

Chapter 4.

PUEBLO PEOPLES OF THE RIO GRANDE VALLEY

PART I. EMERGENCE AND CONVERGENCE

Pre-Columbian Conditions. As with all the other culture groups discussed in *Sustainability and the Sacred*, there are multiple origin stories of the Pueblo peoples of the Rio Grande Valley (“Pueblo” being a name ascribed to them by early Spanish explorers, because they lived in densely populated, adobe-structured villages). Their origins date back either to “time immemorial”, or to the Paleolithic hunters of about 11,000 years ago, depending on what voice the story is being told in. And just as important as time is place.

The archeologists tell us that most of the Ancestral Puebloans (formerly known as the *Anasazi*, a Navajo term meaning “ancestral enemies”) migrated to the Rio Grande Valley during the 13th and 14th centuries of the Common Era from great adobe towns and villages on the Colorado Plateau. These sites include present-day Mesa Verde National Park in southwestern Colorado, and Chaco Canyon National [MONUMENT?] in northwestern New Mexico.

Though to some extent still a mystery, most current evidence indicates two principal reasons for abandoning these majestic structures and their locales. One was rapid urban population growth (the pueblos at Chaco may have housed as many as 10,000 residents) that overwhelmed the life-sustaining capacity of the surrounding environment. Another was a severe and sustained drought throughout the last quarter of the 13th century. There ensued an exodus from the Plateau eastward to the greener pastures of the Rio Grande.¹

By contrast, the Pueblos' own origin story is not one of immigration, but rather of *emergence*. For example, the members of the Taos Pueblo's place of emergence is not some mythic Eden, but rather an actual place: Blue Lake up in the Sangre de Cristo Mountains, the waters from which flow in a creek down through the center of the village. Other Pueblos also mark their location in the universe by reference to various sacred peaks and other landmarks on the horizon of their seen world, referred to as XXXX because they were the spiritual places of emergence—of literally being born of the Earth—for these other indigenous communities.

Also common to the Pueblo cultures is the architectural tradition of the *kiva*. In the traditional style inherited from the Ancestral Pueblos and as constructed in older communities such as Taos Pueblo, the kiva is a circular subterranean chamber from a few feet to several yards in diameter. It is covered by an earthen and timber roof, with an opening in it through which extends a ladder for entrance and exit.

Among the principal functions of the kiva is to house sacred ceremonies, including rites of passage and prayers held in preparation for various rituals, such as dances. As explained to me, whenever a participant in a kiva ritual emerges up into the sunlight, it is an experience of rebirth—of recreating the original emergence of the tribe, and as a ritual rebirth into the day of the individual participant in the ceremony. Thus, one cannot overestimate this sense of primal connection with the Earth as birthmother, and ritual reconnection with it, that is woven into the Pueblos' understanding not only of where they came from, but also of the sense of filial obligation they owe to the Earth's life-sustaining capacity.

Contact and Conquest. First European contact of the Pueblo peoples was with explorers whose disregard for their lands was as evident as the Pueblos' love for

it. Arriving in the Rio Grande Valley in the 1540's, Coronado and other Spanish *conquistadores* cared little for the land itself, but a great deal for the mineral riches that might lie beneath it. When none were to be found, they left. It was not until near the end of the 16th century that a new wave of Spanish colonists would arrive, seeking and—when possible—seizing, the true riches the Valley had to offer and which the Puebloans already possessed: arable land and the precious water without which the land could not support life.

Claiming ownership rights to all the land and resources in the Valley of the Rio Grande, the Spanish Crown then made “land grants” back to the Pueblo peoples of their own villages and fields—their homelands for the last half-millennium. The Pueblos were thereupon compelled to pay taxes in the form of agricultural commodities, manufactured goods, and labor for the right to live on their ancestral lands.

Understandably, this arrangement did not sit well with the Puebloans. When autocratic Spanish rule finally became too burdensome—exacerbated by the Crown’s insistence that the Puebloans abandon their spiritual traditions and embrace only Catholicism—they finally rose up in revolt in 1680. While not all of the dozens of Pueblos then lining the Rio Grande joined in this armed resistance, enough of them did to drive the Spanish colonists southward out of New Mexico.²

On their way south, the Spanish pressed into service members of some of the southern Pueblos, which is why the southernmost tribe of this culture group—the Isleta del Sur Pueblo—is now located in west Texas southeast of El Paso, Texas, near the Rio Grande River where it begins to form the U.S.- Mexican border. In 1692, the Spanish colonial government re-took New Mexico in a brutal campaign that destroyed

many of the Pueblos and slaughtered their inhabitants—including some, like Picuris, that had not joined in the 1680 Pueblo Revolt.³

When Mexico gained its independence from Spain in 1821, New Mexico became part of that country, along with most of Arizona, California, and southern Colorado. The Mexican government continued to recognize the perpetual Spanish land grants under which the Pueblos now claimed rights to their towns, lands, and resources—especially their communal water rights.

The United States seized New Mexico, Arizona, and California during the U.S.- Mexican War, and declared them to be U.S. territories in the 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. In it, the U.S. Government also agreed to recognize the land grants and accompanying water rights the Pueblos had secured from the Spanish as valid under American law.⁴

Contemporary Conditions. Owing to their historic circumstances, the Pueblos of the Rio Grande (now reduced to 19 major ones in New Mexico and one in west Texas, as a result of Spanish military depredations and disease during the 17th and 18th centuries) enjoy a somewhat different status than other tribes of indigenous peoples subject to the jurisdiction of the U.S. Government. The Pueblos have held absolute title to their land and resources for more than 300 years; whereas, by contrast, on many American Indian reservations actual title to lands and resources is still held by the United States, which is under a trust obligation to manage this federal property for the benefit of its indigenous inhabitants. As tribes become more economically self-sufficient, usually either through natural resource development or the gaming business or both, they have begun to buy back these lands that—400 years ago—had been theirs all along.

In terms of water rights disputes with surrounding neighbors along the Rio Grande, the Pueblos have not fared much differently than other tribes of the American West. In this driest region of the United States, water rights are highly contested, and any residual rights the tribes now possess are for the most part the result of hard-fought legal battles and legislative measures.⁵ With regard to the Pueblos' ability to protect their water quality, however, the picture is a little brighter, as the following case demonstrates.

The reason Part I of this chapter is titled "Emergence and Convergence" is that the land-based spiritual practices of the Pueblo peoples contains the elements of emergence from (being birthed by) the Earth, and convergence or re-connection with those natural elements. All the Pueblo tribes of the Rio Grande as well as the Zuni and the Hopi have a particular affinity for the hydrologic cycle in their rites, rituals, teachings, and sacred imagery (such as ancient and historic images carved or painted by indigenes on rock faces throughout the region). At the Isleta [*del Norte*] Pueblo a few miles south of Albuquerque, a purification ritual involves actually entering the Rio Grande, to be spiritually cleansed by and to reunite with this river that is the source of life on their arid landscape.

Unfortunately for the worshippers at the Isleta Pueblo, the City of Albuquerque located its sewage treatment plant on the Rio Grande at the downstream end of the city, into which the plant dumps its effluent. Unfortunately for the City of Albuquerque, however, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency chose to recognize American Indian tribal reservation governments as enjoying roughly the same status as states, insofar as cooperative implementation of the federal Clean Water Act is concerned.

The increasing volume of sewage effluent the city was pumping into the Rio Grande began to make it unhealthy and unfit for the Isleta Puebloans' immersion rituals. So in the Pueblo's Clean Water Act management (which must be approved by the EPA), the tribal government established that the river needed to be clean enough for tribal members to use for traditional ritual purposes.

The EPA approved this plan, whereupon the City of Albuquerque sued the EPA administrator to enjoin its implementation, since enforcement of the Isleta plan would compel Albuquerque to remove more pathogens from its sewage effluent before discharging it into the Rio Grande. The City charged that accommodating religious rituals was not a stated reason Congress had adopted the CWA; and that for the EPA to recognize this use would represent the establishment of Indian religion, in contravention of the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution.

The City of Albuquerque lost on these arguments at trial, and again on appeal before the 10th Circuit Court of Appeals.⁶ The appellate court began its analysis by examining congressional intent in crafting the Clean Water Act back in 1972. That intention as stated in the Act's preamble was to make all surface waters of the United States "fishable, swimmable, and drinkable" by 1985. Even though that goal has clearly not yet been achieved, the court reasoned that any water quality management plan that would help achieve that goal and that the EPA deemed reasonable (such as the Isleta plan to use the Rio Grande for ritual immersion purposes) should be allowable.

In sum, the *Albuquerque v. Browner* decision represents an important example of indigenous teachings on environmental sustainability converging with and helping to inform contemporary public policy on questions of natural resource management. As

other chapters in *Sustainability and the Sacred* reveal, there are several other examples to be found of this convergence between ancient and modern public policy teachings on ways to interact with our environment that do not harm its life-sustaining capacity.

At the same time, of course, other contemporary policy trends at the national and international level seem to be moving in the opposite direction. For instance, in Luis Garcia's presentation in Part II of this chapter, he recounts the story of a 2,000-mile ritual run that some members of the Hopi tribe in northern Arizona took through the Rio Grande Valley southward to Mexico City, drawing attention to current international controversy over the privatization of global and local water supplies, which communal cultures such as the Pueblos and their Central/South American indigenous cultural affinity groups strongly oppose.

The Parklands Connection. Remains of the elaborate dwelling sites where the Ancestral Pueblos lived, farmed, and worshipped can be found throughout the Four Corners/Colorado Plateau area. Some of these are now preserved and conserved at places such as Hovenweep and Natural Bridges National Monuments in southeastern Utah, Mesa Verde National Park in southwestern Colorado, and Chaco Canyon National Historic Park and Aztec Ruins National Monument in northwestern New Mexico (see chapter 6 for a more detailed discussion of some of these places and their history).

Within the Rio Grande Valley itself, Bandelier National Monument, near Los Alamos in northern New Mexico, contains well preserved and restored examples of Ancestral Puebloan architecture and agricultural practices. Further south, Petroglyphs National Monument on the western border of the City of Albuquerque stewards one of the most extensive and concentrated arrays of Ancestral Puebloan

sacred rock imagery (referred to in some circles — but certainly not by contemporary Puebloans — as “rock art”).

In west Texas, where the Rio Grande leaves the geographical confines of the United States to form the international border with Mexico, lies the southernmost of the contemporary Puebloan communities—the Ysleta del Sur Pueblo. This Pueblo has a traditional cultural affiliation with many of the landscapes of the area, including Guadalupe Mountains National Park.

Teachings. The introductory chapter to this anthology contains a narrative description of the Deer Dance at Taos Pueblo, and includes also a subsequent explanation of the teachings the dance portrays, as conveyed by participants in that ritual. Perhaps harkening back to the environmental collapse of Ancestral Puebloan communities at sites such as Mesa Verde and Chaco Canyon, this dance is an important and cautionary tale: that humankind’s aggressive use of our technical abilities to extract resources from the Earth can easily exceed our ability to use these abilities wisely; that is, in a way that does not harm the Earth’s ability to sustain life.

Teachings of the Isleta Pueblo, as conveyed in the voice of Luis Garcia in Part II of this chapter, do the same thing with regard to water. (Water is of course among the most sacred natural elements to all of the Puebloan farming culture groups in this arid region. Thus, several do Rain Dances, perhaps the best known being that at the Zuni Pueblo in northwest New Mexico).

In his tending of and participation in ceremonies with tropical birds such as macaws and parrots, Luis Garcia is helping keep alive a ritual tradition that extends back many centuries in Pueblo culture. Ancient rock images at Petroglyph National Monument depict these birds, whose natural habitat is many hundreds of miles to the

south in the rainforests of Meso-America, in ceremonial settings. As he has conveyed teachings regarding the ceremonial uses of these birds to me, the understanding is that some birds can act as important intermediaries with the spirits guiding natural forces in the environment. Parrots and macaws, acquired by the Pueblos over the last several centuries through trade with Meso-American indigenes, are thought to have the ability to communicate with natural forces controlling the incidence and distribution of rainfall.

Thus, for the Puebloans to ritually honor these birds in their presence is also to honor the unseen spirit forces governing the incidence and distribution of rainfall. The understanding is also that in instilling this reverential attitude toward the unseen natural currents that make rainfall possible, this same reverence may carry over into how this precious resource is used once it falls to the ground and nourishes life.

¹ Daniel Gibson, *Pueblos of the Rio Grande*. Tucson, AZ: Rio Nuevo Publishers, 2001.

² *Id.* at 5.

³ Personal communication with Carl A. Tsosie, Sheriff, Picuris Pueblo, at Picuris Pueblo, NM, Jan. 6, 1999.

⁴ See Lloyd Burton, *American Indian Water Rights and the Limits of Law*. Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1991.

⁵ *Id.*

⁶ *City of Albuquerque v. Browner*, 97 F. 3d 415 (10th Cir. 1996).