

Navaho Religion - Values Sought and Values Received

(PART ONE)

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THE NAVAJO Indians have long been a favorite group for anthropological investigation. Their artistry has become popularly known through their rugs, silver work and sand paintings. Almost as well known are their somewhat less appealing hogans, music and incredible coffee. But the things which have attracted students of culture to the Navaho have been their rugged character, group integrity and colorful religion. Like other Indian tribes, the Navahos have known cruel white pressures from without and the ravages of white diseases from within. But unlike most of the others, they have thrived in that hostile world.

Over two hundred years ago the Navahos were forced to find refuge from the Spanish in the Canyon de Chelly in eastern Arizona. They found a hard existence, but it afforded security from the Spanish, and to a degree from the Utes. Later the United States made several unsuccessful attempts through coercion and treaty to bring the Navaho into peaceful—and subordinate—relations. Finally the army, under Colonel Kit Carson, managed to conquer and capture most of them in 1863. (It poses an interesting question to ask how sizeable Union forces happened to be sent against Indians in the midst of the Civil War.) The 9,000 Navaho prisoners were marched 300 miles to Fort Sumner, and for five years death took its toll by disease, starvation, and exposure.¹ A few thousand Navahos had escaped capture, but the total number after the return of the captives represented a weakened and crushed rem-

nant. Their civilization might conceivably have died out—others have under circumstances no worse.

Today, however, their way of life is stronger than ever, and their population has approximately quadrupled itself, being well over 50,000. Their reservation, which covers a sizeable area in northeastern Arizona and northwestern New Mexico and very small portions of Utah and Colorado, is the largest in the nation. Moreover, this increase has occurred in spite of very high disease rates and living in a region where subsistence is not easily maintained. It is little wonder that white anthropologists have been interested in probing into their vigorous way of life.

The first careful studies of the Navaho were made at the close of the last century by Major Washington Matthews. He was regarded as a friend by the Navahos; he knew their language well; and he had that faithfulness for detail and reverence for accuracy which are so essential for the field worker. As a result of this happy combination, his monographs are regarded today as classics. In many respects his work, like that of Sir Edward Tylor, surpassed later studies by anthropologists of more extensive academic training. Since his time a great amount of literature has accumulated relative to Navaho life, perhaps more than regarding any other contemporary non-literate people.² And

¹ A good account of this sorry story is given in *The Navajo Indians* by Dana and Mary R. Coolidge (Boston: 1930).

² In addition to literary documents, collections of photographs and drawings are becoming numerous. A library of recordings of chants is being developed by the Laboratory of Anthropology at Santa Fe.

much of this data is reported and classified in the tradition of the best Boas methodology.

In this paper I propose to investigate some of the things which the Navahos expect from their religion, and compare that with what as a matter of fact they do receive from it.

This is not a simple undertaking, for neither values sought nor values found are precisely stated by any religion. The Navahos are no exception to this. In their sand paintings, for instance, it would seem that the purpose is to bring rain and good crops. For they contain many symbols of clouds, rain, lightning and fertility. But in most cases it is clear that agricultural values are not the chief objective. The crisis which in all probability precipitated the ritual was illness, and the sand which portrayed the rain symbols is rubbed on the body of the sick person. Nor can one safely infer directly from the sacred lore what the purpose of a given rite is. In the "War Dance," for example, the myth accompanying the ritual would seem to indicate a rite for the purification of one who has committed murder. For it tells of Slayer-of-Monsters and Child-of-Water, who became ill of blood contamination after slaying Yeitso. Their mother found a way to revive them with a concoction of herbs taken from where lightning had struck (an instance of the "golden bough" overlooked by Frazer). Although the rite was formerly used to treat swooning from blood contamination,³ it is used today primarily as a festival occasion. The connection between myth and value sought is distant at best, and, as with many other "explanatory stories," the purpose of the rite could not be deduced from the myth.⁴

Before comparing values sought and values received it will be necessary to survey some of the principal characteristics of Navaho religion. We will examine first their religious techniques

and then their mythology or beliefs. That will give the necessary background for consideration of the function of their religion in terms of values sought and values received.

I. Techniques of Navaho Religion

By "religious techniques" I refer to the overt activities in which people engage in religious behavior, including objects used and patterns followed.⁵ For purposes of analysis the techniques may be separated from the meaning which is given to them.⁶ We shall con-

³ It was so used at the time the Franciscan Fathers produced their great work: *An Ethnologic Dictionary of the Navaho Language* (St. Michaels, Ariz.: 1910), 366. This authoritative work on Navaho life at that time, as well as language, is valuable for comparison with later records to discover changes that have occurred. It is unfortunately extremely rare.

⁴ Such mistakes have been common. Equally common is the error of generalizing about Navaho life on the basis of limited areas of investigation or too limited sources of information. A striking example will be found in both Coolidge, *cit. sup.*, and A. M. Tozzer, "Notes on Religious Ceremonials of the Navaho," *Putnam Anniversary Volume* (N. Y., 1909), 229 ff. The theories advanced in these works as to the origin of Navaho lore are in opposition, yet seem reasonable enough on the basis of facts taken into consideration. In each case some important factors were overlooked. Even the most guarded generalizations about Navaho life will be subject to outstanding exceptions.

⁵ I am utilizing Professor Bernhardt's analysis of religion into "technique, interpretation and function," which will be obvious to any student of his. (See *Journal of Religion*, xxiii, 280 ff.) I trust that my indebtedness to his application of that analysis to the Trobrianders will be equally obvious.

⁶ This separation must be recognized as a post facto convenience, as is brought out by C. Kluckhohn, "Myths and Rituals: A General Theory," *Harvard Theological Review*, xxi (Jan. 1942), 45 f. In this section I am dealing specifically with techniques used to gain values by means other than direct manipulative techniques, which I consider to define religious techniques. (See Bernhardt in *The Iliff Review*, iii, 32.)

sider (A) Divination, (B) Exorcism, (C) Medicine, (D) Charms.

(A) **Divination techniques** are those whose purpose is to gain knowledge by mystical or non-investigative means. Usually this knowledge is not obtainable by normal methods of investigation. The Navahos do not attempt to predict the future so much as to read the hidden meaning and events of the past, although they do have various omens: the horned toad indicating good luck, the crow indicating bad luck, success or failure indicated by flights of birds or dreams.⁷ But the principal method of divination is "hand-trembling."

In hand-trembling the inspired person is seized with a convulsive trembling of the arm, accompanied by a temporary diffusion of consciousness. During the experience a transmission of knowledge takes place. Hand-trembling may be used to find a lost article, or to determine the cause of an illness (i. e. to reveal some past transgression), or to determine what Chant should be used to effect a cure. As Dr. Kluckhohn has said, the hand-trembler belongs to the "shamanistic" tradition, "there is no formal instruction and a minimum of lore; it is a question of direct "gift."⁸ He has listed several accounts of how persons said they came to be hand-tremblers. A typical example:

When I was about fifteen I lay down in the shade at noon one day and took a nap. I was alone. I had been out all morning with the sheep. All of a sudden I woke up and my arm was shaking hard and I couldn't stop it for about fifteen minutes. I told people about that but it was three years before anybody asked me to find out what was making them sick.

Hand-tremblers may aid their thought by making symbols in the sand, and prefacing the trance with a prayer to the Gila monster spirit.

(B) **Exorcism Techniques** are those

whose purpose is to expel evil or harmful powers from the human body and spirit: They are essentially negative: rites of cleansing.

Exorcism may best be described in connection with the Chant. The Chant or Song is the great Navaho religious technique; it includes practically all smaller techniques in one way or another. The Chant requires careful and elaborate preparation of sacred objects, a strict observance of correct routines throughout, and the full cooperation and attention of many people. It lasts from two to nine days. If the crisis is serious enough and the time of year right, a nine day Chant may be decided upon.

First of all the Singer must be engaged. He belongs to the "priestly" tradition—in contrast to the diviner—and is a specialist or trained technician in the complex lore of the Chant. He must memorize minute details governing myths, songs, prayers, sacred articles, paintings, dances and every procedure of a given Chant. His memory must not be approximate for like an electrician he is dealing with high voltage, and mistakes are disastrous. Consequently it takes years of concentrated study for an apprentice to become a Singer. There is probably no single activity in our own culture which places comparably exacting demands upon a man's memory. Only a few Chants could be learned in a lifetime.⁹

⁷ Franciscan Fathers, *op. cit.*, CRJ. Also F. J. Newcomb (A. and F. Newcomb), *Navajo Omens and Taboos* (Santa Fe: 1940), 58 f.

⁸ C. Kluckhohn, "Some Personal and Social Aspects of Navaho Ceremonial Practice," *Harvard Theol. Rev.*, xxxii (1939), 67, 69. On Navaho approach to disease cf. L. C. Wyman, "Navaho Diagnosticians," *American Anthropologist*, xxxviii (1936), 236 ff.

⁹ The tremendous verbal memory required may be understood by examining the texts and interpretations of Berard Haile. Cf., e. g., *Origin Legend of the Navaho Enemy Way* (Yale Univ. Publications in Anthropology, No. 19, 1938), or "Navaho Chant-

The objects gathered in preparation for the Chant must be collected and prepared under so many exacting and difficult circumstances that, as many writers have observed, it is utterly impossible to meet all of the requirements. There are prayer-sticks (Kethawns), cigarets (also considered as prayers as they are smoked), pollen mixtures, feathers, masks, baskets, paint, charcoal, etc.¹⁰

The first four days of a major (nine day) Chant are devoted primarily to the purification of the patient, and the expulsion of the evil forces that have caused the illness or other danger. The sweat-house is one means of exorcism. It is a small hogan, so constructed that hot stones may be placed beneath the patient. The walls keep in enough of the heat radiated to cause large amounts of perspiration. Songs often attend the sweating procedure. The sweat-house is used frequently during the first four days of a major Chant, but it may be used on other occasions, sometimes just for bodily cleansing apart from any ritualistic significance. A Navaho who had journeyed away from the Reservation would probably take a sweat bath for riddance of both dust and evil clinging to the body.¹¹ Bathing with water and yucca suds is also used. Another type of exorcism is accomplished by pressing prayer-sticks, highly decorated sticks, on the body. These are placed around the sacred fire in radiating fashion, the fire being in the center, beneath the smoke-hole. The Singer then applies the heated end to the patient's body, beginning with the soles of the feet and progressing towards the head. (Witchcraft, of course, moves in the opposite direction so that evil mana will be forced into the person.) The Singer gives particular attention to that portion of the body which is in pain. The prayer-stick is blown upon toward the smoke hole, as Matthews says:

as if blowing away some evil influ-

ence which the sacrifices (kethawns) were supposed to draw from her body When the song had ceased some of the assistants took the bundles of sacrifices out of the lodge, no doubt to bury them according to the method proper for those particular kethawns.¹²

Another technique of exorcism is the passing through hoops, the meaning of which will be considered later.

In certain Evil Way Chants, where the patient proceeds each of the first four mornings through five hoops toward the ceremonial hogan from east, west, south, north, on successive mornings, there is an out of door bath following this processing through the hoops.¹³

ways and Ceremonials," *American Anthropologist*, xl (1938), 639 ff., or recent publications by Univ. of Chicago Press. Father Haile's studies are indispensable for Navaho investigation. Demands upon the Singer's memory for patterns of action are even greater than for verbal memory!

¹⁰ I am dependent upon Matthews' works and *Ethnologic Dictionary*.

¹¹ As Frazer observed: "It is believed that a man who has been on a journey may have contracted some magic evil Hence, on returning home he has to undergo certain purificatory ceremonies." (*Golden Bough*, 1922 ed., 197). It is interesting to note that the Navaho boys returning home from the armed forces generally undergo purificatory rites. In talking with young people who left the Reservation for war work or service, I received a strong impression that many of them were not at ease back on the Reservation. As one girl who was leaving the Reservation after a visit, put it: "Oh yes! I'm glad to go back (to work in a city). It's very interesting There's nothing to do in Fort Defiance." (1945). The young people who do return to their culture permanently would certainly have to go through rites of cleansing to feel at ease there again.

¹² W. Matthews, "The Mountain Chant: A Navajo Ceremony," *Fifth Annual Report of the Bureau of Ethnology*, Washington: h383, 37 f.

¹³ C. Kluckhohn and L. C. Wyman, "An Introduction to Navaho Chant Practice," *American Anthropological Association, Memoirs*, lxxx (1940), 93.

Other means of exorcism include sucking, body paint which is washed off, fumigation, passing over a fire, stepping over Kethawns, whistling, spitting, mud paint. The whole effort is bent on separating the body from evil which it has accumulated by forcing it to leave with mana-magnetic objects or passing over barriers which the evil cannot easily cross.

Finally, one important means of exorcism, which usually begins the day's ritual, is group emesis. Since the Chant is to benefit all who participate in it, all must be prepared for it. In the application of the heated prayer-sticks to the body, for instance, the others present repeat the activity when the patient is through. Again, as Matthews describes the process, which takes place in the presence of intense heat causing profuse sweating:

... they take the hot emetic infusion of fifteen kinds of plants mixed together. A little sand is placed in front of each to receive the ejected material. After the emetic has acted the fire is removed, deposited some paces to the north of the lodge, and allowed to die out. Each devotee's pile of sand is then removed (beginning with that of the man who sat in the east and going round the circle) and deposited one after another, in a line north of the sacred fire.¹⁴

The vomitus of each succeeding day is buried farther north for the four days on which emesis is practiced.

These examples will serve to show the importance of exorcism techniques in Navaho religion. They precede the more positive techniques, and in minor instances are regarded as almost sufficient in themselves. The riddance of evil is not accomplished merely by any cleansing or symbolically expulsive activity—exorcism is done in certain precise ways, with properly prepared objects, and following ritual prescriptions governing the most minute details. Moreover, they must be repeated sev-

eral times. For evil is not easily shed.

(C) **Medicine techniques** are those whose purpose is to bring helpful forces and powers into right and active relation with the human body and spirit. They are essentially positive: rites of blessing.

Medicinal objects (medicine—"Aze") are associated with some extraordinary natural powers, and are always associated to some degree with the gods. The paraphernalia of medicine is as elaborate as that of exorcism. Prayer-sticks, cigarets, incense, rattles, drums, bull-roarers (whirling noise makers), stones, charms, feathers, prescriptions, masks, paints and incantations are used in positive medicinal ways. (Some objects, like prayer-sticks, are used in both exorcism and medicine functions.) The main function of medicine is to bring helpful power, associated with the spirits, especially the good spirits, to the Navaho. As the "Ethnologic Dictionary" says:

The existence of evil is attributed to the wrath of the dinaee, or Peoples, such as the Animals, Winds, Lightnings, etc. Much evil disease and bodily injury is due also to secret agents of evil, in consequence of which the belief in witchcraft, spell, dreams and shooting of evil is widely spread. Accordingly, too, of the two forms of worship, one against evil, the other for blessing, the former is presumably in greater demand, but is subordinate to, and always accompanied by, the latter.¹⁵

The most spectacular and powerful medicine is the sand painting.¹⁶ These "paintings" are worked out according to the directions of the Singer, each detail being prescribed by the unwritten traditions. Colored sands and charcoal, finely powdered and variously

¹⁴ *Op. cit.*, 419.

¹⁵ *Op. cit.*, 346.

¹⁶ Cf. the studies of Gladys A. Reichard on Sand Paintings.

mixed, are spread upon the ground in a large and exquisite pattern. The intricacy and brilliance of these large paintings make a striking effect. The top of the painting faces east. Rain gods, snakes, lightning and other natural phenomena are pictured, together with more abstract symbols. The variety of the paintings is amazing, and the memory of the Singers more so. A different painting is constructed each day during the blessing portion of the Chant, and each must be destroyed before sundown. After the sand is applied to the patient, it is used by all, especially upon any bruises or sores that one may have. The small degree of discrepancy that one finds in comparing a given sand painting as made at different times and places testifies to the accuracy with which the Singer's lore has been transmitted in modern times.¹⁷

Pollen is another type of medicine. Its origin is obscure, but undoubtedly once represented fertility.¹⁸ To the Navaho today it is medicine, used in the blessing portion of the Chant or rubbed on a hogan or something else that is to be blessed. Some types of pollen may be eaten. Pollen consists of various ingredients, corn, herbs and animal fetishes. Its purpose is always medicinal in a broad and positive sense.

The song may also be considered as a type of medicine. Songs accompany most of the activities of the ritual. The words often have little or no specific meaning, containing repeated phrases about the gods and good fortune. Older songs have lapsed into syllables whose meaning cannot be explained by contemporary Navahos. The important thing is that the songs are considered to have a genuine potency per se. No distinction is made between the symbol for something and the thing itself, or if made, such a distinction will be hazy at best. Washington Matthews tells of a Singer who became frightened from talking about the lower worlds, because

he feared that he had picked up some evil while (mentally) wandering in this dangerous territory. He also feared that some of his (spiritual) fingernails, shed hair, footprints and excreta might have been left behind, giving some evil one materials with which to work sympathetic magic upon him. This identification of essence with symbol has led to the typical fear of letting one's name be known, and to a general caution about pictures and symbols.

The song embodies a potency of blessing just as the pollen or sand painting. It is learned with great care and persistence in the deep of night, and songs are traded on commercial basis, like any valuable possession. Three examples, indicating the tendency to repetition and affirmation, follow:

The World before me is restored in beauty,

The World behind me is restored in beauty,

The World below me is restored in beauty,

The World above me is restored in beauty,

All things around me are restored in beauty.

All things around me are restored

¹⁷ It does not follow that techniques have been as accurately transmitted in past generations. Changes are made when necessary, as the substitution of other items for the scalp called for in some rites. Singers are generally more conscious of liability to error than they had any reason to be fifty years ago because of improved transportation and the presence of white anthropologists. References to horses in some myths definitely proves how new items creep into the lore, for the Spanish introduced the animal to them. On the development of religious techniques cf. P. Radin, *Primitive Religion, Its Nature and Origin* (N. Y.: 1937), 59ff.

¹⁸ Pollen has been unearthed to the east of the cliff houses, establishing it as several centuries old, and possibly indicating its prior use by the Pre-Pueblo peoples. The use of it by the Navaho at weddings and crop blessings maintains something of the original meaning.

beauty.

My voice is restored in beauty.
It is restored in beauty,
It is restored in beauty,
It is restored in beauty,
It is restored in beauty.¹⁹

In beauty I walk.

With beauty before me, may I walk.
With beauty behind me, may I walk.
With beauty all around me, may I walk.

In old age wandering on a trail of beauty, lively, may I walk.

In old age wandering on a trail of beauty, living again, may I walk.

It is finished in beauty.

It is finished in beauty.²⁰

He lays corn pollen and harvest-fly down.

He lays them beautiful.

Everlasting and Peaceful.

Beautiful.

He lays it beautiful.

He lays it beautiful.

He lays it beautiful.

He lays it beautiful.²¹

(D) **Charm Techniques** are those whose purpose is to ward off evil which might come and/or make the way more accessible for good fortune to come to an individual. Charms do not exorcise evil; they are preventative. They are not so clearly regarded as health giving as the medicines we have mentioned, but are similar in so far as they are considered harbingers of good luck and success. Obviously the Navahos would make no clear distinction here, and I do so only for clarity and completeness of analysis. As in other cultures, trinkets and personal rituals abound.

The distinguishing thing about charms is that they are thought of as personal property. There will be no hesitation about making a charm of any trifle, especially turquoise, if it is thought to have potency. The Chants, including exorcism and medicine, are thought of as belonging to the Navaho

people, having been given them by the gods. But charms, although used personally in the Chant, belong to the individual. Thus there are private tabus, along with the complex social tabus, curses, witchcraft and other strictly individualistic religious techniques.

There are many techniques in addition to these mentioned. However, this summary treatment will have served its purpose if it has emphasized the diversity and complexity of overt behavior patterns in Navaho religion, the priestly function of the Singer as differentiated from the diviner, the negative exorcism as contrasted with and complementary to the positive medicinal techniques, and the rigid exacting regulations governing the use of techniques.

II. Interpretation in Navaho Religion

By "religious interpretation" I refer to the meaning and explanations given to religious techniques and to the environment in which those techniques are considered effective. Naturally the interpretation given to methods of achieving values will require interpretation of the world which responds to those methods and its relationship to human welfare.

The Navahos have an extensive mythology, including a cosmology, escha-

¹⁹ Quoted by Matthews in "Prayer of a Navajo Shaman," *American Anthropologist*, I (1888) 9. The word "beauty" does not mean merely pretty, but includes a quasi mystical sense for which we have no equivalent term. Perhaps the words 'harmony' and 'empathy' connote something of the Navaho thought. This word meaning beauty - harmony - goodness - healthfulness - abundance is quite important in Navaho religion.

²⁰ Quoted in A. H. and D. C. Leighton, "Elements of Psychotherapy in Navaho Religion," *Psychiatry: Journal of the Biology and Pathology of Interpersonal Relations*, iv (Nov. 1941), 523.

²¹ Quoted in Coolidge, *op. cit.*, 133. The most familiar Navaho prayer is probably the one to Dsiyli Neyani translated by Cronyn. (See Hill, *World's Great Relig. Poetry*, 456.)

tology and interpretations of man, the spirits, the surrounding environment and the meaning of their religious techniques. By explaining the ways of the spirits and the why of human fortune, the mythology provides the basis for the efficacy of the techniques. We shall consider interpretation under these headings: (A) Origin Myths, (B) Beliefs About the Ritual, (C) Interpretation of the Environment, (D) Interpretation of the Individual.

(A) **Origin Myths** are stories whose purpose is to explain the source of a technique. They are a necessary part of all Navaho ritual, and must be retold in connection with every performance. In the case of the Chant the attendant Origin Myths are lengthy epics. These myths make good stories, and may be told just for entertainment without the ritual prescriptions which they normally include. The myths invite elaboration, and the wide differences between the versions of a single myth are interesting when compared with the near identity of sand paintings and ritual.

As a rule the Origin Myth tells of some god or animal or original Navaho hero who went through an experience in which he encountered serious trouble. The difficulty was finally overcome by use of some complicated technique. This established a precedent, or "Way." The epic heroes gained their knowledge from the gods and by their favor. The ritual then may or may not follow the events of the myth in some way, but use will invariably be made of the medicines which were used (and prescribed) in the story. Consider this passage from the Mountain Chant Origin Myth:

At dawn the old man woke them and said: "Go out, my children, and build a sweat-house, and make a fire to heat stones for the bath, and build the sweat-house only as I will tell you. Make the frame of four different kinds of wood. Put kac (juniper) in

the east, tse' iscazi (mountain mahogany) in the south, cestin (pinon) in the west, and awetsal (cliff rose) in the north; join them together at the top and cover them with any shrubs you choose. Get two small forked sticks, the length of the forearm, to pass the hot stones into the sweat-house, and one long stick to poke the stones out of the fire, and let all these sticks be such as have their bark abraided by antlers of the deer. (etc.)²²

In addition to providing the authoritative precedent for ritual prescriptions, the Origin Myths provide a means for the transmission of much Navajo lore. It is through these myths that the Navaho child becomes acquainted with the traditions which explain how his people came to this place, how they acquired their religious knowledge, why one must be cautious to observe the traditional rules, and why one should be proud of his heritage. The Blessing Way Chant, which is basic to the other thirty some Chants, is cosmological. As Father Haile says of it:

... legends, songs and prayers are chiefly concerned with the creation and placement of the earth and sky, sun and moon, sacred mountains and vegetation, the inner forms of these natural phenomena, the control of the he and she rains, dark clouds and mist, the inner forms of the cardinal points and life phenomena that may be considered the harbingers of blessing and happiness.²³

The gods (Peoples) created the Navaho, and before departing to their homes at the cardinal points, gave the earth crea-

²² Matthews, "Mountain Chant," 399 f.

²³ *Some Cultural Aspects of the Navaho Hogan* (Fort Wingate, Ariz.: 1935). Origin stories in detail may be found in most any general book on the Navaho, and verbatim in technical reports. Cf., e.g., W. Matthews, "Navaho Myths, Prayers and Songs, With Texts and Translations," *Univ. of Calif. Publications in American Archaeology and Ethnology*, v (Sept. 1907).

ture their knowledge. Other versions²⁴ tell of the emergence from the underworlds, of the help of the Animals, or of the end of the world which will come when the Navahos forget the "Blessing Way."²⁵

It is not difficult to understand why the telling of the Origin Myths should be such an important activity among a people who have no written language. Quite naturally bits of history,²⁶ practical advice, philosophical insight and humor have been woven into the narrative from time to time. As with the Pentateuch, priestly formulas are woven in with folk tales and observations and explanations of life, although in the case of the Navaho lore these strands are not reducible to prior documents. In the creation story, as told by Long Mustache of Klag-e-toh,²⁷ the problem of evil is dealt with. After Slayer has had many adventures and conquered many evil beings, he has the following experience:

But when he thought the land was freed of all evil, he spied four ugly strangers. They were Cold and Hunger, Poverty and Death, and straight-way he went to destroy them.

Cold, who is an old woman, freezing and shivering, says to him:

"You may kill me if you wish . . . But if you do, it will always be hot. There will be no snow, and no water in the summer. You will do better to let me live."

The Slayer can see the wisdom in her warning, and allows her to live. Hunger, Poverty and Death, each represented by appropriate garb and appearance, are spared too, as they say in turn:

(Hunger): "If you kill me . . . the people will lose their appetites. There will be no more pleasure in feasting and eating.

(Poverty): "Kill me . . . and put me out of misery. But if you do your old clothes will never wear out, the people will never make new ones.

(Death): "If you slay me . . . your people will never increase. The worthless old men will not die and give up their places to the young. Let me live and your young men will marry and have children. I am your friend, though you know it not."

The Origin Myths are the great medium of religious interpretation, just as the Chant is the great inclusive technique.

(B) **Beliefs About the Ritual** are those assumptions whose purpose is to regulate behavior and attitude in a general way; they include the assumptions not necessarily stated in the myths about propriety, purpose of the rite, importance of the occasion. It is taken for granted, for example, that one will be attentive during the Chant, that one will think "good thoughts," that all gossip will be avoided, that one will avoid all possible sources of contamination, that tabus are especially potent during the Chant, that the ritual must be performed in the correct way to be efficacious. If one inquires about the meaning of various elements of the Chant, the answers may reveal many beliefs and purposes not included in any way in the Origin Myth. The thing which Malinowski observed in connec-

²⁴ *Ethnologic Dictionary*. Also L. C. Wyman, "Navaho Eschatology," *American Anthropologist*.

²⁵ This threat is of course a later addition when the sacred lore has begun to be neglected by some, and the prestige of the Singer is less secure. The younger generation's tendency to question the ways of their fathers has become an increasingly troublesome issue, but does not indicate any great departure from ways of the past.

²⁶ The oldest fragment of history seems to be a reference to the quarrel with the Apaches. They, like the Navahos, are of Athabaskan lineage, and were once in close association, but somewhere along the line of their slow southern migration the two parted company by mutual agreement.

²⁷ As reported in Coolidge, *op. cit.*, 130 f. This version of the story differs considerably from that in the *Ethnologic Dictionary* (346 ff.), indicating that such interpolations creep into the myths without difficulty.

tion with the Trobrianders applies here:

... perhaps the most remarkable feature of this magic is the discrepancy between its meaning as revealed in an objective analysis of spell, rite and context, and its aim as laid down in the comments of everybody concerned, including the officiating magician himself.²⁸

The specific function of a rite is not fixed, and in the face of some crisis, a Chant may be used for a purpose somewhat different from the usual one. It will be assumed by those participating that the Chant is intended to deal with the problem facing them.

Certain rules are universally observed in Navaho life. It is tacitly supposed that these will be followed. The most important is the progression "with the sun," i. e. beginning at the east, then moving to the south, to the west, and concluding with the north. All ritual activities must move in this four-point clockwise manner, and many non-ritualistic activities unconsciously follow it. This has led to attribution of strong significance to the number four in everything, and associations of activity with direction. The hogan door faces east. During religious activities men frequently sleep with their heads to the east. If someone should die in a hogan, before it is permanently abandoned, as it would be, the corpse would be removed through a small opening in the north. The helpful spirits live to the east, of course, and the treacherous ones to the north. Hence no protective border is required for the east side of a sand painting, but a black line always shuts off the north. Each direction has its color: east—white, south—blue, west—yellow, north—black. Also, numerous social rules are strictly observed at the time of the Chant.²⁹

During the progress of the Chant, although most tabus are considered stronger, the Navaho feels safe in handling sacred objects which would

ordinarily be considered very dangerous. Presumably this is because of the identification of men with the spirits during the Chant. When masks are used the dancers do not merely represent the gods, but each becomes in effect the being whose part he enacts. There is danger, however, from too much constant contact with religious matters. One may become ill from too much hand-trembling, attending too many Chants, singing too many songs. Matthews tells of a prayer which must not be recited more than once a day, and then only in its entirety.³⁰ And a complex system of regulations governs the use of the Chants, some for instance can be performed only "when the thunder is silent and the rattlesnake is hibernating." There is an accumulation of beliefs about the ritual itself, which are assumed whether stated or not, and which are necessary to the total picture of purpose, procedure and efficacy of the rites.

(C) **The Interpretation of the Environment** includes those beliefs about the world, whose purpose is to make the world intelligible—i. e. its events capable of explanations which harmonize with beliefs held about religious techniques. The religious interpretation of the surrounding world, its phenomena and forces, is the necessary foundation upon which a religious system claims to rest. It does not project sophisticated ideas into the primitive mind to speak of a non-technical people's "world-view," if that be taken to mean the interpretations and explanations given to the natural environment in relation to their religious techniques. Or, to approach it from another angle, the religious interpretation of the environment may be understood as such explanation as is given to the uni-

²⁸ B. Malinowski, *Coral Gardens and Their Magic* (London: 1935), i, 226.

²⁹ Cf. Kluckhohn, "Some Personal and Social Aspects

³⁰ "Prayer of Navajo Shaman," 5.

verse in so far as it is thought to be related to human welfare, values and density. It is "the interpretation of the existential medium . . . under the impulse of religious needs."³¹

That so-called primitive man does re-interpret his life and his world, giving it a kind of coherence and intelligibility, as well as a direct relationship to his religious techniques, there can be no doubt. There is, in fact, a sort of rigid consistency in his views of life and its matrix. The world-view of a culture is the surrounding and supporting interpretation in which specific religious techniques and beliefs operate and find their justification. This is not to say that the world-view precedes the adoption of a given technique — the process undoubtedly works both ways, the world-view conditioning adoption of techniques and the modification of the world-view by newly adopted techniques—but is to say that the environmental interpretation is kept generally consistent with specific beliefs about specific religious practices.

A tabu is one form of religious interpretation of the environment. A power to punish is read into some natural object or behavior pattern. The environment must be so understood as to contain this power. With the Navahos there are tabus against killing a rattlesnake, against a man's being seen by his mother-in-law, against marriage within one's own clan, against eating bear meat, fish, uncooked meat, against grave robbing or living in a hogan where someone has died. At a glance it can be seen that some of these are but distantly related to the Chant, others directly, but that all enter into his view of his surroundings and the significance of his religion in that enveloping world.

The Navahos have a fairly complicated interpretation of their environment and the gods and laws which control it. The earth is Changing-Woman (or White-Shell-Woman), who blesses

the Navahos so abundantly, and who returns to youth each spring. As with most religions, her union with the Sun produced human life — in this case, Slayer. To the east lives Dawn-Boy, to the south Gila-Monster, to the north First-Woman, who gives hunger and cold, and who once slew her own children. There are many other gods, such as the Hogan God who built Turquoise Mountain (Mt. Taylor), who are identified with various aspects of nature. Most of the gods dwell at one of the cardinal points, including Zenith and Nadir.³²

In addition to the deities, who to this date have not been satisfactorily classified by anthropologists, there is an over-all system of law. The deities are not free agents, although to some degree they may be persuaded to act in favor of human beings. They, as humans, are subject to the laws and forces of the world. The principal difference is that the gods know more about these laws, they have the power to influence human actions, and of course have abilities which the earth-bound creatures do not. On the other hand, the gods, like the shades of old, are not too intelligent, and must do man's bidding when the ritual is correctly carried out. It is not accurate to de-personalize the operation of spiritual laws. For whereas some tabus seem to be automatic in dispensing punishment upon a transgressor, others are personal in operation, and in breaking the law one has offended a god who will await a suitable opportunity to retaliate.

³¹ W. H. Bernhardt, *The Iliff Review* iii, 32. The entire discussion in that article is to the point here. Cf. Also Malinowski, *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (London: 1922), 62ff., A. O. Lovejoy and Boas, *Primitivism and Related Ideas in Antiquity* (Baltimore: 1935), I, 447 ff., and Kluckhohn, "Myths and Rituals."

³² Cf. A. H. and D. C. Leighton, *The Navaho Door: An Introduction to Navaho Life* (Cambridge, Mass.: 1944), 35.

Life, then, is lived within an over-all complexity of cause and effect. No misfortune occurs but had its cause in spiritual terms, of which the physical event was but the effect, and the physical cause—to borrow a Thomist term—a mere “agent.” This world-view tends to resolve itself into dualistic interpretations. Not that we have here any systematic philosophical dualism, but dualistic elements: opposing and irreducible forces or realities. The oppositions of light-dark, he-she, good-evil, warm-cold, are emphasized in the ritual and construction of sacred objects, as well as in the interpretation of nature.

Within this environmental interpretation, the Navaho has room for much freedom and happiness. His life is not ridden with a burdensome religion as much as some writers have made out. At the same time it must be recognized that such an interpretation as the Navaho gives the world has its depressing effect and inspires a great amount of fear on occasion. One is never alone, but always in the company of invisible spirits, perhaps in the presence of spirits of the dead. This does not bother a Navaho as much as it would one of naturalistic mind, were he suddenly transported to such a world-view, but it is not conducive to a general cheerfulness or gaiety. The danger of breaking a tabu or offending a spirit is constant. The possibility of being punished momentarily for some past transgression, unwittingly committed, always hangs over one. Moreover, witchcraft is a cause of intense fear. Navahos will not easily converse about witchcraft, but it is practised throughout the Reservation. It is made efficacious by the same laws which operate through the legitimate ritual, and fear runs high when one suspects that he is the victim of witchcraft. The undercover existence of witchcraft adds to the uneasiness of the environment. But for all this the Navahos are a happy people, inclined to be contented, and

always possessing dignity, their great virtue. The underlying mental tenseness, like the happiness, is not given much outward expression, but it is very real. Professor Willoughby's observation applies to them as well as to antiquity:

... the ordinary man of that time was inclined to regard the spirits and demons of his universe with fear and blank terror even. Out of this unfortunate attitude there developed irrational beliefs and absurd practices, difficult to understand at this distance in time, but broadly intended to establish and maintain safe relationships with man's spiritual environment.³³

One result of this environmental interpretation is a tendency to accept fate without murmur. Losses of relatively large amounts of money, perhaps a year's earnings, will be sustained after an unsuccessful wager on a horse race with a shrug of the shoulders—reminiscent of Oriental fatalism. There is no attempt to revive the dead or engage in necromancy. If during a Chant death appears certain, the ceremony stops and the Singer accepts the inevitable. In the Navaho autobiography, “Son of Old Man Hat,” the inexorable working of the hero's fate because of an earlier transgression is accepted without question.³⁴

The Navaho's world-view is orderly and makes intelligible the events of his life. The environment is considered held together by laws and alive with forces and beings who may be kept more or less in balance by religious techniques. Evil, which is more tenacious than good, is associated predominantly with what we call the supernatural. But the great goddess Changing-Woman, associated with natural processes, is benevolent, and with the

³³ *Pagan Regeneration* (Chicago: 1929), 6.

³⁴ W. Dyk, ed., *cit. sup.* (N. Y.: 1938), 273

other kindlier spirits enables man to have a good and happy life.

(D) **Interpretation of Individual Life** is the beliefs and explanations whose purpose is to set a personal destiny within the larger pattern of environmental interpretation.

The sense of individualism is strong with the Navahos, and each person has his own story, his own distinct personality and his own bundle of experiences which determine his destiny. There is danger in drawing a general picture of a culture that the impression will be given that the individuals within that culture are all much the same. The reading of any Navaho biography would correct such an error. For there are all degrees of acceptance and rejection of the native lore, all types of personality within the general cultural framework, and the culture does not strive particularly to suppress individualism. Children are taught almost from birth of the essential courtesies, proprieties and dignity, which makes them appear extremely well behaved to the visitor, but the social patterns allow much freedom of expression.

The interpretation of the life of an individual gradually emerges from stories told by the mother, conjectures made by diviners and self-interpretation as events come and go. Navahos are not reluctant to talk of themselves, allowing for their great reserve in all conversation, and their reminiscences

reveal considerable insight and personal interpretation. The way in which specific events are interpreted, private tabus arise and individual interpretations of life are worked out may be suggested in this example:

Many years ago Laura's grandmother was spinning yarn to make a blanket, when a thunderstorm passed over the place and a bolt of lightning killed her saddle-pony. Since then she will allow no member of her family to card the wool, spin, or weave while it is storming. The younger members of the family are inclined to treat her fears lightly and smile when they tell about them, but still they are afraid to disobey her rules of conduct.³⁵

Among the most powerful influences thought to affect one's life are those which result from events during pre-natal existence. These events, together with tabus broken from time to time, precautions taken, punishments suffered and evils feared, provide a real basis for the sense of individuality and personal destiny within the general environmental interpretation.

It remains now to consider the values which the Navaho seeks by means of his religious techniques and interpretations, and to compare those values with the ones which he actually does receive by means of his religion.

³⁵ Newcomb, *op. cit.*, 16.