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Battle of the Sundance: Religion and the Navaho-Hopi Land Dispute

8:00 A.M. August 17, 2001, Big Mountain, AZ. The land is barren and wasted; the plastic tape looped around the property reads POLICE LINE DO NOT CROSS. Altars, sweat lodges, a sundance arbor, and a sacred cottonwood tree are demolished, and the trample dremains of tobacco ties, prayer flags, eagle feathers, and flesh offerings are scattered across the ground. Police cars, trailer vehicles, and a front-end loader are parked outside the mess.

This desolation is all that remains of Camp Ana Mae, which earlier that morning had been the site of the 16th annual Navajo sundance at Big Mountain, on Hopi-partitioned territory. During predawn hours of morning, the Hopi Land Commission entered the camp and destroyed the religious ceremony site with a front-end loader, wood chipper, and chain saws (Zoellner, 2001). Several Navajo “trespassers” at the ceremony site were arrested by the Hopi police. Earlier in the week, five elderly female ceremony participants had been arrested for entering Camp Ana Mae without Hopi government permission (Ghioto, 2001).

In a response to the destruction, Navajo Nation President Kelsey Begaye stated that “The Hopi government appears to be persecuting these families for their religious beliefs, as well as for their heartfelt desire to stay on their ancestral lands and to continue their traditional ways” and demanded for the Hopi government to apologize for their “violent

action” in “the politics of destruction” (qtd. in Zoellner, 2001).

Cedric Kuwaninvaya, chairman of the Hopi Land Commission, refused to express regret. “The Hopi will never again tolerate a situation where our lands our stolen, our people are abused, and our laws ignored,” he said. “We will protect our lands and our rights. When so-called religious ceremonies become little more than political rallies, both the Hopi and the Navajos lose. The actions of the resistors do not support peace between the two tribes” (qtd. in Zoellner, 2001).

A Brief History of the Conflict

The destruction of the sundance religious site in August 2001 is just one recent battle-scene in the still-unfolding (but little-reported) ethnic land battle known as the Navajo-Hopi Land Dispute. The battle takes place in northeastern Arizona, where the Navajo tribe of 180,000 resides on a large reservation which land-locks a much smaller reservation of 9,000 Hopi tribespeople (Zoellner, 2001).

The squall formally began on paper around 1882, when President Chester A. Arthur set aside a rectangle of land in Arizona for the use of the Hopis and “such other Indians as the Secretary of the Interior may see fit to settle thereon” (qtd. in Benedek, 1992, p. 395). The Navajo--or Diné--tribe happened to make up most the “other such Indians” which settled there, and the borders between the Hopi and Navajo land were not clearly partitioned.

The roots of the conflict are much more complicated, however, than Arthur’s ambiguous executive order; the first intertribal clashes had actually begun much earlier, sometime after the Navajo were first historically noted to have come into Hopi territory in 1680 (Clemmer, 1995, p. 33). By the time of Arthur’s executive order, ...the Navajo [had] not only intensified their raids on Hopi villages and mesas, but also penetrated ever deeper into territory long considered by the Hopi to be their own ... as late as 1837 a massive Navajo raid on Oraibi, at that time by far the largest of Hopi villages, killed or scattered virtually the entire population ... especially heartbreaking to

the Hopi were the scalping and slave raids ...Hopi young people brought high prices in the extensive slave trade carried on in Santa Fe and elsewhere” (James, 1974, p. 71-72)

By the year 1934, formal boundaries were finally established for the Navajo Reservation, and in 1962, as a result of the Hopi lawsuit *Healing v. Jones*, the United States government created a joint-use area for both tribes (Benedek, 1992, p. 395). In 1974, the “Navajo-Hopi Land Settlement Act” was passed by Congress, and shortly thereafter the joint-use area was partitioned into strictly Navajo and strictly Hopi areas (Benedek, 1992, p. 395). Several Indian families literally found themselves on the wrong side of the fence and a relocation program was put into affect. The Navajos on Big Mountain were among the most severely affected, and several Navajo families, including the Bennallys who helped to sponsor the 2001 sundance, have refused to move and still occupy the Hopi-partitioned territory today. A 1996 Settlement Act offered a temporary land lease option to the Navajo families, while otherwise basically reiterating the 1974 Act (Cheyfitz, 2000, p. 270). The Navajo families have rejected the lease offer while staying on the land in spite of eviction threats.

Conspiracy theories have abounded as to the “real” reason for the Acts’ requested tribal relocation. Many who tout such theories, including English professor Eric Cheyfitz, admittedly do so in order to claim that the Hopi-Navajo dispute is not real in and of itself, but rather manufactured by the United States government and third parties such as the Peabody Coal Company (which has notably expressed interest in digging on areas such as Black Mesa on Big Mountain). Navajo resistors and Navajo-sympathetic scholars tend, in general, to focus the most on such theories, while Hopi and Hopi-sympathizers tend to blame Navajo encroachment. Some Hopi tribespeople counter-claim that the Peabody story is a Navajo concoction to divert attention away from their own guilt.

While it is undeniable that multitudinous political and socio-economic factors have affected this dispute, it is equally obvious to an unbiased onlooker that a longstanding conflict does exist between the tribes themselves. Fur-

thermore, as sociologists such as Richard Clemmer have noted, tribes have utilized and manipulated oil companies and outside forces to their own benefit (Clemmer, 1995, p. 301).

The Navajo-Hopi Land Dispute remains a clash of ethnicities. And while religion is hardly the mono-causal focus of the disagreement, as the sundance exemplified at the beginning of this piece, religious ideology and practice has had an essential—and as we shall see, evolving and perhaps increasing—role to play in the unfolding saga. As recently as 1988, Lee Phillips filed a suit in Federal District Court claiming that the 1974 Settlement Act violated the Navajo's First-Amendment rights to worship (Benedek, 1992, p. 395), and both tribes have made claims that their religious activities have been precluded by the other tribe. Furthermore, the land itself is viewed by both tribes as a primary manifestation of a sacred reality.

Religion as an inherent aspect to the conflict

The Navajo and Hopi tribes are both devoutly religious peoples with differing spiritual beliefs and practices. The Hopi are traditionally a ceremonialist tribe with religious emphasis on seasonal calendar-based rituals with universalistic overtones. The more individualist Navajo religious system often builds itself around the sacred “hogan” (residential, spiritual dwelling place) and the sacredness of the everyday. Until recent times, Navajo religion has dealt primarily with need-based, non-calendar centered healing rituals. Traditionally, Navajos “don't believe in the letting of blood” (Benedek, 1992, p. 5). Both tribes have complex creation myths involving deities which dictate the importance of the land and the tribes' place upon the land.

As Native Studies scholar Emily Benedek explains, “The Hopis are an ancient farming people; they have lived in the same spot for more than 1,000 years. They believe they are the caretakers of the earth. Through the performance of their intricate and demanding religious ceremonies, they believe they keep the world in balance” (Benedek, 1993, p. 58).

The Navajos have not occupied the land on Big Moun-

tain for as long as the Hopis—a “mere” several hundred years—but they, too, believe that their land and homes are sacred. For many of the Navajo tribespeople occupying land outside the boundaries of the 1974 settlement, relocation is simply not an option—for them, to quote a common outcry, “Relocation is genocide.” For the Navajo, the experience of ancestral land and home is a necessary part of worship. As Asdzaa Yazhi Bedoni, a Navajo tribesman, put it, “I am well known among the hills, among the ditches, rivers, streams, plants. I have touched them in various ways and they have touched me the same. There is no place but here” (Benedek, 1992, p. 1). And as an old Navajo woman explained, if she had to relocate to another piece of land, “The wind won't know me there. The Holy People won't know me. And I won't know the Holy People. And there's no one left who can tell me” (Benedek, 1992, p. vii).

Today, both tribes vie for specific religious rites on land partitioned by the opposite tribe. For the Hopis, one of the greatest concerns is the gathering of the sacred eaglets, whose feathers are used in the making of prayer feathers and kachina dresses. According to George Hardeen of High-CountryNews.org, Hopis have recently been arrested for collecting such eagles on Navajo land without the proper permits. Not only do the Navajo resent Hopi trespassing, they are also said to dislike the eaglet sacrifice itself. According to the Navajo, “The eagles, like other wildlife, come from the Holy People and have power that is not to be interfered with” (Hardeen, 1996). The Hopi tribe, on the other hand, feels that its religious rights have been violated by the Navajo arrests.

For the Navajo, the primary religious concern of recent years has been rights to the controversial sundance grounds of Camp Ana Mae. Perhaps the most interesting quality of this ritual is that it is a completely new ritual for the Navajo, and in fact violates some of the old Navajo religious tenants. This ritual epitomizes the growing and changing nature of the religious tension between the tribes.

Religion As An Increasingly Contentious
Characteristic of Ethnic Interest Groups
In The Navajo-Hopi Dispute

As time has passed, religious activity has been an evolving force in the Navajo-Hopi conflict. An argument can be made that in recent years, the ethno-religious aspects of the conflict have “heated up.” According to the theories of Political Scientist Cynthia Enloe, ethnic divergence is a natural by-product of modernization. It can furthermore be utilized as a counter to internal colonialism—internal colonialism being “a process of national integration and centralization in which the products of one region (wool, arts and crafts, coal, uranium, oil, gas, electricity, water) are consumed in another, and in which the centers of decision-making are removed farther and farther (to Phoenix, Washington D.C., Los Angeles, Window Rock) from the local people (in Hotevilla, Shungopavi, Kuktosmovi, Tuba City, Window Rock)” (Clemmer, 1995, p. 271).

Scholar Richard Clemmer (1995) has said that, according to Enloe, “modernization does not create melting pots but rather promotes tribalism and ethnic groups as interest groups” (p. 271). Clemmer claims that the Hopi and Navajo tribes have attempted in recent years to assert themselves as unique, ethnically based interest groups in order to gain local control.

As Clemmer (1995) said, “The entire Hopi-Navajo land dispute and its legislative, legal and bureaucratic resolution is based on the assumption of ethnicity as the basis for the allocation and possession of resources” (p. 271). Rather than viewing the Navajo-Hopi conflict as a socially engineered third-party conspiracy, Clemmer views the U.S., Hopi, and Navajo land entanglements as a three-way ethnic battle in which the Hopi and Navajo naturally must assert themselves as local interest groups in order to counteract influence from the central, non-Indian, U.S. force.

Building from the ideas of Enloe and Clemmer, it would apparently serve both the Hopi’s and Navajo’s local political interests to assert themselves religiously as much as possible. And religion has indeed played a key role in identi-

fying significant ethnic features of these tribes, helping to mobilize action on the part of both tribes, and offering the Navajo and Hopi tribes privileged legitimacy for social cause.

Clemmer’s theory helps to explain the cultural persistence of the Hopi tribe and its strong protests at any cultural “thievery” from the Navajo end. In recent years, the traditionalists of the culturally persistent Hopi have become more and more upset about the Navajo creation of “Hopi” crafts. While they claim to have originally taught the Navajo how to make these crafts, such as baskets and kachina dolls, today they resent the Navajo from benefiting from “crafts [which] are part of [the Hopi] religious tradition” — a tradition in which “ownership of idea has a great importance” (Benedek, 1992, p. 168).

While the Hopi have persisted in their old traditions more vehemently, the Navajo have recently adopted the sundance — an entirely new ritual for the Navajo — as a religious vocabulary for the resistance to relocation. It was first brought to the Navajo in 1985 by Leonard Crow Dog, Lakota Chief and movement midwife for the sundance resistance to Navajo relocation.

In the Lakota-style sundance practiced by the Benallys and other resisting Navajo tribespeople on Big Mountain, participants dance around a sacred cottonwood tree without food or water for up to four days of rounds. On the fourth day or so, participants may choose to pierce their skin with wooden pegs and string themselves up on the tree. “Ropes are thrown over the tree and attached to the piercing sticks. Each person who pierces is then pulled upward, ‘flying’ by flapping eagle wings, until the sticks break through the skin” (Fisher, 2002, p. 72). The sundance is a tremendously challenging spiritual endeavor and participants are said to reach heights of ecstasy while pushing “the spirit beyond its limits” and transcending pain (Fisher, 2002, p. 72).

The sundance is a spiritual activity originally practiced “to renew the people’s communion with the sun, the wind, the earth, and the gods” (Benedek, 1992, p. 5). It would be ridiculous to suggest that its participants do not have legitimate religious feelings about the ritual; however it is also without doubt that this ceremony was brought in as

a sort of war-tool. This once-outlawed ceremony involves blood-letting a traditional Navajo “no-no” and has more militant overtones than the traditional Navajo ceremonies.

The Navajos themselves knew they were taking a big step when they arranged for Leonard Crow Dog to come in and preside over the first annual sundance and “help out the people faced with relocation” (Benedek, 1992, p. 7). While sitting in his bedroll watching the ceremony, tribesman Dennis Bedonie related his own mixed feelings about the ceremony. “This may be a sign of desperation,” he said. “The people are showing a willingness to stand up and defend the land” (Benedek, 1992, p. 12).

Around the ceremony, participants’ protest signs read “The Creator is the only one who’s going to relocate us” (Benedek, 1992, p. 385). Radical militant talk is common. As Navajo resistance lawyer Lew Gurwitz remarked at one sundance, “There’s going to be a war. It may be a short war. But these people have said, and they mean it, ‘you’ll have to drag me dead out of my hogan.’ And there are people around the country who’ll stand beside them and fight” (qtd. in Benedek, 1992, p. 8).

Such a dramatic ritual as the sundance has drawn more media attention than any other religious ceremony currently taking place in the Navajo or Hopi land. It has allowed the Navajo to distinguish themselves from their Hopi neighbors in a dramatic way. One particularly astounding feature is that the Navajo have allowed non-reservation Indians to come and participate (Benedek, 1992, p. 5). The sacrificial nature of the ceremony vocalizes the distress of the resisters and has attracted the attention of Navajo sympathizers across the United States as well as the U.N. The sundance ceremony is a transcendent motivation and a mobilizing force, a ritualistic undertaking to build a shared identity for the resisters, and a symbolic new mark of distinguishment for the Navajo ethnic identity.

Conclusion

The Navajo-Hopi Land Dispute is a classic example of the entangled nature of religion and social action within the con-

text of an ethnic land dispute. A complete coverage of this complex dispute with all its branches and nuances would require a mammoth thesis. It is a pity that the dispute has not gained more widespread academic attention in our country; it deserves to be examined by scholars as a possible “micro-model” which could have theoretical applications for many land/religion disputes, such as the much more notorious Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

The Navajo-Hopi Land Dispute is still going on, through tribal conflicts and various pending lawsuits (although the Official Hopi Tribal Website claims that the Settlement Acts have officially ended the matter). Lew Gurwitz’s “short war” has not yet occurred. Today it is hard to tell what the final result will look like and whether or not the Navajos will be allowed to stay on the Hopi-partitioned territory; both sides continue to fervently declare that the land is rightfully theirs.

In the meantime, we can hope for peace and healing for both these peoples of the Arizona reservations, and that, within a few years, in the words of a Navajo healing ceremonial:

Over the mountains. All is happiness. All is well...
With roots of Sunlight touching the mind, all is
Happiness, all is well. With Sunshine touching
what lives, all is Happiness, all is well.
...Now all is Happiness, all is well. (Luckert, 1979, p. 180)

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