

Navajo Views of Their Origin

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Navajos tell stories of the origin of their people and their world, Navajoland (*dinétah*), which often reach grand proportions and comprise a number of distinct story traditions. Navajos are quite conscious of story variations, and storytellers are often familiar with the versions of others and will indicate how their particular story differs from them and perhaps how it is more correct or complete. In any case, the many versions of these stories have in common a description of the origin as a series of primordial events occurring in two phases, a journey ascending through several worlds below the surface of the earth followed by a cosmic ordering process once the earth surface is reached. While there are many variations, the general outline of these stories may be described.

The Emergence

The origin story begins with a description of a journey of emergence upward through a subterranean domain of unaccounted origin. This domain amounts to worlds described as either platters or hemispheres, numbering variously from 2 to 14, stacked one on top of another. These worlds are identified by number and distinguishing color as well as by the events that transpire on them. The sun and moon do not exist in these lower worlds, so time is reckoned by colored clouds or columns that appear in sequence around the four quadrants. The color and position tell the time of day.

In this setting, the emergence process begins in the center of the lowest world and proceeds upward, world after world, with a series of events recounted for each world. A given telling may be but an outline in simplest fashion of the essential events that lead to the emergence onto the present earth surface, or it may use this outline as a frame to support a great many stories elaborately developed.

In the beginning, the underworlds are inhabited by insect (usually ant) or animal peoples. There may also be a number of special figures like First Man, First Woman, and Coyote. Some versions feature major creator figures. While the primordial peoples have some insect or animal traits, they have the power of speech and they live and act according to manners and customs in common with those of the yet-to-be-created Navajo

people. These primordial peoples have been placed in their world to live peacefully and happily, but, as the stories recount, they have difficulty in doing so. Quarreling and jealousies disrupt their lives. Incest and adultery erupt into violence and destruction. The powers who live in the peripheral worlds in the four directions repeatedly warn the people that they must revise their ways and live properly and peacefully. But despite repeated efforts to do so, they always fail. In exasperation and disgust, those who control the surrounding oceans unleash their destructive powers upon the world. As the people see the great walls of water converging upon them (or fire, in some accounts) threatening destruction, they take flight seeking entrance into the next world. A helper familiar with the world above shows them the opening through which they may enter. They find that other peoples already occupy the new location. As they establish their homes they pledge anew their desire to live an orderly life.

In each new world, a world with a different hue and with new acquaintances, the pattern is repeated. With good intentions life is begun, but its promise for happiness is dissolved as disruptive acts lead to strife, violence, and eventually to the destruction of the world. Throughout the emergence process there is an unmistakable association of the repeated world destructions and these acts of misconduct. Set in worlds that are somewhat impoverished, yet clearly identifiable as projections of the yet-to-be-created Navajo world, the stories of emergence portray images of disorder, disruption, and broken laws. The stories reveal a Navajo world in chaos and disorder.

One of the most dramatic of stories, which is usually set in one of these lower worlds, is that of the separation of men and women. While this story is told in many versions it always involves some set of misdeeds leading to the men moving across a river and leaving the women behind. The story tells of the difficulties and failed attempts of the sexes to get along without one another. A final reconciliation reunites them with new understanding.

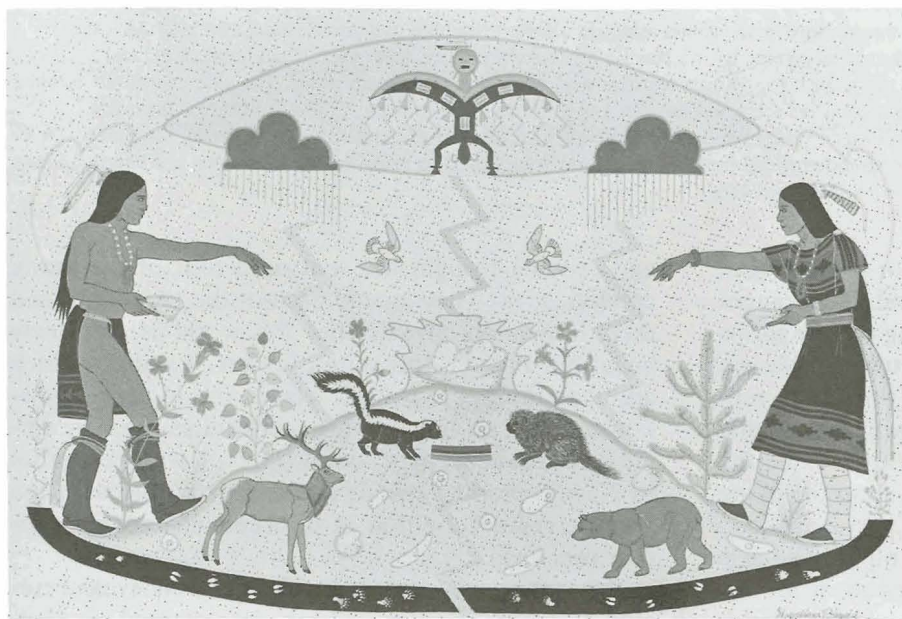
In some versions of the story, aspects of the Navajo world, although usually in prototype form, are created before emergence onto the earth surface. These creations may include the sacred mountains (varying in number from four to seven or more), corn, and even

people. Witchcraft is established here, for the underworld is its domain. Hunting and agricultural procedures are sometimes established. The future carriers of the sun and moon may be created. In these versions the event of emergence onto the earth surface is a final culmination to the process of creation. Based on established prototypes, the world on the earth surface is given its form. Life, as well as death, begins in the Navajo world.

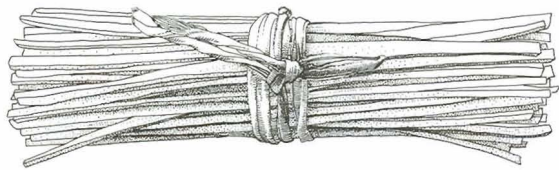
Earth-Surface Origins

In some versions the repetition of this failure to successfully exist, world after world, creates an increasing urgency to find that place upon which an orderly world might be founded. While there seems to be little progress toward this goal, there is some. First Man, First Woman, and other figures who will take part in the creation of the Navajo world come into being as does the sacred medicine bundle, the collection of objects and powers from which will come the Navajo world. These appearances serve as the background for the creation of the world as told particularly in Blessingway, a ritual and story tradition that forms the core of a major Navajo view.

In this story tradition, a new era in the creation process begins with the emergence onto the earth surface. The rim of the emergence place stands at the center of the Navajo sacred geography and sacred history. This new world is markedly different from the others. It is covered with water under the control of water birds. Defeated in contests the water birds flee and the waters recede. The winds of the four directions are called upon to dry the earth, and in the undistinguished landscape that is revealed, First Man and First Woman think and talk about how this new world shall be. This demonstrates the important Navajo notion that thought, speech, and planning are essentially creative acts. With their plan in mind, First Man and First Woman demonstrate the powers of the sacred medicine bundle by opening it and transforming the medicine objects into their spiritual counterpart, holy figures in humanlike form. Then they build a ceremonial house (hogan) in which to create the Navajo world. This creation hogan is the paradigm for all Navajo ceremonial and house structures (see "Navajo Social Organization," figs. 9–10). It is a microcosm standing at the center of the world, at the emergence place. Its four main support pillars are personified as spiritual forces and correspond with the cardinal directions. The party of creators enters this primordial structure and First Man places objects



left, Mus. of Northern Ariz., Flagstaff: 2371/C656; right, Amon Carter Mus., Ft. Worth, Tex.: Laura Gilpin Coll.
 Fig. 1. Sacred mountain of the east. left, *East Mountain*, one of a set of 4 paintings by Navajo artist Harrison Begay, each representing a sacred mountain associated with a specific color and direction. Begay, who spent most of his early life away from the Navajo reservation, based the paintings on a fairly literal interpretation of part of the origin myth published by Matthews (1897; H. Begay 1967). The painting depicts the male and female inner forms of the mountain in characteristic human form, sprinkling pollen upon the 2 eggs placed on its summit by First Man and First Woman. The mountain, decorated with white shells, corn, and lightning, is fastened to earth (represented by a black band similar to that used in sandpaintings) by a bolt of lightning (Matthews 1897:78–79). Painted in 1959, following a similar set (see Dunn 1968: pl. XX), 3 of which went to a singer as payment for an Enemyway performed for Begay. right, Blanca Peak, Colo., sometimes identified as the sacred mountain of the east (R. Roessel 1971:7), which has also been correlated with Pelado Peak in N.Mex. (Matthews 1897:221; Franciscan Fathers 1910:136); see Reichard 1950, 1:20, 2:452–453; Wyman 1957:35–39 for discussion of geographical identifications of the Navajo sacred mountains. Photograph by Laura Gilpin, Feb. 1953.



top, Smithsonian, Dept. of Anthr.: 74,741; bottom left, Navajo Community College Press: R. Roessel 1971:14; bottom right, James T. Bialac, Phoenix, Ariz.

Fig. 2. Moccasin game, a Navajo gambling game, first played between the nocturnal and diurnal animals to determine whether daylight or darkness would prevail and now played as a social game. bottom left, Pen and ink drawing of the first moccasin game by Raymond Johnson, published as an illustration for a contemporary Navajo version of the origin myth (see also G. Begay in Wheelwright 1949:61–62; Matthews 1889:4–6; Yazzie 1971:24–27). Nocturnal animals (at right) face diurnal animals (at left); One Walking Giant (*Yé'ütsösh Łá'i Naagháii*), instigator of the game, is at extreme left, and Coyote (center) observes the proceedings, which resulted in the alternation of day and night. Pointer, ball, and yucca counters in background are all used in the game, which is a form of hidden ball game (see Culin 1907:335–382). bottom right, *Moccasin Game*, painting of a contemporary game by the Navajo artist Robert Chee, 1961 (see Kluckhohn, Hill, and Kluckhohn 1971:388–395 for modern variants of the game). top, Yucca leaf counters used in the moccasin game. The side eventually holding all the counters (102) is the winner. The 2 notched counters are given out last and according to Matthews (1889:3) “One of the party receiving them sticks them up in the rafters of the *hogan* (lodge) and says to them ‘Go seek your grandchildren’ (*i.e.*, bring the other counters back to our side). The possession of the ‘grandmothers’ [notched counters] is supposed to bring good luck.” Average length 23 cm, collected by Washington Matthews at Ft. Wingate, N. Mex., in 1884.

from the medicine bundle upon the floor of the hogan in a manner resembling a painting in sand. He arranges in human shape the objects representing the life forms of all the living things that are to constitute the Navajo world. Then these inner life forms are dressed in representations of the physical forms they will take: plants, animals, and other living forms. So too are created the months of the year, the celestial bodies, and the living landscape.

This ceremony lasts throughout the night. The acts of creation being performed are described in the sequence of songs that are sung. At dawn this world, created in microcosm with objects from the sacred medicine bundle, is transformed into the Navajo world, the world in which Navajo people have since lived. This transformation is achieved by the preparation of smoke to serve as a vehicle to transport the representational forms to their proper places. The recitation of a prayer to the inner forms of the earth is the transforming power giving birth to the earth.

When all is done, the human-shaped forms of dawn

and evening twilight are sent on a tour of the newly created earth. They ascend each of the mountains and their inspection reveals that the world is extremely beautiful. Indeed, this state of order, a state in which all living things are in their places and in proper relationship with all living things, constitutes the very definition of the concept of beauty (*hózhó*), which is central to Navajo world view. It stands in contrast with the preemergence condition of disorder, chaos, and ugliness (*hóchxóó'*).

This is the environment into which the benevolent creator, Changing Woman, is born. Her parents are identified with the most sacred objects, those representing the powers of thought and speech, in the medicine bundle held by First Man. She is reared by First Man and First Woman and upon achieving womanhood, Changing Woman gains possession of the medicine bundle. Her twin sons, Monster Slayer and Born for Water, fathered by the Sun, clear the world of the monsters that had appeared because of adulterous acts of the Sun or others. This done, Changing Woman continues her era of crea-

tion by using her powers to create corn. Then performing ritual acts over balls of epidermal waste that she has rubbed from her body and mingled with cornmeal, she creates the first Navajo people. The first four pairs are the progenitors of the four original Navajo clans and from them stem all Navajo people.

The creation of the Navajo world concludes with the departure of the Holy People who were active in the creation to their own spiritual domains. Those who emerged from the lower worlds return there; for their origin gave them association with disorder and therefore with witchcraft, death, and other forms of malevolence. The human-shaped forms of other Holy People depart announcing that they will never again be seen in their primordial forms, but that they will be forever overlooking and directing life in the Navajo world.

Importance of the Origin Stories

While it must be remembered that there are many and widely varying stories of the cosmic creation and the origin of the Navajo people, these accounts are nonetheless central to Navajo world view; indeed, they are primary statements of it. The order and character of the world and of the place of human beings in that world, including their relationships with one another and with all other living things, is defined in these stories.

With the era of cosmic creation concluded, the responsibility for maintaining the created world passes to the Navajo people. Whether it is the ordinary daily activities of planting, herding, and tending children or

the more formal ceremonial acts of reparation performed at times of sickness and suffering, or creative acts at times of birth and renewals, the Navajo view their creation known to them through stories as the basic model.

Sources

Twenty-three versions of the Navajo stories of origin dating from as early as 1883 are presented with brief synopses by Spencer (1947), whose primary intent was to discern aspects of contemporary Navajo social life in these stories. Other versions have since been published, notably in Wheelwright (1949), Fishler (1953), O'Bryan (1956), and Wyman (1965, 1970a). Wyman (1965) presents an extensive comparative analysis of the themes and motifs in the major recorded versions published to 1965 including: Matthews (1883a, 1897), Stephen (1930), Curtis (1907–1930, 1), Wheelwright (1949), which is a version recorded by Father Berard Haile in 1908, Goddard (1934), Wheelwright (1942), Sapir and Hoijer (1942), Oakes (1943), Fishler (1953), and O'Bryan (1956), in which comparison with other versions is included. Wyman (1970a) published three versions recorded by Father Berard Haile of the portion of the origin story cycle known as Blessingway, which includes only postemergence events. Wyman (1970a) analyzes the motifs and themes of Blessingway mythology in its several recorded versions. For a general summary and review of the entire body of relevant Navajo oral tradition, see Gill (1979, 1980).