

## 2. Steps Toward an Archaeology of Taboo

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*Abstract:* Archaeologists have ignored taboo as a general phenomenon in antiquity despite taboo's clear universality within human religious experience. Why? And what can be done about this omission? In this essay I suggest that archaeologists have overlooked the subject for methodological reasons: to identify taboos one must typically build arguments using negative evidence, and this poses obvious problems given archaeology's broadly materialist orientation. The obvious challenges notwithstanding, I argue that a rigorous archaeology of taboo is possible, providing we train ourselves to look for meaningful *absences* in the material record. Three case studies are used to illustrate this point: the prehistoric avoidance of pork in the Near East, iconographic prohibitions surrounding the Osiris myth in ancient Egypt, and prohibitions surrounding the depiction of katsina masks in the American Southwest.

An anthropology of religion could not be written without due acknowledgment of the leading role played by taboo in much late nineteenth- and twentieth-century scholarship. Frazer (1951) devoted a large portion of *The Golden Bough* to the subject, developing his influential—and much critiqued—thesis that holiness and pollution were undifferentiated in primitive societies and that taboo was the fundamental cultural institution mediating the danger therein. Durkheim also placed taboo at the heart of the religious; hence, he defined religion as a “system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things . . . [to] *things set apart and forbidden*” (Durkheim 1965 [1912]:62, emphasis added). Subsequent scholars went even further, many claiming that taboo was foundational not just to religion but to society itself (Bataille 1977; Douglas 1966; Lévi-Strauss 1969; Steiner 1999).

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Why is it, then, that archaeological theory has remained silent on so venerable an anthropological subject? Why is there no archaeology of taboo?

These strike me as significant questions to pose in a volume devoted to the study of past religions. In the past two decades, we have become accustomed to archaeological discussions of gods and goddesses, witchcraft and shamanism, animism and ancestor worship, sacrifice and sympathetic magic, and even ancient altered states. Yet taboo has been invoked in the course of archaeological interpretation with such infrequency that one would think the very use of the term was, well, ritually prohibited.

I find this curious for two reasons, the first of which is that a goodly percentage of the world's taboos are, in fact, centrally concerned with *materiality*. Certainly there is no shortage of forbidden words, incest regulations, or other largely intangible phenomena that would be difficult to study in the archaeological record alone. (These are not my concern here.) However, innumerable cases also exist in which prohibitions cling to the object or substance itself. This is why Freud (1950) wrote of taboo as the touching phobia and why Frazer (1951:260) compared it to an electrical sanctity that passes like a supernatural shock from tabooed object to transgressor. When we talk about taboo, we frequently have in mind prohibitions surrounding access to, contact with, or consumption of *things*. Thus material culture has a privileged place in taboo theory, and this, it seems, should serve as an entrée for archaeologists.

The absence of an archaeological engagement with taboo is also curious insofar as early ethnological scholarship on the subject consistently maintained that taboo would have been *especially* pronounced in antiquity. Widely read discussions by Frazer and Freud argued that taboo was, by its nature, a primitive, savage, or evolutionarily prior aspect of religious life. Even Weber (1964:35–40) viewed taboo as fundamentally “early,” arguing that it may have been the first priestly strategy in which religion was enlisted to achieve “extrareligious” (i.e., economic or political) ends. Today, of course, most scholars tend toward a more relativistic position, accepting Douglas’s (1966) suggestion that taboo is a basic organizational component of human experience that manifests differently in varying social contexts. But this change in perspective merely underscores the original question: Where are the studies of taboo in prehistory?

The answer, I suggest, has to do with archaeology’s methodological orientation and in particular with how this orientation differs from that of sociocultural anthropology. Ethnologists interested in taboo, for instance, have the luxury of treating ritual prescription and proscription as two sides of a common coin. “Positive magic or sorcery says, ‘Do this in order that so and so may happen.’ Negative magic or taboo says, ‘Do not do this, lest so and so should happen’”—this was the position of Frazer (1951:22) and many of the generation that followed him. According to this line of reasoning, rules to do something and rules not to do something are of the same species of cultural behavior in that both are regulations or directives. Furthermore, failure either to do that which is *prescribed* or not to do that which is *proscribed* similarly leads to bodily harm or supernatural sanctions. It is the act of disobedience that makes one impure and endangered. Eve, tragically, partook of forbidden fruit and her ontological status was altered:

she became unclean or fallen. But from Frazer's perspective Genesis could be re-written. Eve might just as well have failed to eat a *requisite* fruit—she could have disregarded a prescription. Either way, the story would still structurally be one of transgression and a resultant negative change in Eve's status.

For archaeologists whose primary evidence comes in the form of material remains, the situation is not so simple. While there may be a structural equivalence to proscriptions and prescriptions, there tends to be a pronounced difference in how the two are materialized, and it is in this *material* difference that prehistoric taboos become such a thorny problem. Consider the following: If one is told by society that whenever *x* happens, one must do *y*, then there is a chance that this rule will have a materiality that archaeologists can access. For example, *x* might be the death of an individual and *y* might be particular mortuary rituals. Greeks placed a coin in the mouth of the corpse; Egyptians mummified; ancestral Pueblo peoples of the Mimbres culture punched a hole in a ceramic bowl and overturned it on the face of the deceased; and so on. The key point is that, as archaeologists, we see the dead body (*x*) as well as the associated coins, body wrappings, and broken vessels (*y*) and thus have a means of learning about the cultural prescription involved by virtue of the patterned relationship between the two types of archaeological remains.

But if the rule takes the form “if *x*, then *not y*”—if one is told that whenever a particular event occurs or one finds oneself in a particular context one must *abstain* from doing something—then we find ourselves in an awkward position. Suppose, for instance, that in a given prehistoric culture it was taboo for a corpse to touch objects of human manufacture; suppose it was believed that such contact fettered the deceased's soul to the world of the living and thus placed the latter in danger. Such a proscription would result in a very simple mortuary tradition of the sort that is not uncommon in small-scale societies: bodies interred without additional offerings. However, upon what grounds might one make the interpretive leap from plain graves to the underlying taboo? How might one counter the competing hypothesis that the society in question was simply unconcerned with burial goods?

The point is that prescriptive and proscriptive rules tend to have different material consequences and, hence, are not equally accessible to archaeologists. When confronted with a proscription or taboo of the “if *x*, then *not y*” variety, we may well find that *x* has a detectable materiality, but we still face the task of establishing that *x* led to some potential behavior, *y*, not being performed. *What evidence could we use to uncover the unperformed act?* This is the vital question. Of course, in some cases, the puzzle is even more convoluted because taboos can simply ordain “*not y*”—that regardless of time or place, one must not do this or that. Again, how would the archaeologist go about exploring this sort of cultural rule from a materialist perspective?

In philosophy it is sometimes said that one “can't prove a negative,” and herein lies our problem because any archaeological argument for the existence of a religious taboo necessarily attempts to show that some behavior was intentionally absent or not practiced. Indeed, not only must we demonstrate an absence (“*not y*”), but also we must further demonstrate that it was a meaningful absence,

a culturally marked or accentuated absence. These are significant challenges, and the poverty of archaeological work on taboo thus begins to make sense.

How can we meet these challenges? What would an archaeology of taboo look like?<sup>1</sup> Below, I review three case studies that might serve as models or signposts with the potential to direct us in a number of productive research directions. The leitmotif, the pattern that connects, is to be found in the way each case underscores the need to interrogate archaeological data sets in novel ways. Where once we asked how and why past beliefs were materialized, taboo requires that we also consider how and why they may have been emphatically *not* materialized. Where once we looked for material correlates, here too we must look for the meaningful *lack* of material correlates (or, perhaps more accurately, we must look for “immaterial correlates”). Where once we examined only that which is present in the archaeological record, taboo demands that we also examine that which is absent.

## Dirty Pig

Let me begin with perhaps the most familiar of prohibitions: the food taboo or, more specifically, taboos surrounding the consumption of particular animals. All societies classify the animal kingdom into (a) types of species that can be eaten, (b) those that must never be eaten, and (c) those that only become “edible” or “inedible” for particularly situated individuals in certain specific and, typically, ritually charged contexts. Almost certainly there is a deep psychological basis for the universality of such taboos. Indeed, the vegetarian’s maxim that “meat is murder” may hold a cross-cultural (if sometimes unconscious) truth, insofar as hunting and warfare often have close symbolic associations. Furthermore, just as a society may preach “thou shalt not kill” yet permit or even require violence on the battlefield, so too may it cognize the killing of animals as a necessary act, but one that is transgressive all the same. As Bataille (1977:63–75) emphasized, transgression, far from being antithetical, tends instead to be a necessary component of the taboo itself. Be that as it may, the symbolic potency of the kill is intensified by the subsequent consumption of the animal’s flesh, for there is something inescapably powerful and potentially dangerous about the physical incorporation of another sentient being into one’s own body. Animals, in other words, are “good to think and good to prohibit,” to borrow a phrase from Tambiah (1969).

From an archaeological perspective, food taboos have a special significance because animal bone is durable, and consumption practices can therefore be reconstructed with relative ease. Not surprisingly, most archaeological discussions of taboo (those few that exist) have arisen in the context of larger faunal studies.<sup>2</sup> It is noteworthy that many of these discussions have been prompted by textual or ethnographic evidence in which the issue of food taboo had already been raised. We await a series of investigations that are originally constructed atop a foundation of *archaeological* evidence. We await, as I have already indicated, an archaeology of taboo properly so called.

The most widely studied food taboo, of course—both in anthropology generally and archaeology more specifically—is the Jewish pork prohibition. Gen-

erations of scholars have weighed in on this matter, most proposing their own theory as to why the writers of Deuteronomy and Leviticus abominated so potentially valuable a food resource as the pig simply because it “divides the hoof but does not chew the cud.” Among ethnologists, Valeri (2000) offers the most recent reassessment. Critiquing Douglas’s earlier position (1966; but see also Douglas 1975:288), Valeri argues that the food taboos of Leviticus were not about abstract classificatory logics but were more centrally concerned with issues of identity. The taboos, he suggests, established a fundamental moral hierarchy between Hebrews and the gentile Other: Hebrews were to Gentiles as “normal” animals were to “anomalous” creatures, such as the pig. Hence, the eating of “normal” animals and the explicit *not* eating of those that are “abnormal” is taken as an ideological strategy used by Hebrews to reproduce themselves as a culturally distinct and superior people (Valeri 2000:80). When one consumed only the normal, one maintained one’s own status as “normal,” and when outsiders consumed the abnormal, their ontological status became tainted, “abnormal,” inferior.

Such models are designed to be evaluated on the basis of their structural coherence and the degree to which they “make sense” of the seemingly nonsensical. But cultural traditions are never fully coherent nor fully sensible, as archaeological research into this issue has recently emphasized. In the past 20 years, the antiquity of the Jewish pork prohibition has emerged as a critical archaeological question in the Levant, and my interests in this research are twofold. First, zooarchaeologists investigating the pork prohibition have begun to significantly complicate the explanatory models developed by ethnologists. For instance, in Valeri’s model the pork prohibition is portrayed as having a single rationale (identity politics) that changed little over the past three millennia. Lip service is paid to the reality that the taboo had its origin in a particular historical context (Valeri 2000:110), but history itself remains impotent, a background out of which structures and identities spring rather than a process of continuous structural renegotiation and transformation. The archaeological database, in contrast, demands that we adopt a messier, more dynamic, and ultimately more realistic picture (see below). My second interest in this research is more methodological, for here one finds a relatively clear struggle to construct arguments using negative evidence. Simply stated, the key issue in this case is whether the *absence* of pig bones at certain sites can itself point to the presence of a formal religious taboo.

The following discussion is based on the work of Brian Hesse and Paula Wapnish (Hesse 1990, 1994; Hesse and Wapnish 1997, 1998), who have recently developed a regional database to inductively assemble a genealogy of pork consumption and avoidance in the Near East from Neolithic through Medieval times. Unlike most ethnological discussions, Hesse and Wapnish’s research is explicitly anti-essentialist: their starting point is a detailed consideration of the various ecological, economic, and political factors that must be taken into consideration when evaluating the plausibility of the taboo hypothesis. Their “pig principles” include the expectations that pig exploitation will tend to be higher (1) in wetter ecozones, (2) among more sedentary populations with a domestic mode of agro-pastoral production, and (3) among recent immigrants to a region looking to quickly establish a protein source. Hesse and Wapnish note that “so-

cial class" in the Near East can be expected to affect distribution patterns as well, pig meat tending to be viewed as commoner fare by the elite.

In light of the above, Hesse and Wapnish interpret the archaeological evidence with due caution. They note, for instance, that following widespread early use of the pig during Neolithic through Middle Bronze Age times, most of the Middle East had given up pork consumption by the end of the Late Bronze Age (1550–1200 B.C.E.) in response to what appears to have been primarily nonreligious, ecological factors. Hence, the small percentages of pig bone recovered from sites in the central hill country of Canaan during the succeeding Iron Age I (1200–1000 B.C.E.)—in other words, during the debated period of an emergent Israelite identity—are far from distinctive: "If the absence of pig bones in an Iron Age archaeological site is taken as diagnostic for the presence of ethnic Israelites [i.e., of the pork prohibition], there were a lot more Israelites in the ancient world than we ever suspected. . . . If this sounds unbelievable, it is" (Hesse and Wapnish 1997:238). From their perspective, the absence in question was not a *conspicuous* absence, weakening the hypothesis that a formal Hebrew taboo on pork consumption was in place during the eleventh century B.C.E.

Others disagree. During Iron Age I the regional pattern of low pig consumption was disrupted briefly by the immigration of "pig-loving" Philistines into the southern Levant, at which point a relatively clear contrast emerged between substantial pig consumption at many coastal Philistine sites and the marked absence of pig bone in the core Israelite area (Hesse 1990; Hesse and Wapnish 1997:248). In light of this pattern, some archaeologists have argued that political tensions between the proto-Israelite population and the newly arrived Philistines led an existing pattern of pig avoidance to be ideologically recast into a formal religious taboo by at least some proto-Israelite communities (Finkelstein 1997:230; King and Stager 2001:119). It does appear that pig avoidance during the Iron Age could have been emphasized as a means of saying that one was "not Philistine," but given that the rest of the Levant largely shared the same avoidance, did it really serve as a core part of Jewish identity or theology? Hesse and Wapnish (1997:261) suggest the Iron Age evidence is equivocal, noting that it is only much later, during Hellenistic times, that archaeological and textual data unambiguously document the prohibition as a marker of Jewish communities.

As should be evident, archaeology here makes a major contribution. The pork prohibition is historicized, and we begin to grasp its complicated genealogy, its changing significations. In this sense, Hesse and Wapnish's research should be carefully followed by all sociocultural anthropologists who may be tempted to make broad (ahistorical) statements about the "nature" of this most archetypal of food taboos. Archaeology reveals that religious prohibitions can have unstable life histories that slip between the fingers of rigidly structuralist interpretations.

That said, archaeologists studying the pork prohibition still have their work cut out for them. We remain unable to state with confidence when and where the pig began to be the focus of specifically religious avoidance in the Levant. This is largely because most archaeologists are interested in patterns of pig consumption/avoidance to the extent that they reflect the ethnicity of communities *as social wholes*, whereas the more pressing issues surrounding taboo as a religious phe-



nomenon may need to be explored at an *intra*-community level. A case in point is found in Herodotus's (1942:140–141) discussion of the pig in ancient Egypt, in which he notes that “the pig is regarded among them as an unclean animal, so much so that if a man in passing accidentally touches a pig, he instantly hurries to the river, and plunges in with all his clothes on”—a classic taboo down to the concern with touching, uncleanliness, and purification. And yet, in the same breath, Herodotus also observes that the Egyptians *did* raise pigs. Swineherds were rendered ritually impure and socially undesirable by their profession; nevertheless they—as well as those they supplied with meat—coexisted with the priests and other seekers of ritual purity who actively observed the taboo. The taboo was present, but so too its transgression. Following Bataille (1977:63), we might even conclude that the former depended upon, and was made meaningful by, the latter.

Hence, to understand pig avoidance as a *religious* phenomenon, one must not only compare the faunal percentages of different communities or regions but also attend to those conspicuous absences that are to be found within individual communities. (As in archaeological investigations of religious ritual and belief generally, detailed contextual data lie at the heart of all interpretation.) Hesse and Wapnish (1997:251–252) have begun this project, drawing the tentative, but significant, conclusion that pig bone is negatively associated with ritual contexts throughout much of Near Eastern antiquity. Only when studies are designed to search out meaningful absences at this contextual scale will we be able to truly speak of an “archaeology of taboo” in this area.

## The Killing of Osiris

Anthropological archaeologists tend to be comfortable with pig bones—hard, ossified, quantifiable, “economic.” The interpretation of religious iconography, on the other hand, is typically looked upon as a much more speculative endeavor. Nevertheless, icons deserve our special attention, for they comprise a second major category of material culture that is frequently subject to strong taboos.

This is particularly true in the case of icons representing deities or other religious personages. Most if not all religions have an ambivalent relationship with the material world insofar as they privilege the immaterial (i.e., the supernatural, spiritual, or transcendent) but remain reliant on physical objects of some form both to communicate the nature of that privilege to others and to facilitate engagement with the immaterial. The result is a tension that in some cases has come to be perceived as a grave danger when the vehicle of divinity is conflated with divinity itself. Hence the problem of the false idol: “Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven Image, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them: For I, the Lord thy God, am a jealous God” (Exodus 20:4–5 [King James]). Hence iconoclasm: “And ye shall overthrow their [the pagans'] altars and *break* their pillars, and burn their groves with fire;

and ye shall hew down the graven images of their gods, and destroy the names of them out of that place" (Deuteronomy 12:3–4).

Iconoclasm, wherever it occurs, is the enforcement of a religious prohibition. Consider the Biblical story of the golden calf, the idol created by the Israelites during the Exodus to praise God for their safe passage out of Egypt. Intended simply as a tool to assist their devotions, the materiality of the statue nevertheless took hold of the worshipers; their spiritual attention was averted from the immaterial Father, and they began to venerate the golden calf itself. Moses alone recognized the transgression for what it was, exclaiming in despair, "Oh, these people have sinned a great sin, and have made them gods of gold" (Exodus 32:31). He then destroyed the idol, but the breach of taboo could not be undone: "And the Lord plagued the people, because they made the calf" (Exodus 32:35).

In the Old Testament, Moses was able to obliterate the golden calf with such finality that its materiality entirely disappeared (see Exodus 32:20), but in real-world contexts iconoclasm often leaves behind a relatively strong material signature that points to the existence of the underlying prohibition. Thus, one might consider the heaping pile of statuary rubble beneath the empty recesses that once held the colossal Bamiyan Buddhas in Afghanistan as a strongly "iconic" reli-giopolitical statement that archaeologists of the future will recognize as such. The greater archaeological challenge, however, lies in identifying iconographic prohibitions that were *not* defined by destructive or iconoclastic moments—prohibitions that were instead "represented" simply by absence itself, by an empty recess that never did house an icon. Here, as in the case of food prohibitions, we bump up against the challenges of building an argument based upon negative evidence. Let us briefly consider an example from ancient Egyptian mythology to illustrate this point.

In contrast to later Judeo-Christian and Islamic traditions in the Near East, ancient Egyptian religion is not known for its iconographic restraint—quite the opposite. Deities were regularly depicted and their images venerated following a cultural logic in which the distinction between material idol and immaterial deity was decidedly blurred, if such a distinction was meaningful at all (Meskell 2004). My interest is in one of these deities in particular, the famed Osiris, god of the dead, who held a crucial position in Egyptian religious life for over two millennia. A great deal is known about Osiris by virtue of his strong presence in Egyptian material culture, including many two- and three-dimensional renderings in temple and mortuary art as well as numerous discussions in Egyptian religious and literary texts. But there is one key portion of Osiris mythology that is missing from both the Egyptian archaeological and textual records: the story of Osiris's murder at the hands of Seth, his brother. This was a mythological event that, like a keystone, brought together the arch of the mortuary cult, for the deceased Osiris served as a prototype in the elaborate mummification rituals of humans. The circumstances surrounding his death, however, were never explicitly written, drawn, or sculpted. (Our knowledge of the killing of Osiris comes almost entirely from later Greek scholars using Egyptian priestly informants [see Griffiths 1970:75].) Egyptian material culture, in other words, was silent on this theologically central event, and herein lies its significance to the issue of taboo.



Our question, then, is this: In a culture renowned for its iconographic flamboyance and detail, one in which tomb walls were decorated with cosmological depictions and figurative icons towered over their human creators, why this silence? Why did the Egyptians neither illustrate nor write about the mythological fulcrum upon which so much of their religious life balanced?

This question becomes more intriguing once we observe that Osiris's death was embedded within a larger narrative that served as the chief creation story throughout much of Egyptian history. The Heliopolitan myth, as it is known, focused on the Ennead or set of nine original gods: Atum, Shu, Tefnut, Geb, Nut, Osiris, Isis, Nephthys, and Seth. While the details of the myth need not concern us, I sketch its outlines here only as a means of placing in starker relief the question of Osiris's death. Briefly, the narrative commenced with Atum, the Creator, who brought himself into existence and then, in a primordial act of masturbation, begat Shu (air) and Tefnut (moisture). Shu and Tefnut, in turn, begat Geb (earth) and Nut (sky), and with the cosmos thus established, Geb and Nut together gave birth to four siblings: Osiris, Isis (the future wife of Osiris), Seth (the "god of confusion," who grew to be Osiris's assassin), and Nephthys (the future wife of Seth).

In Figure 2-1*a-c*, a selection of Egyptian images are reproduced that tangibly illustrate the Heliopolitan myth up to this point. While such images were never truly commonplace (materializations of the gods were always carefully restricted to some degree, particularly prior to the New Kingdom [Hornung 1982:135–136]), there was clearly no shortage either, and we also know that there were numerous discussions of these events in ancient Egyptian religious and literary texts. In contrast, the portion of the myth that I will relate next is *not* known from Egyptian sources but rather secondhand, from Hellenistic scholarship.

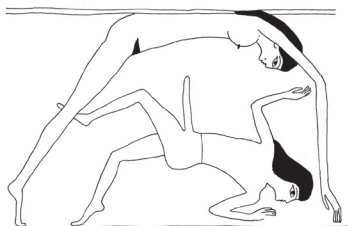
It is Plutarch (1970), for instance, who tells us that Seth conspired to kill Osiris, then king of Egypt. As the story goes, Osiris was tricked into lying down in an exquisitely decorated chest that had been cunningly crafted by Seth to entice his brother. Then, as Osiris was lying in the chest, Seth and his conspirators "slammed the lid on, and after securing it with bolts from the outside and also with molten lead poured on, they took it out to the river and let it go to the sea" (Plutarch 1970:139). Osiris perished; the chest with his body as its cargo floated away; and Isis, Osiris's wife, was grief stricken. After much searching, Isis recovered Osiris's body, but Seth again intervened. He fell upon Osiris's corpse and chopped it into 14 parts that he scattered throughout Egypt.

These details surrounding the murder of Osiris lie at the core of ancient Egyptian ritual and mythology. And yet, they were never given a direct rendering in art or text (Baines 1991:103; te Velde 1977:83–84). From a material perspective, they exist as a silence, a skip in the archaeological record, bounded on either side by numerous representations of the events leading up to Seth's abomination and of the events unfolding from it.

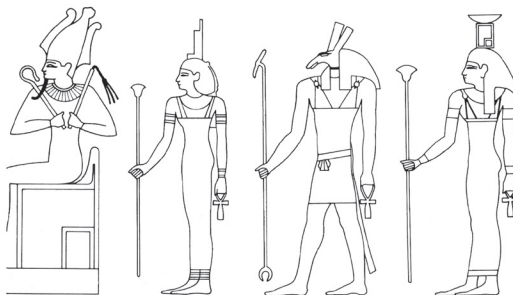
Following the scattering of Osiris's body, for example, Isis combed the countryside, gathering together the pieces of her husband to reassemble him. The temple relief in Figure 2-1*d* pictures the reassembled Osiris with Isis, in the form of a bird, hovering over her dead husband for one last sexual act that did, in fact, lead to her impregnation. At this point in the myth, Osiris departed to assume his



a. The masturbatory act of creation



b. Geb (earth) impregnates Nut (sky)



c. The four siblings: Osiris, Isis, Seth, and Nephthys (left to right)

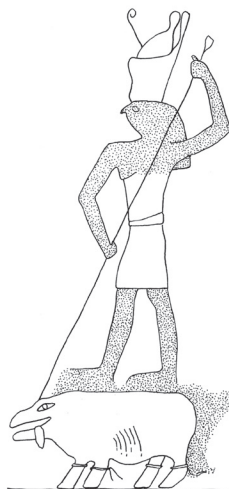
### The Killing of Osiris



d. Isis, as a kite, mounts the reassembled Osiris



e. Isis breastfeeds Horus



f. Horus avenges Osiris and dismembers Seth

**Figure 2-1.** Selected depictions of the Heliopolitan myth prior to (top) and subsequent to (bottom) the killing of Osiris: (a) based on Manniche (1987:31); (b) based on Manniche (1987:52); (c) based on Shafer (1991:frontispiece); (d) based on Budge (1959:frontispiece); (e) based on Clark (1991:107); (f) based on Fairman (1974).

position as god of the deceased and Isis gave birth to Horus (Figure 2-1e), who, in turn, matured and avenged his father's death. The latter event is memorialized in Figure 2-1f, a relief in which Seth, in the form of a hippo or pig, is dismembered by Horus's spear.

It goes without saying that the representation of Egyptian deities and myths was permissible in ritual contexts at a general level, but the more important point is that not all subject matter was equal. Some subjects were clearly avoided with special vigilance. Why? Regarding the killing of Osiris, Hornung suggests the following:

Texts speak of the tomb and the resurrection of Osiris, and both are even depicted pictorially; . . . *but Egyptian texts of the pharaonic period never say that Osiris died.* In the cult celebration of the Osiris myth at the festival at Abydos this detail—the god's violent death—remains unmentioned. Again and again we find this avoidance of explicit statements that a god died, whoever the god may be; for the text, *and still more the image*, would fix the event and even render it eternal. In the Egyptian view it is unthinkable that the death of Osiris or his dismemberment by Seth should be represented pictorially and thus be given a heightened, more intense reality [1982:152–153, emphasis added].

A clear statement indeed. There was a power to images in ancient Egypt and care was required in managing that power. The ancient Egyptians mourned the killing of Osiris at the hands of Seth, but they also feared it as a subject because of the chaos and evil that surrounded the event. Strictly speaking, Osiris's murder was not an unspeakable evil, for the Greek sources reveal that it was clearly part of the priestly oral tradition (te Velde 1977:83). But it *was* an un-writable evil, an un-sculptable evil, an un-paintable evil. It was an evil whose materialization was vigilantly avoided despite—or rather, *because of*—the extraordinary power that surrounded it.

In making these observations, I suggest that we are well within the province of taboo and that we must, consequently, shift our focus toward the distinctive archaeological methodology that taboo demands. Just as we may find food prohibitions in the conspicuous absence of particular zooarchaeological remains, the iconographic taboo becomes visible in the conspicuous absence of iconography and text detailing, in this case, the killing of a major deity.

There is a larger conclusion to be drawn here as well. The Osiris myth presents us with an example in which it is the *most important* supernatural event that is missing from an otherwise rich material record. This fact should give us pause, particularly those of us working in prehistoric contexts without textual or ethnographic documents that can be used as a foil. We often assume that one can measure the cultural importance of some concept or thing by the frequency with which it is materialized. Of course, this may be a legitimate methodology in certain cases; for instance, the more images of the cross that we see (in churches, on mountaintops, dangling from necks, and so on), the more we realize the centrality of the crucifixion to Christian morality. But Osiris had his own crucifixion that was just as important to ancient Egyptian religion, and *its* importance, as we have seen, was expressed in the idiom of taboo—that is, through the *infrequency* of its depiction; through its *immateriality*.

This example should prompt us to acknowledge that (1) prominence in the material record and (2) theological significance are inversely related as often as not. Indeed, let us not forget that even in those currents of Christianity that embraced icons, the highest deity (God as Father) is rarely directly depicted (if ever). This was also true of Ahuramazda in Zoroastrianism (Boyce 2002:686), of the gods in ancient Nabatean religion (Patrich 1990), of the Buddha in early Buddhist art (Tanaka 1998), of “kwoth” among the Nuer (Evans-Pritchard 1956:123–124)—the list could easily be extended—all of which were hidden behind more or less explicit iconographic avoidances. The archaeological challenge, again, is to look beyond that which is materialized toward that which may be purposefully missing. Often we are too quickly satisfied with mere presence. Thus have some—to cite a well-known example—taken the relatively abundant female figurines of the Near Eastern Neolithic as evidence of a “female monotheism,” of a cult in which the Goddess reigned supreme (e.g., Cauvin 2000:32). The potential pitfalls in these sorts of straightforward inferences should be self-evident.

### Where the Katsinas Aren’t

I want to explore one final case study that involves, as in the example of the Osiris myth, what I shall argue was an iconographic prohibition and that in this way can be viewed as building upon the last section. However, it bears a similarity to the Jewish pork taboo as well insofar as this prohibition appears to have evolved partly in response to a complicated identity politics rather than purely out of theological concerns. What is unique about the following case is that it is not premised upon an “a priori taboo”—that is, a taboo that had been previously established using ethnographic or historical evidence. Here, on the contrary, it is archaeological evidence that has prompted a rereading of an ethnographic account, bringing to light the likelihood of an overlooked prohibition. The example concerns the Pueblo katsina religion, and it is one that I have developed in greater detail elsewhere (Fowles 2004a). Consequently, I only provide a summary below.

During the early twentieth century, the Pueblo people of the American Southwest garnered significant anthropological notoriety as among the most “traditional” of Native American groups, largely due to their continued residence in pre-Columbian adobe villages but also to their vibrant and highly aesthetic ceremonial life, much of which centered on a group of spirits known as katsina. The katsina were among the most important supernaturals in the Pueblo pantheon.<sup>3</sup> They were the bringers of rain, traveling as clouds to water the fields—hence, their deep cultural significance for the Pueblo communities whose subsistence traditionally depended upon corn agriculture in an arid and often capricious landscape. The katsina, however, were not uniformly benevolent. They also *withheld* rain, they reported human transgressions to the higher gods, and they disciplined. The Pueblos therefore approached the katsina with a mixture of affection and fear but always with a reverence that was expressed in a variety of personal and group rituals.

The most famous of these rituals are the katsina dances in which men donned ritually charged masks that transformed them into the katsina, the *deus praesens*. Pueblo mythology suggests that the katsina themselves once regularly descended from the heavens to visit the villages but that they had long ago ceased to do so, leaving the priests with the knowledge of how to conjure them with masks (Stephen 1940:103–104). Consequently, the mask—both as object and icon—is regarded as the key signifier of the katsina generally. In the most extensive study to date, Adams (1991:16) adopted this position explicitly: “Unless a mask is depicted,” he wrote, “the assumption will be that the [katsina] cult was not present.”

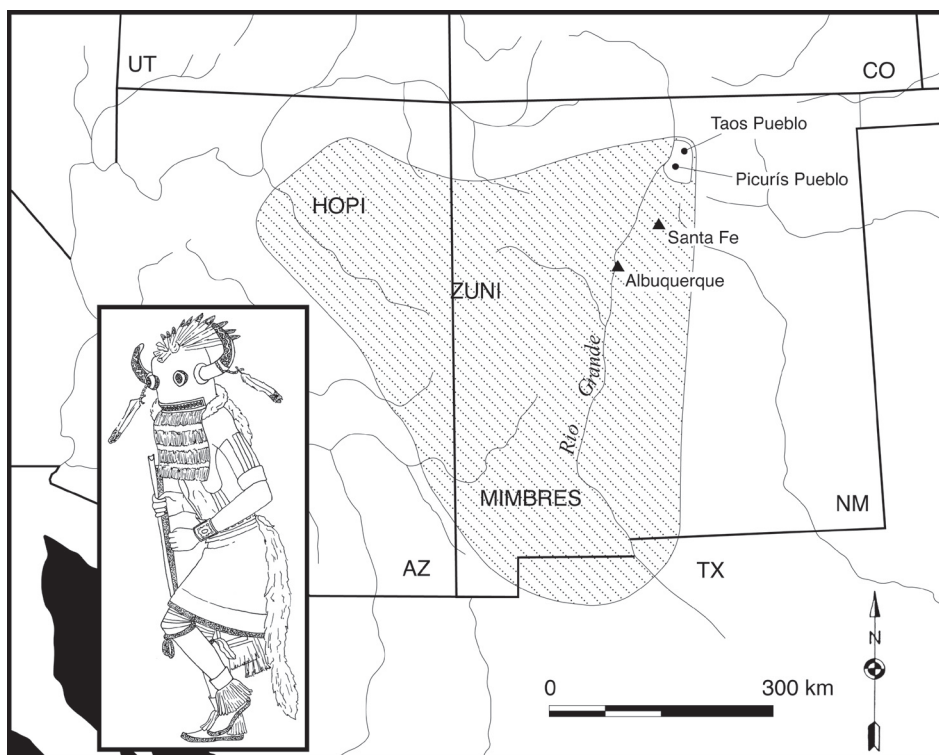
Antecedents to the katsina mask icon first appear as early as the eleventh century A.D. on rock-art panels in southern New Mexico, and by the end of the fourteenth century the icon had expanded throughout most of the northern Southwest, where it was increasingly included within rock-art panels, kiva murals, and, to a lesser extent, ceramic decoration (Schaafsma 1994). Indeed, during the late prehistoric period (A.D. 1300–1600), stylized masks were depicted in sufficient frequency to suggest that the act of representation itself was an important part of katsina ceremonialism, notwithstanding the fact that ritual specialists probably always circumscribed the production of such imagery quite carefully.

When we combine late prehistoric data with the ethnographic evidence of katsina ritual, a broad pattern emerges of a pan-Pueblo commitment to the katsina religion stretching from Hopi in the west to the Rio Grande Pueblos in the east, with two notable exceptions: Taos and Picurís, the two Northern Tiwa-speaking Pueblos of the Taos district in New Mexico (Figure 2-2). The Northern Tiwa are considered by most scholars to be singularly missing the true katsina religion. Early twentieth-century ethnographers working at Taos and, to a lesser degree, Picurís found that neither had a tradition of masked dances, and subsequent archaeological and archival research appeared to confirm this pattern by noting an evident lack of mask iconography in the region’s prehistory and early history as well (Schaafsma and Schaafsma 1974:543). Consequently, there was little incentive to interrogate the issue further. Katsina ceremonialism among the Northern Tiwa was simply absent.

But let us examine this absence more carefully. In Figure 2-2, there is quite clearly a hole or missing patch in the fabric of the regional Pueblo tradition; the question is, was it a *simple* absence? Or might a more complicated set of cultural processes have been involved?

Before tackling these questions directly, let me clarify that while mask iconography and mask-based rituals were not present historically, the Northern Tiwa did indeed *believe* in the katsina as important and influential spirits (Fowles 2004a; Parsons 1936). They were not, in this sense, Pueblo “pagans.” In light of this fact, Parsons (the only ethnographer to explicitly consider this issue) offered two possible explanations as to how such beliefs developed without the suite of ritual practices that typically accompanied them. Northern Tiwa notions of the katsina, she suggested, were either (1) a recent introduction during the historic period, in which case the relative youth of the tradition would account for its inchoate form, or (2) an evolutionary survival, representing “the original cult





**Figure 2-2.** Map of the American Southwest highlighting traditional distribution of katsina ceremonialism (hatched) and the homeland of the Northern Tiwa (Taos and Picuris Pueblos) in north-central New Mexico (unhatched). Katsina dancer at left based on Roediger (1961:11).

which came to be highly developed in the western pueblos but remained unchanged [i.e., embryonic and maskless] at Taos" (Parsons 1936:115). Both of these hypotheses were in keeping with the widespread (and mistaken) view that much of Northern Tiwa culture was a product of geographic isolation, of life on a Pueblo frontier to which many core Pueblo traditions never extended.

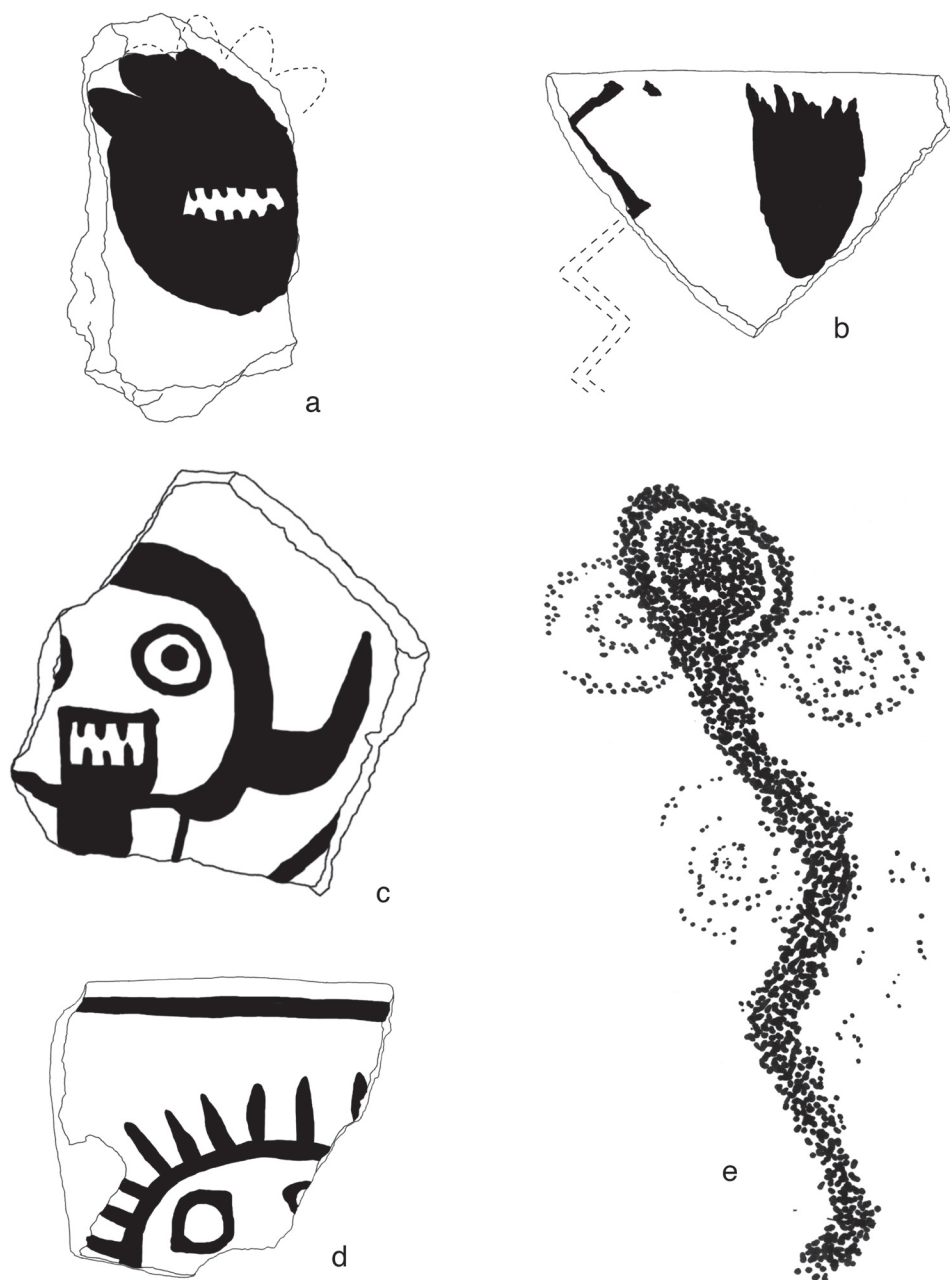
Let us leave to the side the fact that Taos and Picuris were among the largest trade centers in the Southwest and so were hardly isolated from the main currents of the Pueblo tradition. (On the contrary, Taos was arguably the most cosmopolitan of the historic Pueblos as a result of its famous trade fairs, and it was clearly in regular contact with communities who practiced the full katsina religion.) Rather, let us consider the *archaeological genealogy of this absence*, the pre-history of this lack of mask-based ceremonialism, to see whether things were indeed so simple.

Immediately, we find that they were not. Recent research has brought to light a number of prehistoric mask icons made by the supposedly maskless ancestors of the Northern Tiwa (Fowles 2004a). Figure 2-3 includes four locally made sherds and a petroglyph from the Taos district, each of which exhibits kat-

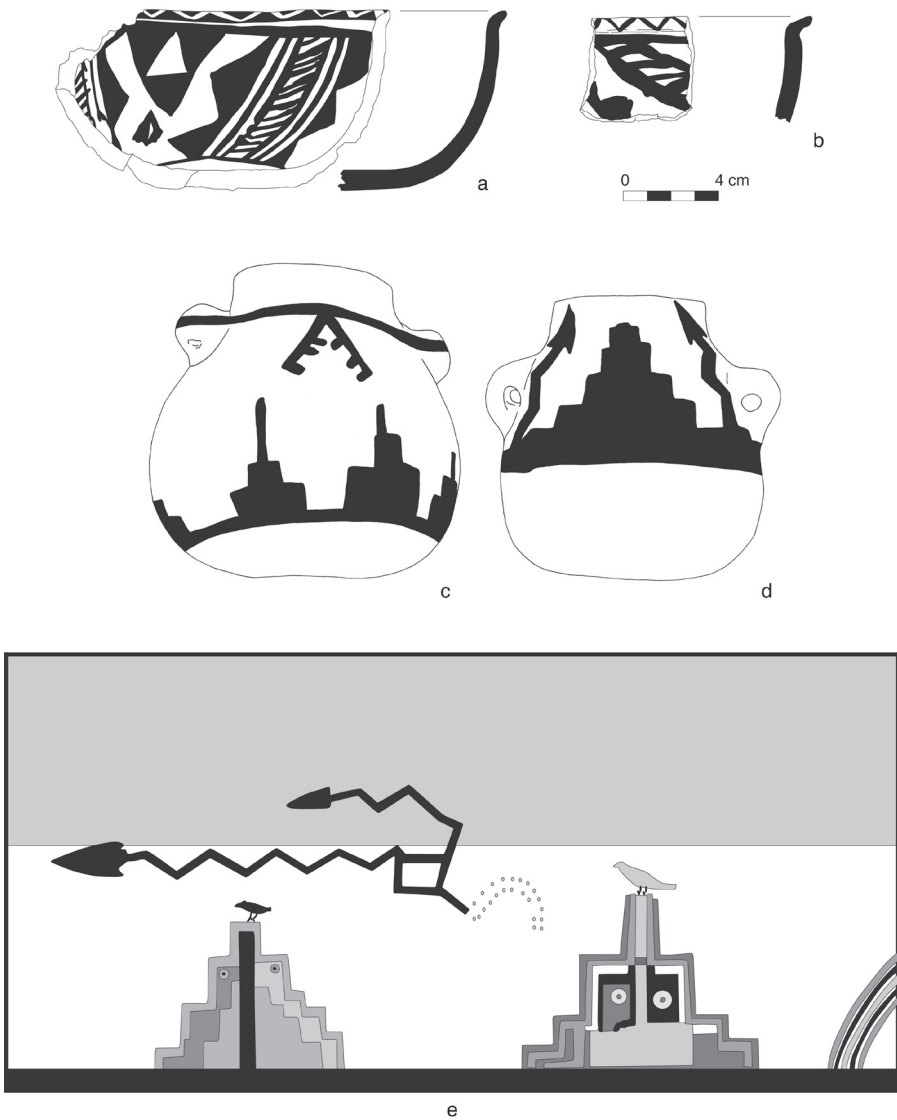
sina mask imagery as defined by the presence of (1) a toothed mouth, (2) goggle eyes, (3) feather-like projections off the top of the mask, or (4) horns—or some combination thereof. The date of the petroglyph is unclear, but all four sherds appear to predate A.D. 1300 or so, making them the earliest such specimens in the Rio Grande Valley. One sherd (Figure 2-3a), in fact, appears to date to the twelfth century and thus is among the earliest sherds with katsina or proto-katsina imagery known. A curious situation indeed: Why is it that the one part of the Southwest supposedly beyond the pale of the katsina religion has some of the earliest katsina iconography? Granted, we are dealing with merely a handful of katsina-related icons, but they are as many or more than are present elsewhere in the Southwest at this early date. Furthermore, such icons are, as Godelier (1999) writes of sacred objects generally, “gorged with meaning”—even a single example implies the presence of a complex underlying cosmological system.

Additional evidence from the prehistoric village of T’aitöna (a.k.a. Pot Creek Pueblo, A.D. 1250–1320) raises further questions. T’aitöna is a large site of some five hundred rooms that is explicitly mentioned in Northern Tiwa oral history as ancestral to both Taos and Picurís. The site grew as a large nucleated village in keeping with trends throughout the northern Southwest at the start of the fourteenth century, exhibiting, for example, multiple large semi-enclosed plazas of the sort that Adams (1991) has explicitly linked to the emergence of katsina ceremonialism. In addition to two of the katsina sherds depicted in Figure 2-3, excavations at T’aitöna have produced a number of “shoe pots” that are thought to correlate with the presence of katsina ritual (Adams 1991:79–80), as well as a fragment of a turtle shell rattle, the latter of which was a mandatory accessory to a dancing katsina’s costume elsewhere (Kennard 1938:9). In short, from the look of the archaeological record at the close of the thirteenth century, the Northern Tiwa would seem to have been at the vanguard of full katsina ceremonialism. What, then, happened during subsequent centuries to make them appear so “katsina-less” vis-à-vis the rest of the Pueblo world?

In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, mask iconography proliferated in neighboring regions to the south and west as the formal katsina religion took hold. Masks were pecked onto boulders by the hundreds, they were painted for the first time on kiva walls, and they increasingly appeared on ritual vessels. But a very different pattern developed in the Taos district. There, explicit mask icons apparently disappeared at the start of the fourteenth century concurrent with a bold new emphasis on celestial imagery within the religious sphere as indicated by (1) the regular use of lightning icons (zigzag lines) in the decoration of ritual bowls at late-phase T’aitöna (Figure 2-4a, b), (2) the new construction of cloud (stepped pyramid) “altars” behind kiva hearths at late-phase T’aitöna and proto-historic Picurís Pueblo, and (3) the presence of lightning and cloud icons on ritual jars at protohistoric Picurís Pueblo (Figure 2-4c, d; Fowles 2004a). By the end of the fifteenth century, cloud and lightning icons had assumed even greater ritual significance as they came to fully dominate a tradition of kiva murals at Picurís (Figure 2-4e). Such icons, of course, were common within later Pueblo religious imagery throughout the northern Southwest, but the Picurís murals are unique in that lightning, clouds, and other celestial referents such as rainbows and birds



**Figure 2-3.** Late katsina non-mask iconography (post–A.D. 1300) from the ancestral Northern Tiwa area: (a) proto-katsina mask from TA-69, A.D. 1000–1200; (b) proto-katsina mask from LA 80504, A.D. 1200–1250; (c) “ogre” katsina mask from T’aitöna; (d) “sun” katsina mask from T’aitöna; (e) masked katsina serpent petroglyph from LA 31038, A.D. 1000–?.



**Figure 2-4.** Late katsina non-mask iconography (post–A.D. 1300) from the ancestral Northern Tiwa area: (a) and (b) kiva bowls with lightning (zigzag) rims, T'aiitöna; (c) and (d) kiva jars with cloud/lightning motifs, Picurís; (e) kiva mural with cloud/lightning motifs, Picurís (based on Crotty 1999).

were unaccompanied by anthropomorphic imagery. All other known protohistoric mural traditions made *heavy* use of anthropomorphs, including masked katsina icons (Crotty 1999). But the Northern Tiwa at protohistoric Picurís fully abstained. They avoided depicting the mask, not only in murals but also in every material context for which we have information.

Should we equate this absence of the mask—the presumed *sine qua non* of the katsina tradition—with the absence of a developed katsina religion in the Northern Tiwa area after about A.D. 1300? This is hardly satisfying, for as I have already indicated the historic Northern Tiwa devoutly believed in katsina; indeed, the katsina were said to visit Taos and Picurís whenever clouds or lightning (their avatars) appeared in the skies overhead (Fowles 2004a). Furthermore, subtle references to the katsina—references that are shielded and avoid the overt depiction of masks—abound in fourteenth-century and later Northern Tiwa imagery. In Figure 2-4c, for instance, two large, crocodile-like mouths open from the sky that are identical to the toothed mouth of the “Black Cloud chief” katsina among the neighboring Tewa (cf. Parsons 1974:120). And in Figure 2-4e, the clouds themselves are adorned with goggle eyes, trademark features of most katsina throughout the Pueblo world. These were small isolated pieces of the mask (its mouth or eyes) that, I suggest, stood for the whole—unambiguous, albeit intentionally understated, nods to spirits whose complete visage may have been too dangerous to depict. Might, then, we read the absence of the mask differently? Might we read it as an iconographic taboo that was part and parcel of a unique Northern Tiwa sect of the katsina religion arising in conscious reaction to the new indulgence in mask iconography at the neighboring Pueblos?

Reinterpreting the absence of mask iconography among the Northern Tiwa as the *presence* of a religious taboo has a number of analytical advantages. First, the very early examples of mask icons cease to be a problem, for taboos are often constructed around practices or objects that once were not taboo (one need only consider the various iconoclastic movements in the Christian tradition). Second, it permits us to explain the timing of the observed shifts in Northern Tiwa religious imagery. Early mask icons (what few we have) disappeared in the Taos district just as neighboring communities were beginning to engage in highly public katsina display and as regional trade and communication networks were beginning to greatly expand. The ancestral Northern Tiwa could not have been naive to katsina ceremonialism, but it is possible that they chose to consciously and intentionally avoid certain elements of it, perhaps as a means of defining their own identity vis-à-vis other Pueblo groups during an era that has long been viewed as one of ethnogenesis throughout the Southwest (see Fowles 2004b, 2005).

Finally, the taboo hypothesis also permits us to offer an archaeological rereading of Northern Tiwa ethnography—a sort of inverted “tyranny of the ethnographic record”—in which certain previously inexplicable anomalies become explicable. Pueblo scholars have ignored or dismissed, for instance, vague reports (1) that the Northern Tiwa did in fact have one or two highly secret masks kept far away from the villages in the mountains (Parsons 1936:76), (2) that during certain rain rituals, a Taos man might draw an ephemeral katsina image in chalk “on the wall of an inner room of his house” (Parsons 1936:110), and (3) that masked katsina dances actually had been witnessed at Picurís, but only under the dark veil of night and in the secrecy of the underground kiva (Stevenson n.d.). Ethnographers have been unable to gather information that either confirms or denies such details—but is this not precisely as one would expect in the case of a forbidden subject? Indeed, the emphasis on secrecy and darkness, on erasability and seclusion, is the very stuff of taboo.



## Conclusion

I have presented, perforce, three extremely abbreviated case studies, but my hope is that they suffice to draw attention to a significant omission in archaeological theory. Religious prohibitions existed and were fundamental to social life in the past as in the present. By ignoring this reality and by failing to engage with the problem of taboo at both theoretical and methodological levels, we limit our ability to effectively interpret the material record. Of course some prehistoric prohibitions will escape us. We will never know whether it was taboo for a Cro-Magnon hunter to eat the game he himself killed or whether certain behaviors were forbidden to a Natufian woman during menstruation.

Fair enough.

The more important point, as the above examples illustrate, is that many prohibitions *can* be studied archaeologically, and these should be able to tell us a great deal about past systems of ritual and belief, providing we take negative evidence seriously and develop methodologies to interrogate the absence of things as well as their presence. When is an absence a *conspicuous* absence? When is it an *unexpected* absence? When does it bespeak some sort of conscious ideological underpinning? The answers to these questions must ultimately involve the identification of what we might refer to as “criteria of conspicuousness”: for example, the rapid rather than gradual disappearance of an object, icon, or practice from the cultural repertoire when viewed over historical time; or the existence of abrupt gaps or holes in a distribution when viewed spatially—unexpected gaps that seem to defy more straightforward explanations. I leave the development of such criteria for longer, more sustained studies. Suffice it to say here that an archaeology of taboo is both possible and needed.

It may well be true that the very nature of archaeological inquiry inevitably draws us toward problems of *materialization*, toward the “materialization of culture . . . defined as the transformation of ideas, values, stories, myths, and the like into a material, physical reality,” as DeMarrais (2004:11) has recently put it. Thus we are trained to search for “material correlates,” the processes by which the social, the political, the economic, and the religious are reified, leaving in their wake trails of tangible residues. But if it is natural for us to think about materialization, then we must also acknowledge that, from an archaeological perspective, there is a decidedly unnatural quality to thinking about taboo. Taboo forces us to confront the *de*-materialization or *non*-materialization of culture, to confront situations in which the presence of a cultural belief is expressed by a physical absence. This is the source of both its challenge and its potential to further our understanding of the past.

## Notes

1. *Taboo* is a slippery term with variable uses. Some scholars have linked taboo with a strong fear of the danger that accompanies transgression (McClenon 1998; Mead 1937); others with a particular ambivalence in which one is both at-

tracted to and repulsed by the tabooed object (Bataille 1977; Frazer 1951; Freud 1950). Both of these positions are too exclusive for my purposes here insofar as they specify a particular emotional stance that followers are assumed to share in a normative fashion. In the spirit of Leach (1964) and Radcliffe-Brown (1965:139), I have broadened the subject to encompass all religious, moral, or ideologically mandated prohibitions, irrespective of the various passions—or lack thereof—that may be involved for different followers.

2. See in particular Jones's (1978) important thesis regarding a millennia-long fish avoidance taboo among the Tasmanian aborigines, Thomas's (2003) and Richards's (2003) similar suggestions regarding the cessation of fish consumption with the shift from the Mesolithic to the Neolithic in northwest Europe, and Insoll's (1999:101–102) discussion of food taboos as archaeological indicators of the spread of Islam. Hodder's (2006) discussion of the possible prohibitions surrounding leopard remains at Çatalhöyük is the most recent contribution to this small group.

3. I am drawing primarily from early to middle twentieth-century sources and so use the past tense, although katsina ritual remains important to contemporary Pueblo ceremonialism.

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