

Migration, assimilation and the cultural construction of identity: Navajo perspectives

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Abstract

The concept of assimilation has experienced a rebirth in the last fifteen years of immigration research. In critiquing this current emphasis, I explore the case of New Mexico in the Southwest where ethnic and cultural differences have been a hallmark for 400 years. Using data from the Navajo reservation, I argue that focusing on ways that Navajo families deal with increased regional migration, economic integration, and intermarriage offers insights into the processes by which elements from a dominant society are incorporated in to distinctive ethnic repertoire that also preserves cultural practices and identities. These processes also characterize change for new immigrant populations. Recent studies have stressed the need to examine the shifting US milieu, the role of new gateway cities in the South and West, and the importance of replenishment in creating the conditions for maintaining cultural difference. This article goes further and underlines the importance of examining variations within families, networks, and communities as well as attention to the micro-practices for creating new cultural forms and retaining older ones.

Keywords: Assimilation; multiculturalism; Navajo; bricolage; family.

On a Saturday in April 2005, I gathered with members of Eva Price's extended family at her family home on the Eastern Navajo Reservation in New Mexico. Of the twenty-three adult family members, just under half of us had driven in from urban areas for the weekend: Eva's youngest son, Randy, and his two children from Salt Lake, her two next oldest sons from Gallup, her granddaughter Valerie, husband Donovan, and son from Farmington, and Eva's grandson (JR) and wife and myself from Albuquerque. Others came from residence groups in Eastern Navajo reservation communities at least twenty

miles away. We were there to celebrate the April birthdays of five family members. Two – a granddaughter (Renee) from Salt Lake and another from Albuquerque (Elena) – had opted not to come, but in the prayers offered before we ate we remembered them. The occasion had been primarily organized by Carole, Eva's daughter and oldest child, and Valerie, her granddaughter, who furnished the large sheet cake. Carole with the help of her son-in-law (Donovan) had spent the morning making fried bread and roasting mutton ribs on an outside grill. Valerie and I had helped with making the salads and roasting chiles while Carole's cross-cousins wrapped the plastic forks in napkins and helped to set up the tables. Thus the meal was a melange of Navajo and Anglo food with Hispano accents – a New Mexico tri-cultural mix. We lined up for the food, piled our plates high and after eating our fill, sang happy birthday three times and then Valerie cut the cake so that we could all have a piece. Birthday parties like this one which feature a dinner and a cake are a new family celebration, one that brings back family members to the family '*keyah*' or land, refurbishing ties of kinship and reciprocity.

To some, this Navajo birthday celebration may seem like a classic example of assimilation. The event had all the hallmarks of a typical birthday: a cake, presents, and the singing of 'Happy Birthday'. There was evidence of structural assimilation including occupational integration, language assimilation, and intermarriage. Many of the adults held wage jobs in the off-reservation service economy, and although the blessing and some of the adult conversation was in Navajo, everyone at the gathering spoke English. And in the larger extended family several young adults in their twenties and early thirties had intermarried with other Native Americans, Hispanos and Mexican immigrants. But to view this event through the lens of assimilation the dominant concept in current immigrant research would be a very narrow approach, failing to place enough weight on the Navajo elements in this particular context (the Navajo food, the blessing and conversations in Navajo) and ignoring the wider array of Navajo cultural events the family engages in at other times. An emphasis on assimilation also blinds us to the ways in which Navajos are combining elements of their own culture with Anglo culture while continuing to view themselves as Navajo, rather than Indian, Native American, or even American.

In this article, I use data from a Navajo extended family to take another look at the concept of assimilation that has experienced a sort of 'rebirth' in the last decade of immigration research. The Navajo case raises some of the same questions as the recent literature on the post-1965 immigration to the United States. While there are some important differences between the impact of regional immigration on a Native American population and the impact of transnational

immigration on Latino and Asian populations who have come to the US, both point to the need to examine the construction and maintenance of cultural identity and difference as it takes place in an 'hour glass economy' where service jobs dominate the bottom end and education provides a small foothold in the professions that dominate the top.

What I want to propose here is attention to the cultural construction of difference that is somewhere between the maintenance of cultural traditions by first-generation transnational immigrants and the 'ethnic options' (a term used by Mary Waters 1999) or 'symbolic ethnicity' (the phrase coined by Herbert Gans 1979) characteristic of third- and fourth- generation European immigrants to the US before 1924. While there has been some criticism of the assimilation framework that characterizes much of the recent literature on immigration (Kasinitz, Mollenkopf and Waters 2004; Waters and Jiménez 2005), I feel this critique needs to go further. First, we need to draw attention to the processes by which meanings and practices from two cultures are integrated, redesigned, or woven together. Second, we need to focus on variability within families, networks and communities in order to overcome one of the weaknesses of the current literature that focuses on comparisons between different ethnic and immigrant groups. We must take into account kinds of variability that may provide more evidence of overlap among populations than is usually emphasized.

Migration and assimilation: The new orthodoxy

Since the 1965 changes in US immigration law, the US has seen a new influx of migrants, primarily from Asia and Latin America. This has transformed the composition of our major cities: New York, Los Angeles, Miami, Chicago, San Francisco and revived our interest in the impact of immigration on the economy, politics, and national identity. The debate in the US among those who study immigration is whether this third wave of immigration will be fundamentally different from the second wave of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

On the one hand are the various frameworks that revive the term assimilation, a concept first used to understand the changing nature of Native American cultures as they were transformed by US internal colonialism. One strand of the new assimilationist approach is that of Richard Alba and Victor Nee, discussed in their recent book *Remaking the American Mainstream* (2003). They propose a more complex vision of assimilation, one led by individual choice, not Anglo-American forced conformity. They examine the evidence for linguistic acculturation, socio-economic mobility, spatial dispersal and intermarriage, comparing first-generation and second-generation recent immigrants.

They see powerful evidence for a 'decline of ethnic distinction and its corollary cultural and social differences' (2003, p. 11). For Alba and Nee, assimilation does not require the disappearance of ethnicity, and the assimilation of immigrant populations can change the mainstream itself. 'Assimilation can occur on a large scale to members of a group even as the group itself remains a highly visible point of reference on the social landscape, embodied in an ethnic culture, neighbourhoods, and institutional infrastructures' (2003, p. 11).

A second strand of the assimilationist position is the emphasis on 'segmented assimilation' a framework proposed by Alejandro Portes and Min Zhou (1993); Alejandro Portes and Rubén Rumbaut (2001). Using census data and material from their study of children of immigrants in San Diego and Miami, they argue that there are three paths to assimilation. One involves increasing acculturation and integration into the white middle class (e.g., Hungarians, Argentians). A second path predicts downward mobility and a reactive subculture (often in response to narrow economic opportunities and discrimination, e.g., Haitians and Mexicans). A Third possibility is represented by some Cubans, Sikhs, and Chinese who are able to move into middle-class business and professional occupations at the same time as they preserve ethnic institutions and cultural practices.

At the other end of the spectrum are those who stress the transnational ties of the new immigrant communities and who focus on the attachments that contemporary populations maintain with their homelands (Levitt and Waters 2002, p. 2). Immigrants sustain economic political and religious links their countries of origin through remittances, frequent visits, and participation in home town associations or fiestas. A number of those studying the children of new immigrants (Peggy Levitt, Robert C. Smith, George Fourn, and Nina Glick Schiller) argue that even for those who do not visit their parents' homeland, the resources, discourses and social contacts of their parents' country of origin strongly shape their lives.

In a review article in 2005, Waters and Jiménez offer what may be a middle position, that new immigrant groups are becoming Americans in much the same way as European immigrant groups did before them, but that it is important to consider two new factors which make this immigrant stream different: the dispersal of immigrant groups to non-traditional receiving areas (new gateways cities and towns) and the continuing replenishment of immigrants through ongoing immigration (Waters and Jiménez 2005, pp. 105–6). Most of the article focuses on structural indicators of assimilation: occupational integration, lack of residential segregation, linguistic assimilation, and intermarriage. On these dimensions, assimilation seems to be proceeding apace. But the examination of non-traditional receiving areas and replenishment, forces the authors to suggest that something else is going on. They

argue, for example, that replenishment helps to refresh ethnic identity through daily contact with new immigrants so that there is a new supply of ethnic 'raw materials' (ethnic festivals, restaurants, food stores, media) that shift the balance of ethnic identity towards the language, culture, and the ways of life of the sending society (2005, p. 120). Kasinitz, Mollenkopf, and Waters (2002, 2004) also point to the changing cultural milieu in the large American cities, like New York, where new immigrants have congregated in large numbers. 'They are creating a new kind of multiculturalism, not of balkanized groups huddled within their own enclaves, but of hybrids and fluid exchanges across group boundaries. . . . The real action is not in the interplay of immigrant cultures within a homogenous dominant American culture, but in the interactions between first- and second-generation immigrant groups and native minorities' (2002, p. 1033).

These authors make important points that provide a corrective particularly to the segmented assimilation framework. However, they do not go far enough in providing a critique of the literature. First, in many studies on assimilation the focus is on comparisons between different groups of new immigrants: contrasts between Mexicans and Haitians versus Cubans and Chinese, for example. This plays down the variations within a population and even within families. Second, the emphasis is on structural assimilation – the economic and social aspects of integration – occupational mobility, the strength of immigrant institutions, and the role of spatial dispersal and intermarriage. The important analysis of these variables, I would argue, needs to be balanced by attention to cultural factors (the kinds of factors alluded to in the statement by Kasinitz, *et al.* concerning a new kind of multiculturalism or Waters' and Jiménez's reference to 'raw ethnic materials'). Here I mean not just language maintenance, participation in ethnic organizations, or church attendance for example (factors found in census data or easily coded in surveys), but the complex cultural construction of meanings and practices that blend ethnic cultural forms with those derived from the larger US repertory.¹ Borrowing a phrase from Claude Lévi-Strauss (1966), I shall use the term 'bricolage' to characterize the process of creative constructive which may maintain older practices or combine them with new ones.

In some ways attention to culture evokes the old distinction between acculturation and assimilation where acculturation focuses on values, meanings, and symbols, while assimilation points to aspects of social organization (family, class, intermarriage, institutions) (Gans 1997). But as someone familiar with the use of these terms to describe the supposed rapid disappearance of Native American populations, I want to break with this framework. In spite of over 150 years of assimilationist government policy, Native American cultures did not

disappear and, some might argue have in the past thirty years gone through a renaissance. Among Native American populations there has been renewed attention to federal recognition, cultural and linguistic revival, and historic preservation. There has also been cultural innovation in the arts and music. Pan-Indian events and religious practices: powwow dancing, the sweat lodge, the Sun Dance and Native American Church ceremonies have also increased in popularity. All this points to an increasing emphasis on cultural difference among Native Americans.

In this analysis I shall focus on women, since they are often the centre of family networks and the support system for family-based ceremonies. I shall also evoke two forms of bricolage 'weaving' and 'stirring' that utilize Navajo women's activities as metaphors for the construction of cultural difference and identity.

The Navajo family in New Mexico

Let me now turn to the Navajo. I argue that we need to see cultural and social processes in the context of changes in the Navajo political economy over the last forty years. I originally conducted field research for my PhD dissertation in 1965–66 in a small Navajo community on the eastern side of the Navajo reservation. In my book, I call this community Copper Canyon.

At that time, the Navajo were already shifting away from a pastoral-agricultural economy. The reservation was being transformed through the increased exploitation of its mineral resources and the growth of tribal, state and federal bureaucratic structures (primarily schools, hospitals and government offices). In the mid-1960s, regional migration was encouraged by the boarding school system and the Bureau of Indian Affairs' re-location programme that sent Navajo families to distant cities. Those who remained on the reservation found themselves more dependent on welfare and wages. In my 1965 census, 25 per cent of the 1000 Copper Canyon community members were living off-reservation, many in Denver, Los Angeles and Albuquerque. Livestock, farming and weaving only contributed 14 per cent of community income, while wages (including seasonal work for the railroad) made up 50 per cent and welfare and social security 24 per cent. The remaining income came from Tribal works programmes.

In 1965–6 I lived with five different Navajo extended families and documented how they drew on household and residence group members for the everyday tasks and utilized a larger network of kin for sheep shearing and dipping, getting rides, and providing help during ceremonies (Lamphere 1977). In this article, I focus on one of the extended families I lived with, that of Eva Price. Over the past ten years I have been putting together a three-generation biography of

Eva, Carole, her daughter, and Valerie, her granddaughter. The narratives included in my (2007) book, *Weaving Women's Lives: Three Generations in a Navajo Family*, inform much of this analysis. In 1965, Eva was the mother of five children. Carole, her oldest daughter, was the product of an early arranged marriage, while her four sons were part of her marriage to Joe who worked for the Railroad during summer and autumn. While Joe was away I shared a small two-room log cabin with Eva and her children. Eva, lived in the same extended family camp as her divorced brother and her mother who had a small herd of sheep and a large cultivated field, yet primarily depended on social security.

Eva's older sister Eleanor and husband lived across the highway with their eight children, as did her sister-in-law Anita and six children. Anita's two married daughters (Eva's brother's children) were frequent visitors who also helped during ceremonies. Two sets of neighbours who were clan-related filled out the picture. Even though wage work and government payments sustained these families, they were still focused on the land settled by their parents during the 1930s in an area where they had lived for generations, tracing their clan ties back to the wives of Narbona and Manuelito, two of the most prominent Navajo chiefs of the nineteenth century.

The 2005 Navajo economy

In 2005, Eva's children were grown up and Carole's own children were adults. Carole's son JR had married a young Yavapai woman and was the father of a five-year-old daughter, Haley. They expected a second child in March 2006. Valerie, her oldest daughter was married to Donovan, a young Navajo engineer; they had two sons, Jacob, age four and a new baby Dylan born in September 2005. Erica, the younger daughter married a Puerto Rican and had a three-year-old son.

The Navajo economy has been transformed. The population more than doubled from an estimated 130,000 in 1965 to 255,000 (2001 tribal enrolment data). There were 168,000 living on the Navajo reservation, with 80,000 in border towns near the reservation and others scattered throughout the west. At present there are more wage jobs on the reservation, since the number of hospitals, schools and tribal government offices have increased. Many of these jobs are clerical and service jobs filled by women. Men have been able to find jobs in strip mining, forestry, and large-scale agriculture, but these jobs have been declining. The Anglo division of labour (clerical jobs for women, trades and construction for men) has been imposed on the Navajo, making it more difficult for individuals to cross gender lines than in the older herding and agricultural economy where both men and women were able to do most tasks.

Compared to 1965, more Navajos commute daily to Gallup or Farmington to work in fast food restaurants, grocery stores, gas stations and motels, and many families have moved to these towns. Even so, women often find it easier to obtain jobs than men and male unemployment is high. Young adults migrate to Salt Lake or Albuquerque to work or attend college. Then they may return to the reservation before re-locating to another border town or city. On the whole there is more residential shifting than forty years ago.

In terms of structural assimilation, Navajos are being pulled into the service economy both through regional migration and through commuting to off-reservation towns. Linguistic acculturation (the dominant use of English in the current young adult population) is gaining ground, and there is increased intermarriage among those who have migrated to larger cities like Salt Lake and Albuquerque. Against this trend of wage work in the service economy is the possibility of college education and mobility into professional jobs like engineering, teaching, nursing, and social work.

Culturally, the picture is more complex. Navajo traditional religion is still practised, although the Native American Church and Christian evangelical teachings have many adherents. A few schools have bilingual/bi-cultural programmes as does Diné College with its several branches across the reservation. There are a wide variety of approaches that individual Navajos can take towards crafting a cultural identity. For Eva, her daughter, Carole, and her granddaughter Valerie, Navajo tradition is still an important part of their identities, even though they also belong to the Mormon Church and attend Native American Church meetings. Others like Carole's children JR and Erica, as well as their cousin Elena, represent a different pattern within the same family: those for whom Navajo traditions are less important and who return home less often. Structural factors associated with assimilation-linguistic acculturation (speaking English), intermarriage, and spacial dispersion (urban migration in this case) account for their situation, but they are, nevertheless, still part of a kin network that is deeply embedded in retaining Navajo cultural practices.

Assimilation, identity and difference

In what follows I shall focus on three important life cycle events: birth, puberty and marriage to demonstrate how these occasions are both sites to reaffirm traditional meanings and practices and to construct new ones. It would be easy, but too simplistic, to think about the lives of Eva, Carole and Valerie as if the story was one of straightforward three-generation assimilation. Using this framework Eva would represent the 'traditional Navajo life,' Carole the one 'in between' Anglo and Navajo culture, and Valerie the most 'modern'. At a

superficial level, one could point to the fact that Eva is more comfortable speaking Navajo, Carole is bilingual, and Valerie, although she speaks Navajo, is more comfortable with English. In the same vein, Eva attended school for eight years, Carole now has a GED (High School degree) and Valerie graduated with a BA in Health Education from the University of New Mexico in May 2000. But when examining each of these life cycle events, it is possible to see cross-generational continuities as well as ways that family ceremonies come to represent both a maintenance of traditional rituals and an accommodation of new realities.

The new view of assimilation is one that does not demand 'Anglo conformity' but sees assimilation as compatible with the maintenance of some culturally distinct religious practices, associations, symbols and values. More attention needs to be given to both the process of maintaining such practices and the creative process of adding to, altering and creating new ones.

Furthermore, greater care needs to be taken in fleshing out the importance of identity in relation to ethnic or cultural difference. Notions of identity can range from self-labelling to strongly held feelings about some aspect of ethnicity (Gans 1997), but identity is usually associated with ethnic identity and at the end of an assimilation process when individuals see themselves as 'Black' or 'Latino' rather than Haitian or Chilean. As researchers who have focused on recent changes in citizenship and voting laws in some Latin American countries are discovering, many first- and second-generation immigrants see themselves as both American and Mexican (Boehm 2005, Smith 2007: this Issue) or Salvadoran (Baker 2004). Not only can identities be multilayered or contextual (Mexican in some contexts and Latino in others), but individuals can retain or grow up to attain identities that have deep cultural and symbolic roots. This is certainly true for Eva, Carole and Valerie who view themselves as Navajo (although in some contexts they might identify themselves as Indian and in Valerie's case as Native American). Both these foci – on family celebrations and life cycle events and on Navajo identity – emphasize difference and distinctiveness, placing my analysis in the retentionist camp rather than the assimilationist one. I might agree with those that take a more 'middle of the road position' that structural assimilation is taking place, but we would be remiss if we did not pay attention to the variety of ways that families are continuing cultural practices even as they alter them and that cultural identities are being retained as others are added.

Birth, *Keyah* (land), place and identity

Navajo identity is tied to three important concepts: birth, land (*Keyah*) and place. Birth creates kinship (*k'e*) and one's most important relationships, but it is also tied to the land and place. One is 'born up and out of the mother's womb.' A person is born of their mother's clan and 'born for' their father's clan. The placenta is buried so as to return it to Mother Earth. The cord is also buried in a place that will have significance for what the person will become. A boy's cord was often buried in the horse corral or planted fields, if the mother wanted him to become a good provider. A girl's cord might have been buried in the sheep corral (so that her thoughts would be with her livestock) or near the loom in the hogan (if the girl was to become a good weaver). As Schwarz explains, 'Burial of the cord in the earth anchors the child to the "belly button" of Mother Earth and establishes a lifelong connection between a person and a place, just as the cord anchors a child to its mother while in the womb and establishes a lifelong connection between mother and child' (Schwarz 1997, p. 48).

For Eva and her family, birth and its connection to place forms a powerful ideology which anchors the family and extended kin network to the land. This became clear to me when in July 1994, we first visited Dzil Zéé'asgai (White Neck Mountain) where Eva was born. First we found the ruins of Eva's parents hogan. Then we walked to a grove of oak trees just down a slight hill near an old corn field. Eva told me that she was born there, in a shade (*chaha'oh*) that had been built for outdoor living during the summer months. She bent over and took some of the earth and blessed herself with it.

Later, Eva talked about the significance of her birth place:

This mother earth, you put it on like this; [then] you will live a good life. And when it rains, you put that on your body or you bless yourself with the rainbow. And early in the morning you have to bless yourself [with corn pollen]. These are holy places. I am very glad I have returned to my birth place. I am very grateful. There is where I was raised, the place I was born. If you just forget and go any old way, I don't think you will last long that way. You won't live very long. You must return to your birth place and say prayers for yourself and state how you will be and how you will live.

Eva mentioned that babies are now born in hospitals. This process began even with her generation. Carole told the story of her own birth:

'The only place that there was, a hospital at Fort Defiance [about forty miles away] . . . my mom was in labour for several days, before I was born. And I guess she was getting tired, and whatnot, and

there was no close-by hospital. . . . On our way over there, I believe, you know, I was born by Buffalo Springs [about twenty miles from her mother's home] . . . and that's where my placenta cord is . . . Right by the old roadside, there.'

Carole often joked that since her cord is buried by the roadside (and not at her mother's home), she is always running around.

Valerie, Eva's granddaughter was born in the hospital and during my interviews with her grandmother she was interested to learn about traditional Navajo birthing practices, where a sash belt is draped over the cross-bar of a loom and the mother gives birth while squatting on the ground and holding herself up with the belt. It is easy to argue that this is an example of 'straight line' assimilation – the grandmother born in a shade on the mountain, the daughter born on the way to a hospital and the granddaughter born in the hospital itself. However, the connection between birth, the umbilical cord, the land (*keyah*) which symbolizes home and literally means 'where one's feet are planted' still has powerful resonance for each generation. Carole has never moved away from her mother's residence group, and even Valerie, who has lived in Albuquerque for thirteen years and Farmington during the past two years, returns to her mother's house at least twice a month.

The Navajo girl's puberty ceremony or *kinaaldá*

For young Navajo women, the girl's puberty ceremony or *Kinaaldá* provides the most important occasion for building a distinctly Navajo identity. This four-day ceremony is a replication of the ceremony first held for Changing Woman, the most important female among the *Diyin Dine'é* or Holy People. Traditionally, it is held twice, once at her first menstruation and once during her second. When Eva told me of her two ceremonies she emphasized how she was told to run in the four directions, what rules she had to follow (since her behaviour would have a long-lasting impact on her life), and who helped to make the corn cake that is baked all night in the ground. 'See it's very important to you, when you make the first cake and the second one, Mother Earth, you do this to tell her "thank you." When you make those cakes . . . You will live a long time.'

Valerie, like many young girls (even in Eva's generation) was a reluctant participant in her ceremony at first. 'I was kind of skeptical; I was kind of afraid. 'I was kind of embarrassed at the fact that my mom and my grandma wanted to have this *Kinaaldá* for me. You know you're young and you think, God, nobody should know this about me.'

During the four days of the ceremony, the *Kinaaldá* is dressed in traditional garb. She wears jewelry borrowed from relatives that will be blessed during the ceremony (and hence mean good luck for its owners). Her hair is tied with a special buckskin tie by a woman who represents Spider Woman who tied Changing Woman's hair. Each morning, noon and evening, the *Kinaaldá* runs towards the East (the most sacred direction), strengthening her bones and building a strong body. In Eva's generation each *Kinaaldá* ground the corn for her cake using a *mano* and *metate* (grinding stones). By the 1960s, Navajo women took the corn to be ground at a mill in Farmington and only a little was ground on a modern machine at home during the four-day ceremony. The corn meal is mixed with boiling hot water and poured into large metal tubs where the *Kinaaldá*, her mother, and other female relatives stir the mixture with stirring sticks. At dusk the mixture is poured into a pit that has been warmed by a burning fire. Corn stalks line the pit and the *Kinaaldá* blesses the cake with corn meal. The cake is covered with fire. Nowadays, women often place wet paper bags on top of the cake to shield it from the fire. It is baked in the ground all night, while Navajo Singer and relatives (mostly women) sing songs from the Navajo Blessing Way. In the morning the cake is cut and distributed to the Singer, those who helped with the songs, and other relatives, after the girl's hair is ceremonially washed and she runs for the last time to the East. During the ceremony the girl becomes Changing Woman. After the cake has been distributed, she is moulded (her body pressed and massaged) by the woman who represents Spider Woman assuring that she will grow strong and have a long life.

In retrospect, the ceremony had a big impact on Valerie. As a college student she has found that it has helped to mould her own philosophy and approach to life. 'All the stuff that I did, like work real hard and push myself. . . . Today, I think when I start to do something, I want to finish it. When I'm in a bind or when I'm in trouble I work real hard to fix it.. to make it better. Just the philosophy that went along with the *Kinaaldá* ceremony kind of incorporated

into the culture that I live in now. . . . You push yourself to the full extent to get what you want. You are outspoken and you express your feelings. You don't sit back and not present to people around you who you are. . . . You make yourself visible. . . . Things like running [in the *Kinaaldá* ceremony] – the significance of that is like pushing yourself harder every time. Today when I look at my *Kinaaldá*, I'm glad that my mom and my grandma placed this opportunity upon me. . . . It's really helped to play a large part in my life.'

Marriage

Marriage is an area where there have been many more changes, although the Navajo wedding ceremony is still performed. In past decades marriages were arranged usually by the parents or the mothers of the bride. Marriage constituted a relationship between two kin groups. A bride price (usually of horses) was paid from the groom's kin to the bride's kin, and the ceremony was held at the bride's hogan where the groom's kin arrive to be welcomed and feasted. The central part of the ceremony is the eating of corn meal mush with relatives making speeches encouraging the couple to help each other, take care of each other and 'sit together nicely' (*Hazhó sok'ee*). Eva's mother, Eva, and her sister were all married young, shortly after their *Kinaaldá* ceremonies. All three men were much older, and each reported that she was afraid of her first husband. Eva described her feelings as follows, 'I was scared of him for four years I was still little and he was a man.' She became pregnant, and Carole was her first-born child. The marriage later broke up, and Eva's second relationship with Joe, a returned World War II veteran, was consensual and not marked by a ceremony.

In contrast to her mother and aunt, Carole had two significant relationships (one with Valerie's father) before her mother arranged a marriage for her in the mid 1970s. Carole herself was very ambivalent about the marriage and tried to avoid it. 'It was a forced marriage,' she said. The marriage lasted several years and produced two children (her second daughter, Erica, and her son JR) before Carole left.

During the spring before her graduation from college Valerie began a relationship with Donovan whom she had known for a number of years. She had not known that her mother's and grandmother's marriages had been arranged and during our interviews when these relationships were discussed, she was clearly on the side of personal choice in marriage, 'I myself, maybe if I lived back in the 1960s, you know, wouldn't have minded so much, but now I'm my own individual, and I'm free to make my own choices. I don't think I would agree to it if my grandma or my mother would ever suggest it to me.' However, she and Donovan chose to have a traditional wedding ten months after their son was born.

With the help of Valerie's uncles, a hogan was constructed. Following an old Navajo tradition Donovan's parents, sisters, relatives and Donovan arrived at the home site on horseback. The groom's family entered the hogan and sat on the north side. The bride entered carrying the wedding basket with the corn meal mush, followed by her relatives who sat on the South. The singer or medicine man presided with the couple who sat to the West. The hogan in this case was decorated with an American Flag and a tapestry containing symbols

from the Peyote religion. He instructed the couple to wash their hands in water poured from a Pueblo wedding vase. Then Valerie fed Donovan from the basket of mush and he fed her in turn; they took some from each of the four directions of the basket. This ceremony added some non-traditional touches. The couple exchanged rings. The medicine man blessed the marriage certificate with a prayer, and the medicine man asked for the wedding cake to be brought in and the couple again fed each other, this time with the cake rather than the mush.

The introductions of each set of relatives began, and most of the significant members of each party spoke about the future of the couple. Then we all filed out of the hogan (in the clockwise direction) and lined up for a Navajo meal (including the same sort of mix I described for the April birthdays). Afterwards Valerie and Donovan cut and served their wedding cake (provided by Valerie's uncle and daughters) and opened their presents (household items and a pair of matching Pendelton blankets).

While experience with childbirth (home versus hospital) lends itself to a straight-line assimilation argument, attention to the other two events (the *Kinaaldá* and the arranged first marriage) suggests more complexity. All three generations participated in the *Kinaaldá* and Carole's marriage, like those of her mother and grandmother, was arranged, though in different circumstances. Rather than seeing these three events as on a trajectory towards assimilation, it is important to view each as a set of events that are culturally maintained or transformed. Rather than measuring assimilation, it is important to see life cycle events and rituals as providing the raw materials for maintaining a distinct Navajo culture and identity.

Metaphors of weaving and stirring

Thus, it is possible to see the elements in each of the family occasions and life cycle events I have described in this article as deriving from a different culture – Anglo or Navajo. The occasion itself may be structured as an Anglo event (a birthday or a funeral) but with Navajo elements (mutton stew, fried bread) threaded in with Anglo ones (the birthday cake, singing 'Happy Birthday'). Or the event may be structured as a Navajo one (the *Kinaaldá*, or a marriage ceremony) with Anglo elements (an American flag, corn grinders used instead of a mano and metate) or scenarios (exchanging wedding rings) woven into it. Some scenarios take an Anglo element (e.g. a wedding cake) and use it in a Navajo way – the couple feeding each other. Other scenarios (cutting a wedding cake, opening gifts) are behavioural events tacked on to a Navajo event, adding to its richness and complexity.

Even if we look at an event like a wedding meal there are additional layers of borrowing, amalgam, and meaning that go beyond the simple Anglo/Navajo dichotomy. At one level there is the contrast between the mutton stew, on the one hand, and the potato salad and hamburger, on the other or the Navajo corn mush and the American wedding cake. Ironically, however, even the mutton originally comes from the introduction of sheep into Navajo life through contact with the Spanish in the eighteenth century and corn itself was adopted through contact with Pueblo peoples before then. These can be seen as elements from different cultural traditions woven together into the same tapestry or rug – distinct yet part of a new whole.

The weaving metaphor may work well for the analysis of events whether they are family meals or life-cycle rituals. But as we listen to Valerie talk about her own identity as a young Navajo woman, the metaphor of stirring or blending seems more appropriate (just as Valerie was stirring together the corn meal and water for her *'alkaad'*). She sees herself as moulded in the image of Changing Woman through her puberty ceremony, as the educated, goal-oriented woman she has become: a sort of seamless blend of American and Navajo ways of thinking about the self. The meaning of the Navajo marriage as *Hazhó sok'ee* or 'sitting together nicely' in beauty and peacefulness blends together Anglo ideas about love and commitment with Navajo goals of reciprocity and mutual aid.

Other Navajo patterns

Not all her cousins fit the pattern of Valerie's life, both in terms of structural assimilation (educational and occupational mobility in the context of regional migration) and the cultural construction of identity through language retention and continued adherence to Navajo traditional ceremonies. For some cousins or siblings, migration has meant incorporation into working-class service jobs, adoption of English (with no use of Navajo) and intermarriage. Valerie's siblings Erica and Junior are cases in point. Erica, her younger sister, did not go on to college but migrated to Salt Lake City to work in warehouses. After trying to relocate in Albuquerque without success, she returned to Salt Lake. In 2004 she married the father of her new baby, a Puerto Rican. JR, Valerie's brother, met his Yavapai wife at community college in Albuquerque. They have shifted from Carole's home to his wife's mother's and back again to the reservation, always looking for work in fast food restaurants or nursing homes. For example, in the spring of 2005 their daughter Haley was staying full time with Carole and attending Head Start while her parents moved to Albuquerque to find better jobs. In the autumn, the parents moved back to Carole's house, where they are awaiting the birth of their second child.

Likewise, Valerie's two cross-cousins (*bizeedí*) who did not come to the April Birthday party live in Salt Lake and Albuquerque and have partnered with non-Navajos. Renee just gave birth to her second child, her partner a Mexican immigrant to the US. Valerie is quite close to Elena, helping her with several difficult pregnancies and renting her their house when they moved to Farmington. Elena's six year old daughter is part African-American. Her husband is Hispano so her new son is bicultural/biracial as well. Not only are these young mothers occupied with the needs of their children, but neither of their mothers live on the Reservation, leaving them without a matrilineal place of return.

In Valerie's generation among an even wider network of kin that includes all the great-grandchildren of Eva's mother, some have remained on the reservation, commuting to service jobs in Farmington or Gallup but others have migrated to Albuquerque, Salt Lake or even as far as Baltimore, finding the same kinds of employment. There is a scattering of these relatives who have attended college which suggests that perhaps 10–20 per cent of Navajo young are upwardly mobile, gaining a college degree and professional jobs by the end of their twenties.

Some of these siblings and cousins will remain away from the reservation but for others (both those moving into the middle class and those pulled into the working-class service economy) home and its celebrations or ritual occasions will remain a powerful magnet.

Like the *Kinaaldá* and the marriage ritual, Navajo traditional healing ceremonies and Native American Church meetings are centred around families and kin networks. Even Anglo originated occasions (graduations and funerals) are followed by a meal at the family home site. Birthdays like the one I described at the beginning of this presentation are just one of the many occasions that bring back relatives from as far away as Salt Lake or Albuquerque. Routine trips home to help build a storage shed, haul coal for a grandmother, or trade one car for another are times for extended family meals with fried bread, freshly butchered mutton ribs, or fresh corn.

Comparative data from new immigrant populations

There are two patterns in the examples of life-cycle rituals and family celebrations I have cited from this one Navajo extended kin network. The first is exemplified by the birthday party which takes an American tradition and puts a 'Navajo stamp' on it. The second pattern is a continuation of a traditional ritual like the girl's *Kinaaldá* and the Navajo wedding ceremony but with American touches. Both kinds of bricolage and pastiche have been the hallmark of Navajo cultural inventiveness since at least 1500. Navajo culture has continued to

survive through periods of strong assimilative policies and weak ones on the part of the dominant societies with which they have been in contact.

So what does this say about assimilation versus retention and the maintenance of cultural distinction? Certainly there are important differences between regional migration among the Navajo whose roots in the US predate European settlement and transnational immigration where the homeland is one-half a world away. Navajos and other Native Americans do not have to cross international borders, their institutions are located within the US and are a product of over 150 years of contact (with many governmental, educational and religious institutions imposed directly from the larger society). The maintenance of a reservation-based society has meant that many Navajo families can still use the reservation home of grandparents or elders as a source for regenerating ties to the land and to kin. The residence group can also be the site of life-cycle events (the *Kinaaldá*, a wedding, a funeral) and healing rituals (a Native American Church meeting, a Navajo singing). Replenishment brought by continued migration and continual transnational flow of goods and people serves the same function among many new immigrant groups (Waters and Jiménez 2005). In some cases families use transnational ties and travel to maintain or even elaborate on a ceremony. Deborah Boehm in her study of transnational families in Albuquerque and San Luis Potosi describes both weddings and *quinceañeras* held in the United States. The *quiceañera* was an elaborate event (often termed a 'coming out' celebration or the flying off of a young dove), with the dress bought in Ciudad Juarez and family members travelling from Mexico to attend having contributed money for the band, favours and invitations. (Boehm 2005, pp. 210–211).

Immigrants often use modern technology to continue a tradition, even though this transforms the cultural practices. Nancy Burke found that her Cuban immigrant interviewees were not able to rely on experienced Santería practitioners in the small Albuquerque Cuban community, but instead used phone cards and long distance telephone links to consult their regular advisers. Sometimes relatives or the practitioners regular *padrino* are able to make offerings, attend to the migrants ritual paraphernalia (left behind in Cuba), or conduct divinations. Ritual practice takes place in Cuba with the subject *in absentia*, while the practitioner has a much smaller altar and scaled down set of practices in the US (Burke 2002).

Nancy Foner's survey of immigrant family patterns (1997) offers several examples of immigrant groups who have altered their family structure to meet new conditions in the US.

Kibria reports that Vietnamese families in Philadelphia coped with uncertainty and economic insecurity by expanding their kin networks

to include more distant relatives, in-laws, and non-kin, all while continuing to draw on Confucian ideology and ancestor worship (Kibria 1993). Foner herself, based on her own research with Jamaican families, prefers to call these changing family patterns a form of 'creolization' – a system of social relations and cultural forms that in the Jamaican case was neither English nor African. Drummond (1980) also uses the term 'creolization' to characterize the two different Guyanese weddings that were a sequence of events that drifted back and forth between two poles (in one case 'Muslim' and 'English', in the other 'coolie' and 'English'). For Drummond ethnicity consists of a 'set of compelling ideas about one's own and others' distinctiveness that provide a basis for acting and for interpreting others' actions' (1980, p. 368). Foner's use of the term seems to focus on the cultural forms that immigrant families create in new context using their own cultural ideas and practices, while borrowing others from a dominant culture, while Drummond describes situations where the actors themselves come from different ethnic or cultural groups and it is their coming together that forges new cultural forms. Foner's approach might describe the way Navajos are changing the traditional Navajo wedding ceremony, while Drummond's characterization fits a Navajo/Mexican wedding, perhaps. The former is a changing form that remains marked as 'Navajo' while the latter is identified as a cultural blend. Yet neither approach (and this is perhaps because the term creolization covers a host of different processes) distinguishes between the birthday party (putting a Navajo 'stamp' on an American celebration) and a wedding that has a few Americanized components. My argument is that we would be better off more carefully examining such differences, not in order to label them as steps towards assimilation but to better understand the creation and maintenance of cultural difference.

Assimilation, as redefined by Alba and Nee, provides too broad a framework. It is too broad because the term has come to mean everything from the disappearance of difference to its active cultivation through ethnic institutions and organizations. Despite the definitional stance that includes both the erasure and the maintenance of difference, both Alba and Nee and those who espouse segmented assimilation focus primarily on structural measures of assimilation rather than on the variety of intra-cultural practices that may be developing or on the various modes of constructing cultural identities that are distinct. The appeal of the term assimilation is that it sounds less 'dangerous,' since assimilation connotes integration and bringing new immigrant groups into the mainstream. Focusing on 'the maintenance of difference' and the cultivation of diversity sounds like emphasizing divisiveness, implying that the nation could be torn apart by conflict and dissension.

The question is whether the US will look more like Rhode Island in 1960 where third- or fourth-generation ethnic immigrants (French-Canadian, Italian, Irish or Polish) exercised their ‘options’ to be different or whether it will look more like New Mexico where Navajo, Pueblo, and Hispano communities retain traditions, institutions, and cultural identities that are distinct while still participating in the same political economy. My argument is for the latter model and for more attention to the ways that members of immigrant and ethnic communities construct identities and practices through bricolage. For Navajo women the appropriate terms might be weaving or stirring- that is building difference into the fabric of their daily lives, and at the same time creating distinct identities that undermine notions of assimilation as a unifying set of similarities.

Note

1. Milton Gordon, in his classic book on *Assimilation in American Life* (1964) distinguishes between acculturation and assimilation, acculturation being the behaviour patterns, values, rules and symbols of the dominant culture. Assimilation, in his view, meant moving out of the ethnic associations into the primary group relationships and social institutions of the larger society. For Gordon, acculturation came before assimilation. More recently, authors (Alba and Nee 1993; Portes and Zhou 1993; Waters and Jiménez 2005) have used the notion of structural assimilation to designate more macro-level factors like occupation integration, linguistic acculturation, and intermarriage, rather than primary group relations. This emphasis leaves out religious and family activities (which Gordon saw as kinds of social institutions) which are the arenas where immigrants and ethnic groups focus their efforts at maintaining difference.

In this article, I argue that we should put life-cycle events and family celebrations back into the analysis. I show that elements of American culture are often integrated into Navajo events or Navajo elements incorporated into what are usually recognized as ‘American’ cultural settings, creating forms more complex than the notion of assimilation (whether it is focused on primary groups or larger macro-level trends) can easily characterize. In my view, these celebrations involve both social (organizational) and cultural (meaning and symbolic) aspects.

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