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Cosmological Order As a Model For Navajo Philosophy

TRUDY GRIFFIN-PIERCE

The temporal markers of the Navajo universe not only divide and organize time but also serve as a guide to human life through their association with specific patterns of behavior and thought. In this paper, which is based on fieldwork¹ and ethnohistoric sources, I will discuss the concept of order in Navajo Creation, identify the sets of markers for the division of time, document their visual depiction in sandpaintings, examine their symbolic representation in the *hooghan*, and explore how these temporal markers have the capacity to influence human thought and conduct.

The Concept of Order in Navajo Creation

The concept of dynamic order is of tremendous importance to Navajo philosophy. Creation occurred *nizhónígo*, or "in an orderly and proper way." The enclitic "-go" at the end of the word *nizhónígo* means "in that way" and denotes an on-going, continuing process. Thus, rather than being a static quality, orderliness must be continuously recreated through time.

Each of the successive lower worlds was more ordered than the world(s) before it. The First World was inhabited by insects and was the most chaotic of all. This red world was characterized by confusion, uncertainty, and error.² Each subsequent upward migration toward emergence onto the Earth's surface led to

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greater stability, order, and knowledge. Thus, we see a progression toward a more orderly way of life.

An important aspect of the concept of order in Navajo thought is that of complementarity. What Westerners call the pairing of opposites Navajos conceptualize as the halves of a whole entity, with each half necessary for completeness (Consultant A). Examples of such paired contrasts are life-death, male-female, night-day, dawn-evening twilight as well as the primary contrast between *hózhó*, all that is good, positive, beautiful, and harmonious, and *hóchxó*, that which is evil, ugly, and worthless. In this discussion of the temporal markers of the Navajo universe, we will see the role that complementarity plays in the establishment and maintenance of order.

The Temporal Markers of the Navajo Universe

After the Emergence into the present world there was a need for an orderly division of time through some kind of temporal markers. In Chanter Frank Mitchell's version of Blessingway,³ First Man addressed this issue, saying,

'This particular [thing, the Sun] in [the light] of which we will be moving about, does as yet not exist. . . . Nor [do] the time periods which are to intervene between each other from now on. . . . That by which . . . [day and night] are to be recognized has not as yet had our attention. At present we are merely continuing our working [period] without established order, whereas there is as yet no resting period . . . concerning these plants, the means of specifying the time of their action and of putting on their different colors [the seasons] is still an unsettled matter. . . . The time too in which those on the upper side [the heavenly bodies] will move about is a point to which you should also give your attention.'

In this speech, First Man was proposing an orderly arrangement of time periods—a succession of day and night for labor and rest, and a winter and summer season for growth and harvest by which the Earth Surface People could sustain themselves. He also called for regularity in the movements of stars and constellations across the heavens. In response to First Man's speech,

four sets of markers were created to divide and organize time: the Sun and the Moon, the seasons, the Constellations, and the cardinal light phenomena.

First Man appointed He-who-returns-carrying-one-turquoise to carry the Sun disk, *Jóhoonaa'éei*, and He-who-returns-carrying-one-corn kernel to be the bearer of the Moon disk, *TY'éhonaa'éei*. With these two entities, we see the first set of contrasting pairs, the stronger, male⁴ Sun which is paired with the weaker, female Moon.

Another primary contrast, that of birth and death, came into being because of the Sun bearer's demand for payment in carrying the celestial disk across the sky. He says, "I will not go down without a man's death. Every time I make this journey, let a man's death occur accordingly."⁵ In return, he agrees,

'You [will] see whatever you may presently be doing on its [the earth's] surface, I will keep all of that visible for you, and wherever movable things occur, I will keep all of them recognizable for you. . . .'⁶

The Moon carrier, when asked his opinion, says,

'I am now in control of this night [part]! . . . births in the future including any and every kind of birth will mostly occur at night, births will be more frequent at night. That will be a cause for rejoicing. Oppositely too, deaths will occur only at night. . . .'⁷

The Sun and Moon, in addition to supplying illumination, provide the orderly arrangement of time periods proposed by First Man. The light of the Sun marks the beginning of day; its disappearance marks the end of day. The Moon is in charge of nightly events as well as vegetation and the monthly cycle. The Sun's movement from north to south is responsible for the seasons, which are marked by the appearance of various constellations.

The traditional Navajo division of the year is only into two seasons of approximately six months each. Again, we see the pairing of complements. The two seasons are visually represented in Figure 1. This sandpainting from the Upwardreachingway depicts a central figure with the darker sky of winter to his left and the lighter summer sky to his right; in each oval of sky are constellations.

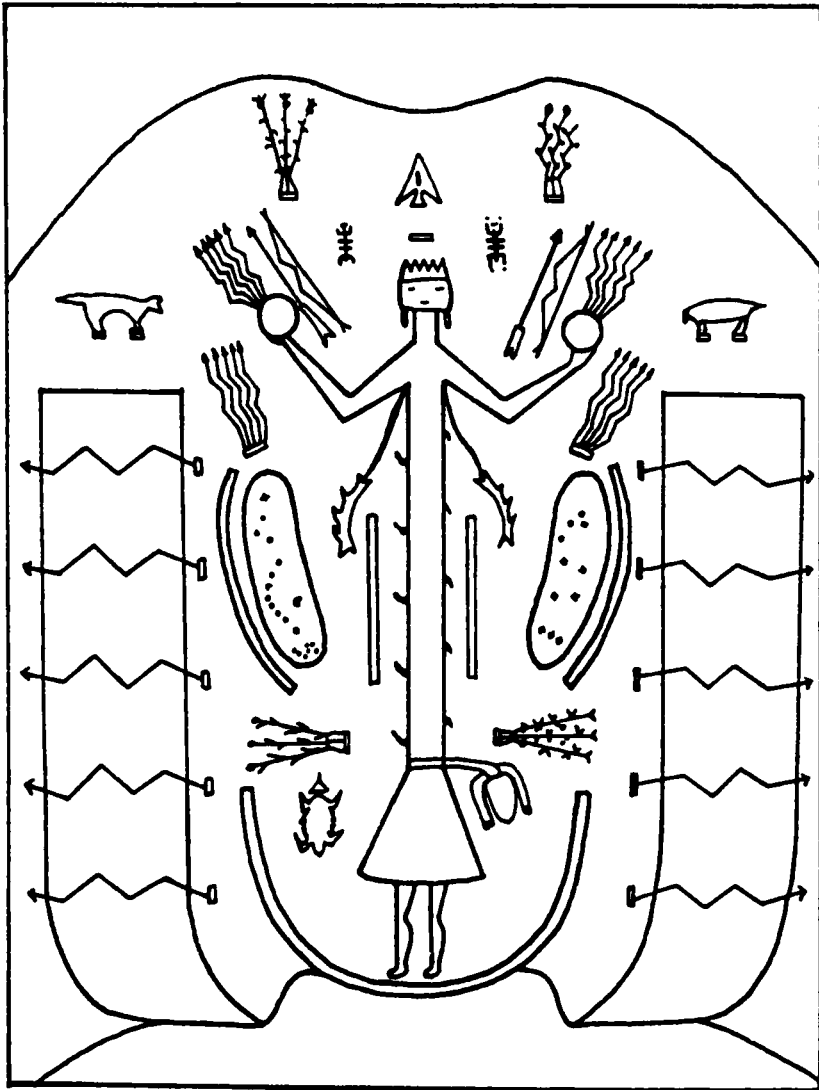


FIGURE 1. The One Who Controls the Rain, from the Upward Reachingway Evilway. Adapted from a sandpainting reproduction by Newcomb; Singer: Bearded Bit-ahni. Courtesy Wheelwright Museum of the American Indian, P21#8.

In Chanter Frank Mitchell's version of Creation, Coyote is the spokesman for the native philosopher who endeavors to rationalize the existence of various phenomena. When the *diyin dine'é* (glossed as Holy People or Supernaturals) involved in the process of creation cannot agree among themselves regarding the months which should come into being, Coyote takes charge, dividing the months which are represented by prayersticks into two groups, a "winter side" and a "summer side."⁸

In the winter, the Earth and the beings that live on her surface rest or die; in the summer, the Earth and her inhabitants become active again as they are restored to life. Changing Woman, who embodies the Earth's powers of rejuvenation, goes through the same cycle of old age and restoration to youth. The Sky goes through his own seasonal changes: in the winter *Dilyéhé*,⁹ the Pleiades, appears, while the summer sky is marked by the fish-hook shape of Scorpius, which the Navajo divide into '*Átsé'et-soh*, the First Big One, and *Gah heet'e'ii*, Rabbit Tracks. Again, we see the concept of dynamic order, or order being continuously manifested through time, as well as the pairing of complements which are both essential to the order of the Navajo universe.

Coyote goes on to discuss the existence of complements, saying,

'Now thus far what is day has come into being with night, birth too and death have originated together, winter and summer also have come into being.'¹⁰

Thus, we see clearly how basic this phenomenon of contrasting complements is to the process of life itself in Navajo thought. Day cannot exist without night nor birth without death.

In addition to the Sun and the Moon, the constellations, and the seasons, there is another set of markers for the division of time. The four cardinal light phenomena of the present world are the four directions and the times of day which are symbolically associated with them. They begin with the white of Dawn, *hayookkáát*, which is ceremonially assigned to the east. *Náhodet'izh* comes next and is translated as "horizon blue" in reference to the blue of the sky at midday; this phenomena is associated with the south. The yellow of evening twilight, *náhotsoi*, comes next and is ceremonially assigned to the west. Darkness, *chahatheet*, associated with the north, is the final light phenomena. These four phenomena are conceptualized as two pairs: Dawn and

Twilight, and Midday and Night, so again, we see the pairing of complements so fundamental to the Navajo worldview.

The sun's movement across the heavens results in the four cardinal light phenomena; however, in the story of Navajo Creation, the prototypes of these light phenomena existed in the underworlds long before the creation of the Sun and Moon, which did not come into existence until the present world. In the First World, the only light came from four cloud or light columns, one over each of the four corners of the world. These prototypes of the light phenomena of the cardinal directions of the present world contained within them (as the light phenomena do today) the substance of life itself. Thus, they mate and give birth to various *diyin dine'é*.

In the sandpainting in Figure 2, Father Sky is held in place by these cloud columns. In this visual representation, instead of one color existing over each corner of the world, the colors are stacked so that each corner contains all four colors of cloud. The masked face of Father Sky also depicts these four cardinal light phenomena: the white of dawn covers his forehead, the black of night lies under his eyes, the blue of the midday sky lies across his nose, and the yellow of twilight covers his chin.

Although the four light clouds were able to create life they remained lifeless themselves (as did other natural phenomena) until the present world when an inner form from First Man's magic corn bundle was placed within each of them as their life principle to vitalize and personalize each phenomenon.¹¹

The most vivid depiction of the cardinal light phenomena is in a sandpainting from the Male Shootingway known by chanters as "The Dawn" painting and more commonly called "The Skies." The most elaborate form of this painting also depicts the inner forms of each phenomenon; in Figure 3, four keystone shapes represent the four light phenomena; within each stands its inner form. Beginning with the east, we have the white of Dawn with its inner form, Dawn Boy, standing inside. To the south, Blue Sky Man stands within the keystone form of the blue of the daytime sky. Proceeding west, we see Yellow Evening Light Girl within the yellow form of evening twilight. And finally, in the north, Darkness is spread with the beings of Darkness—the Stars and Constellations of the Night Sky—and Darkness Girl.

The same or similar beings as those of the cardinal light

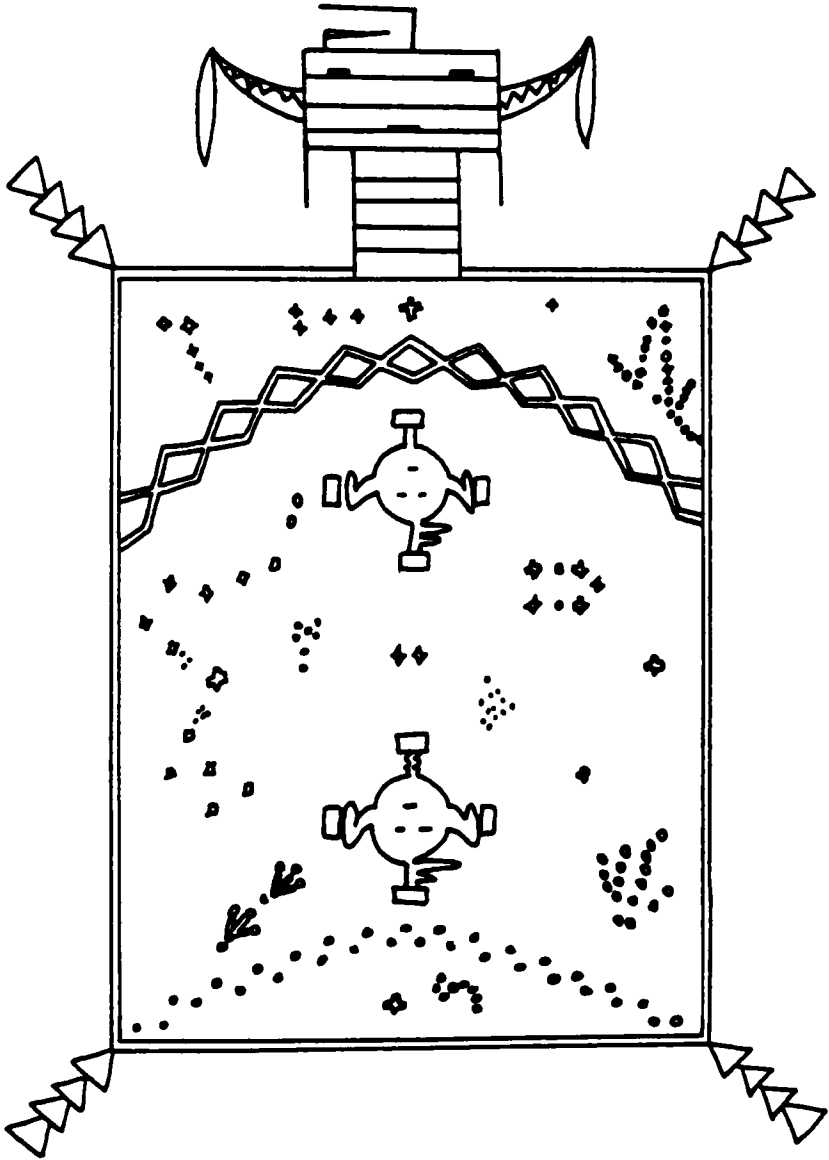


FIGURE 2. Father Sky with cloud columns. Adapted from a sandpainting reproduction by Newcomb; Singer: Bearded Bit-ahni. Courtesy Wheelwright Museum of the American Indian, PI#15.

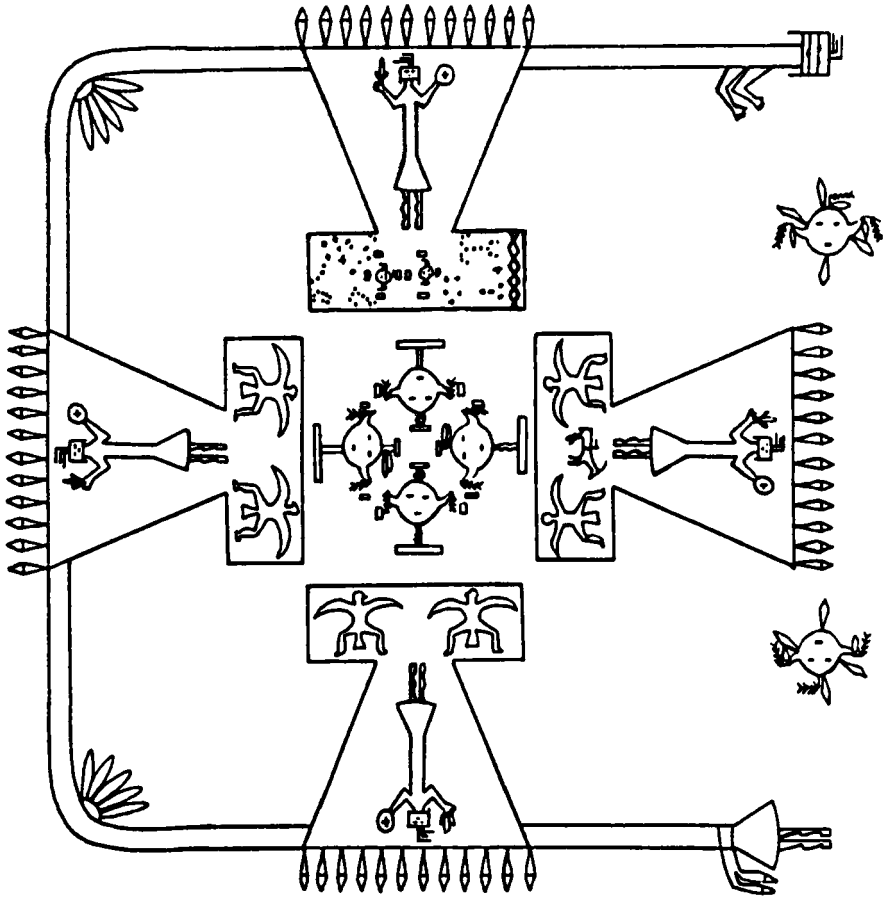


FIGURE 3. The Skies, from the Male Shootingway. Adapted from a sandpainting reproduction by Newcomb; Singer: Blue Eyes. Courtesy of the Wheelwright Museum of the American Indian, P4#11.

phenomena were placed within the mountains created in the cardinal directions of the present world. In the diagram in Figure 4, adapted from the notes of Father Berard Haile, we see the inner forms of the cardinal directions with the four sacred mountains lying at their feet. Names differ according to sex and generation in published Navajo mythologies for these inner forms. The chanter who worked with Father Berard Haile¹² calls the inner form of the white dawn, Dawn Man, whom we see lying in the east with Blanca Peak, the sacred mountain of the east at his feet. To the south is Horizontal Blue Man with Mount Taylor; to the west is Evening Twilight Woman with San Francisco Peak; and finally, to the north lies Darkness Woman with Hesperus Peak, the sacred mountain of the north, at her feet.

The Hooghan as a Model of the Navajo Cosmos

The Sacred Mountains can be conceptualized as the *hooghan*, or "place home," for each of the light phenomenon; conversely, the light is the inner form of its respective mountain.¹³ Thus, the Mountains are living beings because they are animated by the life force of the cardinal light phenomena.

The *hooghan* has been called a diagram, or master encoding, of the Navajo cosmos.¹⁴ After the Emergence, the first *hooghan* was conceived, planned, and constructed by the *diyin dine'é* who decreed that the Earth Surface People follow the plan of this first *hooghan* with its posts at the four cardinal points and east-facing doorway. The main poles of the *hooghan* are to be picked up in the east, south, west, north order with two stones of the sacred jewel associated with each direction, imbedded in the ground next to each pole.

Figure 5 depicts the directional division of the *hooghan* with the inner beings, colors, and Mountains associated with each of the four directions. However, this diagram represents much more than simply a list of spatiotemporal associations because each of the directions is animated with a life force. As Consultant A told me,

The East says, 'I am birth; I am new life; I am a new day; I am all these good things,' so you pray to that. The directions are very much alive. They are the places where sacred things happened, the places where the mountains live.

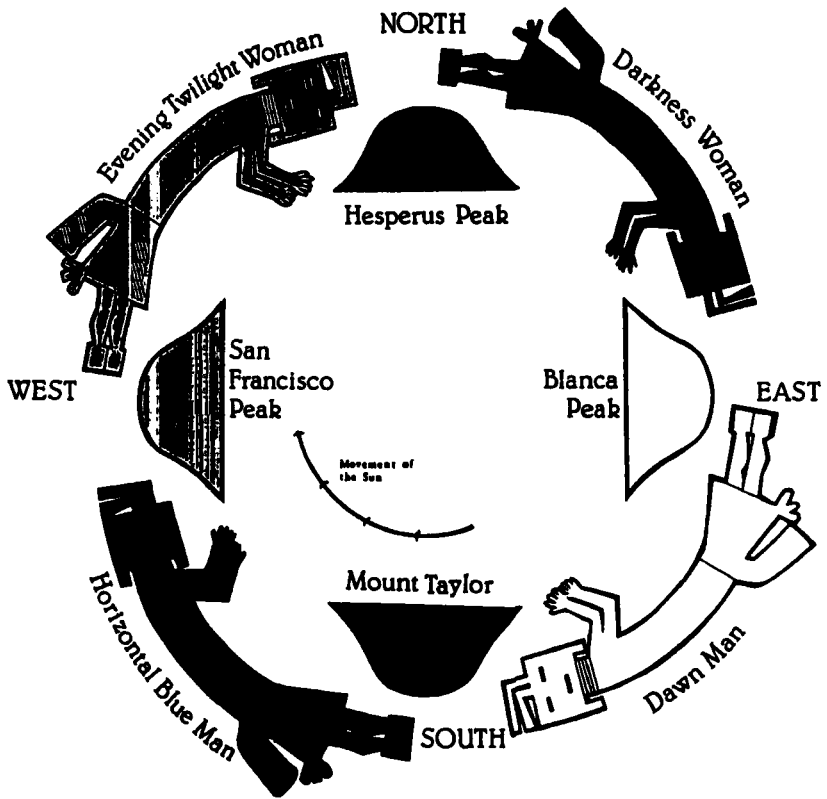


FIGURE 4. The Inner Forms of the Cardinal Points with the Sacred Mountains Adapted from Wyman 1970.

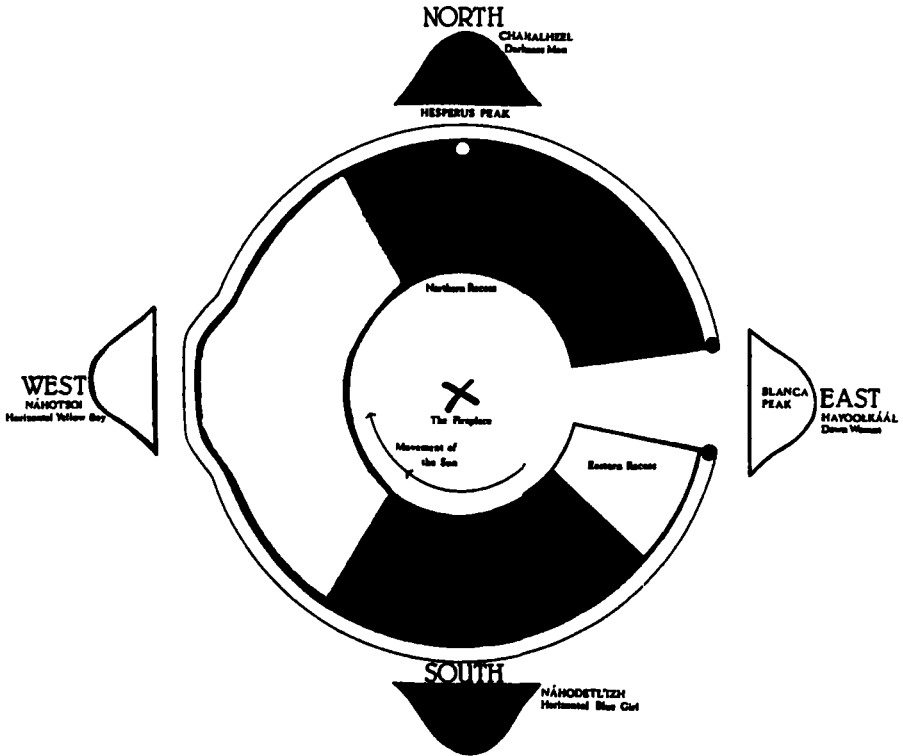


FIGURE 5. Schematic Diagram of the Hoogan with Directional Associations. Adapted from information in Witherspoon (1983: 532), Jett and Spencer (1981), and Mindeleff (1898:Plate XC).

Guidance from the Four Cardinal Light Phenomena

In addition to having an inner form, each living thing on the Earth's surface also has a Wind placed within it. Wind and inner forms are the means by which all living things live, breathe, think, and communicate.¹⁵ Scholar James McNeley calls this indwelling wind the primordial force in the cosmos. The Navajos who worked with McNeley¹⁶ told him that the inner forms of the four Cardinal Light Phenomena—Dawn, Midday, Twilight, and Darkness—send Messenger Winds which inform, advise, and protect people and also report back on peoples' conduct. When Changing Woman and the other *diyin dine'é* departed after completing Creation, they left gifts and instructions about the correct way to live. These *diyin dine'é* are based in the cardinal directions and, because of the Messenger Winds, are all-knowing.

Furthermore, specific patterns of thought and behavior are associated with each time of day. In Chanter Frank Mitchell's version of Creation, Coyote, in his role of philosopher, discusses how the cardinal light phenomena are to guide the Earth Surface People:

Offerings made . . . [at dawn] will all be holy, and in the future young men and women who are to come into being will all be put in shape [so that] he [or she] who has walked in . . . [the dawn] . . . will enjoy every [possession].¹⁷

Coyote goes on to say that while daylight is good as a time to carry out the plans made at Dawn, it can bring either good or ill fortune. Deaths which occur at this time are the payment required by the Sun carrier for his travel:

'Concerning . . . [daylight] . . . although good to some extent it will remain two-sided. Whereas it will be a protection particularly for one's journeys, bad things [deaths] will repeatedly occur in that time . . . [so that] half of it will be good, the other half will not be good'¹⁸

The third light phenomenon, Twilight, is a time of bringing people together again; thus, travel during that time is not proper.

'The . . . [twilight] will also be good, and offerings too will be made in that time, it will be the time of bring-

ing [people] together again. Should any of you not act properly, should anyone disbelieve and continue [travel] through it, that also will not be quite proper.¹⁹

The period of Darkness, however, has more of whatever is bad. It is during this time that the Moon's demand for deaths as payment for his journey across the sky must be satisfied.

'As for . . . [darkness], only a small portion of it will be good. Merely the resting part in this time period, in this small point only will conditions be good. Otherwise, there will be more of whatever is bad [death] in this time than in the others. And should you desire this . . . [time] . . . above the others [i.e., sleep too much], you will suffer want of everything. That is the purpose of these things.' . . .²⁰

Thus, Coyote instructs the Earth Surface People on appropriate behavior for each time of the day associated with the cardinal light phenomena. Rising with the Dawn to make pollen offerings ensures greater accomplishment which, in turn, leads to prosperity. Travel is best during the day but some deaths do occur at this time. Evening should mark the cessation of travel; Coyote warns that travelers who choose to continue at this time proceed at their own risk. If one sleeps too much, all aspects of his or her life will suffer from neglect. Coyote is saying that there is an appropriate time for each activity. By following these instructions for moderation, order, and balance, and by heeding other advice and warnings from the *diyin dine'é*, which are relayed by Messenger Winds, one's life will be marked by prosperity and abundance.

The Navajo saying, "*Yá'át'eehgo nijgha k'*" is an admonition to "walk in a good and orderly way, always." This phrase embodies the ideals of Navajo philosophy discussed in this paper by referring to the order inherent in the Universe. Each day this order recurs in the form of the four cardinal light phenomena; each year order is manifested in the earth's hibernation in winter and restoration to life in summer. Both the *hooghan* and sand-paintings encode this cosmological order. "*Yá'át'eehgo nijgha k'*," is a reminder to live in a way which shows respect to the *diyin dine'é* by doing one's part to continually create anew the order that they created in the Universe.

Acknowledgments

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NOTES

1. This article is based on a combination of fieldwork and ethnohistoric sources. The fieldwork was conducted in the Tsaile and Pinon, Arizona areas in spring, 1984; spring and summer, 1985; and winter 1985-86; and in Tucson, in fall, 1988. I have omitted the names of Navajo individuals because Navajo opinions about sharing information about sandpaintings and cosmology vary considerably. Thus, I feel it is important to maintain the privacy of those with whom I worked. This is why I refer to the individual quoted in this paper as Consultant A.

2. Gladys A. Reichard, *Navaho Religion: A Study of Symbolism* (Princeton: University Press, 1950), 16.

3. Leland C. Wyman, *Blessingway* (Tucson, University of Arizona Press, 1970), 366.

4. Here maleness and femaleness refer to the basic Navajo distinction between that which is coarser and more aggressive, called male (*bika'*) and that which is finer and gentler, called female (*ba'áád*). These differences are not sexual but represent instead a contrast between two types which are both necessary. Neither is preferable or morally better than the other, but rather each is incomplete without the other to balance it.

5. Frank Mitchell in Wyman, *Blessingway*, 379.

6. *Ibid.*

7. *Ibid.*, 380.

8. *Ibid.*, 381.

9. For a description of the eight major constellations recognized by the Navajo today see Trudy Griffin-Pierce, "Ethnoastronomy in Navajo Sandpaintings of the Heavens," *Archaeoastronomy* 9(1986): 62-69. Haile, *Starlore Among the Navaho* (Santa Fe: Museum of Navajo Ceremonial Art, 1947) presents a longer list of Navajo constellations as presented to him by one chanter.

10. Wyman, *Blessingway*, 381-382.

11. *Ibid.*, 24.

12. Haile, "Soul Concepts of the Navaho," *Annali Lateranensi* 7(1943):70-71.

13. John Farella, *The Main Stalk: A Synthesis of Navajo Philosophy* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1984), 105.

14. *Ibid.*, 87.

15. James McNeley, *Holy Wind in Navajo Philosophy* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1982) is the work to consult on *nítch'i* which means Wind, Air, or Atmosphere and is glossed as "Holy Wind." McNeley (1982:52) describes the Holy Wind as an omnipresent spiritual agency which grants and sustains life, adding that this concept goes beyond the Western conception of the soul which resides wholly within the individual; in the Navajo view, the individual participates in the Holy Wind which is a single entity that resides everywhere, enveloping everyone and imparting to them the powers of life, movement, thought, speech, and behavior of which the wind is the source.

16. *Ibid.*, 30.

17. Wyman, *Blessingway*, 369-370.

18. *Ibid.*, 370.

19. *Ibid.*

20. *Ibid.*

21. Wyman, *Blessingway*, 2.

22. Gary Witherspoon, "Navajo Social Organization," *Handbook of North American Indians* 10(1983):532; Stephen Jett and Virginia Spencer, *Navajo Architecture: Forms, History, Distributions* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1981), fig. 2.6; Cosmos Mindeleff, "Navaho Houses," *17th Annual Report of the Bureau of American Ethnology for the Years 1895-1896* 2(1898):pl. XC.