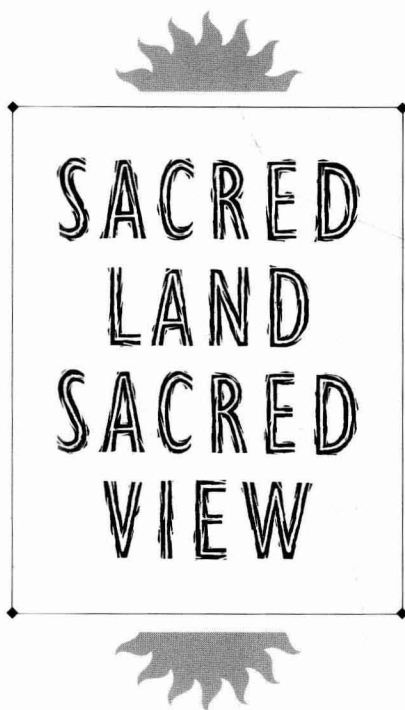


SACRED
LAND
SACRED
VIEW

B E R T S . M c P H E R S O N



Navajo Perceptions of the Four Corners Region

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Cover: Merrick Butte, located in the Navajo Tribal Park, Monument Valley. To the Navajo, this and other similar rock formations are said to be water barrels and hold rain-producing qualities that can be appealed to through prayer. (Photo by author)

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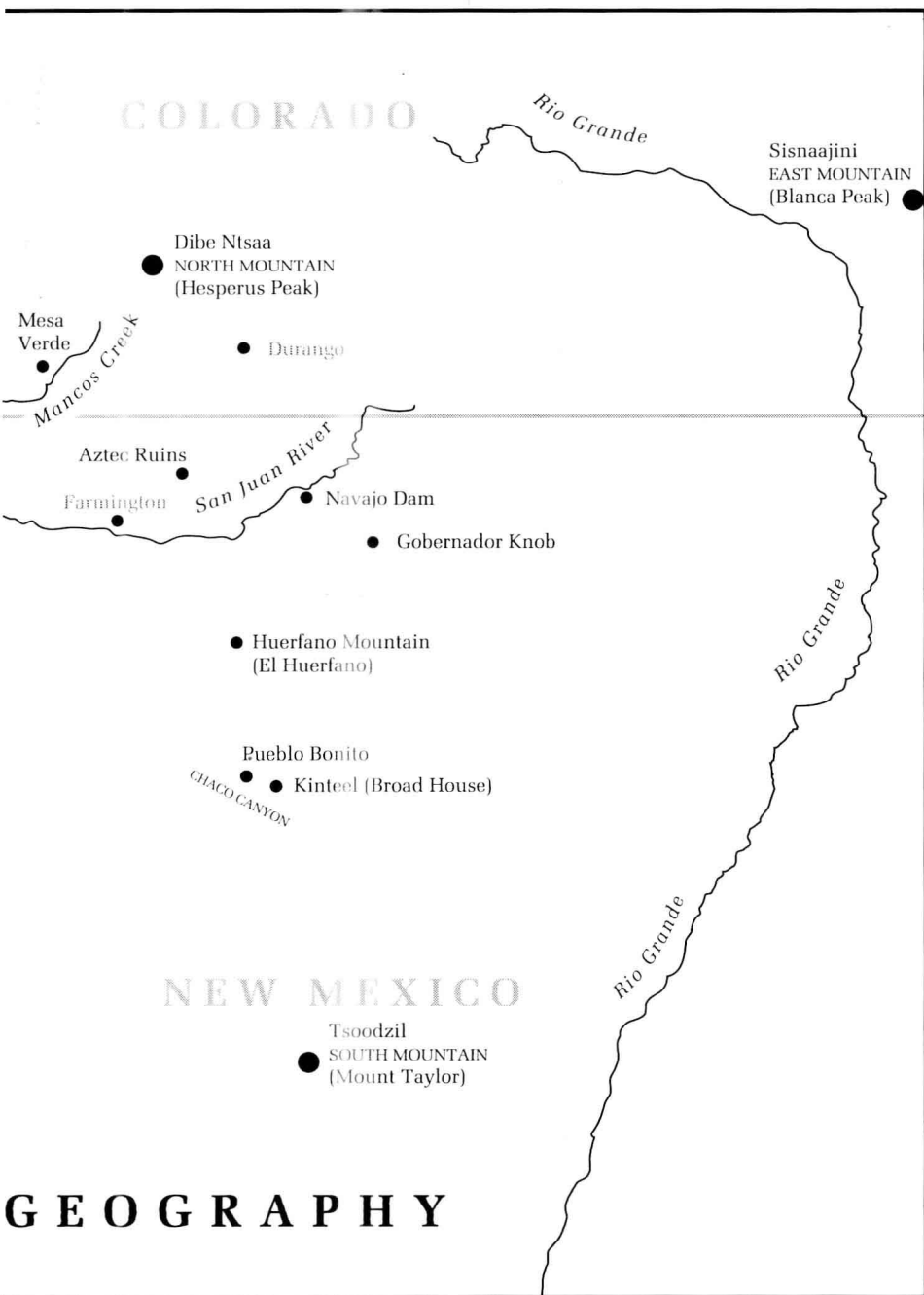
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Introduction

In 1978 I taught a developmental English class to Navajo college students in Montezuma Creek, Utah. When I handed out the midterm exam, the students, like students everywhere, clamored for extra credit, and so I related a brainteaser that I had learned recently. The story frame of the question stated that a man built a square house in which all sides faced the south. A bear walked by the house; what was the color of the bear? The expected answer was that, if all four sides of the structure faced south, the house would have to be built at the North Pole and that the bear would therefore have to be white. One student, however, arrived at a far different response. His reasoning took me to the four cardinal directions with their associated ceremonial colors and a short treatise on the power of bears. Although his answer was not the one expected, it was just as rational and more intellectual than the “correct” one. He received full credit and a thank you for teaching the teacher an important principle of culture and world view.

And so it is with this book—a book about a different perception. In an increasingly mechanistic, complex life, it is helpful to pause and look at the world through another pair of eyes. The Navajo world view provides such a glimpse, presenting a world where the commonplace becomes uncommon, the mundane holy.

On May 28, 1868, William Tecumseh Sherman met with the seven main chiefs of the Navajo nation held captive at Bosque Redondo. Four disastrous years of incarceration on an inadequate, sterile reserve had decimated the *Diné* (the People) physically and spiritually to the point that, to them, the only meaningful answer for life was to return to the high desert plateaus they had left. Barboncito, a well-respected leader, told Sherman:

When the Navajos were first created, four mountains and four rivers were appointed for us, inside of which we should live, that was to be our country,

and was given us by the first woman [Changing Woman] of the Navajo tribe. It was told to us by our forefathers, that we were never to move east of the Rio Grande or west of the San Juan rivers and I think that our coming here has been the cause of so much death among us and our animals. . . . Because we were brought here, we have done all that we could possibly do, but found it to be labor in vain, and have therefore quit it; for that reason we have not planted or tried to do anything this year. It is true we put seed in the ground but it would not grow two feet high, the reason I cannot tell, only I think that this ground was never intended for us. . . . I thought at one time the whole world was the same as my own country but I got fooled in it. Outside my own country we cannot raise a crop, but in it we can raise a crop almost anywhere; our families and stock there increase, here they decrease; we know this land does not like us, neither does the water. . . . It seems that whatever we do here causes death. Some work at the acequias, take sick and die; others die with the hoe in their hands; they go to the river to their waists and suddenly disappear; others have been struck and torn to pieces by lightning. A rattlesnake bite here kills us; in our country a rattlesnake before he bites gives warning which enables us to keep out of its way and if bitten, we readily find a cure — here we can find no cure. . . . I am speaking for the whole tribe, for their animals from the horse to the dog, also the unborn. All that you have heard now is the truth and is the opinion of the whole tribe. It appears to me that the General commands the whole thing as a god; I hope, therefore, he will do all he can for the Indians; this hope goes in at my feet and out at my mouth. I am speaking to you (General Sherman) now as if I was speaking to a spirit and I wish you to tell me when you are going to take us to our own country.¹

Barboncito spoke in metaphorical language rooted in his reality. The land anchored him to a cosmic identity, a way of relating to the supernatural. Geography represented his culture's conscious and subconscious symbols of what was important and unimportant, what supported life and fostered death, how one should act and what to avoid. The importance of these deep-seated, intangible roots of belonging are recognized today as being just as important as the tangible, material things that sustain the body. Thus, Barboncito responded to what his culture determined to be important and practical, in opposition to what the military planners felt expedient.

This same type of misunderstanding persists today. Take, for example, the relocation of Navajos in the Big Mountain region of Arizona. The Hopi-Navajo Joint-use Area is a hotly contested territory in which the government is trying to remove Navajos from land now given to the Hopi

tribe. The anguished cries and hostilities that have arisen from relocating older people have created a tension that seems unresolvable. While the white administrators of the relocation program have provided modern houses with running water, electricity, and a small yard space, many of the older people reject them for their traditional homes and a familiar, local setting. To borrow the title from Richard White's work, the Diné have planted in the soil their "roots of dependency" that lie curled around and imbedded within a local and regional mythological dependence upon the land. Shrines for prayers, places for plant gathering, land formations steeped in mythology, and a way of thinking cannot be easily exchanged for physical conveniences.

Just as desert plants depend upon their deep taproots to seek cool sub-surface waters, leathery leaves to conserve moisture in the blazing sun, and a tough bark to protect against the elements, so too do the Diné shield themselves against the turmoil of daily life and discordant, modernizing influences. The land and its associated beliefs water and fertilize the mind, helping the Diné maintain their identity in the "center" of the universe. Typically, only half of a desert plant is visible, the rest remaining below the surface to nurture and stabilize. The Diné, who survive in a very physical, practical world, are also rooted and nurtured spiritually in the intangible teachings and philosophy of their culture.

The ancient Anasazi serve as a good example of what happens when those roots become weakened and too much emphasis is placed on the physical or visible part of existence. The Anasazi culture shriveled and died because the people transgressed the laws of the holy beings and of nature as they sought ease through power which they abused. Their example and the visible remains left behind serve as a reminder of death and destruction in the midst of life; of a holy way gone bad; of the duality of good and evil, the sacred and the profane, and correct values in opposition to misdirected practices. The Anasazi's failure sends a strong message to the Diné that nothing can survive unless it is vested with power which comes from the holy beings within each physical form.

Geography establishes one facet of this system of survival, a moral code with both positive and negative examples. Battle sites of the hero twins, the San Juan River, Comb Ridge, and Navajo Mountain are just a few of the positive examples that create boundaries and repeat the favorable pattern of protection and well-being throughout the Four Corners region. Negative examples of vice, competition, and destruction lie in the ruins, artifacts, and stories concerning the Anasazi; in rock formations associated

with Coyote and his mischievous, disrespectful ways; in the places of witchcraft; and in locations where misbehavior has been punished.

Good cannot exist without evil, nor white without black. It is important that the Diné recognize both, not only from the practical standpoint of explaining why problems occur and evil exists, but also because understanding the relationship between the two enables an individual to control wrong. Gladys Reichard suggested that the best way to exorcise evil is to narrow its territory, restrict its possibilities, and then create a boundary over which it cannot pass.² In Navajo religion this boundary may be symbolized in the sand paintings of a ceremony, the flint arrowheads of the Twins, the fire poker that represents domesticity, the pungent odors of desert plants offensive to evil, or any number of other devices that speak of protection.

The land also addresses this issue from birth to death. Just as a mother may bury her newborn child's umbilical cord under a piñon tree near the home, signifying an attachment to the land, so too does every waking hour renew this bond through prayers, stories, and respectful behavior. As long as one shows proper reverence, the boundary of protection remains intact and life is harmonious. Defile the sacred or take lightly the holy beings and there is no safety.

While these beliefs hold true for many of the older people, what about members of the younger generation who have not been raised in the same tradition? This is a difficult question to answer and a more difficult one to quantify. I have the impression that within a generation or two only a few select people will live by the teachings discussed in this book. Although there are efforts to maintain traditional beliefs—such as those made by the Rough Rock Demonstration School, Navajo Community College, and various tribal curriculum programs—many teachings do not find their way into an integrated system of values that can override the loud voice of technology and twentieth-century culture. This is in no way to suggest that Navajo culture is doomed, that the younger people will face failure and poverty, or that everyone belongs to a lost generation. There will always be a Navajo people, and for some time yet they will maintain distinct cultural practices; the direction and rate of change is the issue. As they achieve their social, economic, and political goals, many of the older values will be discarded for a different understanding of what empowers the world and what is important.

According to Joseph Campbell, in order for a system of beliefs to be a viable force within a person's life, it must meet four criteria.³ First, the

belief must have a mystical function in which a person lives with awe and gratitude toward the supernatural forces of the universe. Second, it must be in tune with the knowledge and science of the times, giving an adequate explanation of how things occur that does not conflict with the understanding of the physical world. Third, it must "validate" the teachings and practices of what is morally acceptable in a certain culture. Last, it should be a guide to spiritual harmony and strength in a useful life.

For the older people raised with traditional Navajo values, these functions of mythology still provide a vital explanation of how the world was created and empowered with supernatural forces. For the younger generation, these teachings are not as available as the white man's schools that provide a nonreligious, secular explanation of the world and its forces. The result is both individual and community confusion. Some people follow the teachings of their parents, some the beliefs of the dominant culture, and others something in between.

There were two possible ways to write this book. One was to write solely to the scholarly community in the tradition of Gladys Reichard, Clyde Kluckhohn, Gary Witherspoon, John Farella, and others, to discuss the hermeneutics and exegesis of Navajo beliefs and thought. While the work of these scholars is invaluable, it often does not trickle down to the general audience and has little impact upon those living on or near Navajo land. At worst, this understanding becomes bottled up, serving only as mental gymnastics for a select few. Donald Worster, a leading writer in historical ecology, summarized the problem recently when he said, "If we get too obsessed with particularities, the public may not be truly helped by our writings to think clearly and coherently about the larger issues of our time—the relation of nature to capitalism, the collective myths and institutions of nations and civilizations, the workings of imperialism, the fate of the earth."⁴

I have chosen, instead, an approach that I hope will be useful to both the general public and the scholarly community, but most importantly to the Navajo people of the Four Corners region. This is their story, shared willingly with the understanding that the teachings and beliefs written herein will be given back to the younger generation. Elderly Navajos realize that, as rapid change bombards the youth, many of the beliefs accepted as part of Navajo culture will be lost if not recorded. Their desire to pass on this heritage was an important impetus to writing this book. The many hours spent in collecting, translating, transcribing, and writing will be well used if this goal is achieved.



Asdzaan Nez. "We were taught by our parents that Mother Earth is sacred, that it is a place where 'life is lived and buried,' and so it is forbidden to fight or in other ways bother our mother. That is why I leave it alone." Mary Jay, medicine woman, Aneth. (*Photo courtesy Harold B. Lee Library*)

Much of the material gathered is tied to Navajo myths and legends. Many of these are lengthy treatises that deal only in part with the topic at hand—that is, the importance of mountains, streams, clouds, ruins, and the like. Instead of recounting the entire story, some of which is already in print, I have grouped materials topically in order to emphasize their collective importance. Although this may somewhat violate the context in which an idea is given, it provides a clearer, fuller understanding of the depth of respect the Diné have for the land.

These thoughts shared by the Navajo people are as real as anything in the materialistic world of twentieth-century America, but it has not been until recently that myths and cultural beliefs have taken their rightful place in explaining the human experience. Men like Joseph Campbell, Victor Turner, Mircea Eliade, and Claude Lévi-Strauss have been in the forefront in defining these powerhouses of cultural values—values that were earlier considered merely quaint folk beliefs. Myths are increasingly being viewed as a holistic expression of what is important, acceptable, and desirable in a society. And we are becoming increasingly aware that myths determine *most* beliefs, regardless of a particular culture.

Take, for instance, something concrete—say, a mountain. Although a mountain is to many only an inanimate mass of earth and rock existing in a physical realm, Navajo myths teach of its mystical creation, its spiritual powers, and its purpose in relation to the people. In the white man's world, water, lumber, building plots, ski resorts, and mineral rights are the only attributes of the mountain. For the Diné, although some of these concerns are important, they are subordinate to the idea that man works through nature in establishing relationships. The ultimate expression of what is important to the Diné is found, not in things or empirical truth, but in relationships—to the earth, to spiritual forces, to other people. The myths, ceremonies, and prayers all speak to this concern and shape reality.

Today's society tries to corner the slippery eel of truth by pinning it down. People argue their points of view as if they know what truth is and feel that it is their duty to reveal it to those not as enlightened. While the Diné may have their own set of arguments, rarely will they dispute religion and beliefs. One day I took an hour-long cassette recording to Monument Valley to play to a group of medicine men and older people to see if a certain body of material was accurate. After playing part of the cassette, I asked the group for their response. One medicine man, serving as spokesman, indicated that it seemed good, but that I should not be con-

cerned with what the gathering said. He went on, "That is how you were taught; then that is correct." There was no ultimate, specific truth or way of understanding, but rather room for thought and meditation. His view came partly from the varying teachings that serve as the basis for different Navajo ceremonies, and partly because of the way he personally perceived truth.

In a broad sense, truth, or lack of it, to the Diné may take three forms. There are truth, lies, and truth that exists but has not been seen. The first two categories are fairly straightforward; the last one belongs to the realm of myths and religion.⁵ One does not have to see a supernatural being or event to know that it exists now or occurred in the past. Navajo beliefs, therefore, do not try to eliminate possibilities but rather incorporate them into an already existing framework. What is or is not accepted is based in the realities expressed in the myths, not just what is tangibly proven today. The roots of perception—what is practical, believable, and acceptable—are rooted in this religious, mythological view.

Mircea Eliade has observed that man wants to avoid being "overwhelmed by the meaninglessness of profane existence."⁶ Through myths, prototypes of suffering and joy, pain and pleasure, good and evil are given in an explanation that contributes meaning to the vagaries of life. Both the good and the bad can be controlled because they are understood. When a taboo is broken or a god angered, an explanation of what went wrong is provided and a propitiation given. It is the myths that outline the cause-and-effect relationships by which this framework is understood.

Symbols of this mythology help condense into a few elements the meaning or essence of a cluster of thoughts. Referred to in anthropological literature as "polysemous and multivocal," symbols provide an impetus to react in certain ways. Joseph Campbell called them "affect images," images which speak to feelings that evoke a response.⁷ Shared by groups of individuals and the culture as a whole, myths and their accompanying symbols are the lifeblood that courses through them and fosters the unique way of viewing the world in which they are rooted.

In the following pages, two seemingly independent topics—sacred geography and the Anasazi—are used to give a unique understanding not apparent to much of the white world.

To the Diné, everything has a spirit, is animate and rational, and holds a power that can be either helpful or destructive. The basis for this understanding is derived from stories—myths, legends, and tales—that teach the core perceptions of life. While thinking in the white world is often

segmented into various branches of learning such as psychology, religion, history, and science, Navajo stories and beliefs combine such ideas in a holistic expression of the universe. Thus, the criteria of biology or physics should not be applied empirically in a one-on-one relationship to Navajo thought. Comparing the proverbial apples with oranges does not work. These two systems of thinking provide different ways of looking at the same thing which at times may be incompatible, at others mutually supportive. What does consistently occur, however, is a fuller appreciation of two cultures' views.

The land and its forces, the Anasazi and their ruins, serve as just such symbols to the Diné. In the following pages, dozens of examples illustrate this phenomenon, as the Diné interpret their environment through their beliefs. It is one of the central focuses of traditional values; it is a sacred land, a sacred view.



"North Mountain." One of four paintings by Harrison Begay depicting the personalities and qualities associated with each of the Four Sacred Mountains. North Mountain, or Dibé Ntsaa, is fastened to the earth by a rainbow, impregnated with jet, and covered by darkness. It has certain animals, plants, and holy beings dwelling either on or in this sacred form.
 (Photo of painting courtesy Museum of Northern Arizona)