

THE TSE' HATAA'II OF COPPERMINE, ARIZONA

By

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While working on the Navajo reservation from 1965 to 1967, I was sometimes able to look for rock art. While at a friend's place one day, their kids told me of an intriguing place with "writing" called "Tse Hataa'ii". By literal translation Tse is rock, and Hataa'ii is a singer or medicine man. The vision that created was beyond imagination. Soon after obtaining the directions I went to find it. As I approached the large outcrop, the small overhang was obvious with its smoke-blackened ceiling. There was also a small amount of lithic scatter that spread out in front of the overhang, mixed with occasional PII potsherds.

Because of the footprints that had totally disturbed the sand, I thought that pothunters had been there. There was no sign of digging, but the whole surface had been disturbed. As I began searching for the "Tse Bahane", the stone story, that could tell me about the stone singer, I could only find a few crude scratches and figures in the overhang and at the edge of the smoke stains. As I moved to the left into the better but still unpatinated stone, I began to find the names of kids I knew that lived in the vicinity, with many of the names of popular Elvis Presley and Beatles songs that were being sung then. A "rock art" panel composed of names and songs like "I Want to Hold Your Hand" and "Love Me Tender", wasn't what I wanted to find, but that's all that was there.

After sitting there trying to figure the situation out, I had to laugh as it finally occurred to me. This almost sacred shrine, the stone singer, wasn't what I had expected. It was a teenage hangout, typical of the 1960's, that a bunch of the local Navajo teenagers went to. They would set their portable radios down on a rock, tune in to their favorite music, and dance in the sand. In Navajo the term for radio is beesh hataa'ii. Beesh was originally the name of flint. Beesh was also extended to mean knife, since knives were made of flint. It's meaning was later extended to include iron and other metals in general as metal knives replaced chipped stone. These are linguistic fossils, archaisms that sort of freeze in time, leaving a record of a past way of life.

A few other archaisms will illustrate that words (as symbols) do not need to be invented or borrowed to be used for or to name new concepts. Certain principles in linguistics, like iconography, illustrate the reluctance people have to change, but when those changes are necessary it is generally in a shift in meaning of older symbols. For instance, the term beesh adee' is literally a metal horn, or spoon. Adee', the term for horn also refers to spoons made from horns. This is left over from the days when spoons were made from split sheep horns. A more recent archaism is Beesh or Bila' talii. That term means 'a metal, the one that is three' (we affectionately call them threeks). Now that they have four tines, we call them forks (sic).

A beesh be hane'e is the stone (or now also metal) by means of which stories are told. This is not a rock art panel, often called a tse hane' (stone story), used to record some important message or event, but a telephone. A beesh bee 'akie'eichihii is the stone (or now also metal) by means of which writing is being done. That no longer means a rock rock or other implement used to make a petroglyph, now it's a typewriter. So a beesh hataa'ii, a flint (or metal) singer is a radio. That doesn't solve the problem of the term Tse' hataa'ii, the name of the stone with the inscriptions. These terms, like other symbols, demonstrate that old symbols, like religions, die hard, and illustrates that language preserves a tremendous amount of important information.

The name Tse' Hataa'ii includes several possible interpretations. One is that the stone with inscribed song titles (symbols which in essence are the songs, with all their meanings and relevance), would make that stone the entity that contains, retains, and recreates that essence, spirit or memory of the songs, thus the Tse' Hataa'ii. In other words, when one looks at this panel, the symbols bring to mind their special meanings. Thus the symbol continues to recreate the meaning within the mind of the observer (not only the words of the song, but all the other concepts and emotions that well up when associated with that symbol or song). These symbols have power to create an emotional response. Likewise, just as the radio resings the song, emotions well up when the song is heard and remembered.

The other interpretation is that when radios were set beneath the cliff, much like the Shaman chanting to the drum beat, the sounds reflect off the cliff, sounding like the cliff produced the music. Thus instead of meaning the stone shaman or singer, it represents the singing stone.

The possible analogies of these situations should strongly impress us with the fact that it isn't always the exact symbol placed there that had the most significant or relevant meaning. Each of the song titles was a specific representation of some of their favorite songs that was important. It was not the name of the song (a specific element or motif), it was what that song (represented by that title) meant to the person who placed its name on the cliff--each had a certain individual significance. Even the total production of names and song titles was not the importance of the site. In fact, it was only one small aspect of the total relevance that made this place important to those who used it. The overall significance of the site was the combination of all the symbols represented, including their personal identifications (written names similar to the older name groups, clan symbols, or hand or thumb prints). These are like the naturalistic elements that represent the participants in the play represented on other ancient marquette. The song titles are like the other more abstract motifs that represent all of the complex, abstract concepts that fill in the activities and milieu of the players.

The most important thing, however, is not found on the rocks at all. It is the total site, the functions or activities that

took place at the site. The importance that that location fulfilled within the lives of a specific group of individuals at a specific time and place, is only partially represented by the inscriptions. Sometimes that activity is obvious, but not always. Sometimes there may not have even been a specific activity. Whatever the situation, other factors may provide some clues.

Interpreting the significance of this site to them and what it can tell us about them is relative to any rock art site. Each site had its relatively specific figures and the total relevance that site had to those individuals at a specific time and place. That is an area we don't often consider while we are recording these Tse' hane'-- stone stories. Steinbring (1987, 1988) made a somewhat successful attempt at retrieving that information, but how often and how well does the recorded information (what was left on the rocks, and what we observe and record about the site) reveal the activities? What is really sad is that the linguistic and colloquial interplay that could tell us more about the people is not retrievable by our conventional recording techniques. Thus, we are only able to understand a smaller, incomplete part of the total relevance of a site.

REFERENCES CITED

- Steinbring, Jack
1987,1988 Personal communication.