

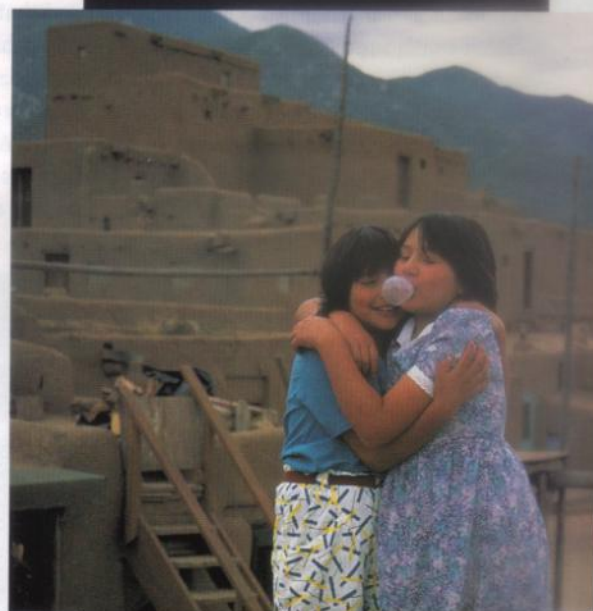
Taos children greet tourists. Opposite: Cindy and Melanie enjoy blowing bubbles.

# *The* PLACE of TAOS PUEBLO

A NATION BEHIND—AND BEYOND—WALLS

“The story of my people and the story of this place are one single story. No man can think of us without thinking of this place. We are always joined together.”

—TAOS TRIBAL MANIFESTO



BY KEIKO OHNUMA | PHOTOS BY MARCIA KEEGAN

Imagine growing up under the curious gaze of strangers who circle your village and peep into doorways all day long, taking pictures. Eventually you learn that this happens because your people are unique on this earth—not only for their fields of yellow flowers, river teeming with fish and frogs, and secret trails on the silent blue mountain, but also for something more complicated and abstract that you will have to deal with the rest of your life, a twisted history of admiration and exploitation.

White men arrived in the Americas in the 15th century hungry for gold, but long after their arrival they discovered something far more elusive that they yearned to possess. In remote Taos, where nomadic, marauding tribes had failed to destroy generations of patiently maintained adobe fortress, Coronado's captain glimpsed his shining city of gold in a vision of what Europe had long since lost: the harmonic convergence of man, nature, and God in those massive earthen dwellings that rival the majesty of Taos Mountain.

By the 20th century, East Coast artists enchanted by the sight of Taos had turned this image of the multistory adobe silhouetted against the mountain into an icon of the Southwest, especially for visitors who came by railroad. It was “a romantic mix of arid landscape, adobe architecture, and ethnic symbolism,” as anthropologist Sylvia Rodriguez put it, which over the next century would lure tourists by the millions in pilgrimage to that lost authenticity.

Taos Pueblo still quenches the modern thirst for the enduring and genuine, not only with its impressive size but also with the reassuring fact that electricity and running water have never been introduced within the pueblo walls—as no description of the site ever fails to report. The spell of the ancients hangs so thick over

the village that enthralled visitors are sometimes thoroughly taken in. On my first visit to the Pueblo some years ago, two well-meaning women rushed forward after the young Native guide had finished her tour, offering her candy and water while stroking her braids, apparently enchanted, and perhaps led to pity, by her brave recitation to a white audience.

What *does* it mean to have your people, your village, turned into a tourist attraction? Once upon a time it was seen as a compliment, a useful way to win friends. Diane Reyna, whose family opened one of the first tourist shops at the Pueblo in the 1950s, recalls feeling lucky to experience so many foreign influences. It was through the goodwill built by tourism, she notes, that the Pueblo achieved the unprecedented return of its sacred Blue Lake in 1970—the first time the U.S. government restored an aboriginal homeland on the basis of religious practice.

As tourism has mushroomed into arguably the world's largest industry, however, its pernicious impact is starting to be understood in both the economy and environment and the local communities' sense of identity and history. The village proper at Taos Pueblo remains the spiritual heart of the community, where most of the tribe's 3,000 members return to their ancestral homes for winter ceremonies. Tourists are allowed inside only during business hours, charged a fee to take photos, and barred from entering homes not marked as shops.

### The Cliché of Authenticity

Yet there is no denying that the endlessly photographed structures at Taos Pueblo have, like other UNESCO World Heritage Sites, not only come to represent their famed historic uniqueness; they have also become a cliché of themselves, a sort of theme park designed

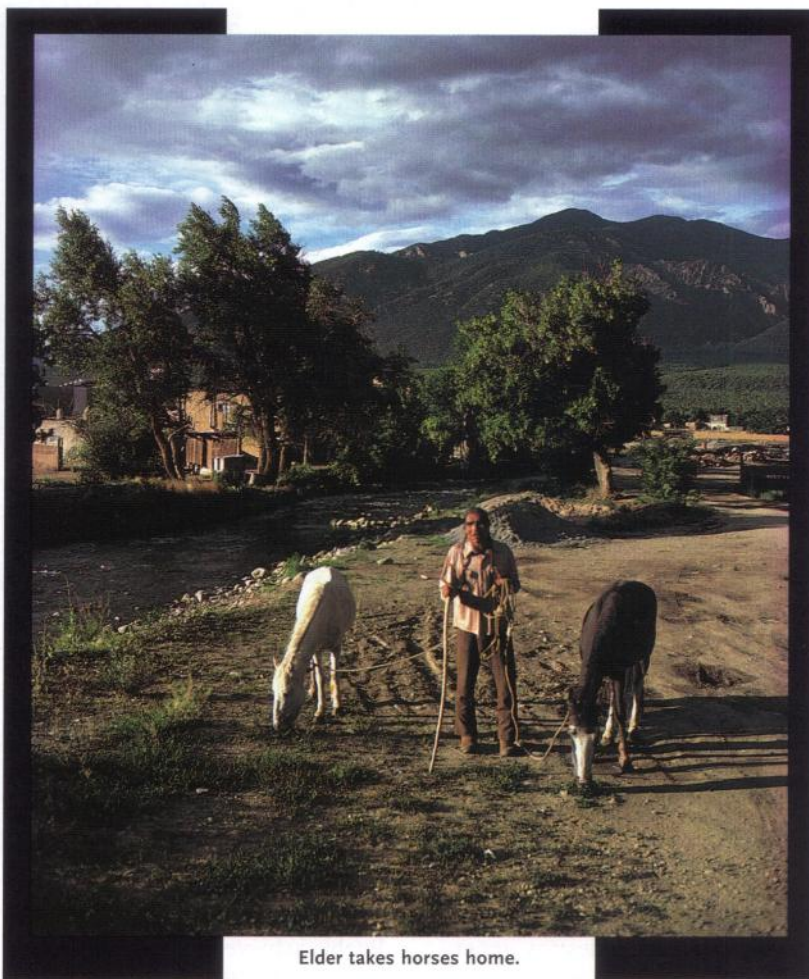
to entertain tourists. Anthropologists have noted that the Pueblo's original north-south division has been overlaid with one separating public from private, figuratively on- and offstage. One resident confides to me that propane stoves and other modern conveniences are often hidden in the back rooms of Pueblo shops, the front of which remain appealingly barren. And the famous Pueblo-wide ban on electricity and plumbing—which caused an exodus of residents in the 1970s after a few mavericks started defying the ban—clearly upholds interests touristic as well as traditional.

Some Taos insiders maintain that too much attention is paid to such accommodations, which hardly affect the community's sense of self. "Indian people don't give a shit what outside people think," declares Rick Romancito, art and culture calendar editor at *The Taos News*, who was the first Taos Native to be employed by the paper some 30 years ago. Outsiders make shallow judgments based on seeing Natives like him, he says, indicating his Hawaiian shirt, and conclude that the Taos Indians have assimilated. "There's a whole other life that people don't see" when the Pueblo is closed, he says. And regardless of what non-Indians judge to be true, he adds, "the fact is that [the Taos] people will continue to live the way they want—outside the scrutiny of others."

It is remarkable, in fact, especially when you have lived among other indigenous groups (such as in Hawaii, where I lived before moving to New Mexico), how early and thoroughly the Taos Native people were able to quarantine outside curiosity so that it wouldn't disrupt their traditions. Charging a fee just to walk into the Pueblo and enforcing a code of respectful behavior puts the teeth in Native sovereignty so that all visitors feel it. Taos's historically harsh treatment of members who reveal religious information to outsiders has only served that Pueblo's aura of mystery and impenetrability, turning potential opposition into political support.

"It has not only protected Taos Pueblo residents, but intensified outside desire for whatever it is that people want from them," says one scholar, who requested anonymity for the very

reasons we were discussing. "The fact that outsiders must be so careful about what they say is *itself* significant," this person adds. "Taos Pueblo people want to have total control over what's written about them—it's remarkable symbolic power" that is increasingly being claimed by Native groups worldwide. "At the same time," the scholar warns, "I'm not sure that anyone who has unique authority over their story can be trusted."



Elder takes horses home.

Secrecy has, in fact, long shielded the leadership of Taos Pueblo from any scrutiny or accountability, as internal critics are quick to note. The veil of religious privacy and Indian mystique easily masks the tribe's poverty, federal dependency, and authoritarian rule, they say. "Our government is a theocracy," reveals one Pueblo resident who has butted heads with the leadership—which comprises a handful of rotating offices, with a tribal council of some 50 male elders. He warns me, as do others, that criticism of the Pueblo rarely gets into print, not least because multiple tourism interests in the town of Taos depend on its image of peaceful multiculturalism.

The governor's office is willing to concede that tourism has often proved to be a double-edged sword. The tribe's remote location allows for few other sources

of income except from a sparsely visited casino, which might be why the Pueblo—restrictions notwithstanding—is actually one of the most welcoming of the 19 New Mexican Pueblos to outsiders. One hundred miles south of Taos, Cochiti Pueblo prohibits photography and even cell-phone use on its lands; reclusive San Felipe Pueblo (25 miles farther south) offers no services for tourists beyond its isolated casino. Looked at another way, limited access to the culture of Taos Pueblo not only protects the tribe's privacy; it also clears the way for "museumization" of the village at designated times, such as the heavily attended ten public festivals held every year—still an important strategy for political and cultural survival.

### Escaping Extinction

And survival, for Native groups, is what it all comes down to. "This is *why* we still exist," the lieutenant governor keeps saying as he



Teresino Jiron constructs a drum.

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A long history of resistance has kept the Taos people from losing their ancestral homeland, while clearly mandated traditions have prevented the assimilation that has led to near-extinction of tribes back east.

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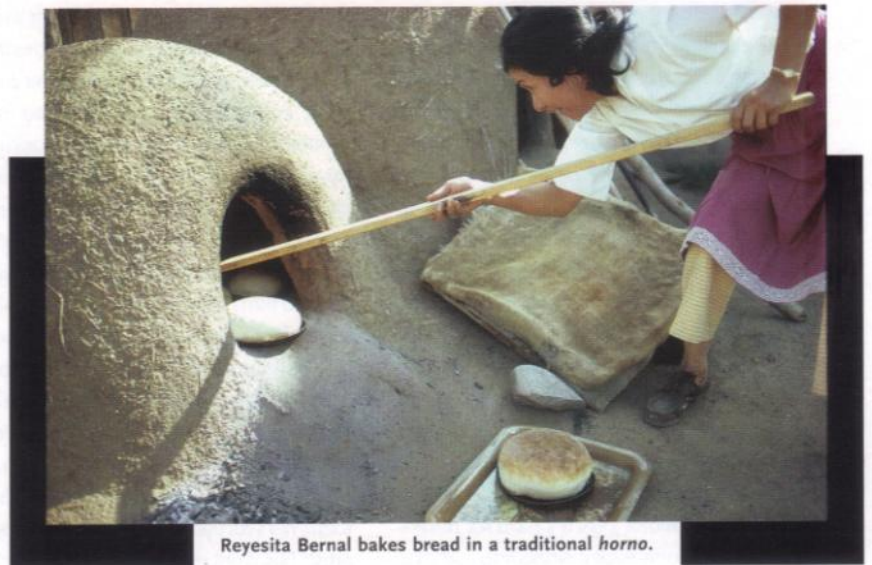
warns me against printing anything without express permission. A long history of resistance has kept the Taos people from losing their ancestral homeland, while clearly mandated traditions have prevented the assimilation that has led to near-extinction of tribes back east. Yet even with exclusive use of 99,000 acres of the most geographically rich land in Taos County, the tribe has few means to hold on to its young people today once they get an education and a job outside.

"Everyone leaves—to advance somewhat, get an education, learn about city life," says Geraldine Lujan-Trujillo, who raised her kids in Albuquerque until an abusive husband left her no option but to bring them back to her mother's place inside the pueblo walls. Eventually she turned the ancestral home into a gift shop, telling her siblings she had no other way to earn a living in Taos. Cheerfully narrating to a stranger a life history of depression, abuse, illness, flight, and desperation, Lujan-Trujillo is one of a few dozen people who run shops in the adobe village and still experience daily the Pueblo saying, "We are in one nest."

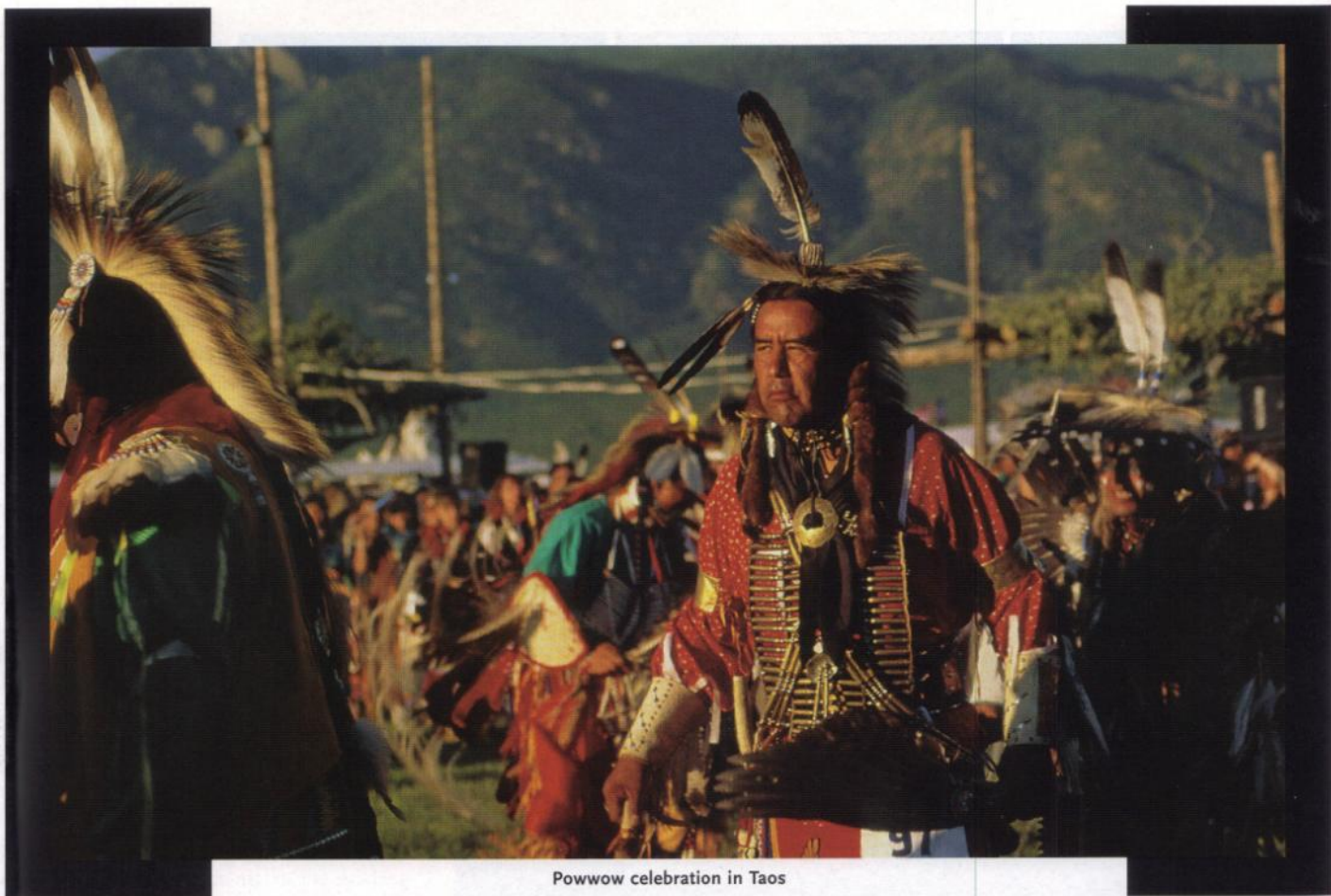
For others, an old way of life structured around clan duties at specific locations at certain periods of the year simply does not allow for the demands of school, work, and nuclear-family life in scattered communities. Roughly one third of Taos Indians live and work outside reservation lands; once exposed to citizenship under democratic forms of government, they tend to chafe at the bit of absolute patriarchal rule. Tribal decisions have been challenged in U.S. courts since at least the 1920s, and increasingly after Native soldiers returned home from World War II. For many Taos Natives today, the only way to support the traditional ways that have sustained the tribe is not to live under their rule.

Taos leaders admit they may have to alter their traditions in the future, albeit with great reluctance, as they have been forced to do ever since the Spanish arrived. Notably, it was only after the tribal council finally agreed to open up secret rites for

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Reyesita Bernal bakes bread in a traditional *horno*.



Powwow celebration in Taos

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academic study that advocates were able to gather the necessary information to fully support the religious case for the return of the Blue Lake Wilderness.

### Cracking the Wall

Looking forward, a healthy Native community that respects tradition might increasingly require a cooperative approach that also respects alternative views, says Reyna, now director of the Learning Support Center at the Institute of American Indian Arts (IAIA) in Santa Fe. "If you don't, you end up with very negative consequences for the community, which we can see in the Taliban," she says, citing an extreme form of theocracy. "It's a very complex issue; it's not an easy thing to deal with—but something has got to give soon." Maybe the context should be helping Native youth, she suggests, because they hold the tribe's future at stake.

Cameron Martinez, an IAIA student, demonstrates the growing willingness of educated young Natives to debate publicly the contemporary contradictions of Indian identity. His black-and-white photographs of Pueblo life direct the camera lens "to what we want people to see," he says. One image in a series he showed last summer at the Mixed Corn Blessings Gallery in downtown Taos juxtaposes his elderly grandfather swaddled in blankets in tiny scale against the streets of commercial Santa Fe; another shows his

brother in pan-Indian powwow regalia shooting pool against his doppelgänger in everyday clothing—a play on clichés about Natives as spiritual, warring, and alcoholic.

While undergoing tribal initiation, Martinez spent 18 months on Taos Pueblo living off the land, "like before Europeans," he reports. Secure in his Native identity through the experience of doing without supermarkets and telephones, Martinez sees tourists through the lens of their own projected fantasies. Outsiders make strange comments, says the former tour guide, because they are longing for a connection with something real, and feel overwhelmed by what they see at Taos. "They're grasping; they don't know where to start, so they start with what they know, and that's Hollywood.

It is tempting to imagine that the younger generation, raised at a time when the survival of the planet is at stake, might conceive of tradition in such nuanced, postmodern terms when they are tribal elders themselves: as an attitude for meeting change instead of a resolve to resist it; armed with awareness, rather than aggression. Native people might thus have much to teach the rest of us.

As a tourist site, Reyna says, Taos Pueblo has a far-reaching responsibility to educate people about what is real, as opposed to merely feeding their fantasies. For within its walls remain not only the visible architectural evidence of what has endured but also the hidden human cost to keep it standing. ✿