

“Sheep is Life:” Economic, Social, and Cultural
Effects of the Navajo Livestock Reduction

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Abstract

This paper examines the drastic impacts of the Navajo livestock reduction on the Navajo economy, society, and culture. The severity of the effects of livestock reduction for the Navajo demonstrates the extent to which Navajo society was shaped by sheep herding. Not only did sheep herding provide subsistence, but it also brought economic and psychological security, shaped societal hierarchy by creating status differentiation, and possessed a significant teaching function for younger generations. After elaborating on the centrality of sheep in traditional Navajo society, I discuss livestock reduction and the immense effects that it had on the Navajo. Such effects include the leveling of wealth, the creation of division within the community, the significant decrease in the status of Navajo women, the rise of Peyotism, and economic hardship that continues to the present.

The forced reduction of Navajo livestock, which began in the 1930s, is often remembered as one of the darkest times in Navajo history (Roessel 1974). By 1933 more than 1.1 million sheep and goats grazed the Navajo Reservation (Parezo 1996:23). Pastures of the American Southwest had with time been overgrazed by Navajo sheep, which stripped natural vegetation, produced substantial erosion, and impeded pasture recovery (Sutton and Anderson 2004:246). Mandatory livestock reduction was enforced by the United States government due to these increasing environmental concerns and sought to reduce stock by forty-five percent by the 1950s (Parezo 1996:23). Livestock reduction may have ameliorated the overgrazing problem, but it also had many unintended consequences that greatly affected the tribe. This was due to the extreme significance of the sheep not only in the Navajo economy, but in Navajo society and culture as well. This paper ethnographically explores both the symbolic and material role of sheep in pre-reduction Navajo economy, society, and culture, and analyzes the immense effects that livestock reduction had on the Navajo.

Role of the Sheep in Navajo Economy and Society Prior to Stock Reduction

Traditional Navajo economy had been characterized by agriculture, livestock, hunting and gathering, and raiding; in good years, agriculture would provide the majority of food (White 1983:244). However, after the Navajos were released from Fort Sumner in 1848 and began to acquire great numbers of sheep, the Navajo economy became largely pastoral. Trade was secondary to this domestic economy, but it nevertheless began to develop in the late 1800s and early 1900s. Navajos traded wool and blankets during this period in return for manufactured goods and sheep to rebuild their flocks (White 1983:241-246). To allow their flocks to grow, Navajos turned to hunting deer and antelope in order to avoid eating their sheep. It was not long before the deer and antelope populations had been depleted and Navajo survival depended completely on the flocks (White 1983:245-46). The Navajo economy was so centered around sheep that drought in the 1890s affected the economy by substantially increasing the number of trading posts on the Reservation and giving rise to the blanket and rug trade (White 1983:246).

The maintenance of the sheep herds was the basis of the Navajo economy during its predominantly pastoral period, which began after the return from Fort Sumner. Sheep were considered mobile wealth (Parezo 1996:19), supplying food, wool for clothing and weaving, and sinew for bows (Witherspoon 1973:1441). Not only did sheep provide economic and psychological security, but they also reproduced every year, thus adding to their owners' wealth (Parezo 1996:19). A Navajo saying goes, "If we take care of the sheep, the sheep will take care of us" (Witherspoon 1973:1442).

Sheep were owned by individuals, but groups of families combined herds in order to share grazing area. These groups of families formed the residence group, which was the basic unit of Navajo society. The residence group was the primary unit of production and consumption (White 1983:238-39), and the sheep represented the common interests of the whole group (Witherspoon 1973:1443). The care of the sheep was therefore the duty of everyone and income from the sheep was used for the welfare of the whole group (White 1983:238). In these ways, sheep played a fundamental role in Navajo social organization and integration (Parezo 1996:22).

Witherspoon (1973) also notes that sheep served as a means of identification. Though a residence group was comprised of many stock owners who lived within relative proximity of one another, if the grouping of homes did not make it entirely clear who belonged to which group, all one needed to look at was who put their sheep in which herd (Witherspoon 1973:1443). Identification of a Navajo as belonging to a particular residence group could therefore be determined by the sheep.

By the end of the nineteenth century, the distribution of sheep in Navajo society was far from equal (Henderson 1989:380). Henderson (1989) notes that among four Reservation districts surveyed in 1915, the wealthiest ten percent of families held between forty-one and sixty percent of the total sheep in the district (McPherson 1985:421-22). A social hierarchy that was dependent on herd size was therefore prevalent. The wealthy occupied a critical role in Navajo society; often a large portion of income was used to benefit other families through off-reservation purchases of motor vehicles, for example (Henderson 1989:398). Wealthy Navajo families also purchased goods and services from other Navajo within the community, sponsored major ceremonies, and provided financial assistance to kinsmen and neighbors (Henderson 1989:398). Wealthy

Navajos were motivated to help their less fortunate counterparts for fear of appearing stingy (White 1983:241). Therefore, the social hierarchy, a defining characteristic of Navajo social structure, was dependent on and shaped by the unequal distribution of sheep. This unequal distribution, along with the Navajo emphasis on altruism and charity (Witherspoon 1973:1446), caused wealthier Navajo to share with those less fortunate, creating a system of dependence.

Navajo society was traditionally matrilineal and matrilocal, as descent was traced through the female line and men left their natal homes to join their wives' families (Shepardson 1982:150). Sheep were the means by which the new husband was integrated into the residence group of his new wife (Witherspoon 1973:1443-44). The new husband typically would leave the majority of his sheep with his natal residence group, but as time passed he would eventually put most of his sheep in the herd of his new residence group (Witherspoon 1973:1443-44). It was through this that the new in-marrying man would materially tie his identity and loyalty to the new group (Witherspoon 1973:1443-44). Sheep therefore served a substantial role in the integration of a new husband into his wife's residence group.

Navajo women had considerably high status in traditional Navajo society; they owned land, sheep, and participated to a great extent in subsistence activities. While matrilineality and matrilocality are defining features of traditional Navajo society, it can also be argued that this is attributed to sheep, especially when considered that most pastoral societies are patrilineal and patrilocal (Levi 1983:4). Levi (1983) suggests that there this is a relationship between the predominant species of livestock herded, type of descent and inheritance system, and sex of the individual who does most of the herding. Because cows are much larger and more difficult to herd, this naturally makes them the responsibility of those with more physical strength (Levi 1983:4). In contrast, sheep are small enough that women can participate in their herding. Navajo women did not just partake in the herding of the livestock—they at times were in complete charge of the herds when Navajo men were away from home either trading or raiding for long periods of time (Levi 1983:5).

It is argued that the emphasis on sheep by the Navajo economy contributed to Navajo society being matrilineal. This in turn helped to ensure that Navajo society was

matrilocal. Because women played a dominant role in herding and thus understood the geography of the land on which they lived, it was necessary for them to stay on the land on which they grew up and learned the local geography (Levi 1983:4). Societies in which the predominant species of livestock is the cow are usually patrilocal; because men were the dominant herders, it was a necessity for them to stay on the land whose geography they understood (Levi 1983:4).

Given the high status of Navajo women, it is not surprising that motherhood is symbolically developed in Navajo culture. The idea of and the symbolism surrounding motherhood dominated traditional Navajo social relations and was the basis of Navajo kinship (White 1983:238). Interestingly, in the Navajo language the words for mother and sheep are the same, as sheep, like mothers, do literally sustain life for the Navajo (Witherspoon 1977:92-93). White (1983) references *Son of Old Man Hat*, the classic autobiography of a Navajo recorded in the 1930s by Walter Dyk: “[Old Man Hat] also told his daughter that the sheep and goats were her mother and father, and this emotional identification with the herd ran deep in Navajo society. Sheep were killed and sheep were eaten but sheep were also ‘loved’ ...The emotional links were equally as strong as financial ones” (White 1983:240).

Herding also embodied values that were passed down to younger generations. Navajo parents traditionally gave their children lambs to teach responsibility. The lamb would be the first member of the child’s herd, thus marking the beginning of the child’s economic future (Parezo 1996:25). Herding sheep taught children to accept responsibility, while infusing in them traditionally important Navajo values, which include individualism, love for personal freedom, generosity, altruism, charity, steadfastness, and self-sufficiency (Parezo 1996:25).

Sheep were a fundamental part of the Navajo pastoral economy that developed after the return from Fort Sumner in 1868; sheep were wealth, eaten, sheared for their wool, and cherished by their owners. Sheep were originally a means of subsistence for Navajos, but by the end of the nineteenth century they began to serve commercial purposes as well. But the value of the sheep was not just economic; they shaped various aspects of society, including social relations, the status of Navajo women, the descent system, and social organization. They embodied traditional Navajo values and were used

as kinship symbols. Given the immense importance of the sheep in Navajo economy, society, kinship, and culture, livestock reduction was a devastating event.

Livestock Reduction

While prior to Navajo internment at Fort Sumner the traditional economy had been characterized by agriculture, livestock, hunting and gathering, and raiding (White 1983:244), after the return to their homeland the Navajo economy was primarily pastoral. Henderson notes that an increase in trade in the later part of the nineteenth century led to “a shift from subsistence-oriented herding to market-oriented herding” (Bailey and Bailey 1986:105). In 1892, Navajo livestock was officially estimated at 1,715,984 sheep and goats, 125,529 horses, and 9,876 cattle (Henderson 1989:380).

The increasing size of Navajo herds inevitably led to overgrazing. The Navajo tried to combat this problem by simply moving their herds to different pastures. The federal government eventually became aware of the environmental problems associated with overgrazing and initiated stock reduction programs. One of the first programs was instigated in 1933 and called for voluntary reduction of stock for which the government provided monetary compensation. The government sought to purchase 100,000 sheep at \$1.00 to \$1.50 for ewes and \$2.25 to \$3.00 for wethers (castrated rams) and non-productive ewes (Roessel 1974:220). This was not effective as the Navajo were more likely to sell their sheep that could not reproduce; thus, this program actually increased flock productivity (Roessel 1974:220).

After 1937 the government turned to a more systematic and enforced method for stock reduction. The total Navajo Reservation was divided into eighteen land management districts and the Navajo were not allowed to move themselves or their herds from one district to another. The carrying capacity was established in each district, measured by “sheep units.” A sheep unit was defined by either one sheep or one goat, one-fifth of a horse, and one-fourth of a cow (thus five horses or four cows were equivalent to one sheep) (Roessel 1974:221).

Once the carrying capacity for each district was established, maximum sizes of flocks were set accordingly and varied from district to district, ranging from sixty-one to

over 200 sheep units. Navajo who had more than the maximum number of sheep units were forced to reduce their flocks to the minimum (Roessel 1974:221). Navajos who did not comply were jailed and their livestock were reduced by force. Between 1933 and 1935, the Navajos reduced their herds by approximately sixteen to twenty-seven percent, and between 1935 and 1940 an additional fifteen to thirty percent of livestock were reduced. Aberle in 1959 estimated that Navajos had lost eighty percent of their per capita holdings since 1930 (Roessel 1974:222).

Social, Economic, and Cultural Effects of Livestock Reduction

There were two main phases of livestock reduction (Henderson 1989:393). The voluntary reduction phase prior to 1937 did not greatly affect wealthy stockholders; Navajo who owned less stock suffered the most substantial reduction. This was due to the fact that the market for sheep and wool was weak during the 1930s, so the government enticed Navajo owners to sell their stock in exchange for favorable monetary compensation (Weiss 1984:99). This caused impoverished small herders to jump at the chance to sell their stock to the government in exchange for higher prices than what the market would bare (Weiss 1984:99-101). Many poor owners, therefore, ended up selling large percentages of their livestock. This period of voluntary stock reduction did not significantly disrupt the hierarchy of Navajo society because the poor were kept poor while the wealthy were less likely to resort to selling their flocks.

The later phase of reduction, initiated by the government after 1937, was targeted toward wealthy Navajo and served as a means of leveling wealth (Henderson 1989:393). This had a substantial effect on the social structure of Navajo society. As the size of herds was reduced to below the minimum subsistence level in every district, previously wealthy Navajos suffered the greatest reduction in terms of percentage of their livestock. Sheep could no longer be used as a measure of wealth. Prior to stock reduction, the elite had played a substantial role in Navajo society; poorer Navajos were dependent upon the financial aid they received from charitable wealthy Navajo families. The foundations of this hierarchy were eradicated with the leveling of wealth caused by livestock reduction, which was detrimental to the whole Navajo community.

It is interesting to point out that although stock reduction did reduce difference in wealth amongst the Navajo, it at the same time caused a great divide in the community, as wealthy and less wealthy stockholders retaliated toward the government in different ways. Navajo whose already modest herds had been reduced to a number far below the subsistence level responded with grass roots resistance, to which the federal government countered with arrest, prosecution, and incarceration of Navajo protesters (Henderson 1989:399). Previously wealthy owners, on the other hand, resisted in a different way. The Tribal Council selected during this time consisted mostly of prosperous stockholders who sought to deal with the federal government directly (Henderson 1989:399). This example serves to illustrate that although the leveling of wealth did eliminate material differences in Navajo society, it also caused further division. The difference in responses amongst these two factions of the Navajo community was the most immediate way wealthy and less wealthy Navajo were differentiated after the leveling of wealth (Henderson 1989:399). Henderson also points out that over time, income and wage differences became stratifying factors as well (Kelley 1986:205).

Another fundamental aspect of Navajo society that was immensely changed by livestock reduction was the status of Navajo women. As previously discussed, the importance of sheep in traditional Navajo economy and culture is argued to be the reason that Navajo society was traditionally matrilineal and matrilocal (Levi 1983:4). Therefore, livestock reduction and the subsequent shift of the Navajo economy had profound consequences for the status of Navajo women. Navajo women suffered as major herd owners, but also because of the fact that one primary source of income before stock reduction had been weaving, which was no longer a sufficient means of subsistence without sheep (Weiss 1984:102).

As sheep could no longer be a dependable source of subsistence for Navajos, the federal government began offering wage work as a means of compensating for their losses. The Navajo economy became dependent on wage labor (Shepardson 1982:151). The federal jobs offered to the Navajos, however, were primarily in forestry, irrigation, road building, and the construction of schools, all of which were obviously more suited for male physical strength (Shepardson 1982:151-52). Shepardson notes that when women did find work in areas such as seasonal agricultural work, restaurants, and

domestic service, they were usually paid lower wages than men (Hamamsy 1957:104). Navajo women therefore became dependent on their husbands, who became the sole provider of the household (Weiss 1984:116). This undoubtedly helped contribute to the decreasing status of women in society. Weiss observes that wage labor had a similar effect on older Navajo males, as federal wage work was generally manual labor that older men were unable to do. As they became dependent on their families, their status in the family decreased (Weiss 1984:116).

Aberle (1983) suggests that there is some correlation between the rise of Peyotism amongst the Navajo and livestock reduction. Peyotism is a pan-Indian, semi-Christian religious movement whose believers ritually consume the Peyote cactus, which has psychoactive effects (Aberle 1983:558). Since the 1890s there had been widespread opposition to Peyotism amongst Native American traditionalists and Native American Christians. After the 1930s, however, the Navajo were perhaps its greatest opponents (Aberle 1983:563). Despite this, the appeal of the religion must have been immense for many Navajos to pursue it regardless of opposition within the tribe (Aberle 1983:563). Aberle argues that the emotional results of livestock reduction were responsible for the appeal and subsequent rise of Peyotism amongst the Navajo.

Peyotism can be conceptualized as a religion of the oppressed, dominated, and exploited, and of those deprived of power, status, and economic goods (Aberle 1983:563). It is also described as a “crisis religion,” one that resulted in response to massive societal changes (Hultkrantz 1977:84). In describing reasons why Peyotism spread predominately amongst tribes of the North American Plains, Hultkrantz (1977) argues that there is a relationship between the military defeat of tribes of this region and the rise of Peyotism (p.185), which suggests that livestock reduction, arguably a defeat of the Navajo by the government, did spark the appeal of Peyotism. From 1869 through the 1930s, there were virtually no religious movements amongst the Navajo (Aberle 1983:563), which further suggests that a single event must have brought about the rise of Peyotism. Aberle notes that those who practice Peyotism had on average lost more livestock than those who did not practice Peyotism, which further suggests a causative relationship between losing livestock and the appeal of Peyotism.

Peyotism initially faced intense opposition from within the Navajo tribe, the federal Bureau of Indian Affairs, other branches of the U.S. government, and individual state governments (Aberle 1983:565). Not only did the spread of Peyotism cause relentless conflict in society by creating clashes between neighbors, friends, and even kinsmen, but financial assistance between Peyotist and anti-Peyotist kinsmen often ceased as well (Aberle 1983:567).

Livestock reduction is argued to be responsible for the appeal and consequent spread of Peyotism. Not only did this religion affect society by causing severe conflict between believers and nonbelievers, but it also signified an important change in Navajo history and culture, as the religion developed from a small belief system of the oppressed to a faith that encompasses a majority of the Navajo tribe (Aberle 1983:569).

The most obvious effects of livestock reduction were perhaps visible in the changes in the Navajo economic structure. Following livestock reduction, the Navajos could no longer depend on their herds for subsistence. Less wealthy stockholders had often depended upon seasonal wage labor and some government welfare prior to livestock reduction (Henderson 1989:381), but it was not until after reduction that these became more significant components of the Navajo economy.

In 1948, the Navajo tribal government in conjunction with the federal Bureau of Indian Affairs instigated a job placement program that placed Navajo males in jobs all over the United States. Increasing employment of the Navajos was continued in 1956 with the Indian Training Act, which provided job training and placed Navajo workers in off-reservation jobs. By the late 1970s, a substantial amount of Navajos had been relocated to major American cities. The separation of the worker and his family and clan caused significant emotional strain on the family (Francisconi 1998:73).

In the 1950s, outside enterprises began exploring for coal within the Navajo Reservation. Coal was mined and used to generate power off of the reservation (Francisconi 1998:67). The coal industry therefore did not benefit the Navajos in any significant way; it did not provide jobs for the Navajos, and the only compensation in direct benefits provided came in the form of royalties (Francisconi 1998:67). The oil industry was not much different; by 1978 over \$2 billion in crude oil had been exported from the Navajo Reservation and would come to exceed \$100 billion from sold in

consumer products (Francisconi 1998:70). Of this huge sum of money, however, the Navajo received only about \$300 million in royalties (Francisconi 1998:70). Not only did these industries employ very few Navajos, but the royalties from them were also too insignificant to reinvest in Navajo industry (Francisconi 1998:70).

Though livestock reduction served as a leveling of wealth amongst Navajo society, the implementation of wage labor restored what somewhat resembles the earlier hierarchy (Weiss 1984:117). Government wage work was unable to employ all the Navajos that wanted work, and some groups of Navajos were better able to acquire these work opportunities (Weiss 1984:117). The more educated, influential, or “wealthy” a Navajo was prior to stock reduction, the more likely they were able to become a member of one of the bureaucracies that was responsibly for distributing jobs (Weiss 1984:117). The result, therefore, was nepotism, as this influence was used to provide their family members with jobs, thus excluding poorer Navajos (Weiss 1984:117) and creating a new hierarchy.

The necessity of government assistance has been growing since the end of World War II, when unemployment amongst Navajos increased as labor was no longer needed in war-related industries (Francisconi 1998:61). In 1970, twenty-five percent of the total income for an individual Navajo was in welfare (Francisconi 1998:61). By 1990, thirty percent of Navajos were unemployed (Francisconi 1998:61), and today, government assistance programs such as Food Stamps and Public Housing are the only official source of income for many Navajos (Francisconi 1998:8). High rates of unemployment and restrictions placed on local business by the Navajo tribal government have inhibited opportunities for the Navajo entrepreneur to develop on-reservation businesses. This has resulted in a significantly expanding informal economy that is based on petty commodity production (Francisconi 1998:8). The informal economy, government assistance, and traditional kinship patterns characterizes the Navajo economy today.

The tragedy of the Navajo livestock reduction and its significant impacts on the economy, society, and culture of the Navajos resulted largely in differing values; the federal government was exclusively concerned with the preservation of the range and the improvement of environmental problems, which could be solved only by stock reduction (Roessel 1974:224). The Navajos, on the other hand, believed that livestock was a gift

from the Holy People, who watched over the increasing flock with happiness. Navajos believed that stock reduction would anger the Holy People, thus causing them to be less generous with rain (Roessel 1974:224). Whether or not livestock reduction could have been prevented through the mediation of these differing values is unknown.

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