Ritual Renewal in Ancestral Puebloan Societies: Collective Memory and Social Control

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**Introduction**

Ancestral Puebloan art and ritual structures have long been a focus of American Southwest archaeological study. Particular attention has been paid to evidence of their periodic refurbishment: regarding art, studies have been made of the replastering of ceramics and repainting of rock art panels; regarding ritual structures such as kivas, much research details evidence of recurrent rebuilding and remodeling phases (Walker and Venzor 2011). Most curiously, studies show that these objects and structures were regularly renovated while still functional (Crown and Wills 2003; see also Munson 2011). Those renovations suggest that Puebloan art and ritual structures were renewed as a ceremonial practice, constituting a tradition of ritual renewal.

Researchers’ methodologies for interpreting the implications of these ritual renewals vary, but several researchers agree that the cyclical and ritual renewals are linked to efforts at establishing and maintaining a collective social memory of the Chacoan ancestral past (Lekson 2007; Snead 2008; Walker and Venzor 2011). In this paper, I explore the idea that ritual remodeling of kivas and periodic redesigning of ceramics were meant to establish a collective social memory, allowing Ancestral Puebloans to feel that they were abiding by the beliefs and practices of their own ancestors. Using a case study to illustrate evidence of adherence to a concept of ritual renewal – Keuren and Roos’s study of Fourmile Ruin of Arizona (Keuren and Roos 2013) – and largely supplementing claims with evidence from Crown and Wills’s exploration of the ceramics and masonry of Ancestral Puebloan sites in Chaco Canyon (Crown and Wills 2003), I propose that ritual renewal be viewed through a sociological lens, especially utilizing the theories of French social philosopher Michel Foucault. Using ritual renewal to create a “time bridge” (Walker and Venzor 2011: 312) that allowed inhabitants to find a sense of
cohesion with new structures and traditions, I argue that the recurrent restoration of Ancestral Puebloan art and ritual structures naturalized the process of societal shifts to legitimize new forms of social organization.

*Origins of Ritual Renewal*

The origins of ritual renewal may spring from the Ancestral Puebloan focus on duality. Not only are ceremonial calendars typically oriented in terms of dualism – Puebloan rituals are organized around the solstice and equinox; the year is divided by summer and winter; and an emphasis is placed on both the agriculture-heavy portions of the year as well as those where hunting are stressed (Mathien 2005) – but there is also an implicit duality to be found in the very structure of Puebloan life. With its focus on both geography and the movements of the cosmos, the Puebloan worldview is shaped by a balanced dualism between the land and sky, between the earth and cosmological rhythms.

Repetition, too, forms a cornerstone of the Ancestral Puebloan ideology. Every winter solstice, the sun rises at exactly the same place on the horizon to an eternal tempo; the sun, moon, stars, and other cosmological features revolve in an infinite cycle through the sky. This predictability lends a rhythm of recurrence to the Puebloan way of life. Touching upon this idea, Ruth Van Dyke argues that the concepts of dualism and repetition intertwine such that “the turning of the heavens and the rotation of the seasons” (Van Dyke 2008: 54) form the backbone of the idea of cyclical renewal. This practice – by which Puebloan art and ritual structures were periodically refurbished – integrates the concepts of repetition, renewal, and continuation. It allows the Puebloan peoples to keep contact with the past, maintain the world’s wellbeing and balance, and, as discussed later in this paper, construct a collective social memory that allows for
a continuation of ancestral traditions even into the present-day. The ways in which the ideology of renewal informed Puebloan ritual practices are discussed below.

Renewal of Art and Ritual Structures

The concept of renewal informed not only the Chacoan relationship with the cyclical rhythms of the cosmos, but also their interactions with ritual structures and art. Much research cites the ritual remodeling of Chacoan ceramics and rock art panels; it also remarks upon the reconstruction of ritual structures such as kivas and great houses. These studies are not at first glance a cause for intrigue – ceramics and buildings can require constant upkeep even in modern times – but when investigated further, research shows that the remodeling of ceramics, rock art panels, and kivas were not functional refurbishments meant to restore wear and tear on an object. Rather, ritual items and spaces were refurbished while they were still functional. Their renovation was “more likely a response to ritual requirements than a functional necessity” (Snead 2002: 763). The ritual scope of the renewal process can be illustrated by the work of Patricia Crown and W. H. Wills in their study of the masonry and ceramics of Chaco Canyon (Crown and Wills 2003).

Crown and Wills’s study of Chacoan art and ritual structures spanned the entire Chacoan Bonito phase – approximately 900-1140 C.E – in order to establish the purpose of refurbishment of ritual spaces and objects. In examining the layers of slip and paint on ceramic sherds of cylindrical jars, Crown and Wills discovered that each jar showed evidence for obliteration of previous designs, as well as subsequent repainting and refiring of new designs. The kivas in their study also showed evidence of dismantling and reconstruction; dendrochronological data provides dates for the original construction, dismantlement, and reconstruction of walls and support beams; and dated plaster samples reinforce Crown and Will’s hypothesis that Chacoan
ritual structures underwent periodic refurbishment. The dates of the destruction and rebuilding of kivas are so closely related that each kiva in the Chacoan Bonito period appears to have been rebuilt two to four times. Renewal events might have occurred multiple times per generation.

Particularly intriguing is the manner by which Ancestral Puebloan builders handled excess materials during the refurbishment process, as their technique points to periodic renewal as having a ritual basis. For example, Crown and Wills discovered that paint scraped off of renovated kiva murals was buried in sacred places or deposited in shrines (2003). Such evidence points to the renewal of objects and spaces as a ritual practice, constituting not just a concept of cyclical renewal, but also one of ritual renewal. Especially considering that the refurbishment of ritual objects and spaces required the unnecessary expenditure of labor and materials, and that renovations took place as required for specific ceremonies or on a calendrical basis (Mathien 2005), I posit that the renewal of vessels and ritual spaces represented a significant aspect of Ancestral Puebloan ritual life.

_Fourmile Ruin, Arizona_

To illustrate evidence that ritual renewal played a part in Ancestral Puebloan ritual life, one may look to Scott Keuren and Christopher Roos’s geoarchaeological evidence for the ritual closure of a kiva at Fourmile Ruin, Arizona (Keuren and Roos 2013). The village site was the largest Ancestral Pueblo settlement in the Silver Creek area and contained two subterranean kivas in the centers of the village’s largest plazas.

Using soil micromorphology, the two researchers present a line of chemical evidence supporting a hypothesis that the subterranean fourteenth-century kiva (“Kiva 3”) found in Fourmile Ruin, Arizona was periodically and ritually burned in a complex, orchestrated
ceremonial “closing” process. The analysis of the site’s deposition history also shows evidence of the deposition of ritual artifacts, although excavation of the site did not unearth intact remnants. Additionally, stratified layers of soil suggest that the kiva in question was ritually “closed” several times in a time frame spanning several generations during the Pueblo IV period. The interpretation of a site’s ritual significance typically comes from the discovery of material that archaeologists consider to be religious or ritualistic in nature; however, Fourmile Ruin was subjected to several instances of systematic looting prior to its transfer from a private landowner to the ownership of The Archaeological Conservancy. Instead, Keuren and Roos’s soil micromorphology and stratigraphic data uncovered evidence of “ceremonial trash” (Keuren and Roos 2013:617; cf. Walker 1995) such as the recovery of ceramic data. While the absence of deposited sacred objects indicates that Kiva 3 may not have been ritually closed, the geoarchaeological evidence from the sediments themselves demonstrate precisely the opposite: that the structure was closed through a series of orchestrated ritual activities, including ceremonial roof-burning (Keuren and Roos 2013). This practice indicates an adherence to cyclical, ritual renewal.

The Aesthetic of Renewal

The case study of subterranean kivas at Fourmile Ruin is not an isolated incident: evidence of ritual renewal practices span the entire Southwest and even Mesoamerica (Crown and Wills 2003; Lekson 2007). While some researchers propose that the renewal of Ancestral Puebloan art and ritual structures was simply for aesthetic reasons – “aesthetics” being used here to signify what Kant calls “the sensual experience of perceiving art” (Ginsborg 2013) – the scope of renewal practices appears to be more wide-reaching, constituting what Marit K. Munson
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(Munson 2011) calls “an aesthetic of renewal” for religious reasons. She argues that the aesthetic appreciation of renewal was widespread in the Chacoan region, basing her argument off of not only the reworking of cylindrical jars but also, like Crown and Wills, the renewal of Chacoan kivas.

Most significant to the argument of a Southwestern aesthetic of renewal is the manner by which art and ritual structures were refurbished. Crown and Wills characterize ritual renewal of cylindrical jars as “creat[ing] layers, some hidden, some visible, on the pottery, preserving the past while covering and obscuring it” (2003: 523). Pueblo IV kiva murals were often covered in a solid layer of pigment to create a clean surface for new designs; functioning as true palimpsests, the power and meaning of the murals’ original images could be redirected through a changed aesthetic (Ninneman, Lekson, and Malville 2005). Kivas themselves were repeatedly reduced to ground level and rebuilt at slightly offset alignments (Crown and Wills 2003: 519). In this way, the new designs of ritual objects and structures gained a sense of power or potency from the earlier forms; they established a sense of continuity with the past by drawing upon the aesthetic experience or religious significance of the previous designs.

The power of ritual objects in Ancestral Puebloan culture was not only restored by the practice of renewal, but also redirected or nullified. David C. Grove’s study of Olmec monument mutilation (Grove 1981) suggests in part that symbolically-significant spaces (such as monuments depicting or associated with an Olmec chief, or the possessions of a shaman) acted as repositories of supernatural energy, which the authority figure controlled. The supernatural power of which Grove’s research speaks “is derived primarily from the underworld and resides in a variety of objects and places” (Grove 1981: 63), and objects harboring such power are, if
unchecked, a societal risk. Thus, after a chief’s or shaman’s death, his possessions must be destroyed in order to invalidate the sacred or supernatural energy held within them.

When one contrasts this philosophy of renewal with the refurbishment of Ancestral Puebloan art and kivas, it becomes clear that ritual renewal is based in a theory of continuation, not of complete destruction. Chacoan cylindrical jars and kivas show evidence of previous designs; rather than nullifying the energy of their original versions, artists and builders chose to superimpose images upon cylindrical jars or restructure entire kivas, and thus draw power from their past designs.

The aesthetic of ritual renewal can be viewed through several lenses in order to draw more nuanced understandings of its implications, most notably a structurationist analysis. The practice of redirecting an object’s power through ritual renewal implies that objects – especially ritually-significant objects such as kivas and art – not only possess agency, but also affect the way in which Ancestral Puebloans lived their lives. In this sense they may be treated as Boudieuvian “structuring structures” (Hegmon 2008: 226) and are a perfect example of the dualistic nature of structuration: just as ritually-significant objects possess power and significance, constituting a form of agency, they are also able to enable and constrain the agency of others and in doing so act as structures. By viewing objects as structuring structures, researchers may draw more nuanced interpretations of ritually-renewed material culture and of the societal organization of groups that renew it. Additionally, by looking at ritual renewal through the lens of social theory, an understanding of the potential for informal social control in the Ancestral Puebloan world comes to light. This concept is discussed below.

Collective Social Memory
Ritual renewal both constructed and supported a collective social memory of the past. By renewing vessels through time, Ancestral Puebloans maintained their continuity with the past while giving the vessels a new appearance; they “impose[d] new meaning onto traditional frameworks” (Snead 2002: 762). By periodically remodeling kivas, ancient peoples created what Walker and Venzor call a “time bridge” (Walker and Venzor 2011: 312) that allowed the inhabitants of civilizations to find a sense of familiarity and unity with new structures, and in turn, construct a collective social memory.

Citing the periodic refurbishing of kivas as evidence, Walker and Venzor (2011) posit that because art and ritual structures contain both visual and memory references, the repetitive ritual practice of renewal created an illusion of timelessness in order to build a social memory that relied on continuity. That continuity built a sense of contact with distant ancestors and traditional practices and contributed to the shared pool of knowledge of ancestral peoples of the time, thus adding to their collective memory. Crown and Wills maintain a similar case for the cylindrical jars of their study: in terms of ritual renewal, “it appears that the process of repainting made these jars into vessels of collective memory” (Crown and Wills 2003:529; cf. Toll's 1990:297-298).

Stephen Lekson (2007) in particular argues that the repetitive remodeling of kivas created a sense of continuity with the past which naturalized and legitimizened new social organization, and perhaps even creating informal social control. He cites the rapid growth of the Chaco community as a factor promoting an emphasis on ritual renewal, for the influx of immigrants to Chacoan communities enhanced a sense of urgency surrounding the conservation of tangible, material connections to the past. In other words, the Chacoan community responded to a period of unpredictable social change by preserving structures and objects that tied them to the past in
order to not lose those connections entirely. The conservation of ritual structures and objects, then, formed a foundation in collective social memory (Lekson 2007; cf. Thomas 1999). In their ability to “repeatedly touch the past” (Walker and Venzor 2011:312), ritual structures and art both construct and formalize a social memory of the past; they also create a perception that present-day social structures adhere to those ancestral traditions and practices.

*Collective Memory as a Form of Social Control*

By allowing inhabitants to find a sense of belonging and continuity with new structures, it is feasible that ritual remodeling was used to legitimize new forms of social organization that otherwise might not have been acceptable. One can apply a sociological lens to this theory. Using the idea of informal social control – defined as “the reactions of individuals and groups that bring about conformity to norms and laws” (Felluga 2011) – the transfer of obedience to a new social organizational structure due to a sense of continuity with the past takes on a distinctly Foucauldian tone. One of Michel Foucault’s prevailing theories on power concerns the internalization of rules and regulations. As inhabitants of a society naturalize the implicit and explicit laws of a society through the process of socialization, those individuals shift the power dynamics of their society’s institutions. The power is not inherent in the institutions: Foucault’s later works argue that

“Power has its principle not so much in a person as in a certain concerted distribution of bodies, surfaces, lights, gazes; in an arrangement whose internal mechanisms produce the relation in which individuals are caught up” (Foucault 1977: 202).

However, the compliance of individuals to new forms of social organization due to an illusion of staying true to the traditions and practices of the previous generations carries an undertone of informal social control and a constraining of agency. When one views ritual structures and
objects as structuring structures, as previously suggested, one sees that the ritual renewal of kivas and art endows those objects with agency as well as allowing them to inform societal reactions. Therefore, they play a part in the structuration of societies.

There is little evidence that hierarchical elites in Ancestral Puebloan societies consciously manipulated ideas and place (Alcock, Herbert, Sinopoli, and Wright 2002), and it is vital that intentionality not be projected upon Ancestral Puebloan peoples for a theoretical sake. However, it can be argued that “the success of a local community depended on establishing the fundamental legitimacy for the entire range of social action conferred by place” (Snead 2008:158). By using the practice and repetition of ritual renewal as a legitimization process to naturalize shifting societal organization, communities and their inhabitants were subjected to a form of social power. This social power informed what Ancestral Puebloans remembered of the past and how they interacted in their present; it helped to construct a community identity; it legitimized the community leaders, for they were perceived as adhering to historical precedent; and it shaped the collective memory of an entire people. As a social and political strategy, ritual renewal allowed a community’s history to be shaped, and thus its present, as well as legitimizing new social organization by providing sacred undertones to community structures, such as Chacoan kivas. As Sue Alcock writes, “What people remember of the past fashions their sense of community and determines their allies, enemies and actions; they will argue over it and kill for it” (Snead 2008:157).

**Conclusion**

The theory of ritual renewal can be viewed through a multitude of lenses: geoarchaeological, Foucauldian, and structurational, to name a few. Each lens clarifies and obscures facets of the
Ancestral Puebloan relationship to the ritual renewal; a clearer picture results when they are combined so that one may gain a more nuanced sense of ancestral life, traditions, and agency.

Detailed though the research may be, it leaves us with more questions than with which we started. Did ritual renewal truly function as a method of informal social control? Was it used to legitimize new forms of social organization, as the infamous thirteen-century Chacoan droughts hit the San Juan Basin and societies were forced to aggregate? Did Chacoan inhabitants view the remodeling of ceramics, art, and kivas as another way to keep their world in balance, just as they feasted and performed ceremonies to ensure the steady movements of the sun and stars?

As the trajectory of research of Ancestral Puebloan lifestyles continues, conclusions should be drawn carefully and measures taken so as to not project intentionality onto the actions of the Ancestral Puebloan people. It is entirely possible that cyclical renewal contributed to a sense of collective social memory; it is also possible that the sense of continuity created by ritual renewal practices functioned as an informal means of social control. However, researchers do not entirely agree on why Ancestral Puebloan peoples felt a need to practice cyclical renewal rituals. Nor are they in agreement over the goals of ritual renewals. Archaeologists and researchers would do well to also consider cyclical renewal through a spectrum of lenses – sociological, archaeological, and phenomenological, to name a few – in order to gain the most accurate picture of Ancestral life and practices.
Works Cited


