The Red Man's Burden:
Creating Symbolic Boundaries in the Age of Technology

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One of the leading indicators of the presence of a nativistic process of revitalization or resurgence may be the strengthening of, and ongoing effort to, redefine cultural boundaries. In an age when the technology of material culture steadily encroaches on all cultures, in effect creating a cultural flatland, how do people erect and enforce boundaries? Can it be done at all? Anthony P. Cohen states the problem as he sees it in Britain in terms that apply to every continent:

The diversity of content sums up our problem. In technologically advanced societies such as those of the British Isles, the mainstream forces of economic, political and administrative life attack the structural bases of local diversity and replace them with a veneer of homogeneity. Distance and physical barriers are breached by the infrastructure of transport and communication; linguistics and dialect differences are battered by the standard English of national television and radio; local resource exploitation is curtailed by national and international regulations; the state appears to impinge ever more insistently on every aspect of life. [1985:1]

The immense acculturative pressures of colonization and technological culture have assimilated many Native American cultures. However, others are unique survivors in their ability to maintain cultural integrity and continually renew their identity in meaningful ways. Many people construct that sense of identity from ideas of sovereignty and nation. Edward H. Spicer defined "nation" as a group of people who share a common historical experience in that "they symbolize in ways giving them a common image of themselves." He further stated that the principal concept of a "people" has to do with boundaries or "boundedness" based on a series of shared meanings among individuals within a specific group (1992:31). He then stated that "the boundaries of culture are at the limits of the domains of meaning for symbols... which may have no meaning for neighboring peoples" (1992:32).

This same sense of boundaries may facilitate routines or customs which allow for an ordering of cultural criteria at a tacit or unspoken level, thus strengthening shared understandings of people as a cultural unit. Clifford Geertz would define these routines or patterns as "extrinsic" because they fall outside of the realm of the individual and lie, instead, within "the collective realm of understanding into which all humans must live" (1965:206). The terms of measurement here may be in the overt behavior of the individual, but culture and its symbolic descriptors become the combining of individual cognates on a group level. Roy Wagner calls this "conventional symbolization" (1981:41). In other words, boundaries may help people within a group bring symbols together in such a way as to express their common perceptions and to order cultural sets in which symbols encode specific information relating to one particular world view. The symbolism of community then is viewed as "collectivizing" from the outsider point of view and differentiating to the insider (Wagner, 1985:42).
One specific instance where we can see that happen is with the Kiva religion of the Pueblo People of Arizona and New Mexico. A discussion of the specifics of Pueblo religion, as it is known today, might impart a better understanding of how the religion and social unit work but would take volumes to describe and then might not be accurate. Authors such as Ortiz (1969, 1772), Dozier (1961), Suina (1992), Rodriguez (1991), and others have approached the symbolic properties of Kiva religion with excellent ethnographic accounts detailing the richness of ceremonial life and the secrecy and exclusion found therein. They also offer the as-yet undisputed analysis that ritual is at the core of all Pueblo beliefs and values. With this last assumption as the key element, it is possible to discuss religion in terms of what it does for the culture without negotiating all the elements of how that occurs.

Alfonso Ortiz in "The Tewa World" wrote about religion as symbols derived from the social order that encode and enact information in symbolic form that hold the social order together (1969:4). Sylvia Rodriguez approaches the matter in much the same way when she states that "ritual drama involves symbolic processes that metaphorically express, encode and enact information and commentary about social and ecological relations" (1991:234). Within all the Pueblo groups and throughout the continuum of acculturation, religion and ritual drama are at the core of cultural existence. All these societies are strongly theocratic with political power emanating from the religious domain of the Kiva. Even situations such as the installation of a BIA-controlled secular village council at Hopi in the 1930's has done little to alter the balance of power within the village sphere, although it has the power to be potentially destructive (Thompson, 1951:181).

The one common denominator in the earlier-mentioned process of revitalization and the fixing of cultural boundaries is religion. Anthony Wallace notes that religion is central to revitalization and that revitalization is essentially religious in nature (1958; 1961; 1972). Even revitalization movements that are clearly defined as secular often have basic religious "earmarks" (1958:227).

I would suggest here that Pueblo culture is similar to the adobe structures that symbolize their villages: high maintenance. The adobe Pueblos, built from mud and straw bricks, must be continually reblicked in the face of sun and rain. In a similar vein, Pueblo cultures have endured tremendous assimilative pressures since the Spanish incursion of 1531. In some ways, the rigid theocratic governance system and annual ritual cycle has served to maintain the culture securely, if not completely. This ritual process serves to realign symbols and bring the social unit into compliance on a regular basis. I have coined the word "resynchronization" to describe this process. This adherence to the agricultural-religious life within each village serves to limit and direct cultural change in ways that seem less destructive and create less cultural stress. However, when assimilative pressure gets overwhelming, stronger measures can occur. From the Pueblo point of view, the resistance of 1640, the revolt of 1680, the revolt of 1837, and the uprising of 1847 were all violent attempts to save their culture. (Schroder in Ortiz 1972: 41-70). Each of these uprisings could be viewed as processes of revitalization sparked by assimilative stress and cultural disintegration and a movement to reorder a confused cultural mazeway.

Since symbols are variously interpreted from culture to culture, and since one culture's highly important symbol may be invisible or trivial from the viewpoint of another culture, understanding symbolic cultural boundaries is highly problematic. Cohen talks about the "form" of a symbol and notes that two groups may hold the same "form" in common while its meanings may be altogether different for the two groups (1985:2). One such example might be the concept
of the ceremonies and religious practice for Native America and Euro-America. In both cases, ceremonies symbolize something for both groups. However, problems occur when the two symbolisms have oppositional or at least very different meanings. Indigenous cosmology includes sacred content and meaning in many dances, gatherings and ceremonies. Many Americans and other outsiders such as foreign tourists on the other hand, view these celebrations as a cultural commodity, to be exploited, revised where necessary to fit a popular image, and marketed as tourist attractions. Considering the radical difference in this most fundamental symbolization, it is no wonder that the cultures clash. But in a larger sense, the conflict also represents a boundary. People who imagine or symbolize in one way are viewed as different from people who symbolize the same form in yet another way. Even though, in terms of structure there might be a flow of persons across that boundary (i.e., whites who embrace the native view, or vice versa), the difference in the world view or religious views in this case symbolizes the boundary between two conflicting groups occupying the same geographic territory.

My wife and I had the opportunity to observe an acted out version of a religious boundary drama during the summer of 1997, while attending the green corn dance at Santa Domingo Pueblo. This dance is famous because it is one of the largest dances of its kind, and the only dance that this very conservative Pueblo allows outsiders to observe. An obviously upper middle class Anglo woman was standing next to us when one of the clowns from the Kiva that was dancing noticed that she had on a large tortoise shell scarf slide. Large tortoise shells are worn by each of the clowns as a symbol of their religious authority during the dance. Several clowns gathered around her and told her in sign language and in Keresan that this was unacceptable. Even though the clowns cannot or will not speak English during the dance, the message was clear.

The tourist ignored the clowns and later when someone who was not involved with the dance told her it was not appropriate, she said "it doesn't mean anything." Obviously, to her, it didn't mean anything; but what about our hosts for this dance? The clowns and the dancers who observed the exchange were obviously upset. This same woman would probably never consider wearing a priest's stole as an article of decorative clothing decoration if she went to a Catholic mass; yet, she was unwilling to listen or change her mind about the wearing of this powerful symbol and could not envision her activities at Santa Domingo as being significant.

Many of the Pueblos have closed their doors to the public during ceremonial times because they regard the aforementioned conflict as a matter of "cultural theft." Newspaper and Internet accounts use this term as a rationale for excluding outsiders from all sacred ritual (Suina 1992: The Muncie Evening Press, 1993). To the average person this sounds quite reasonable. Most native people believe that this idea of theft is appropriate grounds for current exclusionary practices. But how can "cultural theft" take place? What if it is only a metaphor for something else? Culture and its accouterments cut much deeper than the veneer of artifactual belongings.

The sale of drums, dolls, and feathers does not represent the wholesale loss of religious symbolism to a particular group nor can it be sold. Possessing an eagle feather would not make President Clinton native any more than owning a rosary would make him Catholic. If culture is held in terms of symbolic content, beliefs and ideas, and that content is the marker for members of a group, how can it be stolen? More to the point, if religion and sacred symbols are, as sociologist/priest Andrew Greeley states, "imagination;" and the differences between cultures are differences in how people imagine themselves in relation to their self created cosmos, then it cannot be stolen. (1991:44)
This "ceremony" problem expresses the basic conflict of all definably separate groups in the modern world. The conflict represents large groups of people who may represent several different cultures with distinct structural boundaries, but the real problem in the maintenance of cultural diversity is how boundaries are perceived. In this religious analogy, the indigenous observer may see the difference in worldview as an insider/outsider conflict. On the other hand, outside observers who represent the dominant culture may not acknowledge the boundary simply because of their own dominance. This lack of validation may constitute a situation in which the minority culture is battered at a symbolic level as well as a structural level. It may also create a state of stress in which increased resistance is justified in order to preserve or enhance the boundary and sovereignty.

From an ecological perspective, people, such as the Pueblos, have occupied a land niche in the territory of the United States, that has been judged of little economic use by the dominant culture until recent years. Furthermore, they have occupied a niche in which their population declined after contact and has only grown in recent years. Frederick Barth says that when a population is dependent on its exploitation of a particular niche in nature, that position carries with it an implied upper limit in population (1969:26). If the structural boundaries of the American and Pueblo populations are based on a symbiotic relationship that requires stable populations in a fixed geography, then these boundaries may have been breached in recent years.

Barth goes on to argue that adaptation to nature requires an "absolute size," while adaptation to a niche constituted by another group is "affected by it relative size" (1969:26). The demographics of population in a given area may necessitate the flow of persons from one ethnic group to another. In many cases, that flow is primarily from the reservation to white society. There is very little flow the other way. This may indicate that the maintenance of boundaries within the indigenous populations is dependent on a stable population cap, especially since reservation land masses are fixed, and the process of fissioning, which helped relieve population tensions in the past, can no longer take place.

Divisions and separations between the Native people and their Anglo neighbors are more structured at this time than any other group in the United States. The reservations' physical boundaries and the continued existence of subsistence agriculture in many places functions to maintain oppositions and physical barriers between populations. Factors such as the historic continuum of residence in specific villages and their the Pueblo language traditions also serve as barriers to outsiders. The forced assimilation policies of the early and mid twentieth century had their effect on these groups; but persistence of identity under difficult circumstances may have been in large part due to a cultural ability to determine criteria and signals for maintaining status as Indians, and an ability to regulate and structure interaction that limits the effects of the dominant culture. As members of what Barth calls a "polyethnic" society, under the colonial control of a dominant group, interactions such as those in the shared sphere of the marketplace give rise to the idea of dual roles that people must play in order to maintain insider/outsider identities (1969:16).

Identity as an indigenous person implies at least minimal participation in a set of social structures organized around social and family alliances. This identity also must imply a separation from the popular "melting pot" image of the polyethnic state. If an individual is to say that he is Indian, he/she is required to hold a set of values and interactions that lend themselves to a particular ethnic identification. Thus, while identity may be in part self-declared, in a larger sense, it must also somehow conform to the structure prescribed by other
insiders of the same group. This process might then be a gradation of degrees of ethnicity based on the bicultural elements present in any one individual's life at a given time.

Malcolm McFee in "The 150% Man" addresses the issues of stratification and status within indigenous society and describes the presence of a bicultural continuum with total non-assimilation at one end and one hundred percent assimilation at the other (1968:1096-1103). However, even though this scale seems to support the idea of empiricism as a viable tool with which to assess the acculturation process, this empiricism cannot take into account the concept of accommodation as opposed to acculturation.

Thompson (1951), Dozier (1961), Ortiz (1969, 1972) and others would say that Indians throughout history have been masters of accommodation, absorbing useful traits without subscribing to the accompanying value system. The fact that some people have more involvement in Anglo culture than others does not make them less Indian, just capable of adapting a larger number of traits while still retaining their Native identity. There may be some discrepancy between self-identification and group identity. An individual may say he is Pueblo, while his village of origin may say he is not. Inherent in this we have the confusion of ethnic boundaries with those cultural boundaries. A person may be saying "I was born of Pueblo parents; therefore, I am Pueblo," while the village may be saying, "this person is not a part of village ceremonial; therefore, he is not Pueblo."

Two differing lines of thought may come out of this. The first is that ethnicity does not necessarily indicate cultural inclusion, and that if ceremonialism is the major symbolic marker for inclusion or exclusion, it may show a distinct difference between structural and symbolic markers. However, it could also show differences in the insider's viewpoint as to how membership is validated. Cohen would say that differences in meaning from within the culture are the norm and that similarities may be only the "appearance of convergence" (1985:12). Therefore, expression of belonging to an outsider may not necessarily carry with it an indication that there is some gradation of inclusiveness. As Cohen puts it; "the boundary as the communities [sic] public face is simple, but, as the object of internal discourse, it is symbolically complex" (1985:13). Blood quotas structurally determine membership, village of origin, and legalities. Validation within the culture is symbolically determined by membership in ways such as inclusion within the ceremonial structure. Therefore, it is possible to belong and yet not belong.

The distinction between structural boundaries and symbolic boundaries is much clearer on the reservation than in other places. Signs, fences, and legalism impart an excellent sense of boundedness at the edge of each separate reservation/nation. Urban Indians living in Albuquerque or other areas are still distinctly classed as Pueblo from Taos, Santa Clara, or wherever; but as already stated, the legalities of belonging do not adequately cover the actual situation. That is because legal boundaries are, in fact, structural boundaries; whereas, symbolic boundaries are cultural. Structure may be, and often is, applied from the outside; in this case, the dominant societies need to classify and subordinate. Cultural boundaries, on the other hand, are more often internally applied with the significant symbols of inclusion or exclusion applied by the society as a whole.

We have seen many examples of increased resistance in recent years with bans on outsiders, particularly tourists, at many dances and ceremonies. Hopi and Zuni are examples of villages that once were open that are now closed. Many families in the plains have closed the Sundance to outsiders. Often these actions are not without cost in terms of goodwill and economics. The tourist economy at many places can bring in thousands of dollars a day. At the
Pueblo of Taos, for example, the Pueblo council is willing to close the reservation gates at the very height of the tourist season so that ceremonies can go on uninterrupted and unobserved. These actions have internal consequences, too; and some more entrepreneurial types have left the Pueblo because of the resulting factionalism.

The tightening of the village security among the Pueblos and the exclusion of outsiders may well be a dimension of a revitalization processes. Secrecy is no longer a physical necessity for the survival of Pueblo religion, as it was before 1978, but it may be even more important for cultural survival now. If secrecy and the resultant control of the inherent symbolism enhance or strengthen Kiva religion as a symbol of Pueblo belonging, then that added strength may create balanced opposition and more distinct cultural boundaries. It may also be an example of the overhaul of an existing symbol. Secrecy as a metaphor of inclusiveness may represent meaning that has changed entirely in recent years. The process by which this change occurs could be a one of revitalization.

Cultural boundaries are defined not only by the symbols contained within those boundaries, but also by the relative strength of those symbols. The adaptiveness of the culture that is opposing assimilation by a dominant culture may be defined in its ability to negotiate what symbols are paramount and to defend those symbols as validation of content. In this way, the flexibility of boundaries and ability to create oppositional symbols may be enhanced.

Two specific processes for this purpose have been discussed. The first is that of "revitalization." In circumstances of assimilative contact, revitalization may occur when current symbols of boundedness that create oppositional tension and give validation to members of a minority culture are compromised or no longer adaptive. In this instance, the symbols may be overhauled or completely replaced. Revitalization may also be occurring when symbols of the dominant culture such as language or religious icons are adopted but restructured symbolically to represent other than their original intent. The relative strength of these symbols may be further enhanced when the borrowers can shield their particular symbolizations from the original owners.

A term coined for use in this paper is "resynchronization." This represents the minor maintenance of existing symbolism and the continued definition of cultural norms and values for those members of a specific society. Religious doings and their cyclic nature are the mechanisms by which this is accomplished in Pueblo culture.

The combined processes of revitalization and resynchronization are necessary for the maintenance of adaptive symbolic boundaries. Either process in and of itself is not adequate for the full maintenance of oppositional symbols. Both are required to affect cultural change in a manner to resist assimilation. Cultural theft, as a metaphor for revitalization and as a symbol of boundedness for indigenous groups, is an ongoing phenomenon that should be studied more in order to better understand the forces of culture change within Native America today. The metaphor itself is a potent descriptor of multiple processes relating to assimilation and to the stresses felt by minority cultures. It should be noted that cultural theft is not actually the cause of these processes, but rather a symbol of resistance that facilitates the processes of change. As such, the symbol also creates a perceived need for more distinct or stronger boundaries between dominant and minority cultures. Cultural boundaries and how they are symbolized appear to be the strength of Pueblo cultural survival in the modern world, and may represent crucial keys to the survival of other minority cultures in the face of technological assimilation.
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