

# **UCLA**

## **American Indian Culture and Research Journal**

### **Title**

Healing Spaces in the Tewa Pueblo World

### **Permalink**

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/6st0r2rj>

### **Journal**

American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 13(3-4)

### **ISSN**

0161-6463

### **Authors**

Naranjo, Tito  
Swentzell, Rina

### **Publication Date**

1989-06-01

### **DOI**

10.17953

### **Copyright Information**

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

Peer reviewed

# Healing Spaces in the Tewa Pueblo World

TITO NARANJO and RINA SWENTZELL

---

---

## INTRODUCTION

In the Tewa Pueblo world, health is thought of as a state of balance or a state of harmony between the human and natural environments. John Collier, in the 1930s, described the search for harmony between the human and natural environments by the Pueblo people as not altogether unique but so very special that he knew of nowhere else where a more perfect flowering of the man-society and man-society-nature relationship had happened.<sup>1</sup> The Pueblo people recognize that they live in a world of polarities—life and death, man and woman, weak and strong, black and white, and winter and summer—which create unity. They believe that past and future come together in the present—or in the center. The center is where harmony, balance, and grounding happen. It is where opposites come together to create cyclic movement and flowingness—or healing.

## THE TEWA WORLD

In the Tewa Pueblo language there is a word which means “seeking life.” That word incorporates the most basic concept of Pueblo thinking, that human life is about the search for harmony and

---

Tito Naranjo is Associate Professor of Native American Studies at New Mexico Highlands University in Las Vegas, New Mexico. He is a member of the Santa Clara Pueblo tribe. Rina Swentzell is a consultant to Indian-related architectural/educational projects. She is a native of the Santa Clara Pueblo.

balance, about breathing and walking carefully and sensing the connectedness between polarities in the human and natural worlds. The term "seeking life," or *wo-wa-tsi-tu-wa-ji*, contains the root word *wo*, which translates into medicine or healing. *Wo-wa-tsi* is life or walking, moving, and breathing. Life, then, is walking, moving, and breathing in a harmonious manner which leads to healing. Movement is necessary to healing.

Moreover, when a Tewa person is altogether strong in mind and body, that person has *ping-nung* or "heart-of-earth," or a heart that connects with the earth. That person who has *ping-nung* has unusual and even magical powers, because she/he is in alignment or in harmony with the universal essence or the *po-wa-ha* (the water-wind-breath), which gives expression to everything and everybody, including the earth and human beings. It flows through all of creation and is that which we breathe whenever we take a breath. It is that which connects.

*Ping-nung* or "heart-of-earth" also implies a recognition of oneness with the earth. It is interesting to note here that *nung* means "us" (humans) as well as "earth." Earth and humans, then, are synonymous. In that sense, realizing at once the commonness and specialness of the soil of the earth is essential to the fortunate person in Pueblo society who sees relationships and connections between all elements of the world. Pueblo people acknowledge that a "heart-of-earth" is difficult to achieve, but as in Western society, where the goal is a "heart of gold," the phrase focuses on the ideal beingness of the Pueblo culture. *Ping-nung*, then, is a harmonious state of connectedness between humans and the forces of the universe, a state of well-being. Part of the Tewa prayer says,

We gather here . . .  
That we may be loved and liked,  
That we may catch up with that  
For which we are always yearning,  
That we may achieve the Good Life,  
That we live in Beauty and in Harmony.<sup>2</sup>

To live in beauty and harmony is the greatest aim and desire of traditional Pueblo people. Beauty is to be loved and liked. To be loved and liked is to be accepted; to have everybody love you implies that you are in synchronization or harmony with both your social and natural contexts. As the following Tewa prayer

points out, to be totally cognizant of the enclosing and encompassing contexts which make for human existence is all important.

Oh our Mother the Earth, oh our Father the Sky,  
Your children are we, and with tired backs  
We bring you the gifts that you love.  
Then weave for us a garment of brightness;  
May the warp be the white light of morning,  
May the weft be the red light of evening,  
May the fringes be the falling rain,  
May the border be the standing rainbow.  
Thus weave for us a garment of brightness  
That we may walk fittingly where birds sing,  
That we may walk fittingly where grass is green,  
Oh our Mother the Earth, oh our Father the Sky!<sup>3</sup>

As stated earlier, however, dialectical forces are recognized as elemental principles of the whole. The harmonious whole, then, is made up of dichotomies and polar energies. They are part of the conception of the social, political, and religious worlds. "The idea of the dualism of opposite principles which have to be balanced . . . is so all-pervading that it dominates the Tewa social and religious systems, as for instance in the moiety organization of the Winter and Summer people which represent the male and the female principles respectively."<sup>4</sup> The Winter and Summer people rotate the governance of the Pueblo from fall equinox to spring equinox, with the focus being the overall unity of the community.

In the social realm, males and females are considered equally important for human survival and community well-being. A term used for that concept is *kwi-sen* or "woman-man." It is a term that recognizes maleness and femaleness as necessary ingredients of human existence. The term speaks of the greatness or spirituality of traditional Pueblo thought. The ideal leader, for instance, is the cacique who is a "woman-man," or a person who is great enough to incorporate basic "oppositional elements." In the emergence myth of the Tewas, the cacique chosen to enter the upper world is asked if he will not be woman-man. After the fourth time he is asked, he agrees by saying, "Yes, I am a woman-man for all the people who are here."

Again, in a tale imputed to the Hopi a youth is chosen to seek the evil that is killing off the people. "Our

son," says the Summer Town Chief, "you ought to think like a woman-man." He accepts by saying, "Of course, I will be woman-man. . . ." After his preliminary fast, when seated, they say, "Think like a woman-man." After smoking "he fell down, stretching, to become strong like woman-man. When he arises he is able to fly."<sup>5</sup>

The admonition to be a "woman-man" affirms the need to recognize polarities as necessary in life. There is nothing to be done, except to honor those dichotomies which create movement and, hence, healing in the world. The goal of the human, then, is to be in accordance with the *po-wa-ha* or the forces of nature which create both masculinity and femininity, cold and warm, earth and sky, north and south, hard and soft, winter and summer.

That search for balance and harmony focuses the thinking of the Tewa Pueblo world on the more inclusive, gentler, nurturing qualities in humans as well as in the built environment, as will be shown. In the social, religious, and political structuring, the term *Gia*, or mother, is used pervasively to identify ideal beingness. *Gia* is a term used to address the earth. It is also used for the highest supernaturals who remain in the underworld, for males who are outstanding leaders, for strong community-level females, and for biological mothers. The human quality of nurturing is valued so highly that the predominant beings of the Tewa are the *Gias*, or mothers, in all categories of Pueblo social, political, and religious life. They are people who love and help. In Pueblo myths, the corn girls of the six directions are required to act as mothers. "You are the Mothers of the people," says Corn Old Woman to the young corn girls in a Tewa tale, "You are not the ones to treat anyone wrongly."<sup>6</sup> These are the traditional ideals of Pueblo society and are for every Pueblo person to emulate.

Harmony, balance, and nurturing are also pervasive qualities in the natural and man-made spaces of the Pueblo. In the Western world, significant spaces are the man-made ones. The traditional Pueblo focuses on the natural environment and the negative spaces created by the human-made environment. The plaza or outdoor communal space is more important than the defining walls and as important as the shrines which contain the openings into the underworld. The shrines and their openings are im-

portant because they connect the interior of the earth with the human-defined space of the plaza and, then, with the sky.

For Pueblo people, the building, the landscape, the region, all together are the physical expressions of their beliefs. These things form the invisible link between the spiritual and material parallels of their lives. The building, the landscape, the region make up the world within which the people live. It is a holistic and symbolic world. It is a description of the physical environment in terms of what it should be like or what feels right, rather than what makes sense or what is rational. The clouds are where the dead people go, in the form of energy. Hence, the clouds bring life, because clouds bring rain. The cyclical nature of life is continually reiterated. The clouds are very much a part of the recognized physical atmosphere, because movement is the revered element of life.

### HEALING SPACES

Traditionally, movement was also recognized as important for people. Groups of Pueblo people moved through the physical environment of the southwestern United States, building many Pueblos/communities in a few generations. Therefore, the numbers of Pueblos located in the Southwest is astonishing. The movement of the people is seen to mirror the clouds, which are the ultimate symbolic concept of the way life was to be lived and buildings formed. The terracing of traditional Pueblo structures to look like clouds and the simultaneous non-attachment to the "real" place is part of that symbolic coding.

As each Pueblo was defined, it began, as the myths tell us, with the male leaders of the people being told, "Now you have to think like woman. You have to put the big hills to the north." So they (the women-men) took a little mud and threw it in the four directions, and there were the mountains and hills. Those mountains and hills were the boundaries for the enclosed valley within which the Pueblo world was established. Both the mountains and the valleys were important in the physical ordering of their universe. The mountains represent the male forces, and the valleys are the feminine essence of the world. Another Tewa prayer is about the flow of the creative energy:

Within and around the earth,  
Within and around the hills,  
Within and around the mountains,  
Your authority returns to you.<sup>7</sup>

Within that flow, or movement, and within the valley defined by the mountains, a world is described with various zones for human spirits, animal spirits, and human activities. All are well-situated in a concentric manner, until finally the center of the world, which is the very point of emergence from the underworld, is reached. This *nan-sipu* or center, which is usually marked by a mere stone, is the center of the universe or the source of life. It is the point of connection and the place of energy flow between the many levels of Pueblo existence. It is where the people emerged from the underworld; it is the symbolic point through which contact with the corn mothers who remain under the lake can be made. It is also the place in the physical environment which shows the Pueblo preference for the feminine principles of connectedness, inclusiveness, and flowingness. The *nan-sipu* is the symbolic opening of mother earth.

The symbolic openings are found in the plaza area, within the kiva, and in the enclosing hills as well as in the far mountains. These openings represent, again, an effort to connect this level of existence with that below. Each of the openings (*nan-sipu* and shrines) is a special healing space. Each is the primary point of energy flow between the simultaneous levels of the Pueblo world—it is where the movement of the universe is most intense. Those points are the centering places of the Pueblo world, and human life can be felt most intensely, because it is there where one can be in the connective flow of the universe. They are, however, inconspicuous points in the natural and man-made environments. As architectural statements they are practically non-existent, but symbolically they are the essence of the Pueblo world.

Around that symbolic point of emergence is the void or the plaza space defined by the adobe house structures. That negative space is where the drama of human life is enacted. Daily and routine activities, as well as the search for the human relationship with the universe, are played out there. The ceremonial dances that affirm the human connectedness with earth and the clouds also remind the viewers of human baseness via the feces-

eating clowns. It is in this protected, enclosed outdoor space where the large community stories are told of laughter, anguish, humility, and oneness of spirit. As a Pueblo person notes,

One verse in words and at the start of the next, the dancers turned and faced the row of dancers to the left. Silently many-breath body souls cried only with depth and unsadness. Old men of the chorus with right arms lifted, bright head bands, and hands dipped in ceremonial paint motioned and pantomimed the song in rhythmical arches as the songs of the Untege Share (the foot-lifting dance) flowed over the one being—the being of Santa Clara Pueblo.<sup>8</sup>

The community areas of the Pueblo, such as the kiva and plaza area, are healing spaces. The kiva is a microcosm of the plaza. Within both places, the human community makes contact with the other levels of simultaneous existence. Both contain the *nan-sipu*. It is to both that the corn mothers from the lake are brought to help maintain and establish harmony and to bless the community spaces, structures, and people. Within the plaza, as in the Taos Pueblo pole ceremony, the connection and balance point between sky and earth are sought. During the community dances it is within the plaza areas where the entire community participates in “seeking life”—seeking the recognition and consequent balance of the polar or contrary forces of life.

Healing or balance-giving, however, does not happen only during the ceremonies in those community spaces but also happens at other times, for example, when a group of men at Taos Pueblo gather on an ordinary evening or at sunrise to sing. While listening to the dawn-singers, a Taos Pueblo woman made the following comment: “Old lady sickness is hurrying away with slobber on her mouth. It is running down her jaws. Her clothes are tattered.”<sup>9</sup>

Healing also happens within the house form of the Pueblos. The interconnectedness of the house structures creates a unity of the physical community form.<sup>10</sup> It is one monolithic house that grows out of the earth itself. The mud-plastered walls give a sense of continuity moving from the earth up the walls and onto the multi-levels of the structure. The gentle, undulating brown walls are stable and reassuring. The interiors are dark and enclosed.

ing. Peter Nabokov describes the sensation of a traditional Acoma Pueblo house in the following manner:

There were no even surfaces. The walls rippled around as in a cocoon softened and renewed by the annual caress of woman's hands. . . . I felt how safe and warm it would be to sleep in such a place.<sup>11</sup>

Within those interior house spaces, ceremonial healings also happen. All houses are healed periodically and fed cornmeal. Traditionally, some burials also occurred in the floor of the houses. Houses are deemed to be alive and have energies which can bring harmony if recognized and treated with proper respect and care.

## CONCLUSION

Pueblo people, like all other peoples, abstract and produce symbols, and those symbols help create a world that speaks about the essence of life. Traditional Pueblo people have chosen symbols that remind them of the diversity in the unity of the world. The harmonizing and balancing of oppositional elements are necessary to describe the oneness, interconnectedness, and interdependency of the natural and human environments. The Pueblo environment assumes that healing spaces are gentle and warm but mostly provide a sense of connectedness that engenders wholeness with body and spirit, with self and the cosmos, with nature and the creative energy. That seeking of resonance with other humans, nature, and the built environment assures an existence in which healing of body and soul is possible.

## NOTES

1. John Collier, *On The Gleaming Way* (Chicago: Sage Books, 1962).
2. Vera Laski, "Seeking Life," *Memoirs of the American Folklore Society* 50 (1959): 85.
3. Herbert Spinden, *Songs of the Tewa* (New York: The Exposition of Indian Tribal Arts, 1933), 94.
4. Laski, "Seeking Life."
5. Elsie Clews Parsons, *Tewa Tales* (New York: G. E. Stechart and Co., 1926), 263.

6. *Ibid.*, 264.
7. Alfonso Ortiz, *The Tewa World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969), 13.
8. Tito Naranjo, "Back to the River of Life" (Unpublished paper, 1976).
9. Frances Suazo, personal communication, 1986.
10. Henry Lewis Morgan, *Houses and House Life of the American Aborigines* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965).
11. Peter Nabokov, *Architecture of Acoma Pueblo* (Santa Fe, NM: Ancient City Press, 1986), 27.