

## Some Aspects of Pueblo Native Religion

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**Introduction**—The pueblo under scrutiny here is Tesuque. Religion at Tesuque acts as a strong integrating factor in their culture. It serves as a unifying force which permeates practically every aspect of their way of life. The culture of Tesuque becomes more intelligible with a better understanding of the religion and this fact, coupled with their profound secrecy of everything religious, makes field work on the pueblo all the more difficult.

The secrecy on matters religious is mainly limited to the native religion. Along with the practice of native religion, the Tesuque practice Catholicism, and one family belongs to the I Am religion. These religions, though usually practiced independently of each other, have overlapped in many instances. This paper will deal only with the native religion.

**Native Religion**—The author was never told anything in particular about the native religion. To keep in the good graces of his hosts, he had to avoid delving deeply into any discussion concerning their religion. However, no anthropologist who has lived at Tesuque can completely escape learning something about the native religion, just as no anthropologist can ever make a complete study of Tesuque's native religion. Though the degree of conformity may vary, every adult at Tesuque is a religious conformist, and participates in the religious life of the community. All Whites, Spanish-Americans, and non-Tesuque Indians are excluded from all native religious ceremonies. However, in certain religious ceremonies, the Tesuque assist, or seek assistance from, other pueblos. Such a relationship is especially strong with Nambe Pueblo, a Tewa speaking pueblo like Tesuque.

Elderly men play the dominant role in the native religion of Tesuque. These are also the leaders found in the secular hierarchy. They know and guard the esoteric aspects of their religion. The knowledge of these aspects is exclusively in their own possession by virtue of the office they hold in religious societies. Though there is complete secrecy as to these societies and their functions, it seemed apparent that the men powerful in these societies were also officers in the secular hierarchy. They were respected and feared not only for the offices they held but also for the knowledge they possessed in the capacity of "priests."

The Caciques are the religious heads of their moiety throughout their term of office, and the secular heads of the whole pueblo, during that period of the year when one of them wields the reins of government. It is the duty of a Cacique to be a wise leader in matters both religious and secular, and he is the custodian of religious paraphernalia. In the performance of his duties he is helped by other religious officers, often referred to as "elder brothers." In conjunction with these officers, and the efforts of the pueblo at large, it is the Cacique's duty to insure divine blessing on his people and to make the forces of nature help the Tesuque Indians through faith, prayer, and ritual. Though in this respect the Tesuque act as a group, the distinction is made between the officers and the rest of the Tesuque on a basis similar to that between an expert and

a layman. The Cacique and his officers, due to their knowledge and experience are considered experts in the field of compelling or supplicating nature to fulfill the desires of their people.

Historically, the religion of Tesuque derives its major interest from the nature of the environment. Of chief importance in this environment is water, or rather the lack of it. In the Pueblo area in general, there are only a limited number of rivers and streams, and few of them flow permanently. There are hardly any fish in their environment and game was so scarce that it could not be relied on. Since Tesuque once depended almost entirely on agriculture and since corn, before the arrival of the white man, was more than ninety per cent of their food, the lack of water for agriculture is obtrusive in many of their religious beliefs, rituals and superstitions. With starvation constantly at their door, it is not surprising that the major concern of the Tesuque, and the principal aspects of their religion, should cluster around their main economy—agriculture; their major daily food—corn; and that which makes this possible—rain, which in turn came from the sky, clouds, and thunder. Rather than leave their peaceful territory for more fertile and more hostile lands, the Tesuque, along with other pueblos, devised or acquired ingenious methods of irrigation and agriculture and placed faith in their religion to gain and retain the favor of nature and the elemental spirits. Those phenomena of nature which have movement—the clouds, the water, the sun, the moon, and especially the winds—are to them possessed by spirits.

Besides the dances, which are open to tourists, but may not be photographed, the Tesuque have secret ceremonies and dances, especially in the month of October. In this month, just prior to the end of the agricultural year, the pueblo of Tesuque is closed to all outsiders. Even those non-Tesuque Indians living at the pueblo are not permitted to take any part in the ceremonies that follow. The Tesuque themselves laugh about the dances open to the tourists, but the ceremonies performed secretly are held in great reverence and esteem.

The number four has a special significance in Tesuque religion where it is associated both with their dependence on the forces of nature in earlier times and the Catholic symbol of the cross in recent times. Perhaps it was due to the significance of this number that the Tesuque have taken kindly to the cross and used it so widely in their native ceremonies. Though the Tesuque recognize six major directions—North, South, East, West, Zenith, and Nadir—they think of the wind as coming from the four corners of the earth. The wind gains importance as one of the spiritual phenomena, for not only does it move, but one can feel it, hear it whistle, and even be destroyed by it. The number four is used most often in folk tales and is sometimes taken to designate "some" or "several" rather than the precise "four." It is believed that a promise becomes binding if repeated four times, and that the period of confinement should be at least four days as must be the period of mourning. A child is given an Indian name on the fourth day of its birth. In everyday life, the number four seems to have lost most of its religious significance, but the Tesuque admit that this is their most significant number, followed by number six, and that it has some symbolic value for them.

In the native religion, there is respect for land eminences. The author

was informed that such respect was derived from the proximity of these eminences to the "heavens" and thereby the source of rain. On a hill, west of the village, and southeast of the ball field, the author observed one such shrine. It consisted of an arrangement of white painted rocks, in the sign of a cross. Tesuque Indians, returning to the pueblo, often visited this shrine.

On the whole, the native religion emphasizes the group, rather than the individual; religious experience leading to a well developed ceremonial life, emphasizing ritual over belief. The tendency in these religious ceremonials is to identify the good of the individual with the common good. Hence, the native religion tends to draw the Tesuque people into a closely knit group and furnishes them with guidance and discipline.

The native religion also encompasses the realm of witchcraft, though there was no direct mention of it. However, during one discussion of sickness, the author was informed that sickness could be caused by some jealous person. The hospital could not cure it, and though in the past there were "doctors" on the pueblo who could cure it, a case of sickness from witchcraft would now be a hopeless case.

**Conclusion**—It is unfortunate that the time was not yet ripe for a detailed study of the native religion. In spite of their secretiveness, certain generalities regarding the native religion emerge. Native religion still plays a dominant role at Tesuque, and permeates their way of life to such an extent that it is difficult to draw a sharp and clear line between the religious and secular.