

DYNAMIC SYMMETRY AND HOLISTIC ASYMMETRY IN NAVAJO ART AND COSMOLOGY

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I. INTRODUCTION

The Navajo are a Native American society of about 250,000 people residing in the southwestern portion of the United States. The Navajo are famous world-wide for their beautifully and delicately woven rugs, their finely sculptured jewelry, and their ceremonial painting in the sand.

In Navajo society, the artistic emphasis is placed on creation rather than consumption, production rather than preservation, and design rather than display. Correspondingly, nearly everyone in Navajo society is an artist of one sort or of many sorts, but very few Navajo buy or display works of art.

In Native American societies, art is not viewed as marginal, unessential, or extracurricular. Instead, art is viewed as a way of seeing the world, and a way of being in the world. Art is an essential act of living, and an act essential to living:

To begin a study of Navajo art, we must explore Navajo artistic expressions in the context of Navajo culture and from the perspective of the Navajo philosophy of art.

II. NAVAJO COSMOLOGY

The focus of Navajo ontology is not on the particle, the element or the individual, but on the whole and the links, the connections and the relationships that unite the parts of a whole. In Navajo ontological perspective, it is the wholes which are the primary reality and the parts which are contingent and temporal.

Hózhó refers to the holistic environment characterized by beauty, harmony, and well-being. **Nizhoní** refers to a particular item or individual that is nice, attractive or beautiful. The difference in these two terms is in the prefixes **ho-** and **ni-**. **Ho-** refers to (1) the general as opposed to the specific, (2) the whole as opposed to the part, (3) the abstract as opposed to the concrete, (4) the indefinite as opposed to the definite, and (5) the infinite as opposed to the finite. I could add here that the prefix **ho-** refers to an area, a domain, or a universe, as opposed to the prefix **ni-** which refers to a specific item, entity or being within an area, domain or universe.

Each culture projects a particular construction of meaning and purpose on the universe, and each particular metaphorical construction colors and molds all experience within it. The Navajo metaphor envisions a universe where the primary orientation is directed toward the maintenance or the restoration of **hózhó**. **Hózhó** means ‘beauty’ or ‘beautiful conditions’, but

this term also expresses the intellectual notion of order, the emotional state of happiness, the physical state of health, the moral condition of good, and the aesthetic dimension of harmony.

The Navajo do not look for beauty; they normally find themselves engulfed in it. When it is disrupted, they restore it; when it is lost or diminished, they renew it; when it is present, they celebrate it. The Navajo say in their own vernacular: **shil hózhó**, 'with me there is beauty'; **shii' hózhó**, 'in me there is beauty'; **shaa hózhó**, 'from me beauty radiates'. The Navajo express and celebrate this 'beauty' in speech and prayer, in song and dance, in myth and ritual, and in their daily lives and activities, as well as in their graphic arts. Art, therefore, is not divorced from subsistence, science, philosophy or theology, but is an integral part of both common activities and cosmic schemes. This integration is best expressed in a common Navajo prayer/poem:

With **hózhó** before me, I walk.
With **hózhó** behind me, I walk.
With **hózhó** above me, I walk.
With **hózhó** below me, I walk.

From the East **hózhó** has been renewed.
From the South **hózhó** has been renewed.
From the West **hózhó** has been renewed.

From the North **hózhó** has been renewed.
From the zenith in the sky **hózhó** has been renewed.
From the nadir of the Earth **hózhó** has been renewed.
From all around me **hózhó** has been renewed.

Hózhó is the grand metaphor by which the Navajo understand the world and their place within it. It describes what I sometimes refer to as a grand cosmic concert.

When a Navajo gets out of harmony with those other beings with whom he or she shares this world, the ceremonies are there to reformulate aboriginal harmony and beauty. These are participant ceremonies, and the patient not only participates in the ceremony but also becomes engulfed in the restored aboriginal harmony and beauty.

III. SYMMETRY AND HOLISM

The **hózhó** of this world was thought and sung into existence by the Holy People who emerged to this world after experiencing four previous worlds.

Hózhó is unquestionably the most important word in the Navajo language and expresses the most important concept found in Navajo art and culture. The Navajo comprehension of the world is aesthetic and holistic, for harmony is by its very nature interdependent and complementary.

Symmetry provides a succinct expression of the nature of the whole to the part relationship. In symmetry the whole consists of two or more complementary parts. Any dissection of the whole destroys the symmetry and elegance of both the whole and the parts. All parts have their identity, their function, their efficacy and their beauty in relationship to the whole. Any marring or disabling of any part of a symmetrical whole, destroys the integrity of the whole. Therefore, symmetry is inherently interdependent and holistic.

The Navajo passion for symmetry is linked to their well-known passion for synthesis. In a previous book (1977:200-202), I identified synthesis as the dominant pattern in the Navajo intellectual and aesthetic style. In their thinking, in their works of art and in their daily lives, the Navajo seem to be

constantly and creatively integrating and synthesizing. The outward trappings of much of their culture consists of a synthetic and creative blending of the old and the new, the native and the alien, the pragmatic and the idealistic, the familiar and the unfamiliar.

The most interesting aspect of this process of absorption is that the result of the synthesis of the old and the new remains uniquely Navajo. The Navajo absorb without becoming absorbed; that is, they absorb from other cultures without being absorbed by those other cultures. They modify the new and the alien to achieve a harmonious blending of the new and the alien with the enduring core of their culture and cosmology.

The Navajo passion for synthesis does not just apply to opposites (thesis and antithesis), but also applies to anything that is diverse and unrelated. Navajo patterns of synthesis relate previously unrelated, diverse phenomena into new and creative syntheses.

The concepts of static and active form a fundamental bipolarity in Navajo cosmology (1977:63-202). The intellectual style found in Navajo cultural formulations is not content, however, with the static nature of this simple dualism. It reaches for the dynamic and aesthetically pleasing nature of creative, holistic synthesis.

The generation of life and the creation of form involves the transformation of the static condition into the active dimension, but the bipolar nature or complementary asymmetry aspect of movement, life, and creation always returns movement to rest, life to death, order to randomness and beauty to plainness. Therefore, life must be infinitely regenerated, movement infinitely rejuvenated, order infinitely restored, and beauty infinitely renewed. This infinite process goes from static to active and active to static.

Changing Woman, the very essence and personification of regeneration, rejuvenation, renewal, and dynamic beauty, is the Mother of the Navajo and the most beautiful and the most blessed of all the Holy People. Appropriately, she is the child of the male **Sa'ah Naaghái** (thought) and the female **Bik'eh Hózhó** (speech). This is the model of creative synthesis that underlies Navajo language, history and cosmology, and it is this same model that informs the dynamic symmetry and holistic asymmetry found in Navajo art.

IV. BODY SYMMETRY AND COSMIC SYMMETRY

The Navajo cosmos is dominated by a form of bipolar symmetry that I choose to characterize as holistic asymmetry. The use of the term *asymmetry* in this arena is not meant to suggest a lack of correspondence of form but an inversion of orientation and a complementarity of form. Much of what I call holistic asymmetry consists of enantiomorphs, binary pairs, and complementary opposites.

In Navajo cosmology, static/active, inner/outer, male/female and thought/speech are the most prominent and most widespread examples of a binary pairs that possess complementarity and correspondence of form, but do not reflect mirror symmetry.

Holistic asymmetry indicates that the two items in question exist as parts of a whole that has contrasting yet complementary bipolarity, such as the bipolar symmetry of electromagnetic fields. Holistic asymmetry indicates the correspondence and the complementarity of the male/female juxtaposition.

When opposites possess complementarity, harmony, and balance, they are expressing both a form of symmetry and a pattern of holism. Binary pairs constitute polarized aspects of a single, holistic phenomenon. The polarized

differences create a fertile and dynamic ebb and flow of contrast and complementarity.

Symmetry and holistic asymmetry are very important aspects of the Navajo comprehension of the world. Whereas bilateral symmetry is common to individuals and to various other specific entities in the universe, holistic asymmetry is the major organizational pattern of the larger Navajo cosmos. **Hózhó** -- holistic harmony, health, and beauty as a simple gloss -- is generated in the Navajo universe by the supreme bipolar pair **Sa'ah Naaghái** and **Bik'eh Hózhó**.

Sa'ah Naaghái and **Bik'eh Hózhó** represent the underlying bipolar symmetry or holistic asymmetry of the universe. **Sa'ah Naaghái** is the inner form of **Bik'eh Hózhó**, which is the outer form of **Sa'ah Naaghái**. **Sa'ah Naaghái** is the static dimension of the universe, while **Bik'eh Hózhó** is the active dimension. **Sa'ah Naaghái** is the thought of the universe, while **Bik'eh Hózhó** is its speech or voice (Wyman 1970:398). **Sa'ah Naaghái** is male; **Bik'eh Hózhó** is female. The dynamic, fertile, and omnipotent union of these two dimensions of the universe is what produces **hózhó** (Witherspoon 1977:16-46).

Hózhó is exemplified in the profound personality of Changing Woman. The dynamic, regenerative, and holistic beauty and harmony seen on the

earth's surface are outer manifestations of the inner beauty, harmony, and power of Changing Woman, and the seasonal changes manifested on the earth's surface is a reflection of the rejuvenating cycles of Changing Woman.

The name and term **Sa'ah Naaghái** refers to endless repetitions of the life cycle of all living beings, including the earth. These are four-phased cycles that go from birth to youth to old age and, finally, to death and are renewed in each birth. The proper age to die for humans is considered to be 102. **Sa'ah Naaghái** refers to the infinite continuation of the generations of all living beings.

Bik'eh Hózhó is the outer form of **Sa'ah Naaghái**. **Bik'eh** means “according to it.” The **bi-** object prefix refers to what preceded it, in this case, referring to **Sa'ah Naaghái**. A longer yet still inadequate translation of both of these terms would be something like this: “according to the infinite generations of the Earth and all living beings, there is beauty, harmony, and well-being everywhere.” These abstract concepts and the profound persons who embody them represent the single source from which all species get their power of regeneration.

Changing Woman, as the child of **Sa'ah Naaghái** and **Bik'eh Hózhó**, synthesizes the underlying bipolarity and complementarity of the universe into

a profound union that is daily and annually seen in the ever-changing, ever-repeating concert of life found on the surface of the earth.

V. QUADRILATERAL SYMMETRY

In the bipolarity of the Navajo cosmos, Father Sky possesses the same shape and complementary attributes as Mother Earth. They lie together in the pattern of sexual intercourse. The rain from the sky is analogically associated with semen, and its intrusion into the Earth causes germination, birth, and the sprouting of new life.

Naturally a Navajo conception of this world would be four-sided. When bipolar pairs are intersected or subdivided by other bipolar pairs, the result is a multiplication of the original pair into a quadrangular format (Witherspoon 1977:33).

Father Berard Haile's consultant, Navajo singer Slim Curley, said that other inner and outer forms were paired similarly to Earth and Sky: Mountain Woman and Water Woman, Darkness and Dawn, Evening Twilight and Daylight, Talking God and Calling God, White Corn and Yellow Corn, Pollen Boy and Cornbeetle Girl, Changing Woman and White Shell Woman, **Sa'ah Naaghái** and **Bik'eh Hózhó**.

Orientation in the Fifth World is established by four cardinal directions. This quadrangular format is generated from the intersection of the bipolar directions of east/west and south/north. In the quadrilateral, holistic asymmetry

of the Fifth World, the basic bipolarities of day/night, summer/winter, and alive/dead are intersected by the liminal bipolarities of dawn/twilight, spring/fall, and birth/death, generating three more quadrilateral formats. When the chromatic bipolar pair of blue/yellow intersects with the achromatic bipolar pair of white/black, the resulting holistic asymmetry is quadrilateral. All of these quadrilateral formats are analogically associated with the cardinal directions in the dynamic symmetry and holistic asymmetry of the Navajo cosmos.

The resulting classificatory scheme is as follows:

(1) east	(2) south	(3) west	(4) north
dawn	daylight	twilight	night
spring	summer	fall	winter
white	blue	yellow	black

Much of the symmetry of the present world of the Earth Surface People is quadrilateral: four cardinal directions, four phases of the day (dawn, daylight, twilight, and darkness), four seasons of the year, four sacred mountains, four principal colors, jewels, and food plants, and four phases to the life cycle.

Active elements or dimensions of paired categories are female, while static elements are male. Square holes in the initiation ceremonial masks are for male deities and diamond ones are for female deities. Although both the

diamond and the square have four sides, Navajos prefer the shape of the diamond as it is more dynamic and aesthetically pleasing.

Color is metaphorically linked to direction and to the cyclical patterns of the day and the seasonal patterns of the year. For instance, the basic bipolarity of summer/winter is intersected by the bipolar liminal periods of spring/fall. The basic bipolarity of east/west is intersected by the bipolar liminal directions of south/north. The basic bipolar symmetry of the daily cycle is day/night, intersected by the bipolar symmetry of the liminal periods of dawn/sunrise and evening twilight/sunset. In this scheme of bipolar color symmetry, the blue (chromatic) is south and female in contrast to black (achromatic) which is north and male. The white (achromatic) dawn of the east is male, while the yellow (chromatic) twilight of the west is female in the bipolar color symmetry of the Navajo.

VI. DYNAMIC SYMMETRY AND HOLISTIC ASYMMETRY IN NAVAJO ART.

The shapes and meanings found in the dynamic symmetry and holistic asymmetry of the Navajo cosmos are depicted in the healing power of sandpaintings, woven into the patterns of Navajo blankets, rugs, and tapestries, and sculptured into finely made Navajo jewelry.

Dynamic symmetry and holistic asymmetry are universal themes in Navajo culture, expressing a particular feeling for life and for the world. To one degree or another and in one way or another, most Navajo works of art express these universal themes.

Art is not a separate or a distinct domain of Navajo culture. The theme of **hózhó** permeates the entire culture. Navajo art involves expressions of cosmic concert.

Art is not a marginal activity pursued by eccentric specialists. For the Navajo, it is an experience common to everyone. Art is an act essential to living in concert.

In our recent book, Dynamic Symmetry and Holistic Asymmetry in Navajo and Western Art and Cosmology, Glen Peterson and I explore dynamic symmetry and holistic asymmetry in sandpainting, silverwork and weaving.

The dynamic symmetry and holistic asymmetry of Navajo art uses all three aspects of our visual perception: shape, motion, and color. The symmetry of shape found in the motifs of Navajo compositions unifies them into one-image formats. The symmetry of color found principally in Navajo sandpainting and weaving provides a sense of harmonious interaction. The high level of movement and activity found in Navajo visual arts enlivens them and gives them their dynamic quality. All of these aspects of Navajo art combine to create an aesthetic style that is dynamic, holistic, and symmetrical.

In expressing dynamic symmetry, silverwork uses primarily curvilinear shapes and lines while weaving, by technical restriction, uses primarily rectilinear shapes and lines to create active, vibrant surfaces held under control by static backgrounds. Sandpaintings use both curvilinear and rectilinear shapes and lines in creating an active and vibrant surface against a static background. In sandpaintings, the curvilinear shapes and lines usually portray organic and active forms and entities, while the rectilinear shapes and lines portray abstract order and cosmic asymmetry.

Holism is accomplished in Navajo art largely through the power of the center to focus, to integrate, and to harmonize contrasting yet complementary elements into summative wholes that are seen as one-image formats.

Before Navajo weavers started weaving rugs and tapestries for a non-Navajo clientele, Navajos wove blankets for use as clothing. In the middle of these woven compositions, a hole was sometimes left for the head of the wearer to protrude. These blankets put the center of the person into the center of the garment, surrounding the wearer with the dynamic and holistic symmetrical elements of the compositions.

Navajo jewelry is also made to be worn, and jewelry is the one art form that the Navajo do keep, cherish and use for personal adornment. These compositions are also centered not only by powerful center elements and motifs around which they are composed, but by the fact that they are also centered on the persons who wear them.

Centering these art forms on and to the person who wears them tends to make the wearer an integral part of the composition, just as sandpaintings make the patient an integral part of the world portrayed. The sandpainting is centered in both vertical and horizontal space, and its transparency makes both the earth below and the sky above part and parcel of the painting. These art forms are not only visually holistic; they are also spatially and

environmentally holistic, centering multidimensional, symmetrical wholes into visual metaphors of a cosmos in motion and in concert.

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