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## Book Reviews

**Language and Art in the Navajo Universe.** By Gary Witherspoon. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1979. 214 pp. pap. \$7.95

Gary Witherspoon's second book, *Language and Art in the Navajo Universe*, is a continuation of the work begun in his 1975 *Navajo Kinship and Marriage*. These two works and his articles on Navajo social organization, semantic categories, and world view are being slowly forged into what Clifford Geertz calls "a major oeuvre." Witherspoon has spent 15 years living with the Navajos and working in Navajo communities—never solely as an anthropological researcher, but as a missionary, teacher, or school administrator. One very relevant result of this is that none of his knowledge of the culture has been gained from interviews with "native informants." He has learned the culture as an interested non-scholar would learn: by participation, conversation, and by listening as the language is used.

Witherspoon's academic training at the University of Chicago is apparent in his assumptions and methodology. In the tradition of Gladys Reichard, to whom his book is dedicated, Witherspoon attempts to explain and make comprehensible the metaphysical assumptions which underlie all Navajo culture. With only an occasional lapse into romanticism—he clearly sees the Navajo as superior—Witherspoon analyzes the language and the art of the Navajo to isolate those assumptions about reality which form Navajo perception. He is representative of a growing, systematic approach to ethnography which sees reality as an imaginative construction formed by (and explained by) the metaphysics of myth, religion, and language for each culture.

The assumptions of *Language and Art in the Navajo Universe* are explicitly stated. Using transformational-generative grammar as his simile, Witherspoon assumes that

just as the surface structure of a given sentence is generated by a set of operations at the deep structural level, concepts of and orientation to the world (that which is described in a world view portrait) emanate from deeper

level metaphysical assumptions. All conceptual schemes have to start with one or more assumptions from which the whole scheme is ultimately derived. All things that make a people's customs rational and sensible to them and intelligible to others are founded on these primary assumptions.

Witherspoon pursues these assumptions through conversations with Navajo philosophers, through analysis of Navajo behavior, and through the methods of philology. It is as a philologist that he is most impressive. He is able to define central assumptions by isolating and defining key words in the Navajo language, never defining, though, by resorting to mere gloss or comparison to English. Each Navajo word is defined by tracing its meaning in myth and ritual, or by showing the word in context after context, these contexts almost always conversational, seldom mere answers in an anthropologist's interview.

For example, in discussing kinship terms Witherspoon shows that earlier investigators, such as Freed and Freed (1970) were misled by assuming that an informant's first response is the term he would always use for a certain genealogical relationship. In fact, Navajos may use several kinship terms for a specified relationship, depending on the circumstance. Placing the polysemy of kinship terms against several of the myths of the Earth Mother allows Witherspoon to demonstrate that the pattern of kinship terms is much more complicated than previously assumed, composed of a static category of terms which is invariable and an active category, which is constantly changing to describe actual behavioral relationships.

Similarly, the infamously complicated conceptual categorization of nouns is deduced from grammatical relationship and syntactic constraints as used in daily Navajo conversations. Clarifying variables such as animateness, shape, size, and degree of cohesiveness, etc., Witherspoon shows that there are 225 categories possible, with 102 lexical labels. He then shows, by reference to the Navajo emergence myth and other stories, that 102 is an important number in Navajo culture, perhaps based upon the notion that the sun's cycle contains 102 phases.

Throughout his discussion, Witherspoon demonstrates that the primary distinction—"metaphysical assumption"—behind semantic and grammatical classificational schemes is the opposition of the static and the active. Other emphases in the language, behav-

ior and values of the Navajo which Witherspoon constantly demonstrates are on creativity, control, order, and harmony.

This is an ethnographer placed as deeply inside a target culture as it is probable that one will ever be. The amount of evidence marshalled for these positions and hypotheses is overwhelming, and fascinating in its variety of sources. The inductive technique of presenting the problem in all its detail first and then working through to the clarifying hypothesis is honest certainly, but makes difficult reading for any less than scholarly audience.

And this book should receive a wider audience, since it exemplifies a wholly sympathetic and intelligent approach to a different culture. This is no entirely new approach, and its very thorough application to the Navajo culture seems promising. But the search for metaphysical deep structures can be frustrating; Witherspoon's explanation of Navajo color categories never quite settles down into a final satisfying form as do his other schemata. It is futile, of course, to expect color symbolism to yield a simple code, but Witherspoon's citing of myths and ritual here only complicates the set of phenomena for which he seeks an explanation.

The section which applies these discovered classification schemes to Navajo sand painting is probably the weakest section of *Language and Art*. Witherspoon's discussion adds little that cannot be found in the two earlier studies of Navajo art, Mills (1959) and Hatcher (1974). In fact, though neither of these studies involves extensive fieldwork or relies on any very intimate knowledge of Navajo culture, Witherspoon quotes from them at some length to support his discussion. This is not to imply that his method is wrong; that Mills and Hatcher used the traditional methods of the art critic to arrive at conclusions compatible with Witherspoon may prove the soundness of his methods. But it also demonstrates that the informed and engaged ethnographer may not be able to shed new light on the study of art. The method, however, does have much to offer in the study of language; this book is proof that the early promise of this ethnography is being fulfilled, and I anticipate its successful use in other problematical areas.

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