

New Mexico Quarterly

Volume 20 | Issue 1

Article 6

1950

The Black Ewe

Fray Angelico Chavez

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nmq>

Recommended Citation

Chavez, Fray Angelico. "The Black Ewe." *New Mexico Quarterly* 20, 1 (1950). <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nmq/vol20/iss1/6>

This Contents is brought to you for free and open access by the University of New Mexico Press at UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in *New Mexico Quarterly* by an authorized editor of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact disc@unm.edu.



Fray Angelico Chavez

THE BLACK EWE

AFTER PENNING up his master's pet ewe in the small round palisade of juniper posts behind the low adobe house, old Agapito stacked some hay against the palings; then he filled the hewn-log trough with water from the stream close by. This ewe, which he had raised from a lamb, was most unlike the rest of the grey and brownish flocks. The fine wool alone, and the almost jet sheen of it, set her off from thousands of others. The *patrón* had entrusted this sheep to his care all winter, but now he had ordered Agapito to leave her in the corral at San Blas, so that he might enjoy the sight of her, he said.

San Blas was but a handful of earthen huts by the shallow Río Puerco where the wives of the shepherders stayed while their men went out on the range with the flocks shared out to each. Young or old, most of these women had families to keep them busy day and night; a certain young one, however, had become a byword among the herders when her husband was beyond earshot. Although the hacienda of the *patrón* was on the great river in the valley, north of the Indian pueblo of Isleta, he often came to San Blas and stayed a few days each time

to oversee the work, so he said. This time he had called for Agapito and the black ewe; but now, as the old herder was about to leave with his sheep for his own range of pasture, he did not look into the master's eye. Gravely doffing his tattered sombrero, Agapito bowed deeply and trudged off under the hot afternoon sun with a heavy heart.

Not that Agapito had any worries of his own, or about his own, for he had no kith or kin. He was a gaunt, gentle fellow with the white beard of a Spanish grandee set on a kindly Indian-like face, and this made it look almost false. Standing among his sheep he looked from afar like a scarecrow in a field in bloom. Nobody knew where he came from, or if he had been born in the region or elsewhere. He was by far the best sheepherder on the *patrón's* vast ranch, venturing alone deep into the Navajo country where virgin pastures lay, since these wild people did not have many sheep or horses in those days. It was told about that the Navajos never bothered him or his flocks when other herders closer to the valley had to be ever on the watch against a raid. Nor did his fellow shepherders envy him in the least, but rather sought his advice about the care of sheep, even if they let his counsels go unheeded whenever idleness or thievery could be covered up by blaming coyotes, the weather, or the Navajos. It was to him they came in time of sickness, whether it was a lamb or one of their own children, for Agapito held the secrets of various herbs, and his hands, they said, had the touch of prayer.

The *patrón*, still handsome and vigorous despite his graying hairs, took it for granted that the flocks Agapito cared for were the fattest and the most fruitful, as they had always been since he could remember, for the old fellow had served his father quite as faithfully; and he did treat him with all kindness after his own fashion, just as he now, for example, showed a tender concern for the black ewe. But to the *patrón's* wife, who always stayed at the hacienda by the river, Agapito was not merely a

shepherd but a shepherd, clothed with the aura which that word has kept from the gospels and the psalms.

As Agapito followed his close-packed bleating sheep eager to reach their usual feeding ground, he thought of Doña Isabel down at the hacienda and felt very sorry for her. A true lamb of the Lord's flock she was, he thought to himself—a white ewe. His mind could form no more flattering likeness for someone so meek and good. Although her grandparents had been great captains in the conquest of the land, she did not look down on her household servants but treated them more like cousins. Agapito felt like the father that he never was as she embraced him whenever he came to the hacienda. Although past middle age, her dainty hands, her clear blue eyes, the grace she lent to her sweeping skirt and slender bodice, all presented something beautiful to be worshipped. He would never forget that time, last year, when the rattlesnake bit him. While cutting across a field towards the rambling hacienda under the great cottonwoods, he had stepped on what his aging eyes told him was a long-dried cow dropping; the angered coiled viper dug viciously into his foot through the torn rough-hide shoe. As soon as he reached the house, Doña Isabel tore off the shoe and, slashing the flesh with a razor over the ugly marks of the fangs, began sucking and spitting out the dark gory ooze until she was satisfied that the color of the blood was as it should be. It was like the story of her namesake, the great Queen Saint Elizabeth of bygone ages, washing and kissing the sores on the feet of lepers, for a shepherd's feet are not very clean things. Afterwards, having washed both his feet and bandaged the injured one with cool linen strips over the herb remedies he took out of his pack, she had put him to bed, in the great white bed where she and the *patrón* usually slept—for he was at San Blas at the time—and there she kept him for some days until the fever that had set in was finally gone.

All that time, however, he had watched a deep sadness in her

blue eyes, and he knew that she knew without saying a word. Indeed, her eyes seemed to say that he also knew and ought to do something about it. But how can a poor peon give advice in such matters to his *patrón*?

It was drawing on to dusk and Agapito was still far away from his usual range, having traveled but a few hours away from San Blas. First he drove the sheep into the shelter of a blind canyon, low and shallow, which he had often used before. At its mouth he sat down to munch a piece of dry bread and some jerked meat, then prepared his bed on the soft sand in a shallow cave under the low sandstone cliff. But try as he would, he could not fall asleep. The thought of what the *patrón* was now doing plagued him like a toothache. Agapito was not one to judge or condemn with just ire. If he saw evil in others it was to regret the fact deeply and pray for its removal. And here there was greater cause to pray, for Doña Isabel's sake—and the *patrón's* also, of course. So now, as he lay curled up in his small shelter, he began fingering the large string of beads that always hung around his neck under his coarse frieze shirt and leather vest.

How long he prayed he did not know, except that the full moon, after coming up like an overripe squash over the far valley where the hacienda lay, rose steadily higher and smaller into the velvet night, its light sharper and more silvery as it dwindled in size. His thoughts, too, had traveled from the Garden of Olives, where he had placed them at the start, up to the haciendas of Caiphas and of Pontius Pilate, thence to the top of the mesa called Calvary. But more than once he had to round them back, like so many sheep, as they strayed to Doña Isabel at home by the big river, or to her husband at San Blas.

The sharpening moonlight had backed up over the canyon floor, like the imperceptible rise of a flood, until it crept along the outer edge of the little cave. It was then that the beads dropped from Agapito's fingers and he sat bolt upright. Some-

one was crossing the sandy bottom and coming up the small slope to where he lay. It was a lone Indian, a tall Navajo. Agapito had never seen a Navajo so tall. He threw a shadow like that of a long pine tree. He was naked except for a breechclout, as Navajos went about in those times. His chest and limbs, even his cheeks, were streaked with weird jagged lines, luminous in the moonlight. Whether warrior on the warpath or medicine-man on a cure, or both, he carried a war club and some scalps on his belt, as also some trinkets of human bone dangling from it. But all this did not amaze Agapito so much as the fact that the warrior or witch doctor was carrying a sheep, a black sheep, across his broad shoulders. It was the *patrón's* black ewe. There was no other like it in the whole country; and if there were, Agapito could have picked it out from a whole flock of black ewes.

First, Agapito uttered a greeting in Navajo; he knew a few phrases of the language. The Indian grunted a courteous reply, but then continued in Spanish. No Navajo knew more than a few Spanish words, but this witch doctor spoke the language better than Agapito himself, better even than the *patrón* or Doña Isabel. His inflections were more like those of the Lord Governor himself, who had stopped at the hacienda with his retinue once when Agapito happened to be there overnight. Still, this did not keep the herder's eyes from wandering away from the black ewe, which trembled and struggled in stark terror. However, the Indian's two giant fists gripped each pair of legs like a scabbard around a rusted sword. And yet, all this was not half so outlandish as the request he was making in very high Castilian. It was more of a command.

"Agapito, the master wishes you to shear the black ewe tonight, right away. I shall hold it for you and, after you have shorn off the wool—closely and evenly, mind you!—I shall return both sheep and wool to the master." His eyes lit up sharply and seemed to spit forth fire when Agapito did not offer to make

a move. "Simpleton! Spur your old lazy flanks! Here, take these freshly ground shears which I brought along!"

The old fellow obeyed as though in a trance. His thoughts, however, moved about freely, knocking each other down like panicky wild horses shut in a small round corral after a round-up. As he began to clip off the wool while the Indian's massive arms pinned the ewe to the sandy ground, he wondered what this cacique was doing all alone in San Blas, and so near to the valley. If he had stolen the black ewe as the prized prey that it was, why did he want it shorn now when the wool was not yet full-grown? But there was no answer to this and many other jumbled questions. The stampede in his mind merely served to raise greater clouds of dust. Nor could he understand why the ewe struggled and bleated so much. It was not the way of sheep, and her alarmed cries were more like those of a frightened nanny-goat. What with the poor light of the moon and the animal's spasmodic struggles, not to mention his poor eyesight and the whirl in his brain, Agapito pinched and cut the pulsing hide several times. The master would be very much displeased. Finally, the distasteful task was over.

As the shearer got up and stepped back, the Indian's arms and fingers relaxed somewhat. In that instant the ewe broke loose and scampered madly down the silvery sandbed. Promptly, and very gracefully, the Navajo unslung his war club and sent it speeding like a hawk after a low-flying grouse. The heavy stone end caught the ewe in the middle of the back, and she rolled over with a heart-rending cry, like the pained shriek of a woman in the still of night. The Indian ran down to it, stuck the club back in his belt, slung the limp animal across his neck—all this in one continuous motion—and kept on running like an unburdened antelope in the direction of San Blas. Agapito cupped his gnarled hands and shouted for him to come back for the wool, but the Navajo kept on bounding across the rise and fall of the moonlit landscape, when suddenly a black cloud

THE BLACK EWE

47

blanketed the moon, throwing the whole countryside and the enchanted shepherdder into total darkness.

Agapito did not even lie down to sleep. Early at dawn, before the sun slipped out of the horizon where he had watched the moon come up the night before, he was driving his bleating



herd back over the rolling yellowish grasslands towards San Blas. In his knapsack rode the balls of black wool which the Indian had left in his haste. If he had any misgivings, they were too vague to chase away the prayers he kept telling on the beads around his neck. He laid no stock in the common superstitions regarding Indian medicinemen, but he did have a good idea about the devil going about the affairs of men. But why a dumb animal should be the one to suffer, this bothered him. He would look into the corral as soon as he arrived.

By midmorning he came within sight of San Blas and of the low adobe house where the *patrón* was staying. Behind it lay the corral along the little stream. But there was the master already, and running forward to meet him, an unusual thing for a *patrón* to do, as if he had been watching for his appearance all morning.

"Come into the house right away, old man, my friend," he said, his handsome face drawn so tightly down as to show the

red flesh under his lower eyelids. "Agapito, something terrible happened to *her* last night."

Without a word, Agapito unslung his pack and laid it by the door, then stepped inside, his master respectfully holding the door for him and following after. In a corner was a bed, a large bison hide stretched across a square frame slung from the ceiling vigas by four stout braided thongs; on it lay a moaning young woman covered with a blanket. Her head was wrapped in a towel which she held with both hands. Her eyes stared with terror from the frame made by her forearms and elbows.

"It is her back," said the *patrón*. "As though it were broken. But she does not remember falling out of bed. I myself did not hear her." Here he stopped short, like the breathless pause of a penitent waiting for a scolding and absolution.

The woman moaned and shrieked when the two men slowly turned her face-downward. Modestly, Agapito raised her blouse a little and lowered her skirt a bit at the small of her back. In doing so his deft fingers found the spinal bone that was out of place. He ordered her to say the Apostle's Creed; it was commonly used as a measure of time in those days, but she also took it as part and parcel of the old shepherd's curing powers. In a way it was, for, as she was engrossed in reciting the articles of faith correctly, Agapito suddenly pressed heavily with both thumbs and jerked the bone back into place. The swinging thongs sang out and were drowned at once by the woman's piercing cry of pain and surprise. The towel fell off her head, revealing a close-clipped scalp which was chafed and bruised in several spots. She looked so utterly funny that Agapito might have laughed were he a laughing man, or if much more serious thoughts were not beginning to make sense in his muddled mind. She had reached down for the towel and was wrapping it back on her bare pate in a fluster of deepest shame. For the hair of a woman's head is indeed her crowning glory, Agapito ob-

served to himself—and the *patrón*, too. With her thick black tresses this now pitiable creature had been quite a beautiful woman, even to Agapito's disinterested eye; for he had known her since she was born, the child of a Pawnee squaw captured on the bison plains and of the Spanish soldier who had brought her in. Many of these *genizaras* were often prettier and more appealing than the Spanish women.

Muttering something about herbs, Agapito went out to his knapsack by the door. By now he was not surprised to find two braids and the rest of a woman's hair instead of the much bulkier balls of wool. Taking out a leather pouch filled with herbs he returned to the room. After making a paste from various dried-up leaves and roots, he applied a poultice to the woman's sore back, and also persuaded her to let him use it as a salve on her ravaged head.

Then the master followed the servant to the round corral. There, peacefully browsing, as innocent as any young sheep can be, no matter what the hue of its coat, was the black ewe with all her wool. As both men watched the glint of sun outlining her slow movements with gold, Agapito began to tell his story. When he was finished he looked at the *patrón* straight in the eye.

Dofia Isabel became a very happy lady although she never heard about what happened at San Blas. The village is no more because this took place a couple of centuries ago, before long periods of drought turned the high grasslands into a desert, when the shepherders abandoned their homes there, and the once shallow Río Puerco cut through the site to form the wide and deep black arroyo that you see today.