

House made of dawn



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Marcia Keegan's book, *Enduring Culture: A Century of Photography of the Southwest Indians*, beautifully portrays the Pueblo culture's strength. By juxtaposing antique photographs from the early 1900's, with photos of the same scene taken as much as a hundred years later, Keegan powerfully demonstrates how the Pueblo culture has endured the torment of the ages. In Momaday's *The House Made of Dawn*, we see how these fragile customs and rituals managed to survive a century of momentous change.

Throughout the 1960's, 70's and 80's, Keegan photographed scenes and events of Southwestern Indian life. Unbeknownst to her, some of these images were closely identical to those taken by the frontier photographers at the turn of the century. Seen side by side, these images make poignant statements about the deeply imbedded culture of the Pueblos. The photographs are so strikingly similar that it is uncanny to think Keegan had not made a conscious attempt to replicate the frontier photographers' images.

The photos capture women in their daily tasks, sculpting and firing pottery, weaving baskets, baking bread, winnowing corn and combing hair; men in full regalia performing the Eagle, Corn, and Buffalo Dances; and children playing in the streets with pueblos in the distance. Momaday relates the turbulent times this Pueblo culture faced, as well as how it prevailed through such times, in *The House Made of Dawn*. On the eve of his death, Francisco recalls taking his grandsons, Abel and Vidal, out to Campo Santo at dawn.

They must learn the whole contour of the black mesa. They must know it as they knew the shape of their hands, always and by heart. The sun rose up on

the black mesa at a different place each day... They must know the long journey of the sun on the black mesa, how it rode in the seasons and the years, and they must live according to the sun appearing, for only then could they reckon where they were, where all things were, in time...

These things he had told his grandsons carefully, slowly and at length, because they were old and true, and they could be lost forever as easily as one generation is lost to the next, as easily as one old man might lose his voice, having not spoken enough or not at all. (173) Francisco is confident that he has done his part in holding on to his culture by passing it on to his grandsons. He knows the how fragile their customs are, and how easily they could die away with only one generation's carelessness.

The Pueblo's rich culture was preserved by grandmothers and grandfathers, similar to Francisco, who realized the importance of the old ways, and made sure they were passed on to future generations. When Abel is thrust into life off the reservation, it is painfully evident that he is too closely tied to his people's ways to survive in the fully Americanized society. Unlike Benally, he is unable to sever himself from life on the reservation enough to assimilate into the city.

While this was a rather unfortunate situation for Abel, leaving him lost and confused, perhaps it was necessary for some of the Native-Americans not to accept the American way of life. Had all of Abel's generation moved to the city and adapted to it as Benally did, it is doubtful that we would see the striking similarities in Pueblo images presented in *Enduring Culture*. It was

those like Abel, who inherited a way of life from their grandfathers of which they could not let go, that preserved the Pueblo culture.

The introduction to Keegan's collection of images, states that when frontier photographers began their " project to document all the remaining North American Indian peoples, [they] believed that [they were] preserving a record of vanishing culture. " (9) The almost identical images found on the Pueblo reservation a century later are visible proof that their culture has prevailed. Learning of Abel's struggle with identity in *The House Made of Dawn*, helps us realize the obstacles of forced assimilation and outside influence on the reservations, which the Pueblo culture had to face throughout the last century.