



## Chapter 5

# Healing Ceremonies among the Navaho

### THE BEAUTYWAY CHANT

The Navaho are the largest group of native Americans in the United States, numbering around one hundred thousand. They live in the Southwest in an eroded plateau country in northwestern New Mexico and northeastern Arizona. They have lived in this area for nearly a thousand years. Initially, they lived by hunting and food gathering, but eventually they adapted to agriculture and animal husbandry. In recent years their economy has been supplemented by work off the reservation and by small industries on the reservation.

Despite increasing accommodation to white culture, the Navahos have preserved to the present day a traditional way of life in which healing ceremonies remain central. These ceremonies, usually referred to as chantways, are among the most impressive expressions of traditional Navaho religion and culture. They incorporate Navaho mythology and symbolism and are almost always concerned with restoring harmony that has been lost as a result of sickness. They are usually undertaken at the request of and for the benefit of an individual Navaho "patient." In this sense, we can think of traditional Navaho culture as having a dominant concern for sickness, health, and healing.

According to the Navaho, illness arises for several reasons. It may be caused by bad dreams containing inauspicious omens such as death, fire, or snakebite. It may arise because of excess in some activity, such as too much sex, hoarding food, wealth, or property, or preoccupation with one thing or person. It may result from ignorance of and transgression against ritual rules. It may come about because of contact with the dead or with something connected with the dead, even dead animals. If a person

comes in contact with a place where an animal was recently killed, for example, he may become ill. The most feared source of sickness (and one of the most common) is witchcraft. The universe of the Navaho contains many things that are harmful. Contact with them can cause disharmony and sickness. Ghosts, certain animals or weather conditions, and even the gods themselves are dangerous in some circumstances and can cause bad luck, illness, or death if the proper rituals, taboos, or ceremonies are not observed or undertaken.<sup>1</sup>

Illness is an indication of imbalance; healing is the restoration of harmony in the sick person. Nearly every danger can be protected against or attenuated with the proper ceremonies, which have been given to human beings by the gods, the Holy People, for just such restorations of harmony. The rituals aim at restoring harmony on a grand, cosmic scale and in the process are effective means for restoring an individual's health. The rituals must be performed correctly in every detail as a precondition for their effectiveness, but if so performed they are understood to be extremely powerful means for reestablishing health and well-being.<sup>2</sup>

Before engaging a Navaho singer to perform a chantway, the sick person or his or her family must determine the cause and nature of the illness to determine if a chantway is called for and, if so, which chantway is most appropriate. The cause of illness is usually determined by divination. The diviner often asks many questions about the patient's (and the family's) recent activities to find out if misconduct or breach of taboo is involved. The diviner will then perform a divination ritual for a clue to the cause of the disease. Certain images, symbols, or omens indicate the particular cause of illness and imply which chantway is the most appropriate cure.<sup>3</sup>

Navaho chantways are extremely complex and may take as many as nine days to perform, so chanters only know one or two. Although as many as forty-three names of different chantways have been recorded from Navaho informants, only about ten are well known and performed today.<sup>4</sup> The Navaho chanter is a master of ritual and must have a prodigious memory to learn a chantway. Doing so has been compared to the task of memorizing a complete opera of Wagner, including the part for each instrument, every vocal part, the staging, and the costuming.<sup>5</sup> Increasingly, it is difficult to find chanters who know the chantways, and most competent chanters are now quite old. Having determined the appropriate chantway to be performed for the particular patient, and having found a chanter who knows and is willing to perform it, the stage is set for an ancient and dramatic Navaho religious event.

The healing ceremony takes place at the patient's own hogan. The chanter may have assistants, and in addition to the patient and his or her family the ceremony as a public event may attract and involve hundreds of people, who will join in the singing and chanting at certain points in the ceremony. Navaho chantways are sometimes divided into Holyway and Evilway types of ceremonies. The theme of attracting goodness and holiness is dominant in the former type of chantway, and exorcising evil dominates the latter type of ceremony. Both themes, attracting good and expelling evil, however, are evident in nearly all Navaho chantways. As representative of a Holyway chant, let us look at the main ceremonies that constitute the performance of the Beautyway chant.

Much of the performance is done at night and may take as many as nine nights to complete. The priest-singer who organizes and performs the Beautyway chant begins by sacralizing the patient's hogan. He (most of the singers are males) does this by placing cornmeal and sprigs of oak on the roof beams to mark the four quarters. Thus the patient's home is marked off as an appropriate place for the Holy People to visit and bring about healing. The home becomes an altar, as it were, where sacred ceremonies will be performed, where divine presences will appear, and where mythological events will be reenacted.

The patient is also purified so that the Holy People will be attracted to the place. The Holy People dislike impurity and will not respond to the priest-chanter's summons if participants have not been purified. The patient is purified by sweat and emetic rituals and on the last day by a yucca-root suds bath. The sweat and emetic rituals are done every day of the ceremony to keep the patient (and sometimes other participants) in a state of high purity. These rituals take an hour or two to complete. According to the Navaho, one can expel impurity, which is strongly associated with illness, by sweating or vomiting it out. A huge fire is kindled with a fire stick (denoting archaic purity) and the patient bundled in heavy blankets to induce sweating. At the same time he or she is given an emetic to induce vomiting. After these rituals, the priest-chanter sprinkles the patient with a fragrant lotion.

At an early point in the performance, the priest-singer unravels his sacred bundle, which contains the necessary ritual objects, and sets up prayer sticks, which are decorated in colorful fashion. This signals to the Holy People that a healing ceremony is about to begin and that their presence is desired. In setting out his holy objects, the singer also begins the construction of a sacred microcosm that will contain the essential components and powers of the cosmos at large. Divine powers will be concentrated within this potent area for the benefit of the patient. In some of the longer ceremonies, an elaborate sand painting is constructed later on to enhance and intensify the theme of constructing sacred space.

From an early point in the performance, the priest-singer (sometimes accompanied by his assistants and others present) chants hymns, prayers, and excerpts from Navaho mythology. This continues throughout the ceremony more or less non-stop. These chants are often aimed at visualizing certain Navaho gods. By describing and invoking these deities in detailed, repetitive chants, the singer gradually identifies himself with the deity and thereby makes the deity present. An example of an excerpt from such a chant is as follows:

O Male God!

With your moccasins of dark cloud, come to us.

With your leggings of dark cloud, come to us,

With your shirt of dark cloud, come to us,

With your head-dress of dark cloud, come to us.

With your mind enveloped in dark cloud, come to us.

With the dark thunder above you, come to us soaring.

With the shaped cloud at your feet, come to us soaring.

With the far darkness made of the dark cloud over your head, come to us soaring.  
 With the far darkness made of the he-rain over your head, come to us soaring.  
 With the far darkness made of the dark mist over your head, come to us soaring.  
 With the far darkness made of the she-rain over your head, come to us soaring.  
 With the zigzag lightning flung out on high over your head, come to us soaring.  
 With the rainbow hanging high over your head, come to us soaring.

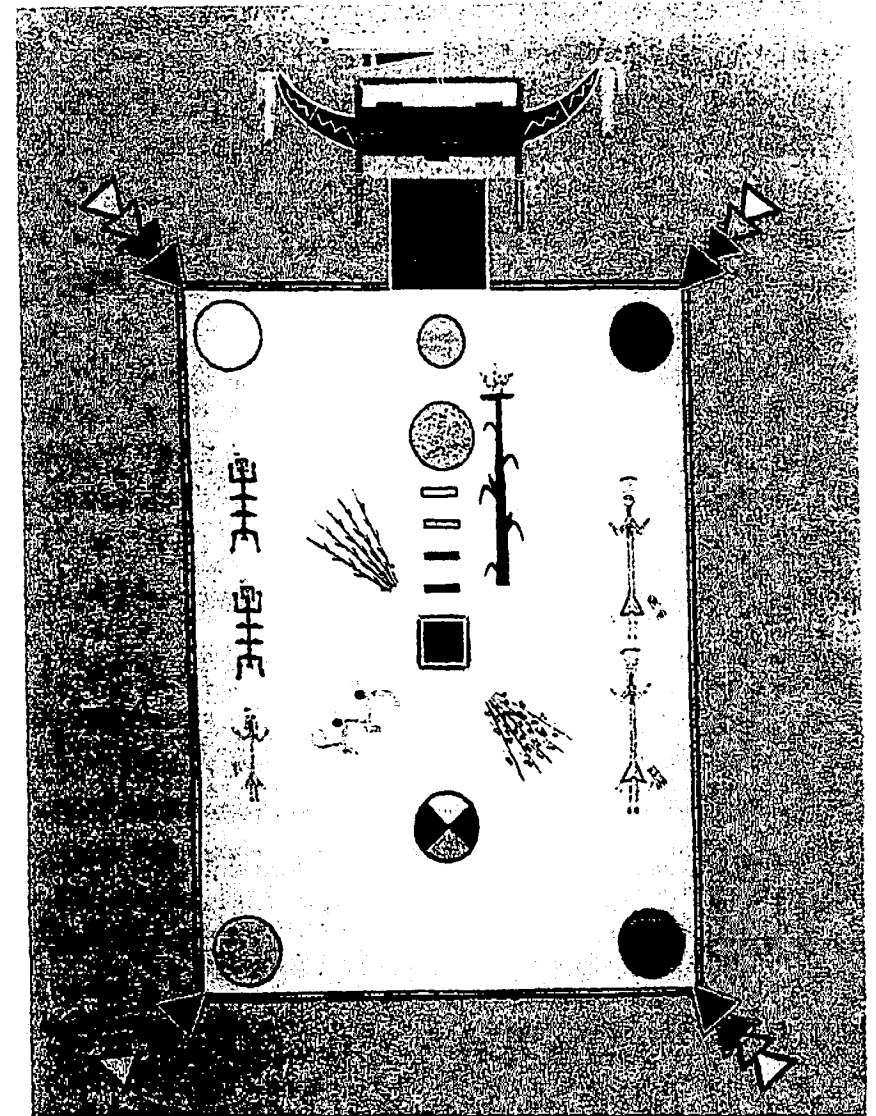
With the far darkness made of the dark cloud on the ends of your wings, come to us soaring.  
 With the far darkness made of the he-rain on the ends of your wings, come to us soaring.  
 With the far darkness made of the dark mist on the ends of your wings, come to us soaring.  
 With the far darkness made of the she-rain on the ends of your wings, come to us soaring.

With the zigzag lightning flung out on high on the ends of your wings, come to us soaring.  
 With the rainbow hanging high on the ends of your wings, come to us soaring.  
 With the near darkness made of the dark cloud, of the he-rain, of the dark mist, and of the she-rain, come to us.  
 With the darkness on the earth, come to us.<sup>6</sup>

Offerings are also made to the Holy People throughout the chant in order to please and attract them. The usual offerings are tobacco, cornmeal, and prayer sticks. These are set out at various places around the hogan.

Throughout the long Beautyway chant, nearly every action is accompanied by singing. The priest-chanter leads these songs by shaking a rattle, and anyone who knows the songs is invited to join in, which many do (usually men). The Beautyway chant requires the priest to know hundreds of songs. At certain points in the chant, the participants eat small amounts of corn pollen and inhale smoke made by putting herbs on a fire. Medicines are also taken from special, ritual cups made of abalone or tortoise shell. Sometimes a bullroarer is swung around to make the noise of thunder.<sup>7</sup>

Perhaps the most dramatic part of the Beautyway chant takes place when the patient is placed on the elaborate, delicate sandpainting, which depicts an appropriate Navaho deity or some event in Navaho mythology. This "painting" is made with pinches of colored sand by the priest-chanter or an assistant. As it is highly perishable, it is mostly obliterated when the patient is placed upon it. At this point in the



**Blessingway, the White Spirit Land. Sandpainting.** Courtesy of the Wheelwright Museum of the American Indian, P1. 17.

chant, however, the aim is to identify the patient with the sacred figures depicted in the painting. As the figures in the painting are obliterated, they are transferred to the patient.

Accessory rites may be incorporated into the Beautyway chant (or any other

chant) at the request of the patient. An example is the Shock rite. This involves the ritual eating of cornmeal mush or a meat and herb stew. The rite is intended to lend the patient stability in the presence of powerful, supernatural things that are made present in every chantway or with which the patient may have come in contact prior to the chant. The rite is supposed to give the patient confidence.

## CENTRAL THEMES

Two themes central to healing in traditional cultures are clearly expressed in the Navaho chantways.

1. An important preoccupation in these ceremonies is purification. The sweat and emetic rituals are done daily, and a more elaborate bath is undertaken near the end of the chant. A main aim of the ceremony seems to be achieving cleanliness or purity. The emphasis on bathing reiterates Navaho mythology. When the first human beings emerged from the earth, the Holy People required them to bathe to rid themselves of offensive odors. Odors offensive to the Holy People are associated with impurity, the profane, and ugliness and are assiduously combated in Navaho chantways.

The Navaho also believe that illness is caused when sorcerers shoot arrows into the victim's flesh. These arrows are impure and polluting. They can be removed by means of sweating. Fasting is also employed as a way of preparing oneself to be visited by the Holy People or purifying oneself to receive their healing power. Sometimes these fasts last twenty-four hours and include total abstinence from food. Sexual abstinence may also be observed. In general, the restraint of normal bodily functions is part of a process that aims at purifying the individual and making him or her receptive to divine healing power. Before the gods will bestow this power, the patient must first become a clean, pure, holy vessel. For the Navaho, healing involves the expulsion of dirt and the ingestion of purity.

2. Another important theme, suggested in the emphasis on purification, is attracting the holy and identifying with the gods. Attracting the holy is partly accomplished by re-creating the world during the ceremonies. The long, detailed Navaho creation myth tells of the gradual creation of the world. To restore harmony, beauty, and health, this myth is reiterated in the ceremony, and the world is ritually re-created—fresh, harmonious, beautiful, without flaw. As part of the re-creation, the patient is restored also. Particularly in the Holyway chants, there is also a strong emphasis on summoning the gods to the ceremony to infuse their healing powers into all involved, especially the patient. The priest-chanters themselves identify with the gods by invoking them in their repetitive chants and reiterating their deeds in Navaho mythology. The theme of identifying the patient with the gods is concretely dramatized in the part of the ceremony employing the sandpainting. In deliberate, detailed ritual gestures the patient is identified with the deity depicted in the painting. The priest-chanter, for example, takes pinches of sand from the limbs of the painted deity and applies the sand to the corresponding parts of the patient's body. When the ritual is complete, the painting has been transferred to the patient. The patient has

become the painting; the painting has become the patient. The patient has entered the sphere of the Holy People, has entered the spirit world, and has there found harmony and healing.

The overall aim of Navaho chantways is to restore harmony, typically referred to as beauty, to a particular person. This person may be suffering from a severe illness, but not necessarily. It is common, for example, for a person who has been away from the Navaho traditional territory for a long time to undertake such a chantway to restore her balance. A person who has committed violent deeds or distasteful actions might feel that he has lost his inner, essential harmony. When young Navaho men return from United States military service, for example, they often undergo a chantway to restore their inner harmony. Sickness is interpreted as a symptom of a deeper malaise, being in disharmony with the cosmic and moral order. An important part of a Navaho chantway involves the patients themselves affirming that this harmony has been restored. As in most other cultures, it is important for the patient to affirm for him- or herself that health has been restored, that he or she is "feeling better." At the conclusion of the Navaho chantways, then, the patient testifies that things are better, that beauty has, indeed, been restored. The following is an example of such an affirmation:

In the house of long life, there I wander.  
In the house of happiness, there I wander.  
Beauty before me, with it I wander.  
Beauty behind me, with it I wander.  
Beauty below me, with it I wander.  
Beauty above me, with it I wander.  
Beauty all around me, with it I wander.  
In old age traveling, with it I wander.  
I am on the beautiful trail, with it I wander.<sup>8</sup>

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Gladys Reichard, *Navaho Religion: A Study of Symbolism* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1950), p. 82.

<sup>2</sup>Bernard Haile, Maud Oakes, Laura A. Armer, Franc J. Newcomb, and Leland C. Wyman, *Beautyway: A Navaho Ceremonial* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1957), p. 6.

<sup>3</sup>Reichard, p. 99.

<sup>4</sup>Haile et al., p. 13.

<sup>5</sup>Bert Kaplan and Dale Johnson, "The Social Meaning of Navaho Psychopathology and Psychotherapy," in Ari Kiev (ed.), *Magic, Faith, and Healing: Studies in Primitive Psychiatry Today* (New York: Free Press, 1964), p. 223.

<sup>6</sup>Donald Sandner, *Navaho Symbols of Healing: A Jungian Exploration of Ritual, Image, and Medicine* (Rochester, Vt.: Healing Arts Press, 1979), pp. 89-90.

<sup>7</sup>Haile et al., pp. 9-10.

<sup>8</sup>Sandner, pp. 64-65.

HEALTH, HEALING,  
AND RELIGION  
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