

The first question, "Is Taos a democracy in miniature and is the effort of present native officers to obtain the Blue Lake area a 'power play'?" hardly should be a point of concern in deciding the matter of returning to this tribe an area of special religious importance to it, but eventually lost through what some might consider to have been a power play of non-Indian politicians. Nevertheless, as the dual question posed is of general interest, we can attempt some brief explanations. To the second portion of the query, the answer is an unmodified "No". The consistent and repeated efforts to regain Blue Lake, as made by Taos Pueblo over a period of many years, negates the possibility of concern for its possession being a "cause" sponsored primarily by Conservatives or Progressives or any other limited group.

In thinking of the matter of degree of democracy of the native Taos government, one first must seek a definition of democracy which will include all those somewhat assorted systems which serve nations considered to be democracies. And, while settling, perhaps, for the simple definition that democratic government is one which represents the people governed, one still should not forget that democracies are likely to fall somewhat short of being democratic, as we recently have been brought to realize in the embarrassment of all-too-open attacks by one of our own minority groups. The governments of the various pueblos, while differing somewhat among themselves, have been characterized as theocracies and gerontocracies, and though both characterizations are true those governments nevertheless are based fundamentally upon the principal of selection of officers as representatives, the use of what might be called an electoral college, and the well understood possibility of applying the sanctions of recall and even of punishment if those officers do not act according to the principles of their constituency.

Within each pueblo there are numerous religious societies, one or more of which most solid citizens are expected—though not required—to join. The functions of these societies cover, on the one hand, responsibility for prayers and the ritual believed necessary for proper functioning of the universe, to the benefit not only of their own tribe but of everyone. On the other hand, the officers of these bodies, who in some cases are selected from what might be thought of as "ruling families" and in others from society members with longest tenure of membership and hence, presumably, of acquired wisdom, comprise the unit which actually controls the government of the pueblo. They, themselves, have been selected, after long consideration, for the accident of birth or of date of joining a society merely permits but does not assure them of officership: they must be deemed conservative, wise, and not easily diverted from duty. The society officers, in turn, select a chief priest or priests. (In some one man serves throughout the year; in others there is biannual exchange of responsibility.) The fact that these top leaders are put into office for life and usually are elders when they take up their positions in reality is not as far as might be thought from our own system, in which political office usually comes to men of middle age or more and repeated elections may carry him into old age. A greater contrast is seen in that Pueblo officers never are supposed to seek office but are compelled to accept it as a duty to their people when that position is thrust upon them by their peers. Furthermore, while all officers receive respect if their performance warrants it, the only officer of the old native system to be accorded any economic compensation was the chief priest, whose lands formerly were tilled for him so that he might spend his time in prayer for his public. But in many of the pueblos today, this chief priest, who may not take a job outside the village, is supported by his family or works at some native craft or task within the pueblo. Such a man formerly was referred to as the "father and mother of his people", and I have seen these officers go against their personal convictions in giving out decisions based upon the thinking of the group they represent. "We have to do what our people want", they explain, patiently.

The chief priest, with advice of his council, the heads of the societies, annually selects men, supposedly of responsible type, to take over the Spanish-introduced secular positions of governor, lieutenant governor, and aids. Except in a very few modernized pueblos, these officers, like those in the religious group, receive no compensation but respect. Until recently the governor was requested by his people to drop any outside job he might have had so that he could be available in the pueblo at all times. In consequence, as sometimes said, the governor was likely to be the poorest person in the village, and if he was appointed for a second term, his relatives wept for him.

As in any political unit, in each pueblo there are those who do not go along with the thinking of the majority group and who grumble, gossip, and complain.