CHAPTER 7

The Key to Cultural Survival
Language Planning and Revitalization in the Pueblo de Cochiti

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For over 20 years the Pueblo de Cochiti has been involved in a struggle for cultural survival, fighting the many forces that have threatened their beliefs and their way of life. Federal and state policies and institutions have pressured the community to accept and assimilate into an English-speaking, urban, individualistic consumerism, as they have other linguistic and cultural minorities. However, in addition to these threats the Pueblo de Cochiti also faced the monumental tragedy of the loss of their spiritual and agricultural lands. Since the mid-1980s, this community has used most of its financial and human resources to recover those lands so that its people could re-engage in a traditional lifestyle. Part of this struggle has included special attention to retaining and revitalizing the native language, Keres, for the various generations of tribal members. As the forces from mainstream society have encroached on native values and beliefs, the native language has increasingly become the core symbol for a renewed commitment to a traditional Cochiti lifestyle. The significance of the language is further heightened by the fact that it is used for prayer and is the only viable means for sacred communication. Recognizing the inseparability of language and spiritual expression, the leaders in this community have understood that these revitalization efforts are necessary for its survival.

BACKGROUND

The Pueblo de Cochiti lies approximately 30 miles southwest of Santa Fe, New Mexico, and occupies 58,000 acres. West of the Rio Grande River, Cochiti land rises sharply in a series of mesas and canyons which form the base of the Jemez mountains (U.S. Congress House Committee on Interior and Insular Affairs, 1992). Approximately 15,355 acres are designated for grazing purposes and 880 acres for farming. The Rio Grande has always played a significant role in the lives of the Cochiti people. For centuries it was the source of irrigation for the corn, squash, chile, and other crops which were the people’s basic food sources.

A notable aspect of life in this community is that Cochiti people have been able to maintain their unique traditional form of government despite enormous pressure from the federal government to change. Rather than moving to a mainstream, constitutional government, the Pueblo de Cochiti has held to a form of theocracy wherein tribal officials are appointed by the religious leadership on a yearly basis. The notion of a servant-leadership is basic to the continuation of this form of government. Leaders serve the community for one year by committing themselves to safeguarding traditional beliefs and practices and to the future of the community. This often means that individuals willingly take a leave of absence from their regular employment so that they can give the community their undivided attention. Members of the community, in turn, pledge their commitment to these individuals to assist them in whatever way they can. For this reason, when an individual is asked for his or her assistance by one of the leaders, he or she must respond in the same spirit in which the leaders accepted their responsibilities.

The continuation of this traditional government requires enormous commitment and sacrifice from all adults in the community. Moreover, participating in it requires considerable fluency in the language, in terms both of its everyday uses and of the more formal registers required for governance and religious affairs. Governing principles, and those which guide the traditional courts, are all expressed through the various registers of Keres. For example, in the traditional
courts, rather than processing people legally, as mainstream courts do, the underlying principle is to bring tribal members back into good standing by resolving the disputes, and the ability to use a particular register is required for successful resolution. The critical role of language in all governmental and religious functions must be understood. It is the thread that ties together all aspects of traditional Cochiti life.

Furthermore, life in this community revolves around the traditional religious calendar of events, which requires participation from a majority of tribal members. These activities are private matters for tribal members only. Therefore, no details can be offered here, except for the fact that virtually every month, some religious event is taking place. Preparation for these ceremonies takes a considerable amount of time. It is not unusual for both men and women to spend 10 to 12 evenings a month in preparatory activities. Young people may also participate. In these settings, as in those described for the governmental domain, fluency in the language is a necessary skill.

As can be seen by this brief introduction, the Keres language is an essential element for the maintenance and survival of a traditional Cochiti lifestyle. The leaders of this community have long recognized the necessity of safeguarding this way of life. The battles they have fought against the imposition of a foreign form of government, for the reclamation of their lands, and for the right to determine appropriate housing patterns is a testimony to their commitment to their beliefs. The efforts undertaken on behalf of the language which are described in this essay are a critical part of this struggle.

THE LANGUAGE

Cochiti Keres is one of seven dialects of Keresan1 spoken in New Mexico. It is probably most closely related to the Keres spoken by the neighboring Pueblo of Santo Domingo. Keresan has no known relationship to any other language and so must be considered a language isolate. Several levels or registers are spoken in the community. The most common is the Keres that is used every day for common activities. Older people speak a more complex, formalized Keres. In religious settings there is still a “higher” and more complex Keres, which is reserved for those in leadership positions. Cochiti Keres remains an unwritten language, in keeping with the oral tradition of the community. There is widespread support for keeping it in its oral form, from the religious and secular leaders as well as from the general tribal membership. The oral tradition in this community has been an important element in maintaining its values and traditional way of life. The leaders know that writing the language could bring about unwanted changes in secular and religious traditions.

The vitality of the language has been affected by several important historic events. The first was the drafting and recruitment of many young Cochiti men during World War II. A number of the returning soldiers came back with ideas about changing their community that did not reflect traditional Cochiti ways. In essence, they believed that the way for Cochiti to progress was by assimilating into white society. They sought work outside the community and encouraged their children to go to school and learn English, never realizing the impact this would have 40 to 50 years later.

In 1969, the Cochiti Dam Project was forced on the Pueblo de Cochiti by the Army Corps of Engineers in order to control flooding and the storage of river sediment for those living in the city of Albuquerque. The community has since then suffered severe consequences. Irreparable damage has been done to its economic, cultural, and spiritual well-being. During the first phase of construction, one-third of all traditional farmlands and homes were destroyed to make room for the dam. Then, when the dam was completed in 1975, the Pueblo de Cochiti began to experience serious difficulties with seepage of water onto what was left of their traditional farming lands. At first, 17 acres were flooded. By 1987, virtually all of the farmlands were under water.

This damage was detrimental not only to the economy of individual farmers, but, perhaps more importantly, to group farming and cultural activities as well. The cultural practices surrounding group farming formed much of the basis for the community’s spiritual life. The damage to the land had a devastating effect on traditional culture. This in turn further eroded the use of Keres by younger Cochitis. Contact between several generations of people—elders, middle-aged adults, adolescents, and children—was greatly disrupted, affecting the transmission of important cultural information. The loss of these important activities meant the loss of critical opportunities to use the language.

Similarly, in 1969 HUD completed the first of three housing projects, which brought 94 homes to the community. Although individual families have benefited from these efforts, the community has suffered particular repercussions. The location of the homes away from the plaza, the physical and spiritual heart of the community, and situated some distance from each other has discouraged visiting, especially by older people who do not have any means of transportation. Thus they cannot interact with younger members and share their considerable knowledge and language skills. In addition, the introduction of houses intended for nuclear families, with each person having his or her own room, drastically changed relationships among family members. Previously, families shared everything in the home—rooms, household goods, and so on. Once these new houses were built, however, a new concern for individual comfort was injected into the culture. These changes, along with a growing consumerism, radically changed family life in the community and, as a result, the transmission of the native language to younger generations.