# UCLA

American Indian Culture and Research Journal

## Title

Holy Wind in Navajo Philosophy. By James Kale McNeley.

#### **Permalink** https://escholarship.org/uc/item/39g512tn

**Journal** American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 5(4)

### ISSN

0161-6463

### Author

Zumbach, Clark

Publication Date 1981-09-01

#### DOI

10.17953

### **Copyright Information**

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial License, available at <u>https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/</u>

eScholarship.org

#### 64 AMERICAN INDIAN CULTURE AND RESEARCH JOURNAL

Mentioned above is the desire to know more about the influence of Congress on anthropological research; another is to have more information about anthropologists not connected with the Washington establishment. For example, did Alice Fletcher, Daniel Brinton, and Frederick W. Putnam have any influence on research interests at the B.A.E.? Did they follow the directions for anthropology as defined in the Bureau or did they go their own way? Albeit, the book's thesis is Washington anthropology, but by considering briefly other anthropologists and their works, the B.A.E. contributions to anthropology would have been better illuminated. Hinsley does discuss briefly the career of Franz Boas, a topic covered more extensively in George W. Stocking's Race, Culture and Evolution: Essays in the History of Anthropology (New York: Free Press, 1968), and The Shaping of American Anthropology, 1883–1911: A Franz Boas Reader (New York: Basic Books, 1974). Hinsley's account, however, is valuable in that it fleshes out Boas' Washington connection.

Yet, despite these reservations, *Savages and Scientists* is a valuable book and the best one we have on this topic. It is a solid contribution to both intellectual and social science history and is as splendidly researched as it is elegantly written.

Robert E. Bieder Bloomington, Indiana

**Holy Wind in Navajo Philosophy.** By James Kale McNeley. Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 1981. 133 pp. \$6.95 paper; \$14.95 cloth.

More often than not, when the term "philosophy" is used, it is in one of two senses. By "philosophy" we might be referring to the academic discipline whose full-blown development in the West comes first with the work of Plato. "Philosophy" in this sense, or "academic philosophy," is the pursuit of certain kinds of questions which are unanswerable by either science or religion in terms of the principles of reason. Academic philosophy is seldom practiced outside the realm of the college or university. "Philosophy," however, is frequently used in the second way. "Philosophy," in this second sense, means some-

#### Book Reviews

thing like "world outlook or view of life throughout all of its vicissitudes." "Philosophy" in this second sense is found in the non-academic, as well as the academic realm. Within this second sort of philosophy there can be disagreements (world outlooks often clash), but seldom do we find the reasoned analysis that we find in academic philosophy. This does not necessarily make "philosophy" in the second sense less genuine or less valuable than academic philosophy. Indeed, if sincerity is taken as the sole criterion of worth, philosophy in the second sense is "better." What is true is only that describing one's world outlook is something distinct from that which professional philosophers do when they philosophize.

It is in this second respect that *Holy Wind in Navajo Philosophy* is philosophy. In this work James McNeley tries to do two things: (1) describe the salient features of Navajo cosmology; and (2) show that these features entail a Navajo theory of why people act as they do. In actuality, the work is highly programmatic, and is best viewed as a detailed (and promising) plan for further study in this area. The actual text is only 61 pages in length. However, the book contains what is (for the size of the book) a whopping 41 page Appendix which, following John Ladd's *The Structure of a Moral Code: A Philosophical Analysis of Ethical Discourse Applied to the Ethics of the Navajo Indians*, consists of the direct data—the statements of ten Navajo informants—on which the author's theorizing is based. As might be expected, the book kicks up dust, rather than settles it.

The text consists of five chapters. The first two are very brief and introductory in nature. The third deals with purpose one above, the fourth with purpose two, and the last, entitled "Work for the Future," consists in large part of a series of suggestions for future research. I shall discuss each in turn.

The central concept in Navajo cosmology, according to the author, is that of *nitch'i*, meaning Wind, Air, or Atmosphere. (The author sometimes, as the title indicates, refers to it as "Holy Wind".) According to McNeley, "Holy Wind gives life, thought, speech, and the power of motion to all living things and serves as the means of communication between all elements of the living world" (p. 1). In the chapter entitled "The Present World," McNeley examines the Navajo view of the world and the role of Wind in it. On the basis of his data McNeley claims that there is only one Wind in the Navajo view, though it has many different names, moves in different

directions, exists in different loci, and has various appearances, sizes, and effects in different situations and times. The Holy Wind emerged from the underworld with the Holy Ones of the four directions, to whom the Navajo look "for their sustenance and guidance" (p. 22). The Holy Wind is in turn sent to the Navajo, the "Earth Surface People," as the Messenger of the Holy ones "to inform, advise, and protect people, and to report back on people's conduct" (p. 30). The Holy Wind thus has the function of monitoring, guiding, and directing human behavior. But McNeley's description of Navajo cosmology is by far too incomplete. What is the entire cosmological function of the Holy Ones? Are they that which is ultimate? If not, what is their relationship to the ultimate? Why do the Holy Ones need this intermediary rather than inter-acting with the Earth Surface People themselves? Does this intermediary possess a free will and self-consciousness of its own? Such unanswered questions contribute to the programmatic character of this work.

Much of the fourth Chapter entitled "Principles of Life and Behavior," lays out the Navajo theory of human behavior which is entailed by this cosmology. As it turns out, Wind is in Earth Surface People right from conception, "its movement and growth producing movement and growth of the foetus" (p. 33). All future development or growth "is governed by the Wind" (p. 35). Each person consists of Wind; a strong person (in character) has strong Wind, a weak person, harmful Wind. A strong person is one who "lacks faults, benefits from instruction, has a thoughtful approach towards life, is well-disposed and helpful towards others, and is even-tempered and difficult to anger" (p. 45); a weak person is one who "is contrary and argumentative, and is quick-tempered to the point of being mean and intemperate in his actions" (p. 45). The Messenger Wind is said by McNeley to be a "determinant" of behavior. But these Messengers are "determinants" in only a weak sense. They pass on warnings and advice from the Holy Ones; they may even "work hard to keep the Wind within one strong, even replacing it when it has become tired" (p. 40). But the individual can always decide for himself whether or not to be "responsive" (p. 40). He can, that is, disregard the advice of the Messengers and let the harmful Wind control him. Notice, however, that strictly speaking we have not left the cosmological level; McNeley has only traced the Wind Theory into the human realm, showing how the Navajo conceive of the interaction between the Holy Wind and human beings. To elucidate a theory of behavior McNeley would have to explain these cosmological beliefs as they are integrated into the dynamics of Navajo behavior. In the final chapter of the text McNeley himself recognizes this (p. 60), which again betrays the fact that this book is closer to a plan than a finished work.

Perhaps one of the most important questions the book touches on in the final chapter is that of what concept of morality is associated with or entailed by Navajo Wind Theory. However, McNeley's discussion of this question contains a significant confusion. Again, the shadow of Ladd's work is present. McNeley reports that Ladd's study is "very influential in supporting the prevailing view that Navajo deities are not involved in morality," a view which he (Ladd) thinks supports "the alleged amorality of Navajo religion" (p. 61). McNeley, however, thinks that his study shows that "For the Navajo the moral sense . . . has its source in benevolent supernatural powers, right conduct being an integral part of an ideal relationship with these powers" (p. 55). But McNeley's statement of both Ladd's view and his own conclusion is ambiguous. To say that the Messengers are "involved in morality" or that the source of the moral sense is "benevolent supernatural powers," might be to say that (a) the Holy Wind merely reports what is right to Earth People, or that (b) the Holy Ones actually make or define morality (as did the God of Abraham in ancient Hebrew religion). McNeley's study only supports (a). Ladd could agree with McNeley and simultaneously maintain that Navajo religion is amoral in that it does not define morality; that is, Ladd might only be denying (b). To put it differently, both Ladd's and McNeley's study might be in agreement over the role of religion in Navajo Morality: The Holy Ones love morality because they are moral, but a message is not necessarily moral because it is sent by the Holy Ones via the Wind.

Despite its programmatic character, *Holy Wind in Navajo Philosophy* is a valuable work. The author attempts to capture truths about Navajo philosophy before they slip into oblivion. Moreover, McNeley's descriptions and explanations of Navajo cosmology plant the seeds for a study of how Navajo philosophy influences self-conscious actions of the Navajo. Finally, the book is a noteworthy effort at accurately presenting other studies of Navajo philosophy (ignoring the one exception just mentioned), while making clear how this study differs from others. My only hope is that someone, preferably the author, develops it into the full-blown and detailed account it can be.

Clark Zumbach Illinois State University

**Oklahoma's Forgotten Indians.** Edited by Robert E. Smith. Oklahoma City: Oklahoma Historical Society, 1981. 126 pp. pap. \$8.50.

*Oklahoma's Forgotten Indians* is an attempt to bring together in a single volume several studies of tribes that have been largely neglected in the literature about Oklahoma. For the most part, the book works very well. Each chapter is devoted to a specific tribe and chronicles the events that led to the individual group's relocation to the Indian Territory. Although a few of the tribes dealt with are in fact very well known, such as the Nez Perces, they have rarely been viewed within the context of Oklahoma Indian history. The chapters are, for their length, detailed and well-written.

There are, however, some problems that could have been dealt with in an expanded version of the book. Basically, a theme of cultural and political survival in the face of government policies is woven throughout the chapters. At the same time there is little cultural information provided. American Indian history demands a holistic approach. The historian must not only chronicle the events but deal with tribal world views and ethics. Indians maintained their identities out of a sense of mission. Without their survival the tribal concept of a divinely created universal order might collapse. Devoid of extensive cultural and ethical material the book loses some of its explanatory power.

The arrangement of the chapters seems a bit confused. Trafzer's excellent article on the Wyandots comes at the end of the book when, if put in a chronological sequence, it should have been placed more towards the beginning. If a chronological order did not seem appropriate then perhaps a culture-area arrangement should have been utilized. In any case, there seems to be very little order in the flow of the manuscript.