“May Crowds of Evil Move Away From Me:” Rituals, Practices, and Attitudes Towards Death and Bereavement Among the Navajos

“If you see a spot of fire, hear a noise, or a coyote follows you, you put turquoise right in the track and have Talking God Blessing Way [ceremony]. It means something is giving you a chance for your family to live. It is a warning to have Blessing Way [ceremony] before four days. After that it is too late.”

A Navajo informant (Wyman, Hill & Ósanai, 1942, pp.30-31).

“The Navajo religion is being Navajo. Religion is something that you live every day.”

Jennie Joe, Diné educator and medical anthropologist

Introduction

The Navajos are known throughout the United States for their rug making skills, beautiful turquoise and silver Native American Indian jewelry, and the important role Navajo Code Talkers played in the World War II, more specifically in the battles of Guadalcanal, Tarawa, Saipan, Iwo Jima, and Okinawa (The Navajo Nation). What is not so widely known, except in the anthropological circles, are their attitudes towards death and bereavement, which are a part of the traditional Navajo approach towards life, aptly expressed in the phrase “sa’ah naaghai bik’eh hozho,” which conveys the notion of “the ideal completion of the life cycle among people and all other things, according to the dictates of hozho” (Young, 2002, p. 246). According to a number of sources, hozho is usually translated as “beauty” or “beautiful” (Young, 2002; De Mente, 2005; Alvord & Van Pelt, 1999, Downs, 1984; Sandner, 1979; Underhill, 1953; etc.). The opposite of hozho is hocho, which represents things that are disorderly, evil, or ugly (Young, 2002; Witherspoon, 1983). Hocho in Navajo society is frequently identified with issues pertaining to death and the dead. Many researchers have noted in the past that the Navajo fear death and that
“death and everything connected with it are horrible to the People” (Kluckhohn & Leighton, 1974, p. 184). However, as other scholars argue, the fear Navajos feel in relation to the dead is “fear not of death or afterlife, but of the dead body and the ghost connected with it” (Sandner, 1979, p. 102). As Downs (1984) states, the Navajo do not fear death any more or less than any other people, but they, “like many western Indians, notably those of the Great Basin, […] do fear the dead. The dead are dangerous because the ghost of a dead man may return to trouble the living” (pp. 108-9). Finally, according to Witherspoon (1983b), the Navajo “have a tremendous respect for life, and an avoidance of the dead, not a fear of death” (571.). In order to re-establish much desired harmony and beauty and in attempt to contend with the uncomfortable and often conflicting feelings related to the experience of death and dealing with the deceased, which have a clear potential for disturbing the said harmony, the Navajo have developed a number of rituals and ritual practices the main purpose of which is restoration of hozho, i.e. harmony and beauty which they strive to surround themselves with. This paper is intended to provide an account of particularly illustrative beliefs and rituals surrounding traditional burial practices of the Navajo. More specifically, in this paper I aim to answer the following research questions:

1. What are symbolic elements in the Navajo fear of the dead, as well as the supernatural beings, such as skinwalkers?

2. What are ritualistic elements in the Navajo attitudes and practices towards death and bereavement?

3. Whether, and if yes, how have the Navajo attitudes towards death and the dead changed with the rise of Christianity and Westernization of their society?

4. What are the similarities, if any, between Navajo attitudes towards death and those exhibited by the contemporary (postmodern) American society?
Before I proceed to address each of the above stated research questions, I will provide some additional background on the Navajo, their way of life, and their beliefs.

Geography and language

With about 200,000 enrolled members in 1996, the Navajos (also referred to as the Diné—The People) are currently the largest reservation-based American Indian nation and, along with Cherokee and Sioux, among the largest Native American tribes in the United States (Young, 2002; Csordas, 1999). About three quarters of the Navajo population live on the largest reservation in North America, Navajoland (also known as Diné Bikeyah or Dinétah).

Navajoland is about the size of West Virginia—27,000 square miles of desert and mountains spread out over the states of Arizona, New Mexico, and Utah (De Mente, 2005; Young, 2002). The Diné are proud to be one of the few Indian nations still living on their ancestral homelands, especially since they consider this land the holy ground. Navajoland is surrounded by four sacred mountains:

To the east Sisnaajini (White Shell-Mountain—Blanca Peak in the Sangre de Cristo Range in central New Mexico); to the south, Tsoodzil (Blue Bead mountain—Mount Taylor in north central New Mexico); to the west, Dook'o'ooshid (Abalone Shell Mountain—the San Francisco Peaks near Flagstaff, Arizona); and to the north, Dívbezítsaa (Obsidian Mountain—Hesperus Peak in the La Plata Mountains in southwestern Colorado near the modern town of Durango. (Young, 2002, p. 222)

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1 Navajo call themselves Diné (or Dineh), which is usually translated as “People” or, in some cases, “Earth People.” Navajo (sometimes written phonetically as Navaho) is, according to Young (2002), “an English rendition of a Spanish term perhaps derived from a Tewa designation meaning “great planted fields.” It was first used by the Spanish to describe the region the Diné called Dinétah, and eventually was applied to the People. The first recorded English use of the term is in the accounts of the 1805-7 Zebulon Pike expedition” (p. 223).

2 The term Dinétah usually refers to the first Diné homeland in the southwest (a region of what is now known as northwestern New Mexico in the Chama Valley and part of the San Juan Basin. However, the term is also used to speak of the larger land that Diné later came to occupy, which is located between the four sacred mountains. (Underhill, 1953; Young, 2002).
In terms of their native language, the Diné are grouped with the Apaches as Apacheans, i.e. speakers of an Athapaskan language, which is also spoken in Alaska, Canada, and along the Pacific coast (Young, 2002).

Walking in Beauty: The Navajo Way

The Way of Beauty or *hozho*, as previously mentioned, is a pivotal philosophy within Navajo society, and it refers to “whatever brings harmony as opposed to that which causes disorder and evil” (Young, 2002, p. 246). This is a crucial concept for each Navajo, and a Navajo person uses it “to express his happiness, his health, the beauty of his land, and the harmony of his relations with others. It is used in reminding people to be careful and deliberate, and when he says good-bye to someone leaving, he will say […] ‘may you walk and go about according to *hozho*” (Witherspoon, 1983b, p. 570). The purpose of the entire human existence is to achieve *hozho*, and the guiding principle behind Navajo rituals and ceremonials is to restore it when a disruption occurs. It is not surprising, therefore, that the word *hozho* appears in the names of two of the major Navajo ceremonials—Beautyway and Blessingway (Young, 2000). When a person falls out of the harmony with the overall pattern of the universe, is when an illness occurs, and the medicine man or a woman serves as an intermediary between the forces of disruption and the forces of harmony, working through ritual and ceremony to reestablish and maintain the disrupted *hozho* (Miller & Schoenfeld, 1973).

Social organization among the Navajo

In terms of social organization, the female principle is of great importance among the Navajo, and the Navajo society falls toward the matriarchal end of the scale, where “in almost all spheres of activity the principle of the importance of the female is expressed” (Downs, 1984, p. 22). The Navajo society consists of about sixty matrilineal clans, and upon birth, children of both
genders become members of their mother’s clan. In the Navajo society women are the ones who own the traditional dwellings known as hogans, the children, the sheep and other domestic animals, and whatever is produced by their own work. Similarly, ownership is transmitted through the female line (Downs, 1984; Young, 2002). That said, it should be of no surprise that the most important figure in Navajo mythology and the most powerful Navajo deity, Changing Woman, is female. This ever-changing, perpetually benevolent, and most beloved of all the Navajo gods gave birth to the Hero Twins (Monster Slayer and Born of Water) and is associated with the Mother Earth, the mother of all living things who ages each winter and is rejuvenated each spring. She is considered a nurturer and a provider who has the ability to give birth, and is thus responsible for the life on Earth (humans, animals, corn, plants, etc.). The Navajos often refer to Changing Woman as “my mother” or “my grandmother” and consider her always helpful and kind (Farella, 1984; Young, 2002; De Monte, 2005).

Kinship ties are extremely important in the Navajo society. According to Kluckhohn & Leighton (1974), one of the worst things that one Navajo can say about another is “He acts as if he didn’t have any relations,” while one of the highest compliments is to say: “You act as though everybody was related to you.” (p. 100). In everyday life, the most important social units are “those which center around a core of women—mothers, daughters, sisters, and their sons,” while relatives by marriage, typically husbands and sons-in-law, “play an important but peripheral role” (Downs, 1984, p. 23). On the other hand, while the importance of the network of kin ties for individual survival is tremendous, it is balanced by the fact that “the Navajo remain highly individualistic people” (Downs, 1984, p. 24). Finally, another important category in the structure of Navajo society is that of age. As Downs states (1984), age holds great prestige for the Navajo, particularly when “coupled with a life of hard work and the production of many children and grandchildren” (p. 25). Any other death, but that caused by old age is considered premature and
Death and bereavement

Death is an inextricable part of existence for any social group, so an uncontrollable fear of death as such would be an indication of a remarkable social trauma within the very fabric of cultural existence, which would make the life as we know it impossible for the said cultural group. However, the fear of the dead serves as an indication of a different socio-psychological process, the primary function of which is protection of the entire society from the disturbing effect of extreme sorrow on the survival of the group. Such a fear actually points toward a high level of collectivism and serves to strengthen the bond between the still living members of the community. This is particularly important in cultural groups such as the Navajo, which have been exposed to a great deal of suffering caused by frequent wars on their territory and the loss of a great number of their members due to illness, starvation, war, and/or genocide. One of the most important events in the Navajo history, which caused tragic death of many Navajos, is known as the Long Walk of the Navajo, or the Long Walk to Bosque Redondo. The Long Walk was an Indian removal effort of the United States government in 1863 and 1864, which included the 300 mile long forced walk from their lands to exile in New Mexico. Those who did not perish on the Long Walk to Fort Sumner, located on the Pecos River in the eastern New Mexico, became ill when they finally reached their destination due to the extremely cold weather and the lack of provisions. When a treaty was finally signed in 1868, granting Navajo survivors a 3.5 million acre reservation, which included a part of their old land, about 25% of their people were no longer living due to illness, starvation, and four years of horrendous suffering at Bosque Redondo (Kluckhohn & Leighton, 1974). As Young (2002) states, “The Diné had been forced from the land the Holy People had given to them. They had passed over three rivers their legends
warned them never to cross. [...] It could have destroyed them as a people, but it did not” (p. 235). The tragedy of the Long Walk experience alone can account for many of the attitudes the Navajo have towards death and bereavement and provide explanations for the rituals and ceremonials that accompany them. In the following several paragraphs I will try to provide an answer to my first research question: What are symbolic elements in the Navajo fear of the dead and ghosts, as well as the supernatural beings, such as witches and skinwalkers?

Symbolic elements in the Navajo fear of the dead, witches, and skinwalkers

According to the Navajo belief, at death the breath or “wind of life” leaves the body, which means that the at death a person loses his or her individuality and what is left is “ghost” or chindi, which is “a malignant influence, [...] capable of return to earth as an apparition” (Wyman, Hill & Ösanai, 1942, p. 11). This evil component of every human being, except for infants who die very young and the elderly who have lived a long and full life, at death “leaves the body and goes to the north, to the afterworld [...] and after four days there it turns into a ghost. [...] [G]hosts live in a place in the north and return to earth from the north” (Wyman, Hill & Ösanai, 1942, p. 11). As the Navajo medicine man interviewed by Newcomb (1940) stated, “After the spirit has gone there is something evil about the body which none of the Navajos

3 According to Wyman, Hill & Ösanai (1942), “a child is a symbol of purity to which no evil has attached, and Navajos do not abhor the burial place of a child” (p. 17). However, here the authors are referring to very young infants only, particularly those who made no sound upon birth, and were therefore considered stillborn or premature. Such infants are typically “placed in a tree and left” (p. 17). However, if a child “showed life and then died it was accorded the regular burial and four days mourning” (p. 17). One of the possible reasons for this kind of attitude towards stillborn infants may be that they are still considered closely attached to the mother’s womb and therefore not yet polluted enough to be able to produce a chindi.

4 Wyman, Hill & Ösanai (1942) also note the loss of the ghost in those who have reached extremely old age. As they assert, “A very aged person who has been respected, “who has lived out his life,” and dies a natural death “without pain”) does not release a malignant influence” (p. 17).

5 Another vital aspect of traditional Navajo philosophy is the importance of number four, which seems to permeate all the aspects of life: there are four season, four directions, the first four clans, four colors associated with four sacred mountains, as well as four days allocated for grieving over a deceased loved one, who, in turn, has four days to reach the Ghost Land located in the north (Alvord & Van Pelt, 1999).
understand, and of which they are afraid” (p. 75). For the Navajo anything related to the dead body is considered *dirty* in the ritualistic sense. As Douglas (1966) asserts, dirt can be considered as matter out of place, and “It implies two conditions: a set of ordered relations and contravention of that order” (p. 35). While *dirt* corresponds to the Navajo concept of *hocho*, *purity* corresponds to the Navajo concept of *hozho*. As Mary Douglas defines it, dirt is essentially disorder and not only that, it offends against order. Eliminating it is not a negative movement, but a positive effort to organize the environment. The initial recognition of anomaly leads to anxiety and from there to suppression or avoidance (Douglas, 1966).

A ghost of a deceased person may return to trouble the living because its property (jewelry, horse, clothes, etc.) has been appropriated by another person instead of being buried with the body, or due to certain ritual failures or errors. There are no good ghosts according to Navajo belief and for that reason it is best to avoid the dead at any cost. Consequently, “when a person has died in a hogan, for instance, the structure is abandoned. The body is often left inside with its belongings. Burial is rapid and without much ceremony, and, in the past at least, a person’s favorite valuable possessions were buried with them” (Downs, 1984, p. 109). A possible reason for abandoning a hogan contaminated by death is that hogans are sacred for the Navajo, since they represent “a major religious and social integrating force” (Cooper, 1990, p. 71, as cited in Young, 2002, p. 251). Hogans have a dual function for the Navajo; they serve as both everyday dwellings and sacred chambers in which many sacred rituals are performed. Still, the sanctity of the threshold should not be violated even when the dwelling is to be abandoned. For that reason, if a person dies inside a hogan, the body is removed through a hole broken on the north wall (the direction of evil) rather than through the door, since the door, as Van Gennep (1960) states, is “the boundary between the foreign and domestic worlds in the case of an ordinary dwelling, between the profane and sacred worlds in the case of a temple” (p. 20). Since a hogan serves both purposes (that of an ordinary dwelling and that of a temple), both of the aforementioned
aspects apply to it. Furthermore, this tactic serves to disorient the ghost of the dead person, so it cannot find its way back to hound the living.

One possible explanation for such negative attitudes towards the dead is that, in most cases, death represents a disruption of *hozho*, or harmony that the Navajo strive to maintain throughout their existence. On the other hand, *hocho*, evil or marginal things, the things that fall outside the natural categories, are seen as monstrous, and are considered taboo acts, or as Van Gennep refers to them, “negative rites” (1960, p. 8). Things that are not orderly, that are unpredictable or violate the norm, such as death and dying, cause anxiety, and humans often react to them by trying to reestablish control by labeling, by ritual, and by using the body of folk belief in an attempt to reestablish the previously existing harmony. Ritual activities tend to accrue around life crisis or situations of conflict, which often coincide with issues pertaining to life cycle (e.g. pregnancy, adolescence, death, etc.). Rituals help members of the cultural group identify anxieties of the group, and their reactions are shaped by their culture. Since the contact of the living with the dead represents merging of two diametrically opposed concepts, it naturally causes disturbance of otherwise harmonious existence, and requires symbolic purification of those contaminated by the unnatural contact. Details of such ritual purification will be discussed below.

As previously mentioned, certain unintentional errors in the burial ritual can be quite dangerous for both the participants in the ritual and the entire community, and may result in the ghost of a dead person returning to plague the living. If accidental errors can have such a significant negative impact onto the individual and/or the community, intentional errors are much more disastrous. As Downs (1984) states, “Navajo logic holds that chants sung backwards or ritual deliberately performed improperly can bring disaster to the community or to individuals. […] [J]ust as there are good medicine men who have labored and paid to learn blessing chants,
there are others who have labored and paid even more to learn evil chants” (p. 109). As Kluckhohn & Leighton (1974) further assert, “The Navahos believe that by witchcraft evil men and women, acting separately or in a group, can obtain property and produce the illness or death of those they hate” (p. 187). These malevolent individuals typically appear alone, after dark, usually in the shape of an animal (e.g. a coyote, and owl, a dog, a mouse), as whirlwinds, or disembodied dark matter and shapeless dark objects (Wyman, Hill & Ósanai, 1942). Since they often wear the hide or the pelt of a wolf or a coyote, they are referred to as “skinwalkers.” As Durkheim states, “Magic takes a kind of professional pleasure in profaning holy things, inverting religious ceremonies in its rites” (p. 40). Furthermore, “To practice his art, the magician has no need whatsoever to congregate with his peers. He is more often a loner. In general, far from seeking company, he flees it” (p. 42). The most powerful magical weapon of the skinwalker is the “corpse powder,” or “corpse poison,” made from powdered human flesh, which is obtained through the activity of grave robbing, and which they carry to drop down somebody’s chimney or sprinkle it on the threshold (Kluckhohn, 1962; Kluckhohn & Leighton, 1974; Ward, 1980; Young, 2002). Skinwalkers may also take other artifacts from the grave, such as the jewelry worn by the deceased and use it to put evil spells on other members of the community (Wyman, Hill & Ósanai, 1942). However, as Douglas (1966) states, “What is clean in relation to one thing may be unclean in relation to another, and vice versa” (p. 9). As it is said that among the Havik peoples cow dung is considered profane for gods but holy for humans who use it as a cleansing agent, so is “ghost powder” profane and unclean for regular members of Navajo society, but sacred to skinwalkers, who themselves represent a marginalized group and are not a part of the society in a broader sense. For them, this impure agent represents the very axis around which their existence revolves. For skinwalkers, who are marginalized beings because they get in contact with dead bodies and can cause others to contract ghost sickness, this agent (ghost
power) is holy because it allows them to gain power over the very society which has shunned and ostracized them.

According to Young (2002), “While certain herbs may be used to treat an illness brought on by witchcraft [i.e. ghost sickness], the principal antidote is a ceremonial such as the Enemyway. If the victim is successful in resisting the witch’s techniques, the evil will backfire on the witch, who will die within a year” (p. 263). These ritual precautions are necessary to restore the harmony and remove the malignant influence of the dead, which occurs as a consequence of breaching a taboo. For that reason the “contaminated” person has to be cleansed with the help of a “holy” person—a singer or a medicine man. The same goes for the Navajos who had fought in wars and thus came in contact with the dead bodies.

According to several researchers (Kluckhohn, 1962; Kluckhohn & Leighton, 1974; Locke, 1992; Young, 2002), the practice of witchcraft among the Navajo has served and continues to serve a specific social purpose—it functions as “a social sanction on undesirable activities and a check on leaders who are afraid of acting despots lest they be accused of being witches and have witchcraft directed against them” (Young, 2002, p. 263). In addition to that, it has been used as a means of economic and social control, preventing individual members of the community from amassing wealth at the expense of others, since those who did accumulate a suspicious amount of worldly goods and refused to share them with others, would be quickly labeled as witches and eliminated⁶. The result of this social situation is that “the poor are treated with generosity lest they bewitch those who do not share, and the rich act with generosity lest they be accused of being witches” (Young, 2002, p. 263).

Another possible social explanation for the existence of the fear of the dead among the Navajo and the belief in skinwalkers, is the fear of the other, more particularly the otherness

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⁶ As Downs (1984) states, “A person suspected of witchcraft […] may, if all other means [such as purification ceremonies or rituals intended to counteract evil spells] fail, be killed in self-defense” (p. 110).
within one’s own self and the dark side of one’s own being, which is parallel to C.G. Jung’s *shadow archetype*. Jung (1980) claimed that facing the shadow was one of the greatest moral challenges a person could face. For him, shadow represents the negative aspect of our psyche, which we project onto others and resent them for it. Since the evil part of the ghost which gets released upon death is an integral element of each and every human being, that means that, according to the Navajo belief, each person carries a bit of the *shadow* with him or her throughout life, but this wicked part of human nature is more-or-less successfully controlled by the good part. However, at death, the good part of the person leaves the body together with the “wind of life,” which leaves only the dark part lingering around the body, until it finds its way to the land of the dead. Edgar Herzog (2000) discusses this issue further by stating that “The capacity to feel horror at death is one of the most essential characteristics which distinguish man from the animals” (p. 14). A different kind of attitude would be considered inhuman, and therefore reserved for the marginal beings such as witches or skinwalkers. As Wundt states (1913), “The moment the human being dies the first impulse is to abandon him where he lies and to fly […] The flight from the corpse shows that man’s chief terror is on his own account. If a living man remains by the dead he is involved in the danger of being overtaken by death himself” (as cited in Herzog, 2000, p. 16). Fear of the dead corresponds to the fear of confronting the nameless, and the encounter with the dead resembles being gripped by a wholly other: “We are concerned with the death of the other person, of the tribal or family comrade, and when a human is gripped by terror and horror at the inexplicable change in a comrade it is because that which was living and comprehensible has suddenly changed into something different and incomprehensibly uncanny” (Herzog, 2000, p. 17). The deceased man, who was previously accepted as he was, through death becomes a mysteriously changed being. Survivors, through their horror and avoidance of the dead, express a “recognition” of the final *otherness* of
death. The concept of otherness is parallel to the Navajo concept of *hocho* and in direct conflict with the idea of living in harmony and beauty, i.e. the concept of *hozho*.

In the following section of this paper I will answer my second research question: What are ritualistic elements in the Navajo attitudes and practices towards death and bereavement?

**Definition of ritual**

Ritual is an important component of human interaction which takes routine acts and their contextually determined meanings and overstates them, stylizes them, filters them, and sets them into a pattern of communicative sequences of visual and auditory symbols. Rituals have symbolic meaning for those participating in them. As Rothenbuhler (1998) affirms, “Ritual is the voluntary performance of appropriately patterned behavior to symbolically effect or participate in the serious life” (p. 27).

**Identifying characteristics of ritual**

Ritual underlines a particular collective identity; if a person decides to participate in a ritual they are acknowledging its function within the social system. Rituals are not just conceptual ideas but they also affect the society in profound ways and have a certain effect on the world at large or the worldview of those participating in the ritual. As Couldry (2003) states, “‘Ritual’ has often been associated with claims that it produces, or maintains, social *integration*” (p. 4). This idea is derived from the work of Durkheim (1995), who asserts that, “rites are ways of acting that are born only in the midst of assembled group and whose purpose is to evoke, maintain, or recreate certain mental states of those groups. […] [Therefore,] [t]hey, too, must be social things, products of collective thought” (p. 9). This corresponds to Rothenbuhler’s (1998) assertion that, “ritual is not something individuals do only for individual purpose in purely individualistic ways. […] Usually, rituals are oriented toward a group” (p. 13). In addition to this, ritual “involves the
use of modes of behavior which are expressive of social relationships” (Gluckman, 1962, p. 22, as cited in Rothenbuhler, 1998, p. 14). Finally, as Rothenbuhler (1998) emphasizes, “The forms of ritual action constitute symbols that often have among their referents the social relations, orders, and institutions of the society in which the ritual is performed” (p. 14). This is certainly the case with the Navajo rituals pertaining to issues of death, burial, and bereavement, particularly due to the notion of fear, which accompanies these activities. As Downs (1984), states, fear can serve as a cultural reinforcement, and the ritual enactment of both hozho and hocho serves to “reinforce the structures and attitudes essential to the survival of Navajo society” (p. 111). As Downs (1984) further states, “To instill this dependence on the group, the Navajo not only encourage loyalty to the family through positive admonition, but also through fear. From infancy, children are exposed to frightening experiences from which they can be extricated only by their mothers and older sisters” (p. 111). The practice of using ritualized fear to inspire loyalty to one’s family is repeatedly practiced through the ritual of telling stories about skinwalkers, witches, and other terrifying beings, which symbolize the fearsome world beyond the confines of one’s family. In addition to this, as in many other cultures, children are taught to be afraid of strangers, which further supports their dependence on the cultural group they belong to. Consequently, according to Downs (1984):

The network of beliefs works from infancy to adulthood to reinforce the idea that only with one’s close relatives can one feel safe and only to them can one turn for comfort, aid, and protection. In short, the homestead group is emphasized and reemphasized as the single refuge in an otherwise hostile world. Its needs transcend all others, and its loyalties are more lasting and dependable than all others. (p. 112)
In this way, the help and support of one’s relatives is guaranteed, and, consequently, the survival of the homestead group is ensured amidst the unforeseeable predicaments that may suddenly befall each and every member of the group.

In addition to their social components, Navajo rituals pertaining to issues of death and burial, particularly the funeral and healing rituals, are *performative* in nature, being “a performance of something, for someone” (Rothenbuhler, 1998, p. 8). For example, Kluckhohn (1962) notes that every part of the Navajo funeral ritual is intended to prevent the ghost of the deceased to return to terrorize the living. Even though Van Gennep (1960) states that rites of transition and rites of incorporation are more prominent than rites of separation in funeral ceremonies, it seems that this is not the case with the Navajo. Mourning among the Navajo lasts for four days only, and the burial rituals are focused on complete separation of the dead from the living and “marking an isolation from society of those whom death, in its physical reality, had placed in a sacred, impure state” (Van Gennep, 1960, p. 146-47). As Durkheim (1995) states, “Once the last breath has been exhaled and the soul presumed to have departed, it would seem that the soul should make immediate use of the freedom it has just regained to […] return as quickly as possible to its true homeland, which is elsewhere. And yet it stays near the corpse, its bond with the corpse having stretched but not broken. A whole set of rites is necessary to make it go once and for all” (p. 246). The Navajo believe that ghosts come back to earth to avenge some offense, such as: “improper burial of a corpse, holding back belongings of the deceased, failure to kill a horse and a sheep for the use of the deceased, disturbing or taking away from the grave parts of the earthly body or things buried with it” (Wyman, Hill & Ósanai, 1942, p. 23). It is not surprising then that the Navajo death rituals are “oriented towards prevention of such return rather than towards the loss situation” (Wyman, Hill & Ósanai, 1942, p. 23). Here are two

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4 Four days are required for the trip to the afterworld.
examples of ritual activity the purpose of which is to confuse the ghost so that it cannot come back to the world it once inhabited, which is also performative in nature:

The two women washed and dressed Tesbah, while Kaisheen and a friend dug a grave. [...] Then, without a sound, they took the coffin to the shallow grave. After covering it with earth they piled rocks over the grave, laid the shovel alongside, and ran back to the Hogan without looking back. (Bennet, 1965, p. 195, as cited in Ward, 1980, p. 28)

And coming back, jumping over anthills, yucca plants, and cactus so that his spirit might not follow them, they left Hoskinini, his body under the rocks. (Gillmor & Wetherill, 1953, p. 178, as cited in Ward, 1980, p. 28)

In the first example, even those participants in the ritual who did not touch Tesbah’s corpse have nevertheless established contact with the corpse, and therefore have been contaminated, by means other than touching. As Durkheim (1995) states, “One is in contact with a thing simply by looking at it, the gaze is a means of establishing contact” (p. 308). Furthermore, “Speech is another means of coming into contact with persons or things. The exhaled breath establishes contact, since it is a part of ourselves that spreads outside us” (Durkheim, 1995, 309). That is why the participants in the ritual described in the first example proceed with the ritual “without a sound.” Even after the burial has taken place, the performative ritual activities continue for four days:

[The mourners] remain quiet and leave the Hogan only when absolutely necessary and then accompanied by the head mourner. A guard keeps the trail between the Hogan and the grave open by signaling to passers-by⁸. Early on the morning of the day following the fourth night the mourners bathe again. After the entire family has also bathed there is a

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⁸ Passers-by need to be warned of the danger of ghost contamination by gaze, speech, or touch.
short period of ceremonial waiting and the mourning time is past. (Reichard, 1928, p. 141, as cited in Griffen, 1978, p. 368)

In addition to this, Navajo burial rituals are conscious and voluntary, but at the same time “accompanied by a certain social compulsion” (Rothenbuhler, 1998, p. 10). Instead of mourning the loss of a loved one, Navajos feel compelled to participate in separation rituals which should protect them from the potential malignant influence of the *chindi*. One such ritual takes place “Four days after the end of the four-day period of restrictions following a burial” (Wyman, Hill & Ósanai, 1942, p. 31). On such occasions, “a singer [a medicine man] is employed for a one night sing to avert illness from the family of the deceased, and about twelve days to a month after this another singer is hired to sing over all the property, horses, sheep, jewelry, etc., that the deceased left to prevent death of the stock and loss of the jewelry” (Wyman, Hill & Ósanai, 1942, p. 31). Moreover, such rituals denote regularly recurring behavior, which, “In addition to being behavior that has been done this way before by others, […] is [also] regularly occurring” (Rothenbuhler, 1998, p. 21). Also, Navajo rituals pertaining to death represent forms of customary behavior, and there are a number of such ritualistic actions that are “stereotyped, standardized, stylized, relatively invariant, [and] formal” (Rothenbuhler, 1998, p. 20). For example, Navajo customs surrounding burial include numerous stereotyped actions, which serve to protect the living from the dead: “These two [people who wish to do the burying] wear only moccasins and loincloths and are covered with ashes. There are no songs. You just don’t talk, eat, or wash until the body is buried. […] A pregnant woman mustn’t look at the body. When they bury the body they shouldn’t leave tracks around the spot. Tracks should be erased. Sweat shouldn’t drop on the burial place, or blood from a scratch or wound” (Sandner, 1979, p. 103-4). All the actions which involve “coming into contact” in Durkheimian sense should be rigorously avoided in order to prevent establishing a physical connection with the ghost of the deceased,
which would provide it with means of returning to the world of the living. Moreover, the Navajo should follow a number of restrictions on daily basis the purpose of which is to protect them from the negative impact of ghosts: they are not to talk about them; they should avoid whistling after dark, for it may attract the ghosts; they should refrain from combing their hair at night, for “ghosts do that;” they shouldn’t sweep the hogan or shake blankets at night, because ghosts are known to do that; and they should not put shoes on the wrong feet, because corpses and ghosts wear them in such a way9 (Wyman, Hill & Osanai, 1942, pp. 24-25). Evidently, Navajo rituals surrounding death are not recreational, but are “part of serious life,” which is another characteristic of ritual (Rothenbuhler, 1998, p. 12). If those engaged in performing such a ritual do not take it seriously enough or “If they do something wrong at the burial, then this thing [the ghost] will come back on them,” and once this pathway is opened, a number of intricate counteractions have to be performed to undo the act that allowed the return of the ghost in the first place (Sandner, 1979, p. 104).

Finally, Navajo rituals in relation to death and burial represent “action regarding the sacred” (Rothenbuhler, 1998, p. 23). As Durkheim (1995) states, “Indeed, there is no rite that does not have [sacredness] to some degree. There are words, phrases, and formulas that can be said only by consecrated personages; there are gestures and movements that cannot be executed by just anyone” (p. 35). Such “consecrated personages” are known as haatali among the Navajo, which is sometimes translated as “medicine men” and sometimes as “singers.” These dignitaries function as both priests and healers and perform the ceremonies, also known as “sings,” such as the Blessingway, the Enemyway, the Evilway, the Holiway, etc. As Downs (1984) states, “The Navajo chanter, frequently called a medicine man, is a person who has, through apprenticing him- or herself to an older person, learned certain sacred prayer songs connected with the origin

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9 Putting shoes on wrong feet of a corpse is supposed to confuse the ghost and prevent it from coming back to the world of the living.
myth. [...] Only a recognized practitioner, however, can sing to effect a cure of another person” (101). Performing a role of a Navajo singer is not an easy task by any means, especially since “There are many dozens of chants and songs and accompanying rituals, and one must know the proper one to use. [...] Sings vary from one-day to five-day affairs” (p. 101). Almost all the sings are accompanied by creation of “sandpaintings,” or “design[s] of colored sands, earths, and pollens, [...] made as the beginning step of the ritual, which ends hours later after a night of continuous singing and intermittent ritual directed at the patient. The effectiveness of the performance is based on the skill of the singer, who must know the proper songs in word-for-word perfection, as well as the ritual acts” (Downs, 1984, pp. 101-2). As Young (2002) further reports, “Sandpaintings are usually begun, finished, and destroyed within a twelve-hour period. The “patient” identifies with and absorbs the power of the Holy People portrayed by sitting in the midst of the painting” (p. 252). If a member of the Navajo nation is in any way exposed to a dead person, they would need to go through a series of purification rituals and would have sing performed and a sandpainting created for healing purposes, which has the function of rewinding the events back to beginning of the universe, and allowing the “patient” to be purified through ritual rebirth.

In the following section I will briefly address my third research question: Whether, and if yes, how have the Navajo attitudes towards death and the dead changed with the rise of Christianity and Westernization of their society?

The impact of Christianity and Westernization on traditional Navajo attitudes towards death and the dead

Researchers began claiming in the late 70s that “In the past two or three decades, Navajos in increasing numbers have leaned toward an Anglo, rather than a traditional Navajo, style for their funerals” (Griffen, 1978, p. 367), and that, in Van Gennep’s (1960) terms, this change has
resulted in putting more emphasis on *incorporation of the survivors* than on *separation of the deceased*. Claims have been made that Christianity has influenced this change in attitudes towards the dead, especially since the Navajo have made extensive use of the numerous social services offered by Christian churches, especially hospitals and schools. In an article published in 1978, Levy states that “The past 15 years have witnessed a rapid increase in the number of cemetery burials, many involving public gatherings and eulogizing of the deceased” (p. 397). Levy (1978) connects this trend with the increased number of conversions to Christianity, which have, according to him, become relatively common, simultaneously allowing for the general level of educational attainment to rise considerably.

It is true that Navajo burial practices have altered dramatically during and since the World War II (Jett, 1996). Moreover, as Jett (1996) asserts, “the trend toward cemetery burials has accelerated since about 1960 and by 1968 there were some 40 formal mission and chapter (community) cemeteries in the Navajo Country” (p. 3). However, it is also important to note that if the traders or missionaries performed the funeral, “no Navajo burial party would have to undergo ghost-protection purification rites” (Jett, 1996, p. 3). In addition, committal in a graveyard located close to the mission tends to afford better security against grave-robbers, i.e. skinwalkers (Leighton & Kluckhohn, 1948; Griffen, 1980, Jett, 1996). In other words, the seeming trend of acceptance of Anglo funeral customs may be misleading, since nowadays honoring the dead through an Anglo-style funeral for the Navajo family “has the specific benefit of appeasing the *chindi* by giving the deceased a good “send-off” (Jett, 1996, p. 4). Furthermore, even in these obviously modernized Navajo burials, “The notion of ghost-protection is reinforced by the continuing custom of erasing footprints around the grave, as in traditional practice, so that the ghost can’t follow the pall-bearers. Too, personal possessions (including the odd television set) are still interred, and are sometimes mutilated” (Jett, 1996, p. 4). According to Griffen,
(1980), Navajos are nowadays oftentimes abandoning or trading-in the pickup trucks used to transport the coffin, since they are considered contaminated by the *chindi*. Therefore, as Jett (1996) concludes, “these manifestations of customs new to the Navajo may actually in part reflect the strength of ancient and persistent Athapaskan beliefs rather than adoption of the novel ones” (p. 5).

In addition to this, Christianity seems to be considered a “part-time” religion for most Navajos (Young, 2002, p. 265). Moreover, Christianity, “perceived by many Navajos as just another “way” or ceremonial complex to be added to, and practiced side by side with strictly tribal ones—may be seen as providing practices affording supernatural protection against ghost sickness” (Jett, 1996, p. 5). Furthermore, as Young (2002) asserts, “Today most Navajo remain committed to the traditional ceremonials and the accompanying myths even if they have affiliated with Christian churches, the Native American Church, or other religious communities” (p. 247).

As Gary Santillanes, a funeral director of Alameda Mortuary in Albuquerque, New Mexico reports, Navajo customs surrounding burial are still permeated with traditional ritualistic elements, which serve to ward off evil and protect the living from the malignant influence of ghosts, rather than to provide solace to the mourners. This is how Santillanes (1997) describes the majority of recent Navajo burials that he personally attended:

The following morning, the body is placed on a board covered with another blanket taken to church for a service (the church is on Indian land). The pallbearers are the only ones that can handle or touch the body and the grave. They are kept separate from all other members of the community, and they must be cleansed following the services. The home also will need cleansing, by smoking (the burning of a certain type of plant or bush),
usually done by a medicine man. After the burial, all family members gather for a meal.

[…] First, a Navajo blanket is placed in the casket. The family provides two or more sets of clothing—one to be worn by the deceased, the second to be placed in the casket. Food, water, and items that may have been valuable to the deceased also are placed in the casket. Because of the native beliefs, everything that is made has the spirit of the maker in it [the deceased], and it must be cut or broken in order for the spirit of the maker to be released. […] the items other than the clothes are placed in the casket after the funeral service and prior to the graveside service. […] After the graveside service, we hold a shovel filled with soil and people in attendance walk around the grave counter clockwise\textsuperscript{10} sprinkling the dirt on the casket. […] When the grave is dug it is checked several times that no footprints are left in or around the grave.

Even though there are a number of elements that the Navajo have adopted from the Anglos, such as using a casket, placing the body of the deceased in a graveyard, and sharing a meal with the family members following the burial, it seems that these elements have the function of complementing the traditional ritualistic elements and reinforcing the old beliefs. Moreover, it seems, at least based on this account, that the focus of the ritual is on the separation of the deceased from the community rather than on the incorporation of the survivors.

In more recent months, namely September 2007, a number of news articles were published pertaining to continuous and unaltering participation of the Navajo in the traditional rituals of purification from ghost-contamination. For instance, an article published in \textit{The Christian Science Monitor} on September 13, 2007, states that the Navajo spiritual leader, Alfred Gibson, regularly conducts the \textit{Enemyway} purification ceremony to help Native American soldiers deal

\textsuperscript{10} The mourners are moving counter clockwise following the graveside service, in the direction opposite of that in which the participants in a healing ritual or a purification ceremony would move (clockwise) to demonstrate that the ritual activities performed for the dead are contrary to those performed for the living.
with the posttraumatic stress disorder, while Veterans Affairs hospitals throughout New Mexico currently run special programs for Native American war veterans, which include talking circles, sweat lodge purification ceremonies, and gourd dances.

Moreover, following the violent death of Mia Henderson, a biology freshman and member of the Navajo Nation who was murdered in her room at the University of Arizona’s Graham-Greenlee Residence Hall by a fellow student Galareka Harrison (also a member of the Navajo Nation) in September 2007, a purification ritual was performed in the said Residence Hall. The purpose of the ritual was, as article published by Arizona Daily Wildcat reports, “to help purify the building” following Henderson’s murder. As it is further stated in the article, “The Navajo prayer, cleansing and healing ceremony was led by Thomas Yazzie, a well-known traditional Navajo medicine men.” As Manley Begay, a UA professor of education and American Indian studies and director of the Native Nations Institute for Leadership, Management and Policy stated, “The aim is to restore harmony. It’s a given that a tragedy has occurred in one of the buildings here, and the ceremony is a way to begin to heal the tragedy that has occurred.” Finally, as Lisa Edd, an interdisciplinary studies senior and a member of the Navajo Nation asserted, “The purification ceremony will help students who can’t sleep in case there was some kind of connection with [Henderson]. It helps guide her spirit in the right direction, so that it’s not left to linger around the dorm and haunt other students.” It is clear from this account that in the year 2007 members of the Navajo Nation, even those pursuing university degrees, or those working as university professors, still very much remain committed to their traditional spirituality and engage in the traditional prayers, sings, and purification ceremonies. As Young (2002) concludes, “Today it is clear […] that not only are a significant number of [Navajo] ceremonials very much alive, but also the worldview on which they rest” (p. 269).
Finally, in the subsequent section of the paper I will in a few words tackle the fourth and final research question: What are the similarities, if any between Navajo attitudes towards death and those exhibited by the contemporary (postmodern) American society?

Similarities between Navajo and contemporary American attitudes towards death

Even though it may not seem so at a first glance, there exist some similarities between traditional Navajo and contemporary American attitudes towards death. While death has and continues to represent a breach of hozho or divine harmony for the Navajo, as Morris (1998) states, “Death is a scandal in postmodern times partly because it unmasks the illusion that we can live forever” (p. 15). As Buckman (1992) asserts, “Contemporary society is going through a phase of virtual denial of death. […] At present, the subjects of death and dying are frequently termed “the ultimate obscenity” and “the last taboo,” reflecting, at the very least, the difficulty our society has in talking about dying” (p. 29). In that sense, postmodern American society is not very different from traditional Navajo society—talking about death represents a taboo for both. If we recall the episode of Sex and the City in which Aleksandr Petrovsky, Carrie’s Russian boyfriend, attempts to discuss the possibility of Carrie’s close friend Samantha dying of cancer, and Carrie’s indignation and outrage with Petrovsky for introducing the topic of death into conversation, we can see that this cultural phobia is being introduced into the media as well. If we chose to look at the popular media as the reflection of reality, and take other aforementioned factors into account, we may conclude that, “With the disappearance of the extended family and with dying becoming the province of the doctor and/or institution, most people have lost that sense of continuity and now regard the process of dying as something intrinsically alien and divorced from the business of living” (Buckman, 1992, p. 30). Facilities such as hospices and hospitals, which provide special care for people who are nearing the end, are becoming progressively more desirable places to end one’s life than people’s own homes, and not just for
Navajos but also for their Anglo-American counterparts. Death remains a taboo for the traditional Navajos and it is, it seems, increasingly becoming so for the members of the postmodern American society. The differences between the two are blurred, as death continues to be considered as *hocho* by the Navajo, and gradually becomes a dangerous anomaly (in Mary Douglas’s terms) for the Western society.
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