

Matthews, Washington: *The Night Chant: A Navaho Ceremony*. Salt Lake City: The University of Utah Press, 1995, (Reprint of 1902 edition.) ISBN: 0-87480-490-6 Cloth; 0-87480-491-4 Paper CDN \$27.95.

The study of Native religious traditions has a long and, unfortunately, somewhat sordid history. Until recently, little training has been available to scholars within the field, and the brunt of academic study in Native religious life has been conducted by anthropologists and what might best be termed "dabblers." This has led to a consistent, subjective treatment of Native religious life as an example of "primitive" or "archaic" systems, worthy of study only because of how interestingly bizarre and foreign they are, and because they were believed to be soon defunct. There have, as always, been exceptions to this stereotype. *The Night Chant* by Washington Matthews may qualify as just such an exception.

The goal of the text is to present, in explicit, exceptional detail, the performance of the Navaho Night Chant ceremony throughout its entire nine days. Matthews spent a significant number of years working with Navaho singers and practitioners of what he called the most important and most popular Navaho healing ceremony, and that time is well documented in his attention to detail. Originally published in 1902, just three years before his death (which has, by some, been attributed to his mishandling of a power he did not understand), this text has withstood the test of time, and remains a critical and dominant text in the field. Why?

Matthews, much along the vein of the scholars of his time period, examines the performance of the Night Chant through a Western, scientific lens, rather than with a humanistic understanding. Obviously, he did not believe what he was learning from these Navaho singers, and his presentation of materials is accordingly straightforward and decontextualized. It is hard to understand Navaho ceremony outside of the culture, as religious life for Native people does not exist in a vacuum, as an entity which can be extracted from the larger scope of society. Religion is not only belief in something written down in a book: it cannot be that, or else it is dead. Religion is a living entity, which shows itself in all elements of Native culture, and cannot be so easily drawn out. In presenting such a straightforward, decontextualized version of the performance of ritual, Matthews serves to objectify Navaho ceremonialism, therefore dehumanizing it. This ritual is not simply something that is done; it is something that Navaho people do. They cannot be excluded from the mix.

These are significant problems with the text, but the reader must also be aware that, at the time of original publication, Matthews had no previous scholarship from which to work. This text is ground breaking in that it was

the first significant endeavor in the field of Native religious life, and stood alone for quite some time. Although one can be critical of Matthews' method, and rightfully should be, one should simultaneously be aware of the importance of this text, not only to those interested in Navaho culture, but to anyone interested in Native ritual and ceremonial life.

In a presentation of this amount of detail, it is natural to expect some mistakes, misunderstandings, or misinterpretations. Is everything Matthews presents exactly as he says it is? Probably not. Does he claim that it is as such? No, he does not. Matthews himself is aware of the limitations of an outsider trying to understand such a complicated and culturally weighted ceremony, and makes it clear that this is merely his best understanding of what he was taught. His humility is refreshing in a field where too often anthropologists have taken the liberty to claim authority over the validity and truth of Native ceremony. Although he does not defer outright to Navaho authority on the ceremony, he represses the Western impulse to pass judgment. He presents the ceremony as best he understands it, and leaves it to the reader to interpret.

The importance of this text to readers interested in Native religious life is in the sensitivity Matthews brings to his subject. Unlike traditional anthropologists such as Boas and Mead, Matthews took the time to learn the Navaho language, at least conversationally, and sought knowledge from the Native practitioners, rather than simply recording observations without cultural knowledge. Although Matthews does not include cultural context within the text with any significance, simply learning a language is a cultural endeavor, and inundates one deeper within a culture than simple observation ever could.

In many ways *The Night Chant* can be seen as the benchmark of how one can present the religious culture of a foreign group in an openly accessible format. Matthews' distinctions and sectioning of the text, along with an extensive index, make it easy for the researcher interested in Navaho religion to find information. The text is full of extensive detail and explanation, and could be treated as *the* original reference point for looking at Navaho religion. Matthews was first, and since his text we have refined and refinished the methods we employ as scholars to give accurate credence to Native religious life. Yet there are still lessons to be learned from Matthews, including how to treat Native people as people, not as objectified subjects. Native religious life is too often misunderstood, and here we find a man, writing in 1902, who allowed readers to come to their

own conclusions about a religious life which was not "primitive," but rather merely different, and interesting.

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McRae, Heather, Garth Nettheim and Laura Beacroft: *Indigenous Legal Issues*. Sydney, Australia: Law Book Company, 1997, ISBN 0-455-21468-9, AUS \$ 85.00.

On 24 December, 1996, the High Court of Australia handed down its decision in the case of *Wik Peoples v. State of Queensland and Others*.¹ This decision (four judges to three) found that Native title was not necessarily extinguished by the granting of a pastoral lease and that it was possible, in some circumstances, for the two to co-exist. Reaction to the decision was polarized. Indigenous people celebrated the fact that their rights, eventually recognised in the long awaited *Mabo (No 2)*² decision, were not to be summarily extinguished, while pastoralists complained that the decision denied them certainty. In response to the *Wik* decision the government came up with a ten point plan which essentially seeks to diminish the incidents of Native title by increasing the rights attaching to pastoral leases. The plan would also prevent Native title claims in regard to unclaimed Crown land in city areas and in regard to water (cf land).

On 26 May, 1997, another significant event occurred in Australian Indigenous/Non-Indigenous relations. The Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission's report on the stolen generation of Aboriginal children, entitled *Bringing Them Home* (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 1997), was tabled in Federal Parliament. This report detailed the impact and effects of the policy pursued by Federal and State governments between approximately 1883 and the early 1970s, a policy which involved the forcible removal of Indigenous children from their families. The report detailed how these children were sometimes placed in institutional homes while at other times they were re-located to farms where they worked as labourers or domestic servants. Still others were adopted out. Many never saw their parents again. Almost all grew up with no understanding of or support from their cultural heritage which was denied them. The evidence contained in the report was damning, heart-wrenching and painful. For example, it included the following extract which is the evidence of a Northern