

Weaving on sacred ground

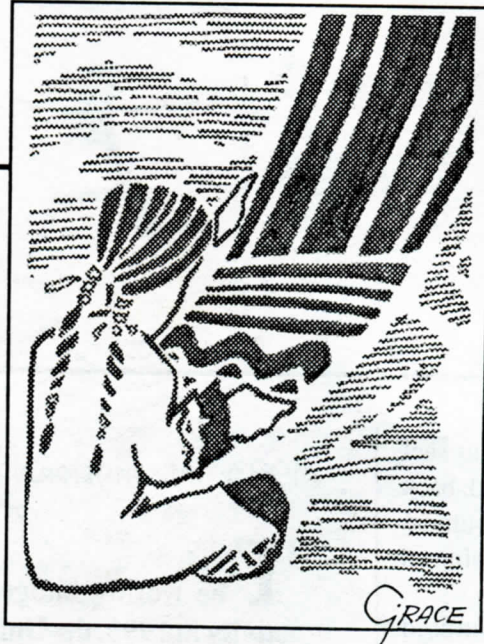
by
M. A. Gomez
with assistance from
Maria Limon

"In the beginning of time, when things were being created by the Great Spiritual Beings, rug weaving was created. Through our teaching we learn that in those times the only people were the insect people, and we learned to weave from a woman. The loom was created with its own sacred songs and prayers. How the loom is set up is very important. Each string is tied from the loom to the frame. The stick that is used to weave with as well as the wool, is sacred to the Dine people. Our way of life is our religion and our teaching."

In 1974, the federal government passed Public Law 93-531, authorizing the partitioning of the Dine-Hopi Joint Use Area (JUA), and the removal of 10,000 Dine people. This led to livestock confiscation, water diversion, fencing, a halt to road and education improvements, clearing of the land and threats to ceremonial grounds.

The lands to be cleared are in the center of the Black Mesa of the Colorado plateau in Arizona, known as Big Mountain. This area contains the largest deposits of energy and mineral resource in the world; it is also crucial to the global climatological balance. Public Law 93-531 was passed as the result of a 24-year campaign waged by special interest Mormon attorneys, some of whom were also on contract to Peabody Coal, the largest mineral extraction lease holder on the reservation.

The reason given by the federal government for the partitioning of the land was a so-called Hopi-Dine land dispute. The real dispute was and continues to be the one between traditional Indians who are opposed to land and mineral development to protect their sacred



and ceremonial lands and the tribal councils and outside forces that support intense mineral development.

Tribal councils were invented in 1923 by the US Department of Interior as 'Business Councils' that could sign mineral leases with US corporations. The Tribal Chairmen were also instituted by US law; they

are employees of the federal government. Traditional tribal leadership is distinct and does not recognize tribal councils.

For the traditional Navajo (Dine), land is at the center of life and religion instructed by their creator to remain on and care for their ancestral land through daily offerings, prayers and ceremonies; traditional Dine women believe it is their spiritual responsibility to protect this land for future generations. The women still carry on the old sacred ways, which are bound together with their weaving traditions. There is no separation between their religious and daily lives.

Livestock, especially sheep, are central to the Dine economy. They represent Dine livelihood, providing them with food, pelts for trade, as well as wool for weaving. No part of the animal is wasted. The Dine Nation was self sufficient before the US federal government intruded upon its sovereignty.

In 1984, the Weaving Project was organized to combat the abuses taking place in Joint Use Area and to build an economic basis by promoting self-sufficiency through the practice of traditional Dine art. The women have established a collective of over 85 traditional Dine weavers representing four generations of

weavers, from great grandmothers to young children, and several communities located in the Joint Use Area of northern Arizona including Big Mountain, Star Mountain, Teesto, Mosquito Springs, Cactus Valley, and Red Willow Springs. Over 2,000 weavings have been sold; 100 percent of the proceeds have gone to the families resisting relocation.

The work completed by the collective to date includes the rebuilding of Churro sheep herds, which are now an endangered species; the Survival School which serves students during the summer and includes classes on weaving, jewelry making, beadwork, pottery, hogan construction, and variety of other classes all taught by volunteers; and advocating for the protection of the mental and physical health of the elders.

One of the most important results has been in the encouragement of weavers to promote and support their traditional art and ceremonial ways at a time in which all is threatened. 200 volunteers around the country donate their time and expenses. Since its inception, weavers no longer have to sell their weavings at the trading post which would typically pay only 10 percent of the actual value; this has increased the weavers income by 90 percent. The Weaving Project has made a commitment with the weavers to support them for the long term efforts to resist forced removal and to support their Traditional Ceremonial Life.

By selling weavings, one directly supports the Dine women's resistance to forced relocation and genocide. The weaver receives 100 percent of the price that she asks for the weaving. With the consent of the weavers, the Weaving Project sometimes adds an optional 10 percent to cover expenses. By buying a weaving, one directly supports the Dine women in their efforts to stay on their ancestral lands and keep their culture alive.

It was in 1974 that I first gave a presentation on the relocation of the Dine. My son, Mekaya, was not even a year old then; I had to bounce him on my knee to keep him quiet. I did not think that in October 1991, I would again address a gathering at an exhibit for the Weaving Project with my son, who is now 17, sitting in the audience. As I spoke and looked out at my son, I realized the importance of this resistance work. It is critical to the continuity of life. The words of one elder came to mind.

"I am a resident of the so-called Hopi-partition land to relocate from my ancestral homeland. I have no intention of abandoning our sacred grounds. Here I know the burial sites, trees and landscape within our native language. My main concern is to preserve our homeland and livestock for our future generations. Therefore I cannot comply with the relocation law."

-- Dine Elder/weaver

Source: *Alma de Mujer Center for Social Change, Austin, Texas, USA. Tel.: (512) 258-3880.*

Alma de Mujer is a project of the Foundation for a Compassionate Society. Part of its work in 1992 is geared towards the effects of the colonization of the Americas on indigenous women. The above article was published in the Foundation newsletter.

The Foundation has sponsored a series of special events for 1992 including a European speaking tour of native american women, info packets sent to educational institutions, sponsorship of indigenous people's musical groups and an indigenous film, art and literature festival.