The Chacoan World Identity
Its origin, evolution, and image in the modern day

Emma Logevall
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Introduction

Chaco Canyon—a precious gemstone of Southwestern archaeology—has fascinated scholars for years. Using countless methods and approaches, archaeologists and anthropologists have gleaned a wealth of information on the rich Chacoan culture and past. And yet, though some of the canyon’s secrets have been unearthed, the ancestral society is still shrouded in mystery. The question that lies at the center of the enigma is simple: how did such a rich and spiritual Chacoan world come to be?

To answer this question, I will explore three topics: (1) the relationship between Chaco Canyon and outlier communities, and the forging of a larger Chacoan world through locally developed social structures, (2) the Mesoamerican connection, specifically how it influenced Chaco Canyon on a political, economic, and social level and (3) contemporary perceptions of the Canyon—in particular, how outsourcing credit to Mesoamerica warps one’s view of the Chacoan identity and structuration. By closely examining ancient Chacoan life and culture, and the ways in which they were shaped by influences from both inside and outside of the massive Canyon walls, it’s clear this ancestral people—the true agents of their society—formed complex and unique social structures and ideologies. The Chacoan world was fully their own.

A Locally Developed Chacoan World

Beginning over a thousand years ago (around 850 AD) and up until the widespread migration and community dispersal of the mid thirteenth century, Chacoan life and culture blossomed (Van Dyke 2008). But despite what many may think, the great ancestral world was not entirely contained by the canyon’s sandstone walls. In fact, the canyon was just the center of a “vast political and religious system that extended 250 miles from the south and north and 190 miles from the east and west” (Malville 2008:50). Though the society in the canyon certainly
flourished, the outlier communities played a hugely important role in shaping the rich culture and greatly contributed to the political and social successes we now associate with Chaco Canyon. At least 70 outlier communities took part in shared ritual, cultural, social, and economic activities and rituals, and both near and distant peoples made pilgrimages to the magnificent “center place” (Van Dyke 2008). In countless ways, ancestral Chacoans from all over the region formed bonds with one another and with the land they called home.

**Exchanges and Offerings**

One tie that linked the Chacoan world was trade. Rahul Oka and Chapurukha Kusimba (2008) argue “trade parallels political, religious, and social processes as one of the most significant factors to have affected our evolution (2008:1).” In many ways, this was true for the Chacoans. By analyzing evidence of the resources and goods found in the region, it’s clear outlier clusters of settlement exchanged extensively amongst each other and, in turn, with the Canyon dwellers (Cordell 2012). Common material goods such as stone tools, wood, pottery and lithic material, as well as exotic goods like turquoise, shell, copper bells, and macaws were often imported into Chaco Canyon, and then exported to other communities in the Chacoan regional system, “likely forming the basis of a political economy controlled by the residents of Chaco Canyon” (Ryan 2010:72). This suggests trade networks were not only existent but were also an integral part of Chacoan society, centered around the Canyon society but still building linkages throughout the region.

Periodic festivals in the canyon drew thousands of outlier community members from all over the surrounding lands, causing a great influx of tradable goods like those mentioned above. But goods were not always brought to trade. In many cases, they were gifts to the Canyon society and to the elite residing there. (Chaco Culture National Historical Park). For example,
according to sources at the Canyon center, it seems a ritual existed where visitors carried ceramics from their communities and broke them at one corner of Pueblo Bonito as an offering. Other forms of offerings existed, evident in the caches of treasures found in some of the pueblo rooms. Archaeologists discovered an enormous stash of valuables (including more turquoise than in the rest of the Southwest combined) under the floor of a room in Pueblo Bonito. Found among the bodies of two unusually tall men, scholars theorize that the men were community leaders to whom the Chacoans paid homage by burying them with a sizeable collection of valuable goods.

Aside from tangible gifts, labor was another common form of offering. Members of outlier communities would travel to the canyon to serve temporary terms, building great houses and kivas in an organized workforce as a means to pay tribute to their “center place” (Van Dyke 2008). Temporary laborers, in addition to outlier community members with visible or ceremonial roles in the canyon, were granted access to ritual knowledge; they would learn all the “tricks of the trade” and bring them back to their home communities. There they would direct construction of Bonito-style buildings, with the Chaco Canyon aesthetic fresh in their minds. The large core-and-veneer multi-room structures, enclosed kivas, high visibility of buildings, and symmetrical layouts are evidence of this shared architecture, and show the extent of contact and interaction in the greater Chacoan world.

Trading goods and making offerings speak to the interconnected nature of the communities, and provides a lens through which to examine the local development and structuration of the region. However, when it came to Canyon visits, parties were often the main attraction.

The Organization of Social Gatherings
People gathered from far and wide to partake in ceremonial festivals, engaging in a shared cosmological spirituality and celebrating both the terrestrial and celestial spheres. But how did they all know when to show up? The answer to this question lies in astronomy. Pilgrimages and periodic visits required the use of a solar calendar, one created by religious priests and spiritual leaders in the Canyon who closely observed the Sun’s movement along the horizon and studied the yearly renewal of the seasons (Van Dyke 2008). Using this calendar, Chacoans were able to predict important events such as the solstices and the major and minor lunar standstills.

Oftentimes, aspects of the solar calendar were embedded in the architecture, like the June solstice marker at Casa Rinconada and December solstice markers found at a corner window of Pueblo Bonito and a pillar near Wijiji (Malville & Munro 2010). The famous great house and kiva at Chimney Rock, situated so that inhabitants might watch the major lunar standstill moon rise between two rock columns, is yet another example of an ancient site deeply connected to the sky.

Apart from architectural evidence, the Chacoans used the calendar to time plantings and harvests and to predict the changing seasons. This was a hugely important part of Chacoan life, for their civilization completely depended on subsistence agriculture (Chaco Cultural National Historical Park). Community plots of farmland were commonly located near the canyon walls in order for the corn, bean, squash, and other domesticated crops to catch runoff water. Being an agriculture-oriented and cosmologically spiritual society, the solar calendar was critical. It was truly ingrained in Chacoan society, and heavily influenced daily life in both a religious and social sense.

But the existence of a solar calendar doesn’t fully answer the original question. A calendar undoubtedly made organizing much easier when it came to social gatherings, but
without the modern astronomical technology used today, discrepancies between individual community calendars must’ve existed. So how did all the communities all know the exact date to arrive? They had a signal system. Bonfires flared as signals atop “ingeniously situated towers and shrines, reminders to important towns and villages of their ties to the center, perhaps communicating important dates (such as the full moon near the winter solstice), and announcing imminent festivals in the canyon” (Malville 2008: 51). This was an effective system of communication that allowed people from distant outlier communities to accurately time their visits to the Canyon, and further linked the many communities in the region.

A Common Worldview

A shared Chacoan ideology was yet another uniting aspect of the culture, of which the ideas of center place, balanced dualism, directionality, and cyclical renewal were defining elements.

Dualism, in many ways, is the most widely seen motif. For example, throughout the Chacoan world, great houses (raised structures) were paired with formal great kivas (sunken structures), showing a dedication to balanced opposition (Van Dyke 2008: 196). Likewise, dualism of gender roles greatly shaped the culture and lifestyle. According to Elizabeth Perry (2010), “the division of labor was expressed and reinforced in virtually every dimension that contained meaning: symbolically, in ritual and ceremonial life; in the spaces they occupied; and in habitual, repetitive bodily experience” (Perry 2010: 107). From what scholars can gather, it seems that in general, men wove and hunted while women prepared food. Archaeologists have used skeletal remains to study how this gender role differentiation affected body development, and as a result have been able to explore the theory of gender division and sexual identity among the Chacoan people in previously impossible ways.
The other worldview elements were critical as well. Cardinal directionality is clear in the countless astronomical alignments of architecture across the region, like in the north-south alignments documented at Pueblo Bonito and Casa Rinconada (Malville & Munro 2010), as well as the roads running North, South, East, and West from the Canyon in an area over two hundred miles in diameter (Ryan 2010). Seeing as the ancestral Pueblos “never invented the wheel and had no beasts of burden, the purpose of these roads remained enmeshed in the many mysteries of Chaco” (Malville 2008:51). Most scholars believe the remarkably straight roads were highly symbolic, on which people underwent ceremonial journeys to Chaco Canyon, the “center place”, the prize of the Chacoan world.

Cyclical renewal, too, became a key symbol for life in the Canyon. With clear evidence of cyclical reconstructions of great houses in Chacoan communities, the significance of renewal is literally embedded in the architectural ruins. The layering of white plaster discovered on the ruin walls is another noteworthy example (Van Dyke 2008). Even migration was seen as a renewing practice—an integral aspect of the Chacoan spiritual journey. In fact, sedentarism was not a desired state of community identity in most Southwestern native cultures at the time. The majority was highly mobile, perhaps especially the Apaches who believed land got “dirty” and needed time to rest and renew itself after years of habitation (Farrer 1994). As to what inspired the Chacoans to appreciate the concept of cyclical renewal on a grand scale, most scholars believe it was the spiritual and agricultural significance of the lunar and solar cycles. It was hugely symbolic to the ancient Chacoans, and evident in the very roots of the culture.

Together, all the branches and elements of their grand ideology influenced the culture and greater Chacoan community heavily, and though it may’ve originated in the Canyon, the worldview spread to the outlying lands and promoted the Chacoan ways many miles from the
canyon walls. This was the case for most everything Chacoan—trade, architecture, rituals, spiritual practice, cosmology, social structure, and so on. The Canyon was the epicenter of local development, the heart that pumped blood to the outlying lands, and the origin of its own world and culture. But why then are the Chacoan people so often cheated the credit?

**Mesoamerican Links**

In the past, many have attributed characteristics of Chacoan society to a “superior” civilization to the south—Mesoamerica, defined as “the ancient high culture area of Central America” (McGuire 1980:5). Credit for the Chacoan world origin and identity often lands here, despite all the evidence speaking otherwise. There is no doubt that cultural exchange between them did occur, but neither Mesoamerica nor the Ancestral Chacoan and greater Puebloan community dominated the relationship. In reality, the two civilizations were “like two languages with many cognates, but different grammars and syntaxes” (McGuire 1980: pg). Though in the end this still leaves you with two distinct tongues, for the sake of this paper, it is worth noting a few of the cognates.

**Facets of Cross-Cultural Contact**

Through architecture analysis, scholars have determined the Chacoans interacted very little with the Aztecs, but other Ancient Mexican peoples as well as tribes in Central America undoubtedly left their marks on the land to their North (Cordell 2012).

Cross-cultural contact resulted in iconographic commonalities. The horned or feathered serpent, found throughout the Americas from Peru to the Four Corners region, is perhaps the most obvious motif they shared. Some believe it was introduced by the Toltec Quetzalcoatl cult, but its true origin is not certain (McGuire 1980: 24). To many Ancestral Puebloan groups, it
represents the water serpent, the god of terrestrial waters, earthquakes, landslides, and floods. This parallels its symbolic meaning in Classic period Mesoamerica—clear proof of cultural exchange between the regions. That being said, it is important to remember that a shared icon among cultures often carries nuanced messages and significance, limiting the extent of the connections we can draw between the different groups in context.

Apart from commonalities in iconography, it should come as no surprise that much of the Mesoamerican connection resulted from material trade. Mesoamerican long-distance traders, sometimes referred to as “pochtca”, traveled many miles to the American Southwest to trade with their Northern neighbors (McGuire 1980). Items exchanged include turquoise copper bells, copper ore, scarlet macaws, cylindrical jars, and ceramic effigy figurines (Ericson & Baugh 1993:153). Archaeologists use the excavations of such items and of pochteca burials as direct proof of Meso-Southwestern American interaction.

They, too, call upon the pervasive evidence of cacao in the Southwest to confirm interregional trade, since the plant is only native to central Mexico (Washburn, Washburn & Shipkova 2011). In the Four Corners Region, 50-70 vessels were found to contain the biomarker for cacao (theobromine). Many of these ceramic containers were buried with the two elite men mentioned previously, leading some to assume cacao was a symbol of wealth and power. However, after extensive analysis, archaeologists found that every single vessel, even those discovered in the homes of suspected commoners, contained the biomarker. They concluded that both elite and non-elite community members drank cacao. Imported from the Mesoamerican tropical coastal lowlands, cacao became a ceremonial and social practice among the Chacoans no matter their socioeconomic status.
This was not the case in Ancient Mesoamerica. Here, cacao was made into chocolate, the drink of the gods, so rich and magical that only the aristocrats and powerful warriors had the opportunity to drink it while the rest of the community consumed a fermented agave substance (Rivero 1990). The power of ancient Mexican aristocracies was strengthened by this disparity. Interestingly, this disparity in ritual practice surrounding cacao highlight key contrasts between Mesoamerican and Chacoan societal structures.

**Expressions of Power and Social Structuration**

The fact that the daily and ritual practices were so vastly different between Mesoamerican social classes and those of the Chacoans illustrates the uniqueness of the two regions. Their social and political systems were built in contrasting ways and the shape of their power structures diverged. In Mesoamerica, a clear stratified hierarchy prevailed, one where peasants farmed and provided for the powerful elite rulers (McGuire 1980). In Chaco Canyon, hard labor in the fields and pueblos was tackled communally, though power was not, by any stretch of the imagination, equally distributed (Perry 2008).

According to Elizabeth Perry (2008), power is the set of limitations on human action combined with differing levels of social and ritual responsibilities and formalized community roles—all characteristics of Chacoan structuration (Perry 2008:91). “This concept of power suggests that the restriction of possibilities for human action leaves material signatures, and these signatures reveal the nature of power” (Perry 2008:91). The signatures are the social and political structures, and the structures inform the agents and constrain the set of actions allowed in a community. They are boxes, constantly pushed and prodded by the agents held within until they change shape. This dynamic process of structuration is a lens through which we can view
cultures all over the globe and better understand patterns of both local and non-local development.

**Shifting Modern Views**

Originating in the 19th century, the view of a Mesoamerican-dominated Southwest stemmed from the European assumption that ancestral Puebloan ruins were much too impressive to be Native American. They argued the size and style of the buildings “exceeded the abilities of the Indians they encountered” and “attributed the ruins to the Aztecs fleeing Cortez’s conquest of Mexico” (McGuire 1980:3). This simple assumption is reflected in the names of Southwestern towns like Aztec Ruins and Montezuma Castle—marks of European ignorance. On the other hand, archaeologists at the start of the 21st century swung to the opposite extreme, insisting that Southwestern development was fully isolated and independent of Mesoamerican influence. They proved some Southwestern ruins predated the Aztecs and used this as a basis for their entire argument.

Neither one of these theories is very accurate. The truth lies somewhere in between. Parallels between the two regions cannot be denied, and in some cases Mesoamerican traits were adopted in the Southwest, but if (as previously discussed) the very structure of Chacoan society was so different, Mesoamerica must not have had as strong of an influence as scholars formerly thought.

**The Relational Approach and an Agency-Centered Framework**

Though the exact relationship between Ancient Mesoamerica and the American Southwest is still murky, McGuire’s Relational Approach has changed the way many view ancestral and indigenous identity and past. His “alternative view is not based on a simple concept of
domination of one area by another but on consideration of shifting trade relations through time” (McGuire 1980:1). When it comes to the relationship between Chaco Canyon and Mesoamerica specifically, though interaction and cultural exchange cannot be refuted, neither civilization was superior. The Chacoans formed their own complex society. They developed a unique cosmology and spirituality, created extensive trade networks, and in practicing agency, they built intricate and dynamic social and political structures.

Giving Mesoamerica the credit for such achievements warped 19th century perceptions of the ancestral Chacoans, and those damaged impressions still linger today. Mesoamerican domination implies that a rigid structure was placed upon the Chacoans from the outside, and that their ability to act was constricted to Mesoamerican structural demands. In order to repair our contorted views, we have to give the Chacoans back their agency. By seeing them as true agents in their own locally developed structures, we return power to their hands and completely change the way history remembers the great Chacoan World.

Using this agency-centered framework when learning about ancestral cultures is critical for the future of anthropology. Without it, the credit for local culture traits and social structures can be easily misplaced, depriving the rightful agents of their deserved power and local successes.

**Conclusion**

Through trade, social and spiritual gatherings, and a common cosmology and worldview, the Chacoans were a uniquely rich and complex native population that bloomed and thrived over a thousand years ago. Cross-cultural contact with Mesoamerican civilizations did impact cultural development, as seen in trade networks and iconographical commonalities, but not enough for it to be viewed as the prime creator of the Chacoan identity. Due to divergent hierarchies, as well
as differing distributions and expressions of power, the two regions developed vastly different societal structures, fostering unique living environments and community dynamics.

In this way, our contemporary perceptions of Chaco Canyon have shifted. In the words of J. McKim Malville (2008), “whatever the reasons for the elaborate buildings, the intricate webbing of roads, and the signal shrines, they could only have been constructed by a highly organized and integrated society” (Malville 2008:51). The Chacoan world was, beyond a doubt, a highly organized and integrated society—the true origin of the Chacoan world culture and identity came from within.

With McGuire’s Relational Approach as a lens, anthropologists today focus on the dynamic social, political, spiritual, and economic interactions between cultures. They identify the common threads that came about through cross-cultural contact, taking all that they learn in the context of the time and place. Using an agency-centered framework in anthropological, archaeological, and archaeoastronomical studies helps to put the power back in the rightful agents’ hands, and alters our recollection of the history we so deeply wish to preserve.
References

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