

“WHEN I AM LONELY THE MOUNTAINS CALL ME”: THE IMPACT OF SACRED GEOGRAPHY ON NAVAJO PSYCHO- LOGICAL WELL BEING

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Abstract: As we approach the twenty-first century, sacred geography continues to have a profound impact on Navajo psychological well being. This article explores the extent of the Navajo's bond with their homeland through an emphasis on orderly conditions in their world view, myths, and ceremonies. When traditional Navajos leave their homeland to pursue educational and professional endeavors or to seek biomedical treatment, a sense of emotional dislocation can undermine their success. The emotional trauma goes far beyond mere homesickness because it is based on an often unconscious sense of having violated the moral order of the universe. It is essential that mental health professionals respond with sensitivity to this issue by understanding the extent to which the sacred mountains and other landforms serve as a vital source of spiritual strength.

When the Navajo were exiled to Fort Sumner, New Mexico after the Long Walk of 1864, the greatest source of trauma was psychological. They saw the harshness of the infertile land with its brackish water only as an indirect cause of their high death rate. The real reason that so many of their people died, they believed, was that they were outside the boundaries of the four sacred mountains, land given them and made safe for them by the Holy People. Their spirits had been broken by each additional mile that they were forced to march farther from their beloved land, especially when they were forced to cross three rivers, all of which the Holy People had warned them never to do.

The Navajos have a word—*ch'ééná*—which describes this kind of heartbreak. *Ch'ééná* means “sadness for a way of life that is gone forever.” They say that many Navajos died from *ch'ééná* during their exile at Fort Sumner between 1864 and 1868.

Navajo leader, Barboncito (Correll, 1979, p. 130–32) eloquently described the moral and emotional toll their exile had taken on his people when he made an impassioned plea to General Sherman:

When the Navajos were first created, four mountains and four rivers were appointed for us, inside of which we should live . . . we were never to move east of the Rio Grande or west of the San Juan rivers and I think that our coming here has been the cause of so much death among us and our animals . . .

When the Navajos at last returned to their homeland, many knelt down to kiss the earth. One elderly lady fainted with joy when she saw Mount Taylor, the southernmost sacred mountain. Francis Toledo (Roessel, 1973, p. 147) said that once "they reached Fort Wingate [near Gallup, New Mexico] many were in a hurry and started taking off, saying, 'We're lonely for our beloved country' . . ."

This degree of attachment to a particular geographic location is difficult to comprehend as we face the twenty-first century. In our increasingly mobile society, most people have already severed their connection with the place where they have grown up; if they return at all, it is to visit friends or family rather than to resume residence. However, geographic displacement is a major cause of psychological distress, not only for Navajo people but for all American Indians and Alaska Natives. Such displacement continues to undermine success in employment, educational programs, and biomedical treatment.

The Importance of Orderly Conditions in the Navajo World View

The Navajo world view is characterized by an emphasis on order, balance, and harmony. Order is so important that disorder is personified in the form of Coyote the Trickster. Coyote is known as "The Patron of Disorder" because of his reckless, selfish, and self-indulgent behavior. His role in the placement of the stars in the heavens is well known. When the Holy People were resting, after having carefully placed most of the stars into orderly groupings of constellations, Coyote impulsively flung the rest of the crystalline stars into the sky. Thus, instead of being positioned in regular and recognizable patterns, the stars that Coyote tossed toward the heavens are scattered everywhere, where they shine as confusing dots of light in sharp contrast to those in constellations which serve as a cultural text, indexing moral stories. Coyote compounded the matter by choosing one star to be his; he succeeded in creating disagreement and confusion over the star's identity; to this day, people still debate whether Canopus is really Coyote's star.

Before the stars could be placed, however, the ancestors of the Navajo had to emerge through a series of previous worlds in a highly structured cosmos. Each of these worlds was ordered and had a particular color associated with it, as well as specific animals and conditions. The cardinal directions in all of the worlds, including the present world, also have their own colors, animal and bird species, jewels, and sacred mountains.

Even the worlds themselves were arranged sequentially in terms of orderliness. Traveling upward, the ancestral Navajos found each successive world to be more orderly and stable than the previous world. The First World—the Black World—was the most chaotic of all; the various beings, including the Insect Beings whose home this was, disagreed and fought among themselves. Because of this quarreling, the ancestral beings climbed up into the Blue World, the Second World. They left this world and the one after it, always seeking a more orderly way of life.

Thus, the concept of order is of tremendous importance in Navajo philosophy: the Emergence process, even through the more chaotic worlds, was ultimately an orderly process. The process of Creation itself occurred *nizhónígo*, or “in an orderly way,” as recounted in the Blessingway myth.

Blessingway, a major song ceremonial which includes five kinds of rites, is called “the backbone of all ceremonials” (Wyman, 1983, p. 20); Chanter Long Mustache calls Blessingway “the spinal column of [ceremonials]” (Wyman, 1970, p. 5). Every ceremonial includes a Blessingway song to ensure effectiveness and to correct any unintentional mistakes. Used to protect livestock, bless a new hogan, send a girl into womanhood, and consecrate marriage, the Blessingway rite or songs and/or prayers taken from it ensure “good hope” and obtain the blessings necessary for a long and happy life.

The Blessingway myth tells the story of Creation, including how the Creator group of Holy People thought, planned, and sang the world into existence. This orderly process could not be rushed if it was to be done properly; First Man and First Woman had to build a sweathouse in which to discuss the conditions they wanted to create before they could proceed. Then, with great care to follow the proper sequence of prayers and procedures, the Holy People constructed a hogan in which to discuss the needs of the people and to plan and organize more completely exactly what they would create to meet those needs. After they had sung the chief hogan songs, they sang the songs of Earth’s Inner Form. All natural phenomena were lifeless until inner human forms and wind souls were placed within them to animate them with life force. After the Holy People blew sacred tobacco in all four directions, the sun’s inner form, the moon’s inner form, and the inner forms of the sacred mountains were clothed, each in a distinctive manner. The inner forms must be described in the proper order: the sacred mountain of the East—Blanca Peak—must be mentioned first, followed by Mount Taylor in the South, then San Francisco Peak in the West, and finally, Hesperus Peak, the sacred mountain of the North.

Chanter Slim Curley (Wyman, 1970, p. 127–128) described the clothing of each inner form in great detail, beginning with the inner form of Blanca Peak, who

. . . clothed himself in dark cloud, male rain, dark water. At his soles he laid a pair of rainbows, tips reversed . . . And he covered himself completely with pollen, after which he clothed himself in white shell and in all sorts of fabrics . . . white buckskin . . . crocheted dark yucca bast . . .

The inner forms of Mount Taylor, San Francisco Peak, and Hesperus Peak are then described with equal attention to specific detail which varies according to the particular mountain and its direction. All other aspects of Creation are ordered as well, down to the most minute detail. An exclusive feature of the Blessingway is the mountain soil bundle which contains pinches of soil from the summits of the sacred mountains. This is the only religious paraphernalia required for the Blessingway rite.

Another aspect of orderly and proper conditions is the concept of complementarity. Anglos conceptualize day and night as a pairing of opposites; Navajos see day and night as parts of the same entity, with each half necessary for completeness. Like the Asian concept of yin and yang, neither component is morally better than the other; rather each component is incomplete without the other to balance it. Male and female, life and death, and *hózhó*—all that is good and harmonious—and *hóchxó*—that which is evil and chaotic are paired as complementary states. The universe thus consists of complementary components, all of which are interrelated and interdependent.

These components make the universe an orderly place which operates according to rules of reciprocity that govern humanity's relations with the natural and supernatural worlds; this belief lies at the core of Navajo religious and medical philosophy. When humans treat the Holy People and the universe they created with respect, the Holy People provide for the Earth Surface People, as the Navajo call themselves. The Holy People are also compelled to respond when their help is asked for in the proper manner. It was the Holy People who gave the country bounded by the sacred mountains to the Navajo people; by remaining within this homeland, the Navajo show their respect and appreciation for this precious gift of land. Within these boundaries, the efficacy of their ceremonies are ensured as well as their general prosperity.

The Navajo Sense of Place

N. Scott Momaday (Griffin-Pierce, 1992, p. xv–xvi) described his amazement when a Navajo hitchhiker was able to name every mountain, mesa, butte, and wash in the vicinity:

I never encountered a more highly developed sense of place. I was left with the impression that this individual was exactly where he belonged: he could never be lost, for he knew precisely where he was in relation to this rock, that tree, that range of mountains in the distance, the sun and moon and stars. He stood at the very center of Creation.

Such a finely tuned sense of place means that being forced to leave one's homeland results in psychological trauma that is unimaginable to those of us without such geographic attachments. Depending upon such factors as the degree of acculturation, the viability of frequent travel home, and the strength of the social network, a Navajo individual experiences varying degrees of psychological distress in an off-reservation setting. Some individuals easily cope with life "off the rez" while others may find that their initial discomfort gives way to a sense of bleakness which culminates in catastrophic feelings of hopeless despair. Far from mere homesickness, such feelings are based on an unconscious sense of having violated the natural and moral order in a culture which reifies order. Such stress is profound and unrelenting for traditional Navajos.

"Modern" Navajos—those who have adopted a Western lifestyle—may still occasionally experience this kind of emotional desolation; a Navajo professor at a major university in the Southwest confided, "When I am lonely, the Mountains call me" (Griffin-Pierce, 1992, p. 199). Being outside of the boundaries of the four sacred mountains means being away from a vital source of spiritual strength.

Examples abound of Navajo ties to their homeland, but this kind of spiritual dislocation when moving to a city to further employment or educational opportunities is certainly not unique to the Navajo. When anthropologist, Keith Basso interviewed Western Apache individuals, linguistic cousins to the Navajo, they described how their land always "stalked people" with stories that pierced their hearts like arrows and thus kept them on a path of moral strength and emotional well-being. For example, Wilson Lavender (Basso, 1984, p. 4) recalled attending mechanic school in Los Angeles as a terrible period during which he drank and fought with his wife. He attributed this not to a loss of his social network, but rather to forgetting the place, names, and stories associated with specific places at Cibicue, Arizona. The primary reason, he said, was that he no longer heard, "the names and stories . . . in my mind anymore. I forget how to live right, forget how to be strong."

Benson Lewis, another Cibicue Apache man, went into greater detail by explaining that he thinks "of that mountain called 'while rocks lie above in a compact cluster' as . . . my maternal grandmother." (For the matrilineal Apache and Navajo peoples, one's maternal grandmother is particularly revered and beloved.) By recalling stories evoked merely by hearing a mountain's name, Mr. Lewis sees the mountain in his mind; the stories surround him, bringing moral strength.

The Navajo universe is equally filled with significant land forms that are the sites of mythic incidents that invest these land forms with great emotional meaning and enduring psychological significance, bonding the Navajo to their homeland. Each of the four sacred mountains has its own story of mystical creation, its own spiritual powers, and its unique purpose in relation to the Diné.

Other landforms index moral stories that remind the Navajos of the proper way to live their lives. A good example is Bear Ears, west of Blanding, Utah. A beautiful woman kept house for her twelve brothers and led a decorous life. Coyote asked her to marry him, but she gave him a series of tests she thought Coyote could not possibly succeed in overcoming. However, through his evil magic, Coyote overcame each of her challenges. The woman was forced to keep her promise by marrying Coyote, whose evil and devious ways soon contaminated her. His qualities of impurity and filth became her way of life and she became known as Changing Bear Maiden because of her ability to transform herself into a bear. She killed all but the youngest of her beloved brothers. With supernatural help, the remaining brother killed his sister, transformed her back into human form, and restored their brothers to life. The landform known as Bear Ears tells of the triumph of good over evil and stands as a reminder of a girl who lost control of her human faculties; in essence, she allowed herself to be overcome by the forces of disorder embodied in Coyote (Wyman, 1973, p. 99–102).

Navajo Mountain, a distinctive land form in southern Utah, is known as *Naatsis'áán*, “Head of Earth Woman.” Monster Slayer and Born-for-Water—the Sacred Twins—made the earth’s surface safe for humans by killing the monsters. The enemy gods on San Francisco Peaks tried to enslave Monster Slayer by firing projectiles tipped with spruce and juniper at him at this birthplace, Navajo Mountain. Monster Slayer caught these projectiles, planting them as trees on the slope of the mountain. Navajo Mountain thus became a shield for the Navajo people, who invoked the power of Monster Slayer as they hid in its recesses when Kit Carson and his troops were rounding up the Diné to send them into exile at Fort Sumner. Today, chanters perform Protectionway and Blessingway to protect soldiers during wars and to ensure adequate food, beneficial power, and an abundance of livestock for the people (Floyd Laughter in Luckert, 1977, p. 31, 48–49, 53).

Outside the Boundaries of the Sacred Mountains

What happens when Navajo students leave their homeland for the first time to attend college? They are subject not only to the unrelenting stress of culture shock that comes of facing an unfamiliar culture, but they also experience a, perhaps unconscious, stress of going against sacred teachings by leaving their homeland, a place given their people by the Holy People.

Navajo students in the university classes I teach—especially the more traditional Navajos—often experience such stress. One such student, whom I shall call Belinda Chee, was assigned to a summer school class, “Introduction to Cultural Anthropology and Linguistics.” As a participant in a special program designed to ease the transition from high school

to a university setting, Belinda was expected to undergo placement tests to see at what level she should be placed in English and mathematics. However, on the day of the testing, when all the other students in the dormitory were taking these tests, Belinda stayed in her room without inquiring why the dormitory was deserted.

Belinda, the youngest daughter in a traditional family from Dilkon, Arizona, had excelled in her high school classes on the reservation and was honored when her mathematics teacher encouraged her to apply for a scholarship to the University of Arizona. However, once she arrived on campus, anxiety began to set in. At first, she could still function and respond appropriately to questions from her peer advisor in the dormitory and to the roommate who had been assigned to her; but soon her answers became wooden and automatic, unconsciously designed to please the questioner, thus shortening the interaction. As the first day wore on, she felt engulfed by a flood of unfamiliar experiences and expectations; each person had something new for her to remember; everything, including her own responses, felt out of her control. She was a stranger even to herself. As the new experiences accumulated, her sense of acute anxiety and emotional paralysis increased. She was barely able to sleep the first night; when she awakened the next morning, the day of the placement testing, she had a pounding headache that only increased as the day wore on. Rather than ask where everyone was going, Belinda stayed in her room, grateful for the opportunity to be alone.

Nothing was the way she had expected it to be. She could tell that people were trying to be friendly, but it was as though they spoke to her through thick glass; their good intentions could not begin to thaw her emotions. She was outside the boundary of the sacred mountains and nothing could change that. A sense of bleak hopelessness permeated her entire being; this was wrong, her being here, outside the land the Holy People had given the Diné. Now, not even the Holy People could help her. For the first time in her life, Belinda felt totally isolated, removed from anyone's assistance.

Belinda chose a desk at the very back of the classroom, where she remained in self-imposed isolation, ignoring the overtures of other students. When it became clear from her test results that she had not studied for the first quiz (which had been announced the previous week), I suggested, in private conversation, that she form a study group with the two other Navajo students in the class. Her eyes widened in surprise, and she said with amazement, "There are other Navajos here?" We were two weeks into the semester, and the 25-member class had been meeting for three hours everyday, yet Belinda appeared to be completely unaware of her surroundings, including the presence of the other students.

Despite this suggestion, Belinda appeared to be too frozen with fear to approach these students. She continued to remain completely disengaged from class discussions and activities as well as those of the

larger transition-to-the-university program. Belinda's mother took the bus to attend Parents' Day. An articulate woman, she waited until we were alone and asked how her daughter was doing and, as gently as I could, I outlined Belinda's difficulties. Her mother expressed misgivings that her daughter might not be ready to be away from her homeland.

Belinda performed poorly on the midterm exam, answering questions incoherently and confusing terms and concepts. She continued to withdraw, not handing in written assignments and not participating in group discussions. I spoke with her privately to ascertain if she understood the assignments which were contained in the syllabus she had received at the beginning of the semester. At times, Belinda expressed amazement, even though I had been discussing the assignments in class for weeks. She responded in a dazed, frozen state of total estrangement from her surroundings. Belinda continued to display an inability to concentrate: during lectures, she alternated between an unfocused, faraway gaze and cradling her head, face down, on folded arms. Her despair only seemed to deepen as the weeks wore on. Eventually, I suggested that she withdraw from the university before her academic record would be affected.

Navajo students in the "Native Peoples of the Southwest" class I teach during the fall and spring semesters have usually adapted better to being away from their homeland. A student I will call Rose Deschinny, from Rough Rock, Arizona, however was one who took somewhat longer to adapt. She had just transferred to the university after a semester at Navajo Community College in Tsaile, Arizona and was finding the leap to off-reservation school extremely difficult. Rose, however, did come to see me during my office hours. (This was fortunate because the class of 165 students met twice weekly in a large auditorium, and I did not have time to make individual overtures to students.)

In Navajo style, Rose kept her eyes averted during our conversation in my office. Instead of explaining the specifics, she said only that she would be missing a week of class because she had to go home. I asked if it was because she needed a ceremony; I could barely hear her soft-spoken response: yes, she'd left home without the proper preparation and bad things had been happening. When I realized that she would not ask me directly for help, I asked if there was something I could do "to help out." Only at this point did Rose begin to express anxiety over her understanding of class material. When I realized that she was seeking help, I spent some time going over the material we had covered, helping her to identify major topics and significant issues. I suggested that she take her textbook with her, since she would be gone over a week, and she would have some spare time. After she returned, we could meet and review the lecture material and go over the reading assignments. Rose seemed relieved that a solution was possible.

By the time Rose returned (a period of somewhat longer than she had projected) the veil over her spirits had lifted. She spoke with greater

assurance and seemed calmer about a positive outcome in class. She had been studying in the interim and had borrowed class notes from another student. There was little I could add to her grasp of class material. Rose went on to turn in an "A" term paper and to earn a "B+" in the course.

A student in another anthropology class, Eileen Laughter was considerably more outgoing than either Rose or Belinda. She made friends with another Navajo student, Sylvester Begay, and the two sat together in the classroom. Both Eileen and Sylvester dressed in the same style as the other students, in baggy jeans and T-shirts. (In contrast, Rose and Belinda had worn more conservative clothing than their classmates.)

Eileen and Sylvester were alert in class and participated in discussions. Furthermore, on exams, they performed comparably to their peers. However, the day of her scheduled oral term paper presentation, Eileen apologetically told me she was not ready and could she be rescheduled; she needed to go home. Sylvester was also unprepared, but he decided to go ahead and speak about witchcraft in Navajo culture instead of the topic he had previously selected. As acculturated as these two students appeared to be, both in behavior and in appearance, their traditional beliefs were still deeply held. Later, I discovered that Eileen had needed to return home for a Blessingway in order to restore the balance in her life. Sylvester's presentation on witchcraft had been spurred on by questions from other students; wanting to be popular, he chose the most sensational topic possible. After his presentation, he disappeared for a week; he, too, had needed to return home for a ceremony "to bring back the harmony." Eileen was able to complete the semester, but Sylvester withdrew and returned the following semester.

It is not uncommon for Navajo students to go home for a ceremony. Ceremonies set right the state of imbalance caused by violating ritual norms; underlying and exacerbating such conditions is the fact of geographic dislocation. Although they might have needed the same ceremony had they remained at home, it is necessary for them to return home to restore balanced and orderly conditions: to be effective, Navajo ceremonies must be conducted in the Navajo homeland.

Such trauma is heightened when combined with the sense of physical and emotional vulnerability that accompanies severe illness. When a traditional Navajo must seek treatment at an urban biomedical facility not only must he or she contend with alien surroundings—Navajo healing ceremonies are held on the earth floor of the family hogan, a vastly different setting from the sealed, air-conditioned world of a modern health care facility—but the patient must also contend with an underlying sense of chaos and unpredictability because of being outside the boundaries of the four sacred mountains. Treatment within the boundaries of their sacred homeland has the blessing of the Holy People; the same natural order and power of the universe which supports the stars, the moon, and the sun in their orderly, predictable paths across the heavens also works on behalf of

the patient as long as he or she is within the boundaries of the sacred mountains. When the Holy People gave the Diné this land, they also created special plants for the healing of certain illnesses. Following these sacred prescriptions—including seeking treatment within the boundaries of Navajo country—enables the patient to work with the natural order of the universe; seeking treatment outside these sacred geographic boundaries plunges the endeavor into danger and uncertainty.

The dramatic mesas and mountains of Navajo country index some of the most powerful and important teachings in Navajo philosophy. Ultimately, the land acts as a visual text which encodes the core perceptions of life. Being outside the boundaries of this sacred land which was given the Navajo by the Holy People is against the natural order of things. Each person must make his or her peace with living away from the sacred text of the landscape. Some do this by becoming acculturated and integrating themselves into the Anglo world; many return home periodically to renew their ties with their geographic and human relatives. In this way, they reestablish the state of orderly and blessed conditions known as *hózhó*.

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