

## Notes From The Field: Regarding Iron Cages: Crypto-Politics and The Hidden Conflicts of American Indians

*Raymond Orr, University of Melbourne<sup>1</sup>*

“Crazy Horse” motioned to the security guard for approval to climb the cage. Chain-linked and approximately ten feet high, the cage walls formed an octagon. Upon reaching the top, “Crazy Horse” pumped a fist jubilantly then initiated what would be an ill-fated back-flip. Over-rotated, he landed solely on his heels, backpedaled to keep balance, but ultimately ended falling anyway. It didn’t matter, as by then most of the crowd had started to leave. Still watching was my Isleta Pueblo host, who, in reference to the back flip, remarked, “Christ, you can’t be doing that. Someone could get hurt.”

It was a peculiar situation to worry about injury. It was the finale of a cage-fighting event hosted by the Isleta Pueblo Casino and Resort. And “Crazy Horse” was not an American Indian but the stage name of an African American fighter. Minutes before his gaff, “Crazy Horse” forced a young Hispanic fighter from Albuquerque, NM, into ceding the match by partially pulling his arm from its socket.

Cage-fighting is a hybrid form of pugilism; two parts wrestling and one part boxing. The matches typically end when one combatant damages an opponent’s body so badly that the referee interferes or a fighter capitulates to their opponent by tapping the other’s shoulder or back – “tapping-out” in fighter parlance. When I asked another Isleta seated nearby what he thought after watching two hours of brutal fighting, he proclaimed that “these people love to fight.”

The Isleta do not consider themselves an aggressive community. Located 13 miles south of Albuquerque, the Isleta Pueblo could be described as a “sleepy” bucolic agrarian community, with a one-hundred million dollar casino resort attached. Most parts of the reservation have a calm quality. Pieces of clothing hang on lines

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<sup>1</sup> *Raymond Orr wrote this piece as a graduate student at the University of California, Berkeley.*

to dry, tractors and sometimes horses till the fields, and community members wave from their vehicles while they pass each other on the road. The central village buildings are constructed from adobe brick. Scholars and policymakers have often understood Pueblo communities as possessing a high degree of social harmony. Bureau of Indian Affairs Under-Secretary John Collier so admired Pueblo communities for their stability and social cohesion that he even modeled programs after these villages during the “The Indian New Deal” reforms of the 1930s.

Over a seven-year period, I visited Isleta extensively to study the dynamics behind indigenous communal conflict. The term communal conflict could be interpreted multiple ways; this essay uses the term in order to describe the conflict within a tribe and among its members. Compared to other North American Native political populations where I conducted similar fieldwork, the Isleta do not make formal political disagreements public. Whereas tribes in Oklahoma voiced disagreements in websites, blogs, letters to the editor, and at community meetings that openly indicted other tribal members of anything from ethnic fraud to embezzlement, the Isleta rarely organized against fellow community members openly. Isleta politics are well-hidden. Individual and group bellicosity takes the form of crypto-politics. These types of politics express themselves non-politically through forms of social subterfuge. Disagreements, hurt feelings, desire and senses of injustice are part of Isleta communal life but the particular community norms allow bellicosity to be expressed openly only at high cost to participants.

Accepted spaces of contestation may differ from actual spaces of contestation. Conflict and where it is (and is not) acknowledged is complicated for both those in the communities themselves as well as the scholars who study them. In examining social change, large and small, scholars have often emphasized the locus of conflict as a critical indicator of social norms, individual values and community transitions. Studying variation in conflict among societies—via both changes over time and differences between individual groups—is a steady point of entry for multiple social science fields, whether the disciplinary approach is institutional, socio-cultural, or psychological.

State sanctioned execution, for instance, is a classical space of contestation that is of particular interest to historians, political scientists, anthropologists and sociologists. State relegation of execution from public displays to guarded state functions was emblematic of the modern state's *sine qua nom* regarding monopolies of violence. The movement away from public executions in town squares to private executions within prisons is a space that scholars deem both appropriate and worthy of inquiry when exploring the dynamics behind state formation and modern political violence. Scholarly communities see such spaces as holding particular value, having arrived at some kind of consensus about which events (e.g., occurrences of conflict) are those from which worthwhile conclusions can be "extracted."

This essay examines when conflict and conflict's study is sanctioned and when it is not. The discussion revolves around two communities. The first community is the Isleta Pueblo in New Mexico, and the early part of this essay examines acrimony's role in this 800-year-old indigenous village in the American southwest. Conclusions and interview data were taken from years of initial and later formal fieldwork. Political scientists that work on Native American politics are the second community. Political scientists who study Native American, however, possess their own norms about what conflicts are acceptable to make open and which are not. As a political anthropologist who engages American Indian communities primarily from the discipline of political science the author has experiences with both of these groups and their community norms around appropriate sights of conflict.

### **Isleta Conflict and Suppression**

While mixing cement in a former livestock trough, I had a conversation with an Isleta that captures the strong community norms surrounding open acrimony. In Isleta, conflict is understood along racial and colonial lines: those who fight openly are cast as less Isleta and more "colonized." He asked me about what the politics were like on the other reservations that I had visited. I described that in contrast to the Isleta, other tribal communities were more comfortable expressing infighting and had more organized political factions

that have a function close to what might be understood as political parties. To illustrate the difference, I described a community in Oklahoma as an example. The Isleta produced the customary and prolonged "gaaawwhhh" – a deviation of "gosh," uttered when Pueblo hear something that strikes them as outlandish. I asked his opinion on why other Natives fight when Isleta appear not to. He offered the following explanation, "those Indians learned how to fight from white people...white people got to them like that, you know?" Continuing, he said "white people fight like that, not here. People would think something is wrong with you if you acted like that. You would be kinda an outsider". If an Isleta created or exposed a communal fissure, the tribal member would become a pariah. Yet, engagement in communal conflict for other Native groups, such as the one described in Oklahoma, would grant the participant greater membership into the political community.

Isleta emphasize a tribal ethos in their political culture. In a communal system guided by tribal ethos, mores strongly discourage an individual from pursuing preferences or grievances that may endanger group cohesion. Conversely, Isleta culture encourages modesty of desire and limited goals so as to minimize competitive behavior that could threaten hierarchal relationships than enforce community norms. Anthropologist might consider such social mechanisms that enforce certain forms of equality as leveling devices. In suppressing acrimony and undermining the expression of desires where conflict may ensue, we can see the Isleta using two leveling devices, each possessing embedded and distinctive tribal-ethos-based rationales. The first argument Isleta interviewees provided in explaining the dearth of apparent acrimony is that to engage in conflict results in deep scorn for contributors. Therefore conflict often remains hidden from the formal realm of politics in Native communities but is still effective at reducing communal dissension. As a result, Isleta's initial "tranquility," depicted at the essay's outset, is possibly enforced secret forms of conflict such as slander, rumor and even accusations of witchcraft.

The second mechanism in reducing conflict is an ethnonationalist imperative that hinges on the affirmation of cultural purity, or indigenous authenticity. The Isleta often attribute conflict between members of other tribes or those communities' failure to

maintain harmonizing aspects of their pre-contact culture that, in the Isleta perspective, valued togetherness. When my Isleta acquaintance suggested that North American Indian groups that fight openly “learned how to fight from white people,” he implied culture and behavioral assimilation. This is also a racial, or phenotypical assimilation. “I went to the northeast, Washington D.C., for the big museum opening [National Museum of the American Indian]” said one Isleta, “and all them Indians, they said they were Indians but they didn’t look that way.” I asked him to elaborate “They aren’t southwestern Indians, they behave and look like whites too and some are pretty much blacks. They are aggressive and rich too, which means they sit on stage looking down at us like they are the real Indians.” Statements such as these are abundant in Indian Country and purport essential divisions between Natives. Yet this phenomenon is rarely mentioned, much less discussed, in American Indian scholarship. Despite being rich intersections of race, class, identity, power, and authenticity, scholars intentionally overlook coarse and unflattering ethnographic data in political analysis. Yet, critical fault lines and meanings are missed when we move to sanitize the relationship that Natives have with each other, whether at the intra or inter-tribal levels.

### **Native Politics: Sacrosanct and Impermissible Conflicts**

Reflecting on my own field’s dynamics, Native American scholarship navigates conflict “taboos” similar to those of the Isleta Pueblo. As communal standards expect Isleta to subordinate potentially polarizing information that may cause discomfort, norms imbedded in Native American scholarship do so as well. This is not to suggest the Isleta are immune to social irritation. When recounting his indignation at witnessing tribes that were, in his opinion, less “authentic” American Indians that take center stage at an important ceremony, my Isleta acquaintance displayed mild forms of what Marxist scholars may even call class rage. A dynamic as essential as American Indian resentment toward wealthier and less-phenotypical Natives is passed-over by political scholars who themselves are discouraged from grounding their projects on intra-ethnic conflict. Inter-ethnic conflict abounds in research discussing the tensions in white-Indian

relations. Yet those interested in native communities will be hard pressed to find contemporary work on intra-ethnic reservation acrimony (between or within American Indian communities). Unlike conflicts between whites and Indians, which have received detailed treatment and become the dominant paradigm in Native political science, Indian-on-Indian conflict remains off the reservation, so to speak.

Sites of contestation are central to political inquiry. However, not unlike the Isleta custom of conflict suppression itself, American Indian scholarship that exposes intra-tribal fissures would break a serious community "taboo," with the potential to make the relevant scholar an outsider. As a community with prescribed norms and sanctions, Native American politics as a field sanctions conflicts between ethnicities but less so within its own community. This prohibition on intra-tribal conflict can produce an impression given to other political scientists that tribal politics are either too bland to document or even non-existent. This is untrue and Natives have powerful political lives within their own communities. Of course there is a certain logic behind overlooking intra-tribal conflict as it is typically unflattering, diminishes the moral authority of one community over another (as my Isleta friend perspective indicates might be present) and hints that ethno-fraternity may not be as salient as desired. Compared to monumental conflicts between indigenous groups and colonial governments, Native-to-Native conflict seems less consequential. These smaller conflicts, however, shape immediate Native political arenas.

Subjectively, the taboos surrounding conflict in both the communities I studied and my own discipline complicated my research and reporting. In political science, the basic assumption scholars start from is that there are conflicts between communities, societies, and individuals. According to the standard perspective in American Indian political science, there is critical conflict between Native and non-Natives. What considerations should scholars who are interested in the discord between Natives take when such intra-tribal conflict is not acknowledged by the field and treated as taboo? How about when conflicts exist in the researched communities themselves? My sense then and now is that essential processes and meanings are missed when scholars or communities avoid bellicos-

ity. Unflattering as intra-ethnic conflict might be, it should not be absconded with. Hiding fissures and avoiding difficult questions is rarely in the interests of marginalized communities, and those trying to understand them.

When conflict is distanced and concerns the relation between outsiders and insiders (non-Natives and Natives or “real” Indians and “fake” Indians) both Native communities and scholarly communities remain poorly understood. Native political scientists prioritize the conflict between racial or civilizational groups over the conflict between members within these groups as more worthy of research. The moratorium on discussing indigenous to indigenous conflict is at high cost. Why Native communities make the decisions they do or hold certain political values is missed. In the context of expanding indigenous sovereignty in the United States, such concerns as local decision-making will become more important. Native Politics negates stories of conflict within native communities and the texture of reservation political life is missed. Power processes that exist on reservations are overlooked and the dynamics of political change go unaccounted for and part of native lives remains peculiarly caged. Pursuing lines of inquiry that are shrouded in taboo makes for a more precarious research path, but hopefully ultimately one with greater accuracy and openness.