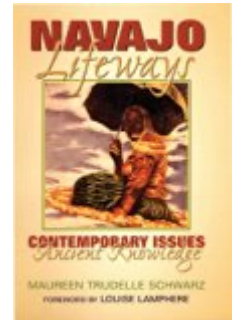


**Maureen Trudelle Schwarz.** *Navajo Lifeways: Contemporary Issues, Ancient Knowledge.* Foreword by Louise Lamphere. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2001. xv + 265 pp. \$29.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8061-3310-2.



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Synecdoche, Homology, and Complementarity  
in Navajo Contemporary Life

In *Navajo Lifeways: Contemporary Issues, Ancient Knowledge*, Maureen Trudelle Schwarz provides a sensitive account of how Navajo spirituality affects the interpretation of our largest Native population's response to contemporary events. This useful volume should be required reading for government entities with regulatory authority over the Navajo Nation. The insights presented provide a foundation for understanding how governmental actions may affect Navajo people and a basis for reaching solutions that do not violate their human or Constitutional rights.

The information is largely imparted in a first-person narrative style that I found refreshing. Interchanging the terms oral tradition and oral history as references to Navajo creation stories causes some confusion, especially as Schwarz uses oral history interviews from her fieldwork to support her views. Additionally, the anthropological lexicon employed sent me to the dictionary repeatedly and only after completing the book did I feel I had fully grasped her meaning. Preparing

the six essays in book form, Schwarz notes, was in response to an awareness that some of them were used as readings in multiple disciplines. Thus, standardization of terminology and a move away from the anthropological lexicon would make the book more accessible.

Generally, Schwarz accomplishes what she has set out to do. She shows how concepts central to Navajo philosophy—homology ("parts share similar structure"), complementarity ("wholes are made up of dual integrated components"), and synecdoche ("every part is equivalent to the whole, so that anything done to or by means of a part is held to have influence upon the whole")<sup>[1]</sup>—affect Navajo interpretations of historical events. Louise Lamphere's foreword states that "history" is necessarily biased, partial, and culturally ordered. Thus, as we read, we should do so with the understanding that Navajos consider their creation stories historical fact and that their interpretations of events are appropriate within their world view and oral tradition.

The first essay deals with the hantavirus outbreak of 1993. While government agencies inves-

tigating the illness turned to science to determine that the excreta of mice was the source of the disease, Navajo elders consider "mice...to be 'bearers of illness from ancient times if the two worlds mingle'"[2]. A Navajo medicine man stated that "We didn't have to wait for scientists to tell us what happened....We brought it upon ourselves"[3] by not following the teachings of the Holy People.[4]

In the case of the Navajo relocation from Hopi Partitioned Lands from 1974-1999 (Chapter Two), Schwarz notes that the bitterness felt by Navajo individuals who were relocated or threatened by the prospect of relocation were deeply concerned because their concept of "personhood" extends to bodily substances (specifically umbilical cords of their children buried in the area, but also to bodily secretions, nail parings, hair clippings, etc.) that literally tie them to the land of their birth within the Navajo system of spirituality. Their adherence to the Holy People's instructions on how to live (including staying close to their birth places and within "Navajo sacred space," the area marked by the four sacred mountains: Blanca Peak [east], Mount Taylor [south], San Francisco Peaks [west] and Hesperus Peak [north])"[5] is necessary for their world to continue. As one informant explained, "Relocation is not the Navajo way and is in contradiction to Changing Woman's Law. ...It is physical, spiritual, and cultural genocide."[6]

The Holy Visit of 1996 (Chapter three) discusses a resurgence in the practice of Navajo spiritual traditions, brought about by a visit from the Holy People. As the teachings of the Holy People reveal, such a visit is not a good sign. Its purpose was to impress on the Navajo their responsibility for living within the teachings--including making offerings and holding ceremonies. Many Navajo made pilgrimages sanctioned by Navajo Nation officials through the granting of leave time for that purpose to the location of the visit. "In essence, these people went to Rocky Ridge because they were seeking a new sensibility...of the altering Navajo

world....The apocalyptic nature of the message is clear...that if Navajo people continue on the path they seem to have chosen [abandonment of the teachings of the Holy People]...the world as they know it will cease to exist."[7]

Chapters four and five again deal with the concept of synecdoche, central to the Navajo concept of personhood, about which Schwarz wrote an earlier volume.[8] In "Snakes in the Ladies Room" (Chapter Four), she details Navajo women's concerns that snakes, powerful entities in Navajo cosmology in both positive and negative ways (and also having personhood or structure in the same sense as humans [homology]), might affect the health of the women with whose bodily secretions and excreta they came into contact in a public building. Chapter Five, "Activism through Emotional Expression," shows that while crying in public, particularly in mourning deaths in the family, is taboo within the Navajo understanding, it could also be a form of activism. Women who lost family members as a result of lack of information on the dangers inherent in the uranium mining industry (which employed many Navajo laborers from 1947 to 1971) could use crying with intent and as a form of activism. Through sharing tears (bodily fluids) with strangers, they attempted to influence persons witnessing their grief.[9]

The last chapter illuminates the role of problem drinking as a feature of complementarity in Navajo philosophy. Schwarz holds that previous anthropological texts have mislead us regarding the Navajo concept of wholeness and harmony central to their way of life. John Farella is cited in this regard: anthropological texts about Navajo concepts of harmony and duality have tended to place "good" and "evil" in opposition. This, he contends, is syncretic, i.e., they have attempted to combine or reconcile Navajo concepts of duality and harmony with Euro-American understandings.[10] Schwarz suggests that the Navajo understanding of harmony encompasses both positive and negative, which allows Navajo people with

relatives who have severe drinking problems to accept it as part of the duality that shapes their world. Extreme alcohol abuse reduces such individuals' personhood to the degree that they experience "social death," making it possible for their families to mourn them and to accept such traumas as manifestations of the duality that constitutes wholeness and therefore, harmony.[11]

Overall, the book is enjoyable reading, and I closed it feeling that I had gained understanding of Navajo behaviors. Use of the anthropological lexicon does, however, limit its accessibility in some regards. Additionally, some of the chapters intertwine multiple themes and therefore, seem to be attempting to accomplish too much.

Schwarz provides a glossary of Navajo terms, and her endnotes are organized by chapters and by headers identifying where the numbered notes appear. There are no illustrations. A twenty-page bibliography is organized in sections for publications, recordings, and interviews and correspondence, including e-mail. An index including references to endnotes is provided.

#### Endnotes

[1]. These three concepts "... structure the relationships of parts to the whole ... in the Navajo origin story" (p.46).

[2]. Attributed to unidentified Navajo elders. Navajo go to some lengths to keep mice out of the home, and in the old days, even burnt clothing that may have been soiled by mouse saliva or excreta, as it was believed they could transmit illness through the air and upon contact (p. 36).

[3]. Ernest Becenti, Church Rock, N.M. (p. 37).

[4]. Attributed to unidentified Navajo elders (p. 38).

[5]. Aileen O'Bryan, *The Dine: Origin Myths of the Navaho Indians* (p. 187).

[6]. Mervyn Tilden, Church Rock, N.M. (p. 63).

[7]. Schwarz' interpretation of the message of the Holy People (p. 109).

[8]. Maureen Trudelle Schwarz. *Molded in the Image of Changing Woman: Navajo Views on the Human Body and Personhood*, 1997.

[9]. Schwarz and her informants discuss expressions of grief through tears and tears' importance as a manifestation of the principle of synecdoche in Navajo philosophy (pp. 134-137, 151).

[10]. John Farella. *The Main Stalk: A Synthesis of Navajo Philosophy* (p. 166).

[11]. Gary Witherspoon. "Holism in Navajo Language and Culture" (p. 178).

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