

Go Up Into the Gaps: Play and Native American Religions – 3

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For a number of years I lived in Tempe, Arizona, just three miles from the Yaqui village, Guadalupe. Every year during the season of Lent I would drop by Guadalupe now and then to observe the various events of their Easter celebration. The Yaqui people lived for centuries in Sonora Mexico before many were forcibly displaced. Some established communities in Arizona. Their history is remarkable. Yaquis effectively maintained separation from the Spanish for nearly a century after the first contact in 1533. After shunning Spanish influence for nearly a century, suddenly, it would seem, early in the 17th century they requested missionaries be sent to them. The Jesuits arrived in 1617 and in two years the Yaquis had undergone remarkable transformation in their cultural and religious lives. They became Christian at that time, but in their own way. For one hundred fifty years they allowed missionaries to live among them, but finally in 1767 they found Mexican pressure so great that they expelled the missionaries. More than a century followed during which the Yaquis enjoyed an autonomous existence. However, though they fought gallantly, in 1887 they were overcome by Mexican troops and dispersed far and wide.

In time, having formed communities near Tucson and Phoenix, some of the Yaquis began to revive their cultural and religious practices, especially Easter. The whole season of Lent is filled with ritual and ceremony centered on the small Yaqui church in Guadalupe, standing in the shadow of the larger Catholic mission church just to the north of it. I'll not describe the complex of events enacted throughout the whole Easter season, only those of the climactic day, Easter Saturday.

During Easter week the attention of Guadalupe is focused on the Yaqui church and the plaza which extends to the east in front of it. Many of the events—the processions around the way of the cross, the capture and crucifixion of Christ, the control of the church by the evil Chapayekas—are somber and heavy in tone. Yet adjoining the plaza in the area in front of the Catholic mission church, a carnival with rides and booths seems to foreshadow and presage the coming victory and its celebration in fiesta.

Easter Saturday is the dramatic climax of this old struggle between good and evil. Early Saturday morning the fearful evil Chapayekas who have captured and crucified Christ and taken over the church, leave this domain and in procession escort an effigy of their leader, Judas, into the plaza and affix it to a large cross. They retire to the fringes of the village. Throughout the morning people from the community gather. Many Yaquis approach the anti-Christ to affix a token of penance to him, usually a scarf.

Pascola dancers, with their small masks on the sides or backs of their heads, mingle among the crowds with coffee cans receiving donations as a man, speaking alternately in Yaqui, Spanish, and English, informs the visitors about what is happening and repeatedly asks for donations. Vendors sell food and drinks. There is an air of expectation. Late in the morning the Maestro, or leader of the Yaqui church,

along with a small group of worshippers carrying a cross appear in the plaza and begin a worship service read from a Yaqui book of worship. The group proceeds slowly in the direction of the church. Once they reach the church they enter followed by many women and children. A curtain is drawn across the door.

At the east end of the plaza appear black garbed pilates, representing soldiers. In two lines, one formed on each side of the plaza, they march slowly forward to a drum beat with an occasional eerie flute melody. The Chapayekas follow, prancing and playing, firing toy cap guns and clacking their wooden daggers on their wooden swords. They often stop to wiggle their hips to awaken their belts of horn rattles. The long bands of cocoon rattles wrapped about their ankles emphasize in sound their every step.

The masks of the Chapayekas are wild and colorful. Many look something like cow heads, but others clearly represent stereotypic images particularly of ethnic peoples: a yellow-faced Chinaman with pigtail; a red-faced, big-nosed, cigar store Indian with long braided black hair. European Americans are not always absent from masked representation. At the end of the Nixon era one Chapayeka was an unquestionable representation of Richard Nixon. Chapayekas are a strange mixture of fearfulness and humor.

This huge procession of perhaps a hundred men march forward into the plaza. Then retreat. Again and again. On each advance they move closer to the church. Finally, at mid plaza, the lines stop moving. They wait in silent readiness. Suddenly the church bell begins rapidly tolling. Simultaneously the lines of Pilates and Chapayekas rush noisily toward the church. As they approach the church the curtain covering the door flies open and the Pascolas along with many women and children rush out filling the area immediately in front of the church. They are armed with hands full of flower petals and green leaves. As the evil ones approach they are pelted with flowers and leaves, the transformed blood of Christ. Repelled, the Chapayekas return to their positions mid plaza and reassemble for another attack.

As the women and children return to the church, some of the Chapayekas, those newest to this role, fall to the ground in the area around Judas. They crawl forward. There, met by their family sponsors, they remove their masks under the protection of a blanket or an overcoat. They leave their masks and their daggers and swords at the feet of the Judas effigy. With unmasked heads covered, the sponsors rush these maskers at a full run to the church where they are rededicated to Christ. Other sponsors approach the remaining Chapayekas who remove some aspects of their costumes--rattles, blankets, sandals, an apparent sign of their loss of power.

Quiet returns. Once again the bell rings. The second attack is launched. Again the women and children are successful with their flowers in repelling the onslaught. Other Chapayekas give up their masks. Those remaining remove even more of their costumes.

One final attack is carried out. On its failure even the last of the Chapayekas remove their masks and are rushed to the church.

The huge straw-stuffed Judas figure is now surrounded by Chapayeka masks. The swords and daggers are all propped in a line around this figure.

As the last of the head-covered figures reaches the church, the Judas effigy surrounded by the masks and boxes of debris generated by all these events is set afire. It is quickly an inferno.

Simultaneously, a troupe of Matachini Dancers enters the plaza and begins to dance and the Pascolas joined by a Deer Dancer appear with their musicians immediately in front of the church. It is fiesta time.

There is really so much to be considered in terms of the play of the Yaqui masking on this occasion. There is the play of the past and the present. The ancient Pascola masks, likely representing animals, which predate contact, appear in the same event as the Chapayeka representations of contemporary stereotypes. The Yaquis seem masterful at playing the past and the future in the same plaza.

Other Yaqui masking features are of special interest to me. The men who mask the Chapayekas comprehend the power of the mask. It is a power that threatens to overwhelm the masker with the character and attributes that the mask presents. In recognition of this power and as protection against it, the masker wears a rosary about his neck. All the time that the mask is on his head, he places the cross of the rosary in his mouth. Constantly he must pray or say the name "Jesus." This is his protection.

From my discussion of masking in terms of play, this practice is telling. The Yaqui masker, by carrying a rosary cross in his mouth, is demonstrating a determination to maintain that masking is and must be a double identity. Indeed those who portray Chapayekas often talk of the difficulty, but necessity, of having to act in two ways at once. The masker is not the entity presented by the mask, yet clearly the masker is that entity for the Chapayeka cannot exist without the masker. The mask form is understood as a powerful presence, especially when enlivened through masking. This conjunction of form (the idea of evil) and sense (the religious Yaqui) must remain at play. Each one both limits and makes possible the existence of the other. If kept in a playful relationship, what emerges is living form, beauty. Another very moving aspect of this event is when the maskers remove their masks and are rushed with their heads covered to the church. It is as though the masker, once free of the Chapayeka mask, is pure sense, that is, formless, a moment of sensation. Certainly with head covered he is faceless, he has no identity. He must be rushed to the church, the opposite pole from the Judas effigy and the Chapayeka mask, to acquire another form, this one in the image of Christ and the good.

Finally, in its annual enactment of the Easter pageantry, the Yaqui demonstrate the importance of this play between good and evil. Every Easter good is victorious. That much is certain. But what makes this victory powerful correlates directly with the presence of evil. If the evil is not powerfully present, how can the victory of good have meaning? And, of course, the struggle continues year after year.

There is one final example of masking that may further illustrate how Native Americans commonly see the double nature of masking, the double nature that I am articulating in terms of play. Hopi children are carefully protected against seeing the masked kachinas, spirit messengers, without their masks as they are guarded against seeing masks not in use. They understand the kachinas to be exactly what they appear to be, spirit beings who come to Hopi bringing rain, food, and life. At the age of eight to ten, children are initiated into the Kachina Cult and thereupon formally begin their active religious lives.

The climactic event of this initiation rite is when the children are invited into a kiva, or ceremonial chamber, to witness a dance they have never before been permitted to see. The kachinas enter the kiva climbing down a ladder extending into the kiva from a rooftop hatchway. As the kachinas appear they come without masks. The children suddenly recognize their male relatives and neighbors. Many experience this event as a horrible disenchantment. They feel the adults have lied to them and they wonder whether they will ever be able to trust them again. In a short time, of course, all of these children are involved in the practice of Hopi religion. The boys will soon begin to be maskers themselves.

What is remarkable from the perspective that I have been developing is that this disenchantment is structurally parallel to a demonstration that the mask and masker must always be understood as a field of interacting play. It is difficult to imagine how the distinction between masker and masked identity could be more dramatically established than in this initiation event. All the more remarkable is that by conjoining this revelation with the initiation of the formal religious life, it must be concluded that the Hopi recognize the religious importance of the play between mask and masker. Though the children feel they have lost something of the truth; they will soon experience that it is in this field of play, in the gap between mask and masker, that Hopi religious life is experienced, that they will come to know by the experience of being them the kachinas.

What then is the significance of seeing Native American religions at play? While I have illustrated the play of Native American religions primarily through ritual masking activities, I think the dynamic structurality, as teased out of Schiller's view, pervades Native American religions and has done so throughout their long histories. Native American religions are vital, are alive—Native American religions are meaningful and powerful—to the extent they play among the many disparate, conflicting, and mutually exclusive forces.

We are accustomed to various metaphors to describe the character of Native American religions. Harmony, as it occurs in music, may be a better metaphor than balance, though both are so often used. Musical harmony requires the interplay of wave patterns that modify one another to produce a whole array of overtones. Harmony occurs through the interplay of separate yet interacting vibrations, not through their resolution into a single tone. Sound is always in process, always coming into being and passing away, always creatively interacting with other sounds. Sound is oscillation, movement. Sound is impossible to freeze or to stop without losing it all together. Various notes when played together, interact, create harmonics, produce living form, or beauty as Schiller put it, but only because there are gaps, differences, between the tones that are made to interact. It is in these gaps that not only Native American religions, but all religions, exist. Only here in these gaps is there the potential for play, for movement, for vitality.

Indeed, the notion of gaps suggests an even more provocative metaphor that opens us to the dynamics and vitality of Native American religions. So where, beside maskings, are these gaps to be found? Mythology and ritual, by their natures, create gaps. They are distinguished by their being at once apart from what seems necessary to life and the basis for all of reality, essential to a meaningful life. Many views of mythology and ritual understand them as guidebooks, charters, or paradigms for proper living.

In this view the religious objective is to diminish the gap between life and these religious forms. Any disparity between the two is somehow a human failing. I think it is much more fruitful to see mythology and ritual as, even by their natures, forms that create gaps. To acknowledge the very character that distinguishes myth and ritual is at once to acknowledge a gap between them and life as lived. Again we have echoes of Schiller's distinction between the formal and the sensuous. The gap created between myth and the physical world, between ritual and non-ritual life affords human beings the playground in which they may play out their destinies. To close the gap, to live in myth, to make every act a ritual act, is tantamount to destroying human life altogether, certainly it would be the end of religion.

While I believe that to view religion from the perspective of play I have here developed may serve to illuminate the religious vitality of all human beings, there are many signs that Native Americans have very playful religions. Among the religions of the world, few have so elaborate or extensive a use of masking. Native Americans incorporate, in some of their most important religious ceremonies, the performances of clowns. The story traditions about fools and tricksters are widely understood as essential to the proper development of life. The ritual arts are rarely confused with the fine arts, though in form they may be indistinguishable.

The religious value of ritual art forms is assured in widespread practices of destroying ritual art in its use or after it has served its purpose. Navajos never keep sandpaintings nor even allow them to be photographed. Pueblos whitewash and repaint kiva walls, so richly decorated every season with murals. Yaquis burn the Chapayeka masks. Ritual masks are carefully stored by the Pueblos and in some cultures, the Seneca for example, masks are fed and considered to be alive. Pipes are disassembled and kept in bundles. Of course, many Native American cultures have developed craft arts that parallel these ritual arts, but most make very clear distinctions between objects made for sale as crafts and authentic ritual art forms. Such acts assure that form does not appear alone, but that it is always conjoined with the sensuous. It is in the interplay that these objects are religiously powerful, that they become truly beautiful.

Native American religions are distinguished in a playful celebration of the gaps, whose spirit and vitality is so nicely caught in a wonderful passage by Annie Dillard:

Ezekiel excoriates false prophets as those who have "not gone up into the gaps." The gaps are the thing. The gaps are the spirit's one home, the altitudes and latitudes so dazzlingly spare and clean that the spirit can discover itself for the first time like a once-blind man unbound. The gaps are the clefts in the rock where you cower to see the back parts of God; they are the fissures between mountains and cells the wind lances through, the icy narrowing fiords splitting the cliffs of mystery. Go up into the gaps. If you can find them; they shift and vanish too. Stalk the gaps. Squeak into a gap in the soil, turn, and unlock--more than a maple--a universe. This is how you spend this afternoon, and tomorrow morning, and tomorrow afternoon. Spend the afternoon. You can't take it with you.¹

¹Annie Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (New York: Bantam Books, 1974).