native Americans showed their clear commitment to the wellbeing of the nation. Hence, it is no surprise that Native Americans performed war-related dances and ceremonies during this time.

However, when war was not an issue, war dances were adapted for peacetime functions. The Navajo Squaw Dance presents a poignant example. In the times of numerous inter-tribal wars pre-twentieth century, this dance was part of a larger, three-day long ceremony called the Enemy Way. The dance is now used as a healing ceremony, with the sickness being given the role of the “enemy.” The dance reflects a Navajo myth of two women being liberated in a battle and dancing around the warriors who saved them. In the second morning of the ceremony, the patient undergoes a mock

⁴⁸ Brown, 36.

⁴⁹ Jeré Franco, “Bringing Them In Alive: Selective Service and Native Americans,” *The Journal of Ethnic Studies* 18, no. 3 (1990): 1, 16, 18.

attack. The assailants, blackened with charcoal, ambush from the north or west carrying staffs crowned with evergreen branches. The use of charcoal alludes to the days when scalping was a common practice, because the Navajos believed that once blackened, the spirit of the scalped victim could not recognize them. As a healing ceremony, the black color symbolizes mourning and sickness, and the ritual serves to drive away all enemy ghosts.⁵⁰ In this way, traditional practices are adapted to be relevant in contemporary times.

In addition to these internally motivated changes, Puebloans have allowed contact with other groups of people to influence their dance canons. Inter-tribal interaction has produced many hybrid forms of Pueblo dances explaining why many of the dances seen on the New Mexican reservations today appear and sound very similar.⁵¹ Tribes will even explicitly borrow dances from one another.⁵² Whenever Native Americans incorporate ceremonial details from other tribes, they preserve an awareness of which aspects are theirs and which are borrowed in an effort to maintain the integrity of their original cultural beliefs.⁵³ These borrowed dances may either be used to poke fun at another tribe or to fill a need in the community.⁵⁴ When constructing their snake clans, many Keresan Pueblos adopted practices from the snake cults in Mexico and Central America.⁵⁵ As subdivisions within tribes, clans served a fraternal function within and between Pueblos. By allowing other tribes' dances to inform their own, the Pueblos used dance as a sort of common language between Native peoples.

⁵⁰ Reginald Laubin and Gladys Laubin, *Indian Dances of North America: Their Importance to Indian Life* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1977), 423-424.

⁵¹ Donald N. Brown, "The Development of Taos Dance," *Ethnomusicology* 5, no. 1 (1961), 33.

⁵² Roberts, 108.

⁵³ Sweet, "Tewa Ceremonial Performances," viii.

⁵⁴ Laubin, 423.

⁵⁵ F. W. Hodge, "Pueblo Snake Ceremonials," *American Anthropologist* 9, no. 4 (1896), 134.

Native American dances have also changed as a result of non-Indian influences. Strong efforts to stop the practice of Pueblo dances have emerged at various junctures over the course of history. Initially, the Spanish conquest of the Southwest from the mid-sixteenth to mid-nineteenth centuries brought Catholicism into the Pueblos. Spanish Catholicism had no tolerance for the polytheistic and pagan practices of the Pueblos, so many of the traditional dances were banned or altered in ways that could construe them as being Catholic in nature.⁵⁶ For instance, early Spanish settlers feared the masked Kachina⁵⁷ dances practiced by the Pueblos,⁵⁸ since in these dances, the Indian dancers impersonate spirits and gods wearing costumes and masks identified with the different characters.⁵⁹ Because Puebloans believed that different deities possessed them during these ceremonies, Spanish Catholic missionaries accused them of idolatry and forbade these practices.⁶⁰ As a result, the dances moved underground and were practiced out of sight of the Spaniards.⁶¹

The ritual elements that could not explicitly be removed from the lives of Puebloans were adapted to suit Catholic attitudes. The Spanish missionaries and Puebloan converts erected churches in prominent positions on each plaza,⁶² and dance orientations were changed so that the church was acknowledged in these rituals.⁶³ In addition, much of the Pueblo ritual calendar now corresponds to Catholic holidays.⁶⁴ Important winter dances are scheduled around Christmas so that the ceremonials can

⁵⁶ Brown, 33, 35.

⁵⁷ Kachinas are supernatural liaisons between the earthly and godly worlds.

⁵⁸ Sweet, *Dances of the Tewa Pueblo Indians*, 8.

⁵⁹ Tioux, interview.

⁶⁰ Sweet, "Tewa Ceremonial Performances," 69.

⁶¹ Brown, 35.

⁶² Tioux, interview.

⁶³ Brown, 35.

⁶⁴ Roberts, 109.

serve the dual purposes of maintaining traditional practices and of honoring the Christ child. For example, during the winter Deer Dance of Taos Pueblo, every door in the village is opened both to welcome the deer, and thus a valuable source of sustenance, and to reflect the travels of the three wise men bringing gifts to the Christ child. Another notable example of the Spanish-Catholic influence in Puebloan dances is the Taos Matachina Dance. This dance is performed around Christmas as well and has costumes and music evocative of Spanish culture through elements such as miter-like headdresses and guitars.⁶⁵

Today, Catholicism is widely embraced by Puebloan people. This religious affiliation is not considered to replace or be in opposition to Pueblo religion, because they are seen as two fundamentally different practices: Puebloans can be both Catholic and true to their heritage.⁶⁶ Joe Sando, a Jemez Pueblo Indian and historian, illuminates this seeming paradox:

Pueblo religion does not proselytize. It is not written, but it is enshrined in the heart of the individual. Although most Pueblo people have been nominally Roman Catholic for more than three hundred years, the native religion is the basis of their system of belief.... Each of the two religions is a distinct socio-ceremonial system; each contains patterns or ways of worshipping not present in the other.⁶⁷

Because Puebloan religion is a philosophy of life that permeates everyday actions and Catholicism is a practice separate from routine activity, both practices can be simultaneously incorporated into Pueblo life. Puebloans easily embraced God into their

⁶⁵ Brown, 35.

⁶⁶ Roberts, 109.

⁶⁷ Sando, 32.

profound worship of the natural world as another manifestation of their Creator. For example, under Spanish colonial rule, Puebloans built churches on their plazas while continuing to practice their traditional dances underground. Today, ceremonies acknowledging both God and the traditional sacred beings are maintained. Dances can start in front of the church honoring Christ and still be considered very much a part of Puebloan culture.⁶⁸

The second substantial historical movement affecting Pueblo ceremonies arose with the presence of Anglo-American missionaries and the establishment of the Indian Bureau in the United States government. Anglo interaction with the Pueblo cultures began in the mid-nineteenth century.⁶⁹ As contact between Anglos and Indians increased, the United States government targeted the traditional Pueblo rituals. With support from many of the missionaries living on and teaching in the Pueblos, the government attacked the dances on the grounds that they were “immoral, pagan, repugnant, or simply a hindrance to the civilizing process.”⁷⁰ Led by the U.S. Commissioner of Indian Affairs, Charles H. Burke, this program to eradicate the Puebloan dances gained momentum in the 1920s targeting the “indecent” and “barbarism” of Pueblo rituals. Representatives of the white world took issue with “dances that involved ‘immoral relations between the sexes’ and ‘any disorderly or plainly excessive performance that promotes superstitious cruelty, licentiousness, idleness, danger to health, and shiftless indifference to family welfare.’”⁷¹ The Anglo world did not understand that these ritual practices promoted the

⁶⁸ Brown, 35.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 33-35.

⁷⁰ Sweet, *Dances of the Tewa Pueblo Indians*, 2.

⁷¹ Circular 1665, quoted in Margaret D. Jacobs, “Making Savages of Us All: White Women, Pueblo Indians, and the Controversy over Indian Dances in the 1920s,” *Frontiers: A Journal of Woman Studies* 17, no. 3 (1996): 179.

very aspects of life that they were being accused of destroying.⁷² The songs and dances embodied Puebloan mores. The subject matter always connected to the health of the community, its betterment and sustainability, and the common good. Any lewd or “indecent” behavior in these rituals taught Puebloans how to act through negative examples.⁷³

The Puebloan clowns were particularly shocking to these Anglo critics. Clowns showcase the Pueblos’ use of negative examples. Pueblo clowns are the moral regulators of any ceremony, and they enact morally suspect scenes to show the residents how they should *not* act and to embarrass anybody who has been acting inappropriately in the village.⁷⁴ As their names imply, their actions are humorous and entertaining in nature.⁷⁵ Dressed in black and white stripes, these men are the satirical overseers of many Pueblo dances. Wordlessly, they wander the plaza making sure that everyone is following protocol for the occasion. They collect donations of food, jewelry, or water from vendors to offer the dancers and the village as a whole. Often, they interrupt the action to engage in silly antics that comment on current events on the reservation, the moral code of the tribe, or any impropriety on the part of the tourist audience.⁷⁶

A particularly provocative example of a clown performance was documented in a description from a Hopi ceremony in the 1920s. Evelyn Bentley, who was a missionary living on the Hopi reservation around the turn of the twentieth century, chronicled the following scene:

⁷² Sweet, *Dances of the Tewa Pueblo Indians*, 3.

⁷³ Sweet, “Tewa Village Rituals,” 20.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 20.

⁷⁵ Sando, 25.

⁷⁶ Tioux, interview.

Two clowns dressed as women came into the court. Their skirts were very short, not over eleven inches long. The men clowns would go up to them and try to pull the skirts down a little. The clowns who stood behind the women would try to pull the skirts down in the back but while doing so the skirts would slip up in the front. Then the clowns who stood in front would stoop down and look up under the skirt as if looking at a woman's private organs. Then the other clowns would come around and have a look, then all would make believe that they were trying to pull the skirts down, then stoop and look under to see how much they could see. All this brought forth much laughter and many yells from the crowd.⁷⁷

This scene and other depictions of “promiscuity, adultery, and divorce”⁷⁸ were actually instances of the clowns mocking Anglo views of sexuality and their duplicity.⁷⁹ The rudeness and hypocrisy of the Anglo presence on the reservation was a common theme for clown skits. Another example comes from San Ildefonso, where a clown

made a specialty of tourists. With parasol and handbag, [he poked] his way around the Indians like a member of the Podunk Woman's Club, gathering material for a lecture on aborigines. He patted the babies, fingered the women's jewelry, asked embarrassingly intimate questions, and made explanatory remarks over his shoulder. “She says she does bathe her baby every day.... Yes, she wears underwear.”⁸⁰

⁷⁷ Jacobs, 178.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 185.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 193-194.

⁸⁰ Erna Fergusson quoted in Jacobs, 195.

These comic antics ultimately serve to show Puebloans what is considered right behavior on the reservation and to point out the insensitivity of many outsiders. Many foreigners come to the Pueblo ignorant of traditional mores and customs. Since the practices of the Puebloans are so unfamiliar to Western conceptions of life, many outsiders tend to treat the Pueblo as though it were a museum display and the residents as primitive objects to be studied rather than as fellow human beings. This mentality causes tourists to ask inappropriately probing questions or invade Puebloan's homes and private spaces to take pictures.

This intrusive behavior from foreigners in conjunction with these many anti-dance efforts have made Puebloans wary of outsiders participating in or seeing their most sacred practices. Hence, the Pueblos generally restrict access to these dances.⁸¹ On most Pueblos now, photography and other types of recording are not allowed.⁸² Puebloans will not speak about the details of many of their ceremonies with outsiders, and only members of the tribe will be allowed into the kiva.⁸³ There are certain Pueblos with multiple kivas, such as Zuni, whose specific kiva ceremonies are withheld even from members of other kiva societies despite being members of the same Pueblo.⁸⁴ These clear boundaries of secrecy result from the many efforts to eradicate Puebloan rituals.

Some changes brought about by outside influences are subtler. Once Anglos became preoccupied with assimilating Pueblo residents into the U.S. society, Puebloans were incorporated into the economic structure of mainstream America. Many Native Americans left their subsistence lifestyles for jobs in order to make money. This

⁸¹ Brown, 35.

⁸² Tioux, interview.

⁸³ Sweet, *Dances of the Tewa Pueblo Indians*, 9.

⁸⁴ Tedlock, 11.

transition often pulled Puebloans away from their villages. Consequently, Native Americans had less time to prepare for and participate in ceremonies. Thus, many Puebloans were no longer able to make their ceremonial apparel or props. An historical example of this is the construction of the Santa Fe Railroad, which employed many Puebloans. The time period of the expansion of the railroad coincides with the replacements of many costume elements by store-bought decorations. Now, few families are able to make all of their own costumes, drums, jewelry, and props for their ceremonies. Rather, these objects are purchased from stores or specialist artisans.⁸⁵

Increasing tourist interest in Pueblo life has enhanced such changes. Initially, many Pueblos embraced tourists, first as curious outsiders and then as a source of income. However, once realizing the potentially invasive presence of these outsiders, some Pueblos took steps to limit tourist activity inside the Pueblo.⁸⁶ Tourist curiosity has also established a divide between dance rituals performed for ceremonial practices and dances performed for the public. The influx of interested researchers and tourists has served to create a new dance style on the Pueblos: show dance. This secular genre of Pueblo dance is directed at a tourist audience and performed for purposes of entertainment and economic gain.⁸⁷ The dance steps and costuming have been embellished in order to cater to the desires of the audience.⁸⁸ In addition, many Plains tribe elements have been incorporated to gratify the stereotypical conception of an Indian as promoted by Hollywood.⁸⁹ Puebloans frequently schedule these performances during

⁸⁵ Sando, 10.

⁸⁶ Sweet, "Tewa Ceremonial Performances," 81.

⁸⁷ Brown, 35, 38.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 35, 38.

⁸⁹ Sweet, "Tewa Ceremonial Performances," 79.

the summer tourist season and have vendors selling cultural foods, crafts, and jewelry.⁹⁰ Furthermore, many Pueblos have established dancing and singing groups that travel to perform at venues geared toward showcasing Native American practices. This has the side effect of increasing contact with other Indian dancers and blurring the distinctions among the show dances of individual tribes. Tied to the waning of the old religion, newer dances have lost many sacred elements.⁹¹ The changes in dances are not all driven by tourism, of course, but this particular industry has been a formative influence in shaping what is viewed as Native American identity.

The distinctions between secularized, commercial show dance and religious dance illuminate some of the details that make dance rituals sacred. The circumstances of location, structure of the song and dance, the role of the audience, and an awareness of the audience are all elements that have changed with increased outsider interest. The root motivation for changes in many aspects of the experience comes from the fact that there is an audience watching the dance as a performance. The show dance audience wants to see a performance rather than to participate in the dance as a prayer. Native Americans perform commercial dances for money, so the expectations of the audience are especially important. Thus, the purpose of the dance becomes attracting and pleasing an audience, a major difference between religious and show dance. The economic basis of this type of Pueblo dance influences the number of singers and dancers involved. Since prices are often paid per performance rather than per performer, financial reasons limit the number of participants in a dance.⁹²

⁹⁰ Tioux, interview.

⁹¹ Brown, 35, 38.

⁹² Jill D. Sweet, "Ritual and Theatre in Tewa Ceremonial Performances," *Ethnomusicology* 27, no. 2 (1983): 258.

Location is another element that changes in the transformation from religious to show dance. The location speaks to issues of access and the connection or lack thereof to a sacred place. Pueblos hold traditional dances, which are public prayers in which everyone can share, openly in the plaza; if the dances are particularly sacred, the participants hold them in the kiva so that access can be strictly regulated. Both of these locations are meaningful for Puebloans. Commercial ceremonials, on the other hand, are frequently performed off of the Pueblo, thereby accommodating a selected audience.⁹³

Awareness of the performance aspect of the dance prompts changes in the song and dance structure as well. The beginning and ending of many Pueblo rituals are unpredictable due to the nature of “Indian time,” since Native Americans view time circularly rather than linearly. On the other hand, commercial dances are performed at set times in order to accommodate the schedules of the audience.⁹⁴ In addition, the attention span of an outsider audience rarely endures the length and repetition of an entire Pueblo ceremony. Thus, the songs and dances are cut to a few key verses. Puebloans edit the songs and dances to exhibit a variety of sounds and steps in order to maintain the interest of the audience. Many Pueblos have even developed a method for editing down the songs in the proper manner so that their meaning is maintained.⁹⁵

At the same time, the visual experience becomes flashier and more exciting. Costumes change from their understated, practical symbolism to brighter, more heavily ornamented attire. Dancers emphasize steps so that the rhythm infects the audience. Most dramatically, attention paid to individuals eclipses the importance of community. Commercial ceremonial promoters encourage competition among dancers in order to

⁹³ Ibid., 253.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 260.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 258.

heighten the showcase aspects of the dancing. In addition to increasingly elaborate costumes, dancers often perform individually and will incorporate tricks with shawls, hoops, or staffs into their dances in order to draw attention. Thus, virtuosity and the desire to be noticed displace the conservative unity of traditional dances.⁹⁶

Because dance is being presented for an audience, the performance becomes determined by the audience rather than the audience deferring to the requirements and structure of the dance. In a traditional ritual, Puebloans instruct outsiders where to sit, when to eat, and how to behave; however, in a commercial ceremonial, the dance becomes subservient to the audience. Performers must suspend their movement for the applause of the audience, make concessions to allow sound and video recording, and provide explanations of their dances for the audience.⁹⁷

All of these distinctions serve to transform Pueblo dance into a performance and thus essentially divorce it from its purpose. Instead of being a prayer or a collection of “right” actions, the dance becomes a show of Pueblo religion. In requiring explanations of these practices, the tourist audience makes the Puebloans further abstract the symbols of the dance from their power through rationalization.⁹⁸ Where before, participants *felt* and generated reverence for the natural world in their dance steps around the plaza, the details and symbolism now have to be explicitly explained. Consequently, Puebloans have started approaching their sacred practices from these explanations that they have created for Western minds rather than organically through experience.

Thus, rationalization may be the key element emptying show dances of their religious significance. The other changes required of transforming a religious dance into

⁹⁶ Ibid., 257.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 259-260.

⁹⁸ Sweet, “Tewa Ceremonial Performances,” ix.

a show dance have methods of accommodation to protect the integrity of the spirit of the dance. Dances performed off the Pueblo are created and then finished in the Pueblo's kiva so that its culmination is ultimately sacred.⁹⁹ Funds earned through performances are most frequently used to support the family and community.¹⁰⁰ The song and dance are edited through particular formulae to protect the meaning, and Puebloans only export elements from their religious practices to the show dances, never the other way around.¹⁰¹ Yet, the process of rationalizing and then explicitly articulating the meanings behind these dances is antithetical to the Puebloan way of life. On the Pueblo, one learns through experience and rarely receives overt explanations. Religious space and action are not separate from day-to-day life. The value of each moment is found in one's own experience of the action rather than in the words offered by another person.¹⁰² Thus, the Puebloan's experience of a ceremony is beyond the capacity of any academic paper to describe. The physical experience and the spiritual intuition of repeated participation are infinitely more profound than explanations of the symbolism can capture.

The element that enables dance to be a sacred form is inherent in what is required of the whole experience rather than in the individual details. Dances require the entire community to observe and share in an extended period of reverence and celebration. The ceremony brings the Pueblo together emphasizing the importance of community. Dance and music are the means by which the Creator's gifts can be acknowledged and continued

⁹⁹ Sweet, "Ritual and Theatre," 253, 258.

¹⁰⁰ Performing these dances and songs for money may even be considered a more honorable manner of accruing income, because greed and materialism are thought to be evil traits introduced by the Anglo world. Before assimilation into the United States, tribes had a working economy. Later, however, the reservations became increasingly dependent on the U.S. government for their livelihoods (Jacobs, 193). Thus, earning money through performing these dances is in a way calling for and receiving the means of subsistence through adapted traditional means. The Pueblos could work toward the preservation of their heritage through their dances and develop new means of earning an income.

¹⁰¹ Sweet, "Tewa Ceremonial Performances," 195.

¹⁰² Littlebird, interview.

prosperity appropriately solicited. Solidifying the core values of the Pueblo in a manner of supreme beauty, the dance is a celebration that reflects and hence pays homage to the harmony of nature. The dance ceremony is not an abstracted religious act full of symbolism but rather an event as essential and substantive as grinding corn.

This fact speaks to the Puebloan way of religion. Puebloans do not have a word for “religion,” because sacred acts and worship are not things that can be separated from everyday life.¹⁰³ “Religion” is inherent in every action. Sando offers the following explanation: “The knowledge of a spiritual life is part of the person twenty-four hours a day, every day of the year.... The tradition of religious belief permeates every aspect of the people’s life; it determines man’s relation with the natural world and with his fellow man. Its basic concern is continuity of a harmonious relationship with the world in which man lives.”¹⁰⁴ Thus, determining what elements in Native American dance allow sacred expression is inherently complex, because Puebloan religion is not something that can be separated from a way of life. The differentiation of religious and non-religious elements in Pueblo dance is an advent of outsider interest in and research of Pueblo life. Yet the project of describing these dances in a form understandable to Western minds is crucial in gaining genuine, widespread appreciation for and celebration of these Pueblo cultures.

In order for Puebloan cultures to survive in contemporary society, the unique historical perspectives and experiences of beauty that they have to offer must be presented to and appreciated by mainstream American society. The integrity of these traditions cannot be sustained if Native American culture is celebrated in disingenuous forms, such as through outsider-determined conceptions of what it means to be Indian.

¹⁰³ Sando, 2.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 30.

Puebloans must practice their traditions with personal, organic motivation and not because of externally dictated explanations of culture. Indigenous societies possess invaluable information with regard to methods of living sustainably in harmony with the land, robust structures of justice, and vibrant cultural traditions that are all highlighted through dance practices. Non-Native societies can profit from this historical knowledge, but only if Indian culture is presented on its own terms. The wealth of cultural experience that Native Americans have to offer will be lost if tribes emphasize only the elements that sell as being particularly “Indian.” Pueblo dances should be supported and celebrated by outsiders, but not be required to cater Western constructs, because they provide such powerful and vivid insight into the wisdom that Pueblos have to offer. In this way, society as a whole can benefit from the holistic and total relationship that Pueblo people have with the environment, and participation in Pueblo dance ceremonies offers a powerful doorway into this experience.

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