

Shifting for Success in the Southwest: Early Navajo Culture Change, A.D. 1500 – 1800

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Abstract

Archaeologists often regard mobility as a cultural response to environmental change or hostile socio-political conditions. The mobility model has been successfully employed to explain the sometimes-dramatic shifts of Native American groups in the Southwest during the time of European contact (circa 1540-1800). However, during this same period, Early Navajos were not untouched by the turmoil that surrounded them, but appear to employ rapid culture change as their adaptive response. This adaptation is consonant with post-1800 Navajo philosophy of Blessingway that regards *change as a fundamental aspect of tradition*, which implies the coexistence of traditional and progressive practices at any slice of time. The archaeology of Dinétah documents the incorporation of economic and ritual practices borrowed from neighboring cultures without diluting Navajo culture and this suggests that fundamental concepts of tradition and change were in place before the advent of Blessingway. Consequently, the early Navajo employed cultural shifts for a successful adaptation in the Southwest.

In 1968 Al Schroeder published an article titled “Shifting for Survival in the Spanish Southwest” in which he considered the causes for Pueblo Indian movements in the region after Spanish contact (in the period 1540-1820s). He argued that the frequent population shifts during this time were most often caused by hostilities between Indian groups and not aggression from New Spain. Thus as some mobile Indian groups were aggressively raiding, other mostly sedentary groups responded in kind by shifting to other established Pueblos or building in new locations.

Schroeder regards the Navajo as one of the mobile aggressors. But, for the period 1540-1775 early Navajo people were firmly ensconced in the Dinétah, northwestern New Mexico, and even regarded by Spanish accounts as stable, powerful, and wealthy. Ron Towner and others have argued, convincingly, that during the 1700s Navajos constructed pueblitos for protection from Indian raiders. And pueblitos of stone are neither easily moved nor associated with mobility.

My purpose here is not to critique Schroeder's work, but to suggest that pueblito construction and use are examples of technologies that are part Navajo innovation and partly borrowed from Pueblos and Spaniards. And that this architectural technology represents a culture change response to new environmental and cultural conditions-in this case the real threat of raiding.

To gain some understanding of how Navajo culture deals with and actually promotes change, we must move forward to the 19th and 20th centuries to which Ethno-historical research has devoted considerable effort to the problem.

Evon Vogt (1961) and David Brugge (1963) often use the term incorporation to describe Navajo acquisition and assimilation of foreign technology. In his discussion of traditional Navajo culture, the Blessingway, Brugge not only provides an excellent description of incorporation but also hints at its success as an adaptive response mechanism.

In regard to the ceremonial break in designs on crafts such as rugs and baskets, Brugge notes that

“It was through the development of simple mechanisms of this sort to allow for the symbolic Navajo-ization of foreign traits that gives Navajo culture its incorporativeness”

And he continues:

“The flexibility of Navajo material culture seems to be in part due to the fact that permissive and restrictive injunctions relating to material culture are considered to be largely a private matter for the individual.”

John Farella’s (1984) synthesis of Navajo philosophy echoes Brugge’s insight as he describes the core values associated with the Blessingway. The first is that “the only permanence is change” Farella interprets this to mean; “Navajos are not change oriented, but rather changing in order to remain traditional”. The second core value is “to be social, you must be selfish” but “don’t compete”. This suggests to Farella that wealth acquisition is not only acceptable but is “an appropriate and even desirable life strategy” (Farella 1984:197). Thus, Navajo culture change can be regarded as motivated by success and not a response to stress.

These largely ethnographic interpretations of the Blessingway can serve to model Navajo culture change observed in the archaeological record before A.D 1800. And, the archaeological expectations of the model are relatively straightforward, because both Brugge and Farella indicate strong linkages between observable Navajo material culture and change.

The concept of incorporation is fundamental to the Navajo Culture Change model, because it implies the coexistence of tradition and change through time and space. Therefore, the archaeological expectations are fairly obvious.

1. Continuity and tradition should be indicated by little or no change in some technologies through time.
2. Culture change is progressive and should be indicated by innovation of new technologies or assimilation of foreign technologies, through time.
3. Traditional and progressive technologies should coexist in a single time frame.

The evolution of the early Navajo economy between 1540 and 1750 provides a good test for the model.

Hunting, gathering, raiding, and trading represent the Athabascan roots of the Navajo economy. Sometime before 1540, contact with Pueblos results in the acquisition of farming technologies by some Athabascan groups - These are the first Navajo. Farming is established in Dinetah by the 1540's as indicated by excavations at LA 55979.

Spanish expansion in the Rio Grande area in 1598 results in increased Navajo trade for European goods. This is accomplished through existing relationships with the Pueblos and directly with the newcomers. In the 17th century the Navajo response to new trading opportunities is the

production of surplus crafts, like basketry, and forest resources, like deer hides and meat.

Moreover, highly valued items like livestock and captive labor are acquired by raiding.

Acquisition of livestock, in turn, promoted the development of Navajo sheep herding, causing further adjustments to the economy in the 1700s. Weaving of black woolen blankets becomes a craft important for both domestic use and for trade. Acquisition of horses extends the range and shortens travel time for raiding and trading expeditions. Through time European goods and metal implements, become more common in Early Navajo material culture assemblages.

Concurrent with the expansion and diversification of the economy are changes in settlement pattern, which may have had profound effects on Navajo culture. The acquisition of agriculture signals a shift from mobility to greater sedentism. Economic stability enhanced by the addition of animal husbandry in the 17th century supports continuance of the sedentary life-style. This changes in the late 18th century when the growth of sheep herding promotes greater mobility and induces population shifts westward to the grasslands of the San Juan Basin and beyond.

I consider the evolutionary trajectory of the Navajo economy as incorporative, because farming technologies are added to hunting/gathering/raiding/trading before 1540; and sheep herding added perhaps as early as the mid-1600s, but does not become dominant until the 1800s.

The archaeological expectation for continuity is evident in the maintenance of hunting technology through the 1700s. Using vastly different methods of lithic analysis Michael Marshall, Tim Kearns, and John Torres have independently reached similar conclusions indicating that early Navajo lithic technology shows affinity with Athabascan technology and

shows continuity with only minor changes through time. The tool kit is characterized by diversity and specialization in bifacial and unifacial tools oriented to large game procurement and processing. Continuity may be pushed further back in time as Torres observes occasional but persistent occurrences of microblades reminiscent of Arctic technologies. After the acquisition of Farming technology, continuity in the hunting toolkit is maintained by diverting some faunal products from subsistence to the trade sector of the economy. Interestingly, the early Navajos never acquired the more complex and efficient ground stone technology of the Pueblos. I attribute this to the maintenance of traditional Navajo food preparation methods.

The second archaeological expectation, culture change in the early Navajo Period, is judged by change in the pottery assemblages and acquisition of European trade goods. Decorated pottery assemblages exemplify both incorporation and innovation in Navajo material culture between 1540 and 1775. In the 1500s Jemez Black-on-white, imported from one or more of the Jemez Pueblos, commonly occurs in Navajo site assemblages. By the beginning of the 1600s Glaze wares from Rio Grande Pueblos and Zuni-Acoma are evident and may indicate a broadening of trade relations between Navajos and Pueblos. Disruption of the production and trade of glaze ware pottery occurs probably in the early or mid-1600s and this correlates, temporally, with the innovation and production of Gobernador Polychrome in the Dinétah. Gobernador polychrome continues to be the dominant decorated pottery type until the late-1700s.

Incorporation is also effective for the assimilation of European goods. For example metal ax-cut stumps tree-ring dated to 1629 indicate the early use of small Spanish axes. Goods of porcelain, glass, and metal manufactured in Europe and Asia occur in greater frequencies at Navajo sites

from the late 1600s through 1700s. In sum, culture change in the early Navajo period is materially evident in changes of pottery technology and design, and in the acquisition of foreign manufactured trade goods.

The final archaeological expectation for the Navajo culture change model is that traditional and progressive technologies should coexist in a single time frame. Kristin Langenfeld (2003) observes a mixture of traditional and progressive households based on ceramic distributions in the 1400 acre Morris Site 1 archaeological survey. The early Navajo occupation is represents a narrow time frame accurately dated between 1700 and 1750 by tree-ring and thermoluminescence techniques. The map shows the distribution of residential sites containing only Diné'tah Gray pottery, a technology that is 250 years old, compared with the distributions of Puebloan glazewares and locally produced Gobernador polychrome. Residential sites are representative of many activities and usually contain the widest variety of artifact types. In this case we find that 10 of 58, or 17% of residential sites contain only Diné'tah Gray. Decorated pottery is present at the other residential sites and a few special use areas. Langenfeld interprets this distribution as differential integration of pottery in contemporaneous households of the Morris 1 project area. The residences with only Diné'tah Gray represent orthodox or traditional households, while the use of decorated pottery may indicate more progressive households. The coexistence of traditional and progressive households not only supports our expectation in the Navajo Culture Change model, it also appears to reflect tolerance of individual choice that Brugge observes as part of Blessingway.

I'll offer two main conclusions with regard to early Navajo culture change prior to 1800. First, archaeological interpretations indicate that the core values of Blessingway may be much older than the tradition itself. This is particularly true for the concept of "the only permanence is change". The time frame offered by archaeological evidence implies Athabascan origins for these core beliefs and offers archaeological support for the ethnohistorical characterization of Blessingway as a revitalistic movement.

Second, the Navajo incorporation of foreign technology serves as catalyst for rapid culture change that is not only flexible and adaptive in response to changing conditions, but also proactive in creating such conditions. Ultimately it is a good formula for success in the Southwest.