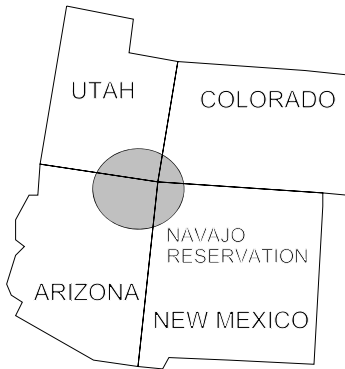


Article 10
Religion (Navajo)¹
James F. Downs



Religion – beliefs and rituals related to the supernatural – is important in virtually all humans societies. In tribal societies that lack strong political centralization, religion often serves to ensure tribal integration. Religion among the Navajo of Arizona, Utah and New Mexico, provides a shared account of what takes place and what, to them, has to take place to maintain the balance of nature. It also gives them a sense of identity and social cohesion by the fact that in its beliefs and ceremonies their religion symbolizes the organization of the Navajo flexible homestead based society. Cohesion among the Navajo is reinforced by the strong element of social control derived from the belief in witches, werewolves and other fearful supernatural forces against which the family and the homestead provide protection.

Perhaps no other aspect of Navajo life has been so thoroughly studied as has Navajo religious practices and beliefs. The consequence of this emphasis on religion has been the development of a somewhat out-of-focus view of the Navajo. Laymen, in particular, are apt to see the many works on religion and ritual as representing the priorities of Navajo culture and gain an impression a people totally immersed in the holy and the sacred and somehow isolated from the mundane and profane. Nothing could be further from the truth. The Navajo, being hard-headed and pragmatic, is as able to judge objective reality as the next man and can be just as concerned about material comfort and social status as others are. However, unlike us, his “being religious” does not preclude his acting in an everyday way. In short, the Navajo view of the supernatural does not really make that distinction. The universe is of a single piece; it is all natural, and man must adhere to its many laws. The laws however, are known - if not in detail to every Navajo, in general; he knows how to behave from time to time and situation to situation so that he may keep the universe in order and balance. To put his shoes on the wrong feet, as a very minor example, bring about his death, not because putting shoes on the wrong feet is a sin but because the order of the world has been for an instant shaken. Old men believe that the lack of rain in recent years is due to the fact that young men are cutting their hair after the fashion of the White man. Long hair encourages rain; it is the natural order of things, and the results are inevitable and understandable. To deny this order is as wrongheaded to a Navajo as it is to argue that is flat in our own world.

The famous anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski suggested many years ago that primitive magic was a kind of science or ancestor to science. Many people, perhaps most, have not agreed

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with that view totally, but in a sense the Navajo support this idea. For us, science, with its laws of motion and gravity and its knowledge of germs and microbes, provides a background of explanation for our actions and for the things which happen around us – rain storms, hurricanes, earthquakes, and the like. For the Navajo, his religion is the explanation not only for what happens but for what one must do in order to keep the universe in order.

We, with our nuclear weapons and pollutants, have only recently accepted the notion that we are responsible for destroying ourselves and our environment. The Navajo has for centuries lived with the idea that he, by some careless act, some small failure to observe proper behavior, could upset the balance of the world and create disaster. Thus his religion, if we may call it that, is a matter of constantly observing the laws of the universe rather than the commands of God. He has little real theology but much wisdom that can be applied to everyday life. There are many Navajo ritual practitioners but no body of Navajo priests. Some men speculate and imagine, while others do not, being satisfied merely to carry out the prescriptions of ritual. Thus, following models of religious study formulated in their own history, scientists and scholars of another culture impose the sort of order on Navajo theology that is implied even in this brief section. For instance, those who study the religion in depth have had great difficulty in distinguishing various mythological figures that appear, disappear, and reappear in Navajo mythology. This difficulty troubles us, but it does not seem to bother the Navajo, who are no more concerned with the incongruities of their origin story than the fundamentalist Christian is troubled by incongruities in Genesis.

The Myth

Dine, the Navajo term for themselves, means literally “People of the Surface of the Earth.” The origin myth of the Navajo describes the ascent of the ancestors of the People of the Surface of the Earth to the surface and the adventures and miraculous happenings that led to the establishing of traditional Navajo life. It could be considered an allegory describing the wanderings of the Athapaskan-speaking peoples and their eventual arrival in the Southwest. It incorporates elements of mythology that are almost universal in the New World. Some themes even appear to have relations to myth elements common in Asia. Certain aspects of myth and ritual reflect association with other Southwestern people, especially the Hopi and other Pueblo tribes. Still other things are unique to the Navajo or at least to the Southwestern Athapaskans.

Before there were Earth Surface People, there were, and are, the Holy People who once lived in the lowest of twelve worlds below the present surface of the earth. The Holy People are holy because they are powerful – not because they are perfect. It was in each instance some act of mischief or malice that forced the Holy People to move into a higher world. Usually one among them practiced witchcraft against the others and forced the move. In each world there were adventures and events that still have effect on the people of today. Practices were established, knowledge was created, and even special types of people appeared. For instance, in the third or fourth world (there is disagreement in the different versions of the myth) there appeared hermaphrodites or transvestites, men who dress and act like women. Such people today and in the past are somewhat venerated by the Navajo and considered to have potential supernatural power. In the last world but one, men and women quarreled bitterly and decided to live separately, each sex on the opposite side of the river. The men, according to the myth, lived quite harmoniously, learning the skills of women and even inventing some important household

implements and techniques. The women, on the other hand, after getting off to a good start, were unable to suppress their sexual urges. Details vary, but it would seem that they engaged in homosexual intercourse and also had intercourse with monsters. From these relations there sprang a whole series of monsters who were to plague the Navajo for a long time – some of them even today. Eventually the sexes reached a rapprochement and rejoined each other to live in traditional harmony. But soon a great flood began to fill the eleventh world, and the Holy People were forced to scramble up through a hollow reed to the surface of the earth.

On the earth, the natural objects were formed, the landscape shaped either by powers of the universe or by the Holy People themselves. Death appeared for the first time.

Prominent among the Holy People were First Man and First Woman, who were created from two ears of corn and who are felt by some to have created the Universe (or at least First Man is given that honor). But their important role is that of mother and father of Changing Woman, the most important figure in Navajo mythology. Her conception and birth were miraculous affairs, but the original pair raised her and trained and allowed her to mate with the Sun and with Water. This mating or matings (it's difficult to know) produced two sons, twins, who grew up to seek out their father the Sun and receive from him weapons and knowledge that allowed them to slay the monsters plaguing the earth and The People. The record of their victories is written in the landscape of the Navajo country. Prominent mountains, lava flows, and other natural features are identified with the carcasses of slain monsters.

The Twin Monster Slayers are considered by some students of the subject to be War Gods, and their lives serve as a model for traditional Navajo male behavior.

Their mother, however, is more properly thought of as a personification of the earth itself, for she is forever growing old and withered only to emerge again, as does the earth in the spring, as a young and beautiful woman.

These figures are certainly not the only ones in Navajo mythology. There are dozens of Holy People, and it is often hard to distinguish one from the other. Is White-Shell-Woman, for instance, a sister of Changing Woman, or is she Changing Woman herself in a different form? Each of these Holy People, or *Yei* as they are called in Navajo, is associated with specific natural features of the land, with other *yei*, and with aspects of the weather, vegetation, mineral deposits, and with certain animals. Perhaps one illustration of these complex relations is needed before we discuss religion as it is acted out in day-to-day life. In her book *Navajo Religion* [1950] Alice Riechard describes the relations of a single *yei*, Talking God. His direction is the west; color, yellow; mountain, Mt. Humphreys. He is related to the sunbeam, yellow clouds, and a yellow light in the evening. Among things used as jewels, he is the abalone shell. Among the birds he is symbolized by the yellow warbler, and as vegetation he is black or yellow corn. Other *yei* who live on Mt. Humphreys are White Corn Boy, Yellow Corn Girl, Evening Light Boy, and Abalone Girl. Dark Clouds, male (?) rain, yellow corn, and wild animals are also associated with this *yei*.

Every Navajo does not know or understand such a systematic approach to the *Yei* who today live at the various points of the compass and at zenith and nadir. However, practitioners are supposed to understand such symbolism so that they will not make errors in rituals. The *Yei* are not in our sense gods, although we often translate the word that way. They can misbehave, make errors, and act with malice. At the same time, they can be controlled and coerced as well as persuaded by proper ritual acts, and it is these acts that form a network of behavioral guideposts

for Navajo life. We cannot discuss them in detail but will simply examine some of the more important aspects of ritual and belief.

Daily Activities

It is customary for the eldest male of a Navajo homestead to begin the day at sunrise by singing a sacred song and dropping corn pollen, a singularly sacred substance in all Navajo and Hopi ritual, in the four cardinal directions. Throughout the day that follows, the routine is accompanied by endless and almost unconscious acts of ritual. A sacred song is frequently sung as the sheep herd is taken from the pen for grazing, and snatches of songs often semisacred in nature are heard throughout the day. The manufacture of various tools and utensils is accompanied by often elaborate ritual. The anthropologist Harry Tschopik has suggested that one reason that the Navajo so quickly abandoned native handmade utensils and tools such as baskets, pottery, saddles, and so on is that the ritual involved had become too elaborate and time-consuming, and when alternatives appeared in the form of manufactured goods, they were quickly accepted. Even the flat baskets used as part of the ritual payment to singers and medicine men in virtually all ceremonies are seldom made by the Navajo but instead purchased and repurchased from the local trader who, by long and complex routes, has received them from the Southern Paiute. The making of a bow and arrows is another activity requiring not only technical but also esoteric knowledge. Without the latter, the former would be useless, and the weapon would not perform satisfactorily.

Even such mundane acts as cooking are governed by characters from the mythological past. The simple act of baking a mud-covered prairie dog in the ashes of the cooking fire is explained in the humorous story of Badger and Coyote.

Badger was hunting prairie dogs and had killed a bunch when he met Coyote. Coyote was hunting, too, but he hadn't caught none of them prairie dogs. He saw all them prairie dogs that Badger had and he tried to figure out how to get them. He said to Badger, "Let's us have a race around that mesa, and the one who wins will get to eat all the prairie dogs." Badger he say, "O.K., but let's put them in the ashes of the fire to cook so they will be ready when we get back." So they built a fire and put the prairie dogs in the ashes with just their tails sticking out, and then they started to race. Well, Coyote was real fast, and pretty soon he was out of sight, and Badger he knew all the time that he couldn't run faster than Coyote. So when Coyote went behind the mesa, Badger he just run back to the fire and pull them prairie dogs out by their tails and ate them. And then he put just the tails back, sticking out of the ashes, and then he went off and hid. Pretty soon Coyote come around the mesa all tired and panting, and he figured he won the race, and so he ran over to the fire laughing about how he'd tricked Badger and grabbed them tails and pulled them out, but there wasn't nothing but tails, and old Badger he laughed and laughed, and that's why we cook prairie dogs the same way Badger and Coyote cooked them.

This story provides an example of how even the most minor aspects of Navajo life are shaped and influenced by references to the Navajo cosmology. Like most other American Indians, the

Navajo mythically recall a time when men and animals shared a single society, culture, and language. It is difficult to separate mythical prototypes of modern animals from the actual animals or to understand clearly in what form the actors in such stories appear.

Throughout their daily life, the Navajo also weave a network of sacred or semisacred songs. From the ritual singing at sunrise and while the sheep are being driven from the pen to the singing in the cornfields and during wood gathering, weaving, or spinning, the Navajo homestead is full of song. Sung softly to one's self or in loud self-confident tones, which are always startling in such a barren, generally silent country, the songs call up blessings or bring down protection on the singer, his herds, his family, or the enterprise in which he or she is involved.

One important combination of the sacred and the mundane is the ritual of the sweat-bath. An integral part of each Navajo homestead is a semisubterranean structure that is perhaps two feet deep, three or four feet above ground, and eight to ten feet wide. It is covered over with earth and entered through a very small door that is closed with blankets. This forms an almost airtight sweat room that can be heated to seemingly unendurable temperatures by placing heated rocks in one corner. Usually once a week, sometimes oftener the men of a homestead take a sweat-bath. The process is a long one requiring the collection of a large wood supply that is used to heat the sweat-rocks. When the rocks are properly heated, the fire-tender calls his companions, and, using a shovel, places the rocks in the sweat-house. Modern Navajo usually take a washtub filled with water as well as soap with them to the sweat lodge. All adult males are required to tie a string around their prepuce before entering the sweat-lodge. To fail to do this would be a very dangerous act. One of the signs of a boy's acceptance as an adult occurs when his father or uncle instructs him to use a prepuce string before entering the lodge. Such a boy is always looked upon with a great deal of envy by his younger contemporaries. Once the rocks are in place, as many men as the small room will hold crowd into the lodge and call to the fire-tender to cover the door. They then begin a round of songs calling for good health, fine healthy animals, good crops, rain, and wealth. The songs are sung in groups of four, and sweating continues through a complete cycle of four, eight, sixteen or even more, depending on the stamina of the sweaters and the size of their repertoire. When the song cycle is finished, the blankets are pulled away, and the sweaters emerge. They dry themselves by rolling in the dust, while praying softly to themselves, and then rinse off with water. Often two groups take turns, or individuals return for yet another cycle of sweating and singing. The sweat bath serves at one time the functions of cleanliness and worship. It can also, as do all other Navajo rituals, include a curing element. Minor ailments are often taken to the sweat-bath. Certain plants that are said to be good for stomach trouble or headaches are carried into the sweat-lodge. Less frequently, and always after sunset, the women of the homestead go to the sweat-house to use the rocks already heated by the men. This use, however, appears to have much less ritual content. Men must stay well away while the women are sweating, and female laughter can be heard for miles across the steppes.

Other aspects of religion and ritual that occur almost incessantly and casually are such things as a constant attention to omens and small personal ritual invocations for health, success, or rain. Regarding omens, one is always alert to signs of danger, the sounds of certain birds or animals, forgetfully putting one's moccasins on the wrong foot (an omen of death), and so forth. An example of a ritual invocation is picking up a horned toad, rubbing it over one's neck and chest, and freeing it along with a prayer to be carried to the forces of nature requesting good health. Also, rain can be encouraged by shooting a variety of swallow that appear in the Navajo country at

dusk. It is considered good luck for a traveler to place a stone or a bit of shell or turquoise on cairns established along trails throughout the Navajo country and to say a prayer. These cairns, standing visible for miles in the flat steppelands, mark well-traveled trails and often are as high as a man on horseback.

Sings and Singers

The acts described above constitute the daily, casual aspects of Navajo religion. The core of Navajo religious activities, however, is the person of the *hatli*, or "chanter," and the ceremonies (generally called "sings" in English) over which they preside. All ceremonial activities are based on special prayer songs, and one can make only an arbitrary distinction between sings and the ceremonies that will be discussed in the next section.

The Navajo chanter, frequently called a medicine man, is a person who has, through apprenticing him- or herself to an older person, learned certain sacred prayer songs connected with the origin myth. Song is considered an especially powerful force in Navajo life, and many persons have personal songs or know parts of sacred songs, which they sing for their own benefit. Only a recognized practitioner, however, can sing to effect a cure of another person. Singers do not constitute a separate caste of people. They live normal lives and are involved in herding and farming, although a popular singer may have little time for these activities, owing to the demands for his services.

There are many classifications of sings and chants developed by students of Navajo religion; however, we need only consider them in terms of length, elaborateness, and associated activities. In all cases, the expressed purpose of a sing is to cure. The ailment may be an obvious physical complaint or a vague feeling of uneasiness, or it may be overindulgence in drink, gambling, horse racing, marital infidelities, or laziness. There are many dozens of chants and songs and accompanying rituals, and one must know the proper one to use. For this purpose, a diagnostician is called. The singer is a skilled workman who has learned a song and its associated ritual. The diagnostician is a person with certain special talents for divining the basis of the complaint. Some diviners, as they are often called, can handle such mundane matters as finding lost articles and animals. Others have the power to understand what is the cause of a patient's complaint and recommend the proper song, ritual, or chant to effect the cure. Some diviners even specialize in getting to the bottom of domestic problems such as quarreling between members of an outfit.

Once a special song-ritual has been recommended, the patient and his family must send an intermediary to seek out a singer who knows the song, has the ritual paraphernalia, and who is willing to work for them. Sings vary from one-day to five-day affairs. Some may be performed only in a *hogan* of traditional design. Others can be performed even in the houses of White men. For others it might be necessary to remove the door from a log cabin or White-style house (called *kin* in contrast to the *hogan* or traditional-style dwelling). Still others may require that a special structure, in which the ritual can be performed, be built of brush. The shorter the sing, the fewer are the people involved. A one-night sing – actually taking place in two parts, one in the daytime and the other late at night until dawn – is attended only by the relatives residing in the homestead. But often in such cases it is not considered effective unless all the residents are present at certain parts of the ritual. In almost every instance, a sand painting or design of colored sands, earths, and pollens is made as the beginning step of the ritual, which ends hours later after a night of

continuous singing and intermittent ritual directed at the patient. The effectiveness of the performance is based on the skill of the singer, who must know the proper songs in word-for-word perfection, as well as the ritual acts.

Such semiprivate family affairs may last from one to five days, and the larger groups of relatives who often attend the longer sings are asked to share some of the expense of paying the singer. Certain traditional payments are made, such as ears of corn and a flat basket and frequently a tanned deerskin, but, in addition, food stuffs, blankets, sheep, and money are also required.

A singularly important family sing which reflects both the strong matriarchal orientation of Navajo culture and the relationship between Navajo and other Western American tribes is the Girls' Sing. This four-day ceremony is held to announce and celebrate a girl's first menstrual period. The Navajo believe that, during the period of her transition, a girl is particularly sensitive to influences that will affect her later life. She is, in fact, seen as an almost plastic being who can be easily injured and at the same time easily shaped into a proper mold. For four days, then, she remains quiet within her hogan and ventures out during the day only in the earliest dawn to collect wood, run, and act out other virtues of womanhood that reflect hardiness, energy, and a will to work. During each of the four nights she is the center of continuous ceremonial singing by her relatives and friends. The more guests who attend and the more vigorous their singing the more assured is the girl's future. Meanwhile the girl's mother or maternal relatives prepare a large cake of ground corn meal, flavored with sugar and dried fruits and baked in an earth oven. On the morning of the last day, the young woman emerges from her seclusion, and the cake is distributed to all the visitors who come through the faint dawn to congratulate her and her family with their presence.

Public Ceremonies

In contrast to the essentially private, family-oriented sings, there are a number of public ceremonies that include entire communities, in fact, the entire Navajo people. They are, however, not in any sense communal ceremonies. At the base is the same rationale as for the simplest of sings, the need of a person to find a cure for a physical, psychological, or spiritual complaint. In essence there is no difference, save in complexity, between the sings and chants discussed above and the larger ceremonies. The primary emphasis is one of curing, and any ceremony must have one or more patients as a focus of the ritual. However, two types of ceremonies have accumulated a superstructure of social activities, which make of them something far different than a simple curing sing. There are two classes of these ceremonies, depending on when they are performed. The actual chants and rituals performed during the ceremony may differ according to the diagnosis and the skills of the chanter employed.

The Squaw Dance

Perhaps the most famous and most frequent of these ceremonies is the so-called Squaw Dance, which refers to the social, not the religious, aspects of the occasion. This can be performed only during the warm months, usually after April, although occasionally Squaw Dances have been held as early as March. Originally the Squaw Dance centered on ritual aimed at removing evil influences from the persons of warriors returning from a raid. The association with foreigners, the

exposure to death, and the ultimate danger of actually having killed, placed a returning fighter in an extremely dangerous position. Such a purification required four days and nights of ritual overseen by a medicine man familiar with complex chants, sand paintings, and other rituals. To be properly effective, it requires the participation of as many people as possible to lend their assistance to the medicine man and to increase the strength of the ritual through their presence and singing. Paying the chanter and his assistants and feeding the assembled visitors then becomes an undertaking too expensive to be supported by a single homestead group. To meet these expenses the hosts – that is, the family of the patient – call on the most distant of relatives in the matrilineal group as well as groups related through marriage. Guests are also expected to make contributions of food or money, although this is not required and hospitality is extended to anyone who appears. A Squaw Dance given by a rich person or by a family with many connections then may entertain several hundred and sometimes more than a thousand guests. Although the ritual is overtly directed at individual patients, the entire ceremony takes on a communal aspect inasmuch as it requires the cooperation of many people in its planning and execution. Moreover, it also has a spatial dimension, as the ceremonies and attendant social activities take place at three different locations during the course of the four days.

The decision to have such a ceremony rests originally with a single individual who feels ill or suspects that a ritual cure might relieve him of a feeling of despondency or depression, stop his excessive drinking, solve domestic problems, or simply improve his luck. A consultation with the diagnostician confirms his need for a dance, and discussions with the members of the homestead group explore the economics and logistics of such an occasion. Often a poorer family must delay the event until money can be saved and relatives convinced of the necessity of the ritual.

Once the decision is firm, the homestead group of the patient begins making arrangements with nearby consanguineal relatives. A series of meetings are held and arrangements made as to where the three different locations will be; the secondary hosts are requested to cooperate, and arrangements are made to pay them, usually in livestock, for their trouble. Because the original ritual site and the secondary site require the building of elaborate structures and preparing food for large crowds, the second-night host is usually an affinal relative of the patient. In this way, members of the patient's clan are required to assist in the construction of one site, while the members of an affinal clan are involved in the other. Another factor in the planning is the availability of a chanter or medicine man who knows the recommended ritual. There are many rituals suitable for the Squaw Dance, but not all medicine men know them all. Many remain only memories and are no longer practiced because no one remembers the proper procedures.

The actual ceremony itself begins at the site selected by the host, where a special brush hogan is constructed for the medicine man and his assistants and where, more or less continuously, various phases of the ceremony are performed over the four-day period. In addition, wood for cooking and lighting is collected in large amounts, barrels of water assembled, and a large brush ramada, where the women of the host clan prepare food, is constructed. Sheep and cattle are collected from relatives and held ready for slaughtering as needed. Quantities of flour, coffee, and other foods are purchased from the trader and delivered to the hosts.

The activities for which the ceremony is popularly named has nothing to do with the ritual being performed and is entirely social. The returning of warriors in the past was seen as a good time to announce the readiness of young women for marriage. These young unmarried women, dressed in their best clothing and displaying their wealth in turquoise and silver, appeared each

night to select partners to join them in a simple shuffling dance. The primacy of women in Navajo life is again reflected in the etiquette of the dance. No young man, once selected, can refuse to dance with a girl unless he can prove that he is a member of the girl's or some other ineligible clan. Should a man refuse, the girl's mother, aunts, and older sisters may well descend upon him and drag him into the center of the circle of wagons and campfires that forms each night. If a young man does not want to carry the affair further, he must make some small payment at the end of the dance. Should he refuse to pay, he binds the young woman to be his partner through the rest of the dance. If she has second thoughts about her choice, she is trapped unless she can steal his hat, blanket, or some other possession and ransom it, thus receiving the payment necessary to free her.

In addition to the courtship dance, which is the focal point of a great deal of good-natured ribaldry and not a little jealousy because girls can select married as well as unmarried men, there are round dances performed by both men and women, married and unmarried, and team singing. The singing teams form quite casually and are made up of men of all ages, who, while swaying back and forth, sing traditional and often spontaneously composed "Squaw Dance songs," accompanied by a small pottery drum. This gives rise to the term *swaying songs* often used to describe these compositions. Navajo vocal music is particularly distinctive because it is performed with great throat tension and with an emphasis on high-pitched nasal sounds. The newcomer who is not familiar with Navajo music generally assumes that women are singing until he sees the crowds of young men.

In the days between the night dances, while rituals are being conducted by the medicine man, the visiting families camp near their wagons, visit relatives and friends, gamble, stage horseraces, and continue diffidently the courtships that began the night before.

On the final day, the arrival of young warriors is reenacted and presents of bread, cakes, candy, and fruit are thrown to the crowd. If the host can afford it, the events of the day may also be enlivened by young men who, disguised with simple masks and daubed with mud, act as clowns and terrorize the crowd by seizing hapless individuals and dumping them in the mud or otherwise harassing them. The clowns also confer some benefits of health by seizing a person and, while chanting, carrying him on a blanket. Persons suffering minor or chronic ailments or those seeking a change in luck volunteer for the treatment.

Although the orientation of the Squaw Dance is familial and individual in practice, it involves all, or at least a large part, of the community, by defining relationships, establishing obligations, and providing the opportunity to pay off old ones. It is an occasion of social display - wearing one's best clothing and jewelry, displaying one's horses and wagons (and in later years trucks and autos), initiating courtship, and engaging in illicit liaison. Failure to take part in a family's Squaw Dance is tantamount to admitting a serious breach within the structure of the family. At the same time, a well-known or powerful family entertains visitors who "drop in" from throughout the reservation as a symbol of friendship and support. Relatives absent from the community are informed and expected to return home to take part, even, and this is often the case, if it means giving up off-reservation employment. At the same time, the collection of livestock and other food stuffs, the presenting of gifts to the host, the payment of the chanter and his assistants, the feeding of participants and guests, the exchanging of money and goods in gambling, and the purchase of supplies from the trader mean that each Squaw Dance has an enormous impact on the economic life of the community.

The flexibility within prescribed patterns that characterizes Navajo social structure can also be seen in ceremonial life. Since the defeat of the Navajo, the military aspect of Navajo culture has gradually disappeared. However, the ceremonies surrounding the warrior's life were extended to serve as protection for anyone exposed to foreigners – children returning from school, women working as domestics off-reservation, traders, Bureau of Indian Affairs officers, or anyone else suffering from what might be diagnosed as dangerous contact with foreigners. After World War II, returning veterans almost without exception were the focal point of a Squaw Dance to ward off the evil influences of their wartime experiences.

In the past, the Squaw Dance ceremonies appear to have been held less frequently than in recent years, perhaps only a few each summer on the entire reservation. In modern times, especially since World War II, hundreds of such ceremonies are held each summer throughout the reservation area. This may be a result of the greater felt need as a result of increasing contact with outsiders. On the other hand, the gradually deteriorating economic conditions on the reservation may be the basis for more frequent attempts to correct whatever supernatural evil has befallen individual families. There is also a distinct element of competition in the staging of Squaw Dances in any given area. The occurrence of one dance almost always is followed by another and yet another, until it would seem that the psychic and economic energy of a community is exhausted. In part, this is the consequence of each homestead group's wishing to display its status by staging the most impressive dance possible. In part, too, the decision to hold a dance may be motivated by the knowledge that as more and more dances are held the ability of relatives and friends to contribute is reduced, so each family considering the possibility of a dance speeds up its decision. In the Nez Ch'ii area [a fictitious name for an actual regional community] in the summer of 1960, thirteen such events occurred within a radius of about twenty miles. The summer before, only two dances were held, as a response to real physical illnesses, and in the following year only four dances were held. A dance cycle such as the one in 1960 is particularly exhausting physically and economically to persons of influence and political aspirations and those who have many lines of kinship in a given area. One such man, the chairman of the local grazing committee, felt obliged to appear at every dance, to make speeches and participate in the ceremonies for which he always received a gift of tanned buckskin, food, or a plush shirt; ruefully contemplating yet another dance, he said, "I hope them people don't give me no nice presents. I can't afford no more presents." His problem was that the giving of presents anticipated a reciprocal act that he could no longer afford. Yet, to maintain his position in the community, he felt required to repay each gift even if it meant going into debt at the trading post.

Yeibeichai Dances

The mobile nature of the summer Squaw Dance reflects perhaps the mobility of Navajo life in the summer as well as the network of relationships within which each homestead group rests. The winter ceremonies on the other hand are not mobile and for a number of reasons are less frequently performed. Again, a great number of separate chants and rituals can be performed in the winter, but the general class of ceremonies at which they occur are called the *Yeibeichai* dances. The fact that the *Yei* are represented by masked men and can appear only in the winter months suggests that they may, in part, at least, represent religious figures borrowed from the neighboring Pueblo peoples, with their colorful cycle of *Kachina* dances. In any event, a *Yeibeichai* dance is even

more expensive and complex than the Squaw Dance, inasmuch as nine days and nights of ritual are required in order to complete it. Because chanters who know the entire complex ritual of a nine-day ceremony are rarer than Squaw Dance medicine men, because the feeding of large numbers of people for nine nights is exceedingly expensive, and because travel is more difficult in the winter, thus preventing the kind of enjoyable socializing associated with the Squaw Dance, the *Yeibeichai* dances are not as frequently performed. However, in the event of some disaster or illness which cannot be otherwise treated, there is no alternative. The dances, with costumed dancers or the social Fire Dance in which fire brands are whirled and thrown into the darkness, are more spectacular than the night performances at a Squaw Dance, and in a sense the rituals associated with the *Yeibeichai* are considered more powerful simply because they are more complex. Some of these chants are associated with the bear, and the dances are never held before the traditional time when the bear goes into hibernation. In the past, particularly ambitious medicine men have attempted to use live bears or bear cubs in the ceremonies, but the results have often been disastrous and dangerous, so that the animal, particularly fearsome and sacred to the Navajo, is represented only in symbol.

Of the actual rituals performed in either the Squaw Dance or the *Yeibeichai* dances we will probably never have a complete accounting. Some of them, associated with activities no longer important to the Navajo, such as antelope hunting, remain memories but are no longer practiced. Others have fallen into disuse because the medicine men who knew the correct chants and rituals have died without passing on their knowledge.

The rituals, skills, paraphernalia, and songs necessary to conduct such a ceremony are exceedingly complex and require years to memorize under the tutelage of a practicing medicine man. This must be paid for with personal service or wealth in livestock, food, or money. Learned in any other way, without payment, the knowledge would be of no value because it would, in effect, be stolen and thus not the true property of the practitioner.

Among the neighboring Hopi, the rituals and ceremonies follow a predestined pattern through the year in a cycle of dances that mark different phases of the year and assure in each ceremonial step that the rains will fall at the right time and the crops will come to fruition when they are expected. The role of each man and woman is determined in relationship to the community, his clan, or cult membership; the ceremony is not the function of a family but of the entire community.

The Navajo ceremonial complex is equally as symbolic of the structure of his society as is that of the Hopi, and it reflects the flexible nature of Navajo life and the importance of the homestead group on which each Navajo, in the final analysis, must depend for survival. Thus, while each Hopi plays a predetermined role in each ceremony according to his status in the community, the Navajo participates in terms of his relationships to the host family. If his homestead is the sponsor, his duties and responsibilities are many and often onerous. If, on the other hand, the sponsor is a distant relative or a friend, the individual Navajo may or may not be expected to contribute and participate heavily. Thus, while a person might take part in as many as a dozen ceremonies in a single year, each ceremony will present itself from a different perspective and emphasize the person's relationship, not to the community as a whole, but rather to each homestead unit that makes up the community. Only an understanding of all the complex interrelations provides a definition of community.

Death and the Dead

The people of Nez Ch'ii, like most other Navajo, do not fear death any more or less than do other people. However, like many Western Indians, notably those of the Great Basin, they do fear the dead. The dead are dangerous because the ghost of a dead man may return to trouble the living. There are no good ghosts in Navajo life. A ghost is the evil part of a total man. It may return because its property has been mishandled or expropriated or because of ritual failures. It is possible for a ghost to harm the living by entering their bodies. Thus it is best to avoid the dead, lest one is exposed to such a visitation. There is great danger in being near the dead, whether they are former friends or former enemies. To escape the danger that such association raises one must undergo long and expensive ritual treatment.

Thus, when a person has died in a hogan, for instance, the structure is abandoned. The body is often left inside with its belongings. Burial is rapid and without much ceremony, and, in the past at least, a person's favorite valuable possessions were buried with them. Early traders and missionaries were often tolerated by the Navajo because they would volunteer to bury the dead, thus freeing the Navajo from the fearsome task. Similarly, hospitals were used as a place where one could take an obviously dying sick person so that the hogan did not have to be abandoned; this was perhaps also done to confuse the ghost so it could not return to plague the living. The consciousness of the presence and danger of ghosts is expressed in fear of the dark and a reluctance to go out at night, as well as in avoidance of funerals and of obviously dying people.

Witches, Werewolves, and Society

The power of Navajo songs, chants, prayers, and ritual is compulsive. A prayer is not a supplication but the activation of natural forces, the outcome of which is a foregone conclusion. An error in manipulating these forces, a mistaken word in a chant, an error in the preparation of a sand painting, or the omission of some act renders the ritual ineffective and sometimes can be quite dangerous for the patient, the practitioner, and the community. Errors of course can be set right, but if an error in ritual can be dangerous, what of deliberate error? Navajo logic holds that chants sung backwards or ritual deliberately performed improperly can bring disaster to the community or to individuals. They further believe that just as there are good medicine men who have labored and paid to learn blessing chants, there are others who have labored and paid even more to learn evil chants. These witches, both male and female, can bring illness and disaster on enemies, and their influence is constantly feared. It is a fear of coming under the spell of a witch that makes Navajo careful and wary in large crowds. Seldom does a person go to even purely Navajo affairs without the support of familiar company, preferably relatives or close friends. Nor does a Navajo relish staying alone, particularly at night. One seldom sees women alone, even in the daytime, and although men may travel alone in the daylight, they try to find company before nightfall. Particularly when going to a large gathering, a Navajo wears charms and amulets, often simple bags of sacred corn pollen, to protect himself from danger.

Negation of Navajo Ethic

Despite the strong belief in witches and witchcraft and extensive study by anthropologists, witchcraft is an elusive subject. Almost anyone who has gained the confidence of Navajo people has heard endless stories of witches and "wolf men" and heard vague accusations against one or another person, usually a non-relative living at some distance from the accuser. In addition, he has been told how the death of one or another person close to the teller has been traced to the evil influences of a witch. Navajo can describe in detail the initiation of witches to a coven, the murder of relatives, and incest and nakedness in mixed groups. All of these are violations of the most important strictures of Navajo morality. Murder brings down danger on the murderer and the community as a whole. Incest, of course, is a singularly dangerous act abhorred by even the most depraved. And while the Navajo are relatively casual among themselves about nudity above the waist, exposure of the genitals by even the youngest of children, particularly girls, is a serious breach of etiquette. In short, the witch presents a reverse picture of what a good Navajo should be and a negative emphasis of the Navajo ethic. Whether or not there are people who actually undergo the initiation of witches and believe they can perform evil deeds through evil chants and ritual is a matter of conjecture. The individual Navajo believes that such people exist, and he governs his behavior accordingly. A person suspected of witchcraft, particularly if he or she is suspected of directing his power against one's person or relatives, may, if all other means fail, be killed in self-defense. Such killings, officially unexplained by White law, still occur. A less drastic cure is to seek the aid of a chanter who knows the proper rituals to counteract evil spells. Although seldom declared outright, this is often a reason for holding a Squaw Dance or *Yeibeichai* ceremony.

The Wolf Man

The most frightening figure among Navajo witches is the "wolf man." Such a person is felt to be able to transform himself into a wolf or coyote and, while in this form, bewitch his enemies by sprinkling a magic substance containing ground parts of human infants through the smoke hole of a hogan. Few Navajo attain adult status without having some experience that they interpret as having to do with wolf men. A man riding alone at dusk and spotting a stray dog near the trail will spur his horse into a gallop and ride into the homestead wide-eyed and breathless, convinced that the animal was a wolf man. Any unusual sound in the night is explained as being made by the wolf man. A sudden paroxysm of barking by the homestead's dogs is considered a sure sign that a wolf man is prowling in the darkness. If it persists, the men of the homestead arm themselves with all the weapons the family can muster and fearfully probe into the darkness. A wolf man can be killed by ordinary bullets, and many stories circulate about the tracks of a wounded coyote suddenly changing into the tracks of a wounded man. Killing a wolf man is a dangerous event because the killer will most certainly be the object of vengeance on the part of the wolf man's relatives, who in all probability are themselves witches.

Jimmie Yazzie, he was married to my sister. He was a good man and worked hard and took care of his kids. In the winter he was hunting - looking in the snow for tracks. It was getting pretty dark, and then he saw this coyote or wolf or dog, and it was real close and he shot it. He knew he hit it, but all of a sudden it was gone. So he went home, and the

next day he went back to where he had shot that thing, and he found the tracks and blood, and they went to a place under a tree, but they never went away from the tree. The trail away from the tree was a girl's tracks, and they went over to the west toward where an old man and woman lived with their granddaughter. And we heard that she came home one night, and she had been shot and died the next day. So we knew what it was. And that Jimmie Yazzie, he died six months later.

Fear as Cultural Enforcement

The complex of mythology, omens, and ritual that make up the "good" aspects of Navajo religion all function to reinforce the structures and attitudes essential to the survival of Navajo society. Stressing the "evil" aspects is no less important in confirming the proper behavior in the Navajo individual.

Many observers have noted that Navajo child training, in keeping with general Navajo interpersonal relationships, is generally lacking in coercive practices. That is, whipping and other corporal punishment to enforce proper behavior does not occur as frequently as it might in a non-Navajo family. However, Navajo make skillful use of terror to instill in their children, and reinforce in adults, the most important attitude in Navajo life – dependence on the immediate relatives of the homestead group. As mentioned earlier, the Navajo seldom travel alone, always preferring to be in groups and preferably groups of relatives. The most innocent departure from this norm is met with great emotion. Members of a family are constantly worried lest some other member "run away" from the family. Even a casual walk by oneself is considered a suspect act. In fact, a desire to be alone and to go for lonely walks is evidence to the individual and to his or her family that something serious is the matter, probably the evil influence of a witch.

To instill this dependence on the group, the Navajo not only encourage loyalty to the family through positive admonition, but also through fear. From infancy, children are exposed to frightening experiences from which they can be extricated only by their mothers or older sisters. A common practice for older children is to dress up in old clothes, often using a coyote or wildcat pelt, and to paint their faces with charcoal and other pigments and appear suddenly to terrorize infants and very young children. The frightened youngsters flee to the arms of their mothers, who usually let them continue their frightened outbursts for several minutes and often add to the fright by pretending feat on their own part. Only when the infant is nearly hysterical with fear does the mother cover its eyes and comfort it and protect it from the horrible monster. Such experiences can only suggest to the infant mind that safety exists solely in relation to mother. The costumed monster may be related to the similar but much more complex institution among the Hopis. The use of fear to instill family adherence is also practiced through the telling of stories about wolf men, witches, and other fearsome beings. Again, as with so many Navajo institutions, there is little formality in the behavior involved. Only after repeated exposures is it possible to realize that what seems like a casual childish prank is a regular activity and is intimately linked to the structure of the society as a whole. Almost every evening, the older children, from eight through twelve years of age, begin to tell stories about evil beings to the younger toddlers and soon have them in a state of abject fear. During this performance, older children and parents watch and listen with much amusement and only in the final extreme of infantile terror offer protecting arms and comforting words. But the cycle does not stop with infants. The teen-age children and adults join in the

recounting of tales of witches and wolf men and soon reduce the eight- to twelve-year-olds to states of terror as abject as that of the infants they were previously tormenting. In the telling, the older children and adults usually manage to frighten themselves, and by full dark entire families, fearful of the unknown dangers of the dark and feeling safe only in the protection of their family are crouched in their hogans. Thus, the network of beliefs works from infancy to adulthood to reinforce the idea that only with one's close relatives can one feel safe and only to them can one turn for comfort, aid, and protection. In short, the homestead group is emphasized and reemphasized as the single refuge in an otherwise hostile world. Its needs transcend all others, and its loyalties are more lasting and dependable than all others.