

UCLA

American Indian Culture and Research Journal

Title

Navajo Sandpainting: From Religious Act to Commercial Art. By Nancy J. Parezo.

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/3z82c3qz>

Journal

American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 16(3)

ISSN

0161-6463

Author

Feye, Cornelia S.

Publication Date

1992-06-01

DOI

10.17953

Copyright Information

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

might be an anathema. How did the interaction between a white male and a native woman produce such an intimate document? I am not suggesting any impropriety. My concern is with methodological considerations for other works. What was the role of the mediator? He mentions Lucy Swan, a highly respected Lakota woman. What, if any, reciprocity was involved?

The cultural interpretation in St. Pierre's notes is provoking. He imposes a stratified society (pp. 181, 196), indicating that Madonna comes from an "upper class" family. He locates Chilocco Boarding School in Oregon rather than Oklahoma. His designation of the Lakota word for the Blackfeet Lakota—*si sapa* for *Sihasapa*—and his facile explanation of the social organization of the seven bands of the Lakota are inexcusable. He attributes a matriarchal structure to a bilateral social organization where descent was counted on both paternal and maternal lines. This attribution plays into the currently emerging assumption that Lakota is a matriarchal society.

There are other errors. Essentially, one must give minimal cultural context for any native life history in order for the reader to comprehend the interplay of culture, values, and personality. The book could have been enriched further if St. Pierre had coalesced a reasonably accurate account of Lakota society. Lest this criticism detract from the essence of Madonna Swan's life story, I hasten to add that her words enrich our understanding of Lakota womanhood.

Beatrice Medicine

California State University, Northridge (retired)

Navajo Sandpainting: From Religious Act to Commercial Art. By Nancy J. Parezo. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1983. 251 pages. \$19.95 paper.

For half a millennium, Navajo medicine men have made ephemeral paintings on the floors of their ceremonial hogans. Using crushed minerals and different colored sands from the deserts and plains of New Mexico and Arizona, they depict stylized figures of Snake people, Eagle people, Corn people, Talking God, Changing Woman, and other beings of their pantheon of supernaturals, called *yei*. For less than half a century, Navajo sandpainters have made permanent sandpaintings for sale. Nancy Parezo investigates this transformation in her book: How can a ceremonial ritual

act suddenly turn into a commercial art form?

Sandpaintings were reproduced in permanent form as early as the late nineteenth century. Since the early 1950s, this type of sandpainting has been sold in and around the Navajo Reservation. In the 1960s and 1970s, more tourists than ever experienced the American Southwest, searching for Indian souvenirs, and this increase in demand spurred the production of permanent sandpaintings. Since then, sandpainting reproductions have provided a fairly regular income for their producers, who previously had few opportunities to earn a living on the Navajo Reservation. Parezo concludes that commercial sandpaintings are a justified development, due to economic necessities on the reservation.

The focus of Nancy Parezo's book is the observation of the changes that have occurred in Navajo art. She provides a long-missing chronology of the historical development of permanent sandpainting, from the first sketch by an Anglo anthropologist in 1884; through the early sandpainting rugs woven by the famous medicine man, Hosteen Klah; to the discovery, by the pioneers of the art, of a way to adhere sand to plywood. She argues in favor of permanent sandpaintings as a new art form that preserves traditional Navajo culture.

Originally, sandpaintings were created only by medicine men during Navajo healing ceremonies. The preservation of these paintings beyond the ritual, or their reproduction in any other form than the ephemeral sand, was believed to be punished by the supernaturals. "The consequences of misuse of sandpaintings were believed to be blindness, insanity, paralysis, and crippling for the singer, weaver or painter, whether Anglo or Navajo" (p. 63). But, since few weavers and sandpainters who broke the taboo got ill, increasing numbers of Navajo reproduced the sacred patterns.

In order to appease their gods and the more conservative members of their community, Navajo sandpainters began "intentionally changing or omitting at least one element in the design, color symbolism, or composition" (p. 75). With this tactic, they tried to ease the tensions between conservative and progressive Navajo people and avoid punishment by the gods. In the late 1970s, Parezo analyzed more than ten thousand permanent, commercial sandpaintings. In her book, she compares dangerous motifs like snake and bear, which are considered unpredictable, with benevolent figures like Changing Woman. This is part of the process that led to the secularization of the sacred sandpaintings. Parezo also includes the reasons and rationalizations that sandpainters use to justify their craft.

The main reason why Navajo medicine men first made permanent sandpainting reproductions in the early 1920s was to preserve Navajo religion. Decreasing numbers of young Navajo wanted to spend several years apprenticed to medicine men, learning and memorizing the hundreds of chants and sandpainting patterns. Since Navajo is not a written language, it was necessary to find other ways to record the traditions. One form was permanent sandpaintings. Times have changed since then, and so have the reasons for making sandpaintings. In the 1970s, Parezo's statistical analysis indicated that the main reason that contemporary Navajo make permanent sandpaintings is to sell them and make money.

Questions surface about the changing religious values in Navajo society that are reflected in the transformation of this art form. The author believes that the emergence of commercial sandpainting, which includes the breaking of religious taboos, does not interfere with or endanger ceremonial practices on the reservation. "The facts point to a coexistence of a commercial art with its sacred prototype" (p. 5). As an anthropologist, Parezo is interested in the social and economic aspects of the emerging art form. She reserves judgment on its quality or its impact on traditional lifestyles, although the transformation goes deeper than the sandy surface of the paintings.

Traditional Navajo sandpaintings served as important tools in the healing process. The idea of healing through art and beauty is essential to Navajo philosophy, which is outside the scope of Parezo's book. Readers interested in this aspect and function of sandpaintings are referred to Donald Sandner, *Navajo Symbols of Healing* (New York, 1979), and John R. Farella, *The Main Stalk: A Synthesis of Navajo Philosophy* (Tucson, 1984). Is the deeply rooted concept of the unity of religion, beauty, and health affected by the sale of commercial sandpaintings to non-Indians? Are commercial sandpainters alienated from their native Navajo religion? Asked about their religious affiliations, Parezo observes that "Navajo are becoming increasingly heterogeneous in terms of religious belief" (p. 157). Therefore, they have fewer scruples about depicting sacred designs for sale.

Much has been written about traditional sandpainting (Kluckhohn/Leighton, 1962; Reichard, 1963; Wyman, 1983), but this is the first attempt to research the transformation from ritual to retail values. This transformation has so many aspects and consequences that it will take years to analyze and study—a task

that has to be done in many other areas of anthropology. Nelson Graburn's *Ethnic and Tourist Arts: Cultural Expressions of the Fourth World* (Berkeley, 1976) can serve as a guide to what has been written in this direction so far.

Parezo's book is the work of a pioneer. She went to the reservation and documented the change while it was occurring. She had no written material to support her research. Parezo collected valuable data, but she did not interpret it. This lack of interpretation may be the book's strength or its weakness. It is left to the reader to ask questions about the stability of a society whose traditional structure has been invaded by non-Indian concepts of commercialism and by art for money instead of art for the supernaturals.

The contents of this book are not the interpretations and hypothesis of an academic reflecting on Navajo culture. Parezo interviewed more than three hundred Navajo sandpainters about their reasons for what they do. "Sandpainters all believe they are producing objects of beauty, which will show the world how Navajo see beauty. . . . In this way, Navajo sandpainters feel they are bringing happiness and blessings to the world" (p. 191).

Nancy Parezo has long been interested in the cultural change reflected in Indian arts and crafts. In 1982, during a postdoctoral fellowship at the Smithsonian Institution, she analyzed the role of anthropologists and museums in the development of Southwest Indian craft and art. She is one of the few anthropologists who are concerned with contemporary ethnic cultures, instead of looking back at what has been lost. This book is and will be a valuable resource for anyone who is interested in the Navajo culture today.

Cornelia S. Feye

Property Rights and Indian Economies. Edited by Terry L. Anderson. Lanham, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield, 1991. 320 pages. \$44.00 cloth.

Property Rights and Indian Economies is the product of a 1989 conference held by the Political Economy Research Center of Bozeman, Montana. The Research Center promotes what it calls the *new resource economics*. Most economists would classify the center's approach as fitting within Nobel prize winner James Buchanan's school of public choice economics. Public choice economics has as its primary goal a detailed analysis of rent-seeking