



# PUEBLO SECRECY RESULT OF INTRUSIONS

by Joseph H. Suina



*(Editor's note: Our acknowledgement of the Quincentennial year would be incomplete without reflection on the impact the newcomers had on the Native American people. To increase cultural understanding, Joseph H. Suina of Cochiti Pueblo writes an essay that addresses why the Pueblo Indians continue to guard many of their beliefs in secrecy and how this practice led to the preservation of their beliefs and traditions.)*

**T**he Pueblo Indians of the Southwest mystify and even frustrate outsiders because of their secretive ways. They deliberately conceal information if they consider it related to their religious, ceremonial life. The inquisitive non-Puebloan soon discovers the impenetrable shield that protects a good portion of traditional Pueblo culture. Through evasive responses or silence, the Pueblo people establish a barrier against what would be considered only curious and inoffensive inquiries in other cultures. Even the young are skilled at these behaviors should they face questions from a tourist or even from a teacher. From an early age, Pueblo children are taught not to divulge certain information to outsiders.

Highly visible signs forbidding picture-taking, sketching and other forms of recording are posted on the outskirts as well as in the village center. Visitors' recording devices, such as cameras, can be impounded by tribal officials and violators are faced with a possible fine. Usually, the film is confiscated

and a warning issued to the embarrassed offender. Occasionally a Pueblo village will be closed to the outside world for periods of two or three days to celebrate a private religious event. Not even the U.S. mail gets through. In this instance, outsiders might include other Indians as well. Some Pueblo villages perform their sacred doings using the cover of night along with other tight security measures. Villagers suspected of revealing information are chastised and shunned by their fellows. They might be subject to appear before the elders for discipline. These are ways Pueblos maintain an inner circle of their people with the knowledge, values and practices they consider their own.

Secrecy is frustrating for the casually curious as well as the serious student of the Pueblos.

While many carry their frustration in silence, some express resentment over the matter. A common interpretation of secrecy is that Pueblos simply are not cooperative. A more negative one is that they exercise a form of racism to avenge Spanish and Anglo injustices endured over the years. While neither interpretation approaches the true motivation for Pueblo secrecy, both represent typical conclusions of uninformed non-Indians. In their extreme, such mismatched interpretations can mean a complete breakdown of understanding and respect between the cultures.

Misinterpretation of Pueblo secrecy is partly due to differing

views of knowledge held by the different cultures. In the Anglo world, knowledge is highly regarded and its acquisition is rewarded in a variety of ways, including admiration of knowledge for its own sake. With the exception of protected government information and personal privacy, almost any information is at hand; the inquisitive soul needs only to have desire, time and energy.

But that is not the case in the Pueblo world. Like the Anglos, Pueblo Indians consider knowledge to be of high value. Some types of knowledge, however, are accessible only to the mature and responsible. This is particularly the case with esoteric information that requires a religious commitment before it can be acquired and used. For example, the Pueblo healer must dedicate his knowledge and energies for the remainder of his life, not for personal gain, but for the welfare of the people. Maturity as a prerequisite to knowledge affects even the most ordinary individual in the village. Deemed mature, he or she is provided knowledge that was painstakingly withheld up to this point. This person not only will be accorded the knowledge, but also will actively be assisted by the elders to acquire as much as possible, as quickly as possible.

Other types of information might be withheld on the basis of gender alone. A husband will conceal male information from his wife. Likewise, a woman, if a member of a religious society, must not

re  
sp  
an  
fo:  
wi  
th  
Pu  
wi  
cri  
att  
] fir  
hir  
de:  
sai  
for  
spe  
reg  
as  
cre  
sac  
I  
cau  
tive  
me:  
oth  
feel  
witl  
sco:  
othe  
the  
nose  
frus  
asso  
H  
Puel  
rive:  
earl  
view



Helen Victor

The Last Supper, a 3-foot by 4-foot acrylic on canvas by Taos Pueblo artist Jonathan Warmday. The painting is now part of the Millicent Rogers Museum collection.

reveal information even to her spouse. While gender, maturation and commitment provide the basis for acquiring knowledge, there always is some type of knowledge that is taboo to someone in the Pueblo community. The motive for withholding information is that the criteria for knowledge has not been attained.

In the Pueblo world, the unconfirmed are not to display even a hint of curiosity about the forbidden. Delving into these areas is said to be inviting responsibility for which one is not prepared, a responsibility one will most certainly regret. The curious one is regarded as disrespectful of that which is sacred and perhaps as committing a sacrilegious act.

Differing views on knowledge cause misunderstanding of the motives as well as the character of the members of one culture by the other. On one hand, the non-Indian feels information is deliberately withheld for no other reason than a scorn toward outsiders. On the other hand, Pueblos often perceive the inquisitive ways of Anglos as nosy. This might result not only in frustration, but also in disdain for associating with one another.

Historically, the reason why Pueblos withhold information derives from brutal encounters with early Europeans. The Spaniards viewed Pueblos as pagans, cele-

brating false idols, by Christian standards. They also saw the Pueblos as potential converts to the one true God through the Roman Catholic Church. Subverting the indigenous religion was the first step to replacing it with Christianity. Action against the Pueblo religion included collecting and burning religious paraphernalia before the public. Religious leaders were sought and whipped in front of their people to make examples of them. Such persecution resulted in more than just anger on the part of the Pueblos. It compelled them to value more deeply the core of their existence, their native religion.

Religious items, locations, ideas, activities and leaders became well-guarded matters within the village. Secrecy became synonymous with preservation and was elevated to the status of a communitywide effort to save native religion. Eventually, much of what was considered religious was taken underground and guarded at all cost. The result was exactly the opposite of what the Spaniards had strived to achieve.

The religious conflicts with Spaniards eventually eased after many years and events, including the 1680 Pueblo Revolt in which the Pueblos evicted the Spaniards from what is now the Southwest, a feat never achieved by any other tribe in North America. The return

of the Spaniards 12 years later brought newfound respect for the Pueblos and an alliance between the two for protection against marauding tribes. Over time, the church's persistence made significant inroads into the Pueblo culture. The majority of Pueblo people eventually adopted Catholicism, but not at the expense of their native religion.

Outside the Pueblo world, governments fell and rose; Spanish rule gave way to a short-lived Mexican government, that was succeeded by Anglo-American dominance. The credit for maintaining a rich native religion for more than the 300 years of intercultural relations must be given to the most important weapon: secrecy. Attempts to eliminate native religion took on renewed vigor with the advent of the U.S. government, which sought to obliterate the total native culture as well.

Indian youth were removed to distant boarding schools for years at a time and taught the white man's ways, while their own traditional values were suppressed. The idea was to replace their very essence with European values and ways of perceiving the world. The tribal system, and especially the native religion, were again major impediments in the attempted transformation process. The gov-

ernment soon learned that changing the culture, even in the young, was no easy task. The student who returned to the reservation quickly succumbed to tribal influences and "returned to the blanket." To step up the acculturation effort, the government established and imposed the Religious Crimes Code in 1923.

The Religious Crimes Code was intended to prohibit ceremonial practices that might be contrary to accepted Christian standards and to take punitive measures against leaders who encouraged or permitted such activities. Some specific directives of the code included:

—That Indian dances be limited to once each month in the daylight hours of one day in the midweek and at one center in each district, except for the months of March, April, June, July and August when no dances were allowed.

—That no one less than 50 years old take part in these dances or be present.

—That a careful propaganda program be undertaken to educate public opinion against the (Indian) dance.

Suppression of Indian customs and ceremonial activities was not only focused on the Pueblos, but

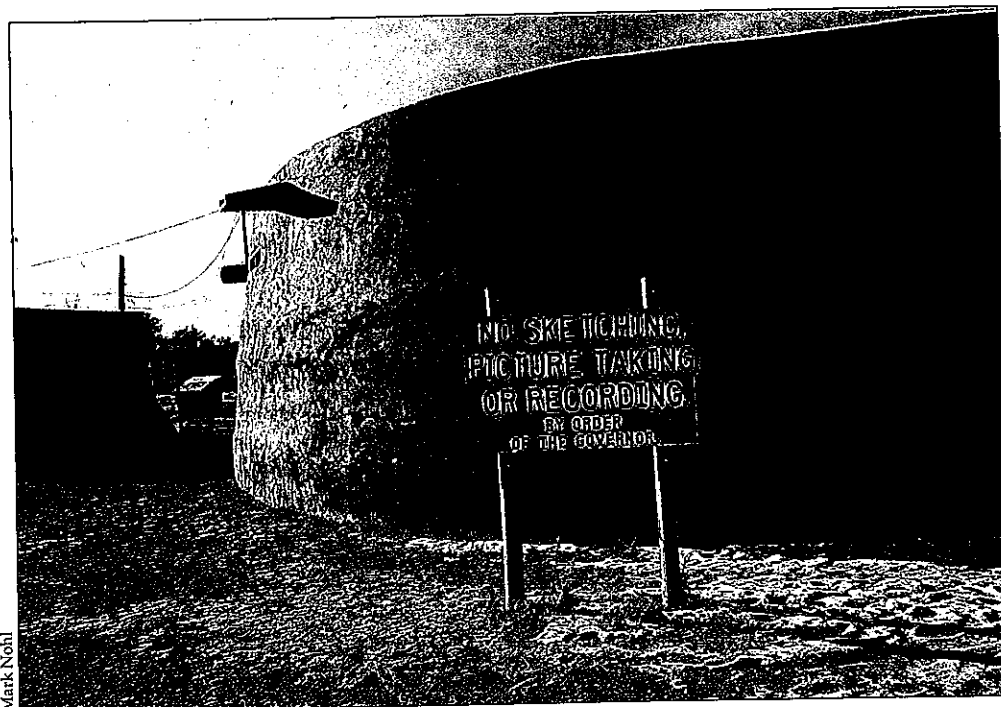
also it was a general policy of the U.S. government imposed on all Indian groups in the country. The Pueblos, because of their rich ceremonial life, were profoundly affected by it. It was unthinkable not to perform certain ceremonies on restricted days or not to have the young involved. The result was that the Pueblos again concealed their native ceremonial system just as they had when Spanish oppression was most severe.

Assaults on religion were not the only antagonism experienced at the hands of the government during this period of time. The Bursom Bill (1923), designed to quiet land title questions, involved the Pueblos of the Southwest. The burden of proof to show ownership of land was placed on the Pueblos. This meant the original inhabitants of the land were forced to disprove outside ownership of land according to the definition of ownership of the latecomers and with a form of documentation that meant written records. Such a demand was absurd for several reasons: First, the Pueblos had occupied the land long before others; second, Pueblo records were not written; and third, the Pueblos did not conceive of land ownership in

the same manner as the American government.

A more recent government attempt to subvert the Native American culture came in the 1950s, during the "termination era." The official government policy was to terminate the special relationship the tribes had with the federal government. More importantly, it was an attempt to dissolve the ancient cultural system of Native Americans. Before the policy was rescinded, some tribes were terminated only to result in disaster. This sent fear through Native American communities across the country; the message was clear: Their rights were not all secure under the protective eye of the government. Again, the Pueblo view that they could not be too open with their land and culture was reinforced. Caution was once again the key.

The relocation program that the government instituted and encouraged in this period was perceived by tribes as another means of termination. To the government the concept was simple: Relocate Indians in cities and towns throughout the United States and they would become assimilated and independent of the tribe and government. Washington's solution was com-



Mark Nohl

Highly visible signs at Cochiti Pueblo forbid sketching, recording and taking photographs.

plete with vocational training, job placement and adjustment assistance particularly intended to move young families off the reservation. After enough tribal members were moved, the reservations would "dry up" and traditions would wither since there would not be any young left to carry them on.

The curious tourist and scholar also have contributed to Pueblo secrecy. Their careless and, at times, rude behavior has appalled and outraged the Pueblos. For example, a tourist was recently spotted on top of a kiva, a ceremonial chamber that is off limits, even to villagers, except during special events. The shutter of the tourist's camera was snapping rapidly into the opening of the kiva, as he totally ignored the numerous "off limits" and "no picture-taking" signs.

For the most part, visitors are courteous and respectful. Unfortunately, it takes only one incident of disrespect to remind Pueblos of previous invasions. Prior experiences have created what, at times, seems like a less-than-understanding reaction from the Pueblos. In recent years, the Hopis closed certain religious ceremonies to the

public because of the "circus atmosphere they've turned it into," according to a tribal spokesman. In 1990, Zuni Pueblo also decided to bar outsiders from viewing the famed Shalako dances conducted in December, due to "insensitivity and disrespect for the sacred nature of the ceremony."

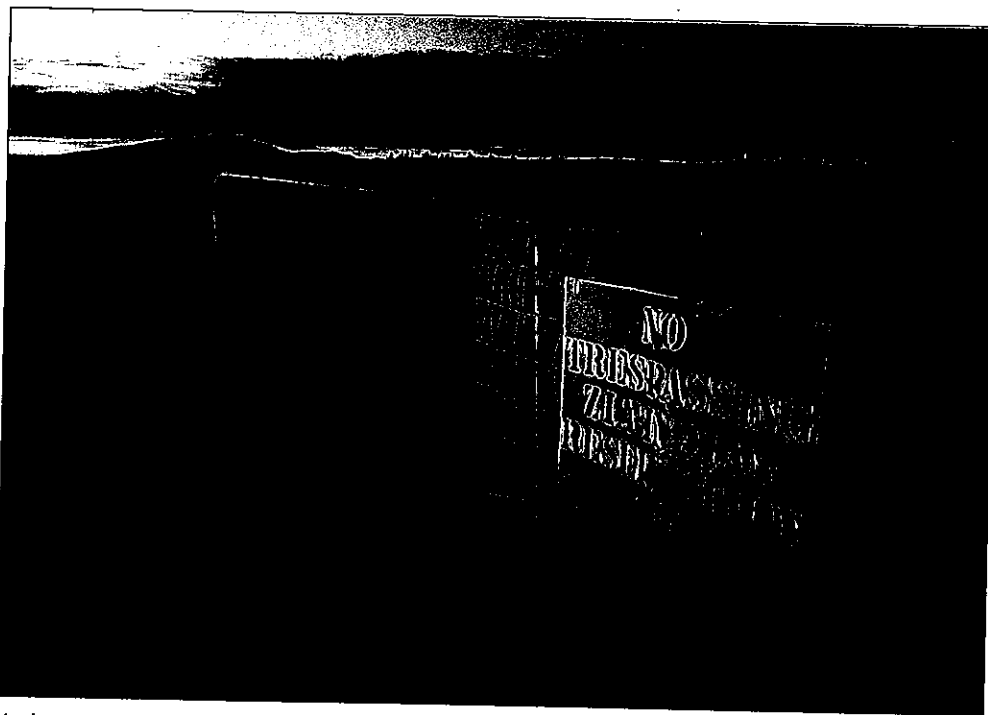
Perhaps the most frequent and irritating infractions are committed by professional photographers, writers and scholars. Time and time again, they have managed to gain the trust of Pueblo people who, in turn, share bits of information in good faith, only to see this knowledge made accessible to the general population. What is particularly distressing is when unscrupulous outsiders take advantage of a desperate Pueblo individual.

Not all violations are purposely with that intent. An honest and well-intentioned act that might result in conflict comes from the outsider who has a genuine desire to befriend Pueblo people. To an Anglo, asking questions is a sure way to spark good rapport. While that might work well with Anglos, Pueblos might send up a caution flag for a possible scalper of information, or it might be perceived as

invasive and rude behavior. The type of question is more important than the number asked. A question closely tied to native religion and ceremony will elicit wrath where as those on the weather or the upcoming Indian Market will pave the way to a friendly relationship.

In spite of the sensitive nature of this cultural difference, there are any number of close friendships between Pueblos and non-Pueblos. Such relationships have been established through time, patience and respect for one another's traditions. Respect means becoming knowledgeable of the Pueblos through the acceptable process. Respect also means accepting cultural patterns that differ from those of the dominant society. Many excellent publications, information centers and other media resources are available for information. Most importantly, there are Pueblo people who will share their world properly from their perspective. ☸

*Joseph H. Suina, a member of Cochiti Pueblo, teaches in the College of Education at the University of New Mexico. He continues to live at Cochiti and is active in community affairs.*



Mark Nohl

*A sign at Zia Pueblo clearly prohibits visitors from entering the reservation.*