

Seven Centuries of Tradition: the Pueblo of San Juan

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In 1598, Don Juan de Onate and his expedition arrived at the junction of the Chama and the Rio Grande Rivers in what is now central New Mexico. There he found an Indian pueblo which he renamed San Juan de los Caballeros. Since then the pueblo has kept its official Spanish name, but in the Tewa language it has always been referred to as *Oke*.

San Juan, located on a high semi-arid plateau, is the largest and northernmost of six Tewa-speaking villages in the upper Rio Grande Valley just north of Santa Fe. The population during the early 1920s was about 500, but now boasts well over 1700.

In an area inhabited for nearly 700 years the houses in the center of San Juan are constructed of adobe. In recent years, however, members have

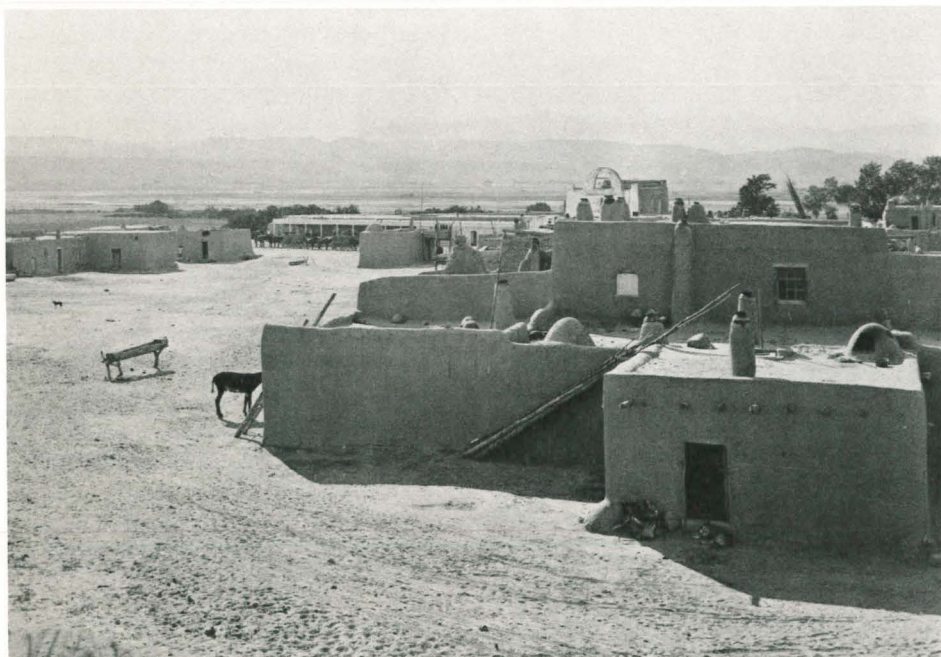
built more modern houses farther away from the village center on reservation lands that span over 12,000 acres.

Because it is located near two rivers, San Juan has easy access to water for its irrigation ditches. For centuries, this has made agriculture possible for the inhabitants of the pueblo, and has provided corn for their staple food. Beans, squash, and, more recently, wheat, alfalfa, chili and fruit have supplemented the corn. Meat was provided by the formerly abundant game in the region. But even in this fertile valley, corn could not grow and game would not roam without the blessing of rain so vitally needed in this semi-arid region.

Despite changes that Pueblo society and culture have undergone, the traditional core of Pueblo life continues; for instance, its unique principle of social division into the Summer

A plaza of the San Juan Pueblo as it looked in 1879.

Photo by John K. Hiller for the Smithsonian.



This symbol which is used in the San Juan Pueblo exhibit at the 1978 Festival of American Folklife is taken from a contemporary San Juan pottery dish. Typical motifs are arranged in a scattered fashion. The background is the tan color of the clay and the decorations are painted in white and brown.

Examples of the older style of San Juan pottery with its monotone coloring and incised patterns can be seen on exhibit in the Museum of Natural History's Hall of North American Indians.

people and the Winter people. This division is inherited through one's father.

The religious leaders of the Summer and Winter people are called the Summer *Cacique* and Winter *Cacique*. These ceremonial village chiefs alternate semi-annually in taking charge of the whole pueblo. The *cacique* holds his office for life, and is considered the primary authority in all matters, sacred or secular.

Besides this indigenous system of village chiefs and their assistants, an additional government structure was imposed on San Juan (as well as other Pueblo communities) by the Spanish. Adapted from the Spanish provincial government system, the village position consists of the governor and his five assistants. These civil officials are elected to office annually and are essential in dealing with secular matters and the world outside the pueblo.

Although some cultural activities have been abandoned under pressure of modernization, a traditional agricultural activity still important in San Juan is the annual cleaning of the irrigation ditches. Since some village members still engage in farming as did their ancestors, cleaning the ditches is crucial, for it insures proper flow of newly melted winter snows. In early spring, rows of men line up along the ditches, digging, clearing and burning the overgrowth of ac-



The summer home of Governor Trujillo in 1899.

Photo by Adam Clark Vroman for the Smithsonian.

cumulated shrubs and weeds. Regardless of one's occupation in or outside of the pueblo, every able-bodied male is required to participate in this annual communal activity.

Traditional arts and crafts continue to flourish through the Oke Oweenge (San Juan) Arts and Crafts Cooperative that is operated by community women. Each individual offers her time and talents in continuing arts that are unique to San Juan. Women may be seen at the Cooperative decorating the traditional red or brown pottery. Delicate embroidery on tradi-

tional ceremonial costumes, along with woven blankets and belts, are some of the finest objects produced by the San Juan women.

Ceremonies, whether from the native ceremonial calendar or from the adopted Spanish-Catholic system, involve the entire population. Unlike other Pueblo villages where rituals and dances are presented by smaller community groups, the preparation and performance of ceremonies in San Juan are sponsored by the whole

San Juan woman preparing bread to be baked in an adobe pante, the Pueblo version of the bee-hive brick oven found around the world.

Photo by Edward S. Curtis © 1905.



community. Thus, both Summer and Winter people participate in all ceremonial dances.

From the native ceremonial calendar, certain dances involve a very unique communal activity. Some songs performed during the winter season require new music as well as new song texts each year. Weeks before their performance, the community's corps of composers will gather together to create new songs for the Turtle Dance, Basket and/or Cloud Dance. These men as a group contribute to each other's songs to insure that the proper words and melodies are appropriate for the ceremony. Communal composing in San Juan is age-old, and may be a custom unique to the Pueblo culture of the Southwest.

From the Spanish-Catholic calendar comes one of the most important occasions celebrated by San Juan, occurring on June 24 in honor of St. John, the pueblo's namesake. At no other time is the village humming with so much activity. Homes are swept, painted, or replastered weeks ahead of time. A few days before the Feast Day, women may be seen baking ovenloads of bread in their *pantes*, bee-hive shaped adobe ovens. The men have already gathered and chopped cords of cotton and juniper wood to fire the *pantes* as well as the still much-used wood stoves. As families begin to prepare their extensive menus, some members may be at the *kiva*, or religious sanctuary, attending dance rehearsals for performances during this important celebration. On June 24 families welcome their relatives and neighbors and also open their homes to the many visitors and friends who have come for the Feast of St. John.

Some of these special festival foods and dances will be presented at the 1978 FAF by participants from the San Juan Pueblo, and audiences will be able to enjoy firsthand some of the traditional customs that play such an important part in the life of this community.

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