



**SOUTHWESTERN
INTERLUDES
PAPERS IN HONOR**

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David M. Brugge

WHEN WERE THE NAVAJOS?

The stimulation for this essay is the fact that so often when people learn I claim to know something about the Navajos, they ask, "When did they **arrive**?"—in New Mexico, in Arizona, in the Southwest; or simply, "When did they arrive?" There is seldom any concern about where they came from, what caused them to leave a former home, what route they took, how they traveled or their adaptations in their new home.

The question may seem a simple one, but it deals with a very complicated subject and I do not think we can yet give anything resembling a definitive answer although we have long known that they speak an Apachean or Southern Athabaskan language derived from the Northern Athabaskan languages of western Canada and Alaska.¹

There are two primary questions that need to be answered before anything approaching a "time of arrival" can be addressed. These are, "Who are the Navajos?" and "Where can they be considered Navajo?"

Navajos today, of course, know who they are, a people who call themselves *Diné'e* as opposed to the *Ndée* of the other Apachean speakers and the Dene of the northerners, who plant crops, raise livestock, weave woolen textiles, make jewelry of silver and turquoise, hold rodeos, play basketball, follow their own religious traditions as well as participate in several introduced religions, attend schools and colleges, and work at many occupations from politics to cake decoration to architec-

ture to auto mechanics to medicine to drafting and on and on in an unbroken sequence from traditional to modern, but as we try to penetrate the mists of time the view dims and the focus blurs.

The Navajos today constitute a nation, a corporate political entity made up of more than an hundred communities of people belonging to over sixty clans. They are located in parts of New Mexico, Arizona and Utah within arbitrary reservation boundaries and scattered beyond these boundaries in all directions.

The term nation derives from Latin *natio* meaning birth or race and is related to the term native (Mish 1993). It thus implies a genetic relationship among its members, but as used in English today it designates a sovereign polity, often with a diverse population, one properly called a nation-state. It is usually characterized by a distinctive material culture and a dominant language with variant cultures and languages receiving greater or lesser recognition, tolerance or oppression. Nations and nation-states have formal political structure, full-time specialists in leadership positions and rigid rules for membership.

In the seventeenth century, and until recently, the Navajos were viewed as a tribe, in some cases as a part of an Apache nation (in the older sense of this term) made up of a great number of tribes.² They seem to have been differentiated from the other Apaches as a result of their practice of agriculture. There was little, if any, unity in the nation and the

tribes were basically sovereign entities united internally by culture, language or dialect and social structure. They lacked the strong, formal centralization that characterizes modern nations and nation-states.

Early Spanish language documents distinguish at least three population groupings: the *tribu* or tribe, the *parcialidad* or band and the *familia* or clan.³ Tribes are intermediate in complexity between nations and bands, but bands may be subdivisions of a tribe or more or less independent entities. The degree of formal organization with tribes varies considerably. Bands, on the other hand, are quite informal, often flexible in organization, and may have very fuzzy boundaries with fluid membership. The Spanish colonists wrote of units they knew personally and all too often did not specify the sociopolitical status of named groups.⁴

Clans are descent groups with membership assigned matrilineally, from mother to child. Nonrelatives may gain clan affiliation by adoption or other special circumstances.⁵ Among the Apacheans, clans are found today only among the Navajos and Western Apaches.

This description relates to Apachean sociopolitical structure during the historic period insofar as we can discern it from writings of the past and observations of present-day practice. Going further into the past we must rely on oral tradition, archeology and inference. Comparison of the various tribes may reveal stages in the process of change or adaptations to differing economies and environments. It is probable that both factors have had an influence on usages in the Southwest and on the High Plains.

Anthropologically, bands of prehistoric peoples are often described as having been rather small, not over fifty people according to some archaeologists who never saw them, but only their traces in

the soil. Ethnographers have often applied the term to larger groups.

The inconsistency of the use of the term band becomes apparent when one looks at the structure of the historic Apachean tribes, where "band" is used for major divisions numbering in the hundreds of people and sometimes perhaps in the low thousands, three or four bands making up the entire Chiricahua Tribe, only two for the Jicarillas and possibly two for the Mescaleros. The larger Western Apache and Navajo tribes had several such units. What students of the Western Apaches call "groups" appear to be comparable to bands in the more easterly tribes and Western Apache "bands" seem to equate with small units such as "local groups" among the Chiricahuas and communities among the modern Navajos. There are five "groups" among the Western Apaches, each composed of two to seven "bands" or "semibands" which seem to fall somewhere between the Chiricahua local groups and Navajo communities. Tradition and some hints in the historic record suggest that the Navajos themselves recognized twelve units that might correspond to the bands of the Chiricahuas or the "groups" of the Western Apaches (Gifford 1940; Goodwin 1942; Opler 1941; Sonnichsen 1958; Tiller 1983).⁶

This is a necessarily overly simplified description of the levels of organization or identity as it has been viewed in historic times, not taking into account all the details of varying terminology adopted by observers writing in English, but it will suffice to provide such understanding as seems essential to project into the past the trends that created the historic tribes.

The earliest reports of Apaches west of the High Plains are those of the Espejo expedition of 1582-83. Called Querechos or Corechos, they were found near Acoma and Awatovi. They raised some crops, but were also hunters of large and small game and tanners of buckskin. Trade, alliances

and warfare with neighboring Puebloans suggest that they were well established over a wide area and represented several bands or tribes (Hammond and Rey 1966).

No further mention of these westerly Apaches appears until 1599 when Don Juan de Oñate, founder of the Spanish colony in New Mexico, decreed that the elderly captives taken with the defeat of Acoma be entrusted to the care of the Querechos. If this is not a mistaken rendering for "Queres," the Navajos of the Mount Taylor area must be those intended. Barely two weeks later, in a report to the viceroy, Oñate used the term Querechos as a synonym for the Vaqueros or Plains Apaches and "Apaches" in contrast for those in the Southwest. He relied entirely on hearsay regarding those peoples, writing that he had heard that they lived in rancherías, but had recently learned that they lived in pueblos, there being one such village with fifteen plazas about eighteen leagues from his capital (Hammond and Rey 1953:484). This alleged pueblo with its many plazas must have been the result of a badly mangled translation, probably from a pueblo language through an intermediate language to Spanish of a description of an Apache band with several rancherías. The rather densely settled region on the upper San Juan known as the Dinétah is the most likely location if the distance is equally in error.⁷

For the 1620s Benavides (1945; 1996) provides names for five Apache populations, uniting the Plains Apaches under the name Vaqueros, but mentioning for the Southwest the Perrillo Apaches, the Gila Apaches, the Navajo Apaches and the Apaches de Quinia, all names that appear ultimately to be place names.⁸ These might equate with Mescaleros or Faraones, Chiricahuas, Navajos and Ollero band of the Jicarillas. With the Jicarilla Llaneros among those lumped as

Vaqueros, the New Mexico pueblos were very nearly surrounded by Apacheans.

Benavides' observations regarding the political structure of the Navajos appear to be colored by his Europe-centered concepts of government, but do shed some light on the subject. He noted a cacique who was chief over the entire tribe, but dealt with a cousin of this leader, a "chieftain" or "primary captain" who may have headed a band and at the time met by Benavides' Tewa delegation was engaged in going about to the scattered rancherías to recruit warriors for a war against the settlers. There were also, on the basis of information from the Tewas, numerous lesser "captains." This would seem to indicate three levels of headmen in a hierarchical system, although the formality of this organization was doubtless considerably less than the priest imagined.

In the prehistoric Southwest the cultural sequence on the Colorado Plateau and the upper Rio Grande drainage began with hunter and gatherer peoples in late glacial times, first the Paleoindians who hunted large game animals followed by the Archaic folk who placed more emphasis on the use of plants and by about 1800 BC had begun some reliance on horticulture, growing little more than maize and squash. Increasing dependence on cultivated plants led to fully agricultural societies called in Navajo Anaasází. These peoples were ancestral, in part to the modern Pueblo tribes. These were much more sedentary societies who gathered in communities near lands best suited for growing crops, building compact villages of adobe and stone masonry.

The old archaic lifeways declined, but anomalous dates from rather simple archaeological sites suggest that at least a few people may well have continued primarily to hunt and gather, perhaps exchanging the products of the hinterlands for the more specialized products of the villagers. Whether these few formed distinct societies or

merely followed family traditions might be debated and local geographic and ecological factors may well have conditioned different solutions to this situation. It is entirely possible that in some areas divergent trends in populations large enough to support two ongoing traditions led to separations sufficiently great that where one people had once existed, two arose distinguished by diet, dress and ideology. Small populations seemingly left behind by those gathering in the villages would be going their own way on a different trajectory.

Granted that this is speculative and may not be sufficiently amenable to testing to qualify as a hypothesis today, it is yet so well within the realm of probability that it cannot be ignored. Our knowledge of the prehistoric past is growing steadily and the degree of detail that would enable us to verify or falsify what seems idle speculation may not be as long in coming as we might suppose.

Navajo traditions tell of small populations existing on the fringes of prehistoric Puebloan society, usually peoples who excelled in the hunt, whose ethnicity is vague, but thought of as in some manner ancestral to the Navajos of today. It is entirely possible that some such group, non-Athabaskan-speaking, was the nucleus that developed into the modern Navajo Nation. If this is so, Navajo "arrival" is a misnomer.

Here again, resort to Navajo tradition informs us of a change in language in the Navajo past. Two peoples joined, speaking differently. Two headmen are said to have, over an extended period, selected the "best" words from the two languages. Most of the words selected were from the introduced language and that is what present-day Navajo most resembles (Matthews 1994:143; Zolbrod 1984:301). The process, as described is not one that could succeed any more than has the Spanish Academy in regularizing the Spanish language, but the story satisfies a Navajo need to explain something that perhaps took place more subtly and naturally.

If this scenario is correct, could the original nucleus be said to be "Navajo," although clearly not "Apache de Navajo," or must it be thought of in some other way? In other words, when were the Navajos?

We have no certain way to date the arrival of Athabaskan languages in the Southwest. The Navajo explanation of the many ruins in their country is that these were the homes of the *Anaasázi* who were destroyed by storms sent by the deities. This destruction is sometimes conflated with the story of the monsters who were eating the people. A few people survived to join Navajo society. Those survivors might represent the hypothesized Archaic nucleus or remnants of the villagers, stragglers as more of their compatriots reached the surviving centers of Puebloan culture along the Rio Grande and westward through Acoma, Zuni and Hopi.

As the villagers withdrew from all of the San Juan drainage and ultimately much of the Little Colorado as well, a great deal of land lay unoccupied and open to settlement by 1300. While we lack well dated sites in the San Juan country during the fourteenth century, perhaps maize pollen in soils formed during this time indicates that the land was not completely vacant (Hall 1977: 1606).

Northern influences had been seeping into the Southwest for some time. Small side-notched triangular arrowheads had arrived well in advance of any likely Athabaskan immigration, the adaptive advantages of these simple projectile points having led to their spread throughout the west as the efficiency of the original Avonlea form was refined.⁹ By the thirteenth century, moccasins, porcupine quill decorations and fringed buckskin were known as far south as Utah and a much simplified form of snowshoe had appeared at Mesa Verde (Aikens 1970; Steward 1937). A long tradition of sandals as footwear among the Puebloans continued almost into historic times,¹⁰ but moccasins seem to have

been in general use by the time of contact according to descriptions from the first Spanish explorers. Kiva murals indicate the use of the double-curved sinew-back bow during Pueblo IV times, probably beginning in the 1400s (Baldwin 1997; Hammond and Rey 1966; Hibben 1975; McGregor 1965; Smith 1952).¹¹ We cannot plot the movement of people in relation to the diffusion of traits with any precision, but the northerners clearly came closer as the centuries progressed.

The Athabaskan expansion is thought to have been initiated by two massive volcanic eruptions in the Saint Elias Range in the Alaskan panhandle. It has been suggested that the first of these, about A.D. 500 was the impetus for the intrusion of Athabaskans into western Washington, Oregon and California, while the second, about A.D. 800, initiated the migrations that ended with the Apache advance (Ives 2003; Workman 1978).

In both the west coast and the Southwest-Plains migrations, the expansion of occupation resulted in differentiation into local bands and ultimately tribes. Adaptation to new environments was responsible for cultural changes that were associated with the economic base and material culture. While these developments inevitably also influenced aspects of nonmaterial culture such as religion and social structure, the processes were doubtless more evolutionary than revolutionary.

Another process could have a more pervasive cultural effect. This is the incorporation of peoples native to the new countries. This incorporation may or may not have been peaceful, a question that is not easy to handle for more reasons than can be considered here. In some instances, the process may have been reversed and the immigrants were absorbed into resident societies, while a simple merging of two peoples can be postulated as a third alternative.

One peculiarity of Navajo clan origin accounts is resolved if this process is correct, regardless of type of unifying that took place. The earliest clans that we encounter at and around the Place of Emergence are described in distinctly un-Athabaskan terms. They wore primitive clothing of untrimmed deer skins and woven juniper bark, along with sandals on their feet, had simple bows and reed arrows, seldom managed to kill big game but subsisted largely on rats, porcupines, ducks, fish, snakes and seeds. Corn appears incongruously; farming skills were limited. Pitched water baskets and pottery were introduced during this period (Matthews 1994; Zolbrod 1984).

Well along in the story the speakers of the new language appear. They are described as dressed in well made, tailored skin clothing and wearing moccasins and as being great hunters using sinew-backed bows. Although they are also said to be superior cultivators of the soil, it seems possible that a narrator got somewhat carried away in describing his ancestors' contributions.

This process of merging or incorporation should have had more far-reaching cultural consequences than mere environmental adaptation. Conflicting cultural values would have to be resolved and differing origin stories accommodated. Navajo oral tradition has, as noted above, at least two versions of the demise of an earlier population. It also includes two sets of clan origin accounts, one that emphasizes a migration from the Pacific coast, the other an emergence in the mountains of Colorado with a gathering of clans on the upper San Juan River. Various narrators combine the two in different ways, usually placing the stories validating most ceremonial procedures into a subsequent period. Incongruities exist in these sequences, just as they do in the Judeo-Christian sacred literature, but the very complexity of the narratives and the faith of most adherents of both traditions ensure

preservation in memory of events no longer fully comprehended.

There can be no doubt that Navajo society is a melting pot (Brugge 2003). Clan traditions and historical archives document the process in post-contact times, while the sacred stories from the distant past indicate that the process began at an even earlier date. We may not be able to distinguish just when incorporation of divergent populations began nor just who were those involved, but the reality of the process cannot be doubted, a tradition at times noble when refugees from disaster or oppression were accepted, yet less so when captives taken in war were integrated into their cap-

tors' society. The scenario presented indicates greater historicity than usually accorded Navajo tradition and suggests solutions to some of the more troubling passages.

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ENDNOTES

1. It has now been more than 150 years since this relationship was first recognized (Goddard 1996:294).
2. See the memorials by Fray Alonso de Benavides (1945, 1996) for an early description of the Apaches. Spain at this time had reached an even greater level of complexity, that of an empire based on the conquest of foreign territory. Spain claimed sovereignty over the lands occupied by the Apachean peoples, but exercised no effective control over them.
3. These usages are derived from Spanish writings in New Mexico. Local usage on the New Mexican frontier may not correspond precisely with usages in other parts of the Spanish empire.
4. The numbers of Apache tribal and band names that appear in published sources gives some idea of the magnitude of this problem. Navarro Garcia (1964) has 15, Moorehead (1968) includes 16, John (1975) notes 24, all names that I can recognize in the index of each book. Inclusive names (i.e., Apache, Querecho) were not counted. Many of the groups named met their demise during the Comanche advance down the High Plains long before any detailed descriptions were written.
5. Immigrant groups and captives, among the Navajos, sometimes founded new clans, but might also be admitted to older clans if a close relationship should develop. It also should be noted that a clan might split into two related clans. See Zolbrod (1984) for examples.
6. See, for example Correll (1979:139) where at the termination of the negotiations for the final treaty between the United States and the Navajo Tribe, Manuelito asked that two more members be added to the council of ten that the federal delegation had formed, making twelve who approved the treaty on behalf of the Navajos. A few more names appear after those who composed the council with no explanation of their status, but a twelve-member council clearly had significance for the Navajos.
7. For archaeological evidence of the dense settlement pattern of the Dinéyah, see Wilhusen et al. (2000) and Dykeman (2003). Note also that Oñate at this time also claimed that the Vaqueros lived in a pueblo (Hammond and Rey 1953:485).
8. Perrillo, "Little Dog," was the name of a spring. Gila, of unknown derivation, exists only as the name of a region and a river. Navajo is derived from a Tewa place name. Quinia appears to be Hispanicized from Navajo kin'í'áhi, "Standing House" or a similar term in a closely related language.

9. The papers in Schlesier (1994) together provide a good description of the spread of these projectile point forms.
10. Sandals have been found in archaeological contexts suggesting use by Navajos (Hester 1962).
11. Additional kiva mural items of probably Apachean influence include large body shields, "heart-line" in animal depictions, mountain lion-skin quivers, four-pointed star motif (Baldwin 1997) and hide rattles erroneously identified as gourd rattles in Dutton (1963).

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