

Spanish-Speaking People in the United States

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A TRI-ETHNIC TRAP: THE SPANISH AMERICANS IN TAOS

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This paper will examine certain of the factors of acculturation that define the relationships established between three ethnically separable populations in the New Mexico community of Taos. Crucially important is the documentation of the value of ethnocentrism. For each group this has required the adherence to certain attitudes that are apparent in the interactions that occur.

There is ample demonstration in the literature of acculturation that bi-ethnic communities are complex subjects for study and the variability they display have frustrated many anthropologists who have attempted to construct a meaningful typology of acculturational models (Lurie 1967). The examination of a tri-ethnic situation poses even more difficulties. However I feel that such investigation can provide very fruitful insights into the nature of culture contact.

With the appearance of summary studies of the history of relations, like Edward Spicer's Cycles of Conquest, we are in a much better position to investigate the realities of interaction that occur in the many tri-ethnic communities of the Southwest. One such community that can be considered archtypical in terms of the intensity of tri-ethnic contact is Taos, New Mexico. For the purposes of this paper, the spotlight will be turned on the Spanish Americans of this mountain valley town to illuminate their special position in the complex web of acculturational forces that bear heavily on them in 1968.

Taos is home for the Taos Pueblo Indians, a sizeable colony of Anglo-American artists and tourist entrepreneurs, and a numerically dominant group of Spanish Americans. First it is important to summarize briefly certain historical facts that laid the groundwork for the present set of relationships. We know that effective Anglo-American control of this region began with the usurpation of political domination in the late 1840's. Until then Taos and her sister communities along the upper Rio Grande were governed, if tenuously, by Spain and briefly by Mexico. The people of Hispanic culture were politically and economically the dictators of their fate. They shared the resources of the region with the indigenous Indian populations and had established, more or less successfully, a working set of relationships between themselves and the Indians. There never seems to have been a serious question in the Spanish mind that their cultural system was superior to that of the persistently pagan Pueblos. Until

the arrival of members of the special Anglo-American colony around the turn of the 20th century there was comparatively little reason for them to doubt their superiority.

In 1898 the first Taos artists took up residence in this small "Mexican" town and soon afterward ethnicity-seekers, led by a former empress of Greenwich Village and the salons of Florence, Mabel Dodge, arrived in Taos. When Taos was "discovered" the Spanish, tucked away in their small and relatively isolated mountain communities, were perpetuating a life-way akin to peasant settlements elsewhere in the Southwest and in Mexico. They were people of the land for whom life was difficult and inevitably so. Stoicism made its harsh reality a bit more bearable. Of course this is a value they share with their cultural peers elsewhere in the Hispanic world. I feel it is probably an important factor limiting their frustration and possible rebellion against the injustices they received from Anglo society.

The reasons for the attraction of Taos for artists and ethnicity-seekers alike are vitally important in determining the present position of the Spanish. These Anglos were drawn to this valley by the presence of the Taos Indians and what they conceived to be their immutably mysterious culture. They came as well because Taos offered a remarkably beautiful environment and a rather effective degree of isolation wherein they could develop their artistic and intellectual talents. Finally, in order of importance, they could savor certain elements of Hispanic culture so markedly imprinted on New Mexico. All of these factors convinced them that they were residents of an area that was different and quite foreign by comparison with most other U. S. communities. Therefore they emphasized and attempted to preserve those elements of ethnic difference which fed their special mental appetites. They did not consciously attempt to disturb the tenor of relationships established between the Indians and the Spanish.

On a formal and quite vocal level the Anglos expressed, and still do, an attitude of tolerance and acceptance of both individual as well as cultural idiosyncrasy. While they sought from the two other ethnic groups proof of cultural difference which they found quaint, charming, mysterious and psychically satisfying, they never relinquished their claim to their own cultural superiority. As bearers of the civilization of the now dominant society, they made it crystally clear to both the Indians and the Spanish that they were the representatives of the new order that inevitably would be established. This points up again that the value of ethnocentrism is the base on which interaction can so often be interpreted. If other values and attitudes had not developed Taos would be more similar to other bi- or tri-ethnic communities.

One would expect, as elsewhere, that the members of the two European derived groups would jockey for first place in the status structure, but there would be little question that the Indians occupied the position at the bottom. However the Taos Anglos in

weighing the elements of ethnic attraction have consistently placed the Spanish Americans on the lowest rung of the ladder. The reasons are clear. The Anglo of Taos tenaciously holds the belief that this community is a kind of Utopia. It is transformed into a never-never land by the rather constant employment of a kind of mental gymnastic in which imagination reigns supreme. From the Anglo point of view one can legitimately speak of the "mystique" of Taos. In its creation the Anglos glorified Taos Indian culture and relegated the Spanish American to the bottom of the prestige structure.

With these facts in mind we can proceed to examine in a more concrete manner the realities of interaction. We are faced with a cultural triangulation which demands daily and face-to-face contact by members of each ethnic group. Today the Anglos firmly control the one important commodity that Taos sells: ethnicity. Tourism is the only industry that matters and no one is unaffected by its operation. The Spanish have been able to improve their economic lot by finding employment in the many Anglo owned tourist businesses. They provide the Anglos with a pool of cheap labor from which waitresses, service station attendants, store clerks, domestics and all manner of menials can be drawn. Some Indians also serve in these capacities, but Anglos have frequently found them to be less dependable in terms of faithfully reporting for work. The Spanish are more attuned than the Indians to the Anglo-American attitudes toward work (Bodine 1964). By and large the Spanish need steady employment more than many Indians. They often do not have the extended family to fall back on if they lose a job. This has greatly increased their reliability as employees, but it has created a certain amount of resentment toward Anglos as well. The Spanish have learned that if they do not closely follow Anglo orders they can be quite quickly and easily replaced. The Anglos demand and receive faithful service due to this usually subtle form of coercion. Many Taos domestics, for example, are willing to work for 75 cents an hour. Of course there are only so many positions available. The significant decrease in agricultural production in the valley and the general increase in the Spanish-American population have thrown great numbers of Spanish into the unskilled labor market. Taos cannot support them all, so many are forced to leave each year to seek either permanent or seasonal work elsewhere. Many are absorbed into the produce centers of the West and follow the harvests from Colorado sugar beets to Washington apples.

However it should be noted that in spite of the substandard wages for many jobs, there has been a gradual increase in affluence among the Spanish Americans who remain in the area. Never as protected by the government as the Indians, the Spanish have nevertheless managed slowly to raise their standard of living. The great amount of truly desperate poverty that was certainly characteristic before World War II has diminished. An increase in various kinds of welfare programs has been important in helping many, particularly the physically unfit and the aged. These aids are relieving the younger generations of the

responsibility for total support. However the Spanish are far from having achieved an economically comfortable status by national standards, as all recent government surveys have demonstrated.

The change which led to this slow road toward economic betterment began during the Second World War in which great numbers of Spanish Americans served. Men in the armed forces sent home more cash than many of their families had ever seen and in their absence this money usually went into the purses of the women. Spanish-American women had rarely been in such a position. Cultural patterns decreed that the husband was the acknowledged head of the household and controlled all strategic income. There had been little opportunity for the women to rise above their position of economic subservience. Suddenly they were in control. At first many were totally irresponsible in handling this money, but gradually most learned to direct the financial affairs of their families and they came to enjoy their new position of responsibility.

Many men returned from the War to find their wives were not only capable of handling their own affairs but determined to preserve their new-found independence. In many cases the traditional structure of husband-wife status and role playing was broken. The women refused to remain at home as long suffering "servants" of the men. If the men proved to be poor providers, the women left the home to find work. Such a move would have been improper under the traditional system. The Spanish-American male came back from service to face the problems of adjustment that hit many veterans and frequently to find that the family he left was not the same. Alcoholism increased as did the divorce rate. A major factor preventing even more widespread chaos was the maintenance of the traditional family relations by the older generation--the parents of the veterans and their wives. Their conservatism tended to hold in check the rebellious nature of the younger women and the confusion of their sons.

To a much greater extent than with the Indians, the War succeeded in implanting new needs and desires in the minds of the Spanish. They are now significantly directed toward attaining the economic standing of the Anglo American and many have dedicated themselves to that aim with an almost fanatic zeal. However in Taos they are consistently frustrated in their attempts to achieve their goals. The Anglos still consider them lower class citizens. The Spanish represent the poverty ridden masses who lost control of their town as Anglo settlers and businessmen poured in and took over the reins of economic exploitation. Naturally the Anglos have no intention of relinquishing their hold on these operations, which they often worked very hard to develop. Therefore the Spanish find themselves victims of a system which demands attitudes of accommodation in decided contrast to their personal goals of achievement, but which has so far offered them no real avenue of escape. They are trapped.

The economic structure is not the only aspect of life in Taos through which the Spanish have suffered prestige and status deprivation.

Religion constitutes another if somewhat different force. The majority of the Spanish Americans of Taos are practitioners of the brand of Hispanic folk Catholicism found elsewhere in the United States and in Mexico. The details need not be repeated here since they have been admirably reported by others (e.g., Madsen 1964). One special aspect of their religious system does need mentioning.

Due partly to the rather effective isolation from their cultural peers, the Spanish Americans of this region kept alive a religious cult that largely disappeared elsewhere. This is the penitente movement, which is still operative although considerably slowed down. Excessive self-flagellation and crucifixion are not as characteristic as in the past. The official wrath of the Church was felt by these people in a blanket decree of excommunication imposed by the Archbishop of Santa Fe. It resulted in the penitentes surrounding their devotion with utmost secrecy so that now, although the decree is lifted, it is very difficult to obtain accurate information on this practice. However the attitudes held by most Anglos can be easily summarized.

One would suppose that the mysterious nature of penitente activity would have been a factor to intrigue and enflame the imaginations of the ethnic-seeking Anglos. Indeed Anglo Americans were fascinated by the macabre processions and crucifixions that took place each year in the valley. But their fascination was not accompanied by respect for these customs. Catholicism generally and the penitente cult in particular engendered more prejudice than admiration. The majority of Anglos were either Protestants or non-practitioners of religion. Settling themselves in a sea of papists only tended to reify their anti-Catholic feelings. Even Anglo Catholics found the excesses of penitente custom incomprehensible. So this spectacular ethnic difference figured rather unimportantly in the attractions of the area. On the other hand, Indian religion was lauded by most Anglos as being beautiful in its symbolism and majestic in its performance.

This has been a very hard thing for the Spanish to swallow. Regardless of whether as individuals they were loyal members of the Church, certainly Catholicism or at least Christianity was the only road to salvation. For generations the priests had worked to convert the pagan Indians to the True Faith. Their reluctance to accept this core aspect of civilization was taken as proof of their inferiority. Most Spanish are still very derogatory in their remarks about the nominal adherence to the Church of most Indians. To discover that the Anglos heaped praise on the Indian religion, while either ignoring or belittling their own, increased not only their resentment toward Anglos but toward the Indians as well. Yet the Spanish are forced to pay lip-service to the importance and beauty of Indian culture since they are painfully aware that most tourists come to Taos not to see them but to see the Indians and their famed four and five storied pueblos. Again they are forced into the background and have been unable to convince anyone that their cultural system is more advanced, more respectable and far more worthy of emulation than that

of the Taos Indians. I strongly suspect, but have no means of measuring it, that a certain amount of Spanish resistance to acculturation is prompted by their need to demonstrate cultural superiority. Any number display definite signs of social paranoia.

One rather small victory the bearers of Hispanic culture have achieved is to insist on the term "Spanish American." They point out rather vehemently that they are the pure and direct descendants of the Spanish Conquistadores. They are Spanish, not Mexican. Use of the term "Mexican" is definitely derogatory in Taos. Significantly the Indians insist on calling them just that, although not too openly anymore.

It is true that certain families of Taos can trace their genealogies back to the time of the de Vargas reconquest in 1692. At least there were Bacas, Lujans and so forth on the expedition, some of whom settled in Taos Valley. But today there are very few, if any, "pure" line families left. The majority possess a very mixed background. Intermixture with persons of Indian ancestry has produced a population that can hardly be categorized as Spanish, let alone Castilian as a few insist they are. In fact, if you establish sufficient rapport, most Spanish Americans at Taos will tell you of the Indians they know in their ancestry.

Anglos willingly employ the term Spanish. Their motives again seem to be linked with their desire to consider all aspects of Taos as being different and special. By acceding that their darker neighbors are indeed Spanish effectively separates them from the vast sea of lower-class Mexican Americans found elsewhere in the southwestern United States. Actually the Spanish Americans of Taos have never been totally successful in this mild effort to distort reality, although certainly there are not the very real ties with Mexico that one finds farther south. And as a small element of the Taos "mystique" the term Spanish-American, which does not mean simply Spanish speaking, is appropriately accepted.

There is an area of Taos life in which the Spanish have succeeded in maintaining control. They rather effectively dominate the local political scene and become deeply involved in small town politics. They can elect to office Spanish-American candidates because their superior numbers permit them to control the vote. Until recently no Anglo American had any interest in being an elected official in Taos town or county. Anglos relished their enclaved minority status in this "foreign" community and were quite willing to allow the local inhabitants to run the petty affairs of government. Salaries are substandard anyway, so few Anglos were tempted.

The Spanish-American mayors and their councils have frequently used their positions of authority to try and thwart attempts by the Indians to gain any more prestige within the Taos social milieu. They can always be counted on to oppose the claims of the Indians to grazing, water, a right of way or even a cash settlement for past land grabs by either the Spanish or the Anglos. The Spanish Americans

are easily aroused over such issues and become the staunchest supporters of the cause against the Indians. I feel there is little question that the Spanish suffer most from the injustices of the past. Naturally their ire is raised when they see the Indians, who have received so many benefits from the Federal government, attempt to obtain even more. However I believe that a good part of their resentment is the result of the discrimination emanating from Anglo-American society. They try to retaliate by any means available and they certainly cannot accept further blessings bestowed on the Taos Indians regardless of whether those blessings will affect them directly or not.

Among the many other factors that could be employed to document the position of Spanish Taoseños, one stands out as crucial in helping to formulate Anglo attitudes. Whenever anything happens in Taos of a criminal nature the finger is pointed first at the Spanish-American community. Vandalism, theft and physical violence are frequent. Anglo women have been raped on occasion. Such behavior, including rather rampant juvenile delinquency, is readily understandable and for many of the same reasons that such problems occur in similar populations in other communities. Since most of the Spanish are economically lower class, they bear many of the problems that such a predicament so frequently creates. High unemployment and consequent idleness often leads to frustration. Moreover there still exists the value of machismo in the Spanish community, even though it has declined since the Second World War. But fighting was long an established mechanism through which machismo was expressed. The weekly brawls at "Old Martinez Hall" in Ranchos de Taos became almost legendary. The lower-class Spanish still have their own cantinas where physical violence often occurs. The Anglos have little patience with such behavior. They imperfectly understand the stresses and strains facing many of the Spanish and most have never heard of the term machismo. This issue however greatly increases their distrust of the Spanish Americans and is partly responsible for the very real degree of social separation that exists in Taos.

Only in the past few years has there been any significant invasion by Spanish Americans into the clubs, restaurants and bars patronized by the Anglos. Even today few Spanish venture into these places and those who do must be the more affluent since the prices are pitched to snare the tourist dollar. Moreover most Spanish Americans still feel out of place and Anglos do little to help them overcome their self consciousness. Indeed many Anglos would prefer that large numbers did not invade their places of enjoyment. There are Anglos who resent the fact that some of the Spanish are now in an economic position to measure up to them. Token acceptance is often reflected in hearing an Anglo refer to a particular Spanish American or family by saying, "He is a nice Spanish boy" or "I have always liked María and José. They are quite different from most of the others."

It is obvious that many of the well known signs of prejudice

and discrimination are characteristic of Taos. They are perhaps more subtly expressed there due to the special set of attitudes that has created the Taos "mystique." Significantly both the Indians and the Spanish have been affected by the creation of this somewhat imaginary environment. Indeed as I have shown in another study, Indian culture has been decidedly influenced by the special breed of Anglo who settled Taos (Bodine 1967). Everything should be so beautiful and serene. It is not, of course, but the idea is sufficiently attractive that nearly everyone is infected with it. A member of any of the three ethnic groups is apt to make the plea at a time of community crisis, "Let's not allow this issue to destroy the marvelous harmony that we three peoples of Taos have achieved." Verbalization of the possibility of such destruction rather pointedly demonstrates that harmony in Taos is rather superficial. If harmony is destroyed I am confident that the push will come from the Spanish Americans, as perhaps other papers in this symposium will support. After all it is they who find themselves firmly held by the tri-ethnic trap of Taos, New Mexico.

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