

What's in a Name?

Publication of *The Anasazi Guide* was announced with a press release and one editor responded with a note reading in part,

As a Native American of Pueblo descent I am offended by the use of the term "anasazi." It is neither accurate nor specific with regard to these tribes that existed prior to the arrival of Diné peoples.

Although I'm sure he had another agenda in mind, his reply does help to highlight a couple of issues.

First and foremost, the ancient peoples did not call themselves "Anasazi." It is a name attached by the Navajo and carries a slightly negative connotation, meaning roughly "ancient enemies of my ancestors." Of course, today's Pueblo people do not like to think of themselves as anybody's enemies, ancient or otherwise. And, each of the Pueblo languages has a term for their ancestors as do the Hopi and other groups who trace their ancestries to the Anasazi.

The National Park Services uses a more neutral term, "Ancestral Puebloans," to refer to the Anasazi. It works, sort of, but large numbers of visitors respond by saying "Who? Do you mean the Anasazi?" Most interpreters whisper "yes," and proceed as if no social gaff had been committed.

I am more comfortable using the name than most, here's why:

- Visitors know the ancient people as "Anasazi," and other names only confuse things in their minds.
- Using Native American names would require reading a list of as many as 30 distinct names every time one refers to the ancient people. Why 30? Because giving preference to any one, say the Hopi "hisatsinom," would risk offending representatives of other peoples who trace their ancestry to the ancient peoples.
- My informants from two pueblos and the Hopi have told me that they aren't offended. A few Hopi and Puebloans do take offense, but my informants say that their concern reflects "other agendas with which you do not need to be concerned."
- I'm in pretty good company using the name; witness J. J. Brody's excellent *Anasazi* and David Stuart's outstanding *Anasazi America*.

Of course, I have no desire to offend anyone. Please consider this my apology if one is called for. That said, I think there is a bigger issue we should address.

The name, "Anasazi," was formally applied to the ancient peoples by the experts at the 1923 Pecos Conference. You can read more about that in Chapter One of *The Anasazi Guide*. Nonspecialists may assume that the name refers to a single tribe or society. Wrong! The Anasazi were no more a single tribe than the people of New York are a single tribe. New Yorkers are a diverse group just as the Anasazi were.

Pecos Conference participants applied the name to a group of people who used similar technologies. They lived in shaped stone pueblos, employed similar farming methods, and crafted pottery vessels using a coil and scrape approach. In other words, the name Anasazi refers to people using common cultural approaches to eking out a living.

These people had more in common with one another than with the other early peoples including the Hohokum, Payatan, and Mogollon. But the common material remains tell us nothing about genetic or social structures. Had genetic testing been available, the groups might have been formed differently, but reliance on cultural traditions was adequate for conference participants' needs.

More recent work has aimed to make the name more precise. Archeologists recognize distinct clusters and frequently refer to the Kayenta Anasazi, Chaco Anasazi, Mesa Verde or Northern San Juan Anasazi, and Virgin Anasazi. These terms refer to unique characteristics of the ancient people in different regions, and they reflect different cultural adaptations in the study areas.

While an improvement, even the regional names are not specific enough to capture the diversity of the ancient peoples. We don't know what they called themselves, but it is likely that villages just a few miles apart had distinct names for themselves. In primitive societies studied today, most call themselves "the people" and use the name to distinguish themselves from "the others." It's possible that the Anasazi had similar naming conventions and research is still attempting to sort out the social structures and relationships that defined their society.

So, what's in a name? A name is a convenient way of grouping together people who shared some common traits. It is an abstraction that we have created. Think of it as a convenient shorthand, but understand that it glosses over differences that were probably important to the people we lump together.