

## ANTHROPOLOGICAL TRADITIONS VERSUS NAVAJO TRADITIONS IN EARLY NAVAJO HISTORY

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Many archaeologists and other scholars have accepted the idea that the Navajo and Apache (hereafter called the Apachean) migrated from the north into the southwestern United States around A.D. 1500 (for example, Wilcox 1981:213). This idea is based on linguistic studies and on the supposed lack of any earlier archaeological sites with material culture that archaeologists recognize as Apachean. To connect the archaeological and linguistic findings that undergird the conventional idea of early Apachean history, many scholars have assumed that a speech community, an endogamous community, and the users of distinctive material culture are all the same people in one neat self-contained package that is also stable for a long time. Today, many anthropologists are questioning this assumption (Bateman et al. 1990; Moore and Romney 1994; Welsh and Terrell 1994).

When one gets rid of this assumption, the conventional idea about early Apachean history falls apart. Furthermore, the findings that are the basis of the conventional idea are ambiguous. About the conventional linguistic—glottochronological—reconstruction of Apachean “origins,” we need only say that archaeologists have used glottochronological dates uncritically. Such dates, according to Young (1983:393), “are theoretical constructs

with a complex relation to actual prehistoric interruptions of communication; they are used by some comparative linguists to give rough estimates of linguistic prehistory.” The rest of this paper sketches some of the archaeological ambiguities and how they relate to Navajo tradition. We honor Dave Brugge for his insights.

### AMBIGUOUS ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVIDENCE

The archaeological record contains dwellings, pottery, and other material culture, such as those recorded among the Apachean in the last 500 years. Associated chronometric dates tend to be later than the 1500s. Until very recently, even meticulous archaeologists, such as those to be discussed here, tended to disregard pre-1500s dates from sites with material culture they recognized as Apachean.

For example, Dabney Ford (1979) excavated a site in the middle of Dinetah, which encompasses the upper San Juan and Chama River drainages of northwestern New Mexico where the Navajo settled densely by early Spanish colonial times. Appended is the following analysis of dates from three hogan wood samples by William J. Robinson of the

Laboratory of Tree-ring Research, University of Arizona:

The numbers [dates of 1190vv<sup>1</sup>, 1209+ +vv, and 1289vv] may shock you, but let me explain what I think is going on....none of the samples, including the one with the latest date, have any sapwood left. This means simply that the sapwood has been eroded and the death date of the tree is some years later than the latest date. How many years is hard, again, to prove. It is not unusual for a juniper to have 100 to 150 sapwood rings. Thus I am going to guess that the tree died about A.D. 1400. Since it was then over 500 years old [inside rings dated 0972fp, 0852+, and 1072fp], I further guess that the tree died a natural death and was later incorporated in the hogan. When I can't say.

The alternative explanations are that your site is actually as early as ca. 1400, which I don't believe, or that we are dealing with wood reused from an Anasazi context, which also seems a bit far-fetched.

Whatever the case, we have a real paradox.

Nearby was another anomaly, a deposit of

twenty-eight sherds, all from the same vessel,...in an active arroyo bottom 24 meters northeast of Hogan II [which Ford says elsewhere was probably a ramada rather than a true hogan like Hogan I, which produced the tree-ring samples]....They are identified as Rosa Smoothed, a local Basketmaker III-PI [A.D. 700-900] utility ware common in the Largo-Gobernador drainages....

Were it not for the fact that Rosa Gray and Dineta Utility (an early Navajo ware) are notoriously similar, nothing more would be said about the sherds. [Ford 1979:11]

But, because of this problem, Ford scrupulously compares several different attributes of the sherds with type descriptions for Rosa Smoothed and Dineta Utility. Still, the sherds are found where Navajo custom would direct occupants of "Hogan II" to return a broken pot to the earth, a coincidence that today would beg for thermoluminescence dating of the sherds themselves.

McKenna (1987) illustrates how archaeologists conventionally interpret sets of radiocarbon dates that seem anomalously early for Navajo sites. At the Sand Dune Site, Ganado, remains of a possible burned hogan (Feature 3) are part of a cluster of features. The cluster also includes a Precolumbian structure and ceramic types conventionally dated to the A.D. 900s and 1275-1300.

Radiocarbon dates...all concentrate in the Feature 3 complex....The dates initially appear to indicate an early historic component, but one that predates the known, historic occupation at the site. [McKenna 1987:8]

What McKenna considers the "known, historic component" is used by a Navajo leader (Ji#haalii) in the late 1700s—he is mentioned in several Navajo interviews with Brugge (1985). McKenna ignores the one interview that also seems to have identified the 1700s leader with individuals from earlier times, thereby hinting at the earlier "historic component" of the <sup>14</sup>C dates.

...these dates might ordinarily be rejected, but their consistency suggests they form populations worthy of interpretation. The distribution of these dates suggest that two populations exist....[McKenna 1987:8]

Statistically, the four samples fall into two separate clusters: one consisting of the 1700s

floor specimen and the other consisting of the other three specimens, whose averaged tree-ring calibrated dates span a 95 percent confidence interval of A.D. 1407–1563 (averaged uncalibrated radiocarbon date is A.D. 1522±32).

These dates are probably more informative of wood use than in pinpointing different occupations. The A.D. 1730 radiocarbon date [floor specimen] may represent the possible use of fresh cut wood in some construction element of Feature 3. The earlier dates, all coming from firepits or possible firepits, suggest the use of gathered, dead wood for fuel. The calibrated [radiocarbon] A.D. 1548 date from Feature 3B (posthole?) is somewhat ambiguous. The identification of this feature is not certain—it may be a firepit. Conversely, the use of dead wood in Navajo construction is not unheard of...and if this sample represents the use of dead wood in construction such wood might be expected to be sounder (younger?) than dead material routinely selected for fuel. Although several interpretations of the radiocarbon dates may be offered, all the samples appear related to the late eighteenth century Navajo occupation and cannot be categorically dismissed as “bad dates.” [McKenna 1987:8–9]

McKenna offers two choices: the 1400s–1500s dates are bad or they reflect use of wood 250–300 years old for both construction and fuel.

Interpreters of such dates from structural wood (e.g., Brown 1996:56) need to consider Navajo wood-use customs reported by Brugge and his colleagues way back in the Navajo Land Claims Research of the 1950s–1960s:

A span of dates over a number of years, in terms of Navajo culture, indicates either a long, continuous occupation or recurrent use

with repairs or rebuilding. Tree-ring dates from Navajo hogans or sites rarely cluster within a few years of one another... There are several possible interpretations applicable to tree-ring dates from a hogan or site which spread over a number of years:

a. Construction was about the time of the earliest date in the series, the later dates representing repairs.

b. Later dates represent the building date and the earlier dates represent timbers reused from a former hogan, or a rebuilding of the original structure. Reuse of poles inherited within a family sometimes accounts for spans of 100 years or more in dates.

c. If the dates are from different structures on the site, they may represent the addition of hogans to the already existing site [as daughters grow up, marry, and add their own hogans to the parental homesite]....

d. The latest dates from a series may represent a reoccupation of the site with repairs or rebuilding....

e. In a few instances, a date may be obtained which is a variant from the majority in the series. A variant date, usually substantially earlier than the others in the series, may or may not represent the use of a dead timber. Navajos occasionally utilized a sound standing dead timber, if live timber was not available, but this was not the common practice... Because of Navajo superstitions concerning the use of timbers struck by lightning or otherwise rendered taboo, they were reluctant to utilize “any wood that I don’t know anything about, that has been laying around.” [Navajo Nation circa 1963: 762–765]

Recent archaeological excavations at several sites in northwestern New Mexico with Navajo pottery have yielded dates as early as the 1300s. Brown (1996:56) believes these dates indicate use of the sites by A.D. 1500 but not necessarily earlier. These dates are the result of several techniques (thermoluminescence, radiocarbon, obsidian hydration) that do not perfectly corroborate each other. Archaeologists seem uncertain about what factors can skew the dates produced by each technique, so interpreting these dates is also uncertain (Towner 1996). The one certainty is that we need more sets of dates for various materials from sites of all types and systematic hypothesis-testing about why the dates differ. As archaeologists apply new dating methods (and refine interpreting these dates) to sites with distinctive Apachean material culture, and as every boom in oil, gas, and coal exploration brings more such sites to light, even earlier dates emerge (see examples in Towner 1996). Of special note is a campsite with dates from a hearth and a Dinetah Gray ware jar between 1200 and 1400 (Brown 1996:65).

The new discoveries (and reassessments of other dates such as those described here) also narrow the gap between the "earliest Navajo" pottery and the Navajo-like pottery on Gallina sites of the 1100s-1300s. The Gallina sites are near the new discoveries in an area densely settled by Navajo in Spanish colonial times. Cordell (1979:142) describes the Gallina sites:

There is general agreement that the Gallina phase developed out of the Pueblo I groups in the Gobernador [including the Rosa of 700-900]..., but a temporal gap separates the two. The Gallina phase has been characterized as one of relative isolation because of a lack of evidence of much trade or interaction with Mesa Verde or Chaco Canyon.

These sites consist of clusters of pithouses and small surface structures; a few sites have towers. The pointed-bottom pots of these sites "are not a characteristically Anasazi trait, and it has been suggested that they represent contact with Plains or Woodland groups." (Cordell also does not mention that archaeologists first attributed these sites to the Navajo because of their Navajo-like pottery [see Wilcox 1981:215]). Cordell (1979:143) continues that the pottery may indicate "a functional adaptation in increased cooking or storage efficiency encouraged by climatic deterioration," and "a link between the Gallina sites and the protohistoric and historic sites of Jemez, including modern Jemez Pueblo...on the basis of floor features and room configuration...is generally accepted."

Here, without explicit justification, a normally skeptical archaeologist ignores certain similarities to modern Navajo material culture in favor of other similarities to the material culture of a modern Puebloan group. (In a later work, Cordell [1984:357] mentions, without endorsing, a possible Apachean connection.) Since material culture supports a possible Apachean connection, as well as a Jemez one, why does Cordell ignore the Apachean possibility? Especially since the entanglements of Navajo and Jemez peoples make connection of both groups to Gallina worth studying. The Navajo were ancestors of more than half the late 1800s Jemez Pueblo people, according to Adolph Bandelier (cited in Van Valkenburgh 1941:80).

#### **"ABSENT" ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVIDENCE**

But, regardless of how one interprets the dates of these items and their relations to the Navajo and other Apachean, why assume that forebears of today's Navajo had pottery or house forms like more recent types? Why

assume that all Navajo forebears had the same type of house form and pottery? Pushing back the date of the earliest Navajo-like ceramics and house forms by a century or so does not establish that the people who made them had just "arrived." Opler (1983:381-382), Cordell (1984:358), and Brown (1996:64-69) find that recognizably Apachean archaeological remains (such as Navajo forked-stick hogans) may be adapted to local conditions and therefore may not be the earliest Apachean remains. Those are more likely to be the sparse and generic leavings of hunter-gatherers (as the Apacheans are assumed to have been when they "entered the Southwest").

If migrating people could be counted on to leave a trail with an unchanging type of house or pottery, and if the pattern of divergence among the Athabaskan languages also tracked the movements of people, archaeologists would have found the migration route somewhere in the archaeological record of the western United States. Absence of evidence may not be evidence of absence, but after almost half a century of looking for evidence of migration, they have not found anything they can agree on (Cordell 1984:358). One reason that archaeological remains do not mark out an obvious trail of migration may be that an entire community migrating into the territory of another (reflected by the "site unit intrusion")

is relatively rare ethnographically. More commonly, individuals and family groups follow separate migration paths, integrating themselves into ongoing communities where they have kinship or friendship ties.... Archaeologically, this form of migration would be visible primarily as a regional increase in population (Cordell 1984:333-334).

The conventional archaeological story about the Precolumbian Southwest also says that, before the Apachean<sup>5</sup>, the Apachean homeland on the Colorado Plateau was the home of the prehistoric "Anasazis." (Because of its various connotations, we avoid this name hereafter and substitute "Precolumbians" of specified time and place.) Archaeologists long thought that these Precolumbians abandoned most of the Colorado Plateau around A.D. 1300. Drought and erosion have been the most popular recent explanations. (Before archaeologists got hold of the glotto-chronological reconstruction of Athabaskan language fissioning and used it as a metaphor for migration, however, many proposed an Apachean invasion as the cause.)

Today, archaeologists suggest that Precolumbians from the central Colorado Plateau scattered to various other places, including southern Black Mesa and the Rio Grande Valley, where archaeological evidence suggests that population grew after A.D. 1300. The people already living in these places absorbed the central Colorado Plateau Precolumbians (as well as other people moving in from elsewhere) to become the various Indian (Pueblo) villages that the Spaniards encountered. Archaeologists today still believe that people around A.D. 1300 reduced their use of much of the Colorado Plateau. But they are abandoning their scholarly predecessors' notion of a wholesale Precolumbian abandonment. Some archaeologists now suggest that some people did stay in the central Colorado Plateau after A.D. 1300 (Cordell 1984:304-361). Most archaeologists still assume, however, that the only descendants of the "Anasazi" are the post-contact Pueblo Indians.

The highly organized systems of the Chacoan San Juan [and elsewhere]... seem not to have been able to maintain themselves

structurally or energetically. Initially, there is the *appearance* of population decline, but the situation may have been one of decentralization, reduced coordination of labor, and changes in village layout. Some trade networks, albeit fragmented, were maintained.

Abandonment of the central San Juan Basin [and elsewhere]...coincides with population increases in surrounding and upland regions. These movements coincide with a temporary shift from intensive agricultural production to more hunting and gathering and less-intensive agriculture. Within only a short period of time, however, much of the Southwest was once again incorporated within regionally organized systems. These systems were different from those of the A.D. 1100s and 1200s. [Cordell, 1984:325]

Large villages then appeared in "parts of the Southwest...formerly...thinly populated" (Cordell 1984:328). Cordell adds that families probably emigrated atomistically as described in the quotation above, so one cannot connect post-1300 aggregated sites of the Rio Grande or western Pueblos with communities in areas that were populous before 1300 (Cordell 1984:333-334).

Brugge (1989:1) suggests that Apachean<sup>c</sup> then moved into the depopulated central Colorado Plateau:

[The Apachean<sup>c</sup>] must have arrived in the regions abandoned by the Anasazi and their neighbors within a century of the [c. 1300] withdrawal of the prehistoric agriculturists or their occupation would have been prevented by others getting there first....

I do not mean to imply that one people cannot displace another, but I believe that

except in the face of catastrophic events such as ecological disasters, arrival of deadly pathogens or intrusion of technologically more complex societies, replacement is rare and ethnic continuity the norm.

## NAVAJO TRADITION

Regardless of when archaeologists and other scholars think that the ancestral Apachean<sup>c</sup> first appeared in the Southwest and where they originated, Navajo stories of ceremonial origins refer early and often to landscapes remote and accessible all over the Colorado Plateau at a time without domesticated animals and non-Indians, when the great ruins that antedate A.D. 1300 were still in use—in other words, Precolumbian times. Brugge (1992:33) describes these stories:

Taken literally, the sacred traditions would indicate that the Navajos' ancestors were living in close association with the Anasazi, that their homes and camps were intermingled with the settlements of the village dwellers, and that their wanderings took them throughout the country among the various Anasazi centers.

The most curious aspect of the distribution of places named in the sacred texts is that they seem to concentrate at the old Anasazi centers, Mesa Verde and Mancos Canyon, Canyon de Chelly, the Hopi Mesas, Aztec Ruins, and Chaco Canyon in particular....

There are various ways of regarding these texts....The most straightforward view is that they describe events in which the Navajo participated, thereby implying an early Navajo arrival in Pueblo country, perhaps as early as A.D. 1000....A less direct view is that these describe the history of

peoples whose ancestors were not Navajo, but who were incorporated into the Navajo Tribe. Two possibilities occur here. I have long favored the idea that the stories were carried to the Navajo by the Pueblo refugees who fled the Spaniards in the 1690s, if not by occasional fugitives who joined the tribe before this date....The other possibility is that the Archaic lifeway persisted throughout Anasazi times and that the stories were transmitted to the Navajo by remnants of this Archaic population, who were absorbed by the Navajo as they entered the region.

We agree with Brugge that the 1690s "Puebloan refugees" might be one source of these stories. But we also offer an additional possibility that Brugge does not mention. Instead of Brugge's "Archaic" people, we suggest Precolumbian hunter-cultivators dispersed in the small (presumably extended family) compounds that are the archaeological background for the pre-1300 "great house" ceremonial complexes. Then came the 1300s-early 1400s transition that Cordell describes—first social decentralization with a simplified way of life and the resulting much-reduced archaeological record, then later generations moving to new centers elsewhere. From the 1400s on, the depopulated areas supported a thin scatter of families whose simple life left archaeological traces easily dismissed as "bad dates" and "old wood"—in a nutshell, early Apachean sites. Some of these families may have been newcomers, others descendants of earlier residents.

We wonder if Apachean speakers before and after 1300 could have been traders who linked the Plains with the Pacific and Gulf of California, as Navajo ceremonial stories hint? In these stories, turquoise, obsidian, marine shell, and buffalo cross the central Colorado Plateau and beyond on routes that match

"traditional" (presumably Precolumbian) long-distance trade routes (Ford 1983:719). We suggest that Apachean might have been a *lingua franca* for such trade. Then, after 1300, this *lingua franca* became the language of the scattered bands that stayed in the depopulated parts of the central Colorado Plateau. (Apachean would have fragmented into Navajo and other variants as a result of Spanish intrusion.)

Most Navajo<sup>s</sup> we know today accept what their elders have said that Navajo forebears were in Navajoland far back in Precolumbian times. Many Navajo<sup>s</sup> today also acknowledge at least limited connections with "Anasazi" (Kelley and Francis 1994:29, for example). The Navajo stories that Brugge describes above tell about the origins of ceremonies and about Precolumbian life as witnessed by Navajo forebears. These stories were recorded between the 1880s and the present (most were recorded between the 1920s and early 1950s) in English and sometimes also in Navajo, and they represent at least 44 tellers, 66 narratives, and 21 ceremonial repertoires. The list is too long to include here; sources cited to support each statement are only examples. These stories tell that:

— The Navajo people (Diné) originated not far north of their present homeland in the central Colorado Plateau (Fishler 1953:87; Matthews 1897:219 n43). Diné and Kiis'aanii (village Indians) originated together (Stephen 1930:102). The criteria to distinguish Diné from Kiis'aanii are stories that emphasize house form, settlement pattern, and perhaps habitat, proficiency in farming, and hairstyle. The two groups traded and intermarried. Language differences are largely unmentioned (Goddard 1933:24, 133; Matthews 1897: 77-78). Diné and Kiis'aanii in these stories embody the symbiotic opposition between "hunters" and "farmers" reportedly basic in

origin stories widespread in the Western Hemisphere (Brotherston 1992:140).

— Events occurred when people still lived at dozens of Precolumbian archaeological sites. The Diné lived outside the large ceremonial centers and interacted with their inhabitants at Chaco Canyon, Mesa Verde, Canyon de Chelly, Tsegi Canyon, Black Mesa, centers south of the Little Colorado River, and elsewhere on the central Colorado Plateau that archaeologists have dated to the 800s–1200s (Fishler 1953; Goddard 1933; Haile 1978; Matthews 1897; O'Bryan 1956; Wheelwright 1958). Certain Diné ceremonies commemorate events at certain Precolumbian ceremonial centers (now archaeological sites) and incorporate certain things that Diné practitioners learned at these sites (Matthews 1897; O'Bryan 1956).

— The people of the central Colorado Plateau, both Diné and Kiis'aanii, were beset by powerful malevolent gods (some perhaps formerly venerated), by natural disasters, and by epidemics, which killed off most of the people (Haile 1981; Matthews 1897). Small groups (Tachii'nii clan forebears [Matthews 1897:145]), survived and stayed in the central Colorado Plateau, later to be joined by people from down the West Coast or Death Valley region. Small bands of isolated wanderers joined a growing network of other bands to form a social fabric of exogamous clans (Fishler 1953:89; Haile 1981; Klah 1942:107–108, 114–122; Matthews 1897:104–159).

— Still later, some Kiis'aanii from the edges of the central Colorado Plateau moved back among the growing population of the Plateau. They joined existing Diné clans or were recognized as clans in their own right (Brugge 1994:8–9; Matthews 1897:63, 104–159; Mitchell 1978:168–191; Preston

1954; Van Valkenburgh 1941:80; see also Benedict 1981:1; Courlander 1971:70–71, 177–184; Yava 1978:36). During this time of clan coalescence, the immortal Changing Woman taught the Diné the Blessingway ceremonies that are the root of “modern” Navajo ceremonialism. One purpose was to keep peace among the people (Mitchell 1978:185–186; Wyman 1970). Brugge (1963) has suggested that Blessingway resulted from a revitalization movement in response to the Puebloan influx after the Reconquest. We suggest that Blessingway integrated the ceremonialism of these people of diverse origins.

Early in this century, Fewkes (1919: 262–281) laid out how various clans could have brought certain ceremonial iconography and practices from various archaeological districts to Hopi. We believe that one can generalize this process to all Southwest Indian clans. The histories of different clans start in various regions among various speech communities. Groups of clan members break away and move through a series of places. As they move, they change language, pick up affiliates from clans of their hosts, and move on. The result today is that members of a particular clan and others affiliated with it are spread among various Puebloan, Apachean, and other communities.

## CONCLUSIONS

Navajo oral history and its implications are compatible with archaeological findings if, first, one admits the ambiguities of those findings and, more importantly, if one avoids assuming that language, material culture, and ancestry coincide. Navajo scholars Harry Walters (1991) and Clyde Benally (1982) have synthesized anthropology and Navajo oral history in ways similar to what we propose above.

Probably all post-contact Southwest Indian communities, including Apachean groups, incorporate genealogical descendants of both Precolumbian residents of the central Colorado Plateau and other postcolumbian emigrants onto the Plateau. No one modern ethnic group can reasonably claim to be exclusive descendants of the Precolumbians. Those Navajo who acknowledge connections with Anasazi limit the connections to certain specific Navajo clans, specific aspects of Navajo ceremonialism, or specific Precolumbian archaeological sites.

Anthropologists need to quit assuming that societies are normally (or even ever) self-contained, self-sufficient, endogamous communities in which ethnicity, language, and culture coincide and remain stable for a long time. In the real world, ethnic identities, marriage and political networks, and speech communities overlap only partially and therefore perpetually destabilize each other. Each group's encyclopedia of cultural knowledge, as well as the acts by which members pass on this knowledge, also constantly change. Ethnic, linguistic, and cultural boundaries may exist, but networks cross them. Boundaries and networks both create and destabilize each other. Anthropologists need to learn more about how these processes work.

A Navajo story (Wheelwright 1951:8-16) dramatizes these relationships. Around the

Precolumbian ceremonial center now called Aztec Ruins, drought hits and people move away. They leave behind a young man. A (totemic?) bear rescues and raises him but cannot overcome her instinct to devour him. He runs away and becomes a Ute. One of his Ute sons is likewise abandoned and raised by a cannibal owl. The son escapes and follows his forebears' trail of abandoned dwellings, pots, and fire-pokers that point back to Mesa Verde. A younger son is also adopted by Utes. Another is captured by the Hopi<sup>s</sup> and recovered by Navajo<sup>s</sup>, whose language tells the story.

— Gallup, New Mexico

### END NOTE

fp The curvature of the inside ring indicates that it is far from the pith.

+ One or a few rings may be missing near the outside whose presence or absence cannot be determined because the series does not extend far enough to provide cross-dating.

++ A ring count is necessary because, beyond a certain point, the specimen could not be counted.

vv There is no way of estimating how far the last ring is from the true outside.

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