Title: The Navajo Migratory Experience

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Abstract

The story of the Navajo Diaspora from Asia, into Canada and then into the Southwestern United States; their passage through several Native American regions; and their initial settlement and subsequent forced resettlement among the existing Pueblo, Spanish, Mexican and U.S. populations, as well as their own ebbing beyond their reservation borders, presents a powerful story of migrant adaptation, cohesion, and resilience. Their story illustrates one strain of migratory experience and questions the utility of trying to constrain human migrations -- either physically or rhetorically within nationalistic conceptions of ethnicity or politically sanctioned multicultural handles.

Keywords: Migration, immigration, Diaspora, Navajo, Diné, Pueblo, indigenous, Southwest, New Mexico, “segmented assimilation,” “migrant resilience”
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Karim (2006) asserts that both national boundaries and contemporary multicultural understandings borne of nationalistic and ethnic identifications fail to adequately depict the realities of today’s diasporas. This essay looks at Navajo migration in the Southwestern United States during the last few centuries to demonstrate the trans-border nature of prior significant migrations in a region that has a rich history with diasporas.

Ueda (2007, p. 24) describes the ongoing migrations of U.S. and Mexican citizens into the region as family- and friend-based chain migrations. Such contemporary chain migrations follow a common ebb-and-flow character that might only take on the characteristics of a diaspora when viewed retrospectively in a historical light.

Migrants often follow non-linear routes, frequently back-tracking and returning to particular sites on the planet in sequences that vary between persons and groups. Apart from their multifarious connections with the land of origin, world-wide diasporas develop intricate networks linking their various settlements. The resulting identities are complex and dynamic – sharing different cultural characteristics with specific parts of their transnational community and simultaneously sharing with respective national populations of whom they have become a part. (Karim, 2006, p. 271)

The much earlier migration of Navajos into the American Southwest, and the Navajo population’s subsequent relationship to the Pueblo “Native American” cultures who continue to inhabit the area, as well as their movements among non-indigenous Arizona and New Mexico populations, illustrate the difficulties involved in trying to describe migration using terminology of either national identity or government-sanctioned multicultural ethnic identifiers. Migration also demonstrates historic permeability, extravagance, and counter-productivity of pre-colonial, colonial, and current nationalistic efforts to draw physical boundaries and segregate populations according to national affiliations or ethnicity in this part of the world. Indeed, the
migrants themselves have rarely migrated or self-identified according to such proscriptions.

Multiculturalism policies tend erroneously to view members of immigrant communities as having engaged in a one-way move that break all ties with their past. . . .

They carry documentation attesting to their membership in a national group, but usually not to that which identifies them with a diaspora. Their relationships with various groups are subject to change in accordance with events in an individual’s or community’s life. A person’s multilayered identity may from time to time shift the hierarchy of attachments modulated by ethnicity, religion, nation as well as other forms of belonging. Some . . . may feel comfortable engaging with several diasporas or with a conglomeration of groups from a geographical region (including an entire continent). (Karim, 2006, p. 271)

The arid U.S. Southwest experienced waves of indigenous migration long before the current diaspora from Mexico and Central America and the immigration of large numbers of European-heritage citizens into the area. Understanding the trajectory, displacement and cultural adaptability of the Navajo people, first within the Pueblo and Colonial Spanish periods, and then during the contemporary U.S. national and trans-border migration periods, reveals the complexities of the great variety of migratory and globalization processes.

Karim (2006, p. 271) maintains that researchers need to understand how migrants understand themselves and their history – including how receptive other cultures in areas targeted by migrants are – to understand migratory experiences. This sheds light on the extent to which the migrants retain and adopt customs and traditional cultural markers, such as language.

Thus, when viewed in retrospect, the varying stories of the Navajo diaspora from Asia, through Canada and into the Southwestern United States (Wilson, 2005); their passage through various Native American regions; and their initial settlement and
subsequent forced resettlement among the existing Pueblo, Spanish, Mexican and U.S.
nationalistic cultures, and their current ebbing beyond the Navajo Nation boundaries
represent a powerful story of migrant adaptation and mixed migrant affiliations.

The Southwest and Migration

The American Southwest, as embodied in New Mexico and the surrounding areas,
has been affected by migratory patterns for millennia. The early Pueblo cultures traded
and competed for resources long before Europeans came with their propensity for
bureaucracy, surveyed boundaries, and written land claims and property rights. Despite
these contemporary means of stabilizing ownership of land and resources, the Southwest
has historically and pre-historically been the site of great population blends and shifts,
including great migratory movements across its vast expanses.

Interestingly, recent U.S. Government attempts to seal the borders, physically and
culturally, in an effort to restrict such trends, run counter to centuries-old migratory
patterns. The U.S. Department of Homeland Security and Immigration and Customs
Enforcement (ICE) attempt to construct barriers and prohibit specific commercial
activities and cross-border human movements. Such efforts go against powerful cultural
forces supporting human migrations and cultural cross-pollination that are likely to
continue, even if harshly prohibited. Indeed, longstanding cultural traditions of the
Southwest embody patterns of movement and cultural mixing and re-adaptation that were
forged long before the existence of the United States, or even the arrival of Spanish
colonizers.

In the last five centuries, first the Spanish, then the Mexicans, then finally United
States authorities, have established religious, linguistic, racial/ethnic, commercial and
migratory boundaries and desperately sought ways to enforce them. These central governments have generally viewed the sparsely-populated Southwest borderlands as nearly vacant areas, and therefore ripe for further subdivision, expropriation and resource exploitation. When these nation states imposed ethnic segregation and restrictions on population movement, proscribed educational and religious indoctrination and linguistic control, and attempted to seize rights to the land with economic resources—such as uranium, coal or water—they frequently acted in accordance with political and commercial pressures from outside the region. Efforts to control the region, under the guise of religious, civil and national necessity, were generally accomplished with little regard for the complex experiences of existing populations, whether indigenous, mestizo or the current mix of people with varying degrees of tribal, mestizo, Hispanic, European, Mexican, U.S. and other identities.

Examining one of the great migrations to the Southwest that occurred just prior to the development of written records illustrates the magnitude of the migratory forces that shaped human activities there, and belies the brutality and futility of macro-efforts to divide, claim, own and control the Southwest and its people. It also provides significant perspective on current governmental-bureaucratic efforts to restrict group and chain migrations, as well as the individual personal relationships that have characterized this part of the world, not just for centuries, but for millennia. As such, it also sheds light on some of the characteristics that migrant populations embody—particularly the resilience, outreach and solidarity that migratory populations demonstrate.

Pueblo Culture
The ancestors of today’s indigenous Pueblo people settled in communities that were typically abandoned between 1,700 and 500 years ago. Excavations at sites such as Hovenweep, Mesa Verde and the expansive site at Chaco Canyon suggest that the Pueblo people had a farming and trade based economy without large domesticated livestock, and that their agriculture was supplemented by hunting and gathering. These cultures had much in common with the great Aztec (Méxica) civilization in Central Mexico, as there is considerable evidence that people from the U.S. Southwest migrated south centuries before Columbus’s arrival. The Pueblo people of the Southwest also appeared culturally and linguistically distinct from their Plains Indians neighbors to the northeast and west, who were primarily hunter gatherers. Thus, in Pre-Columbian times, the macro trade, migration and settlement patterns of the Pueblo peoples were already well established, and their cultural similarities to Aztecan cultures to the south appeared far stronger than their ties to their neighbors to the east and west.

Abandonment of many of the most ancient Pueblo communities in what is today the Southwestern United States resulted in great population fluctuations, as more dense communities appeared to flourish for several centuries, only to be abandoned and then followed by settlement in what would become new population centers that would rise and be abandoned until the time of European contact around the Fifteenth Century. At the time Columbus arrived in the Americas, approximately 50 Pueblo communities existed within the current boundaries of the state of New Mexico, with a combined population of at least 50,000 (KNME & AIAI, 1992). Each of these pueblos had its unique, but often similar customs and linguistic variation, drawing upon four basic linguistic roots.

According to their oral histories, the Pueblo Indians of New Mexico and Arizona all share a common ancestry, descending from the ancient Anasazi civilization.
Unlike other confederacies of related Indian peoples such as the Iroquois or Wabanaki, however, the Pueblo people are linguistically diverse, speaking languages from four unrelated language families: the Acoma, Cochiti, Laguna, San Felipe, Santa Ana, Santo Domingo, and Zia Pueblos speak Keresan languages; the Isleta, Jemez, Nambe, Picuris, Pojoaque, Sandia, San Ildefonso, San Juan, Santa Clara, Taos, Tesuque, and Ti'guy/Ysleta del Sur Pueblos speak Kiowa-Tanoan languages; the Zuni speak their own language which is not known to be related to any other; and the Hopi, furthest west, speak a Uto-Aztecan language distantly related to Nahuatl. (Nahuatl, 2008) (Also see Figures 1 and 2 from Crouthamel, 2008.)

For hundreds of years these traditional Pueblo cultures traded among themselves and with neighboring groups, particularly those to the south, in a complex and often dynamic cultural and ecological system. The Hopi, perhaps the most tradition-bound of all contemporary Pueblo cultures in the United States, share particularly strong linguistic and commercial connections with the Nahuatl-speakers of Central Mexico, whose Nahuatl dialects constitute the largest contemporary indigenous linguistic community in that country (Fernández Ham et. al., 2006, p. 63). It was the Tenochtitlan dialect of Nahuatl that the Spanish encountered when they invaded Central Mexico, and many Nahuatl words were adapted and passed down into contemporary English, including "tomato," "coyote," and "chocolate." (Nahuatl, 2008)

The Pueblo systems in the U.S. Southwest became destabilized in the last several hundred years by migration, disease and nationalization. First, were indigenous migrations, including those of the Athabaskan Diné (Navajo) and Apache who arrived sometime between 1,000 and 300 years ago. This was accompanied by early contact with Europeans and European diseases, and subsequent conquest, colonization and nationalization of the Southwest by Spain, Mexico and the United States. All this resulted in a dramatic decline in traditional Pueblo cultures. Their decimation culminated approximately 150 years ago when only 14 Pueblos in New Mexico existed with a
combined population of less than 5,000 inhabitants (KNME & AIAI, 1992). Today, there are still 14 existing Pueblos in New Mexico, but their population has recovered to Pre-Columbian levels. (Also see Figure 2, from Crouthamel, 2008.)

Immigration and the Navajos

Navajos are currently one of the two largest Indian tribes in the United States. Their tribe has a population of more than 250,000 living in and around their expansive reservation, which, even though it has had large slices expropriated from its area in the early Nineteenth Century, today is still the largest indigenous reservation in the United States in land area, covering more area than each of the 10 smallest U.S. states (Welcome to the Navajo Nation). Furthermore, the major Navajo Reservation completely encircles the current Hopi reservation, which continues to be a hotbed of Pueblo traditions. (See Figure 2.)

The reservation of the Navajo Nation has extraordinary natural beauty, but it is dry and isolated from any large non-Indian city, and therefore seemingly remote from mainstream U.S. culture. Yet in many ways the survival and existence of the Navajos has much to do with their unique culture, cosmology and how they themselves migrated to an area once dominated by other Pueblo peoples, and finally were forcibly relocated to a remote reservation by the U.S. government at the behest of white and mestizo settlers.

For generations the people of the Navajo Nation have spoken Diné, an Athabascan (Athabascan is also referred to as “Na-Dene”) language that has traceable roots to native languages in the Great Slave Lake region of the western sub-artic Canada, and even prior to that, to Central Asia (Wilson, 2005). (See Figure 3.) Native Diné speakers can intuitively understand and speak some Apache languages and share many
linguistic commonalities with some other Athabascan speakers whom descendents of European immigrants to the Americas would consider indigenous. Like some other cultures with an Athabascan linguistic heritage, the Navajo have a strong warrior tradition and a number of their ceremonies bear more similarities with the singing, dancing and art of the Plains Indians than they do to those of their longstanding Pueblo neighbors.

The Navajo migration from the Great Slave Lake region of Canada into the Southwest United States is shrouded in mystery. Anthropologists and archeologists, such as Towner (2003), date the migration as occurring between 1400 and 1700. It is not entirely clear whether the Navajo traveled in significant-sized groups or practiced smaller-group chain migrations or precisely what paths they took to arrive in New Mexico and the Four Corners areas of the Southwestern United States. As illustrated in Figure 3, Towner indicates that many of the ancestors of today’s Navajo appeared to come from Canada through the mountains of Utah and eastern Colorado, which would have brought them in direct contact with Ute and other mountain Indians. Other Navajo migrants followed a slightly more eastern route that took them just east of the Rocky Mountains. The eastern route would bring them in contact with Comanche and Querecho Indians, who practiced very different hunting patterns than the Utes. It was this migration group’s language that predominated and eventually developed into the Diné form that Navajos use. Finally, an Apache group appeared to take a more easterly route through the American plains areas.

Throughout the migrations significant acculturation took place during a multi-generational period that by the early 1700s had many of these Athabascan immigrants
gathered in area they call the Dinétah. This area, just west of the Continental Divide in north-central New Mexico, lies within the traditional expansive subsequent Navajo homeland marked by four sacred mountains, but is approximately 50 miles east of the eastern edge of the contemporary Navajo Reservation. (See Figure 2.)

Koenig and Koenig (2005) also posit that Athabascan speakers who left the Great Slave Lake region in Canada were of a primarily hunting and gathering clan culture. However, descendents of those Athabascans and others who eventually migrated and regrouped in Dinétah around the Gobernador Knob Peak between 1500 and 1700, experienced varying migration paths that forced them to adapt to different groups of Indians – from the mountains, plains and local pueblo cultures -- and encountered terrains that placed distinct survival demands on them. This resulted in a mélange of diverse migrants with considerable awareness of varied hunting, pastoral and agricultural survival practices who evidenced many linguistic elements that were eventually grafted onto an Athabascan linguistic base attributable mainly to the migrants who traveled south through the plains that run along the eastern foot of the Rocky Mountains.

The key is that, by the end of their Gobernador Phase, ca. 1750, that Navajo had become a mélange of people with very different backgrounds. To the present day, Navajo society is structured by exogamous clans, each with an origin story. . . A recent compilation, an educational guide written for younger Navajo, lists thirty of the larger ones (Lynch, 1987). About one-half are named for geographic aspects of places that clan members encountered on their migrations, as given in their respective origin legends. . . (Koenig & Koenig, 2005, pp. 20-21)

Thus, it is possible that many Navajos arrived in the Southwest after the first incursions of Spanish into the area. Navajo interpreter Howard Smith (2008) reports that Navajo oral history indicates that the sheep and horses the Spanish introduced in the Southwest were already there when Navajos arose on scene. Although the claims are
difficult to verify historically, it is well documented that during the Sixteen and Seventeenth Centuries the Spanish focused their earliest efforts toward exploiting the wealth of the agrarian Pueblo cultures in New Mexico and that the Spanish had only scant interest in the emerging Navajo cultures, primarily because they apparently lacked what the Europeans considered to be “wealth.” The Spaniards also saw little advantage in colonizing the region’s hunting and gathering Apache cultures, which bore many similarities to the nomadic Navajo (Linford, 2000).

Koenig and Koenig (2005) assert that throughout the period of close proximity to the eastern Pueblo tribes, when Navajos lived in the Dinétah area, Navajo and Pueblo cultures, particularly Jemez Pueblos, experienced significant contact and the cultures came to share building and other customs. From the mestizo Spanish and Pueblo cultures, Navajo learned to make elaborate silver and turquoise jewelry that they could trade with the Spanish, and they mastered raising sheep and working on horseback. Throughout the Eighteenth Century the Navajo engaged in intermittent raids on the Spanish groups when they entered Navajo territories to capture slaves and claim Navajo lands. From 1500 through 1750, the Navajo frequently shifted and reformed new alliances with the Spanish, Pueblos, Apache, Comanche and Ute against other combinations of colonial and indigenous people. By the Eighteenth Century, expansionist land pressure spurred a series of attacks from the colonial Spanish settlers and the Utes to the north, which eventually pushed the Dinétah Navajos to disperse westward throughout the Four Corners region. Linford (2000, p. 5-7) records eight significant confrontations between Spanish military expeditions and Navajo between 1675 and 1805, ending with Lt. Col. Antonio de Narbona’s massacre of Navajos in Canyon de Chelly in 1805.
However, historically the Spanish were far more focused and successful in their effort to exploit whatever economic wealth and human resources the agrarian Pueblo cultures had amassed than they were in subjugating Navajos. Wars of colonization starting in 1540 and culminating in the 1680-1692 period (Herrick, in press; KNME & IAIA, 1992) brought the Pueblos under Spanish colonial control for much of the time from 1540 through 1821. Colonizers’ efforts were also partially effective at coercing the surviving Pueblo inhabitants to adopt some measures of Christianity, although Christian rituals and beliefs generally merged with Pueblo religious practices, rather than supplanting them.

Within a few generations after vacating Dinétah, hostilities between Navajo and Mexican authorities developed, with frequent livestock and slave raids from 1821 through 1846, until a general state of war existed between the groups at the time of the American invasion of the Southwest. In fact, Linford (2000, p. 7) maintains that the extent of the Navajo-Spanish hostilities helped explain the relative ease with which the American nation seized control of the Southwest from the Mexico in 1846.

A series of failed treaties marked the first two decades of imposed American authority over New Mexico territory, which included the Navajos’ greater Four Corners homeland. Finally, in 1863 Brigadier General George Carlton ordered Colonel Kit Carson to conduct a scorched earth campaign to subdue the unruly Navajo. Operating out of Fort Defiance, which was renamed Fort Canby, Carson destroyed crops and livestock, eventually forcing more than 9,000 starving Navajos to surrender. During the winter of 1864 the Navajos were forced to march approximately 250 miles to the east to Bosque Redondo along the Pecos River. This episode marks one of the most brutal
forced marches in U.S. history. After what has come to be called “The Long March,” the Navajos remained interned amid squalid conditions for another three years. During the summer of 1868, the approximately 7,000 surviving Navajo were permitted to return to their much reduced 3-million acre Four Corners homeland. (Linford, 2000)

Since returning to their Southwest reservation, the Navajo prospered in many ways. Their reservation, and the annexed Ramah Navajo Reservation to the southeast, is now approximately six times larger than the one allotted to the Navajo in 1868. In the ensuing years, the Navajo actively participated in the trading post system set up by the American government. For more than a century the Navajo adapted to and subsequently resisted U.S. Indian-school-led efforts to force children to speak English exclusively rather than Diné and to give up other customs that shape Navajo identity.

Through it all, the Navajo have demonstrated an air of autonomy and social cohesion not evident in many indigenous populations in the United States. In the 1920s they formed a tribal governing council to deal with oil discoveries and exploration on their land. Although the uranium boom of the 1950s and 1960s had tragic long-term health consequences for many Navajo miners, the Navajos readily embraced the new type of mining.

The physical isolation of the Navajo homeland, combined with the cohesion of the culture itself, has also allowed the Diné language to survive even into the contemporary age of mass media. Beginning in 1972, commercial and non-commercial radio stations started offering programming in Diné across much of the reservation, which helped to preserve and reinforce Navajo culture. The broadcasts also helped
disseminate a more universal or simplified form of the Diné language for Navajos who grew up on or near the reservation (Peterson, 1997).

Like other indigenous in the United States, Navajo culture endured the “Indian school” policies that aggressively forced young Navajos to abandon their language and adopt white ways. Yet this effort to break young Navajo of being Navajo was more difficult to implement on the remote Navajo Reservation and proved only marginally successful.

. . . Before World War II, when the Diné were predominantly rural, they spoke Navajo almost exclusively. It was only in the 1950s, the early post-World War II period, that schooling in English became available to the majority of Navajo children, resulting in a significant decline in the use of Navajo – particularly near population centers – with very few Diné being bilingual. Attempts were made by the tribe to reverse this trend, given that – particularly for Navajo – syntax, grammar, and world view are inextricably meshed. As a measure of success (from 1980 census figures), 85% of first graders were bilingual, whereas only 62% of the general population speak Navajo, evidence of a linguistic revival in progress. (Koenig & Koenig, 2005, p. 8)

Although there are now more Diné speakers than at any time in history, there are still many young Navajos on the reservation (43% according to 1990 U.S. Census data) who speak only English. So the Diné language continues to be threatened, even as the number of Diné speakers has grown to the point where there were to be 178,000 estimated Diné speakers by 2008 (Thomas, 2008).

Today, Navajo have their own newspaper, The Navajo Times, an indigenous police force, a Diné language elementary textbook (Thomas, 2008) and a thriving tourism industry on their reservation. They capitalize commercially on the natural beauty of their reservation and have numerous other successful private and tribal businesses. Their numbers have grown dramatically in the last 140 years. Thus, the descendents of the Navajo who relocated from Canada and various other Southwest locations proved
unusually opportunistic and resilient in adapting to their dual status as citizens of the Navajo Nation and the United States.

Navajo Clans and Acculturation

The Navajo creation story is one of the most complex of any civilization, grounding the tribe’s origins within its territorial homeland in the Southwest United States. According to Harold Simpson (2008), the survival of Navajo society is premised on a clan system and a matriarchal transmission of clan identity and inter-generational wealth. When Navajo first arrived in the Four Corners region, there were 64 original clans. Navajo society sanctions marriage to partners exclusively outside their parents’ clans, meaning that Navajo are expected to go outside the comfort of their parents’ clans to find mates. These clan traditions push Navajo youth beyond their clan identities and the traditions of their family unit. That system, which puts an onus on any Navajo clan that does not adequately discourage its young from intra-clan marriage, is itself an agent of exogenous acculturation and change, and simultaneously a unifying concept of what it is to be Navajo, even though intra-clan marriages occasionally happen.

Because the Navajo system is matriarchal, when a Navajo man marries a woman from outside the Nation, their children’s clan identity, perhaps what one might consider to be the offspring’s “official” identity, will follow the lineage of the mother, so the couple’s children will not be identified as belonging to a Navajo clan even though they would likely be discouraged from marrying back into the father’s clan, as well as from marrying the relatives of the mother. In contrast, a Navajo woman who marries a man from outside the Navajo Nation – or outside the Navajo system of clans – will produce offspring who share the mother’s clan and Navajo identities.
Thus, when a Navajo woman marries, her children will likely expand the clan identities of the biological family, as any daughters she might have would incorporate new clan and family identities into the clan and tribal system of the Navajo Nation. Today, the few clans that Navajo oral tradition describes as the earliest or original clans have grown to more than 70 clans. This dynamic and potentially expansive system is one of the cultural attributes that has given Navajos the ability to maintain powerful tribal and clan identities even as the people themselves have migrated great distances and likely assimilated cultural traditions from other Indian tribes, mestizo colonials and mainstream U.S. culture. (Diné Clans)

Navajo Cultural Attributes

The Navajo clan system stands in stark contrast to European, Asian and Latin-American immigrant experience in the Americas, where strong prohibitions on family intra-marriage – incest, and old nationalistic identities continue for no more than one or two generations after migration (Vigdor, 2008). Once children of European, Asian or Latin-American migrants adopt English -- or Spanish -- as their first language, their identifications change. At that point, old nationalistic identities break down and the family identity and new national identity come to the fore, as old ethnic affiliations diminish with each subsequent generation. This model of major changes in identities between first- and second-generation migrants has been labeled “segmented assimilation” and it is the dominant feature of the “melting pot” notion of migration (Waters & Ueda, 2007 p. 11).

For the Navajo, identity is more nuanced and multi-layered. First is immediate family identity, which recognizes the paramount importance of parents and biological
siblings. They also possess dual national identities as members of the Navajo Nation and citizens of the United States. Yet, there is also the intermediate identification with the clans of one’s parents, and the significance of that within Diné culture. The Navajo system of clan identification has been handed down for generations and it demands that Navajo care for the well being of their “brothers” and “sisters” from the clans of their parents, even though there may be no bloodline ties to such clan-siblings. Therefore, the clan system encourages this indigenous subgroup to maintain powerful tribal identifications even to members who venture off the Navajo Reservation.

When viewed from a purely functionalist perspective, it is difficult to say whether Navajo culture was uniquely suited to immigration or whether immigration itself shaped and transformed Navajo culture into a hybrid cultural strain that differs from many European, Asian and Latin-American cultures, as well as those of the Pueblo people of Arizona and New Mexico. Nevertheless, Navajo have proven to be particularly adaptable to mainstream culture, yet managed to maintain significant aspects of their Native American culture into the present day.

Navajo cosmology assumes a dynamic world (Simpson, 2008). Unlike some tradition-bound indigenous people, the Navajo do not necessarily expect tomorrow to be like today or today to be like yesterday. Progress and tradition do not stand in stark contrast for Navajo. Although Navajo conceive of themselves as having a nomadic heritage, their creation stories do not portray a great migration in exactly the way that has been described above. That migration is an anthropological and archeological artifact, more so than an intrinsic part of Navajo cosmology. Indeed, that cosmology is tied to what the Navajo describe as their ancestral homeland – an area demarcated by the four
sacred mountains that bound the Four Corners region of the United States, and which surrounds today’s Navajo Reservations. Yet, some aspects of a relatively recent and significant migration continue to influence Navajo culture.

The Navajo and Migrant Flexibility

Except in the most forced of migrations, the impulse to leave one’s traditional or familial homeland is itself an anti-traditional impulse. Voluntary migration implies that the traditional home of one’s parents at some point no longer represents the ideal for the prospective immigrant. Indeed, for most voluntary immigrants, homeland came to be viewed as a problem the migrant needed to overcome. The departing immigrant risks the future on a critical evaluation of present circumstances. In short, the impulse to voluntarily migrate is, at least in part, based on a rejection of the immediate past and a desire to risk one’s future on change. Binder (2008) has described this as a self-selection process that tends to prove that those at the heads of immigrant chains are unusually economically dynamic.

This type of migrant mentality itself is a high-stakes embrace of dynamism, as the migrant ventures away from home – either moving in progressive ebbs and flows or embracing a more desperate and permanent change of scene and circumstance. Sometimes such decisions are driven by hardship at the familial or societal level. Other times such decisions are based on changing climatic or economic conditions, or perhaps even warfare. At any rate, migrants bet on their own cultural resilience to ensure survival and the prospect for a better life in a new place. This dynamic spirit and faith in the migrant’s own flexibility marks many migrants’ experience and mentality, even though some migrants almost immediately try to recreate aspects of their traditional
homelands upon arrival in a new area. And although some migrants ultimately come to regret the decision to leave their homeland, their original aspiration was for something new, something different.

In this sense, the very act of voluntary migration represents a basic social action toward a new way of life. The propensity to embrace change may help migrants be well suited to living in societies that value progress, risk taking and innovation. Not only is tradition often perceived by migrants as oppressive and associated with an older environment where they felt disadvantaged, migrants in commercial societies have well-established reputations as financial risk-takers and entrepreneurs.

The Navajo ability to adapt to the dry climate of the U.S. Southwest, overcome nationalistic efforts to destroy their indigenous culture, and deal with the exigencies of industrial and post-industrial life, is in part attributable to their resilience as a relatively recent migrant people who assimilated attributes of other indigenous cultures while maintaining social cohesion – in spite of experiencing a massive migration and subsequent forced internment. Today, the Navaho encircle the Hopi Reservation and culturally dominate the Four Corners region.

The Navajo migration to the Southwest bears some similarities to great chain migrations that brought new groups of Europeans and Asians to the Americas a century ago. When analyzed in retrospect, those groups have come to personify the “segmented assimilation,” or melting pot immigration model that still dominates romanticized notions of immigration in many Americans’ minds. Yet, the Navajo story of migration and cultural evolution and cohesion represents a far different immigration model. This model and other virulent migratory strains preceded the arrival of Europeans to the Americas
some five centuries ago, and continues to transgress the nation-state and political multicultural understandings that the United States Government and those of other contemporary developed cultures often use to judge more recent migratory experience.

In short, wall or no wall, visa or no visa, multicultural definition or no ethnic clarity, migrations occurred for millennia in many varied forms. Efforts to prescribe a single model of idealized migration, such as the segmented melting pot model, are counterproductive even though they may be politically palatable in the short run. In the American Southwest, an area characterized by migratory experiences for millennia, the Navajo migratory experience has produced a hybrid indigenous culture that survives and thrives within a highly developed nation.
Figures

Figure 1: Southwest Indigenous Languages (Crouthamel, 2008)

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<td>Hohokam</td>
<td>Pimans</td>
<td>Akimel’ O’odham (Pima), Tohono O’odham (Papago)</td>
<td>Uto-Aztecan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patayan (Hakataya)</td>
<td>Yumans</td>
<td>Cocopa, Mojave, Maricopa, Quechan (Yuma), Havasupai, Yavapai, Walapai</td>
<td>Hoka-Yetman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dene (AD 1000-1400)</td>
<td>Navajo</td>
<td>Navajo Navajo</td>
<td>S. Athabascan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Apache</td>
<td>Jicarilla, Mescalero, Chiricahua, Western</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 2: Current Southwest Indigenous Reservations with Dinétah (gray area) (Crouthamel, 2008 from 1994 Encyclopedia Britannica)
Figure 3: Athabascan Migration Routes

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