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SEMESTER Spring 2005

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TITLE THE SHADOW OF A VISION YONDER

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# The Shadow of a Vision Yonder

While my family and I were living with a Navajo family north of Tuba City, Arizona, I witnessed an ordinary social event that at the time I thought to be curious but of little consequence. Since then I have found occasion to reflect upon that event. From it I think I learned something about the Navajo way of life, even something about their religion, which is the subject I had gone there to pursue. I confess that I went to the Navajo reservation not very well prepared to do fieldwork. I had not done enough homework to afford me the clearest view of my contact with Navajo people. As a result, much of what I was to learn came to me through insightful flashbacks some time after I had left Navajo country.

By midsummer we had become well enough acquainted with our Navajo family to be trusted with some of their work. I considered it an honor to be asked to help hoe the weeds in the cornfield they had planted in the valley below the beautiful mesa on which we lived. Being from a farming family in Kansas, I willingly accepted the invitation and replied that I would gladly hoe the corn. To my dismay our Navajo friends expressed alarm. I am sure they were considering how they could retract the invitation as they told me, "Oh no, we don't hoe the *corn*, we hoe the weeds!" I assured them that I really did know the difference between corn plants and the unwanted weeds and that it was just the way we described the job back home. It was simply a product of the peculiarity of my own language, not theirs.

After getting the younger children on their way with the sheep, we headed for the cornfield early the next morning. Under cautious eyes I set about proving that I not only knew the difference between weeds and corn; but that I was no slouch with a hoe. Of course I was

never to know the extent of my success. The weight of my experience with the Navajo people is that their quiet dignity always prevails.

With my flashing hoe gradually slowing to match the ordered, rhythmic movement of the other hoes—the native hoes—I was relieved when late in the morning it was time to stop for lunch. Moving to the arbor or "shade," a small, partly enclosed brush structure, we took lunch. Then we prepared to rest for several hours during the heat of the day. It was in the shade that I was to observe the event on which I want to reflect.

The shade was perhaps half mile from a narrow dirt road. In that part of the country the traffic is not what one would call heavy. During the quiet rest period after lunch I was aroused from my drowsiness a couple of times by a soft but excited discussion of whatever motor vehicle, usually a pickup truck, passed by on the road. I noticed that all present expressed interest in the traffic. They arose and peered through the open areas in the brush on the side of the shade facing the road. I recalled the many times I had driven up to a Navajo dwelling, finding absolutely no sign of human activity.

What surprised me was the response my friends made when one of the passing pickups turned off the road and headed toward our shade. Watching with rapt attention, my Navajo friends carefully timed it so that as the truck pulled up to the shade and stopped, every member of the family was actively occupied. The grandmother sat on the ground with her back to the entrance near the truck and began her spinning. The children played a game in the dirt of the shade floor. Others sat about, gazing across the landscape, always in a direction away from the truck. This directed all attention away from the presence of the visitors.

The visitors in the truck were Navajos and knew how to respond. They sat in the truck for some minutes. It seemed like a very long time to me. Then quietly the man, his wife, and young daughter left their truck to enter the edge of the shade. There they sat upon the ground. The man quietly restrained the eagerness of the little girl to play with the other children. Again some minutes passed while my family continued their spinning, playing, and gazing. Finally the man spoke a few soft words to the grandmother, who gently, almost inaudibly, responded without turning her head toward him. In a few

minutes he spoke again. This quiet conversation continued for some time; then the visitors arose and moved about the shade, talking softly to each of us, including me, extending their hands for a handshake and speaking the Navajo greeting, *yá'át'ééh*. Next my friends arose and began to intermingle with the visitors. I was informed that they were going to the trading post some ten miles away to get water and supplies to prepare a meal for the visitors. The entire proceedings had taken more than a quarter of an hour.

The insight that has come to me through continued reflection is that the incident illustrates the "way" of Navajo religion. I had witnessed the performance of a formal ritual for purposes of establishing certain kinds of social relationships, in this instance between Navajo families. The ritual reflects the quiet dignity and the patient and formal manner of the Navajo people. And by its simplicity it helps place the almost infinite complexity of Navajo ceremonies in a better perspective. It also gives clues regarding the nature of Navajo religion, wherein relationships are established or reestablished with the holy ones.

Notice that the situation had been carefully analyzed by my Navajo friends. They followed proper conduct with deliberateness and patience. This resulted in the successful establishing of a relationship between two families. Each party made some sign to show that it understood its obligations and was committing itself to their fulfillment. The guests offered their hands as a sign of their entrance into the relationship. My family proceeded to meet their first obligation of the relationship by offering a meal to the guests.

It is commonly observed that Navajo religion centers largely on the rituals by which an individual who is suffering a malady is healed. The sufferer is attended to by an individual called a "singer." The singer directs the ritual activities and is responsible for knowing the songs, prayers, and the order of the ritual processes. A Navajo ceremony is not performed unless it is called for. But when it is called for, the family of the sufferer must arrange with a singer to perform the ceremony. This requires making a formal relationship through social and ritual acts not unlike those characteristic of the introduction to which I have made reference. In both settings the relationship is bonded through a formal sign. In this case the singer receives payment in material goods or cash in return

for performing the ceremony. David Aberle has analyzed this exchange and has convincingly shown that the "fee" is not really payment for services rendered, but is a sign of the establishment of a reciprocity relationship.<sup>1</sup> The singer is thus obliged to respond by conducting the requested ceremonial.

In the performance of Navajo ceremonies the observer is struck by the material insignificance of the ritual objects. He also cannot help but notice the extreme care and formality with which these objects are treated. A singer's medicine bundle consists of nothing more precious than an odd assortment of sticks, feathers, bags of colored sands and vegetal materials, rocks, and so on. These things appear so common, even crude, that it makes one wonder how they could have any religious significance. But in the context of ritual the same objects are carefully handled, described in song, explicated in prayer, and manipulated in ritual. Their significance is developed to such a magnitude that they infinitely surpass their material content.

This is in keeping with the Navajo story of creation. The story utilizes common objects in describing the process of bringing life to the world. First Man, who directed the creation, had a medicine bundle containing bits of colored rocks called "jewels." First Man carefully placed these "jewels" upon the floor of the creation hogan to designate the life forces of the things that were to be created. All life forms were represented in these mundane substances, and their distinguishing characteristics were understood to be exemplified in the shapes of the jewels. Furthermore, the relative place where each was laid on the floor of the creation hogan designated the place each was to occupy in the world, together with the relationship each was to have to all other living things. These material representations of life were then clothed in a layer of colored sands to represent the outward appearance they would have in the created world. After the preparation of this microcosm had been completed, prayers were uttered to transform the ritual creation into the more visible everyday world of the Navajos. This is the way in which the Navajos conceive the process of the creation of their world. When creation was completed, the world was beautiful. All things were formed and set in a place, and proper relationships existed among them.

In both the creation of the world and the creation of the social relationships formalities dominate. The formal enactment of ritual

brings things to their proper place and serves to interconnect them by establishing binding relationships. Ritual acts are understood to be essential to the establishing of proper relationships. Navajo life depends upon such relationships.

Scholarly interpretation does not always catch the significance of this. Frequently the interpretation of Navajo religion has called attention to the performance of "magical" acts. They are called magical to indicate that there is no ordinary causal principle that connects the acts performed with the expected results. I would never want to dismiss the presence of mystery and magic in Navajo religion. Yet it seems to me that the more significant factor is the process by which the visions and great conceptions are communicated by the formal manipulation of mundane objects. Let me illustrate the difference. The most common scholarly interpretation of the sand-painting rite is that it contains a kind of magical osmosis. The sand painting is prepared upon the floor of the ceremonial hogan, the sufferer enters and sits upon the sand painting, and the singer applies sands from the figures represented in the painting to the person. At the conclusion of the rite the sand paintings are formally destroyed and removed from the ceremonial hogan. According to the magical osmosis explanation the sand painting is understood to absorb the illness or the evil cause of the illness, taking it from the one suffering and replacing it with goodness from the sand painting. This explanation focuses attention on the removal of the sands after the rite, for it resembles and builds upon similarities between this act and the removal of sands into which one vomits in emetic rites.

In my view this magical osmosis interpretation is partially if not wholly in error. I would propose instead that sand-painting rites are meaningful curing acts because of the Navajos' recognition of the performative powers of ritual representation. In preparing the sand painting the Navajos follow the precedent established in the processes of world creation. In Navajo creation stories it is said that in the beginning the forces of life were set forth in material form by arranging common objects of several colors upon the floor of a ceremonial hogan. Thus, in physical representations using ordinary materials Navajos express their conception of the profound nature of life. In a healing ceremony the sand paintings are closely associated

with the elements identified with the cause of the illness suffered. As is told in the story of each ceremonial, the sand paintings are revealed to the hero as he or she is being cured of an illness. In most cases the illness is due to the fact that something is out of its proper place—for example, a ghost who will not remain in its domain, a person who has made contact with the dead, a deity who has been angered or offended by a person who has trespassed or violated a taboo, or a witch who has gained power by being out of bounds. The causal agent rather than the illness suffered determines the nature of the ceremonial cure. The ritual presents the forces of life in the shape and relative places assigned to them as recounted in the stories. The identification of the person treated with the sand painting by touching the sands of the parts of the body of the painted figures to the corresponding parts of his or her body is a gesture of communicating proper relationships. This is very similar to the acts performed to place the forces of life represented on the floor of the creation hogan within the representations of the outward forms they were to take in the world. And, as in the case of the process of world creation, the formal removal of the sand paintings designates a transition from the world of ritual to the world thus represented.

Relationships are central to the Navajo way of life. Life's interrelationships are not casual. They are the product of careful ritual prescription, which acts to both bind and reestablish a proper order of relationships. In the Navajo conception life and good health are not so much a matter of substance as they are a matter of form and place with respect to the rest of the created world. Each living thing has an identity, a proper place, and a way to be. This identity, place, and way must be honored and carefully maintained.

The Navajo way of life can be characterized at one level as a kind of formalism, although Navajos would not describe it in this way. The Navajos' own appreciation of ritual form becomes particularly compelling in their belief about the curative power of the healing rites. Here the objects and acts presented are appreciated for having the power to cure physical illness, and the Navajo have in mind something quite different from our common reduction of their religion to a kind of primitive psychology. In the enactment of their religion they recognize a power to change the shape of things in the world, even when the materials they engage in these enactments are

mundane. Such acts make earthly elements into a vehicle disclosing the deepest forces of life.

The performance of a sand-painting rite is in a way comparable to the shaking of hands to seal a social relationship. Both of these acts reflect the same temperament. Both indicate the way in which Navajos apprehend reality. In both cases mundane ingredients reveal deeper significance. There is nothing special in the handshake, for example. But in the context of the formal ritual of establishing relationships, handshaking performs an essential role by assuring each party of the acceptance of the privileges and obligations of the relationship. It marks transformation from a relationship discussed to a relationship established and made operative. Similarly, in Navajo sand painting rites the substance of the colored sands is not as important as the shapes which they form. Properly prepared and used, the sand painting has the power to cure. It reestablishes for the sufferer the proper relationships with the forces of life on which his or her health and happiness depend. In this regard one of the most important components of Native American religions is the process by which concepts of being and becoming are represented and communicated through the use of acts and objects. I have cited one instance of this in Navajo religion. The same phenomenon occurs in Hopi culture.

I remember feeling confused when I first learned that Hopi children witness an event which they find shocking and bitterly disappointing at the conclusion of their first religious initiation. I am referring to the conclusion of the initiation into the kachina cult, which is composed of two societies, the Kachina Society and the Powamu Society. Formally this initiation begins the religious life of all Hopi children, boys and girls alike. The event occurs as a part of the Bean Dance, which concludes the annual celebration of Powamu, a late winter ceremonial to prepare for the agricultural cycle. The newly initiated children are escorted into a kiva, an underground ceremonial chamber, there to await the entrance of the kachinas, the masked dancers they have come to know as Hopi spirit messengers. Prior to this time the already initiated go to great efforts to keep the children from discovering that kachinas are masked male members of their own village. Announcing that they are kachinas, the dancers enter the kiva where the children are

eagerly awaiting them. But they appear for the first time to the new initiates without their masks. The children immediately recognize the identity of the dancing figures. Their response is shock, disappointment, and bitterness.

It would seem to me that this concluding event in the Powamu ceremonial leaves the children in a peculiarly unstable state as new initiates. I would have expected the purpose of the initiation to be to reveal clearly the full nature of the kachinas to the children. But it appears that the initiation rites accomplish only the destruction of the belief in the identity of the kachina figures held by the children prior to the initiation. Margaret Mead likened this event to the European-American child learning of the identity of Santa Claus, which is often accompanied by the same kind of bitter disappointment. There are surface similarities, but this is not a satisfactory explanation. Nor should we accept another common scholarly interpretation: that it is inevitable the children learn that kachinas are not real gods, but men dressed as gods. We may find some force in this argument, since, as outside occasional observers, we can easily recognize that the kachina dancers are masked mortals. Even when a Hopi says that in donning the kachina mask he "becomes the kachina," we tend to offer a critical interpretation. A play theory has also been advanced. This position argues that the Hopi acts "as if" he were a kachina and makes the statement while he is so pretending. But all of these interpretations are found wanting.

Instead, it is important that we take seriously what the initiated Hopi says. We must recognize that he actually means what he says, that in putting on the kachina mask he really becomes a kachina. This is a clear statement on his part. It is in light of this statement that we should attempt to see how at the conclusion of the initiation the shadow cast on the kachina figures serves to reveal to the children the true nature of the kachinas. The ceremony appears to be deliberately calculated to engender the disappointment the children feel.

A fuller review of the contextual events is necessary.<sup>2</sup> Prior to the initiation into the kachina cult the children, largely under the age of ten, are carefully guided into the development of a particular kind of relationship with the kachinas. The kachinas, who frequent the villages during only half of the year, have a wide range of contacts with the children. Many of them are kind and benevolent to the

children, presenting them with gifts. Others are frightening ogres who discipline naughty children by threatening to eat them. And some are silly clowns who entertain the children with their antics. In all of these contacts the uninitiated children are protected against seeing kachinas unmasked or the masks unoccupied. They are also guarded against hearing anything that might disclose the masked character of the kachina figures. The children are told that the kachinas come to the village from their spirit homes far away to overlook and direct the affairs of the Hopi people. They are taught that they too will become kachinas when they die. Prior to the initiation events the children grow to accept the familiar kachina figures as being exactly what they appear to be.

The perspective nurtured in the children is given its final stage of development in the kachina cult initiation rites. During the Powamu ceremonial to which the initiation rites are attached, the initiates are given special attention by the kachinas. They come into closer contact. The kachinas give the children special gifts. They are instructed in kachina lore. All of this seems to be carefully calculated to intensify the shock the children will feel when they observe the unmasked appearance of the kachinas during the Bean Dance.

When the kachinas enter the kiva, in one sharp and sudden blow the expectations so carefully nurtured are forever shattered. For the moment only pain and bitterness take their place. But even with the disappointment life goes on, and the initiated child is given the privilege of participating in religious events. In time he or she can enter other religious societies and enjoy expanded privileges of participation. But once initiated into the kachina cult, the child can never again view religious events naively. Unforgettably clear to the children is the realization that some things are not what they appear to be. This realization precedes the appreciation of the full nature of reality.

This brings us back to the question of truth regarding the Hopi statement that when one dons the kachina mask he becomes a kachina. Given the appreciation by the initiated Hopi of the full nature of reality in both its material and spiritual aspects, the truth of the statement can be more clearly understood. By donning the kachina mask a Hopi gives life and action to the mask, thus making the kachina spirit present in material form. We, as uninitiated out-

siders, observe only the material form. The spiritual aspect of the kachina is present as well, but that can be perceived only by the initiated. The material presence without the spiritual is mere impersonation—a dramatic performance, a work of art. The spiritual without the material remains unmanifest; it leaves no object for thought or speech or action. The spiritual must reside in some manifest form to be held in common by the community. The view, often taken, that the kachinas are merely impersonations fails to recognize the full religious nature of the kachina performances. It also fails to take into account the truth of the statement. If the kachinas are not present in both material and spiritual form, the events could scarcely be called religious.

Both Navajo and Hopi religions evidence an appreciation for the power of ritual performance, for in this way are the surfaces of reality penetrated. On the one hand, the mundane materials which comprise religious objects and actions must never be taken as being more than the simple ordinary earthy and human elements they are. This fact is driven home in the disenchantment with the material appearance of the kachinas experienced by the children undergoing initiation. It is also evident in the example of the sand-painting rite from Navajo culture. On the other hand, the ordinary materials when presented in the proper form manifest the spiritual, or reveal the deeper meanings of life. Both Navajo sand paintings and Hopi kachinas have the power to order and profoundly affect the world.

I think that this deep appreciation for this process of manifestation and investigation is broadly held among Native Americans, as among most religious cultures. A fine illustration of this is found in the wisdom of the Oglala Sioux, Black Elk, as told to John Neihardt in *Black Elk Speaks*, although the role of Neihardt as editor is questionable. As a youth Black Elk was the recipient of a remarkable vision which he looked to as a guide throughout his life. For many years he kept the vision to himself, fearing to tell others. But as time went on, he found rising within him an even greater fear. Part of the message given him was that he was to enact the vision in ritual form for the people to see. This was a common practice among the Dakota. An old medicine man from whom Black Elk sought guidance warned him that if the vision were not performed, something very bad would happen to him.

Under Black Elk's direction preparations were immediately begun so that the vision could be enacted by the people. Black Elk recalls how he experienced the enactment of his vision: "I looked about me and could see that what we then were doing was like a shadow cast upon the earth from yonder vision in the heavens, so bright it was and clear. I knew the real was yonder and the darkened dream of it was here."<sup>3</sup>

There is a sense in which the Navajo sand paintings, the Hopi kachina masks, and many other Native American ritual acts share the properties of a shadow of a vision yonder. I have stressed that it is the form more than the substance that is important in manifesting the more profound forces of life. Certainly this is characteristic of shadows. There is a "thinness" to ritual objects and acts; they are meaningful only when cast in the light of the "yonder vision." This fragility is illustrated in the Navajo sand paintings, which are destroyed in the very acts by which they are of service. All of this is a constant reminder that the material vehicles exist and are meaningful only in the degree to which they lead beyond their own obvious limitations.

Were it not for these shadows cast by the vision yonder, Native American religions would be confined to the experience of rarified mystical moments or the internally borne knowledge of tradition. The shadow may appear bright and clear as it did to Black Elk, or dark and foreboding as it does to Hopi kachina cult initiates, but the shadows integrate Native American religions with distinctive ways of living and interpreting life.

#### NOTES

1. David F. Aberle, "The Navajo Singer's 'Fee': Payment or Prestation?" in *Studies in Southwestern Ethnolinguistics: Meaning and History in the Languages of the American Southwest*, ed. Dell H. Hymes and William E. Bittle, (The Hague: Mouton, 1967), pp. 15-32.
2. The full analysis is presented below in the chapter "Disenchantment: A Religious Abduction."
3. John Neihardt, *Black Elk Speaks* (New York: Pocket Books, 1972), p. 142.

## "It's Where You Put Your Eyes"

"Attention to the world's art historians!" was the message sent forth in 1885 by the Army physician Washington Matthews upon observing that Navajos routinely destroy their own sand paintings.<sup>1</sup> He was deeply impressed with the beauty and elaboration of these paintings in sand, but that only heightened the shock of the feature he was calling to the attention of the world. A number of people work to make a sand painting; on the same day they willfully destroy it. Matthews declared these paintings to be the most transient works of art in the world. We know that such short-lived works are not unique to the Navajo, but I don't think that Matthews' cry has been seriously considered. Perhaps that is because it would raise grave questions about the way we see and understand the nature of Native American art. Now, over a century later, I would like to consider some of the questions that echo from Matthews' message.

A description of Navajo sand painting will give us a place to begin. It is a ritual procedure in Navajo culture which is part of certain religious ceremonials performed to cure an ailing person. The sand painting is constructed on the floor of a ceremonial hogan and depicts mythic persons who have a connection with the cause of the illness being treated. It must be carefully replicated according to the memory of the officiating singer or medicine man. No visual record is kept by the Navajo people, but hundreds of different patterns are known to exist. The finished picture, like a costume and mask, provides a physical form in which the spiritual beings may manifest their presence. When cornmeal is sprinkled by the singer on the painting and the person for whom the ceremony is being performed, the holy people are present in the sand painting. The rite identifies the ailing person, who walks onto and sits in the middle of