

**Weaving a Web of Understanding:
Navajo Textiles**

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“Navajo Weaving Song

*I weave in harmony.
 With the Earth I weave.
The strings are like rain,
 The rain touches my fingers.
There is beauty in my blanket.
 There is beauty all around me.
There is beauty above me.
 There is beauty below me
The plants speak to me,
 Mother Earth colors my rug.
I weave in harmony.”*

(Whitaker, 1998, 11)

Introduction

Navajo textiles play a significant role in Navajo culture that extends beyond the functional aspects of textiles. The act of weaving and the spiritual aspects of weaving in the Navajo culture date back to the Navajo creation story. Weaving in Navajo life illuminates significant aspects of the culture, carrying on these values from generation to generation. Through the practice of weaving, family and cultural values are passed on. Sheep and the production of wool also have played a crucial and interesting role in the development of weaving in Navajo culture. In addition, through the study of Navajo textiles, important cultural events and developments can be discovered. Weaving mirrors the change and continuity of Navajo culture. These changes and continuities can be seen through the different stylistic changes and developments of weaving techniques, the raw materials used—including wool and different dye techniques—as well as the development of weaving within the Navajo community and interactions with outsiders.

The Navajo clearly define the development and role of weaving in their community. Through the practice of weaving, the Navajo maintain and emphasize their connection to the earth, the importance of community, the beauty of imperfection and a deep connection to the past, present and future. Through the analysis of the continuity and change of techniques and materials, in addition to the analysis of the inherent messages associated with the practice of weaving, this paper explores the importance of preserving this art and way of life in order to preserve vital lessons about weaving and community.

In order to gain a comprehensive understanding of Navajo weaving, the historical influence of frontier commerce, and the preservation and restoration of textiles and community must be examined. In order to do so, I used a multifaceted approach combining different research insights, including environmental history, a discussion of frontier commerce, museum studies, and immersion in culture through weaving samples and traveling to a weaving community in New Mexico. The combination of these approaches allows for a holistic understanding of Navajo weaving rather than simply focusing on a single aspect of Navajo weaving.

Methods and Sources

These methods and sources of information are used in order to demonstrate the overall significance of preserving and restoring all aspects of Navajo weaving and the traditions, language and culture. First, in seeking to understand Navajo weaving, an in-depth analysis of the history and environmental history of the sheep proves crucial. I then evaluate the language and concepts surrounding frontier commerce demonstrating how Navajo goods have been commoditized and the role

of the Navajo in frontier commerce. In addition to these textual analyses, a museum studies adds an element of preservation and restoration concerns, demonstrating how crucial the preservation of textiles is in the overall preservation of a community and tradition. I examined a range of Navajo textiles owned by Colorado College at the Fine Arts Center. Examining the textiles in person greatly helped me gain an understanding of specific characteristics in weaving techniques. Handling actual textiles and being able to evaluate the weave techniques in person rather than through photographic images is vital. In order to fully understand a textile it is crucial to see texture and weave and visualize the textile as a tangible object. This is also why preservation of textiles is vital to the preservation of the weaving community.

Finally, I traveled to La Tierra Wools in northern New Mexico to experience a contemporary weaving community. I received funding from the Keller Family Venture Grant Program for Student Research and the Joel P. Benezet

Research Grant in Southwest Studies to help aid my travels. La Tierra Wools practices a different style of weaving than the Navajo, mainly due to their use of a floor loom rather than an upright loom. However, they have a flock of Navajo Churro sheep and hand spin and dye the Navajo Churro wool, which is very specific to Navajo weaving and the cultural identity of the Navajo. In addition, by experiencing



Figure 1: Los Ojos, New Mexico
Source: Photo by Author

a current weaving community that has been operational for more than 100 years, I gained a deeper understanding of the community aspect of weaving and the underlying importance of this community. In order to demonstrate my knowledge and dive fully into the “community” of weaving, I replicated several different styles of Navajo weaving, using Navajo Churro wool. Each style I chose came from a different period of Navajo weaving. Through my replications I am not attempting to claim that they are Navajo woven, they are not. I created these replications in order to gain an understanding of the complexity of the weaves and the work that it takes to create the elaborate weave structures that the Navajo use. I replicated a Chief’s blanket originating from 1840-1850, a Navajo Two-Piece Dress originating from 1850-1870, an Eyedazzler originating from 1870-1875, and a Child’s blanket originating from 1875- 1880. ¹I also hope to be able to pass on some of the experience of weaving through my capstone showcase and weaving demonstration, where Navajo textiles from the Fine Arts Center will be displayed alongside my replications of Navajo weaving techniques.

As Navajo textiles have gained in popularity, textiles that are not Navajo woven have been marketed as Navajo woven textiles. These textiles can be marked-up significantly in price, hurting the Navajo financially because they are being passed as Navajo textiles but made with cheaper materials. In addition, it also takes the market away from the Navajo. In order to prevent this continuing, preserving actual Navajo woven textiles and the community that surrounds these textiles, helps distinguish Navajo textiles from other textiles that are being passes as Navajo, as

¹ A description of these styles appears later in the paper.

well as helps inform people about Navajo textiles, what makes them special and how detrimental it is for the Navajo to have other textiles marketed as Navajo.

Preservation of textiles extends farther than the mere act of preserving the physical textiles. It extends to the preservation of the art and community of weaving. Each period of Navajo weaving is directly influenced by events happening to the Navajo, which illuminates a great deal about the community. A large aspect of this community is the concept of teaching through demonstration and watching. The Navajo never tell someone how to do something or that they are doing it wrong—even a husband and wife. Instead, they model and demonstrate their technique for others to watch and learn from. This also allows for the beautiful combination and incorporation of historical techniques and practices and each individual's creative and intuitive style. Even though the same techniques and concepts are being employed, no two textiles are ever the same—which is one of the beauties of weaving in the Navajo community.

In addition to the preservation of historic textiles, the preservation of the raw materials, specifically sheep required for Navajo weaving, proves vital in preserving the community. These practices aid in the preservation of Navajo cultural identity. Sheep and the activities associated with raising sheep and producing wool are at the heart of Navajo life.

Background:

Navajo Creation Story

Understanding weaving is not just a question of outsiders 'expertise', but how textiles parallel Navajo beliefs and self-identity. Thus providing insight into the

Navajo community. For the Navajo, life began in the underworlds. The journey of the Diné began with Insect People who moved through the four worlds. In the first world everything was ocean with no sun, stars, or moon. The second world was “uninhabited waste,” with no animals, trees or mountains. Grasshoppers populated the third world. Finally, in the fourth world, which had four snow-covered mountains, the First Man and First Woman were created. They were not mortal but Diyin Diné`e. First Man and First Woman then entered this world and created the Diné (Weisiger, 2009, 71).

Certain versions of the Navajo creation story emphasize the role of sheep in Navajo culture through including that it was only after giving life to sheep that the Changing Woman created people. In Navajo culture it is commonly understood that “from the beginning... the lives of Diné and sheep have intertwined” (Weisiger, 2009, 65). The sheep created plants that spread across the Earth, helping the landscape for the soon to come Diné. A cloud was “taken down and formed into the sheep” (Strawn, 2007, 313). This close intertwining between the Diné and sheep has generated the feeling that “it’s not just yarn and fiber. It’s meaningful” (Strawn, 2007, 313). The Earth Surface People (or the Nihookaa Diné`e) in the fourth world then entered this world and were dependent on the Holy People to aid them in their survival. Changing Woman, the most important and powerful Holy People, instructed the Diné where they should reside, in the area that was marked by four sacred mountains. The Diné made their home there, while another Holy People, Spider Woman, taught the Diné how to survive through the art of weaving (Bsumek,

2008, 25). Spider woman cast a web of life, incorporating the elements. Spider Man built the first loom for the Diné.

“The crosspoles were made of sky and earth cords, the warp sticks of sun rays, the healds [heddles] of rock crystal and sheet lightning. The batten was a sun halo, white shell made the comb. There were four spindles: one a stick of zigzag lightning with a whorl of cannel coal; one a stick of flash lightning with a whorl of turquoise; a third had a stock of sheet lightning with a whorl of abalone; a rain streamer formed the stick of the south, and its whorl was white shell” (Strawn, 2007, 304).

The Diné were given the ability to “create with beauty, patience, understanding and harmony” (Whitaker, 1998, 10). They created “gifts of life on their looms,” weaving a part of themselves into the textile through their creative interpretations (Whitaker, 1998, 10). With this gift, Spider Woman also warned them of the danger of the gift, teaching the Navajo the importance of moderation. Through weaving, the Navajo understood that in any arena of their lives, it was crucial to practice moderation.

Understanding the Navajo creation story and its underlying significance, aids in consideration Navajo culture. The Navajo creation story emphasizes the number four, which can be seen represented through the four directions, seasons, sacred mountains and four cross poles the loom is constructed from. The creation story also illustrates the deep connection and relationship the Navajo have always had with nature and the earth, and specifically their deep connection to sheep. The origin story demonstrates that the Diné understood that they possessed sheep and horses from the dawn of creation. In addition, the Diné understood how vital sheep were to their people since they were created in order to allow the Navajo to survive. This understanding helps set the stage for the hardships and brutality that overcame the Navajo when the United States government began to place regulations

on sheep and slaughtered mass numbers of sheep in front the Navajo. Not only was the government killing the Navajo's livelihood and food, they were also slaughtering the Navajo's 'children' in front of their eyes, creating a rift that still lays deep between the Navajo and the government. The creation story and role of sheep in Navajo life aids in the understanding of the conflicts between Anglos and the Navajo, especially over livestock.

Weaving Community/ Spiritual Aspects

Each weaving represents the free flowing energy of an entire culture and the individual who physically weaves the textile (Whitaker, 1998). It is a creation of beauty with the incorporation of oneself. Navajo weavers express that the yarns and fibers guide them on their own path through the loom. They say that the designs "come from the mind" (Whitaker, 1998, 10). As the designs come from the mind, they provide the weaver with a link to ancient past, present and future. The weaver is acting as an instrument, representing all that has been learned and all that still remains to be learned.

Even textiles that use a specific pattern demonstrate the character of the weaver through the combination of each individual stitch, thought and concept that come together to create the whole. The wholeness of a textile comes through the balance of technique, innovation, creativity and the textile as a finished product. There is an ability of the weaver to innovate and improvise with each new textile they weave. It is through innovation that weavers are able to maintain tradition yet still insert their individuality (Gilpin, 1968). Weaving is a process of "change...[in order] to create new possibilities for reinterpreting tradition" (Hedlund, 1997, 17).

One of the important elements of weaving in Navajo culture is the importance of imperfection in each blanket. A weaver never creates a perfect design, and if she were to, it is said that she would never weave again. Slight imperfections in the weaving signify that the blanket or rug was hand woven (Correll, 1972, 72). In addition, there is great beauty in weavings that have slight imperfections. It demonstrates that all people are human and make mistakes. It is the slight variations, even in a simple traditional pattern, that makes hand weaving special. A weaving without any mistakes does not have the same inherent beauty of life, imperfection (Correll, 1972, 74).

The Navajo have many spiritual beliefs surrounding weaving and the creation of textiles. Blessings are given throughout each part of the process, including to the sheep the wool comes from and after a textile is complete. There are songs and prayers specific to weaving, and many Navajo believe that if a weaver does not partake in these activities illness or hardship will be brought upon the weaver. In addition, there are certain sacred symbols, in particular ones used in Sandpaints, used by the Medicine Man to cure illness, that are not supposed to be permanently trapped in a weaving. The Sandpaints are brushed away after they are used in ceremonial processes to release the energy in them. Weaving certain symbols into textiles transforms these symbols that are supposed to be transient into a permeate manifestation of it, trapping energy and spirits into the cloth (Winter, 2002, 7).

In Navajo culture, woven blankets are considered a “second skin” of the weaver (Kahlenberg, 1972, 14), an extension of the self and the community through

the textile. Blankets serve as a form of communication throughout the tribe. Weaving is shared by everyone in the tribe, and holds a feeling of energy of the individual who wove the blanket. Each blanket is a representation of a spiritual presence of an individual and is central to their personal identity (Kahlenberg, 1972, 19). *“Art for the Navajos was not separate from life, and the best blankets show a combination of conscious and subconscious elements, a balance between tradition and improvisation that came to them naturally”* (Kahlenberg, 1972, 28). A completed weaving is a collection of energy from the weaver and the community.

Early Navajo Textiles

The earliest known Navajo textiles date to the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The earliest Navajo textiles discovered were excavated in Gobernador Valley in northern New Mexico and date to the middle of the eighteenth century (Blomberg, 1988, 2). A fragment of a wearing blanket was excavated from Massacre Cave that was woven with handspun wool, with stripes of different natural colors on a predominantly white background (Strawn, 2007, 305). Other fragments of early Navajo textiles were found at Canyon de Chelly, dating to the early nineteenth century. These fragments of the first Navajo textiles indicate that the earliest Navajo weavings were made with wool and the design was of simple stripes (Blomberg, 1988, 2). The earliest Navajo weavings had the same horizontal striping found in Pueblo weaving. However, as Navajo innovation began to take over, the stripes were broken up into terraced geometric shapes. These designs were very similar to the basket weaving that the Navajo had partaken in prior to weaving blankets (Strawn, 2007, 304).

Raw Materials: Sheep

Acquiring knowledge of the raw materials used for weaving and how the presence and acquisition of the materials changed over time plays a vital role in understanding the development of weaving as a whole and of Navajo culture. As regulations and access to materials change over time, the impact these changes have on weaving and more generally on Navajo culture are greatly apparent, having a significant influence on the Navajo. The type of yarn, wool or cotton, and more specifically the type of sheep the wool comes from greatly impacts Navajo culture. These developments can provide insight as to what happened to the Diné at a given time, and how these impacts on the Navajo result directly in the development of new materials used in weaving.

Early Sheep

In 1540, the first documented sheep came to the American Southwest with Francisco de Coronado who was in search of riches. The thousands of sheep he brought were not intended for their wool but as sources of meat. Years later, in 1598, Don Juan Onate introduced the first sheep intended for meat and wool into the American Southwest. These sheep were Churro sheep, a desert sheep from southern Spain. The Spanish Churro sheep were the foundation of the Navajo-Churro breed, which used to be called "Old Navajo Sheep." (Strawn, 2007, 305). Fine-wool Merino sheep were not introduced into the American Southwest until the nineteenth century. It wasn't until 1640 that there were the first documented accounts of Navajo possessing sheep. The Navajo likely obtained these sheep from

the Spanish, the Puebloan people and from capturing them in during raids (Strawn, 2007, 306).

In the 18th century the importance of flocks increased for the Navajo. From the remains of wooden battens, spindle whorls, loom fittings carved in stone and hanks of wool, the presence of weavers in early Navajo life is known (Weisiger, 2009, 115). In addition, due to Spanish soldiers' reports it can be deduced that the Navajo had sheep during this time. One description from a Spanish soldier was that the "natives occupy themselves raising their stocks and cultivating their farms" (Weisiger, 2009, 116). In the second half of the 18th century, the Navajo abandoned Dinétah due to their growing flocks, the drought and Utes and Comanches driving them out of their homelands with guns. In 1774, the Navajo raided ranchos and pueblos for sheep, in addition to obtaining sheep through trading (Weisiger, 2009, 119). Many ranchos and pueblos in the surrounding area lost sheep due to a variety of causes, however, since it was known that the Navajo did raid to obtain some of their sheep, the government used the raids as full justification for total war on Navajo country, eventually resulting in the disruptive Long Walk (1864- 68).

Understanding Sheep and the Government

When examining the interaction between the United States government and the Navajo it is crucial to understand the juxtaposition of views and philosophies of the two groups. The government became increasingly worried about overgrazing and amount of livestock that the Navajo had. Not understanding the connection that the Navajo have to their livestock, in particular sheep, the government acted based solely on their understanding of livestock. In turn, the Navajo did not have the

understanding of certain environmental concerns in the same regard that environmentalists and the government did. Sheep are a sacred animal to the Navajo, being inseparably connected to the Navajo since the creation story, especially to women, and therefore livestock reduction not only hurt the Navajo economically but spiritually (Weisiger, 2009, 56).

Livestock Reduction

The government became worried about the numbers of livestock that the Navajo had and the damage that the livestock was conflicting upon the land, due to the dust storms and drifting sand dunes that were created by the overgrazing and farming methods. This later became known as the Dust Bowl (Weisiger, 2009, 34). In 1933, the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) launched a livestock reduction program in order to regulate the number of livestock the Navajo were allowed to have. The program was implemented to stop the accelerated erosion that was a result of overgrazing. Implemented in two stages, voluntary then mandatory, the program began to put regulations upon the Navajo concerning their livestock, drastically impacting the Navajo community. Between 1933 and 1934, the BIA purchased more than 86,500 sheep from Navajo stockowners and began shipping livestock to slaughterhouses to feed children at Navajo schools, although large amounts of meat went bad because of the surplus sent to the schools (Weisiger, 2009, 25). These actions “took our [Navajo] meat off our tables and left us hungry and heartbroken” (Weisiger, 2009, 18). It was also killing a “life sustaining blessing” (sheep and horses) from Diyin Din’é (Weisiger, 2009, 18). The actions of killing these animals

were not only wasteful but also disrespectful to Diné, meaning that the actions would bring disorder to the Navajo.

The second phase of the Livestock Reduction Act was mandatory. Range specialists determined the carrying capacity in Navajo country to be 560,000 sheep and goats. Based upon this carrying capacity, each family was allotted a certain number of livestock (Weisiger, 2009, 28). In 1937, the grazing regulations were lowered in order to make it more equal between the Navajo. The government began to use the livestock reduction program as an “economic leveling and social engineering” program (Weisiger, 2009, 29). Family life for the Navajo changed drastically during the implementation of the new regulations. Many Navajo’s livelihood centered on their livestock and having their livestock taken from them instantly plunged families into poverty leaving them no work. The government justified these actions by saying that the Navajo would be able to get wage-earning employment, however this logic was flawed on two counts. First, it was difficult for the Navajo to obtain the jobs because there were very few jobs. Secondly, it is primarily the women who are the owners and caretakers of the sheep. The jobs the government mentioned were not jobs that these women would be able to get, such as maintaining the railroads and working in coalmines. This caused a shift in the family dynamic of the Navajo, shifting from women being the heads of household in many regards, including financially, to the men. However, women still remained the head of house old in other regards, such as caring for the children and elderly and caring for their land, while the men were not home working at wage-earning jobs (Weisiger, 225, 2009).

Disconnect Between Communities

During the attempts of livestock reduction on the Navajo reservation, the deep cultural divide between the Navajo and Anglos was deepened. Both parties believed that they knew the best relationship between people, livestock and the land. The United States government was growing increasingly worried about erosion due to overgrazing. They believed that with their technology and western advancements they were able to understand the amount of livestock acceptable and way in which the Navajo needed to live in order to minimize the problem. On the other hand, the Navajo had been living in these lands for their entire lives and had their own systems for regulating land use. The Navajo knew how to live in harmony with the land by moving with the seasons. Until the Navajo had strict land regulations, “the people moved with their sheep whenever and wherever they wished with the seasons” (Weisiger, 2009, 31). Movement was essential to the Navajo, which can be demonstrated by the fact that in Navajo language, the key verb is “to go” rather than “to be”, as it is in English. The Navajo had their own way of managing the land through the patterns that they herded their sheep. The Navajo would walk their sheep in every direction so that the grass would not die; it was through “movement from one place to another... that Diné managed the land” (Weisiger, 2009, 126). The Navajo have a deep spiritual connection with the earth. Every thought manifests itself, and therefore songs and prayer are extremely important because “everyone thinks the wrong thoughts” and those ‘wrong thoughts’ must be rectified through prayer and song (Weisiger 2009, 54). Any sort of dissonance with the earth will cause disorder in the nature and among the

Navajo. Therefore, the Anglos' actions and 'bad' thoughts were, in the minds of the Navajo, causing extreme disorder.

The Navajo's connection to nature is vital in understanding the impact of the Livestock Reduction Act. For the Navajo, the Livestock Reduction Act was not only killing their beloved animals but also permanently impairing their connection to nature. Sheep are inherently related to the identity of the Navajo, "from the beginning they say, the lives of Diné and sheep have intertwined" (Weisiger, 2009, 65). Therefore, when the government slaughtered the Navajo's livestock, specifically sheep, the Navajo people felt as though a part of them had been slaughtered. For the Navajo, livestock was not simply there for their use and consumption, replaceable and disposable, but a part of their spiritual connection to the Earth. The New Dealer Conservation program was reasonable for placing these regulations on the Navajo. They view the situation through a different cultural lens than the Navajo. They were never able to fully understand the argument of the Navajo or the deep wounds that were made when the Navajo were forced to have their livestock slaughtered. They did not have the same spiritual connection and understanding of the livestock that the Navajo did. In turn, the Navajo also looked through a different lens and did not fully understand or act upon the worries that the New Dealers had for the land. Instead, there was a cultural clash where the New Dealers asserted their role of power over the Navajo, instead of working with the Navajo and their cultural practices to reach some sort of agreement. This blind assertion of power created a divide between communities that still is present (Weisiger, 2009). Navajo Churro Sheep have played, and continue to play, a vital role in Navajo culture, being the root

of conflicts between the government and the Navajo. Therefore it is essential to understand the importance and characteristics of these particular sheep.

Navajo Churro Sheep

Navajo Churro sheep are an extremely important breed of sheep, having



Figure 2: Navajo Churro Sheep
Source: Moskin

many characteristics that differ from other sheep, making them, for the Navajo, the most valuable sheep. Navajo Churro sheep are historically important as the first breed of Navajo sheep. Navajo Churro sheep have unique

natural colors and fleece qualities

that make them very well suited for Navajo weaving. First, the sheep are astonishing natural colors that cannot be achieved by other sheep, even after dyeing the wool.

The sheep are a variety of creamy white, black, light tan, gray, blue-gray, brown, red-brown and multicolored. These colors were adaptations by ancestors in the need for concealment. The wool of the sheep is ideal for hand production and Navajo weaving. Unlike many of the 'improved breeds', the wool from Navajo Churro sheep is not fine white wool, with a heavy crimp (fineness of the wool) and high grease content, that makes it more difficult to hand spin. Navajo Churro sheep have a double coat, unlike those of the improved breeds. The outer coat consists of long coarse hair fibers, while the inner coat consists of short finer wool fiber and variable amounts of kemp (hair-like) fibers. The fleece from Navajo Churro is very easily

hand spun, and in some instances does not need to be carded, which increases the speed of getting on the loom. The fleece has very low grease content, which repels sand and dirt, which are typical in the desert. This in turn requires less washing of the fleece, which is a huge advantage in the Southwest where water is extremely scarce. These characteristics of the wool contribute to the “higher durability and luster” of Navajo hand-woven textiles (Strawn, 2007, 308). In addition to the differences in the wool of Navajo Churro sheep, the sheep are also a local breed, which has developed disease resistance. The local breed has adapted to the desert and canyon terrain. Navajo Churro sheep are small sheep with narrow bodies, long legs and light bones. They are limber enough to walk long distances to graze, as opposed to the ‘improved breeds’ that are larger, wider and heavier animals to support more weight and wool yield. Navajo Churro sheep have little fleece on their face, legs and bellies so that it will not snag on desert plants. They also eat less due to their smaller stature and lower wool yields, making them ideal for the harsh range conditions of the Navajo nation. (Strawn 2007, 307- 308).

As the numbers of Navajo Churro sheep dropped over the years, increased by the attempts to introduce new ‘improved breeds’, the Navajo Churro breed of sheep faced extinction. By the 1970’s the American Livestock Breeds Conservancy, a non-profit organization that protects domesticated livestock breeds, estimated that there were no more than 450 Navajo Churro sheep left (Strawn, 2007, 310). In attempts to rectify the drastically declining numbers of Navajo Churro sheep, the Navajo Sheep Project at Utah State University established breeding lines of Navajo Churro sheep derived from small amounts of the old type of Navajo Churro sheep

purchased from women in isolated regions of the Navajo reservation. Once they built up a small but substantial flock they returned the sheep to the Navajo weaving community. In 1991, a group called the Diné be'iina (Navajo Lifeway), a community-based organization that focused on restoring Navajo Churro sheep emerged. The group was implemented in order to support the culturally relevant economic developments based upon sheep, wool and fiber arts. The goal is to “train, educate, and develop the capacity of Navajo communities and persons to preserve and continue their culture, traditions and livelihood, in particular, those that sheep, wool and weaving have meant, and continue to mean, to the Diné” (Strawn, 2007, 311). Each year, the group holds their annual event; Sheep is Life Celebration, to “honor the central role that sheep play in Navajo spirituality, philosophy, and daily life” (Strawn, 2007, 311). One of the main goals of the event is to explore the cultural identity associated with the efforts to reintroduce Navajo Churro sheep for Navajo weaving. For many Navajo, this reintroduction of Navajo Churro sheep brought very emotional reactions, of joy to have the sheep back and sadness from the memories of the loss of their sheep. Many weavers have lost the traditional knowledge of techniques needed to process fleece with the qualities of Navajo Churro wool. With the readily available commercial wool, the process of learning to “go back to carding and spinning the wool instead of going to [a trading post]” was a huge step for the Navajo reemergence of culture.



Figure 3: Sheep in a Field, Los Ojos, NM
Source: Photo by Author

Role of Sheep

Sheep play a vital role in Navajo culture. In addition to the spiritual connection the Navajo have towards their sheep, sheep play a crucial role in the social cohesion of the Navajo. Caring for the sheep requires lots of time, energy and determination. Through the elders teaching children how to care for the sheep, they are in turn educating the children in the Navajo way of life. Children must care for the sheep, taking on a great deal of responsibility at a young age, which helps them grow up and understand certain values of Navajo culture. Caring for sheep allows young children to learn responsibility, hard work and the influence of nature and the Navajo's relationship with nature. Losing the sheep culture resulted in an erosion of the traditional way Navajo children are taught about culture and life lessons. Herding acted as a "central part of the Navajo socialization process" (Strawn, 2007, 306). In addition to providing vital lessons for the children, sheep act as means of stability in Navajo's lives. "The sheep will always be there for you. No matter what. Through thick and thin the sheep will be there for you. A job can disappear years down the road. The sheep will still be there for you" (Strawn, 2007, 311). A mother of a weaver who raised Navajo Churro sheep warned "not to ever let go of the sheep, because without the sheep there's no stability in your life... Without sheep, you're in poverty (Strawn, 2007, 311). In recent years, with the reemergence of the Navajo Churro sheep, there has also been a reemergence of Navajo culture. Coming back to Navajo Churro sheep and traditional process of wool has in turn allowed Navajo traditions and values to be reemphasized. "You kind of re-meet your own family, too, in the process [of returning the Navajo- Churro]. This is a powerful

tool to use for future generations of kids and how we teach them... it all goes back to the sheep culture... The sheep is the vehicle to talking about the deeper issues, which is the culture” (Strawn, 314). For the Navajo, sheep are much more than just livestock. Sheep significantly aid in the socialization and culture of the Navajo.

Women and Sheep

The creation story demonstrates that sheep were intertwined with the Navajo before the Navajo existed. Not only are Navajo women the caretakers and owners of sheep, sheep are inherently connected to womanhood, and by extension motherhood. For the Navajo, weaving was not a separate profession but a part of the cycle of life for the Navajo. Women, being the primary weavers, gained certain roles from weaving. The “creative independence, within blanket tradition, points to important freedoms of women in Navajo society” demonstrating the importance of weaving in the development of women’s role in the Navajo community (Kahlenberg, 1972, 28). For example, property is in the woman’s name and the family line is traced through women. The United States government’s lack of understanding of this concept and failure to recognize women as heads of households and owners of sheep has deepened the divide between these two parties. Having two inherently differing opinions of nature, particularly livestock, created a divide that could not be breached, weakening the already strenuous ties between the Navajo and the US government. Due to the government’s power, they were able to impose their cultural understanding on the Navajo, and further suppress and control the Navajo through the control of their livestock particularly sheep (Weisiger, 2009, 59). Flock numbers growing, diminishing and flourishing again illuminate regulations and

events imposed upon the Navajo and how these regulations affected the Navajos way of life, including weaving. Along with helping maintain social cohesion among the Navajo, sheep act as a crucial factor in the roles women have in the Navajo community.

Raising Sheep

Shepherding

Historically, the entire family would move with their flocks of sheep. Today, families are not as mobile and certain members will move the sheep. Generally the women and young children care for the sheep. The women are generally the owners of the sheep (Weisiger, 2009) and young children are in charge of shepherding (McCome, 1951). The experiences that children had at young ages caring for sheep prepared them for leadership roles later in life as adults (Strawn, 2007, 314).

Shearing

In order to obtain wool from sheep a series of steps must be completed to turn the raw fleece into wool. The first step is to shear the sheep. This process is completed in early spring, when the sheep still have their thick winter coats, yet it is warm enough that the sheep can live without their coat. Each year the time sheep get sheared changes depending on the season, and when it begins to get warm. The sheep shearer begins by tying the sheep's legs together and using a pair of ordinary hand-shears. The shearer works systematically from the neck to the tail clipping the fleece off the sheep. In Navajo culture, the shearer does not necessarily keep the fleece all in one section while shearing. Weavers want the wool from the back of the sheep and not from the belly or neck. The wool is the best at the shoulders and sides

of the animal. The wool on the belly, front and neck is extremely short, worn and dirty. The wool near the tail is very coarse and the wool at the head and shins is short, stiff and straight. Wool from Navajo-Churro sheep does not need the extra step of washing that would generally come after shearing the sheep. The Navajo-Churro wool is less greasy and therefore laying the wool on a rock in the sun and beating it to remove excess dirt can replace washing the wool (Reichard, 1936, 13).

Carding

After the wool has been sheared, and washed if necessary, the wool is then carded. The process of carding rearranges the fibers of the wool into some sort of order, all the fibers even enough for the wool to be spun. Since most wool from Navajo Churro sheep is not washed, the process of carding also acts as a second cleaning step. More dirt falls out of the wool as it is worked during carding. After the wool comes off the sheep, matted, dirty and irregular, the woman carding the wool pulls the mats apart and chooses bits to put on her towcard, a device with teeth used to sort and agitate the fibers. She fluffs the wool with her fingers, picks out foreign objects and lays the fluff on her towcard. Not many women enjoy the process of carding as much as other steps in the process. Carding requires exact hand positioning and strength. In addition, it is an extremely dirty job. However, not all fleece needs to be carded, and often wool from certain flocks of Navajo Churro sheep do not need the extra step of carding before spinning the wool. Some wool can go directly from shearing to hand spinning and skip the carding step which allows one to not “agitate the fiber at all ...[to not]... make them rough” (Strawn, 2007, 313). In more recent times, many weavers welcome the introduction of technology that

increases the speed that they can get on the loom to weave such as spinning wheels, which eliminates having to spin yarn by hand. One Navajo weaver feels “a lot of our [Navajo] people... have benefited... [and] are able to see these new inventions that will help us get faster to the loom” (Strawn, 2007, 313). Bypassing certain steps, or increasing the speed due to new technology has allowed Navajo weavers to spend more time on creating their designs. However, it has also lead to a lack of understanding and appreciation for the process of obtaining fleece from sheep and producing beautiful handspun wool (Reichard, 1936).

Spinning

The process of spinning yarn surpasses the simplicity of the last task required to make wool suitable for weaving, and enters the spiritual realm. The “simplicity of the art, combined with the grace necessary for skill...” demonstrate the beauty and importance of spinning wool in Navajo culture (Reichard, 1936, 19). Throughout time, the process of spinning has become “symbolic of goodness” (Reichard, 1936, 19). During the process of spinning yarn, it is very important to the Navajo the direction of the spindle as it spins. In Navajo culture, direction and relation to the Earth, particularly the sun, is vital to the well being of the Earth and the Dine. Many practices are based upon the movement of the sun in a sun wise motion, or a clockwise direction. The act of spinning yarn represents the sun’s movement. This directional movement is crucial in the spinning of yarn. Yarn that is not spun in the sun wise (clockwise) rotation would produce yarn that represents the reverse of a normal state, creating an imbalance. If yarn is spun backwards, not the sun wise or clockwise direction it is yarn that will “come unraveled”, “won’t stay

in rugs” and “might cause sickness” (Farrer, 1994, 61). When spinning yarn, the spinner starts by taking half of the pad from their towcards. They moisten the pad at one end and cause it to stick loosely to the end of the spindle. In order to spin yarn correctly, it takes an exact relationship between the tension of the wool held in the left hand, the twirl of the stick on the ground, and the angle the wool makes with the stick. Then, the spinner must keep a balance of twirling the stick and drawing more wool. While spinning, the base of the spindle rests on the ground spinning at the right of the spinner, assuming she is right handed. The upper end of the stick rests on the inside of the spinner’s right thumb with the rest of the fingers resting gently around it. The thumb, first finger and second fingers slide it back and forth from the end of the thumb to the base. The wool is held in the spinners left hand, between the thumb and first finger, with the palm up. This hand regulates the twist of the wool, creating a loose twist the thickness of the middle finger. The spinner works on creating an even twist throughout all the wool. (Reichard, 1936,17). Once the wool is spun the wool gets dyed. One of the defining characteristics of Navajo weaving is the use of Navajo Churro Wool.

Navajo Weaving

Navajo weavers have very fine skills working with complex weave structures and techniques. Navajo weaving techniques differ than those of the other two main weaving communities in the American Southwest, the Pueblo Indians and the Spanish American. Both the Navajo and the Pueblo weave on a vertical loom where Spanish American weavers weave on a horizontal loom. In addition, characteristics of weave structures and finishing techniques differ between the three groups of

weavers. Navajo weavers use wool warp², in addition to wool weft³, where as other groups of weavers use cotton weft. Another typical weave characteristic of Navajo weaving is the inclusion of lazy lines. Navajo weavers use lazy lines to work on a



Figure 4: Example of lazy line in textile
Source: Photo by author

certain section of the tapestry building up along a diagonal line. This technique makes reaching the weft through easier as they are working in a smaller section. The inclusion of lazy lines, which the Pueblo and Spanish American never include in their weaving, is a defining characteristic

of Navajo textiles that greatly helps identify who wove a certain textile. Navajo weavers work vertically from the bottom upwards on their loom, although sometimes to ensure that their weft selvage⁴ at the end will not be loose, a weaver might start at the top of their loom and work down a few inches of weaving, switching back to the bottom of their loom and weave upwards until they meet up with their previous weaving. The Navajo generally weave in a weft-faced plain tapestry weave, meaning that the warp is completely covered by the weft and it is woven in plain weave. Plain weave creates a simple checkerboard pattern, made by the warp and weft wool crossing “at right angles to each other, over-one, under-one”

² A series of yarns extended lengthwise in a loom thereby forming the lengthwise threads of a woven fabric and usually twisted tighter than the filling yarns and sized for protection during the weaving in of the filling threads (Gove, 1968)

³ The thread or yarn that crosses the warp and extends from selvage to selvage of a cloth (Gove, 1968)

⁴ The edge on either side of a woven or flat-knitted fabric so finished as to prevent raveling (Gove, 1968)

(Wheat, 2003, 91). A twill weave is created when the pattern of alternations changes, “such as over-one, under-two or over-two, under-two” (Wheat, 2003, 91). Twill weaves create a diagonal or diamond shaped pattern. However, Navajo weavers weave in difficult weave structures such as diagonal and diamond twill weaves (Wheat, 2003). Another characteristic in Navajo weaving is the use of twining. Twining consists of “the weft elements used in pairs or, more rarely, in triplets, which wrap around each other as they interlace across the foundation, or warp, elements” (Wheat, 2003, 92). This technique can be used both with plain and twill weaves. The Navajo are also known for their tightly tied selvages corners and tassels. The warp selvedge generally consists of a selvedge braid with two 3-ply twined cords. The weft selvedge consists of a single outside warp cord or a selvedge braid with two 3-ply twined cords (Strawn, 2007, 304). The Navajo combine complex weave techniques, innovation and creativity to create their textiles.

Language Surrounding Navajo Weaving

The view of the Navajo, and how the Navajo have been portrayed has changed throughout history, in a large part due to the art and jewelry that the Navajo create. Through the process of commoditizing Navajo goods, the image of the Navajo has been scripted and sculpted, in order to gain the approval and market of Americans. The word Navaho has been used in order to represent characteristics whites have ascribed to the Navajo in order to facilitate the sale of blankets and jewelry. Navaho “invoked a dramatic and market-oriented identity,” (Bsumek, 2008, 2) seeking to represent a particular product rather than a specific group of people. The term Navaho allowed consumers to create their own narratives surrounding the

“Diné as a primitive and preindustrial group while reinforcing their own cultural identities in contrast to these qualities” (Bsumek, 2008, 4). The term Navaho also allowed for a selective understanding of Navajo customs and practices. The Navajo were described as ‘primitive’ pushing them away from the consumers and placing them on display. The language surrounding Navajo art has drastically shaped the view of the Navajo in order to gain approval and market of Americans.

Periods of Navajo Weaving

Historians divide Navajo weaving into three different periods, the Classic Period from 1650 to 1868, the Transitional Period from 1868 to 1890 and the Rug Period from 1890 to 1920. These periods signify changes within the Navajo community, specifically their weaving techniques, reflecting significant events that happened in the Navajo community during each period. Weaving was greatly impacted by the interactions the Navajo had with Anglos, specifically the government, and regulations that were placed upon them. Stylistic changes mirror changes in Navajo culture and help illuminate an in depth history of the Navajo.

In many accounts of the Navajo’s weaving tradition, historians simply site the start of the Navajo weaving at their first interaction with the Pueblo Indians. This depiction of this story does not give a full account or consider all aspects of early Navajo weaving. However, when the Navajo came into contact with the Pueblo Indians, the Navajo incorporated some techniques of the Pueblo Indians into their own weaving. There are a few major differences in weaving techniques that indicate that the Navajo were weaving prior to contact with the Pueblos (Gilpin, 1968, 122). First, in Navajo tradition, women weave, where as in Pueblo tradition the men

generally weave. In addition, Navajo and Pueblo weavers sit differently while they weave. Navajo weavers sit with their feet pointing out behind them whereas the Pueblo sit cross-legged. In addition, Navajo weaving takes a more creative aspect, where as the Pueblo have little variation (Gilpin, 1968, 122). Also, simply stating that the Navajo learned to weave after their first encounter with the Pueblo Indians dismisses the Navajo creation story and spiritual connection the Navajo have towards weaving. The origins of weaving for the Navajo date back to their creation and Spider Woman and Spider Man giving the Navajo the gift of the loom and ability to weave. It is crucial in the study of Navajo textiles to remember that weaving is not merely a task of labor but a spiritual connection to the Earth, Spider Woman and all those that have woven in the past, present or future. Ignoring this understanding of weaving creates a flawed account of Navajo weaving techniques and traditions, even though the Navajo have not always woven, weaving has been at the center of their tradition. In the past, many Anglos have attempted to ignore this understanding of weaving, viewing the process, from the raising of the sheep to the selling of the textile as merely an act of labor, inherently not understanding what weaving actually means to the Navajo.

Classic Period

The so-called 'Classic Period' of Navajo weaving spans around 1650 to 1868. During this time, the Navajo primarily wove utilitarian objects, including blankets, shirts, dresses and belts. The weaving, specifically for blankets, was a very tight weave to protect against the elements. Blankets were woven longer than wide, intended to be worn width way across the shoulders (Blomberg, 1988, 1).

An early style of Navajo weaving, serape style, was inspired by bright colors and the bold patterns of Saltillo serapes of Mexico. There is a delicate balance of inspiration from other styles of weaving and appropriating styles in order to markup the price. Throughout the development of weaving, there has been a shift in this relationship of borrowing ideas and styles. The Navajo have become threatened by the appropriation of their designs by other tribes. The most notable of these threats comes from the Zapotec Indians who market their textiles as “Southwestern U.S. textiles” or as “Navajo-like patterns” (Bsumek, 2008, 212). The Zapotec Indians appropriated the Navajo designs to their region, then import them into the Southwest of the United States and mark up the price 200 to 1,000 percent (Bsumek, 2008, 212).

The classic period of the Navajo serape was filled with weavings woven in a plain tapestry weave, with elaborate terraced zigzags and diamond motifs. The color scheme was primarily red, blue and white. Children’s Blankets are essentially miniature serapes, distinguished by their size (Blomberg, 1988, 2).

A prominent style of Navajo weaving during the Classic period was the Chief blanket. The name of this style of weaving can be deceiving because the Navajo do not have tribal chiefs, and therefore these blankets were not designed for Navajo chiefs. The term “Chief’s blanket” emerged because this particular style of blanket was a very rare and valuable item for trade. The blankets were carried over lengthy trade routes, and symbolized wealth and achievement. They were extremely popular with the Ute Indians of the Great Basin and Plains and the Chynenne and

Arapaho. Chief style blankets were also woven width wide, to be worn across the shoulders (Blomberg, 1988, 3).

At the end of what is considered the Classic Period in Navajo weaving, the Navajo endured hardships that would change their lives and weaving, forever. During 1863 to 1868, the Navajo were removed from their homelands and suffered greatly due to actions from the United States government (Blomberg, 1988). These actions greatly impacted the Navajo as a whole, The abrupt displacement of the Navajo not only greatly impacted the Navajo as a whole, but also had significant impacts on Navajo weaving

Long Walk

As conflict continued between the Navajo and the surrounding communities, including the United States government, the Navajo endured fights and battles in attempts to stay at their homeland between the four sacred mountains. The United States government decided that the Navajo should not remain in their homelands. After this decision, the force on the Navajo heightened. Entire countrysides were burned, destroying homes, cornfields, and sheep. The intensity of the brutality became too much for the Navajo and in 1864 the Navajo finally surrendered. The Navajo were then unceremoniously kicked out from their homeland, and under the command of Colonel "Kit" Carson made to walk over 300 miles to a place that the Navajo will never forget. The place takes on different names depending on who is remembering this horrific period in the history of the Navajo. The Navajo refer to the place they were exiled to as Hwelte, where as the Mexican-Americans called it Bosque Redondo and American soldiers referred to it after the man who established

it, Colonel Edwin V. Sumner, Ft. Sumner. Around seven thousand Navajo had to walk 300 miles to reach Hwelte (Link, 1968, 1). The Navajo remember the journey and “the hardships endured, along with the tragedy, suffering and death” as “The Long Walk” (Link, 1968). There were numerous deaths during the travel and these deaths continued when the Navajo arrived at their new home and nearly 2,000 people died due to pneumonia and dysentery (Link, 1968). In May of 1868, members of the Peace Commission were sent to Hwelte to begin negotiations with the Navajo and on May 28, 1868 General T. Sherman asked the Navajo to express themselves at council. Navajo spokesperson Barboncito spoke on behalf of the Navajo. After this council, a treaty was signed on June 1 and the Navajo began making their journey back to their homelands, or what the government had agreed with them was their homeland. After returning home, the Navajo were given a smaller section of land to live on, excluding much of their original lands (Link, 1968).

Transitional Period

The start of the Transitional Period in Navajo weaving marks the Navajo’s return to their homeland after their exile at Hwelte, or Bosque Redondo. The Transitional Period spans 1868 to 1890. During this time, weaving in Navajo culture changed drastically. Returning to their destroyed homelands, and most of their livestock killed, greatly impacted the production of textiles. During the time at Hwelte, the Navajo endured horrific suffering and loss, but were also exposed to new aspects of culture that changed their weaving. First, the government gave the Navajo blankets while they were at Hwelte, which influenced the patterns of Navajo

blankets when they returned to their homelands (Blomberg, 1988, 5). In addition, there were attempts of crossbreeding Navajo sheep with high-production breeds in order to increase wool yield and meat production. However, this attempt at crossbreeding was not successful and led to “genetic chaos” in Navajo flocks (Strawn, 2007, 309). In addition, there was a shift in the market for Navajo textiles from native consumption to tourist consumption. With access to commercially manufactured items, the utilitarian need for weaving became less important and Navajo weavers shifted the type of textiles they were producing. In addition to the shift away from weaving clothing, there was also a shift in the raw materials used weaving. During this time, there was more commercial wool that was readily available and that came in many colors, including bright colors.

In 1865, new chemical or aniline dyes were invented in England and sent to the United States, where they reached the Navajo. The colors were a lot brighter than previous Navajo textiles. Also, during this time there were significant design changes, influenced by two main factors. First, the new designs of blankets that the Navajo were exposed to at Hwelte changed their designs in tapestry from this time. In addition, there was a shift in function of weaving, moving from blankets to rugs. One significant change was the reorientation of the design layout from horizontal to vertical. During this time there were two new types of textiles, pictorial blankets and eyedazzlers. Pictorial blankets included design elements of plants and animals. Eyedazzlers were composed of very bright colors, very stimulating designs and dizzying patterns (Blomberg, 1988, 5). Another style of weaving that was present during this time was the Two-Piece Dress. The Two-Piece Dress consisted “of two

small, identical blankets sewn together at the shoulder and along the sides, to make a single garment” (Wheat, 2003, 136). Reservation traders also significantly influenced Navajo weaving during this time. Traders provided new weaving materials and new design ideas and established a market for the sale of Navajo textiles (Blomberg, 1988, 6).

Trading Posts

The presence of the first trading post in 1870 radically changed the Navajo weaving community forever. Trading posts played a key economic factor in the life of the Navajo. Trading posts opened up the market for Navajo textiles, allowing them to be distributed to numerous locations and potential buyers that were not an option due to limited transportation before trading posts. However, the presence of trading posts also took some of the Navajo’s independence away. Many traders used them as an opportunity to take full advantage of the capitalist society and free market of the United States by selling Navajo rugs for two to three times what they originally purchased them for. A Navajo weaver expressed that “our creations allowed them to make that money” (Weavings Worlds). While Navajo weavers and their families remained in poverty, Anglo dealers were making a fortune selling rugs they were purchasing for very cheap from the Navajo. The Anglo rug traders did not see themselves as taking anything from the Navajo or doing anything but the job they came to do—to “service the people” (Weaving Worlds). In the Anglo’s view they were simply taking advantage of the market by seeing an opportunity to make a great deal of money seizing it. Navajo weavers did not have this same opportunity

and found themselves having to sell their rugs to these dealers even though they knew that they were getting only a fraction of what their rug would be worth.

Trading posts provided a buffer zone between rural settlers and indigenous people. In addition, they allowed for multiple different forms of exchange including bartering. Traders reinforced that the Navajo were primitive and needed to have a step between them and the consumers (Bsumek, 2008). Trading became a necessity for the Navajo. They were out of options and did not have the access to the market that the Anglo traders did. It was through this shift in market of textiles that Navajo weaving changed drastically.

In 1900, there was a shift to a romanticized view of American Indian life, moving from language such as “savage”, to “primitive” artists. In the 1860’s, photos and descriptions of the Navajo depicted them as savage in order to justify their actions at Ft. Sumner, when the Navajo were removed from their land and forced to live in poor living conditions at Ft. Sumner. During this shift in portrayal, the Southwest became portrayed as exotic and adventures while still being luxurious and safe. Traders worked hard to create a desire for art made by “primitive” artists, while emphasizing how well it can be incorporated into a westernized way of life.

The railroad brought an entirely new market into the Southwest, creating a tourism business. People intrigued by this “primitive” lifestyle could travel via railroad to New Mexico and watch Navajo artists make their creations. There were even hotels where people could watch the Navajo weave in the comfort of their own hotel. The role of “Indian- traders”, a non- Indian who exchanged manufactured good with American Indians for raw materials and handmade crafts on Indian

reservations, and trading posts became vitally important as economic centers. The Navajo were portrayed as “primitive” and made dependent on white traders to participate in a westernized marketplace. The label *Indian Made* became almost a brand and was highly sought after. Traders recognized that there was money to be made off the Navajo by becoming the middleman between consumers and the Navajo. Traders justify their actions because in their opinion the Navajo would not have access to the same market of consumers and therefore would not be able to sell their work as readily (Bsumek, 2008, 33).

By 1951, there were 175 traders operating on or adjacent to the Navajo reservation (McCombe, 1951,135). Traders began to tell weavers what to weave in order for the textile to sell. Weavers started incorporating bolder designs and colors into their work to satisfy the traders and the Anglo market. In addition, some weavers began to include more symbols and spiritual images that were not necessarily supposed to be woven into a lasting object. In Navajo tradition spiritual images such as these were not preserved but made and then destroyed to release the energy in them. However, as many Navajo weavers faced extreme poverty, and they began to consider their options, even if they went against spiritual and cultural practices and wove these items in tapestries and rugs. Some weavers never included images that they did not feel should be captured in a weaving, however, there are textiles today that have very sacred symbols woven into them. The families of the weavers who incorporated these designs would have been told by their family not to weave these certain designs. Many weavers were persuaded by the money and

relied on “prayer and purification to “atone for the sin of breaking the rules”
(Bsumek, 2008, 41).

Rug Period

Following the Transitional Period in Navajo weaving came the Rug Period from 1890 to 1920. By 1900, Trading Posts were key economic centers in the Southwest, symbolizing Indian and Anglo encounters (Bsumek, 2008, 49). The influence of trading posts and traders on the reservation continued to greatly impact the development of Navajo weaving styles. It was through these influences that the Navajo transitioned from weaving thin, tightly woven blankets into heavier, thicker rugs. The presence of traders on the reservation opened up a new market for Navajo weavers. The development of the rug was primarily to satisfy the new customers. Most rugs were made for floors of Victorian homes. It was at this juncture that weavers began to incorporate borders into their work. Borders were more aesthetically pleasing underneath furniture than woven rugs with designs that were not encompassed by a border (Blomberg, 1988, 10). Also, during the transition to rug weaving and the implementation of trading posts, Navajo blankets began to be marketed as pound blankets, meaning that the price of the blanket was determined by the weight of the blanket. Due to the unfair prices many Navajo were receiving for their hard work on their textiles, some Navajo weavers took less time cleaning the wool before weaving with it, as the more sand included in the rug would cost more because of its weight. During this time, some Navajo became very uninspired to pour their hearts and creativity into weavings for Anglos that did not respect their work. Many Navajo weavers felt, and continue to feel that “sometimes

the price [paid for the rugs] is so low [they] do not get much out of what [they] weaved” (Bsumek, 2008, 47).

These different periods of Navajo weaving have been constructed based on historians categorizing Navajo weavings in order to make it easier to understand and sort. The language surrounding these periods is arbitrary and plays into the construct of the Navajo that was created in order to advertise and promote Navajo weaving. However, understanding the history behind Navajo weaving, and the different periods that have been constructed allows for an educational observation of physical textiles.

Role of Museums: Preservation and Restoration

One of the main avenues of preservation and restoration of textiles is through museums. Textiles take a lot of care and proper housing to keep them in good shape and in their original form. Not only do textiles take up a lot of space to be stored, they must be stored at specific temperatures and humidity in order to keep the textile in as good of form as when it was acquired.

Colorado Springs Fine Arts Center Textiles

Navajo Saddle Blanket

The Colorado Springs Fine Arts Center acquired this textile on September 16, 1965. The Saddle blanket is a double weave, weft faced plain weave made of wool. It is in poor condition with four large patches sewn on the back. The blanket originates from a Navajo Reservation where R. W. Corwin collected it. The



Figure 5: Navajo Saddle Blanket
Source: Photo by author

prior owner could have sewed the patches on prior to the acquisition of the textiles in order to keep using it as a blanket. The brown, white and grey wool had large variations of color with in each different color indicating that this wool was the natural sheep's color.

Chief's Blanket

The Fine Arts Center acquired this textile on August 26, 1965. This Navajo "Chief" style blanket has a native spun one-ply weft and a cotton warp. The white, grey and black wool is natural coloring and the red is analine dyed. It appears that this textile was bought for the Corwin collection when new and never used. The textile originated on a Navajo Reservation. The blanket



Figure 6: Navajo "Chief" Blanket
Source: Photo by author

is possibly a Second Phase Chief's blanket because the design is composed of elaborate patterning and not only stripes as early phase Chief's blankets were. The blanket is still in good condition and the colors are extremely bright. However, there are reminiscences of solder found in multiple places on the textile. It is possible that a pervious owner was a silversmith or the blanket has some other encounter with salder. This textile also has many distinct examples of lazy lines.

Navajo Saddle Cover

The Fine Arts Center acquired this textile on August 26, 1965. The saddle cover originates from a Navajo Reservation where R. W. Corwin collected it. The

weft is a four-ply Germantown yarn, with a red background and a blue, green, yellow and red double diamond in the center. The saddle blanket is very finely woven due to the use of the Germantown weft. The saddle blanket also has a three-inch fringe on one side, which was possibly intended to be at the back of the horse



Figure 7: Navajo Saddle Cover
Source: Photo by Author

so that the tassels would hang down on the side of the horse. The saddle blanket is in good condition with no holes just some minor moth damage on the front.

Classic Period Blanket

This blanket from the so-called Classic Period of weaving was acquired by the Fine Arts Center on August 26, 1965 from a Navajo Reservation where R.W. Corwin collected it. The blanket is a combination of white and indigo-dyed native wool and raveled bayeta spun in a



Figure 8: Navajo Classic Period Blanket
Source: Photo by Author

two-ply strand. The blanket is in excellent condition, with the colors still extremely vibrant, expect a few minor holes. It appears that someone has attempted to repair the holes multiple times.

Navajo Chief's Blanket

The Fine Arts Center acquired this textile on August 26, 1965. This blanket, also considered a "Chief's Blanket," consists of natural brown, white wool, native

dyed indigo wool and raveled bayeta. The blanket is very well worn with multiple holes and the edges of all sides are not intact. The old tag on the blanket, from the Colorado College Museum reads, "Cubero, Valencia Co., New Mexico from an Acoma Indian. May 14th 95." However, the newer tag describes the location and date of

Origin to a Navajo Reservation during the

Early Classic Period. This blanket

demonstrates characteristics of the Early

Classic Period due to its simple design

and color choice. In the Early Classic

Period, "Chief" blankets used simple

designs and colors where these designs

and colors became more complex in the

later Periods. The pattern of this blanket was made to create a different pattern

when looked at as a whole and when looked at draped over someone's shoulders, as

many blankets of this time were designed this way.



Figure 9: Navajo "Chief" Blanket
Source: Photo by Author

After examining multiple different textiles, I gained a better understanding of the different weave structures and designs adding me in my immersion into a weaving community. In addition to the preservation and restoration of physical textiles, it is vital to preserve the community surrounding weaving as well.

Weaving as a Community Experience

La Tierra Wools

Weaving extends beyond a utilitarian craft, encompassing spiritual realms and acting as a glue of a community. Traveling to La Tierra Wools, a weaving

community center in northern New Mexico, gave me a sense of how powerful the community surrounding weaving is. In addition, since La Tierra Wools has a flock of Navajo Churro sheep I was able to also appreciate the importance of the Navajo Churro breed and the quality of the wool.

When I entered La Tierra Wools, a happy joy filled me. The storeowner's child ran around- weaving in and out of older women—all gathered for their weaving supplies but also much more. There was a sense of deep community that



Figure 10: La Tierra Wools, Los Ojos, NM
Source: Photo by Author

hit me hard as I first entered the store. Beside the young child, around 2 years old, and the storeowner's baby, I was the youngest person around. I had a feeling that I knew the least about the community I had just entered. It became very clear to

me, what I had already known, that La Tierra Wools is much more than a store or a place that gives classes or demonstrations. It is the heart of a weaving community. Weavers come from far and wide for this community and place to share their joy for weaving. It is a place for a continuation of a history and tradition. It is also a place where weavers share ideas, techniques and keep the tradition of learning through demonstrative alive.

I wandered around the shop for a while amazed. The most beautiful weaving surrounded me. The walls were covered in weavings and racks filled the shop

displaying more weavings including pillows, blankets, purses, jackets, bookmarks and essentially anything that could be woven. It was wonderful to see how weaving had developed in our current culture into certain objects and desirable things. Once the crowd died down, the storeowner came and found me in the back room ogling some of the most beautiful weaving I had seen. She gave me a second very warm welcome, and invited me into the back rooms to see all the looms and dye studio. The two-year-old girl, named Adriana, came and found me at this point. Grabbing my free hand she led me into the loom room and insisted she wanted to show me “her colors.” The loom at the very back of the room was filled with lots of bright colors—tons of pinks and purples. With very few words that came out in a combination of English, Spanish, and jibberish, the young girl gave me a demonstration of how to weave. She stood on the treddles of the large standing floor loom typical of Hispanic weaving tradition, shifting her weight back and forth showing me how when she jumped to the other piece of wood how she could make the weaving come apart (creating the shed to put the weft shot through.) The treddles were almost the size of her and she fit completely underneath the loom. After the weaving demonstration, she led me around the shop. After this moment, she was glued to my side whenever I was around the shop. We stood next to the warm wood-burning stove—she showed me exactly where to stand to get the drafts of hot air. Then, we played a game of hide and go seek around the looms. After, I asked her to help me pick out some colors to use on my handloom. While we were deciding on colors, her family began to make lunch in the shop. It was really difficult to tear her away from the yarn to eat her lunch, which the family invited me to join

in. I had been in the store for less than a few hours and everyone was already opening their hearts and home to me. That's when it *really* sunk in for me. Weaving has always been, and remains to be, something much larger than the creation of textiles. It is the creation of a community. The intertwining of young and old, outsiders and insiders—the passing down of traits and traditions and the joy that comes from others learning and enjoying. I had not simply entered a yarn store, I entered a weaving community that was ready and eager to have me join. They were very eager to share their knowledge.

As I sit outside with the sun beating down on me, the faint distant call of an animal meets my ear, I feel as though I



Figure 11: Loom Room, La Tierra Wools
Source: Photo by Author

have transcended time. Except my car I see to my right and my cell phone lying inside on the kitchen table, I could be from any time. Looking out over the fields, getting inspiration from the colors and textures of nature, weaving with Navajo-Churro wool—that came from the sheep in the fields I'm looking at. There is great beauty that nothing—and yet everything—has changed. Weaving in Navajo culture is a combination of new elements incorporated into old patterns (Weisiger, 2009, 67). I'm weaving with the same techniques and yarn—yet I live in a world that is run by technology. Instead of my clothing being made by hand and weaving my own blankets, I can purchase ones that were made by machines. Weaving provides me a

connection to the past and to the future. The traditions remain the same while the world changes. It's a connection through time. It weaves the generations together, creating a cohesive unit. Weaving connects us to each other, the Earth, animals and the new and unknown.

Community Reflection

The town of Los Ojos was extremely open and welcoming to the weaving community. Even the surrounding town of Chama, New Mexico encouraged people to explore La Tierra Wools for the experience of the sheep and breathtaking yarns. They hold La Tierra Wools with the upmost respect and appreciation of what it brings to the community. Everyone in the surrounding community waves and gives friendly honks as they pass. As I walked into La Tierra Wools, an elderly man from town talked to me for a good five minutes asking about my hurt arm and how my weaving was going with it. In addition, everyone at La Tierra Wools is extremely flexible and is willing and has a desire to help anyone regardless of their needs or time constraints. The important thing for them is exposure to weaving and passing on the learning.

The surrounding setting tremendously impacts weaving. Not only does the setting determine the sheep that will be able to produce the wool, it also inspires the weaver. There is an inherent connection between the Earth and weaving, through the natural dye colors, the wool, and the inspiration of the color and textures in the weavers surrounding.

The young girl Adriana helped me pick out more yarn—and play another game of hide and go seek around the store as her mom helped the numerous

customers that were in the store today and watched the 5 month old baby. Adriana's father and grandmother were dyeing yarns for their commercial sales today. Their dye studio was absolutely incredible. It is at the back of the shop in a barn area. There are numerous mixing tubs and stations. As I watched them at work, the grandmother was having a blast mixing a bright pink while the father was pulling yarns out of the dyes to dry. The entire family was extremely welcoming, ready to help me with anything and at the same time acting though I was a part of the family leaving me be with Adriana to play.

When I went to the store today around 10 am it was jam packed with customers as well as local weavers hanging out. There was a group of 5 women all working on different fiber art projects at a table in the center of the main room. Customers wandered around the show rooms and loom room. Everyone was extremely friendly when I came in, asking me about myself and my studies. The atmosphere of La Tierra is much more than simply a show room or yarn store. It is a community center. A gathering place. A way for the entire weaving community of the area to unite and come together. It has the feeling of a community and a family.

As I set out for my sunset walk, I talked to the man who lives next door to where I am staying. He has lived in Los Ojos his entire life and explained he can't really imagine going anywhere else. He said, "he likes the pace" and kept mentioning the pace of life in Los Ojos. He believes there is something special about the pace of a place like Los Ojos. As I write this, a random car of someone in town just gave me a friendly honk and wave. I am an outsider here, yet within the short amount of time I have been here I have already been accepted into this community. Without second

thought the people in Los Ojos opened their hearts to me. The same man that talked to me today drove past me today as I was taking a picture of the store and posed in his tractor laughing hysterically for me. A small community that enjoys the presence of outsiders. Understanding that everyone has things to learn from. In not many places are outsiders greeted with these open arms and desire to have a conversation.

Conclusion

Weaving, both the art form and the process, allows outsiders great insight into Navajo culture. Through changes seen in the production of textiles, outsiders can begin to understand changes that happened internally in the Navajo Nation. Weaving not only demonstrates the creative and artistic abilities of the Navajo, but also helps outline values, traditions, roles in society and the connection to nature, which the Navajo hold so deeply. Weaving is not merely a form of art; it becomes a way of life. Weaving extends the mere time that a weaver is at the loom working on a piece. Weaving encompasses the entire journey of the sheep and the sheep's relationship with the land and the Navajo, revealing environmental concerns facing the Navajo as well as the surrounding communities. Weaving also encompasses the entire journey of the wool once it is removed from the sheep and the changes in materials that the Navajo have had access to in order to complete these processes. In addition, weaving teaches and instills cultural values in young members of the Tribe. Even one of the most basic of philosophies of the Navajo, that the way to learn is to watch, is demonstrated through the process of weaving. Gaining an

understanding of weaving-- the history, the process, the materials—can help illuminate a better understanding of the Navajo.

Weaving has been a part of the Navajo lifestyle since the creation story. It is not some simply art that has been acquired, but a core of the Navajo. Therefore, when outsiders who do not have an understanding of the deeper ties that weaving has throughout the community act based off simply their needs and desires without gaining an understanding of the significance of all aspects of the weaving, act in ignorance. Weaving provides a means for entering this community through understanding. Learning about the process of weaving in Navajo culture, the impact it has on their society, the role of the sheep and the land, provides deep insight into Navajo culture. Seeking this understanding leads to more peaceful interactions and understandings. When there is a disconnect between cultures, communication stops and people begin to get hurt. The language of a society is influenced by this disconnect, rooting misunderstanding into society for generations to come. Weaving provides an avenue for understanding.

The inter-disciplinary approach I used, combining different lenses and methods, including environmental history, a discussion of frontier commerce, museum studies, and immersion in culture through weaving samples and travelling to a weaving community in New Mexico provided me with a better understanding of Navajo weaving rather than simply focusing on a single aspect. Beginning with an environmental history of sheep, specifically Navajo Churro sheep and the decline and destocking of the sheep set the stage and provided a historical understanding of the role sheep play within Navajo culture, and how vital they are to an on-going

weaving tradition amongst the Navajo. Shifting into an evaluation of the language and concepts surrounding frontier commerce and how these have developed throughout history and are still applicable today allowed for a better understanding of Navajo goods and the commodification of these goods. In addition to these textual analyses, the incorporation of a museum studies component added an element of preservation and restoration concerns in order to demonstrate the importance preservation of textiles plays in the overall preservation of a community and tradition. Examining a range of Navajo textiles, owned by Colorado College at the Colorado Springs Fine Arts Center helped me gain an understanding of specific characteristics in weaving techniques. Handling actual textiles and being able to evaluate the weave techniques in person rather than through photographic images was vital in fully understanding a textile because I was able to see texture, weave and visualize the textile as a tangible object. This is why preservation of textiles is vital to the preservation of the weaving community. My final research method, immersion in textile culture by weaving samples and travelling to a weaving community in New Mexico, helped me gain a deeper understanding of the community importance of weaving. Through the creation of these textiles I am not attempting to claim that they are Navajo woven—they are not—I am completed these textiles in order to gain an understanding of the complexity of the weaves and the work that it takes to create the elaborate weave structures that the Navajo use. My replications aided me in gaining a more comprehensive understanding of Navajo textiles through creating weavings using traditional materials and techniques. It also provided me with a creative outlet to explore the community of weaving, not only at

La Tierra Wools but also the weaving community at Colorado College. Since the Navajo and their weaving culture are so closely intertwined, simply focusing on a single aspect of either would not provide the in-depth analysis. Therefore, my approach relied on a multi-disciplinary approach in order to weave all aspects of this complex story.

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