Biocultural Approaches to Ritual Violence

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Short description of talk:

Violence is an ancient behavior that is shaped by culture and history. While violence can be a disruption which communities must recover from, it also operates in sync with ideology and symbolism to sustain and restore balance. A case study from the Pueblo Southwest is provided drawing on 35 years of research on indigenous forms of violence.

Abstract:

Violence is an ancient behavior that is historically contingent and deeply embedded within cultural systems. The American Southwest has been a proving ground for archaeologists and ethnologists regarding theories of culture change and more recently the role of violence. Most approaches to violence have been decontextualized, narrow and monomorphic. These studies have limited the interpretive potential of the data by seeking simple explanations that fit modern notions of warfare and violence. Using a theorized biocultural approach, a dynamic long-standing tradition of ritual violence is readily apparent. It represents a culturally specific form of indigenous violence that cannot be mapped on to modern Western notions of violence. Yet, Southwestern indigenous people (Ancestral Puebloans), like all humans everywhere, experienced violence as a cultural practice with biological implications that was woven into everyday life. While violence is both chaotic and disruptive to communities, it also operates in sync with ideology and symbolism to sustain, revise and restore communities. Themes of purification and restoration of order are pervasive in Pueblo ideology, religious practice and social action.

Bio

Debra Martin received her PhD from UMass/Amherst under the mentorship of George Armelagos in 1983. She taught at Hampshire College until 2006 when she relocated to the University of Nevada/Las Vegas. Her research interests are centered on biocultural approaches to understanding violence in human groups. She received the Harry J. Reid Silver State Distinguished Researcher Award in 2015, the Barrick Senior Distinguished Research Award in 2014 and the Lincy Professorship in Anthropology in 2012. She was awarded the American Anthropological Association/Oxford University Press Distinguished Teaching Award (2014). Since 2006 she has published 11 books and 54 journal articles and book chapters, many of them co-authored or co-edited with her PhD students. New Directions in Biocultural Anthropology, co-edited with Molly Zuckerman, is an homage to George Armelagos with chapters authored by his many PhD students (2016, Wiley). Other books include Bodies and Lives, Health in Ancient America (2015, Routledge), Bioarchaeology of Women and Children in Times of War (2016, Springer), Broken Bones, Broken Bodies (2017, Lexington) and Blood in the Village: Bioarchaeology of Massacres (in press, UPF).