Land, Water, and Pueblo-Hispanic Relations in Northern New Mexico

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In assessing the current and future water needs of New Mexico, it is important to recognize the ways in which communities of widely varying cultures have resolved differences in their management of land and water resources in order to co-exist on an economic base of subsistence agriculture. The history of Puebloan and Hispanic communities of northern New Mexico shows why, in an area of chronically low rainfall, intercultural relations must be maintained at a level which fosters co-existence.

Even among communities of identical culture, the strain of a chronically short water supply can lead to contention. Earl Morris (1939) suggested such contention as the cause for burned-out prehistoric pueblos in the La Plata Valley of northwestern New Mexico. The chronicles of the Coronado expedition (1540–42) record that both Pecos and Zia Pueblos offered to help the Spaniards defeat the southern Tiwas provided that they be awarded some of the Tiwa lands in the fertile Rio Grande Valley between present-day Alameda and Belen (Castañeda 1904; Bolton 1949: 226, 234).[1]

Collaboration between Pueblos and Spaniards to improve irrigation systems commenced with the very beginning of the Spanish colony. Juan de Oñate's arrival at the pueblo of *Okeh* (San Juan) in

1. In addition to the listed references, this article is based on unpublished field notes and reports of research conducted in 1960–62 in the San Juan Basin and thereafter in various regions and communities of New Mexico. During the decade 1968–78, when I worked for the Museum of New Mexico, this research was partly funded by the Home-Education-Livelihood Program (1968–71), the National Foundation for the Humanities (1973–75) and the New Mexico Highway Department (1975–78).

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1598 is instructive. The Rio Grande was running so low that the ditch intakes had failed and the harvest was imperilled. The Francisan fathers with Oñate promptly intoned a prayer and within twenty-four hours a heavy rain fell. Gratified, the Indians allowed the Spaniards to settle at *Yuqueyungue* (San Gabriel), facing San Juan on the west bank of the Rio Grande. Indians and Spaniards then prepared for the following spring's planting by building new ditch intakes and laterals (Villagrá 1933: 147; Simmons 1972). Thus began a network of irrigation systems which, by the late eighteenth century, was shared by Pueblo Indians and Spanish settlers throughout the Tewa Basin.

The colonists introduced some advanced irrigation techniques such as dams built above the ditch intakes, movable wooden ditch gates, and flumes. They also introduced metal shovels and hoes, as aids in building, cleaning, and diverting ditches. The settlers brought into New Mexico new cultigens, such as tree fruits, melons, onions, cabbage, grains, all of European origin, and chile and tomatoes from Mexico. While the Pueblos soon started raising most of these crops, they continued to give preference to their native corn, beans, and squash.

Other innovations introduced by the colonists were more problematic. The Pueblos were, and still are, a theocratic society whose units are small independent city-states led by priests. The Spaniards, who lived under the tripartite leadership of a civil governor, a military lieutenant-governor, and the religious authority of the Franciscans, did not understand the reverence felt by Pueblo villagers toward their religious leaders, whom the Spaniards considered wizards or even charlatans. While the Pueblo Indians were willing to build churches as directed by the Franciscans and to accept indoctrination into the new religion, they resented demands that they abandon their traditional observances and disregard the commands of their own leaders. They were further antagonized by the military elite, the *encomenderos*, who collected tribute from the villagers and kept their livestock on pueblo lands.

Some of the governors impressed Pueblo artisans into service in virtual sweatshops where they produced goods that the governor could sell at a profit. The time spent in such enterprises and in building the mission churches, tending mission gardens, producing goods for the *encomenderos*, and taking care of their animals left the Pueblo Indians with little time and energy to tend their own gardens and

live their own lives. Along with the epidemic illnesses introduced by the colonists and some severe crop failures, life during the eighty-two years of the first Spanish colony became increasingly odious to the Pueblo Indians. With the 1680 Revolt, they attempted to wipe out every vestige of colonial rule.

In this they did not entirely succeed, but they did succeed in paving the way for a less oppressive colony. When Don Diego de Vargas began to set up his new colony in the 1690s, he selected settlers who were prepared to work for themselves and were skilled in tilling the land, operating irrigation ditches and raising livestock. The Laws of the Indies had been compiled in 1680 with new and liberalized statements on the rights of Native peoples of the Spanish Empire. The Pueblos became increasingly aware of their rights under these laws, including the proviso that they were exempt from both involuntary and unpaid labor. Although some *alcaldes* (magistrates) and other leading settlers tried to exact services from the Pueblos there are notable cases recorded in the colonial archives which show that the Indians, with or without the aid of their legal advocate, ably defended their rights.

During the early eighteenth century, many of the rank and file settlers displayed animosity toward Pueblo neighbors. The Pueblos, in turn, were suspicious and secretive. As land grants were made to individuals or groups of settlers in northern New Mexico, the best available locations were usually interspersed between the pueblos. This meant that building and maintaining ditches became a shared part of the yearly round, as did public works such as building and upkeep of the rudimentary roads and bridges of the region. These activities and the shared struggle for survival against frequent incursions of nomadic Indians became the foundation for building better relations between the settlers and their Pueblo neighbors.

By the late eighteenth century, numerous settlers spoke at least some Tewa, or another Indian language depending upon where they lived. The missionaries urged settlers to serve as baptismal godparents to Indian babies and, in time, the relationship of *compadrazgo* between parents and godparents began to be more than a formality. Intermarriage between settlers and Pueblo Indians, while not very frequent, did occasionally bring Pueblo wives into Hispanic households and Hispanic spouses into Pueblo households. Intermarriage did not blur cultural differences but the presence of Puebloan, as

well as Navajo, Apache, and *Genízara*[2] wives in Hispanic settlements seems to have stimulated a degree of independence and enterprise among settler women unheard-of in colonial communities elsewhere in New Spain.

These women, like Pueblo women, became expert *enjarradoras* (plasterers) of adobe homes and some of them even built houses. When men and older boys were absent on militia service or on hunting or trading trips, women, children, and old men often had to fend off Indian raids. In quieter moments, literate women taught their children to read and write.

One woman settler of Chamisal, at the southwest corner of the Picuris Pueblo land, distinguished herself by finding a way to build an eleven-mile ditch line that carried water over a high hill to Chamisal. Unable to convince her fellow settlers that such a task was feasible, she spent three years digging the ditch line by herself, frequently visited by marauding bears. When her fellow settlers saw that she was right, it took five more years of community effort to complete construction of the ditch.[3]

Proximity and shared tasks brought on unexpected problems for the Pueblos, causing them to accede to changes in their normal yearly round. In the Tewa Basin today, the dual ceremonial cycle is asymmetric. The Winter Priest officiates for the San Juan Pueblo from the autumnal equinox only until February rather than until the spring equinox. The Summer Priest officiates for the remainder of the year, taking office in late February. According to Alfonso Ortiz, on the day after taking office the Priest conducts the work called "Bringing the buds to life," which initiates the agricultural cycle. This

2. *Genízaros* were detribalized Indians, largely of nomadic origins, who had been captured by Comanches and Utes in the early eighteenth century and sold to Hispanic settlers. By the mid-eighteenth century, these Indians had been indoctrinated in the Catholic faith, had learned Spanish, and had partly acquired the skills of the settlers among whom they lived. At that time, they petitioned to be released from their servile status and to receive lands like other settlers. For the remainder of the century, they continued to represent a considerable portion of the settler population. When Mexican Independence was achieved, they became full-fledged citizens and merged into the Hispanic population.

3. 1969 statements on the building of the Chamisal ditch come from the mayordomo, Mr. David Abeyta. The original document was stored in the Taos Land Office and was copied by WPA writer Simeón Tejada before the building burned down with all its documents. Tejada made a copy for Mr. Abeyta, only one page of which survives, but Mr. Abeyta remembered the entire document. This particular manuscript is not to be found among WPA documents either at the History Library of the Museum of New Mexico or at the New Mexico State Records Center.

activity takes place at least a month before the actual changes in nature that the works are supposed to bring about (Ortiz 1969: 112–17).

The three irrigation canals that tie San Juan Pueblo into a cooperative unit with neighboring Hispanic villages are cleaned in early March and by mid-March water is ceremonially led in from the nearest Hispanic village through the mother ditch.[4] From that time forward, fishing starts in the ditches and the San Juans obtain their domestic water from the ditches. From April until early May they plant their seeds of corn, beans, squash, and other vegetables and fruits.

Ortiz gives the following explanation for the premature agricultural ceremonies and early cleaning and opening of irrigation ditches: 1) wheat must be planted much earlier than other crops because it germinates and grows slowly. In the Tewa Basin, the wheat harvest must take place by early August to avoid infestation by insects; 2) in early colonial times, the Tewas did not clean their irrigation ditches until the vernal equinox and did not raise wheat, but their wheat-growing Hispanic neighbors annually pressured them to clean their ditches earlier; 3) the forty days of Lent begin in late February or early March and the Catholic Church formerly suppressed all native religious observances during Lent. For this reason, the mass public rituals which must follow "Bringing the buds to life" had to be scheduled before or after Lent. In order to provide water for Hispanic wheat-planting, the Tewas agreed to advance the opening and cleaning of their ditch lines (Ortiz 1969: 115–16, 174–76).

Curtailment of the Winter season in Tewa observance may have followed reduction in the wild game supply brought about both by Hispanic hunting and by the stress of food competition from the sheep, goats, horses, mules, burros, oxen, and cattle that grazed near (often on) pueblo lands. Tewa reverence and concern for game animals still finds expression in the winter animal dances, including the dance honoring buffalo, no longer hunted for the past century.

Pueblo talent for cross-cultural diplomacy continues to exert a pacifying influence in potentially sticky encounters with Hispanic neighbors. In 1968–69, I conducted intermittent research in the high Peñasco Valley of Taos County. This was an area of concentrated

4. In 1989, the mother ditch brought water to San Juan Pueblo on March 31. According to Dr. Sue-Ellen Jacobs, San Juan planting schedules vary by the lunar calendar, as in many farming communities.

poverty and of marginal agriculture due to long winters and limited irrigable land. The Río del Pueblo (de Picuris) provides irrigation water for five ditch associations, the foremost of which is Picuris Pueblo. Three ditch associations take water from the Santa Barbara River, as do Rodarte and El Llano de San Juan on the plateau upstream. I was able to sample the views of the *mayordomos* (ditch bosses) and officers of these associations. All were mature men, typically elderly and mild of manner. Conciliation was their way of meeting the problems and needs of *parciantes* (association members), but they were uniformly firm in enforcing the requirement that these members meet their shared responsibilities. Each member must pay an annual assessment fee and perform his/her share of labor or provide a substitute to clean and maintain a portion of the ditch. Anyone who fails to meet these obligations cannot receive irrigation water without paying a fine. Written records are meticulously kept. The mayordomos, officials, and members I consulted agreed that, although individual members may feud with one another over water rights, majority votes of the membership (one vote per member regardless of the extent of irrigated land) always uphold the regulations and the elected officials and mayordomo.

The unifying role of the officials, especially the mayordomo, is especially important when water shortages occur at crucial times during the growing season. At such times, the mayordomos responsible for the ditch lines of each stream must get together to "divide the waters." It is difficult to reconcile competing interests so that all share equally in the reduced water supply. If a mayordomo is overbearing, uncompromising, and unreasonable, it is impossible to reach a consensus. This is one reason why ditch association members in the Peñasco Valley and elsewhere in northern New Mexico select their mayordomos with care.

Along the Río del Pueblo, the acid test of water sharing relates to the priority of Picuris Pueblo's water rights. The ditch association of Picuris is not elected on the basis of one member, one vote; rather, the religious leaders delegate the governor to select a mayordomo and officials to uphold the interests of Picuris as a single unit. This places the pueblo, with its population of about one hundred, two-thirds of whom were minor children or aged persons, on a collision course with the Hispanic population of the valley, about three thousand strong.

To me, the situation seemed alarming. In 1968, Picuris had built

a trout hatchery which required a continuous flow of water through the trout pond. That same year, Hispanic seasonal farm laborers of the valley had formed an agricultural co-operative and had leased most of the Picuris irrigable lands. The co-op manager had refused to allow the Picuris mayordomo to supervise irrigation of the leased lands and had allowed his personnel to irrigate all those lands at once. This had caused sudden drops in the water flow through the trout pond.

The co-op manager was not concerned about the effect of his orders on the Picuris enterprise, but the governor was more than equal to this challenge. First he installed pumps to equalize the flow of the trout pond. Then, perfectly conversant with Hispanic culture and language, he proceeded to conduct a quiet campaign with the Hispanic mayordomos of the Río del Pueblo ditch associations to win their support for Picuris water rights.

One day, one of the Hispanic mayordomos took me to visit the governor. The two were old and cordial acquaintances, and the governor, without threatening or ruffling any feelings, soon had the mayordomo fully convinced that all Peñasco Valley Hispanos would best serve their own interests by upholding the water rights of Picuris Pueblo.

Pueblo-Hispanic relations in the Peñasco Valley are generally rated as poor, but this example shows that the doors to communication and compromise remain open. Despite its low population and poverty, Picuris is respected throughout northern New Mexico as a major source of herbs and medicinal herb lore. The Picuris Matachine dancers are popular not only in the Peñasco Valley but also in communities of the Española Valley, and often an Hispano will undertake the comical female impersonation of the *perejundia*. The musicians for the dance are Hispanic neighbors who also fill in other roles if the Picuris cast is short of personnel.

Taos Valley is more advanced than Peñasco in building Pueblo-Hispanic alliances for mutual benefit. The issue of Blue Lake, sacred to the Pueblo as its ancestral place of emergence, had been festering for years. Timber-cutting operations under a National Forest permit often disrupted religious pilgrimages to the lake.

In 1964 a recently formed organization of Hispanic land-grant heirs, then named the Alianza Federal de Mercedes, endorsed the Taos claim to Blue Lake and surrounding lands under the Freedom of Religion provisions of the First Amendment. The Alianza lost

some of its Taos Valley members who were claiming the Blue Lake area as theirs under title of the Antonio Martínez-Lucero de Godoy land grant.

The loss of this support was more than offset by growing support for the Alianza from Pueblo religious leaders, especially at Santo Domingo and as far away as the Hopi villages. In the latter 1960s Taos Valley Hispanos began to circulate a petition opposing construction of the Indian Camp Dam. This project, popular among large real estate concerns, would have priced irrigation water beyond the means of small farmers. Taos Pueblo quietly supported the position of the Hispanic farmers.

Populations native to arid regions view water with respect and even reverence. Pueblo ritual and symbolism from prehistoric times is rich in allusions to clouds, rain, serpents, and other creatures associated with moisture. Hispanic communities have the same concern, expressed in a different symbolic idiom.

June 13 is the feast day of San Antonio de Padua and, in the village of that name above Tijeras on the Cañón de Carnue Grant, it is a day to give thanks to God for the source of water He has provided. After mass and the customary solemn procession around the church, all able-bodied persons, led by the priest and a group of Matachine dancers, climb a steep hill to fenced-in springs on the mountainside. The priest blesses the springs and then each person brings a cup to be filled from a dipper. The water is sipped with profound reverence.

The San Antonio springs have spelled survival for the village and, indeed, for all the communities at the east end of the Carnue grant since its founding in 1819. Tijeras Creek and its tributaries carry water too saline in content either for drinking or for irrigating crops. From the San Antonio springs a network of ditches was built using flumes to span arroyos. Twice since 1819 the springs have stopped flowing for brief or extended periods and each time the villagers faced the imminent prospect of having to leave their homes. It is not surprising that they have woven into the ritual honoring their patron saint a special tribute to their blessed springs (Swadesh 1976; Quintana and Kayser 1980).

While not idyllic, Pueblo-Hispanic relations have over centuries built interethnic communication and means for solidary action. These means were put to the test in the period of conquest by the United States. In 1837, Governor José Pérez tried to enforce a newly enacted

Mexican tax on land. Citizens of New Mexico were accustomed to taxes in kind on their harvests and the increase of their herds but the new tax system inspired Pueblos and Hispanos from the Tewa Basin to Taos to unite in ousting Governor Pérez and in demanding a more representative "cantonal" system of government. The rebellion was put down by craft and bloodshed (Reno 1965). It nonetheless sowed the seeds for the 1847 Taos Uprising which for months pitted the same interethnic coalition in northern New Mexico against the military government of the United States (Swadesh 1979: 59).

During the 133 years that New Mexico has been part of the United States, the dominant American culture (behaviors and values which operate in great part on an unconscious level) and legal system (based on judicial prescription and precedent) have viewed land and water as chattels to be bought and sold at will.[5] So strong is this view as to erase or at least distort appreciation of subsistence farming. In New Mexico, U.S. Census reports consistently under-report the number of full-time or part-time subsistence farmers because of the low cash value of their crops. No consideration is given to the percentage of family food needs covered by subsistence farming and livestock-raising (Quintana 1980: 953).

Some social scientists with this view also dismiss subsistence farming as antiquated and irrelevant. One research report ridicules an aging Taos Valley Hispano who used his horse to plow a vegetable plot on his small acreage and used the rest of the acreage to pasture the horse (Burma and Williams 1961). The authors failed to observe that the horse produced manure which more than paid for its upkeep, since well-manured soil can more than double the crop yield of a small plot.[6]

A fine old Anglo-American, lifelong resident on the Tierra Amarilla Grant, exploded in righteous wrath when I tried to explain to him the nature of community lands on a grant, open to certain uses by all grantees while remaining inalienable to the community. He

5. Anyone who considers this statement extreme should reflect that, between 1880 and 1896, the Travelers' Insurance Company acquired thousands of acres of land in the San Luis Valley of southwestern Colorado and put them under irrigation in a vast agricultural enterprise. So much of the Rio Grande flow near its headwaters was usurped by this enterprise that 65,000 acres of the 125,000 acres farmed in the Middle Rio Grande Valley had to be abandoned for want of water (USDA 1936: 53).

6. My husband, Miguel Quintana, has brought this point to my attention. Each year, he demonstrates its validity with the vegetables he plants in a small, well-manured plot.

exclaimed that this was unconstitutional, undemocratic, that it was the nature of land to be bought and sold.

A by-product of the Anglo-American compulsion to view all land as a chattel is that the sincerity of those who do not share this mindset comes under suspicion. The late Senator Clinton Anderson, himself a large investor in the Blue Lake timber enterprise, accused Taos Pueblo of using the religious issue as a smokescreen so that it could control the lands for profit-making purposes. Jim Baca, likewise, in his 1988 campaign for Congress, denounced the Sandia Pueblo's claim to the upland approaches to Sandia Peak as motivated by land greed. By so saying, Baca won support from real estate interests yearning to build on those lands, while subtly casting aspersions at his rival candidate, Patricia Madrid, who is the granddaughter of a Sandia Pueblo Indian.

According to observers from the Coronado Monument, small groups of Pueblo Indians from as far away as Zuñi and the Hopi villages come each year, stopping first at the Monument to make a long visit to the painted kiva. Then they go to Sandia Pueblo and are observed walking across the pueblo lands to the foot of Sandia Peak, where they set out toward the top along a small, otherwise unused trail. The Monument observers have reported their impression that these visitors are religious pilgrims visiting shrines in the Sandias and probably collecting materials such as ocher for ceremonial use. If this interpretation is correct, the Sandia Pueblo claim on the approaches to the Peak is on a par with the Taos claim to Blue Lake.

Large land and water projects in our society are invariably prefaced by impact studies which are guided by references to "cost-benefit" and "highest and best use." Such projects often have a hidden cost in human lives which is left out of consideration. For example, construction of the Elephant Butte Dam caused Rio Grande waters to back up and flood the villagers of San Marcial out of their homes and community.

Displacement of population is sometimes a direct and immediate concomitant of water projects, accidental in the case of San Marcial but deliberately planned in the case of the communities lost to the Navajo Reservoir. Threats to population may also be delayed side-results of a project. The Navajo and Abiquiu Dams leak so badly that they threaten to inundate populations downstream. Farmington has installed a special alarm system for this contingency. Underground

seepage from Cochiti Dam is turning the pueblo's agricultural fields into a swamp.

The current system of water management discriminates against long-established populations that have been unable to use their water rights for years when they had to leave the home village during the growing season in order to earn money to pay taxes. Coyote, El Rito, and Truchas, among other villages, have been trying to recover their lost water rights from the San Juan-Chama diversion, but are not allowed to withhold modest amounts of water from the winter melt-off. What this means is that villagers can no longer earn their livelihood at home.

Another by-product of large water projects, never calculated into their cost-benefit analyses, is the impact on physical and mental health of displaced populations. New Mexico has been described as a "national sacrifice area" because of negative environmental effects of uranium, petroleum, and natural gas extraction and open-pit coal mining. Current land and water policies in New Mexico tend to sacrifice the lives of those most intimately attached to the lands and waters of the state, Native Americans and Hispanos.

Through all these stressful experiences and in the face of concerted efforts by government agencies to drive a permanent wedge of distrust and non-communication between Native Americans and Hispanos in New Mexico, communication continues and often reconciliation is achieved between the contending interests of the two groups. If the sector dominated by Anglo-American interests, including government agencies, could learn from the neighborly exchanges and informal channels of communication that Native Americans and their Hispanic neighbors have kept open over centuries, it might be possible to resolve land and water disputes with less vehemence, less litigation, and less destruction of long-established communities. ✤

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