

NAVAJO HOOGHAN AND NAVAJO COSMOS

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ABSTRACT/RESUME

The hooghan (homestead) of the Navajo is one means of stating sacred information about the world. In the mythological examples it appears to be the constant nucleus of power and good structure; it represents the Navajo cosmic order at a small scale and it is used in healing ceremonies as a necessary sacred construct by means of which contact with holy powers is possible and restoration or healing is reached.

La ferme des Navajo constitue un moyen d'exprimer des renseignements sacrés au sujet du monde. Dans les exemples mythologiques elle paraît être l'élément de base constant du pouvoir et de la structure sociale: elle représente en petit l'ordre cosmique des Navajo et l'on l'emploie dans les cérémonies de guérison comme un objet sacré nécessaire grâce auquel il est possible d'établir un contact avec les puissances sacrées et d'atteindre la guérison.

The Navajo Hooghan, A Living Place And A Ceremonial Place

When visiting the Navajo reservation one sees that many Navajo nowadays do not live in the traditional hoghans anymore. Many of them live in rectangular brick-houses or in trailers (McAllester & McAllester, 1980). During the hot summer period the Navajo often spend the day in wooden shelters that are covered with green branches of spruces, cottonwood, greasewood or tumbleweed. These shelters provide shade and natural air-conditioning as the light summer-breeze can pass through the loose wooden construction. At dusk, however, the people living in these shelters will retire into more solid constructions, for even if they are very hot, they also are safer. The nights in this part of Arizona are dark, and dangerous animals like the rattlesnake or the black widow live in the vicinity of houses. The night is also the period when the sun is considered to be at rest so that people with bad intentions - the so-called skin-walkers (werewolves) who practice black magic (i.e. who use their knowledge in a destructive way) - might roam the premises. In order to protect themselves against all these evils, the Navajo prefer to retire to the house or the hooghan at night. When spending the night in the hooghan, traditional Navajo put down their beddings in a semi-circle around the fire place: the men should be on the north-side, women and children on the south- and west-side. The east side of the hooghan should be left free; I will come back to this given later, but I will mention here that the east-side of a hooghan is of crucial importance.

Since the hooghan is usually constructed with natural materials (wood and clay), it functions as an airconditioner that is well adapted to the harsh environment of the Arizona and New Mexico desert area. During the hot summer it *offers protection against the sun, and in winter it keeps out the cold.*

But the Navajo hooghan is more than a living place. It is also a small-scale representation of the Navajo universe and as such the framework for the performance of Navajo healing ceremonies (Wyman, 1975).

In the following sections I will develop these notions in three steps. Firstly I will present a brief survey of Navajo natural philosophy. Secondly I will show how the building of a hooghan contributes to the explicit revival in the Navajo community of the creation and evolution of their world. Finally, I will make the link between hooghan and religious ceremonies.

Navajo Natural Philosophy

The Navajo consider the world they are living in to be one of the possible worlds. Moreover it is a closed world. That is to say, the energies which

make up the stuff of this world and which evolve between earth and sky may change in quality, but not in quantity. Other worlds may exist apart from this world, but they are not "The Navajo world". People of other worlds may even act upon the Navajo world, but their action is considered to be a rather ridiculous effort of people who are not "the people", to intrude into the Navajo world. Because of their ignorance about the nature of things, inhabitants of these other worlds may do some damage to the physical objects of the world, but the Navajo do not see them as intruders with a real impact on the Navajo-world. Furthermore, Navajo show an amazing capacity to adapt themselves and to integrate elements from other worlds. For example, the introduction of the peyote-cult, which stemmed from Mexico and became a pan-Indian form of ceremony, was for a certain time the object of a very articulate debate between "orthodox" and more "liberal" Navajo. In the end, the Navajo successfully combined the use of peyote with Navajo and Christian elements and created a new series of ceremonies. These take less time than the orthodox ones and are thus better adapted to a modern life-style.

The Navajo world is not only a closed one but also a dynamic one (Pinxten, Van Dooren and Harvey, 1983; Farella, 1986). The forces of the earth move in waves from the center to the border of the world and back to the center again. In this movement the forces interfere with each other and man's responsibility is to correctly estimate these processes. Man should try not to disturb the delicate balance that exists between the different forces at work in the world. Navajo indicate this cosmic task by the rule of conduct, that is, to be respectful. The balance of forces is everywhere (e.g. Father Sky and Mother Earth are held in a closed system of exchange of energies-forces). The sun gives its warmth and light to the earth, and energy is to be rendered to the sun in the form of human lives. The forces that keep Father Sky and Mother Earth related are primarily concentrated in the four sacred mountains, which border the Navajo land in the four cardinal directions. Each cardinal direction is associated with a different color and with different precious "stones".

east : white - white shell

south : blue - turquoise

west : yellow- abalone

north : black -jet

In the healing ceremonies the use of these colors and precious materials is strictly prescribed (Reichard, 1950; Lamphere, 1983). When mistakes are made in the combination of colors or materials (for example, during the construction of a sandpainting) the ceremony becomes worthless.

The Characteristics of the hooghan and their relation to the natural philosophy of the Navajo

- a. shape
- b. materials
- c. placement

a. shape:

The actual volume of the hooghan is limited. I often wondered how the Navajo, who were rather timid in physical contacts (for example, when greeting each other they avoid eye-contact and only touch each other at finger-tips), are able to gather in great numbers in relatively small hoghans.

The shape of the hooghan is important and can be traced in the actual construction procedures. I will dwell a bit on them. The first step in building is to make a shallow roundish dug-out in the ground representing Mother Earth lying on her back, slightly curved. (Her head is pointing to the east, her feet are in the west.) In the center of the dug-out a small wooden box is constructed in which four wooden poles, pointing to the four cardinal directions, are placed. In Navajo mythology the four original Navajo clans started out from the center of the earth and moved towards each cardinal direction. The poles symbolically stand for these initial clans (Wyman, 1975; 458-459):

east = Its Leaf Clan
south = Bitter Water Clan
west = Close to Water Clan
north = Mud Clan

In the practice of building the hooghan, these poles serve as a sort of compass. The one pointing to the north should be made of a tree whithered by lightning. After finishing the walls of the hooghan, they are removed.

Once the four cardinal directions are identified, upstanding poles are introduced into the soil. Sometimes they are eight in number, sometimes twelve. For technical reasons the building of a large and/or a round hooghan requires many upstanding poles. In my opinion, the marked preference for more or less roundish structures goes back to the belief that sharp-angled spaces or objects and even pointing actions are too direct and thus hinder the free movement of the roaming forces. (For example, arrowheads and plants with thorns are considered to offer protection against the negative use of forces, such as witchcraft. They stop these forces in their tracks, so to speak.)

Between these upstanding logs, planks are attached horizontally. The eventual gaps between them are filled up with clay. Only one opening is left

in this wall. It is situated on the east side of the hoghan. When the hoghan is used, be it as a homestead or for ceremonial purposes, this doorway should be closed off only with a piece of cloth, in order to allow for the necessary communication with the forces of the outside world. (When the hoghan is used as a living place this rule is not followed, as the winters on the reservation are hard and in springtime there are many sandstorms.) On top of the upstanding logs a whirling roof made of wood is constructed with a smoke-hole in the centre. This wooden construction is covered with clay on the outside. The roof represents Father Sky, who lies on top of Mother Earth. The smoke hole represents the opening in the sky which permits the future access to a new world. I suppose it is acceptable to state that the smoke hole represents the zenith of the Navajo-world. The fire-place which is built perpendicularly to it represents the nadir. For more information on the construction of the hoghan, see Wyman, 1975.

b. the materials:

As can be deduced from the previous pages, wood is very important in the construction of a hoghan. However, as the territory of the Navajo is a semi-desert, wood (mainly redwood) is rather scarce and expensive. If available, the Navajo nowadays use industrial building materials such as metal poles, polyester and other isolation materials.

My general impression is, however, that the choice of the materials is not so important. The realization of a correctly built hoghan seems to be of much greater importance.

c. the placement of the hoghan:

For obvious reasons it is advisable not to construct a hoghan on places where lightning has struck. But there are other limitations in the choice of a site: hoghans should not be built on places where certain forces could be concentrated. When, for example, during a ceremony, precious stones have been offered at a certain spot, this spot should not be chosen for the building of a hoghan.² Furthermore, my impression is that the belief in the shift of forces with death lies at the basis of the Navajo custom never to re-use a hoghan in which somebody has died. Often when a person dies, the corpse is left inside the hoghan and the family moves to another spot leaving written warnings for the naive tourists and anthropologists not to enter the old hoghan, nor to take away certain parts of it.

Navajo also advise one against building a hoghan in the near vicinity of the livingplace of certain animals, such as crows, prairie-dogs and so on.³

Finally, the motives to avoid a certain place to build a hoghan are sometimes of an ecological order, for example, one should not build too

close to the scarce water resources.

The Navajo hooghan and the Navajo Sandpainting in their ceremonial context

The main purpose of Navajo ceremonials is to restore well-ordered, harmonious relations between the various forces which are at work within the Navajo world (Witherspoon, 1977). When a member of the Navajo-people falls ill, he or she is considered to be in disharmony with nature. The ailing person is first diagnosed by a shaman, who determines the causes of the illness and advises a particular ceremony to cure it. The "patient" or his/her family make arrangements with a medicine-man to organize the ceremony. The medicine-man (or -women) will instruct the helpers in the healing ceremony during the construction of the many sandpaintings (there will be at least one per day; each ceremony takes five or nine days; for all this see Rechard, 1939, 1950).

All ceremonies have to take place in a hooghan. Whereas this traditional house is considered to be a small scale replica of the Navajo universe, a sandpainting is conceived of as the symbolic small scale reconstruction of that part or aspect of the universe (or that set of forces in it) vis-a-vis which the "patient" has caused disorder or disharmony. The sandpainting is created on the floor of the hooghan. It can vary in size, but in practice it should at least be large enough for a patient to sit in its center.

The construction of the sandpainting follows a strict procedure, under the guidance of the medicine-man. First, the floor of the hooghan is cleared (the fireplace is removed, etc.) and swept clean. Then, the medicine-man and his helpers carefully strew the moulded and ground minerals and plants to form the required pattern on the floor. The construction has to start at the center of the sandpainting and progress clockwise to the edges. As mentioned before, this construction must be carried out meticulously. Form, size, place and colors of the composition must be exactly right. As for the contents, the sandpaintings are composed of plantlike, animal-like and anthropomorph figures, each of which represent particular forces or principles, mainly indicated as types of wind or air (McNeley, 1982; Farella, 1986). The boundary of most sandpaintings is constituted by a representation of a rainbow which closes off the sacred world to the south, the west and the north. The east side is left open to allow for communication and interaction of this micro-world with the (real) powers and forces in nature (outside the hooghan). The opening of the sandpainting is symbolically guarded by representations of a medicine pouch and/or animals with horns or stings (for example; bat, horned toad, dragon fly, gila monster, and so on). By the end of each night of the ceremony the particular sandpaint-

ing is ritually destroyed. That is to say, it is debuilt and swept away in a counter-clockwise sense, while participants and by-standers are allowed to take samples of it. Of the sandpaintings that are available in print or on slides it is said that they all contain deliberate mistakes. Indeed, sandpaintings should not be fixed, but have a temporary role in a process of healing or restoration. Thus, stills or prints of sandpaintings are only allowed provided a (minor) mistake is introduced in them, such that a "forgery" is fixated instead of the "real thing".

A note on the practice of healing ceremonies should be added. It would be naive to think that the Navajo do not recognize the advantages western medicine can offer. In cases of acute health problems, the western health centres are frequented now, but the practice of the traditional healing ceremonies is still very much sought for outspokenly culture-bound problems.

Conclusion

Within the frame of this rather compact description I have tried to show that there exists an obvious link among several elements of the Navajo world which the fieldworker encounters and which at first sight appear to be exotic. It has been my main aim to disentangle these elements from their exotic context and to interrelate them within a frame that can allow us to grasp the homogeneity of the Navajo way of thinking about and acting upon the world.

Navajo cosmology is orally transmitted through the myths in story telling and in the singing of holy songs during the healing ceremonies. It is also made explicit and relived when building a *hooghan* and blessing it in a ceremonial way. Fractions of the cosmological order are reconstructed, reexplained and relived when laying out the sandpaintings. I am inclined to use the following metaphor: when the Navajo build a *hooghan*, they build a small-scale replica of the Navajo universe, and as one does not "fool around" (to use their favorite expression) with forces, or other materials in this world, one proceeds with extreme care when thinking, talking and actually building the *hooghan*. For the realization of the sandpaintings and for their use, a high degree of precision is required. Talking about the world or representing it by building images or taking ceremonial actions means to reconstruct it, and this cannot be done in a casual, off-hand way.

NOTES

1. F. Harvey, personal information.
2. Information by F. Harvey.

3. Lorraine Boomer, personal communication.

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