

DANCES OF THE TEWA PUEBLO INDIANS
Expressions of New Life, second edition

C H A P T E R O N E
SEEKERS OF LIFE

The dancers file out of the kiva and move slowly into the village plaza to perform. Sounds of deep male voices singing, the clatter of deer hoof rattles, and the steady, resonant beat of the drum draw the Tewa people from their homes. Parrot feathers, embroidered dance kilts, striped blankets, and fringed shawls color the event. The people have come together for dancing, singing, and feasting; they will leave with a sense of renewal. The Tewa Pueblo Indians say that they dance and sing to “find new life,” to “regain life,” or to “seek life.”

Visitors may find a Tewa village ritual performance in progress during any season of the year. In winter, the public performances tend to focus on hunting and game animal themes, while spring, summer, and fall events center on agriculture. The number of public ritual performances held annually varies from village to village and year to year. At San Ildefonso, San Juan, and Santa Clara, it is not uncommon for the people to hold six to ten public performances in one year; Nambe and Tesuque generally hold fewer, and Pojoaque currently has only one village performance each year.

For most events, long parallel lines of dancers move in unison to the beat of one or more drums (fig. 7). The dancers sing as they dance, or a chorus of male singers stands close by the dancers and accompanies them. These public performances often last from sunrise to sunset, demanding great endurance from performers who range in age from three years to over eighty. Each ritual occasion is the united expression of an entire Tewa community and helps reinforce Tewa Pueblo Indian traditions.



Figure 7. Led by a man carrying a banner, two long lines of dancers file into the plaza at San Ildefonso to begin the harvest dance. A chorus and a drummer accompany them. Each woman wears a wooden tablita headdress. (Photo by Roger Sweet, 1973.)

Not all who witness Tewa ritual performances understand or appreciate them. Some of the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Spanish explorers and missionaries saw these events as devil worship and described Pueblo religion as idolatrous, its rituals dangerous to the souls of participants and observers. The Spanish missionaries were particularly disturbed by ritual performances involving masks, which they interpreted as blatant idol worship. One missionary referred to the masked dances as “an offering of the fruits of the earth to the Devil” (quoted in Bandelier 1937:207). Another tried to stop a masked ritual performance by walking through the plaza “with a cross upon his shoulders, a crown of thorns and a rope about his neck, beating his naked body” (Bandelier 1937:184).

In 1846, when the Tewas and other Pueblo Indians became a concern of the United States government, their ritual performances were described by some Anglos as immoral, pagan, repugnant, or simply a hindrance to the civilizing process. In the 1920s, Charles H. Burke, the United States commissioner of

Indian affairs, attempted to stop many forms of Indian ritual performance, claiming that these events contained “barbaric features” and interfered with family and farming responsibilities. The commissioner and the Protestant missionary groups who supported him failed to understand that many Indian ritual events are held specifically to unify families and ensure agricultural success. Burke’s crusade against Indian ritual performances failed primarily because of protests voiced by both Indian and Anglo supporters of Pueblo religious freedom (Philip 1977:55–70).

While Burke was attempting to ban Indian rituals, Anglo businessmen in the Southwest saw Tewa and other Pueblo performances as potential tourist attractions. These entrepreneurs discovered that tourists would pay for guided trips to village ritual events and that Pueblo Indians could be brought into Southwestern towns to perform segments of their rituals for large groups of paying tourists. The Tewa Indians, however, discouraged Anglo businessmen from any serious attempts to convert their village rituals into tourist shows. Tourist performances do exist today, but these events, in which the Tewas present short segments of their native dances, have developed independently from the Tewa ritual cycle and stand as separate, tourist-oriented theatrical productions held outside the sacred village dance plazas. In spite of the pressures from Spanish and Protestant missionaries and Anglo government officials, Tewa village ritual performances survive. The people still dance and sing “to find new life.”

Tewa Pueblo Indians

Contemporary Pueblo Indians are the proud descendents of native peoples who inhabited what is now the American Southwest as long ago as two millennia. By 500 B.C., these ancestors were living in small villages and growing corn, beans, and squash. Between A.D. 900 and 1300, prehistoric Pueblo peoples built elaborate towns with spectacular architecture, the most dramatic examples of which are the famous sites of Mesa Verde and Chaco Canyon. By the beginning of the fourteenth century, some of the Pueblos’ ancestors had migrated to the Rio Grande Valley and established farming communities there.

In 1540, Francisco Vasquez de Coronado led the first European expedition into Pueblo territory. With several hundred armed men and five Franciscan missionaries, Coronado traveled northward from present-day Mexico in search of gold and converts. Soon the Pueblo Indians were declared Spanish subjects and introduced to Catholicism. This was a difficult period for the Pueblos because colonial Spanish policies were harsh. Civil and church authorities confiscated native religious paraphernalia, burned kivas (ceremonial chambers), and punished uncooperative Indians with public whippings, head shavings, and

occasionally the amputation of a foot or hand. In 1665, Hopi Pueblo Indians reported that a priest whipped an Indian for practicing idolatry, then doused him with turpentine and set him on fire. During this same period, a Taos Pueblo woman was allegedly killed by a priest because she failed to spin cotton for him (Simmons 1979:184).

By 1680, Pueblo resentment of the Spaniards became so great that the Indians united in revolt, driving their oppressors out of the area. The Spaniards returned thirteen years later, however, to reestablish control, though after the reconquest their treatment of the Pueblo Indians became less harsh. The Spaniards continued to rule Pueblo lands until 1821, when the newly independent Mexican government took control. Twenty-seven years later, the area became a territory of the United States. Throughout these political changes, the Pueblo Indians attempted to live their lives as their ancestors had for centuries.

Modern Pueblo Indian villages can be identified by location and language, the languages being Hopi, Zuni, Keresan, Tiwa, Towa, and Tewa. Hopi-speaking Pueblo Indians, the westernmost group, inhabit villages in northern Arizona, and Zuni Pueblo lies near the Arizona–New Mexico border (fig. 8). In New Mexico, the Pueblo Indians living in the villages of Acoma, Laguna, Santa Ana, Zia, San Felipe, Cochiti, and Santo Domingo all speak the Keresan language. Tiwa speakers are found at the geographically scattered villages of Isleta, Sandia, Picuris, and Taos, while Towa is spoken only in the village of Jemez. Finally, Tewa-speaking people, the subjects of this book, live in the villages of Tesuque, Nambe, Pojoaque, San Ildefonso, Santa Clara, and San Juan, all within a twenty-mile stretch of land along the Rio Grande and its tributaries, north of Santa Fe, New Mexico. Population figures for the Tewa villages range from as many as 1,487 inhabitants at San Juan to as few as 107 at Pojoaque (Simmons 1979:221).

The traditional economy of the Tewas, like that of all Pueblo Indians, emphasized agriculture along with hunting and trading. Today, some Tewa families still farm the irrigated lands surrounding their villages, and the men occasionally go on hunting trips. Most contemporary Tewa families, however, depend on wage work and/or sales of arts and crafts. Some Tewa people commute to jobs in Santa Fe, while others temporarily leave their villages to work in other states. More Tewa Indians are attending colleges and universities and then taking professional positions in their own villages and elsewhere.

Visitors often find the Tewa villages aesthetically appealing. Many Anglo artists and architects are inspired by the simple adobe houses that surround the village plazas, by the kivas with their ladders reaching toward the sky, and by the massive mission churches with heavy wooden doors (fig. 9). Traditional Tewa houses, usually located in the central part of the village, have flat roofs supported by pine logs, or *vigas*. Inside, there is often a corner fireplace, and near

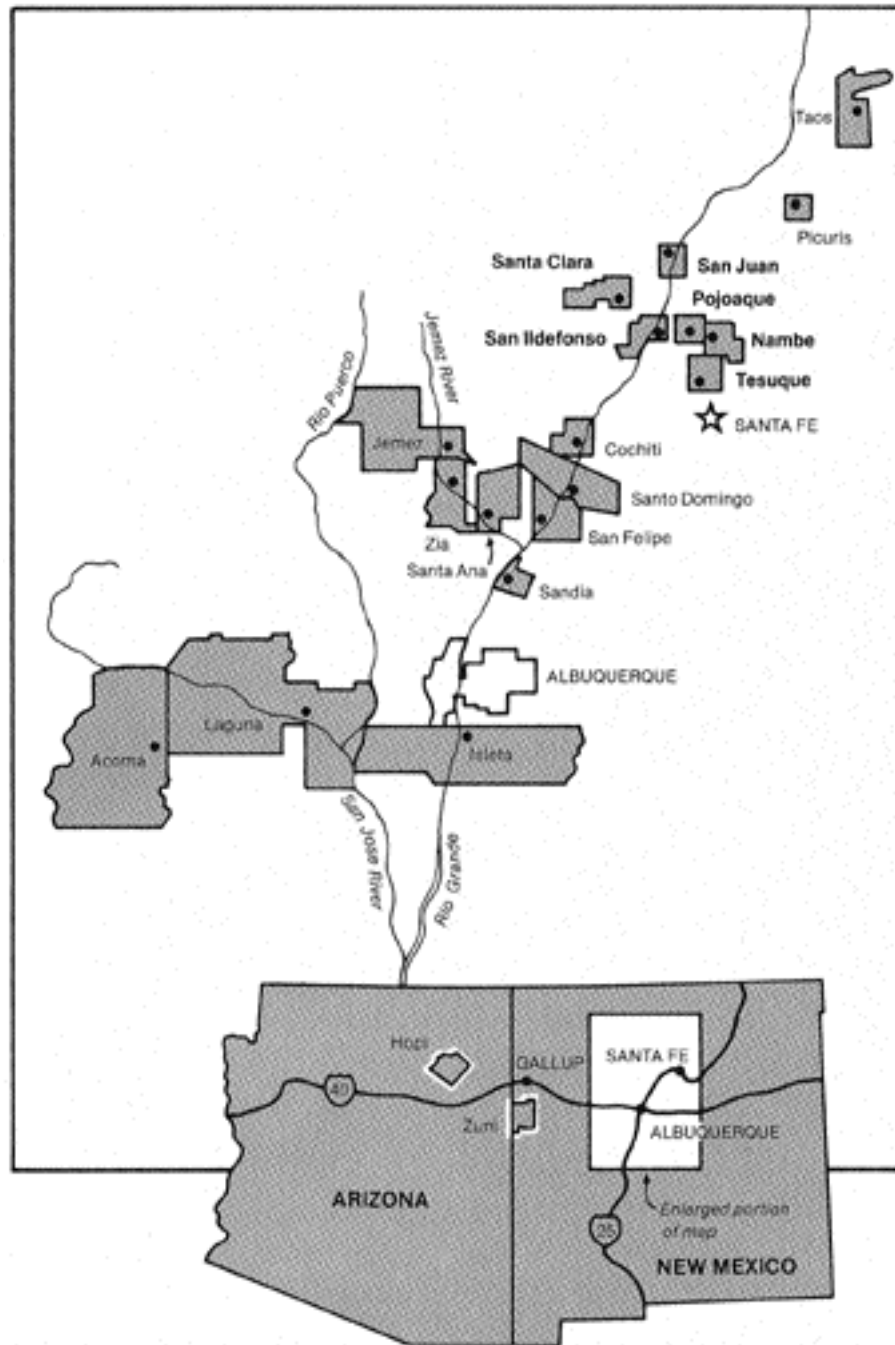


Figure 8. Locations of the modern Pueblo Indian lands and villages. (Map by Carol Cooperrider.)



Figure 9. In front of the village church, San Ildefonso Tewas present the Comanche dance to honor their patron saint. (Photo by Roger Sweet, 1973.)

the house there may be a beehive-shaped adobe oven used to bake bread, cakes, and cookies. The newer houses built at the outer edges of the villages are ranch-style homes similar to those in any modest American housing development. Many are constructed of concrete blocks and wood rather than of the traditional adobe bricks. Both old and new homes are filled with contemporary furniture, often including a stereo and a television. Frequently, the interior walls are decorated with Navajo rugs, Mexican shawls, Hopi or Apache baskets, photographs of family members, and pictures of Christ or a favorite saint.

Some Tewa villages have one large plaza; others have as many as four smaller ones. These open spaces are not paved, partly because the ritual performances are held in these areas and performer contact with the earth is symbolically important. In villages with several plazas, the ritual dancing is often repeated in each area as the dancers make a circuit through the village.

Tewa kivas may be round or square, semisubterranean or at ground-level. Some are entered by ascending a ladder or stairway to the roof and then descending a second ladder through a ceiling opening down to the kiva floor (fig. 10). Others are entered through doors at ground level. Tewa kivas may stand isolated

in the plaza or be integrated into a village house block. At the village of San Ildefonso, visitors can see an example of both an isolated round kiva with a stairway entrance and an integrated square kiva with a ground-level doorway. All Tewa kivas are constructed of adobe and carefully maintained.

Kivas are the scenes of preparation for village rituals: both men and women participants practice for their performance inside the kiva. When a public performance is to begin, the participants move from the kiva to the dance plaza, symbolizing the Tewa origin myth that describes how the first people emerged from a world below this one (Ortiz 1969:37). Private rituals not performed for the public also take place in the kivas, which are off-limits to all non-Indian visitors.

Kivas are not the only religious buildings to be found in Tewa villages; each also owns and maintains a Catholic church. Some Tewas regularly attend mass, while others seldom go. In the past, the Tewa people may have seen the Church as a threat to their traditional religious beliefs and practices, but today they seem comfortable having two religious systems coexist within their villages. Indeed, church walls may even be decorated with native motifs such as birds, corn, or cloud symbols.

Some visitors also become intrigued by the social organization of Tewa villages. The moiety system, a division of the people into two major groups, is central to traditional Tewa social organization. Typically, each member of a Tewa village belongs to either the “summer people,” associated with the south, femininity, and plant life, or to the “winter people,” associated with the north, masculinity, and minerals (see Ortiz 1969). Each Tewa belongs to his or her father’s moiety, although in some cases a woman may change to her husband’s moiety. The moiety system is sometimes expressed publicly during ritual performances as each group presents a different dance, uses its own kiva, or performs in its own plaza area.

A native priest heads each moiety and directs ritual activities for half the year. These priests are aided by war captains, who, together with their assistants, are most visibly in charge of the village performances. They watch over the events to make sure that visitors maintain a respectful distance from the dancers, stay away from the kivas, and observe photography and sound-recording rules. The war captains’ group is also instrumental in selecting dancers and singers and organizing dance practices.

Each Tewa village also has a council consisting of the current governor and his lieutenants, all previous governors, and the male heads of native religious societies. First established by the Spaniards in the belief that the Pueblo Indians lacked a legitimate political structure, the offices of governor and lieutenant governor—perhaps because of their foreign origin—are responsible for any secular



Figure 10. After a performance of the yellow corn dance, Nambe Tēwas return to their semi-subterranean kiva by climbing the steps and then descending a ladder. (Photo by Roger Sweet, 1974.)

matters brought to the council, as well as dealings with government officials and other people from outside the Tewa world.

The Tewas' native religious system focuses primarily on group rather than individual concerns. Religious activities seek group harmony and community health and promote seasonal changes and weather control more often than they mark changes in an individual's status or celebrate personal religious experiences. As an extension of this concern for group welfare, the Tewas honor animals and plants that are part of their environment, seeking a harmonious coexistence with the natural world.

Fundamental to Tewa religion are the many supernaturals who can use their power either constructively or destructively. One important type of supernatural is called *okhua* by the Tewas but is more commonly known to non-Tewas by the Hopi Pueblo term *kachina*. Okhua or kachinas are sometimes described as spirits of the dead. Only people who have devoted their lives to religious activities, however, will join the kachinas after death (Ortiz 1969:96). In private ritual performances, men who have been ritually initiated embody the kachina spirits, which may be male or female mythical characters, animals, insects, or plants. Kachina dancers wear elaborate masks that hide their human identity even from Tewa women and children. It was the masked kachina dances that especially troubled the early Spanish missionaries, and probably for that reason, Tewa

kachina dances are no longer open to the public. No outsiders are allowed to witness these most sacred performances, and the Tewas will not speak to visitors about the masked beings or their ritual appearances.

Historically, the Tewa Indians had several esoteric religious societies that were responsible for performing specific rites during the annual ritual cycle. There were societies of medicine men, hunters, warriors, women, and, the most visible and interesting to visitors, the *kossa* (“k’ohsaa”) clowns. The current state of these societies is difficult to determine because they are not openly discussed with outsiders. Apparently, some societies no longer function in Tewa villages, but the *kossa* clowns of San Juan and San Ildefonso are, without question, still active (fig. 11). Their numbers are few, but they dedicate themselves to the spiritual and ritual life of the village, and, like members of all the religious societies, they must be instructed in highly esoteric matters and ritually initiated for life. They supervise some of the public performances and engage in ritual buffoonery, reversing and inverting reality by doing things incorrectly or backwards. Thus, they help reinforce socially acceptable behavior by demonstrating what is unacceptable, using pantomime, speech, or ridicule of people who have broken Tewa social norms. Anglo visitors are not exempt from the antics of these clowns, who may target an unsuspecting tourist for one of their pranks.

Two Types of Public Performance

The village rituals that are the public aspects of the Tewa religious system are regular parts of the Tewa ritual calendar. With their dramatic action, dance, and music, these traditional performances are communal public prayers presented primarily for those who understand and share the Tewa language, beliefs, and worldview. Each year, some Tewas also participate in a second type of performance: theatrical productions that are generally held away from the village for non-Tewa audiences. Anglo-organized ceremonials, Tewa-organized ceremonials, and arts and crafts fairs are the most elaborate of these productions and have been the most popular and regularly held since the 1920s. Although participation in theatrical productions is regarded as enjoyable, this second category of public performance is not considered as important for the Tewa community as is performing in a village ritual.

During the first quarter of this century, when Southwestern towns began to compete for the tourist trade, local businesses and chambers of commerce started promoting commercial shows called *ceremonials*, in which “Indians were hired to perform for the Anglo tourists whose presence in the town promoted the local interests” (Vogt 1955:820). These theatrical productions encouraged tourists to stay in town a few days and spend money while being entertained

by Indians participating in sports competitions and music and dance performances. Gallup, Santa Fe, and Albuquerque hosted the early Anglo-organized ceremonials in which the Tewas most often took part.

After years of experience in Anglo-organized ceremonials, the Tewas began to design and organize their own. Adopting some of the Anglo entrepreneurs' ceremonial practices and rejecting others, the Tewas developed tourist-oriented events that creatively combined ritual and theater practices. Santa Clara Pueblo held the first of these Tewa-organized ceremonials at Puye Cliffs, ten miles from the village; it continued as an annual event from 1957 until 1982. In 1961, the Nambe Tewas established the Nambe Falls ceremonial, which is still held each year.

Today, both Anglo- and Tewa-organized ceremonials have become rare, while arts and crafts fairs have gained in popularity, perhaps because they more directly address Tewa commercial interests. Some fairs are organized by Anglos and others by Indian groups, but they share an emphasis on displays, demonstrations, and sales of arts and crafts. Performances of Indian dance and music are secondary attractions usually held off to the side of the main sales booth area. Of the many Indian arts and crafts fairs held throughout the Southwest, the one that most directly involves the Tewas is the Eight Northern Indian Pueblo Council (ENIPC) Artist and Craftsman Show.

Ceremonials and Indian arts and crafts fairs, as commercial theatrical productions designed for non-Indians, are events that simultaneously unite and separate the Indian and the visitor. They bring Tewa Indians and Anglo tourists together to share and experience a combination of the two cultures' performance traditions. At the same time, these events set the two groups apart by delineating and highlighting their cultural differences. Thus, Tewa Indian performers and Anglo observers both can experience a combining of cultural elements into a new form, as well as a reinforcing of cultural boundaries.

New Life

All Tewa performances, ritual or theatrical, express a central theme of finding or seeking new life, regaining or renewing life. While each dance or song carries specific meanings and stresses certain aspects of the Tewa world, all of them are underlain by this notion of seeking, finding, regaining, and renewing life. It is a recurrent and important theme that encompasses both individual and cultural rejuvenation or revitalization.

Tewa songs, gestures, and costumes incorporate many symbolic references to this theme of new life (see Laski 1959). The songs often refer to the dawn, youths, flowers, the growth of corn and other kinds of plants, and rain and signs of rain, such as clouds, thunder, lightning, and rainbows. To an agrarian society



Figure 11. Mountain Sheep Chasing the Koshare, 1951 by Alfonso Roybal, Awa Tsireh San Ildefonso Pueblo. 35372/13, Museum of Indian Arts and Culture/Laboratory of Anthropology, Museum of New Mexico. www.miac.lab. Photograph by Blair Clark.

living in an arid climate, these symbols promise the renewal of life that is inherent in natural cycles.

Dance gestures visually reinforce the symbolic power of the songs' images. An upward reaching of the arms with palms lifted suggests the welcoming of rain; lowering of the arms may indicate digging, planting, or harvesting new crops. Arc-like gestures from side to side can suggest rainbows and clouds. The dancers hold evergreens, rattles, baskets, or ears of corn symbolizing life and growth. After some Tewa ritual performances, the dancers raise the evergreens to their mouths and inhale, thus taking in new life from a plant that remains green and "alive" all year.

Costume designs also provide symbols of new life. The long tassels hanging from a sash suggest the blessing of rain drops; woven yarn headdresses depict the squash blossoms of spring; embroidered designs symbolize layers of clouds; and a fan of feathers or a basket may represent the power of the sun. No single meaning can be attributed to a Tewa costume, dance gesture, or song, but the many layers of meanings all revolve around the central notion of new life. Even the translations of the Tewa terms for private rituals performed by the native priests reflect this theme: for example, the priests perform "bringing the buds to life" in

February, “bringing the leaves to life” in March, and “bringing the blossoms to life” in April (Ortiz 1969:98–100).

Tewa ritual events as complete experiences exemplify new life because they are seen by the Tewa people as mechanisms for revitalizing the community and bringing it together again. If, in a world of changing values, individuals begin to lose sight of their roles as Tewa Indians or to forget Tewa beliefs, then sharing in a traditional village event or even a theatrical performance can renew feelings of identity. The performers can bring Tewa families and friends into contact and reawaken in them concepts central to the Tewa worldview.

Perhaps this idea of new life has helped the Tewas maintain their cultural distinctiveness throughout a history of contact with other Native American groups, as well as with Europeans and Anglo Americans. The community regularly regains its cultural life as members dance the ancient dances and sing the ancient songs in costumes that have not changed significantly since their grandparents and great-grandparents danced in the plazas. For the Tewas, seeking and regaining life is seeking and regaining a rich cultural heritage.

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Figure 12. Young Santa Clara Pueblo dancers at a sno-cone booth between dance sets (Photo by Roger Sweet, 1973).