

Out of the underworld: landscape, kachinas, and pottery metaphors in the Rio Grande/Jornada rock-art tradition in the American Southwest

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Abstract

Tied as it is to landscape, rock-art is a powerful vehicle for identifying and reconstructing past ideological systems regarding human relationships to natural environments. Rock-art can be used to help rediscover and define past cultural landscapes that have been rewritten by highways, cities, and other artefacts of the technological ideology of western culture. This study aims to show how rock-art – framed within its locational and graphic symbolism – may be used together with ethnographic information to understand the archaeological Puebloan landscape in connection with the Puebloan preoccupation with rain-making. Pueblo people of New Mexico and Arizona see themselves as integral parts of the historical/ecological processes that form their world (Anschuetz et al 2000:3.55), and the distribution of images on rocks in the Pueblo landscape – as is true elsewhere – is the result of a culturally prescribed, as opposed to random, interaction between people, their terrain, and their ideology of place. In essence, people project culture on to nature (Crumley & Marquardt 1990:73). Landscape as a cultural construct is derived from a people's patterned perceptions and interpretations of their natural environment (Anschuetz 1998). Worldviews embrace comprehensive ideas of how cultures conceive of the relationship of human society to the natural order. As part of worldview, the cultural landscape and its various features are invested with meanings and spiritual qualities, which in turn will affect where imagery, especially rock-art, is located. Pueblo people today link their identities with and establish spiritual connections to special places through words, thoughts, and feelings (Cajete 1994:43). Greg Cajete from Santa Clara Pueblo writes (1994:85): 'Traditionally, the connection of Indian people to their land was a symbol of their connection to the spirit of life itself.' Further:

The American Indian sense of place, and the importance of being in harmony is embodied in all cultural traditions. Our collective experience with the land, integrated by myth and ritual, expressed through social structures and arts, combines with a practiced system of environmental ethics and spiritual ecology to create a true connection with places and a full expression of ecological consciousness (ibid).

1 Pueblo rock-art and perceptions of landscape

In the past, image-making in the landscape was an important means of connection and communication. Places named in legends and myths, as well as specific types of landscape features, were regarded as appropriate for rock-paintings and rock-engravings. In turn, images imbued with spiritual qualities lend power to place and thus compound its significance. Since the conceptual transformation of landscapes into cultural entities structures a people's interaction

with the landscape on a continued basis (Anschuetz 1998), contemporary Pueblo worldviews contribute to meanings ascribed to relatively recent archaeological landscapes, as in the Jornada and upper Rio Grande regions in the American Southwest (figure 1).

Various studies have identified rock-art associated with prehistoric agricultural fields or in topographic situations favourable for maize agriculture (Snyder 1966; Kearns 1973; Robins 1997; Anschuetz 1998). In some well-documented historic cases, Western Pueblo rock-art marked boundaries of clan-owned

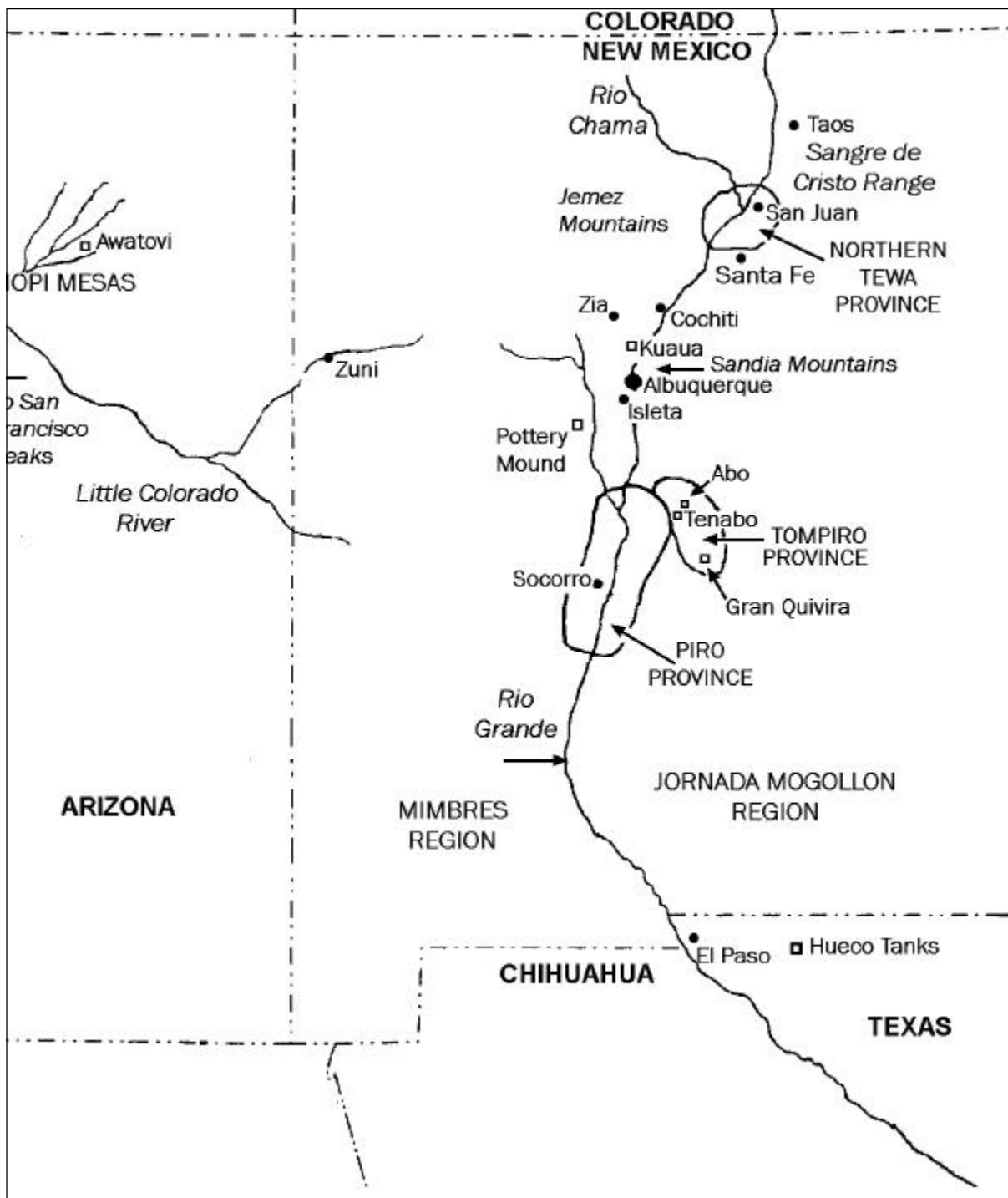


Figure 1 Map showing contemporary Pueblos and related prehistoric regions

fields (Cushing 1920; Forde 1931; Olsen 1985). Similarly, Kurt F Anschuetz (1998:437–475) discusses rock-engravings occurring in the vicinity of late prehistoric Tewa fields in the Chama valley. In the Tewa instances, however, where clans are of minor importance (Dozier 1970:165–166), it is likely that images on rocks near fields and grid gardens involved requests for rain. In the arid Southwest, with its unpredictable rainfall, an adequate supply of water

in any form is always a major issue for horticulturalists. Rocks near some contemporary Pueblo fields near the Rio Grande valley have rock-engravings of kachinas, images of the rain-bringing masked ancestral spirits. Ethnographic information on the meaning of kachinas allows one to hypothesise specifically that kachina masks in and around fields functioned to engage these supernaturals in rain-generating rituals.

By utilising the ethnographic record to access the



Figure 2 Prehistoric kachina mask (1325–1525 AD) near Santa Fe, New Mexico

Puebloan cognitive model of space, we can vastly broaden our scope of inquiry and address a set of spatial relationships that may help explain the presence of rain-making images in a variety of other prehistoric landscape contexts. This opens the door to the symbolic features of the Puebloan cultural landscape where rock-art is located, as well as landscape metaphors in the imagery itself. The vertical dimension and organisational principles of the Pueblo cosmological scheme, that emphasise the interaction between the underworld of the ancestors and the living on the earth's surface, or middle plane, are central to this discussion. Reciprocity between residents of this world and the rain-bringing ancestral spirits is an essential part of the communication process and hence the ritual of rain-bringing. This reciprocity involves petitions in the form of prayers, offerings of food, and the planting of feathered prayer sticks (Hieb 1994:27–28).

Beginning in the fourteenth century AD, kachinas, and more significantly kachina masks (figure 2), became important elements in Pueblo Rio Grande style rock-art (c1325–1680 AD; Schaafsma 1980:243–289). In short, kachinas are the masked, rain-bringing supernaturals that represent the corporate ancestral dead. Upon being petitioned by the liv-

ing, the dead return to the village as masked dancers or as anonymous rain-spirits with their cloud masks, to water the earth and ensure the growth of crops. Clouds, lightning, and other moisture motifs, are also represented in the Rio Grande style. Painted or carved stepped designs that signify moisture-laden mountains and clouds may be anthropomorphised, signifying their identity with the ancestors (figure 3). These rain-related images and a variety of other subjects are carved on boulders, high ridges and escarp-



Figure 3 Terraced cloud with face (1325–1525 AD), near Santa Fe, New Mexico

ments throughout the landscape where lightning strikes and where various supernaturals reside. Small enclosures of dry-laid stone, marking shrines where offerings were placed, may occur in these localities as well. Important to this discussion, however, is the observation that rock-paintings situated in recesses and overhangs and more rarely in dark caves (locations that in themselves have underworld symbolism) favour kachina masks, clouds, and ceremonial impersonators over other subjects.

Openings into the earth – caves, springs, and lakes – are perceived as points of energy flow between the simultaneous levels of the Pueblo universe (Naranjo & Swentzell 1989:262). As such these openings function as conduits to the underworld and the abode of the ancestor rain-makers. Within this cosmological scheme, caves and springs feature importantly in the cultural landscape, since they represent the source of clouds and rain. Thus the discovery of kachina masks and a large cloud and a snake/lightning figure painted deep underground in a totally dark limestone cave in Piro Pueblo country should come as no surprise (see Schaafsma 1999:fig12.17).

The underworld home of the kachinas is often envisioned as located beneath a lake. Kachina Lake west of Zuni, Blue Lake at Taos, and several other small lakes, sometimes associated with mountains, are regarded as portals to the watery underworld kachina home of the anonymous deceased, a world that mirrors the land of the living. Mountains, around which clouds form, are also regarded as kachina homes. In Zuni poetry, underground homes of the

rainmakers, are described as ‘rain-filled rooms’ (Bunzel 1932:644). In all cases, chthonic sources of water are of ultimate importance and all water sources are perceived as being linked underground. (Schaafsma 2002:57)

Throughout the Pueblo world, volcanic features and landscapes have strong associations with the supernatural (Ortiz 1969:19; Malotki & Lomatuway’ma 1987). Otherwise foreboding lava fields may be riddled with dark caves, blowholes, tunnels, and hollows that collect rainwater; all features that symbolise passages to the underworld and thus proximity to the rain-making supernaturals. Extensive areas and many major landscape features in the Rio Grande Valley and neighbouring Pueblo regions consist of basalt or volcanic lava flows of recent origin known as malpais. Volcanoes, wind caves, and lava flows are described in contemporary Tewa oral traditions with references to breath, emergence, movement, and connectedness (Naranjo & Swentzell 1989), and the northern Tewa regard lava landforms in their area as inhabited by underworld supernaturals (Ortiz 1969:19). As described below, offerings to rain-makers are often made in such areas.

Seventeen thousand or more rock-engravings, including numerous depictions of kachina masks (figure 4), have been recorded at West Mesa on the west side of the Rio Grande in the southern Tiwa province near Albuquerque, New Mexico (Schmader & Hays 1986). The black West Mesa escarpment (figure 5) was created by lava flows from the nearby small volcanoes on the western horizon, and one volcano con-



Figure 4 Rock-engravings of kachina masks, West Mesa, Albuquerque, New Mexico



Figure 5 View of the West Mesa escarpment with three small volcanoes in the distance

tains a lava tube from which a warm draft of air is still emitted. Consistent with Pueblo worldview, the area is regarded by members of nearby Pueblo communities as a locus of communication between this world and the spirit world.

The religious importance of the West Mesa is not limited to the rock-engravings themselves, but messages to the spirit world are communicated throughout the entire 17 mile-long escarpment (William Weahkee in Anschuetz et al 2000:3.46). Phillip Lauriano of Sandia Pueblo north of Albuquerque has described the West Mesa as a kind of 'divide', a place of transition between the human world and a 'spirit reservoir' – it is where people go to pray and leave offerings. Further, via spirit pathways, the West Mesa escarpment connects the volcanoes on the western horizon with the Sandia Mountains that form the eastern skyline (personal communication 1990). At a height of over 3000 metres, the Sandias are also the home of various supernaturals, including the War Gods who have potent rain-making abilities (Stevenson 1894a:57; White 1935:31,182). Through the centre of this spiritually-charged landscape runs the Rio Grande along which many prehistoric pueblos and farmlands formerly existed. The rock-engravings, shrines, volcanoes, caves, and ruins west of the river function to characterise this area as a 'center of spiritual power, a healing place, a nexus of communication between the natural and the supernatural, and a living continuous reminder of the Pueblo past, present and future' (Herman Agoyo in Anschuetz et al 2000:3.42).

Further up river, the Tewa north of Santa Fe describe the physical landscape of the Rio Grande valley, bordered on the west by the Jemez Mountains and on the east by the Sangre de Cristos, as a bowl. The rivers flowing through the bottom are sustained by streams from the surrounding mountains, often viewed as the mountains of the four directions (Swentzell 1990). The terraced elements modelled along the rims of Puebloan ritual vessels simultaneously signify mountains (ibid) and the clouds that form around their peaks. Prehistoric bowls with crenellated rims may have small holes in the rims for receiving downy feathers simulating clouds (see Peckham 1990:fig 149). These bowls are not represented in rock-art or in kiva murals, and are not found archaeologically in the upper Rio Grande or in the Jeddito prior to the seventeenth-century AD (Smith

1952:250). The form is present, however, in El Paso Polychrome ceramics from the Jornada Mogollon region (1200 AD –1400 AD; see Peckham 1990:fig 149).

1.1 Pottery vessels in Pueblo rain ritual and oral tradition

Bowls and jars may also represent springs and the presence of pottery vessels on Pueblo altars unites symbols of landscape with ritual. Water from sacred springs is present on every Zuni altar (Bunzel 1932:491–492) and probably every Pueblo altar elsewhere. Zuni ceremonial pottery may be painted with tadpoles and dragonflies, because 'if we paint them [water creatures] on our bowls, our bowls will be full of water like the springs' (Bunzel 1929:69). In a similar manner, Zia water vases in the late nineteenth-century AD were painted with clouds with faces (see Stevenson 1894a:pl xxv). In ritual contexts, pottery jars and bowls, analogous to caves and springs, are the perceived sources of clouds and rain, an association that is repeatedly described in Pueblo oral tradition.

Stevenson (1894a:80–83,109; 1904:538) recounts various rain ceremonies at Zia and Zuni in which water was poured from vases via a gourd into medicine bowls and cloud bowls resting on cloud sand-paintings as the cloud rulers were implored to send rain. As metaphors for springs, and thus the origin of rain, jars and bowls on altars functioned as containers of clouds and storms (Stevenson 1904:96; Parsons 1932:280 n 48). Parsons (1932:280) describes rituals at Isleta Pueblo in which thunder, lightning and rain are directed into the medicine bowl. Bowls full of yucca suds that simulate clouds are commonplace on altars (Stevenson 1894a:82; 1904:175). The person acting as 'cloud-maker' in various society rituals makes yucca suds in the cloud bowl that rise up and flow down the sides, covering the vessel (Stevenson 1894a:82; 1904:539). Stevenson (1904:202) also describes *kia'punakwe* (water sprinklers) at He'patina shrine during the Zuni Hla'hewe ceremony for rain. In this rite, the water sprinklers empty water from their vessels into the cloud vases that are ultimately deposited in the lowest or 'under chamber' of the shrine. In addition, Alexander Stephen specified that jars simultaneously represent the sipapu, the access to the underworld; he describes a small shrine, in the bottom of which is a small jar called the *si'papuini* covered with two flat stones and sand (1936:618). When it rains, the jar fills with water.

As well, a vessel in which prayer sticks are placed may be referred to as the *sipapu*, carrying the connotation of a cave or spring and the possibility of communication with the spirit realm and the rain-makers.

Oral traditions and myths elaborate on these relationships between rain, clouds, springs, and water vessels. Dumarest (1919:173–175) relates a Cochiti story in which a terraced bowl holds water for the Shiwana (rain-makers), who sprinkle water from it on the earth. A Zia Pueblo story describes water brought from springs at the foot of the mountains in gourd jugs and vases by the men, women, and children [of the cloud people] to water the earth (Stevenson 1894a:38). Similarly at Zuni:

The earth is watered by the deceased Zuni of both sexes, who are controlled and directed by a council composed of ancestral gods. These shadow-people collect water in vases and gourd jugs from the six great waters of the world, and pass to and fro over the middle plane, protected from view of the people below by cloud masks. (Stevenson 1894b:315).

In a Hopi tale, the Ka'na kachinas on the San Francisco Peaks collect and store water in vessels to bring rain to the Hopi (Malotki & Lomatuway'ma 1987:15–98).

The profound and complex affinity between rain, pottery vessels, and cave-like passages into the earth was elucidated by members of one pueblo in the 1980s while defending ritual rights to terrain rife with lava tubes and caves adjacent to reservation lands. Large numbers of pots (now removed because of the threat of theft and vandalism) and other offerings had been placed in this ritually specified area dotted with symbolic underworld entrances. These offerings were compared by pueblo residents to runway lights at airports because their perceived function was to guide rain clouds, the rain-makers or kachinas, into the village from the west (Stumbo 1987). Related to this is the Hopi practice of putting vessels of water in cornfields to attract rain (Stephen 1936:483).

2 Kachina masks and visual metaphors of landscape

Significant features of cultural landscapes may be translated graphically into visual metaphors and symbols. A strength of the Pueblo imaging system is its use of ambiguity: a figure can embody several mean-

ings simultaneously and through these meanings the visual and emotional impact of a given image on the knowledgeable viewer is made more powerful (Young 1988:154–155). At this point I wish to focus more narrowly on kachina masks in rock-art that take the form of pottery vessels (figures 6 and 7) (Schaafsma 2002:57). As demonstrated repeatedly in the ethno-



Figure 6 Jar-shaped mask painted in red, yellow, green, and white near Abo, New Mexico, (1325–1672 AD)

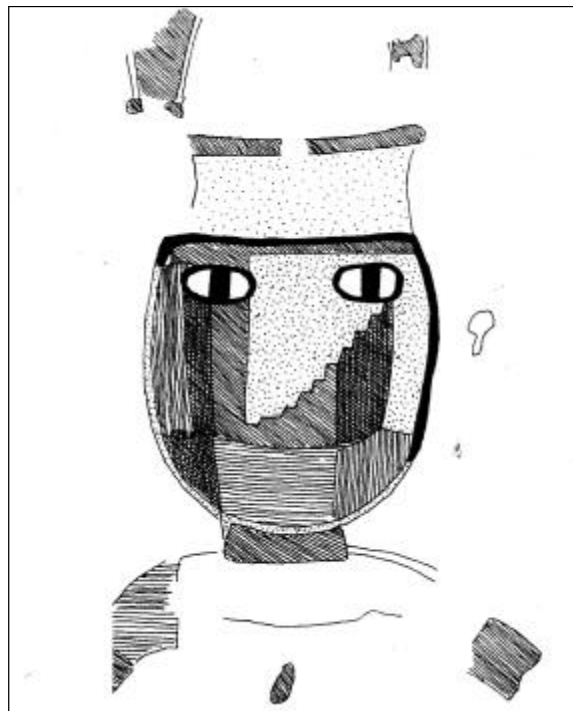


Figure 7 Painted jar-shaped mask with a stepped-cloud motif on the face (1325–1672 AD), Tenabo, New Mexico

graphic texts cited in this paper, these ceramic containers may serve as metaphors for springs that, in turn, are regarded as sources of clouds, rain, and storms. Among the thousands of masks represented in Pueblo IV rock-art (c1325–1680 AD), there are a few that simultaneously take the form of jars and bowls, and a small number appear to be canteens. The painted decoration on ceramic canteens from this period sometimes consisted of masks, emphasising the symbolic affinity between the two (Hays 1994:pl 3; Wright 1994:pl 16c&d). Some of the most elaborate masks configured as pottery vessels are those painted in several colours under rock overhangs in the vicinities of the Tompiro (Mountain Piro) Pueblo ruins of Abo and Tenabo between 1300 AD and 1672 AD. As already noted, the locations themselves may have implications of underworld access, although the recesses in question are quite shallow. In addition, many of the rock-art pottery vessel-like masks have cloud imagery as decoration. In this regard, Bunzel's observation (1929:70) comes to mind: 'In Zuni ideology, clouds and masked dancers are one. ... Indeed, it is artificial to make any distinction between them.'

The metaphorical roles of pottery vessels are explicit in the detailed mural paintings of kiva art from the same time period that often elucidate themes or figures represented in more abbreviated form in rock-art. Pottery Mound mural paintings not only illustrate dancers with jar-shaped heads or masks (see Hibben 1975:31, fig 16), but human figures balancing bowls and water jars on their heads from which lightning emerges (see Hibben 1975: figs 45 & 61). In the painted kiva from Kuaua on the Rio Grande north of Albuquerque (Layer G-2), probably dating from the late sixteenth to early seventeenth centuries AD

(Vierra 1987:75), numerous murals picture pots spewing rain and even snow, accompanied by lightning. Pottery vessels or water-filled netted gourds positioned at the base of kiva murals, or below the level of the ritual participants or even below a cloud band, indicate that they are on or beneath the earth's surface and suggest their symbolic function as springs (see Smith 1952: pl G & fig 62a; Dutton 1963:160–161, 168–169, pls xxi & xxiii).

South of the Rio Grande Pueblos, a very similar worldview is evident in rock-art and its contextual vocabulary in the Jornada region. Kachinas or kachina-like supernaturals appear to have been part of the ideological package of the so-called Desert Mogollon complexes beginning with the Mimbres (1000–1150 AD). The Mimbres initiated the Southwest art tradition that includes the Jornada and Rio Grande styles, both of which feature masks, and in the south, a goggle-eyed figure that resembles the Mexican rain god, Tlaloc (Schaafsma 1992:64; 1999). The Jornada style (c1000–1400 AD) is immediately antecedent to and in part contemporary with early Pueblo IV Rio Grande style art.

3 Rain symbolism and rock-paintings at Hueco Tanks, Texas

Perhaps no site synthesises the link between landscape and rock-art symbolism under consideration here better than Hueco Tanks State Park in Texas (Kirkland & Newcomb 1967:173–203). Hueco Tanks itself consists of three small intrusive rocky hills that rise above the surrounding desert (figure 8). These hills are riddled with cracks, dark passages, caves and overhangs (Schaafsma 1980:218, fig 175). *Tinajas* – stone tanks where rain water is trapped – are prevalent in the inner recesses of these stony

hills. Within these veritable 'water mountains', harbouring water in the Chihuahuan desert where moisture is otherwise scarce, are at least 24 of these southwestern Tlaloc paintings (Evelyn Billo, personal communication 2000) and over 300 rock-painted masks (Kirkland & Newcomb 1967; Davis & Toness 1974). These rock-paintings may be found within the darkest caves



Figure 8 View of rocky outcrops at Hueco Tanks, east of El Paso, Texas

and crevices, and sometimes they are situated inside recesses in the walls of these caves and rock shelters as well (figures 9 and 10). Kirkland, who documented much of the rock-art at Hueco Tanks in the early twentieth-century AD, noted that 70 of the 89 mask rock-paintings that he recorded:

were found in small niches, crevices or shelters too small or otherwise unsuited for habitation. Some of the mask paintings were reached with difficulty, and were copied while lying flat on the back, there being hardly room to sit erect under the rocks on which they were painted. Others were in small recesses, difficult to reach... (Kirkland 1940:19).

These locations within niches and cracks are in themselves symbolic of the access to the watery underworld and dwellings of the rain-bringing ancestral spirits represented by the masks.

It is significant that the decorations on the Tlaloc torsos resemble both pottery designs as well as clouds, a redundancy that evokes the concept of containers with all their associated metaphors including a linkage to springs and the underworld (Schaafsma 1999). At least 10 more large paintings of



Figure 9 Rain god, or southwestern Tlaloc 1200–1400 AD, painted in a recess within a rock shelter, Hueco Tanks, Texas



Figure 10 Mask painted within a recess under an overhang, Hueco Tanks, 1200–1400 AD. To the left of the mask the black outlines of a cloud terrace are visible, although the painting has been largely obscured by water-laid deposits. Perhaps this location was intentional

cloud/ceramic patterns that also have symbolic references to water vessels may have been intended as rain-associated imagery in this context. Some are painted in recesses above tanks of water. Significantly, an El Paso Polychrome pottery design in yellow, the curved form of which suggests a bowl (Schaafsma 1980:234, fig 193), is situated at the bottom of a dark crevice above a prehistoric human-made water catchment. The bowl-like pattern is symbolically connected to the pool via the Pueblo model presented here.

The symbolism of the rock-paintings of masks and Tlalocs at Hueco Tanks and their locations in caves inside the hills and within recesses within caves, and the rain god/pottery syntheses in the iconography itself, compounds, condenses, and brings into focus the power perceived in the cultural landscape, confirming the potency of this place as a rain shrine for the Jornada people of the region.

4 Conclusion

This discussion has aimed to show how Pueblo cosmology functioned to integrate such seemingly diverse things as water-bringing supernaturals, pottery vessels, and landscape features, and how the rock-art pertaining to these issues defined a cultural landscape. Visual metaphors, ie, pots as masks of rain-bringing supernaturals and the relationships that these images imply, are not readily understandable without knowledge of the densely-layered symbolic vocabulary of Pueblo cosmology provided by early

ethnographic texts. These texts, however, illuminate both the meaning of the prehistoric rock-art images addressed here and the symbolic aspects of various landscape contexts in which they occur.

In the most obvious and general sense, kachina imagery in the landscape, along with other moisture-related motifs such as clouds, would certainly have been regarded as beneficial. The images petition the supernaturals to bring rain, and the mere repetition of kachina masks found at many sites contributes to the power of place (Young 1988:178–189). Like the pots placed in the malpais lava beds west of the Rio Grande valley in New Mexico or in Hopi corn fields, rock-art kachina images may be viewed as attracting the attention of the rain clouds and directing them to water the fields. Further, rain-related images within or near caves, would seem to denote specific power spots or places of unusual importance as points of access to and communication with the underworld spirits where petitions for rain could be made. Rock-paintings of kachina masks in the form of pottery bowls and jars, however, compound ties to the spiritual landscape as they function as metaphors for springs, the underworld home of the ancestral dead –

masked supernaturals – who, in turn, provide rain and moisture to the land of the living. Painted masks, cloud designs/ceramic motifs, or the mask/pot situated in rock shelters, overhangs, and in recesses within shelters, fuse all these associations and stand as powerful reminders of Pueblo cosmology from past centuries.

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