

## KIVAS OF THE SOUTHWEST

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The subject of this paper is the unique architecture and ceremonial chambers generally referred to as kivas of the ancient puebloan people of the United States Southwest. The Southwest region of the United States has been of great interest not only to archaeologists, but also many amateurs who find the architecture of the ancient Pueblos fascinating. The Southwest has been described as an area that extends from Durango, Mexico, to Durango, Colorado, and from Las Vegas, New Mexico, to Las Vegas, Nevada (Cordell 1997:3). The term kiva has been borrowed from the Hopi language and is used to describe the ceremonial chambers of the Anasazi.

The Anasazi, also known as the cliff dwellers, are a people that represent a culture that lasted from 1500 B.C. to around 1300 AD. They lived in Mesa Verde and the San Juan region and are ancestors of the modern occupants in the region, the Hopi and the Zuni (Ferguson 1996:189). Today, the Hopi use the term "kiva" to describe their ceremonial structures (Smith 1990:55). Kivas have been studied by archaeologists for at least one hundred years, and yet there does not seem to be any clear-cut definition to describe this structure of the Anasazi.

Traditional kiva structures date from approximately A.D. 700 to after A.D. 1300 and are located in the Four Corners Region of the Southwest (Cordell 1997:190). Throughout the centuries, many have sought out the exact use and purpose of the kiva in the pueblos. The Spaniards were the first to write about the kiva in the 1500's, calling the structure an *estufa* (Nordenskiold 1973:17). Following the Spaniards, many antiquarians became interested in the Southwest and in the unique structures of the pueblos. The purpose of this research is to understand the definition of a kiva, understand what features constitute a kiva, and determine if its definition should be questioned. Following are definitions from the past, to introduce the reader to the complexity facing archaeologists with regard to the day identification of kiva structures using past definitions.

### Background and Definitions

The definition of a kiva has been used in the past to identify the use of a ceremonial chamber, yet there are no standard features which may identify a kiva. It may or may not be consistent in shape, size or its contents, and this varies according to its placement in the Southwest. The Spaniards were the first to explore throughout the Southwest and, while there, discovered numerous round rooms, which they referred to as *estufas*. In Spanish the word *estufa* literally means stove, but the Spaniards believed that the *estufas* in the Southwest were used like the steam baths they observed in Mexico. (Nordenskiöld 1973:17).

In 1891, a young twenty-three year old aristocrat from Sweden by the name of Gustaf Nordenskiöld learned about the ruins in the Southwest and arranged to stay with the Wetherill family in Mancos, Colorado. Even though Nordenskiöld did not possess a degree in anthropology or in ethnology, he is well known for his detailed notes and photographs taken of the pueblos during his short visit to the Southwest (Nordenskiöld 1973:XII). During his explorations, he adopted the term "*estufa*" to identify all the "round rooms" as opposed to the square blocked rooms of the sites in the region (Nordenskiöld 1973:17). These *estufas* are now what we now call kivas. He believed that the *estufas* that were in current use by the Moki in Oraibe village, Arizona, could be compared to those at Cliff House in Mesa Verde and that they were used in similar fashion, as a place for religious and political gatherings, and not as a steam bath as the Spaniards believed (Nordenskiöld 1973: 17).

The Moki village of Oraibe that Nordenskiöld visited was situated in the northeastern portion of Arizona. In his notes, he describes an *estufa* at Oraibe village as a large rectangular apartment that was two-thirds below the surface; its length was between 7.5-10 meters, width 4.5-7 meters and height 2-3 meters. There was a bench on three sides of the room, and a fire pit; the walls were made of stone; the inside plastered and a ladder had to be used to enter through the roof (Nordenskiöld 1973:137). Nordenskiöld also stated that the *estufa* was used for special occasions, such as ceremonies for a good harvest and abundant rain fall. Nordenskiöld found that it was rare for the women of the village to enter the *estufas*, as their duties were performed outside on the terraces. The men of the village entered the *estufas* during the day and would sit, chat, smoke and weave or do other small duties in the *estufas* (Nordenskiöld 1973:137).

In the early twentieth century, Jesse Walter Fewkes became interested in the Southwest after he began his career as a marine zoologist. In 1895, Fewkes

was employed by the Bureau of American Ethnology and was sent to the Southwest to explore the ancient Pueblos (Smithsonian Institution Archives, 1998). Fewkes' definition of a kiva is as follows: "The word *kiva* is restricted to subterranean chambers, rectangular or circular, in which secret ceremonies are or were held..." (Fewkes 1999:48). In his reports from 1909 and 1911, he describes two different types of kivas at Cliff Palace. The first type was described as a subterranean room that was circular or cylindrical in form, with pilasters that supported the roof, a fireplace, deflectors and a ventilator. The second type of kiva identified by Fewkes was circular or rectangular with rounded corners and without pilasters, a fireplace or a deflector (Fewkes 1999:48). According to Fewkes' research in the modern Pueblos, "the kiva represents one of the underworlds or the womb of the earth from which the races of man were born." (Fewkes 1999:48).

It was not until the First Pecos Conference about the Southwest in 1927 did archaeologists agree on a very broad definition of a kiva. "A kiva is a ceremonial chamber specially constructed for ceremonial purposes." (Woodbury 1993:90). Because this definition of a kiva is vague, for years archaeologists have questioned when a structure should be considered a pit house and not a kiva, and vice versa? How many features must be present to identify a structure as a kiva is a question that many archaeologists ask, as not all structures contain all features ascribed to the kiva complex (Smith 1990:56).

Watson Smith was a lawyer before he began his archaeological career in the Southwest in the 1930's. He was introduced to archaeology in the summer of 1933 and worked with Paul Martin on the Rainbow Bridge-Monument Valley Expedition (Smith 1952:vii). Smith's description of a kiva is that it may be circular, rectangular, D-shaped, completely or partially subterranean, or completely aboveground. The entrance may be through a hatchway in the roof or through a door in one of the walls. It may contain columns or pilasters to support the roof, benches around the walls, fireplaces, ventilator shafts, niches in the walls, fixtures for loom supports, and a sipapu which is the symbolic opening in the floor that gives a connection to the underworld (Smith 1952:5). The sipapu is part of the origin myth as it is believed that the people came up through the sipapu onto the earth (Smith 1972:120). Smith goes on to state that none of these previously mentioned features are definite; therefore, the definition cannot go beyond that of "a room with a floor, walls, and a roof" (Smith 1952:5). Smith also believed that the kiva was a specialized ceremonial room that was used for little or no domestic work and that it was an Anasazi creation (Smith 1990:59). While working in Big Hawk Valley, Arizona, he discovered that there was a "lack of uni-

formity in kiva architecture” and discerned that maybe the “specific features” in a room do not determine its function, but its position in the architectural unit and its relation to other rooms determine whether it is a ceremonial room or not (Smith 1990:70).

By comparing the descriptions of the kivas, we have learned that they are not steam rooms, but that they are a ceremonial chamber. Nordenskiöld in his report did not go into great detail about kivas, but instead his reports covered the ruins of Mesa Verde in detail. Jesse Walter Fewkes also reported on the ruins in Mesa Verde, however, his report on Cliff Palace he has described the size, shape, location, few if any objects discovered, and features of the kivas. Watson Smith’s main interest is in what the definition of a kiva should be and its features. Watson Smith has investigated many archaeological sites, and has done extensive work on kivas; yet he did not come up with a conclusive definition of a kiva.

#### Features Constituting Kivas

Before the kiva evolved into a specialized ceremonial chamber, it was the domestic dwelling of the Anasazi called a pit house. A pit house is a structure that is built partially underground, has a flat roof, and was either circular or rectangular, and entrance was through the roof (Ferguson 1996:66,191). It is believed that during the late Basketmaker III period, A.D. 575 to 750, and during Pueblo I period, A.D. 750 to A.D. 900 (Cordell 1987:193), the architecture of the Anasazi pit houses began to change (Cater & Chenault 1988:19). As the Anasazi began building aboveground units, the pit houses were being used less for domestic work and were being used more for ceremonial purposes. Archaeologists believe the kiva was not used completely for ceremony until after Pueblo III, A.D. 1100 to 1300, and was used both for protection from the cold in the winter and for domestic purposes, such as grinding corn. (Cater & Chenault 1988:29). Kivas differ in shapes and sizes and this depends on where in the Southwest they are located. Some are circular, square, or D-shaped and range in size from small, 5 – 8 meters in diameter, (Cater & Chenault 1988:29) to large, 10-23 meters (Van Dyke 1999:475).

Small circular kivas are located in the eastern portion of the Four Corners region of the Southwest, in particular Mesa Verde and the San Juan Region (Ferguson 1996:189). Some of the features include a bench, fire pit and sipapu. This type of kiva has been referred to as a kin kiva, which was used only by an extended family (Ferguson 1998:11). These kivas are usually built into room blocks or underground, and it is believed that these kivas functioned

for both domestic and religious purposes (Ferguson1996:13).

How do we know the difference between great kivas and small kivas? Do they have any distinguishing characteristics? As the name states, great kivas are large in size, 10-23 meters, aboveground or subterranean, and its shape may be circular or rectangular depending on its location in the Southwest. Great kivas have been discovered situated away from the habitation units and are believed to be used for communal purposes, such as ceremony and dance, discussion of issues within the pueblo, and market and trade actions (Van Dyke 1999:475).

In the eastern portion of the Southwest, the great kivas of Chaco Canyon were all circular, semi-subterranean, and it is unknown if they were completely or partially roofed. The building structure was highly formalized with crypts, sub-floor passageways, antechambers and benches around the structure. Archaeologists believe that, due to the large amount of labor used to construct the great kivas, the structure held a higher value than that of just a community center. Evidence that suggests this is the rich deposits that were discovered in the sealed crypts and niches. (Lekson 1986:52).

Those Great Kivas located in the western portion of the Southwest are rectangular. A good example is the great kiva at Grasshopper Pueblo located in east-central Arizona. This area was occupied between approximately A.D. 1275 to A.D. 1400. The great kiva at Grasshopper Pueblo measures 15 meters by 12 meters and is believed to have first served as a plaza and later transformed into the great kiva that was completely enclosed by the roomblock. The discovery of the postholes in the floor has provided evidence suggesting that the great kiva was completely roofed. Entrance to the great kiva was through a doorway, and it contains few features such as a hearth, metate, and footdrum (Riggs 2001:108). The population of Grasshopper Pueblo was believed to be inhabited by immigrants, and the Great Kiva served as a structure, which brought the entire pueblo community together (Riggs 2001:184).

### Discussion

Many archaeologists do not agree with some of the theoretical interpretations of the kiva. In particular, there remains disagreements regarding the theories that the kiva is used solely for ceremonial purposes (Cater & Chénault 1988:30), that the large numbers of kivas at a particular site can be interpreted as a ceremonial center (Lange 1986:16); and that the abandon-

ment of the pit house to live in the aboveground room blocks left the kiva to serve as a special ceremonial chamber (Lekson 18988:224). The early archaeologists from the nineteenth century did not have a magic crystal ball to see into the past. So how can we be sure that the use of kivas in the modern pueblos was the same as those of the historic period? Cater and Chenault argue that there is evidence that shows that other activities occurred in the kivas, such as the mealing bins for grinding corn and lithic debitage from making stone implements on the floors of the kivas well into the Pueblo III period. Another problem they raise, concerns the influence of the Catholic religion imposed on the Native Americans by the Spaniards; consequently, because of this influence, the modern use of the kiva may not reflect the attitudes and use of the kivas from the historic period (1988:30).

Stephen Lekson has questioned the interpretation of a kiva by asking why all semi-subterranean, circular structures must be called kivas. He feels that the term kiva is "ill defined ethnographically and archaeologically" (Lekson 1988:224). What Lekson refers to as a pit structure others call kivas. Some archaeologists believe that due to a large number of kivas at a site this makes it a ceremonial center (Lange 1986:16). If we look at Lekson's interpretation, he strongly believes that the Anasazi were still using pit houses until the 1300's, and their features were very similar to the kivas such as the stone/earth walls, a bench, mealing bin, and sipapu (Lekson 1988:230).

One of the many problems archaeologists face in identifying a kiva is that they cannot communicate with the past to make a definite decision regarding its use as purely ceremonial. We can only go by the modern use of the Pueblos today, which may or may not reflect the historic use due to the influence of the Spaniards and Catholicism. We cannot describe a kiva as a kiva, just because the structure is round, semi-subterranean and has few or some of the features which archaeologists from the past have said make up its definition. If we look into our homes, we cook, eat, sleep and sometimes perform religious ceremonies in them. What would be the interpretations of our homes five hundred years from now if our cities were abandoned? Could it be possible that the interpretation of a kiva has been wrong from the beginning?

The problems faced in trying to correct some of these errors from the past are that there are many archaeologists who find it very difficult to remove themselves from traditional interpretation. Another problem is offending the Native American population in the Southwest. The Native American community now uses the word kiva; if archaeologists are trying to look at the problems with identifying the structures and correcting these problems, we are

faced with offending a population that has strong mythic ties to the kiva.

In order for archaeologists to find a more comprehensive definition of a kiva, different methods should be considered. Not just the size, shape or features can identify a structure. To the student archaeologist the broad term used today is extremely confusing, and it seems to be an anything goes type of definition. Looking at definitions from the early twentieth century, there is not a kiva that includes every feature that has been described. How are students going to be able to identify these structures, if there is not a better definition? We must continue to challenge ourselves with questions, for if we do not question what we have learned, how are we to continue learning? With the extensive literature research conducted, I cannot offer a solution to identifying a kiva, I can only offer to the reader the broad, confusing definition: "A kiva is a ceremonial chamber specially constructed for ceremonial purposes." (Woodbury 1993:90).

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