Integrating the Navajo Blessingway Rite and Drypainting

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ABSTRACT

In this paper we will study the symbolic healing of the Blessingway Rite and the dry paintings associated with this rite. The Blessingway Rite is the core of the Navajo way of life [religion]. The Blessingway Rite is representative of all the other Navajo ceremonies. We will also give an overview of the importance of Navajo hooghan, the place home (Wyman, 1970). This roundhouse is home to Navajo healing ceremonies and dry paintings (Wyman, 1970). We will examine the primitive and modern symbolic healing of the Blessingway Rite and associative dry paintings (Sandner, 1979).

Introduction

The reason for my research is to find a meaningful purpose for the rest of my lifespan. I want to find and have this knowledge for my foundation and protection. I hope to find this in my efforts:

The Blessingway Rite is best described by Rain Parrish, Curator of the Wheelwright Museum of the American Indian in Santa Fe, New Mexico. He states:

For the Navajo, the interrelationships of stories, chants and rituals express ideas that are empirical. They involve notions about natural laws, which enable us to understand ourselves. The myths and ceremonial rituals are offered for various occasions: the curing of a person who has experienced an imbalance, the blessing of a new dwelling, weddings, birth and other times when one wishes for protection, happiness and long life are appropriate. At the beginning of the ceremony the practitioners introduce the surroundings of the dwellings, and the practitioner and patient’s relationship to the natural and supernatural worlds. The origin of the Navajo is traced and we then return to the present world. The story of the myths is
related with all its appropriate rituals. The key to the restoration of harmony and well being is in carefully acquiring the knowledge or ritual actions and their powers. By participating in this process, by actualizing the myths, we are composing a profound sense of unity with spirit and substance. It is at this moment when the words of the Blessingway Rite songs acknowledge the deep kinship we have with the earth:

Earth’s feet have become my feet by means of these I shall live on.

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(Wyman, 1970)

The Origin and Development of Blessingway Rite

The core of the Navajo religion is ho’zho’oji’, which we render in English as Blessingway. It is derived from the Navajo language, which has no single equivalent in English (Young & Morgan, 1943). Like the Greek word arete, which is usually translated as excellence and implies the idea of wholeness and harmony, the Navajo term ho’zho’oji’ includes everything that a Navajo thinks is good. This includes, good as opposed to evil, favorable to man as opposed to unfavorable or doubtful. To the Navajo ho’zho’oji’, means such concepts as the words beauty, perfection, harmony, goodness, normality, success, well being, blessedness, order and ideal do for speakers of English (Reichard 1950, Wyman, 1970). The ending, -oji’, expresses in the direction of, side, manner, way, and so we translate the name as Blessingway (Wyman, 1970).

According to Wyman (1970), Father Berard gave the following analysis of the name, the Blessingway Rite. The adverb nizho’ni’ defines anything that is nice, beautiful, or pretty, like a blue bird, a baby, or a horse. In Navajo mythology, the Navajo word, nizho’ni’ is translated as beautiful. Peculiar to Navajo is that when you speak of a nice or pleasant condition of things you must make a change in the prefix element. Instead of nizho’, which means nice, you employ ho’zho’, which means the place of condition is pleasant, beautiful. Thus ho’zho’oji’ is on the side of nice conditions. A study of the legend and practice of The Blessingway Rite reveals its intent, which is to secure a fine result in any phase of the life cycle, from birth to old age. These results are blessings, which the Blessingway Rite alone insures. Therefore we rightfully call it Blessingway (Wyman, 1970).
Myths That Are the Origin of the Blessingway Rite

The Blessingway Rite began on the rim of the Place of Emergence (O’Bryan, 1956). Here the hooghan was constructed with indestructible doorstep stones as a mandate so that the Blessingway Rite would continue as Talking God’s songs proclaim (Wyman, 1970). The Blessingway Rite is about a peaceful existence and the songs that are a part of the Blessingway Rite encompass everything that is related to the home (Toelken, 1996).

The origin of the Blessingway Rite holds many important events, including the birth of Changing Woman. After her birth, she rapidly matured into a grown woman. She was soon impregnated by the Sun and gave birth to the Warrior Twins, Monster Slayer and Child of the Water. They brought on a new cycle of progress and journeyed to meet their father and obtain power to rid the earth of monsters (Wyman, 1970). Changing woman is credited with bestowing domestic and game animals on mankind (Sandner, 1979). When the Gods were moving away from mankind, Changing Woman was persuaded by her sons to move to an island off the Western Shore into a luxurious house equal to that of the Sun. She was offered power over rain, vegetation, eternal youth and custody of the “road of perfection” (Sandner, 1979). Her favorite son was Child of the Water, whom she hoped would accompany her but instead he chose to go with his brother. Changing Woman wept as her sons disappeared into the darkness as the other Gods had disappeared (Reichard, 1950).

Another part of the Blessingway Rite myth is the clan origin myth, which signifies the commencement of the Navajo clans (Sandner, 1979). Changing Woman rubbed little balls of epidermal waste from her arms, right and left sides of her breast and shoulders, back, and from them created four pairs of people who were to become the ancestors of the Navajo people (Wyman, 1970).

The Clan Origin myth closes with the abduction of two children of Rock Crystal Talking God. These children were members of the Close to Water clan. Rainbow and Sunray carried the children to the beautiful home of Changing Woman of the Western Shore. Talking God of White-Earth Streak coveted the Rock Crystal Perfect Shell owned by Rock Crystal Talking God so he persuaded Changing Woman to have the children brought to her beautiful home to teach them the Blessingway Rite (Wyman, 1970). In exchange, Rock Crystal Talking God, the father of the two children, would give Changing Woman the Rock Crystal Basket (jewel) to hold Changing Woman’s medicine bundle. This jewel offering made by the father was the prototype for the Blessingway Rite. The children were bathed to rid them of human smell before they reached Changing Woman’s home (Sandner, 1997). The bath or purification part of the Blessingway Rite is a beautiful feature of this ceremony (Wyman, 1970).
Changing Woman demonstrated her powers of rejuvenation and senescence to her students. She showed them the flora and fauna of the rooms of her house and told of her life stories (Wyman, 1970). She retold the history since the emergence of the Navajo people and what was done at the last Blessingway Rite. She then recited all the songs and prayers of the Blessingway Rite, demonstrated the manufacture of the Mountain Soil Bundle, and explained the details of the rite. The Holy People put together a Blessingway Rite for the two children before they departed for home (Wyman, 1970).

The children returned to their people on the rainbow via the mountaintops to the very same location in the cornfield from which they were abducted and told of their experience (Wyman, 1970).

A final prototype of the ceremony was held and many Holy People attended to watch the people prepare the Mountain Soil Bundle. Talking God of White-Earth-Streak was in charge of the process. Mountain soils were gathered and contained. The Return to Starting Point prayer was said. The children were bathed for the Blessingway Rite. The Holy People inspected the medicine bundles and gave advice of its use and care (Wyman, 1970).

**Holy People Depart**

At last, the Holy People told the People they would be leaving and would never be seen again. They also said that there would be dire consequences if someone should say that they had seen the Holy People. After departing, they would still manifest their presence through the sound of the wind, the eagle feather, in some small birds and in the growth of the corn (Wyman, 1970).

The People who worked on the Mountain Soil Bundle learned the Blessingway Rite from the two children and then held a ceremony for one another. There were other ceremonies for the other people as well (Wyman, 1970).

**The Purpose of the Blessingway Rite**

The songs, prayers, and drypaintings of the Blessingway rite are utilized for a variety of reasons. The ultimate aim is to obtain hope, avert potential misfortunes and to obtain the blessings that people need for a long and happy life. The songs of The Blessingway Rite cover all aspects of domestic and social life and they bathe blessings on all of man's possessions, renewing and purifying them when necessary, as to remove contamination by the dead, thus making inherited property safe for the heirs (Wyman, 1970).
The Blessingway draws close birth and adolescence, the home or *hooghan*, weddings, gaining and holding on to property. It shields against accidents, premonitions in dreams and imagery, and endeavors to prolong life as long as possible. The Blessingway Rite recites how a Navajo adolescent girl can best achieve her life mission through the Puberty ceremony (Frisbie, 1964). Like no other ceremony in the Navajo system, the Blessingway offers assistance in every walk of life. It knows and has a solution for disturbing dreams and fancies. In social life it strengthens leaders and in religious affairs it amends mistakes and errors. It provides an influential medicine to obtain the comforts of life. It makes the goal of old age a possibility. The Blessingway adapts itself to any emergency, dream, fancy or human infirmity (Wyman, 1970).

After the Blessingway rite, the person who was sung over will be protected and insured long life and the comforts of life. The prayer formulas primarily seek transformation of earth surface man into the Holy People represented by the inner forms of all natural phenomena, so that man can enjoy the strength, power, and immunity from the harm that they do (Wyman, 1970).

**Navajo Drypaintings and the Blessingway Rite**

The Navajo word for drypainting (*'iika’ah*) means “a stage where the gods enter and go.” The stage is a smoothed out sand background with colored sand sprinkled to depict figures and symbols. The purpose of the stylized drypaintings is to attract the Supernatural to help with all related Blessingway Rite and chantway ceremonies of the Navajo (Parezo, 1983). The Blessingway Rite process and its connected Drypaintings is a complex integration of the arts. The major arts that we recognize can be found in the Blessingway Rite. There is music and poetry in the songs and prayers, drama and dance in the ritual acts, graphic art in the drypaintings, great prose and poetry in the myths. In sanctions, the drypaintings render the illustration and explanation in Navajo thinking. Navajo drypainting is probably borrowed from the more simple drypaintings of the Pueblo Indian people. There is no material available for studying Navajo art as it evolved. The first ever recorded and preserved drypainting was in 1897 (Wyman, 1970). This strewing of loose sand to make an impermanent picture is not an uncommon art and is used worldwide. The language-linked relatives of the Navajo, the Apaches, some Pueblo tribes, various California tribes, and some of the Plain Indians, utilize this drypainting technique. Sacred ground painting is practiced in India and Tibet. Drypainting has even appeared in Christianity, where drypaintings are made on ground floors in churches in parts of Mexico during fiestas (Wyman, 1970).
Tan-colored sand taken from a nearby cornfield is used to form the smooth background of drypaintings on the earthen floor of a roundhouse. The Blessingway Rite drypaintings differ from chantway in a number of ways. The chantway is directed more at sicknesses for curing. Drypainting designs are made with cornmeal, corn and other plant pollens, powdered flower petals especially from the blue flower “blue pollen”, and charcoal strewn on a plain sand background or often on a perfect deer hide. This valuable and worthy deer hide is one without the markings of a weapon since the Blessingway Rite is peaceful and rendered for restoration. There is an absence of a rattle or gourd. These instruments are associated with other Navajo chantway sings. Two or more final songs from the Blessingway Rite justify these chantway ceremonies. The only instrument required for the Blessingway Rite is the Mountain Soil Bundle, which the person sung over holds on to during prayer sessions.

The Blessingway Rite drypainting designs are a few inches in diameter and smaller than drypaintings associated with chantways sandpaintings. The radical symbols (cardinally oriented around a central motif) or linear symbols (in a row or rows) are a majority feature and this distinguishes the Blessingway drypaintings from those of the chantway. There are twelve radial, six are linear, and thirty-two are extended –center (Wyman, 1970).

Nowhere is there a wealth of content, variety of artistic devices, or excellence of technique, equal to that of the Navajos (Wyman, 1970). Navajo dry painting is a primitive form of communication between the singer, the person sung over, Holy People, and the Gods (Wyman, 1970).

The first phase of the symbolic healing of the Blessingway Rite is the return to origins in Navajo mythology. The use of language, songs, prayers, drypaintings, and purification helps one to identify with those symbolic forces that once created the world and by entering into them creates a state of wellness and wholeness. One experiences this energy and activity at that time of creation (Sandner, 1979). One retracts his/her steps after birth (in this lifetime) and journeys past his/her birth and into the past again and then returns to the present following the corn pollen path. The Medicineman is the guide and trust in this journey of healing. This journey is recited through prayer as the Medicineman and the person sung over take their place in a kneeling position. The person sung over carefully recites the prayer with the Medicineman as she/he holds the family mountain soil bundle in hand. This prayer session takes place on the first night of the Blessingway Rite (Wyman, 1970). The afternoon and night time in our life cycle is not considered good or negative, but rather a time when our negative experiences are dealt with and addressed. A prayer session in the evening takes the person sung over on a very patient journey to retrieve the person’s wandering mind and to rejuvenate it through the Blessingway
Rite. The Medicineman sings a healing song for the dream and calms it. The person sung over starts another cycle of therapy by getting reacquainted with his/her dreams and experiences the tranquility of sleep again.

In the morning, when we are in the positive cycle, a drypainting is featured with the bathing of the person sung over. This corn pollen path is evident on the surface of a smoothed out path leading from the doorway to a Navajo wedding basket positioned next to the fireplace holding water for the person sung over to bathe in as part of the Blessingway Rite. Starting out with the right foot, the person sung over follows the miniature footprints to his place behind the basket of water and yucca suds resting on a corn-soil mound marked with a white corn meal cross. This act is the return of the (mind and physical being) person sung over on the appropriate return road to his/her *hooghan* or place home. From this significant point of origin, one can start over on his/her life journey refreshed. To the right side of the basket is a white corn meal cross for the right hand. To the left of the basket is another white corn meal cross for the left hand. To the back is another white corn meal cross for the right knee and left knee.

The Medicineman then approaches the person sung over and blesses the bathing water by forming a circle with corn pollen next to the brim in a sun wise fashion. He then places a cross in the middle of this corn pollen circle. This simple drypainting of the Blessingway Rite gives birth to the other more complex drypaintings of the Navajo people. The person sung over is marked with the suds and corn pollen mixture from the bath water. The blessing starts from the feet and continues up to the head. Navajo Medicinemen bless their clients in this upward fashion as to summon one to the Gods. The person sung over places his/her hands on the cross next to the basket and knees on the two other crosses and is bathed by the Medicineman. The person sung over and his/her jewelry is bathed to wash away negative experiences and to set him/her on a more appropriate direction for well-being and a prosperous life. The person sung over is dried with corn meal like the abducted children who learned the Blessingway Rite.

The basket (jewel) some printed material (fabric), and about three yards of white material forms the altar for the Blessingway Rite. This assorted blessed material is an appropriate acceptance for the Medicineman’s services. This is the exchange for drawing from the positive. The healing concept here is to strive and to gain assorted material of worth to enjoy in your long life to old age as you would a gift or reward.

The last night of the Blessingway Rite is started with the *Hooghan Songs*. The belongings of the person sung over and others are also blessed in this process. The singing is continuous until dawn. The Dawn Songs from the Blessingway Rite conclude the singing. The Medicineman hands
a pouch of corn pollen to the one sung over to share and eat with his/her inner forms (Lyon, 1996). He/she takes a pinch of corn pollen and places it on his/her head to nourish his/her direction of growth. The person sung over then takes another pinch of corn pollen and sprinkles a new path towards the east where the Sun, new instructions, good health, new blessings, and the proud Gods await to proclaim her/him as their child. The people partake of the corn pollen in a sunwise fashion. The person sung over is encouraged to greet the dawn first. She/he is informed by the Medicineman that the Gods are close at dawn to the east and blessings await us if we are up with the dawn. He/she is instructed to reach upward for the dawn and to breathe it in four times as to reap the blessings (Wyman, 1970). This is an appropriate Navajo gesture when one receives a gift of value and worth.

This concludes this beautiful ceremony of caring and love. There is a constant repetition of teachings and instructions of healing for the young and old so they can experience happiness and old age in the Blessingway Rite (Farrella). Knowing (knowledge) even a small portion of the Blessingway Rite can form a protection around a person.

**Summary**

In my research I have found that it is recommended that you have knowledge of the Blessingway Rite before you can study a healing ceremony in the Navajo culture. The Blessingway is central to all of the Navajo ceremonies. My original thought was that the Blessingway Rite contained magnificent dry paintings and I found out that this is not true but is does have simple very basic dry paintings.

The Navajo roundhouse is very significant in the Blessingway Rite, more so than I originally believed. The *hooghan* songs start the Blessingway Rite ceremonies and the other Navajo Chantway ceremonies end with the *hooghan* songs of the Blessingway Rite.

The Navajo way of life (religion) is whole with his/her Mother Earth, his/her Inner Forms (thought process), Universe (father), and the Life Cycles (children). This concept has been conveyed from the elders to the young for generations. Our mothers have spoken for the well being of her children even before conception. She spoke of a happy and good long life experiences for her children. She says, “ I want my child to walk about in a happy and harmonious state.” These words go back past my maternal mother and to my spiritual mother (Changing Woman). These words (prayer) of thought expressed to the Gods have to be honored in one’s life span. The Blessingway Rite and its simple drypainting can direct one to start over again in the appropriate direction towards a healthy and happy conquest of old age. The Blessingway Rite serves this purpose and renders
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its healing properties. A person can also gain a foundation for further learning in their lifespan. I can utilize this research in my continuous learning.
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Works Cited


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