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TITLE PRAYER AS PERFORMANCE

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tion and interdependence of story and history. Life experience, the past, oppression, incongruity, suffering, and joy all gain meaning, they take wing, through the power of story, through the magic of words.

## NOTES

1. For a full bibliography to the history of Tecumseh's encounter with Harrison as well as the story traditions that are associated with it, see Sam Gill, *Mother Earth: An American Story* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1987), chap. 2.
2. Henry Rowe Schoolcraft, *Travels in the Central Portions of the Mississippi Valley: Comprising Observations on Its Mineral, Geography, Internal Resources, Aboriginal Population* (New York: Collins & Hanney, 1825), pp. 144-45.
3. For a full bibliography to the dreamer movement led by Smohalla see Gill, *Mother Earth*, chap. 3.
4. J. W. MacMurray, "The 'Dreamers' of the Columbia River Valley, in Washington Territory," *Transactions of the Albany Institute* (Albany, 1887), pp. 247-48.
5. Edward B. Tylor, *Primitive Culture* (London: John Murray, 1873), 1: 326-27.
6. James Mooney, *The Ghost Dance Religion and the Sioux Outbreak of 1890*, Bureau of American Ethnology 14th Annual Report (Washington, D.C., 1896), p. 721.
7. Albrecht Dieterich, *Mutter Erde: Ein Versuch über Volksreligion* (Berlin-Leipzig, 1905).
8. See Gill, *Mother Earth*, chap. 6, for a full review of the scholarship on Mother Earth.
9. See Gill, *Mother Earth*, chap. 7, for an account of the history of Mother Earth as a goddess to Indian peoples.

# Prayer as Performance:

## *A Navajo Contribution to the Study of Prayer*

Frank Hamilton Cushing, ethnographer, lived at Zuni in the late nineteenth century. The Zuni accepted him and even made him a priest of the Bow society. A Zuni poem recalls the initiation of Cushing into the Bow priesthood.

Once they made a White man into a Priest of the Bow  
 he was out there with other Bow Priests  
 he had black stripes on his body  
 the others said their prayers from their hearts  
 but he read his from a piece of paper.

There is a double edge to the humor of this poem, for in Zuni language the term used for the written page is "that which is striped," so Cushing, with his white body painted as a Bow priest with black stripes, was literally a walking page of writing.<sup>1</sup>

I think this poem gets to the heart of the criticism that can be made of the academic study of prayer. It distinguishes between a heartfelt act of prayer and a prayer formally recited from a piece of paper. The difference has yet to be adequately appreciated. This failure is clear when we see that the study of prayer has hinged upon attempting to reconcile prayer as it appears in the form of texts with the ideas we have about prayer that have been developed on the basis of personal experience and common knowledge. The study of prayer has been based largely on the analysis of written texts and shows prayer to be a formulaic, repetitive, redundant, and even trite verbal act. This conflicts with the expectation that prayer be a spontaneous, creative, and extemporaneous conversation human beings have with God about their heartfelt concerns. In textual

forms prayers appear rigid and uncreative in contradiction to the expectation that prayers will be free and spontaneous.

Most students who have approached the study of prayer on the basis of a comparison of isolated texts have seen this difference as a problem, and they have been frustrated by their inability to resolve it. I have found, to the contrary, that this difference is not a problem that must be resolved, but rather it is a key to our understanding of prayer as a meaningful and efficacious human act. We are simply encountering the difference pointed to so nicely by the Zuni, the difference between text and act, the difference between prayer considered as constituted only by its words and prayer considered as constituted by a performance which engages aspects of utterance, including a wide religious and cultural context in association with the words.

Edward B. Tylor's ten-page discussion of prayer in *Primitive Culture* (1873) stands today as a classic statement, and it has been surpassed by very few studies of prayer. Prayer is a standard entry in phenomenological studies of religion, but here the principal concern has been to distinguish it from other forms of religious speech, especially magical spells.<sup>2</sup> Prayer is usually mentioned in general treatments of what has been called "primitive religion," but these vary little from Tylor's statement.<sup>3</sup> Other than Frederick Heiler's *Prayer* (1932) there have been no significant extensive comparative studies of prayer.

It is not of interest here to present fully and critically the history of the academic study of prayer, short as it is; but by briefly describing and commenting upon a few significant moments in this history I can highlight those features that have been consistently recognized as distinctive of the character of prayer. Notably, the very character of prayer is interlocked with the unresolved problems encountered in the study of prayer.

#### *Turning Points in the Study of Prayer*

*Tylor and the Evolutionist Assumption.* In the formative period of the fields of anthropology and the comparative study of religion, evolutionist and primitivist perspectives shaped the way that religious phenomena were seen and defined. The study of prayer is

interesting in this historical context because the phenomena of prayer so clearly confused and confounded the assumptions on which were built this organization and understanding of religion.

Edward B. Tylor's discussion of the nature of prayer has greatly shaped the scholarly view of prayer since the late nineteenth century. It is not difficult to find Tylor's views on prayer in currently published works on exclusively oral peoples. He considered prayer to be the address of personal spirit to personal spirit. It is a conversation distinguishable from ordinary human speech acts primarily in that it involves a supernatural entity. Tylor agreed that prayer is "the soul's sincere desire, uttered or unexpressed," but when it is expressed, it is an act of intelligible speech in more or less ordinary language that addresses reasonable and practical concerns.<sup>4</sup> He held these characteristics of prayer to be incontestable because the nature of prayer is simple and familiar to us all. This was Tylor's view of prayer as a religious act of the heart.

The confoundment of Tylor's understanding of prayer arose when he considered prayer in the comparative study of culture, and especially as it confronted his evolutionist hypotheses. Here he dealt with prayers primarily as recorded and written texts, not as performed acts. Tylor considered prayers in both "primitive" and "advanced" cultures, but it was difficult for him to make distinctions between the prayers of these culture types in order to chart the evolution of prayer or prayer forms. The only evolutionary correlation he was able to advance was in terms of the ethical character of the message of the prayer. He posited that "primitive prayer" was concerned primarily with selfish personal needs and wants, while the prayer of "higher religions" took on ethical concerns to become an instrument of morality. Tylor probably knew that this would not withstand rigorous testing, but he held to his evolutionist view and despaired when the practices of more advanced cultures did not properly align with their attained level of advancement.<sup>5</sup>

While the content or message of the prayer text could be forced to yield, however disappointingly, to the evolutionist assumption, this was less possible when considering the formal character of ritual prayer. The highly structured and rigidly maintained character of prayers that contradicted Tylor's expectation of prayer as a spontaneous outpouring of the human heart was found to be as evident in

"high religions" as in "primitive religions." Rosaries, prayer wheels, and formal liturgical prayers found throughout the world religions could not be ignored. This formal character of prayer posed a most difficult problem for both the definition of prayer and the evolutionist schema which sought to interpret it. Again, there was little choice but to yield the case as a failure and to attempt a recovery by pointing out what caused the failure. Ironically, Tylor suggested that the process of civilization was the culprit by forcing worship, and consequently prayer, into a mechanical routine needed to regulate human affairs by fixed ordinance. He wrote, "Thus prayers, from being at first utterances as free and flexible as requests to a living patriarch or chief, stiffened into traditional formulas whose repetition required verbal accuracy, and whose nature practically assimilated more or less to that of charms."<sup>6</sup>

The empirical data on prayer should have forced the evolutionist position into acknowledging a reverse case, a movement from religion to magic, prayer to charm. By Tylor's definition prayer is a speech act between man and god, but the processes of civilization undercut its basically communicative character by forcing it into becoming a formulaic act. Prayer became charm in the process of civilization. But at this point prayer and charm overlap and blur to the point that we can no longer distinguish them on the basis of the original definition that prayer is an intelligible act of speech. The content and, especially, the form of prayer when confined primarily to ritual text, to words, present a major problem to the evolutionist position.

Tylor's view of the effects of prayer is consistent with his intuitive understanding that prayer is a heartfelt and spontaneous communication between humans and higher beings: "Wherever it occurs prayer is a means of strengthening emotion, of sustaining courage and exciting hope."<sup>7</sup> Tylor stood with the Zuni in seeing prayer as an affair of the heart; but in his comparative studies of culture he approached prayer, as did Cushing, by limiting its scope largely to what was written on paper. By doing so he met with the disparity signaled by the Zuni response to Cushing.

*Reichard and a Structural Approach.* In the early 1940s a new period in the study of prayer finally began the departure from the position that had been stated by Tylor and carried on by Heiler,

Radin, Lowie, van der Leeuw, and others. Susanne Langer, in *Philosophy in a New Key* (1942), identified symbolism as the generative idea that was shaping the entire scope of the human sciences. Just two years later Gladys Reichard published a book on Navajo prayer entitled *Prayer: The Compulsive Word*. While this book is concerned only with Navajo prayer, it is important because of its approach to the interpretation of prayer. There are implications in Reichard's study that suggest a movement from the evolutionist perspective to a new symbolic and structural perspective. However, Reichard failed to develop fully this new perspective and settled on a view of Navajo prayer as mechanically compulsive.

By using alphanumeric designations she charted rhythmic word and phrase patterns in Navajo prayer texts. Once these patterns of repetition were charted, she proposed structural divisions corresponding with her interpretation of content. These distinctions in both form and content were made without explicit criteria, but several levels of structure were defined. At one level were distinctions such as invocation, petition, and benediction; at another level were distinctions such as address to the deity, the reason for the deity coming to the aid of the one praying, the symbols of the deity, the behavior of the deity, the concern expressed by the deity, and the description of repetitive ritual acts. At still another level Reichard attempted to correlate two major types of rhythmic patterns with the general purposes to which prayers in these types are addressed.<sup>8</sup>

The implications for a new turn in the study of prayer stem from Reichard's recognition that the formal composition of prayer texts is significant and that aspects of the structure correlate with the performance context. These propositions open the way to resolve Tylor's dilemma. Reichard's attention to the form of prayer texts suggested that even the structured character of formula, of repetition, of convention, was inseparable from the communicative functions. But beyond that her study suggests that these correlations may be extended to the performance of prayers, prayer acts—that is, prayers uttered in specific social, historical, religious, and ritual contexts.

Reichard's book on Navajo prayer has had little, if any, impact on the broader comparative and general study of prayer, doubtless because she held to the notion, despite what her study suggested,

that Navajo prayer is basically a magical utterance, signaled boldly in the title of her book.

*Other Points.* Since Reichard's study others have studied prayer and related genres of religious language in the broader contexts of performance in culture. Some studies focus only on the code structures found in prayer. For example, in a study of Zuni speech acts, including prayer, Dennis Tedlock considered inflectional patterns as a code which signals aspects of the intent of the speaker.<sup>9</sup> At the other end of the spectrum S. J. Tambiah focused on the metaphorical character of magical language to demonstrate that complex messages may exist even in apparently nonsensical charms. But this approach tends to ignore much of the rigid and highly repetitive character of these speech acts.<sup>10</sup>

Another development that suggests a potential advance in the understanding of prayer arises from the illumination of the performative aspect of language by philosophers of language. To my knowledge this has been tentatively considered in terms of prayer only by Philip Ravenhill,<sup>11</sup> and I have incorporated the perspective in a study of Navajo prayer.<sup>12</sup>

Other analytic paradigms have been fruitful in the study of prayer. For example, Gary Gossen adapted Victor Turner's approach to the study of ritual symbols in his study of Chamul prayers.<sup>13</sup> By illuminating meanings at the exegetical, operational, and positional levels according to Turner's scheme, Gossen was able to point to certain sets of time-space cultural categories that are encoded in these ritual speech acts. But while he shows that Chamul prayers demonstrate these categories, he has no particular concern for the peculiar or distinctive character of prayer as a speech form, nor for the significance of prayer as a religious act.

*Critique and Comment.* The most striking fact is that in the past half century the general study of prayer has received little attention. This is in spite of the advancements in the study of language, speech acts, and religious language made in several fields. The existing studies of prayer have generally suffered from one or more of several problems. Prayer is viewed in only semantic terms, as a system of encoded messages. The rigid and repetitive form distinctive of prayer is ignored. Prayer is studied primarily as text separated from the religious, cultural, and performance contexts. Some studies con-

sider only the form or structural character of the speech act or some aspect thereof and exclude concern for the content and its meaning. Other studies are concerned with prayer only as a medium of culture and are not interested in understanding the nature of prayer.

While the study of prayer remains undeveloped, the fact is that prayer is among the most peculiarly remarkable of religious phenomena. It is foremost, and undeniably, religious. It has not been taken nearly seriously enough by students of religion. Can we claim to know much about religion while having ignored such a central and crucial act as prayer?

#### *Prayer Acts in Navajo Culture*

The intelligibility of the language of Navajo prayer is one of its distinguishing features. It has few vocables, so common to Navajo song, and it can be clearly understood even in translation. Navajo prayers may easily be written down and translated into English. While the message of this prayer is directed toward a pragmatic concern, the language is not without poetic imagery and reference to oral traditions. Navajo prayer is highly formulaic, rigidly guarded against change, and recited without verbal interpretation, interpolation, or significant alteration. In the examination of texts of prayers there seems little challenge or difficulty in interpreting much of their surface-level message. It is even easy to move to a deeper level of significance and meaning in the prayers where we find that the structure and images bear interrelationships with the whole Navajo cosmic system of interacting dualities. These categories are encoded in the prayers in the designations of direction, color, time, sexuality, and geography. We can easily see that Navajo prayer images reflect cosmic and cultural values.

When we move beyond the words to consider the performance of prayer as religious act, we move well ahead in comprehending the power of Navajo prayer. Here story traditions, ritual, and cultural concerns must be incorporated into our analysis. Navajo prayers are performed as the central and most important acts in most of the many ritual processes which constitute the enormously complex ceremonials of the Navajo. Prayers are usually intoned in litany fashion by a singer (a medicine man or woman) and the one for

whom the ceremonial is performed, with the voices slightly overlapping. They are usually performed with the one praying sitting in a ritual position with legs extended, facing east, head slightly bowed, and holding a ritual object in his or her hands. The intonation of prayers may take from a few minutes to an hour or more. Everyone present is familiar with the distinctive sounds of the intonation and the common phrases of prayer performances. Prayers are never intoned or spoken outside a context which Navajo tradition has defined as appropriate. To lead the litany recitation of prayer one must have properly learned the prayer and the accompanying ritual and have cultural knowledge of the ceremonial way. In this way a Navajo gains possession of prayers.

Upon considering the semantic content of prayer texts in light of this simple description of the performances of prayers, there are notable observations to be made. First, while the message or information encoded in the prayers can be described at several levels, there is little indication that in the performance of prayers this information is particularly unique or informative, although it is not irrelevant to the situation. The style of the performance and the physical and emotional aspects of the performance seem to greatly overshadow any concern with message. Then, too, the immediate message is obvious to those present. Further, the message of the prayer is highly redundant due to dense repetition. The extent of repetition and the verbal elaboration of the prayers and the related ritual elements is greatly out of proportion to the extent of the semantic messages of the prayers. We must not ignore the obvious issue of why such complex and elaborate acts are required to convey a message so ill proportioned to these acts. We must ask why the information conveyed seems to be given such little attention. We must ask if there is not much involved in prayer that has little to do with the semantical referential meaning in the text. We must ask to what extent and in what ways prayer is more than a conveyance of encoded messages.

First, we must note that to any Navajo the sounds, the settings, and the occasions of prayer are distinctive. These elements signal that the act being performed is an act of prayer, thus framing it in the minds of Navajos. Thus they do not see a discrepancy between the referential dimensions of prayer messages and their knowledge

of the ordinary empirical world. The performance characteristics of prayer permit Navajos to experience it as prayer, as an experience of the evocation of images which are capable of "strengthening emotion, of sustaining courage and exciting hope," as Tylor would have it. It is precisely because the performance of prayer signals that a special frame of experience should be engaged by those present that we can speak of prayers as being more than simply message-bearing in nature. Further, to explain prayers in terms of the simple semantical referential messages they bear is to ignore the question of why they are not simple nonredundant utterings of messages we can easily decipher.

Let me restate this in general terms, for I believe it applies not only to Navajo prayers but to prayers generally. Seen in one way, an act of prayer is clearly an intelligible communication between human beings and higher powers. It is a language act open to translation, interpretation, and analysis. But seen in another way, prayer is poetic in language and is performed as a highly complex ritual act. In this view whatever message exists in the prayer language is not nearly as important as its power to evoke a network of images related to sense experiences, moods, emotions, and values. This evocational aspect is borne not only in the form of rhythmic repetition and the language of the words but also, and perhaps to an even greater extent, in the context and texture of the ritual act of prayer—the sounds, sights, smells, stories, songs, ritual gestures, and dance movements that inform the experience.

A peculiarity of prayer is that it is both a practical and intelligible act of speech which seeks pragmatic results and a ritual act which engages and coordinates numerous contextual spheres in the creation of a network of rich images. While these aspects of prayer may seem disparate, they are in fact interdependent, for the performative dimensions of the prayer act serve its pragmatic concerns by engendering the powers of evocation which can transform moods, reshape motivations, muster courage, and present meaning-giving images. This means that while prayer is the communication of an intelligible message describing an expected pragmatic effect, the form in which that message is carried engages real processes which serve to achieve the desired results, even to the extent of physical cure.

Consequently we can see the possibility that the performance of a prayer act can be creative and responsive to heartfelt needs while being utterly formulaic. The creativity and immediacy of a prayer are not fully apparent at the level of its referential meaning, but they become so when a prayer is considered also as a religious act that incorporates much more than the isolated words of the text. In this wider frame it is virtually impossible to replicate exactly an act of prayer from one occasion to another, for the needs to which it speaks are always changing, as is the cultural milieu in which it is performed.

With this understanding of prayer it is clear that we must be able to analyze the referential meaning of the words of prayers but also to consider the meanings of the performative aspects of the prayer acts. We must analyze both the semantic content and the form of the prayer texts. But we must also be able to analyze a prayer as the performance of a religious act that is ritual in character, and we must be able to construct a description of the network of powerful images that the performance evokes. This will require the systematic analysis of the structures of a prayer in its context of ritual, oral tradition, and the specific circumstances motivating the particular performance of the prayer act.

What is thereby achieved is an understanding of ritual prayer as a religious act whose significance is achieved through a complex hierarchical set of structuring principles. When seen in a limited way, prayer has an internal tension between its pragmatic and its poetic and structural aspects. But when considered in the wider frame of performance, this internal tension is recognized as the source of its vitality and potency. Thus only when we extend the frame in which prayer is considered wide enough to include all of the dimensions its performance calls into play, but without losing track of the minute constituents in each of these dimensions, do we reach the point of achieving an adequate understanding of any prayer act.

The following interpretation of a particular Navajo act of prayer will demonstrate and illustrate this understanding of ritual prayer.

#### *A Navajo Enemyway Prayer Act*

On analysis of the structure of more than three hundred Navajo prayer texts, totaling more than fifteen thousand lines, in isolation

from their performance context, I have been able to determine that all Navajo prayers are composed of combinations of some of twenty constituents that can be defined in terms of their content and poetic style. An analysis of the structure of all of these prayers in isolation from their performance contexts permitted the distinction of eight major categories of prayer. When the prayers were considered in their performance contexts, the classification of prayers correlated well with a Navajo ceremonial classification. This confirmed the hypothesis that the structure of prayer is significant. This can be demonstrated in the discussion of a specific prayer act.<sup>14</sup>

One class of prayer texts corresponded with the Navajo ceremonial classification *Enemyway* (*anáá'jít*), which is a ceremonial formerly used to respond to the infection caused by contact with foreigners—that is, non-Navajos—in the context of war, but is now used to respond to the problems of any infection believed caused by foreign contact. In either case the source of the malevolence is due to the agency of a foreign ghost—that is, the disembodied spirit of the dead foreigner.<sup>15</sup>

The following is a structural analysis of the *Enemyway* prayer known as the Prayer to Shoulder Bands and Wristlets. All Navajo ritual is modeled on the first performance of the ceremonial as told in an origin story. In the story of *Enemyway* this prayer is said on behalf of Young Man at Jarring Mountain, who helped the Corn People defeat the people of Taos. The prayer has twelve parts, each with a complex structure, but the constituent which distinguishes this prayer is concerned with the removal and dispersion of the foreign malevolence. The affliction being treated by the ceremonial and this prayer act is traced to the ghosts of defeated Taos enemies. This extensive prayer act is but a small portion of a four-day ritual process to treat the ailing Young Man at Jarring Mountain. The prayer is said in the context of a series of complex ritual acts to which it is associated.

As the preparation for these acts was taking place, animal figures came to the ceremonial hogan and contributed something to the medicine of *Enemyway*. Water was boiled, into which the medicine was put. Then the concoction was drunk from a basket by the young man. It worked as an emetic, and after he had vomited, the remainder of the medicine was applied to his entire body. The shoulder

bands and wristlets, paraphernalia of war, were placed into his hands for the intonement of the prayer. After the prayer medicine was sprayed by mouth onto cotton strings. Slip knots were tied in these strings. The knotted strings were then held to various parts of the body of the ailing person and the knots pulled free. A black tallow was prepared by mixing burnt herbs into tallow, and the body of the young man was blackened with this mixture. All of these ritual acts were accompanied by song.

This archetypical performance of the prayer act and associated rites is used as a model for present-day performances of the prayer. Typically it would occur in the morning of the third day of a four-day (five-night) performance of the Enemyway ceremonial.

A consideration of this prayer act for the expulsion of foreign malevolence must include the emetic rite, the litany intonement of prayer, the unraveling rite, and the blackening rite. These rites when performed according to traditional prescriptions have the potential to evoke in a Navajo a network of images introduced through the story traditions and ritual performances. The imagery is also clearly articulated in the text of the prayer. As each rite is considered in turn, I will examine the images evoked by the rite and reinforced by the story which describes the motivation and precedents for the rite.

*The Emetic Rite.* Emetic rites are commonly associated with purification. That has been the standard interpretation of this Navajo rite by scholars. But fuller examination of the Enemyway emetic rite reveals that the images it evokes are more complex. In the emetic rite the medicine is prepared in a Navajo basket, an object that in ritual is associated with unity, beauty, and health. The basket is placed on a figure of Ripener, a female insect figure who is strongly associated with fertility, that has been drawn on the floor at the rear (west side) of the hogan. On the surface of the medicine is drawn, in pollen, the figure of Big Fly, who serves as a messenger between human beings and the holy people who seldom come personally to the world of humans. Big Fly is a protector and informer. Pollen, of course, is invariably connected with health, life, fertility, and plenty. The emetic is drunk by kneeling with one's hands and knees on those of the figure of Ripener drawn on the floor. One drinks the medicine from the very center of the Big Fly figure drawn on its surface.

The songs sung during the preparation of the medicine identify it as food. "With a thrill, my grandchild, you have prepared a food for yourself, with a thrill . . ." And the songs sung during the application of the emetic medicine to the body of the one suffering identify him with Monster Slayer, who in primal times slew the monsters in order to make the earth's surface a place inhabitable by Navajos. The medicine is thus associated with the weapons and powers of destruction wielded by Monster Slayer in the killing of enemies.

The images evoked in the emetic rite cluster in two areas. One is distinguished by an emphasis on the expulsion of malevolence; the other by a concern for the acquisition of blessing—fertility, food, and life.

*The Prayer Recitation.* Immediately before the prayer is intoned, songs are sung. These are the songs that Changing Woman heard when her sons, Monster Slayer and Born-for-Water, returned from killing monsters. Changing Woman is a wholly benevolent figure in Navajo religion and is inseparable from the powers of creativity and life. She is time, motion, and creativity personified. The songs describe the achievement of a new order and happiness in the world because things have been put back into their proper places.

The shoulder bands and wristlets, the central ritual objects held by the one praying, are made of yucca. Their origin is told in the stories of Enemyway. When Monster Slayer killed one of the monsters he removed its colon, and filling it with blood he slung it across his shoulder. This initiated the practice of Navajo warriors collecting bloodstained articles from their enemies to display on their shoulder bands. Thus the objects are associated with the death-dealing powers and weapons of Monster Slayer as well as representing red trophies of victory over enemies and monsters. These are the instruments that helped put the Navajo world in order so that Navajo people might live in it.

The Prayer to the Shoulder Bands and Wristlets is a set of twelve prayers of identical constituency with two much shorter prayers appended. The first eight prayers name, respectively, Monster Slayer, Born-for-Water, Born at Yellow Mountain, Reared Underground, Sun, Moon, Talking God, and Calling God. These prayers differ from one another only in terms of the person to whom they are directed and certain alterations in line sequences and phrases.



The first prayer addresses Monster Slayer by the descriptive term "Who time and again kills monsters." It goes as follows:

Who time and again kills monsters,

He of "Waters flow together!"

His feet have become my feet,

thereby I shall go about,

His legs have become my legs,

thereby I shall go about,

His body has become my body,

thereby I shall go about,

His mind has become my mind,

thereby I shall go about,

His voice has become my voice,

thereby I shall go about,

By which he is long life, by that I am long life,

By which he is happiness, by that I am happiness,

By which it is pleasant at his front, thereby

it is pleasant at my front,

By which it is pleasant in his rear, thereby

it is pleasant at my rear,

When the pollen which encircles sun's mouth

also encircles my mouth, and that enables me

to speak and continue speaking,

You shall take the death of the upright,

of the extended bowstring out of me! You

have taken it out of me, it was returned upon

him, it has settled far away!

Therefore the dart of the enemy's ghost,

its filth, by which it bothered my interior,

which had traveled in my interior, which had

absorbed my interior, shall this day return

out of me, therefore I am saying this. Because

this day it has returned out of me, I am saying

this.

The dart of the enemy's ghost, its filth,

by which it bothered my skin, which had traveled

on my skin, which had absorbed my skin, shall

this day move away from me, therefore I am saying

this. Because this day it has moved away from me,

I am saying this.

The dart of the enemy's ghost, its filth, has  
turned away from me, upon him it has turned, far away  
it has returned.

Right there it has changed into water, it  
has changed into dew (while) I shall go about  
in peace.

Long life, happiness I shall be,

Pleasant again it has become,

Pleasant again it has become,

Pleasant again it has become,

Pleasant again it has become,

Pleasant again it has become.

Prayers nine to twelve mention, respectively, the names White Corn Boy, Yellow Corn Girl, Pollen Boy, and Ripener Girl. These prayers are the same as the first eight except that the passage which identifies the one praying with the holy people has a variation in wording.

Where White Corn Boy . . . rests his pollen  
feet, there I have placed my feet,

Where he rests his hands in pollen, there

I rest my hands,

Where he rests his head in pollen, there

I rest my head,

His pollen feet [legs, body, mind, voice] have

become my feet [legs, body, mind, voice], thereby

I shall go about [continuing as in the other

prayers].

Following the twelfth prayer two short prayers name Pollen Boy and Ripener Girl.

Pollen Boy,

Nicely you shall put my foodpipe  
in its [former] condition again!

Nicely you shall put my windpipe  
in its [former] condition again!

Nicely you shall put my heart  
in its [former] condition again!

Nicely you shall put my nerves  
in its [former] condition again!

Nicely I shall walk about, without ailment I  
shall go about, unaffected by sickness I shall  
be going about!

Without monsters seeing me I shall be going about!

Without beings which are evil seeing me I shall be going about!

With monsters dreading me I shall be going about!

With monsters respecting me I shall be going about!

Governed by this I shall be going about!

After conquering monsters I shall be going about!

After accomplishing this with monsters I shall be  
going about!

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Pleasant again it has become.

Pleasant again it has become.

Pleasant again it has become.

Pleasant again it has become.

Pleasant again it has become.<sup>16</sup>

*The Unraveling Rite.* Medicine and pollen are applied to slip-knotted strings. Each is held to a certain part of the body of the one suffering while the knots are pulled out. These ritual procedures are accompanied by the singing of songs that describe a progression of unraveling, extracting, and dispersing the malevolence of the enemy ghost from the body of the one suffering. The final song describes this malevolence as being dispersed far away. The unraveling concludes with the singer (medicine person) blowing away the malevolence that he or she has ritually loosened and extracted in the unraveling. When the unraveling is finished, the body of the ailing one is given an application of the unraveling medicine, and pollen is also applied. This is done to songs that describe a state of health and blessing. They celebrate the association being formed between the sufferer and Changing Woman and Monster Slayer. From this association will come the sustaining power of life.

*The Blackening Rite.* This is the final rite that should be considered as part of the prayer act. At this time the sufferer has his body blackened by tallow into which has been worked charcoal made from selected plants. It is accompanied by the singing of thirty-four songs. The plant ingredients of the tallow are associated with the events of the killing of monsters, but the tallow itself forms a black shield on the body which is associated with

the flint dress and armor of Monster Slayer. The tallow is also identified as a medication. In the blackening rite the suffering person is identified with Monster Slayer and his powers to slay monsters. He is dressed as Monster Slayer, a dress which will protect him. He is given medicine.

*The Significance of the Prayer Act.* We have at the surface of the prayer text the rather simple message which invokes a holy person and then seeks identification between the one praying and the powers of the holy person. This leads to a request for the holy person to remove and disperse the malevolence which is causing such suffering so that a state of health and happiness can be achieved. The language of the prayer could even be viewed as the description of this process taking place. However, much of the prayer act exceeds this relatively simple message. It is repeated a total of twelve times, not to mention the extensive redundancy of the message within each prayer. It is placed in the context of several rites which have corresponding associations. We must attempt to understand what all this surplus is about, what it means. On the hypothesis that prayers evoke a field of images and that they structure these images in such a way as to transform an individual's entire relationship with the world and even his or her own body, we must carefully analyze this field of evocation and associations and show how the prayer act creates and structures the images.

First, at the level of structure of the complex prayer set, we can observe that the first eight prayers invoke an association with four pairs of holy people who are well known by Navajos. This is accomplished in the first constituent of the texts. The constituent boundaries are indicated in the text by lines. Beginning with Monster Slayer and Born-for-Water, the monster-slaying twin sons of Changing Woman, there is a progression toward pairs who have less of a warrior image and more of a positive ordering capacity. Talking God and Calling God, the last pair, are principal figures in the initial acts of cosmic creation. They are even outspokenly opposed to war.

In the second constituent each of these eight holy people is identified as being at the place "waters flow together," the last place where Monster Slayer was seen on the earth's surface.

The next constituent of these eight prayers calls for and describes the identification of the whole body of the one praying with the

bodies of each of the holy people named. The identification is described as achieving a state in which the person may enjoy pleasant conditions. The identification is parallel to several elements in the associated rites: the identification with Ripener and with Big Fly in the emetic rite, with the powers of the unraveling strings which are placed at the same points of the body, and with the black armor of Monster Slayer in the blackening rite.

In the Navajo perspective the act of identifying and associating a person with a holy person (*diyin dine'é*) is an act of creation or recreation. This is designated in this prayer constituent by indicating that the body form of the holy one addressed in prayer is "long life" (*sq'ah nagháii*) and "happiness" (*bik'eh hózhóq*). These Navajo terms when conjoined are central to Navajo religion, designating a way of life that proceeds in a condition of health to old age, a life reflected in the world as an environment of beauty and pleasantness. This environment is attested in the concluding lines of this prayer passage. Long life and happiness are sometimes understood as being a male and female pair, the personifications of thought and speech, vital signs. They are the vitalizing principles. To be identified with them is synonymous with gaining life and existing in a world of beauty and pleasant conditions.

The prayer passage which follows describes the removal and dispersion of the foreign malevolence, succeeding upon the acquisition of the powers and weapons gained through the identification. The passage is notable in its reference to the malevolence as an object, a dart. The Navajo conceive of the life principle as an inner humanlike form that stands within all living things.<sup>17</sup> The dart is recognized as an intrusion upon this inner life form causing the illness. The opening phrase, "You shall take the death of the upright, of the extended bowstring out of me!" is ambiguous out of the context of the prayer act. This is a reference to the weapons and the staff of Monster Slayer which rendered death to the monsters. It refers to the situation of the warrior who, by inflicting death on his enemies in the fashion of Monster Slayer, risked attack by the ghost of the slain enemy. This passage asks for the removal of the effects of such attack. The verb sequencing of the passage is very important. It begins by referring to the removal of the malevolent object as a future event and progresses through verb forms to a conclusion

which refers to the removal and dispersion in the past tense, as a fact accomplished. This language construction engenders a performative force which surpasses the description of such events and participates in effecting the desired conditions. In the following chapter I will discuss more fully the significance of this verb sequencing as a performative force.

The final prayer passage describes the state of blessing and pleasantness gained by the achievement of the removal and dispersion of the malevolence. The terms *long life* and *happiness* refer to the central concept of Navajo religion.

The progression of names invoked in the first eight prayers, from warriors to creators, is continued in prayers nine through twelve. While the constituency of these prayers remains unchanged from the others, these four are addressed to purely life-giving forces, the pairs White Corn Boy and Yellow Corn Girl, and Pollen Boy and Ripener Girl. The two prayer passages added at the conclusion rename Pollen Boy and Ripener Girl and drop all but the passages which petition these figures to put the inner life forms of the one praying back into "nice" condition, with the expected result of achieving a state of health, order, and blessing. These passages center on the internal parts of the person—the foodpipe, the heart, and the nerves—which can be restored because the ghosts or malevolent forces that were bothering them have now been dispersed far away.

There are a number of parallels in the structure of meaning among the various levels of the prayer act. These parallels clearly show that the significance of the message of the prayer is at one with the process of effecting the desires expressed by the message. The basic constituent structure of each prayer text is an identification between the one praying and a holy person, followed by the expulsion and dispersion of the malevolence, which results in and makes possible a restoration and the reacquisition of a state of health and happiness. Each of the twelve prayers in the set bears this basic semantic structure. But as the prayers succeed one another, there is a gradual change in emphasis, beginning with an identification with the powers of destruction of Monster Slayer and moving eventually to an identification with the powers of life and creation. While the passage which is concerned with the expulsion of malevolence is

carried throughout all twelve major prayers, it is finally dropped completely in the two short prayers at the end where the entire concern is with the restoration of one's interior and the acquisition of blessing.

There is a parallel between the semantic structure of each of the first twelve prayers in the set and the semantic structure of the prayer set considered as a whole. Both move from an acquisition of the powers of destruction achieved by a process of identification, to the dispersion of the malevolent influences, making possible a restoration of the body to a state of health and blessing.

The parallel does not stop at this. The emetic rite has a similar semantic structure. The drinking of the emetic through the pollen figure of Big Fly achieves an identification with the forces that have the power to expel malevolence. The emetic is a medicine designed to expel the undesirable through vomiting. Even though the rite is noted by other interpreters for its powers of exorcism, there is much more to its meaning. The sufferer drinks the medicine with his hands and knees placed in physical contact with a pollen figure of Ripener. Both the substance and the form are strongly associated with fertility and creativity. This shows that in the emetic rite the actions and forms give expression to a balance that exists in the Navajo perspective between the acquisition of the powers of expulsion and death and the acquisition of the powers of life and blessing.

The parallel in semantic structure is also apparent in the series of songs that begin after the emetic and proceed through the unraveling. After the sufferer has vomited, the remaining medicine is applied to his or her body accompanied by songs which identify the various parts of Young Man at Jarring Mountain's body with the weapon-adorned body of Monster Slayer. This identification is parallel to the emphasis in the first few prayers in the set. The songs which Changing Woman heard on the return of her sons from killing the monsters are sung just before the recitation of the prayer. These are set in the aftermath of the utilization of the powers of death, and they affirm that the use of these powers is necessary to help put things back into their proper order. The unraveling takes place following the prayer, and the unraveling songs tell of the removal and dispersion of the malevo-

lence. Thus, the songs sung from the emetic rite through the unraveling rite bear the same structure as the individual prayers and the whole prayer set.

At the conclusion of the unraveling, medicine and pollen are applied with the accompaniment of songs which emphasize the acquisition of life and creation. In these songs the major concern is with the achievement of long life and happiness—that is, with the means of life—and the minor theme is the relationship with Monster Slayer which makes this possible. This continues the semantic parallel with the prayer set, which ends with its emphasis on the acquisition of restoration and health.

The blackening rite which concludes this prayer act recapitulates the structure one final time. The tallow is associated with the acquisition of weapons, of a shield of protection, and of the medicines that can heal and restore life.

It can now be seen that the prayer act evokes a wide range of images, and in its performance it engages the sufferer in an intimate relationship with these images. All of the sufferer's senses are engaged in the prayer act. We can see that the significance and efficacy of this prayer act is drawn in the interplay between the double emphasis upon the acquisition of the powers of destruction and death and the acquisition of life and health. We may conclude from the analysis of the prayer act that the Navajo sees these forces as interdependent, but perhaps in ways that are otherwise inexplicable. The prayer act, according to our analysis of it, affirms that death may be essential to life; but it also responds to an underlying notion that to take upon oneself the powers of dealing death, as in acts of war, is to risk the potential danger that is associated with these rather awesome responsibilities. The danger is conceptualized as the malevolent intentions of the ghost of the one who has been killed. To deal with it requires the association and identification with the events told in story. In these stories each death caused by Monster Slayer was also an act of creation. Improper acts which cause death or mistreatment of the dead will likely cause illness.

The meaning and power of the prayer act can now be grasped in much greater detail. Death must not be inflicted on another except for creative purposes. When it is, as in times of war, ill conse-

quences may result that are ascribed to the ghost of the dead. Enemyway and its prayer acts expel this ghost, but they may do so only by bringing the focus finally upon an act of creation. Until some creative act results from that death, the ghost can never be allayed. The significance of the performance of the prayer act is to evoke and structure the images associated with this situation in such a way that they create the power that can expel malevolent influences and that can reorder, and hence restore to health and happiness, a person who suffers.

### Conclusion

The significance of prayer is extensively influenced by the associated ritual, story traditions, and pragmatic aspects of the prayer performance. These contextual spheres are heavily involved in the processes of evoking and structuring images and, in turn, are instrumental in bringing about the effects these images achieve in the world. Since a single prayer text may be uttered in a very wide range of contexts—one can even say theoretically an infinite range of contexts—it can be seen how a prayer act is not restricted in the influence it may have on the world or in the significance it may bear in its performance, no matter how formulaic it may appear. In this way then we may finally close the gap Tylor found to exist between the commonly accepted idea that prayer is spoken from the heart to the most specific of existential needs and the highly formulaic and rigidly structured character of prayer.

### Epilogue

Having for some time worried about the nature of prayer and the pitfalls that seem to have accompanied the study of prayer, I have concluded that a set of simple distinctions would enhance the situation. The study of prayer must distinguish between prayer as text, as the words that comprise a prayer; prayer as act, the praying or utterance of a prayer within specific historical, cultural, personal, pragmatic, and performative contexts; and prayer as subject (what I call metaprayer), statements made within a religious tradition about the nature, character, efficacy, value, theology, and philosophy of prayer and praying. Not only must these distinctions be made, but

the interrelationships among these aspects of prayer must be considered. Much is to be gained in understanding prayer according to each category, but much more is discerned when all three can be conjointly considered for specific prayer situations.<sup>18</sup>

### NOTES

1. Dennis Tedlock, "Verbal Art," in *Handbook of North American Indians*, ed. William C. Sturtevant (Washington: Smithsonian Institution, in press.), vol. 1, chap. 50.
2. See, e.g., G. van der Leeuw, *Religion in Essence and Manifestation* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), chap. 62, "The Word of Man: Magical Formula and Prayer."
3. See, e.g., R. R. Marett, *The Threshold of Religion*, 2nd ed. (London, 1914); Robert H. Lowie, *Primitive Religion* (New York: Liveright, 1970), pp. 321-29; and Paul Radin, *Primitive Religion*, (New York: Dover, 1957), pp. 185-91.
4. Edward B. Tylor, *Primitive Culture* (London: John Murray, 1873), 2:364.
5. *Primitive Culture*, 2:365-70.
6. *Primitive Culture*, 2:371.
7. *Primitive Culture*, 2:374.
8. See Sam D. Gill, *Sacred Words: A Study of Navajo Religion and Prayer* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1981), chap. 1 and Appendix A, for a critical discussion of Reichard's study of prayer.
9. Dennis Tedlock, "From Prayer to Reprimand," in *Language in Religious Practice*, ed. William J. Samarin (Rowley, MA: Newbury House, 1976), pp. 72-83.
10. Stanley J. Tambiah, "The Magical Power of Words," *Man*, n.s. 3 (1968): 177-208, and "Form and Meaning of Magical Acts: A Point of View," in *Modes of Thought*, ed. Robin Horton and Ruth Finnegan (London: Faber & Faber, 1973), pp. 199-229.
11. Philip L. Ravenhill, "Religious Utterances and the Theory of Speech Acts," in *Language in Religious Practice*, pp. 26-39.
12. See the following chapter, "Prayer as Person: The Performative Force in Navajo Prayer Acts." For further bibliography see note 1 in this article and Ravenhill, "Religious Utterances," pp. 38-39.
13. Gary H. Gossen, "Language as Ritual Substance," in *Language in Religious Practice*, pp. 40-62.
14. See Gill, *Sacred Words*, chaps. 1-3.

15. The principal source for the mythology and ritual of Enemyway is Berard Haile, *Origin Legend of the Navajo Enemy Way*, (New Haven: Yale University Publications in Anthropology 17, 1938).
16. Haile, *Enemy Way*, pp. 207-13.
17. See Gill, *Sacred Words*, chap. 4, for a fuller discussion of the concept of inner form.
18. For a fuller discussion see Sam D. Gill, "Prayer," *The Encyclopedia of Religion* (New York: Macmillan, 1986).

## Prayer as Person:

### *The Performative Force in Navajo Prayer Acts*

Doc White Singer, an old man knowledgeable in the traditions and ways of Navajo religion, told me about prayer. He said, "Prayer is not like you and me. It is like a holy person; it has a personality five times that of ours." I have heard other Navajos refer to the act of prayer variously as a person who knows everything, as a person who can take you on a journey down under the earth or up to the sky, and as a person who is all-powerful. The extent of the references to prayers as active agents, or more familiarly as persons, has led me to believe that this reflects the Navajo conception that prayer acts are active forces that can render effects on the world. In other words, the Navajo conception of prayer acts emphasizes their pragmatic character. In the recent philosophical vernacular of J. L. Austin, Navajos see their prayer acts as "performative utterances," that is, as groups of words the utterance of which is actually the doing of an action.<sup>1</sup>

Scholars have occasionally recognized that Navajos believe that their prayers affect the world, but their view of how that takes place has been to see prayer as magically compulsive. Gladys Reichard, in her *Navaho Prayer: The Compulsive Word*, analyzed the rhythmic substructure in Navajo prayers to demonstrate various repetitious patterns which, she argued, garner magical forces of compulsion.<sup>2</sup>

In this chapter I am going to exemplify a different approach by focusing on the structure of a prayer act commonly performed in Navajo ceremonials. I want to show that it is due to the structure of the prayer act, rather than to its magically compulsive character, that Navajos see it as an active agent in their world.

The uttering of the prayer plays an integral part in satisfying the needs which motivate the prayer utterance. From this point of view I