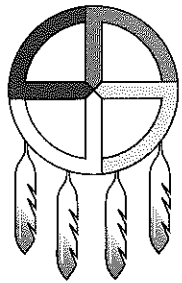


Philosophical Foundations: Religion as Relationship

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Before the arrival of Europeans in North America, the indigenous people of this continent lived for thousands of years, developing complex social and cultural systems that enabled them to survive in a meaningful way in their native landscapes. Over time Native communities moved and migrated throughout the continent, forming alliances and creating new tribal nations. Their experiences were distinctly shaped by the places in which they lived, as they formed



symbiotic relationships with the landscape and drew their religious experiences, symbols, and stories from their surrounding environment. Because of the autochthonous relationship between Native cultures and their landscapes, Native religious traditions came to vary as widely as the landscapes of North America.

This chapter looks at some of the foundational principles of three Native spiritual and cultural traditions: the Lakota, the Diné, and the Coast Salish.¹ In order to explain the foundational world-

views that inform these religious traditions, it begins by looking at the creation narratives that describe both the origins of the people and their relationship to their landbase. It then examines the fundamental principle of sacrality or power as it exists within these traditions, and the ways in which Native people connect to and maintain a connection with this power. Power in Native religious traditions is not social or political, involving control over other people. Rather, it is an abstract energy, a force that is given and derived from the spiritual realm, a force that may be channeled through a human being. Power is temporary, earned, and lasts only so long as one maintains a relationship of respectful reciprocity with it or its source. In many Native cultures, it is the animating force of the universe, the spiritual principle that unites all things. But understanding spiritual power, where it comes from, and how it is to be

approached, first requires an understanding of origins—of where these communities and their worldviews have come from.

Foundations of Diné traditions

Before the arrival of Europeans in the American Southwest, the Diné lived alongside their Pueblo neighbors in relative peace, caring for their corn fields, hunting, and (from the nineteenth century) raising sheep. As with the Lakota and the Coast Salish, Diné spirituality emerged from the unique landscape in which they lived; to the four mountain ranges that border the Diné homeland in the American Southwest can be attributed the reverence for rain in an arid climate and the Diné reliance on corn and sheep for their food and clothing. These mountains are the home of the *ye'ii*, the Holy People responsible for the creation of the Diné cosmos. Diné origin stories reflect the people's agricultural lifestyle: the Holy People emerge from the earth, just as corn emerges from the earth after planting. The Diné

themselves are created from earth, their bodies formed from corn and minerals, molded together by Changing Woman. Underlying Diné cosmology is the notion of *Nitch'i*, sometimes defined as Holy Wind, which animates and binds the cosmos. The heart of Diné ceremonialism and religion is, in many ways, about negotiating and balancing *Nitch'i*.

Diné emergence²⁰

At the beginning, the Diné Holy People ascended through three levels of the underworld before reaching this one. The first level was black, the second blue, the third yellow, and the fourth (this earth) white. According to one account of creation related by James K. McNeley, creation began when light "misted up" from the four horizons: White Early Dawn (*hayolkáát*) in the east; Blue Sky Noon (*nahodeet'iizh*) in the south; Yellow Sunset (*nahootsoii*) in the west; and Dark Night (*chahaltheet*) in the north. These mists were the inner forms of the cardinal directions, and the inner forms of the mountains that mark them. From these four directions likewise came *Nitch'i*, Holy Wind. *Nitch'i* came in the form of winds, which gave life and power to the inhabitants of the first world: First Man, First Woman, and the Holy People or *ye'ii*. *Nitch'i* supplied the living with breath, thought, and understanding.²¹

A series of cataclysms drove the Holy People to ascend from first one world to the next, from black world, to yellow world, to blue world. In the third world, however, the *Diyin Diyinii* argued with each other. Men and women began to think that they could do without each other, believing that they were sufficient on their own. They quarreled, and men and women determined to live apart from each other, on opposite sides of a river. But living so long apart, their sexual desire increased. The women sought to satisfy themselves with long stones, thick quills, cactus, bone, or corn; men with mud or raw meat. Eventually the people realized that the genders were meant to be together, working cooperatively. They reunited, aware that they needed each other for happiness and children.²²

Shortly thereafter a great flood forced the Holy People to ascend to this world, at the Place of Emergence. There First Man and First Woman built a sweat house and sang the new world into being. First Man opened his mountain soil bundle, which contained soil from the four directions of the underworlds. From this bundle, he built

the first *hooghan* as model of the new world to come. The *hooghan* had four pillars at the four directions. The round floor marked out the round space of the earth, while the round ceiling symbolized the sky. The door at the east, First Man determined, was the place of birth and beginning.

The *Diyin Diyinii* gathered together in the *hooghan*, and First Man expanded it to make it large enough for all the Holy People. Within this first *hooghan*, he set in place the four directions and the mountains that marked them. First Man and First Woman determined the seven directions that would define the Diné world: the four cardinal directions, zenith (top), nadir (bottom), and center. To mark the directions they located the six mountains: in the east, Blanca Peak (*Sisnaajinii*); in the south, Mount Taylor (*Tsoodzil*); in the west, San Francisco Peaks (*Dook'o'oosthid*); in the north, La Plata Peak (*Dibé Ntsaa*); and in the center, Huerfano Peak and Gobernador Knob.

First Man then assigned each of the *Diyin Diyinii* to stand as the inner forms within each mountain and within each plant, animal, and mineral that lived on the mountains. He assigned them as couples, male and female, to live in the cardinal directions. To the east, he sent Early Dawn Boy and Early Dawn Girl; to the south, Blue Daylight Boy and Blue Daylight Girl. To the west, he sent Yellow Evening Twilight Boy and Yellow Evening Twilight Girl; and to the North, Folding Darkness Boy and Folding Darkness Girl. These Holy People became the inner forms of the mountains, and they were adorned with the minerals of those mountains: white shell, turquoise, abalone, and jet.²³

To animate this new world, to bring it into motion and movement, First Man sent out Holy Winds.²⁴ These winds moved through all things, through stones, minerals, plants, and animals, animating and giving breath to everything on the earth. He assigned Holy Wind messengers to the pairs of Holy People, to act as messengers, to carry the Holy People's thoughts and intentions throughout the earth and to each other. First Man then dressed the four mountains. He pinned Blanca Peak to the earth with a bolt of lightning and he dressed it in white: white shell, morning light, white lightning, white rain, dark clouds, and white corn. Mount Taylor was pinned to the earth with a great stone knife and dressed in blue: turquoise, dark mist, daylight, blue corn, and wild animals. San Francisco Peak was held to the earth with

a sunbeam, and dressed in yellow: abalone shell, sunset, blue clouds, yellow cord, and animals. La Plata Peak was bound to the earth with a rainbow and dressed in black: jet, night, dark mist, plants, and animals. Then First Man and First Woman created the sun, moon, sky, winds, constellations, and seasons. They established birth and death and gave names to the animals. The world was set in perfect order, harmony, and balance: a state of *hozho*.

Although the world began in order and beauty, disorder and ugliness were soon introduced. Monsters roamed the earth, killing healthy babies and causing the Holy People to become infertile. This world was in *nichxo'i*: ugliness, disorder, chaos, sickness, imbalance, and infertility. *Nichxo'i* emerged into the world first when the Holy People had briefly forgotten their dependence on each other; they had forgotten the need for masculine and feminine to come together and care for each other, and for the balance of powers.

Things looked dire until one day First Man was out walking and discovered Changing Woman. She was raised by First Man and First Woman and grew up in twelve days. At her first menstruation, the first *Kinááldá* was performed. Soon Changing Woman was impregnated by the sun and gave birth to twin sons: Monster Slayer and Child of the Water. Her twins grew quickly and became great warriors, who rid the world of monsters. When the world was safe, Changing Woman took some of her flesh and molded it together with the four colors of corn and the four minerals from the four directions: white, blue, yellow, and black, and white shell, turquoise, abalone shell, and jet. She shaped the concoction into human form and created the first earth people, the Diné. The human form was animated by Holy Winds, *Nilch'i*, which entered the body from the four directions, through the swirls on the tips of its toes and fingers, through the swirls of its ears, through the top of its head.

Diné notions of power

Within the Diné cosmology, *Sa'a Naaghai Bik'eh Hozho* is a central philosophical concept, influencing traditional notions of the sacred. Difficult to translate or define, it is a synthesis of the entire Navajo religious and philosophical system. Some scholars have translated it as "Long Life-Happiness." Others translate it as, "According to the Ideal May Restoration Be Achieved." Still other scholars have

pointed out that *Sa'a Naaghai Bik'eh Hozho* suggests the interaction of male and female principles of creation. According to John Farella, *Sa'a Naaghai* suggests a masculine energy, while *Bik'eh Hozho* suggests a feminine one.²⁵ This philosophical ideal seems to suggest an animating energy, one of rejuvenation, reanimation, fertility, and creation. Male and female energies exist in tandem, each mutually dependent on the other, different but equally crucial parts of a vital whole. It is because of *Sa'a Naaghai* and *Bik'eh Hozho* that the universe continues to reproduce and to exist in balance, and that male and female beings continue to be drawn to each other.²⁶ This spiritual principle is responsible for rainfall, the fertility of the earth, the growth of corn, the vitality of livestock, human reproduction, and cultural strength. Corn, the primary food staple of the traditional Diné, occupies a central place within Diné ritual activity and symbolism. As shown in the ceremony described in Chapter 1, corn pollen, embodying the fertility and potential for growth inherent in the cosmos, was and is a central aspect of Diné ceremony.

The creative power in the Diné universe thus binds human and spiritual communities together. Individuals are tied to their partners, their communities, their ancestors, First Man and First Woman, Changing Woman, the present and the future, the earth, the heavens, and the four directions. To recognize and cultivate this creative energy within oneself is to recognize one's origins in the cosmos and one's interrelatedness with the Diné landscape, its ancestors, and the Holy People. To grow in spiritual maturity is to realize one's interconnectedness and kinship with the universe. According to an interpretation put forth by Farella, *Sa'a Naaghai Bik'eh Hozho*, male-female energies in complementarity, is completeness. It emerges from the four directions and is a vehicle for increase, reproduction, and sexuality, for the realization of the interconnectedness of the universe: these energies and their realization enable one to live a long, healthy, creative, and constantly renewing life.

Nitsh'i, Holy Wind, distributed and set in place by First Man during the formative era of this earth, also acts as a powerful animating force in traditional Diné philosophy. Winds inflate, give strength, motion, and change; they give life to animals, plants, people, mountains, water, stones, and soil. As the primary energy in the universe, wind is creator, life giver, and sustainer. Winds give direction to living

things; they give movement, the ability to think, and the motion to carry out what needs to be done. While there is one essential Holy Wind, it is expressed and found in many different forms: the winds of the four directions that reside in the mountains and provide knowledge and breath to the Holy People; winds that animate the earth, water, and clouds; and various minor winds with destructive or precocious properties, such as Sunward Revolving Wind, Coiled Wind, Striped Wind, Wavy Back Wind. The same winds that first animated Changing Woman, bringing her to life, animate the Diné people and all that surrounds them.

The nature of Holy Winds, both as an animating force and as a messenger of the Holy People, makes them a vital part of Diné spirituality and ceremony. As messengers between the inner forms of earth and sky, the winds monitor, guide, and direct human life. Winds and Holy People reside in all living things; they are the life, breath, movement, and speech of earth and living things on it. Inappropriate human thoughts or actions are instantly related to the Holy People by these messenger winds. Offending the Holy People, or Holy Winds, results in the wind's withdrawing from a person.

Just like Changing Woman herself, so the Diné are animated and given life by Holy Winds. Winds move the body on a physiological level, animating blood vessels, muscles, and organ systems. Winds also motivate the body on a spiritual and intellectual level, guiding clarity of thought, will to action, emotions, and spiritual balance. When these winds withdraw from the body, sickness or death can result. As one scholar describes it: "According to the Navajo conception ... winds exist all around and within the individual, entering and departing through respiratory organs and whorls on the body's surface. That which is within and that which surrounds one is all the same and it is holy."²⁷ The focus of much Diné ceremony thus works to restore a healthy interaction with Holy Winds, by establishing good and balanced relationships with the Holy People and inner forms of the cosmos. To be healthy is to be in a state of *Sa'a Naaghai Bik'eh Hozho*, to reflect and mirror the harmonious nature of the universe. As one Diné elder explains it, "The same wind moves us ... you see, the same Wind's Child exists within our tissues, it moves us, it causes us to think."²⁸ The same Holy Wind that brought the universe into creation moved the earth, animates water, and moves the internal self.

Much of Diné spirituality centers on the performance of chantways, ceremonies that cure individuals of physio-spiritual ailments — and restore them to a balanced and harmonious relationship with the Diné landscape and the *Diyin Diyini* that reside within it. Traditional Diné ceremonialism thus developed as a means of bringing the individual back into a state of *Sa'a Naaghai Bik'eh Hozho*. Chantways, such as the Blessingway, or *Nizhoni*, are complex ceremonial sings taking from one to nine days, and are held in a ceremonial *hooghan*. Each has its origin in a sacred story: a hero or heroine undertakes a journey and meets Holy People, who teach a ceremony, including the songs, prayers, and sand paintings that should accompany them. The hero or heroine then returns, teaching the chantway to his or her people.²⁹

One central element of a chantway is the creation of sand paintings, complex dry paintings with images of the four directions, the four mountains, and the Holy People. The patient sits in the center of the painting, while the medicine man or woman tells the hero's journey in song and prayer. The presence of the Holy People is invoked, and the individual is restored to balance through their presence. These chantways strengthen good winds, remove negative winds, and help the individual relocate him- or herself within the Diné sacred geography. Through the chantways the individual remembers who he or she is, and where he or she came from. Such ceremonies are not simply symbolic recreations of sacred stories. Rather, through speech and ritual embodiment of the stories, Holy Winds are brought back into balance, and human and spiritual relationships are restored. The patient is brought back to a state of *Sa'a Naaghai Bik'eh Hozho*: beauty, harmony, order, balance, well-being.

Conclusion

The three traditions discussed in this chapter illustrate the diversity of Native religious life. Origin stories, notions of power, and ceremonial ways of negotiating spiritual power differ dramatically. These differences reflect the vast differences of the ecosystems within which the traditions emerged, for each is, first and foremost, an autochthonous tradition, emerging from a people's relationship

with the landscape that nurtures and sustains them: the Northern Plains and Black Hills; the temperate coastal rain forest of the Pacific Northwest; and the high mountainous deserts of the Diné homeland. However, these three traditions also demonstrate key similarities. They share a sense of spiritual power as depending on the cultivation of reciprocal relationships with spirits within the landscape. None of these communities sees spirituality as a compartmentalized part of life, but rather each one integrates spirituality into its daily activities, from fishing, to farming, to cooking, to dreaming. Finally, as each tradition emerges from a particular landscape, it exists in relationship with that landscape and with the indigenous foods that that landscape provided: bison, salmon, or corn.