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From Either/Or to Both/And: Between The Traditional and The Modern

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Much has been said and written about indigenous peoples being figuratively and literally trapped between two very different worlds. This discussion, unfortunately, is invariably framed in notions of victimhood: their traditional value system under siege by rapidly encroaching Western influences. Such a cliché is appealing because it essentializes natives into passive victims. Yet Navajos, in particular, have a well-deserved reputation for actively and selectively incorporating foreign influences into their culture throughout their long history. Not only have they been able to withstand the onslaught of outside pressures but, more often than not, they have absorbed the customs and culture patterns which they determined to be most useful.

Although these categories are loaded with subjective interpretations, it is important to remember that "traditional" and "modern" are terms Navajos often use themselves to distinguish between two disparate lifestyles. Longing for "the way it used to be" is a common phenomenon as every generation criticizes their descendants for not following in their footsteps. I have heard various members of the Benally family often complain about how the younger generations are turning their backs on tradition. The Old Guard—like every Old Guard before it—is merely lamenting the way it was when its members were the Young Guard.

THE BEST OF BOTH WORLDS

Nowadays, Navajos who are familiar with both worlds realize that it is possible to have their cake and eat it, too. Regina, the first college graduate in the Benally family, grew up denying and even ashamed of being Navajo but gradually learned to embrace her heritage. She is now actively seeking to understand the more "traditional" aspects of her culture and incorporating these into her modern lifestyle.

Nowhere is this more evident than in the material culture of her house. It is obvious that Regina has invested a lot of time, energy, and money into making her home a reflection of how she wants to be seen. Indeed, the way she has decorated her house is a public statement of identity. James Twitchell contends that the power of commercial branding has rapidly moved outward from the face to the body to the choice of vehicle and now to the inside of the house (1999). Regina has always preferred focusing on exterior manifestations of her personality. Buying new curtains, for example, is much easier than losing twenty pounds.

Regina has designed her home in a way that combines both modern and traditional elements. Following a basic black and white color scheme, the "art deco" inspired interior of her home could easily be mistaken for the apartment of a Greenwich Village artist—except for the Navajo cradleboard and several Navajo rugs woven by her grandmother interspersed throughout. She counts Martha Stewart and other hosts of home remodeling cable programs as influences.

Her rationale for decorating her home likewise applies to the way she wishes to "decorate" her life: "I just picked out what I like." Regina does not feel compelled to make a choice between the traditional and the modern. "I want both," she has stated confidently. From the modern world, she has selected education, wage labor, and material possessions. From the traditional world, she is learning about Navajo ceremonies, stories, and her native language. Past the point of no return, Regina realizes

that incorporating aspects from both worlds is not only possible but also *essential* to the continued existence of the Navajo as a people.

Regina is representative of a new breed of educated men and women who have returned to their reservations to help their people. These indigenous torchbearers realize that American Indian life has long been a blend of ancient traditions and elements borrowed from mainstream culture. Now, the younger generations of Native Americans are increasingly deciding that they can keep their culture alive by modernizing it. Off the coast of Washington, for instance, a small group of young Makahs have revived a tribal tradition of whale hunting by adding a new twist. Instead of using spears to kill the whale as their ancestors did, the weapon of choice is a high-caliber rifle.

ADAPTATION

Many scholars have marveled about how Navajos have selectively incorporated foreign influences into their culture throughout their long history (Farella 1984; Hall 1994; Iverson 2002; Jett 1992; Page and Page 1995; Schwarz 1997). Indeed, Navajos are known for their expansionist and appropriative ethic as they have a long and storied tradition of deliberately incorporating the cultural, religious, and economic practices of neighboring groups into their own cosmology. They obtained corn and weaving from the Pueblos, horses and sheep from the Spaniards, and pick-up trucks and satellite dishes from the Anglos. The descendants of Changing Women have adjusted well to tremendous changes in a relatively short period of time. It is a testament to their perseverance and resiliency that they have not only been able to withstand the onslaught of outside pressures but, more often than not, they have selectively absorbed the customs and culture patterns which they determined to be most useful. When peeling the cultural orange, Navajos have demonstrated a knack for distinguishing between skin and pulp.

Today, the Navajo people take justifiable pride in their ability to adapt to changing circumstances while maintaining a fierce loyalty to their traditions. Contemporary Navajos live in an increasingly complex world in which they must navigate between numerous powerful—and sometimes competing—cultural systems. There is no denying that changes in the modern world have altered the lived experience of Navajo people.

Elders, in particular, have experienced significant historical changes over the course of their lifetimes, and many struggle with the ongoing tensions between the old values and new. Grandma Elsie, the matriarch of the Benally clan, complains how younger generations not only speak English but also think in the English way. She notices that her grandchildren are reluctant to visit. After staying for only a little while, they are anxious to return to their homes and back to the "modern world." Kids are also not listening to their parents. In her view, teen pregnancy, juvenile delinquency, violence, drugs, and other social ills are all the direct result of alienation from their cultural roots.

Interspersed throughout her narrative are references to changes that Grandma Elsie has observed during her lifetime. The relative ease with which she discusses or casually mentions certain events or different ways of doing things belies the profound transformations in Navajo culture in just the past half-century. Elsie appears to be comfortable with both the old and new, albeit a bit begrudgingly. While she values the

continuities in Navajo culture, she also realizes that Navajos must adapt to necessary changes. Indian women have always been forced to be flexible, resourceful, and tenacious in facing struggles for survival and growth in constantly shifting circumstances (Bataille and Sands, 1984). By drawing on her ancestral past for traditional values and spiritual stability, Grandma Elsie sees herself not as someone occupying the margins of two cultures but as someone taking pride in her ability to draw effectively on traditional resources.

Her son has adopted a more resigned attitude towards cultural change. Unlike many younger Navajos, Delbert Benally is not upset by whites who try to look or act like Indians. In fact, he was positively ambivalent when I informed him that one of his cinematic heroes, Iron Eyes Cody—better known as the "Crying Indian" whose tear-streaked face became a familiar anti-littering image during the 1970s—was not a Cherokee from Oklahoma, as he had proclaimed, but actually a full-blooded Italian named Oscar DeCorti: "I don't give a shit." Perhaps his indifference can be attributed to his own experiences with cross-cultural transvestism. Just as whites have masqueraded as Indians, so too have Indians imitated whites. Yet whereas the former is called "appropriation," the latter is termed "assimilation."

Throughout the reservation, the outfit of choice for a Navajo man over the age of thirty is a Western shirt tucked neatly into a pair of Wrangler jeans held up by a thick belt adorned with a shiny buckle. This ensemble is always topped off with a cowboy hat and bottomed off with leather cowboy boots. While it may seem ironic that Indians have exchanged much of their traditional garb for that of their conquerors, there is no denying that what has been identified with the American cowboy is also associated with the modern American Indian. Indeed, the current trend for Indians living west of the Mississippi is driving a pickup, wearing cowboy garb, listening to country and western music, and participating in rodeos. But clothes do *not* make the man. Indians can comfortably incorporate elements of cowboy culture without feeling that they are replacing or capitulating their native identity just as whites can wear deerskin jackets, moccasins, and turquoise jewelry while still maintaining their essential "whiteness."

The consumption of foreign influences poses an inevitable dilemma: either one takes the antimodern stance and rejects them wholesale or one appropriates them, tames them, and makes them indigenous and "authentic." Navajos have historically chosen the second alternative. When Delbert wears a cowboy hat and boots, as he often does, he does not view these objects as foreign. Rather, they have already been appropriated as the modern equivalents of traditional male display items. Wearing a sash around his head or a cowboy hat is not seen as mutually exclusive choice and does not necessarily imply the embrace or rejection of "tradition" or "modernity." Delbert can wear one one day, and wear the other the next—without sacrificing any of his essential "Navajoness."

Their seemingly innate ability to absorb and incorporate foreign influences was actually cultivated during the most ignominious chapter of their history, the Long Walk. While interned at Fort Sumner, government officials waged an active campaign to destroy the Navajo lifestyle. The prisoners were crowded together in a strange land in unsanitary conditions. Food was dispersed in inadequate stores of raw, uncooked flour that they did not know how to prepare. After returning to their ancestral lands, the survivors managed to retain their ceremonies, stories, social organization, and language (Hall, 1994). In addition, the Navajos used their experiences from Fort Sumner to

supplement their daily repertoire. Internment taught them not only the futility of further fighting but also the utility of many Anglo tools and materials. The fluted calico skirts and velveteen blouses Navajo women wear today, for example, were influenced by the wives of Army officers (Linthicum, 2001). And they finally figured out what to do with all of that flour.

MAKING FRYBREAD

Today, frybread is not only considered a "traditional" Native American food but an ethnic marker of Indian identity. For example, a popular shirt for sale at powwows around the country has the initials F.B.I. that stand for "Fry Bread Inspector." Another big seller on the powwow circuit is a royal blue shirt with red insignia proclaiming "Fry Bread Power," which was made fashionable after it was worn by Thomas Builds-The-Fire in *Smoke Signals* (1998). Thomas changes into the shirt to symbolically represent his "Clark Kent to Superman" transformation from a culturally ignorant nerd into a "real" Indian.

Frybread is a staple of every reservation diet. Homesick Indians who have moved to the cities constantly crave this food item, which they associate with "back home." Yet even many Native Americans are not aware that frybread is a default food that their ancestors invented because there was nothing else to eat. Actress Irene Bedard explains: "Frybread is a commodity. Basically, we had flour, water, and some lard. So we were put on a reserve and weren't allowed to do the things we normally did for food, and frybread became traditional" (Clark, 1998, p. 8).

There is a danger, however, in taking the agency argument too far. All of this talk about empowerment and freedom of choice has become increasingly appealing and trendy whenever discussions in anthropology turn to native peoples and their continuing survival. In our politically correct climate, it is not only popular but prerequisitory to acknowledge the decisive voice and deed of "the native" as a conciliatory gesture to atone for the sins of our forefathers. Indeed, to refute the dogma of indigenes as agents of their own destiny in part or degree is essentially to reject the natives themselves and risk being branded with a scarlet "C" for "colonizer."

Of course, it is comforting to believe that, despite centuries of forced assimilation with its concomitant murder, religious persecution, and cultural genocide, natives have still been able to pick and choose what they want to incorporate into their cultures and reject everything else while maintaining their essentialness along the way. There is something deeply satisfying in the notion that the tools of colonialism may be grasped by their supposed victims and turned on their creators (Wilk, 2002). The colonized native is similar in this way to one of those inflatable punching bag dolls: no matter how many times or how hard you hit it, the doll bounces rights back up—all the while with that goofy grin implanted on its face.

Still, I find something unsettling about this unchallenged notion that native people have walked through some metaphorical ethnic buffet proclaiming "I'll take some of this and a little of that." I am unable and unwilling to subscribe to such an ideology, much less be bullied into accepting it. The often-cited statistics of alcoholism, domestic violence, suicide et al are not indicative of a population who is in control of their own destiny. Moreover, the pervasive fatalism that often borders on helplessness and its

bedfellow, hopelessness, suggests that many natives have internalized their own oppression and conquest.

Adaptation is not a choice. In fact, adjusting to their surroundings has been a necessity born of a *lack* of choices. The only way for native people to survive centuries of colonization is to make the best of limited resources. There is an old saying that "if life hands you lemons, make lemonade." For Native Americans, a more culturally appropriate (and accurate) analogy might be: "If the government gives you nothing but flour and lard, make frybread."

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