

Initiation Rites and the Status of Women at Taos Pueblo

PEARL KATZ

*Ph. D. (Dept. of Psychiatry, Univ. of Maryland, School of Medicine,
645 W. Redwood Ave., Baltimore, MD 21201, USA)*

The ethnographic studies of Taos Pueblo have emphasized the dominant men's status in social organization. This has been based on their exclusive role in the formal activities of governing and their designation as the official heads of households by the Taos Council, the Bureau of Indian Affairs, and the State of New Mexico. The dominant status of men at Taos has been most significantly supported by their assumed exclusive role in *kiva* initiation ceremonies and subsequent *kiva* ceremonial participation.

Kiva membership is the most important association among the Taos. Parsons (1936: 5) states that "the social organization of Taos centres [sic] in the *kivas*." Without *kiva* membership a Taos was unable to exercise power in many aspects of social life, nor did he have access to the Taos "secrets." When an informant was accused by the Council of revealing Taos secrets, he successfully defended himself by reminding them that he didn't know any secrets because he had not been initiated into a *kiva*.

Women, however, were believed to be excluded from *kiva* rituals. Parsons (1939: 934) states that "girls are not trained, nor do they attend *kiva* ceremonials." Similarly, Dozier (1961: 109) states that "male and female children are assigned by parents to Taos *kivas*, but only men are formally initiated." Although Taos men readily assessed their own social status as dominant to the women's, the women hardly behaved as if they were powerless or unaware members of Taos society. Economically, they inherited and owned land, houses, horses, and other personal property on equal status with men. Many Taos women had independent sources of income from working as maids or cooks in town or as small shopkeepers selling curios to tourists in the pueblo. These women kept and spent their money independently of their husbands, and they were better informed about the amount of their husband's income than their husbands were about theirs. If a woman was unmarried or widowed she could be considered the official head of the household.

Politically, Taos women could appear before the Council on equal status with men. Complaints ranging from a husband's failure to supply his wife with sufficient money, wifebeating, and drinking to requests for divorce for reasons of incompatibility were introduced to the Council by Taos women, and the resolutions of these complaints reflected their equal status with men. Taos women had substantial informal decision-making powers with regard to the running and maintenance of the household, the care of the children and the distribution of the men's income. They had extensive informal reciprocity relationships with many other women, cross-cutting kinship ties and independent of their husband's affiliations. These reciprocal ties involved cooperation in preparing for family festivities, mutual aid in emergency situations and an extensive communications network in which community and private events became rapidly known. Taos women's power was also reflected in interpersonal relationships. Women commonly interrupted their husbands to correct or add a statement. Fenton (1957: 319) writes "There are no meetings of the women, but there seems to be some mechanism for consulting the women before reaching a decision on certain issues." Husbands tended to talk freely with their wives, and women possessed extensive amounts of information regarding male activities. Ceremonially, women were required to participate in the dances in the plaza and in the important annual ceremonies at Blue Lake. They were similarly allowed to attend ceremonies of the Native American Church and to eat peyote.

Thus, Taos women exercised a considerable degree of influence economically, politically, and interpersonally, and knew significantly more about Taos affairs than had previously been attributed to them; it was most unlikely that they were unaware of the