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# The Circulation and Silence of Weaving Knowledge in Contemporary Navajo Life

*Jill Ahlberg Yohe*

Weaving knowledge and practices are shaping contemporary discussions of personhood and belonging in Navajo communities. This article explores the circulation and management of weaving knowledge in a Navajo community and how these activities inform aspects of community and self. Drawing upon several years of ethnographic fieldwork in this community, I illustrate ways in which keeping and sharing weaving knowledge communicates specific understandings about exchange and reciprocity, ideas about cultural patrimony, inalienable knowledge, and connections between weaving knowledge and personal and moral character. Based in a particular Navajo context, this case study contributes to a growing body of work in anthropology and the study of indigenous material culture that seeks to understand the multiple roles that aesthetic knowledge and practices play in contemporary Native communities. In this specific case, circulating and preventing the circulation of certain kinds of knowledge often provides opportunities for various community members—weavers and non-weavers alike—to participate in the exchange of ideas, ideas which are often at the heart of ongoing discussions of what it means for many people to be Navajo today.

Understanding weaving knowledge as an active part of social life shifts the study of Navajo textiles in significant ways. Earlier studies of Navajo weaving

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offer a rich and varied body of work that often concentrate on one or more of the following areas of research: (1) understanding textiles in terms of form, style, and technique;<sup>1</sup> (2) focusing on the relationship between Navajo weaving and worldview, cosmology and philosophy;<sup>2</sup> and (3) uncovering the wider economic, market, political, and cultural forces that shape weaving production throughout history.<sup>3</sup> Less attention is often paid to weaving knowledge as it moves and circulates within communities. While important ethnographic research documents the transmission of weaving practices and knowledge in learning contexts,<sup>4</sup> few scholars examine other contexts in which many community members—weavers and non-weavers—exchange this knowledge in particular ways.<sup>5</sup>

On this last point, it is important to note that weaving knowledge is not something that is static, nor is there a singular “Navajo perspective” that all Navajo people share. Knowledge is specific to the people and the social worlds in which it lives. One of the most consistent themes that emerged throughout the course of my ethnographic fieldwork was variability and the many ways that people interpret, use, understand, and have access to certain kinds of weaving knowledge. While many community members may understand important weaving knowledge in the form of “traditional” stories or in the “teachings” I describe in this article, others who have different levels of familiarity and access to this knowledge may interpret and use it in different ways. At times, circulation of knowledge takes place when individuals transmit weaving technique and skill to others. On other occasions, knowledge circulation can offer a context for multiple viewpoints, offering different levels of engagement and participation by a range of people within the community to take part in the exchange of ideas connected to weaving.

Primarily I discuss weaving knowledge that community members call “weaving teachings” and “weaving taboos,” or the “dos and don’ts of weaving.” Taboos are short and evocatively rich directives to guide behavior and can be followed by an explanation of what might occur if the taboo is broken. For instance, one taboo states that to respect the power of weaving tools and the weaving process, the weaver is never to leave weaving tools within a loom. Another common taboo is to weave only in the daytime and to cover the loom at night. By following the taboo the weaver can avoid danger that could enter a textile in the dark of night, which has the potential to affect the weaver’s wellbeing. Many times, taboos are viewed as practical guidelines rather than explicit moral codes, usually taken as statements of fact and read at a surface level rather than analyzed for their deeper meanings. At the same time, they can also be conceptualized more abstractly as a set of rules given by supernatural beings, the *Diyin Diné*, or Navajo Holy People, that provide knowledge of the proper way to care for and treat weaving objects and the weaving practice.

“Teachings,” in contrast to taboos, are set down in more elaborate narratives, and are often based on personal experience or traditional stories. Like taboos, teachings also direct and guide persons toward the proper treatment and care of weaving items to maintain individual health and harmony.

Many of the classic studies of Navajo textiles emphasize the importance of understanding the interconnections between weaving and all other aspects of social life. Weaving unites local modes of kinship to political economies, and subsistence strategies to the cosmological and moral spheres. Weavers and scholars frequently relate how the economics of weaving is not only connected to commerce or the marketplace, but also to valued ways of making a living and a practice that embodies personal and moral growth, self-sufficiency, and industriousness.<sup>6</sup> In some instances, weaving knowledge and practices become expressions and performances of cosmological and traditional narratives, bolstering personal and moral character. This article, therefore, examines weaving knowledge in terms of how stories, teachings, and taboos come alive and meaningful through moments of circulation.<sup>7</sup> The study of exchange and circulation in Native North American communities has become an increasingly valuable vantage point to examine the specific ways that indigenous communities share and keep knowledge and material items for local and national consumption, a process that resignifies aesthetic objects, traditions, and knowledge today.<sup>8</sup>

This article offers a particular ethnographic case study to build upon this work and contribute to the broader discussion in the study of indigenous art and practice. In doing this, I draw upon two key insights in the study of exchange and circulation in the history of anthropology: *reciprocity* and *inalienability*. At their most basic level, reciprocal exchanges are ideally based on equivalence: the giver and recipient of the exchange are to give and receive something of mutual benefit. Because reciprocal exchanges emphasize balance and mutuality, they can promote and enhance social ties. Studies within Native North America and elsewhere indicate that reciprocal transactions can occur between humans and a series of beings, including other humans, animals, the landscape, and the celestial world.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, the give-and-take that occurs between these beings may not always be an exchange between peers; reciprocity often involves social persons with different levels of power and influence. What is most important in these kinds of transactions, and for the case I present below, is not the equality between participants, but rather the idea of a reciprocal and mutually beneficial exchange.

Reciprocal exchanges are central to understanding the circulation of weaving taboos. Weaving taboos are often conceptualized as being a set of laws exchanged by the Holy People, knowledge that maintains a state of *hózhó*, which broadly translates as a state of well-being, harmony, order, and health.<sup>10</sup>

By following these taboos, individuals maintain a state of *hózhó* that will help to create a successful weaving environment. In order to complete this reciprocal exchange, the weaver then gives back to the Holy People by implementing these teachings in her own life. Both parties are dependent on the other and the reciprocal exchange: the Diyin Diné depend on Nihokáá Diné, or Earth Surface People, to follow their teachings to perpetuate a state of *hózhó* within the universe, and individuals equally depend on these teachings for health and harmony.<sup>11</sup>

Viewing taboos as a series of reciprocal exchanges, therefore, presents a radical departure from viewing taboos as either dusty old subjects in the anthropological past, ideas that are mere archaic superstitions, or as systems of classification and a way of ordering the world outside of everyday interactions. The focus of much of the earlier anthropological research on taboos is on content and classification (sacred/profane, pure/polluted, for example), and often presents such knowledge as static conceptual categories that exist outside of specific social and historical contexts.<sup>12</sup> More contemporary work on taboos examines restrictions on hunting, food, the body, and menstruation in relation to wider social contexts and systems. Few scholars examine the central role taboos continue to play in contemporary aesthetic practices.<sup>13</sup> While certain community members may sometimes conceptualize Navajo weaving taboos as relatively unchanging and complete, they are not understood as static doctrines, mere superstitions, or relics of the past. For many in the community where I worked, these taboos are a part of living systems of knowledge, elements of a much wider set of distinctive cosmological understandings and social systems that continue to be lived and enacted by contemporary Navajo people.

While reciprocity guides the exchange of weaving taboos, notions of *alienability* and *inalienability* inform the circulation and withholding of certain weaving “teachings” within Navajo communities. The fundamental difference between alienability and inalienability, as noted by a range of scholars such as Marx, Mauss, and Weiner, is between detachment and connection: alienability implies separateness and detachment, while inalienability involves attachment and permanence.<sup>14</sup> Because of their more deep and lasting connections to people, inalienable objects, knowledge, and practices often carry more prestige and value than their alienable counterparts, and often are more carefully kept and guarded. To understand how Navajo people carefully manage certain weaving teachings, notions of inalienability are critical. Acts of circulating and withholding teachings considered to be inalienable are opportunities for weavers and community members to convey to others ideas about inalienable cultural patrimony and, sometimes, ideas and practices that are part of what makes Navajo people distinct.

The awareness that knowledge can be conceptualized as inalienable and as cultural patrimony profoundly shaped the direction of my own work. As a non-Native white anthropologist working in a Navajo community, my role was not to document the content of information that may be deemed inalienable, but rather to identify the circulation and systems of exchange that managed inalienable knowledge as cultural patrimony. While some teachings can and do circulate widely—including the widely shared “hand” teaching I discuss below—other teachings are considered inalienable and are to be kept from general circulation. In order to illuminate how inalienable knowledge is managed in this particular case study, and to illustrate how silence prevents the transfer of inherently powerful knowledge to others in a Navajo context, I draw upon the insights of Keith Basso’s analysis of silence in a Western Apache community. In situations of ambiguity and uncertainty, silence becomes a mechanism by which participants keep inalienable knowledge from circulating, providing an opportunity to establish and maintain cultural distinctiveness, and to preserve and sustain community identity and well-being.

Weaving knowledge continues to take on additional meanings in contemporary life, and all the activities surrounding taboos and teachings described in this paper occur in the present. With fewer people who rely on weaving as a primary source of income or as a daily practice, for many community members weaving holds a prominent place as a symbol of traditional Navajo lifeways and of Navajo culture more generally. Whether or not they are weavers, sharing taboos and keeping silent with respect to certain kinds of weaving knowledge has become a productive way for many community members to activate and present aspects of their identity as Navajo people. In addition to providing necessary information about remaining in harmony and balance within the Navajo universe, it is equally important for individuals to know when and to whom one can pass these teachings and how to manage this information effectively in various social situations. The orchestration of sharing and withholding weaving knowledge offers individuals opportunities to display their command of knowledge that remains connected to valued moral and personal qualities, as well as aspects of tradition that have become increasingly valued in today’s world.

## ETHNOGRAPHIC CONTEXT

To illuminate the instrumentality of weaving taboos and teachings in this article, I draw upon a much broader ethnographic study that examines the meaningful practices related to weaving, including the circulation of weaving-related objects and knowledge in a contemporary Navajo community. From

2003 to 2007, I lived and worked in St. Michaels, Arizona, conducting ethnographic research on the ways in which weaving items and knowledge are used by a variety of people in the Navajo community—weavers, non-weavers, cultural specialists, and community members—in both established and novel ways.<sup>15</sup> I was able to participate in and observe social life in a variety of contexts, both daily life and activities during special events, and conducted informal and formal interviews with weavers and non-weavers. I was particularly interested in everyday activities and ongoing conversations about weaving, finding that teachings and taboos are not marked for occasions for formal instruction or in interview settings separate from everyday talk, but most often embedded within friendly conversations.<sup>16</sup>

St. Michaels is located just west of Window Rock, Arizona, the capital of the Navajo Nation. St. Michaels is a community with more than 6,000 people; the wider Navajo Nation is home to more than 250,000. Located in the Four Corners area of the Southwest, the Navajo Nation covers more than 27,000 square miles and is the largest Native nation within the United States. *Diné Bikéyah*, or Navajo land that extends beyond the Navajo Nation borders that were created by the United States government, is protected and secured by the four sacred mountains, encompassing a large area of land that covers much of the northeast quadrant of Arizona, the southeastern portion of Utah and southwestern area of Colorado, and the eastern side of New Mexico. Navajo also live on land directly outside of Navajo Nation lands, including what is known as the Checkerboard area in western New Mexico, the bordering towns of Gallup and Farmington, and a few satellite Navajo communities. Many have ties to Albuquerque, Flagstaff, Tucson, and Phoenix, nearby metropolitan areas where there are more opportunities for employment, higher education, and urban life.

This geographic area contains a Navajo social organization that is still based on extended family and strong matrilineal ties, but is also flexible. Navajo social organization is largely centered on matrilineality and matrilocal residence; that is, living situations are often composed of extended family units with a grandmother, a mother, and her children. Anthropologists who have worked with Navajo people sometimes use the word *camp* to describe these arrangements. Individuals can also live with their *náltí*, their paternal grandmother and grandfather, or move into nuclear family households. This flexibility is evident in my own research experience. Many people live near their mother, but others live in separate households, such as Window Rock housing, or move to cities such as Albuquerque or Phoenix, either temporarily or on a more permanent basis. Still, ties with one's maternal and paternal kin remain strong, and it is through these primary relationships that many Navajo learn how to weave, and where the transmission and exchange of weaving knowledge most commonly occurs.

In economic terms, community members are a part of the predominant mixed subsistence pattern associated with Navajo society, in which a variety of economic opportunities and resources are utilized. Most households receive income from multiple sources, including full-time employment by the Navajo Nation in nearby Window Rock, in local hospitals and schools, part-time waged work at local stores and restaurants, and various forms of public assistance. To varying degrees St. Michaels residents are also a part of the wider national economic landscape. Most St. Michaels families have several family members who work seasonally or year-round in nearby cities and border towns, places where professional jobs as well as employment in construction and the service sector are more readily available than in more remote areas of the Navajo Nation.

The production and sale of arts and crafts, such as jewelry and weaving, remain an important complementary economic resource for households, and for a few weavers, it is their primary source of income. While there are no exact figures on the number of weavers in the community or within the Navajo Nation, at the time I conducted ethnographic fieldwork, I found that there was at least one person who wove within each extended household. The opportunity for the trade of textiles continues to expand, particularly with the growth of virtual marketplaces such as eBay and weavers' personal websites. Still, the majority of weavers with whom I consulted exhibit and sell their woven work in nearby trading posts, shops in border towns, occasionally at weaving auctions, and for a few, in art galleries in nearby urban centers.

Weaving remains a key symbol: it embodies in material form notions of tradition and culture held by both Navajo and non-Navajo consumers, and this association with "authentic" lifeways often translates into an increase in market value. This enduring link between weaving and notions of authenticity and tradition, I argue, makes knowledge such as the taboos and teachings associated with weaving increasingly valuable today.

## KEEPING TEACHINGS

There are certain stories, songs, and other forms of knowledge associated with weaving that do not circulate widely or freely within the community. The restricted flow of this information is tied to its inalienability. In the case I present here, I purposely do not circulate the content of inalienable knowledge, instead focusing on its navigation and management by Navajo people. Often this knowledge is considered to have a level of inalienability that is inherently powerful and cosmologically authenticated. All weaving skills and knowledge are said to originate with Spiderwoman, the Holy Person most associated with



weaving. Sacred weaving teachings can include stories about Spiderwoman, creation stories, and some of the meanings of looms and tools and the stories about them. Weaving songs and spinning songs also belong to this category, and are to be passed to those in the family who will be responsible caretakers of them. Transmission usually occurs as individuals are learning how to weave, through storytelling, and on special occasions, such as during the Kinaaldá, or female puberty ceremony.<sup>17</sup>

Stories and teaching that are considered inalienable are inextricably tied to the Diyin Diné and to the origin stories that are, in part, what is understood by many to define and constitute Navajo as a distinct group of people. Taboos are purposely made by the Holy People, but then are detached from them to circulate freely. In contrast, it is understood that certain sacred stories and teachings are eternally connected to the Diyin Diné and as such, are distinctively Navajo manifestations. Community members draw upon this cosmologically authenticated, inalienable knowledge to align themselves with prized cultural forms and expressions that articulate key aspects of Navajo identity. From the perspective of many Navajo people, weaving teachings and stories are also inalienable because they are forms of knowledge that are living and powerful. Sacred knowledge is not only a resource for persons to live well, but also an animating source for the cosmos that requires reciprocal care in order to provide sustenance and abundance for all living things.

For some, knowledge is understood as a powerful possession that may belong to a person, a family, or to Navajo people in general. If knowledge makes one strong and powerful, giving knowledge to another may in effect be giving strength or power away, so a person may withhold information for personal protection.<sup>18</sup> Alternatively, allowing these valuable teachings to circulate freely to “just anyone” can be understood as disrespectful to the Holy Ones. There are community members who assert that all knowledge is made by the Holy People to circulate, and that no one person, group, or family beyond the Holy People can claim ownership over it. Johnson Dennison, a Navajo healer and a cultural educator in many settings, explains this view of knowledge:

It's all carried through, it's all carried through oral stories, so it's just, just goes through. I mean, one person knows it and then that person dies and then the next person knows it so in that way there's no permanent—knowledge, of one person, it just carries on . . . It belonged to whoever started that—our forefathers. And then, then they taught us to live in this society so they gave it to us. Now, it's not ours, we're just keeping it. To the next generation then we just give it to them, then we die off. . . . So this knowledge is like that. Our ceremonies just carry on. So the keepers, these temporary keepers, it doesn't stay permanent . . . knowledge is to be shared, like, like, planting, of pumpkins. Then it comes up and it grows. But it doesn't stay but it grows, all different directions. So in that way, the produce, of, of

the plant will have many. So knowledge is like that, you just plant it and then it grows, different directions.<sup>19</sup>

Mr. Dennison presents weaving teachings as being cultural forms that are fluid and dynamic, made with the intention of being shared rather than kept. In this sense, people become only recipients or carriers of this knowledge and skill, not owners of it.

One of the ways that participants protect certain kinds of information from circulating widely is through strategic acts of silence. Keith Basso studied the role of silence in a Western Apache community, finding that in certain social situations intentional acts of silence become powerful forms of communication: “the absence of verbal communication is associated with social situations in which the status of local participants is ambiguous . . . keeping silent among the Western Apache is a response to uncertainty and unpredictability in social relations.”<sup>20</sup> Basso’s insights resonate strongly with my ethnographic findings about the circulation of inalienable weaving knowledge. In the Navajo community where I worked, silence becomes an effective means for assessing social relationships and the social status of others, particularly if these are unclear. Because inalienable knowledge often remains firmly connected to valued cultural practices and personal qualities, silence prevents the transfer of inalienable weaving knowledge when the moral or personal character of the person receiving this knowledge is in question, or if the intentions of the person and how they may use this knowledge is unknown or in doubt. This careful management of knowledge in uncertain situations is understood as essential to maintain knowledge with levels of inalienability.

The silence that surrounds weaving stories and teachings most commonly occurs because this type of knowledge is to be shared only between certain persons at particular times. One weaver, for instance, told me that she never “gives away” the teachings of weaving to anyone outside of her family. When she was young, her *náíí*, or paternal grandmother, taught her how to weave and told her never to share stories and teachings with anyone other than with responsible members of her family. Another example from my fieldwork further illustrates this point. I was shopping with a weaver at the local grocery store when we met another weaver in passing. After we shook hands and greeted each other, the weaver with whom I was shopping began to talk to the other weaver about her weavings. Suddenly she stopped, saying, “Oh, I shouldn’t be talking about this,” and quickly changed the subject. Later I asked her about this moment, and she told me that she was taught not to talk about weaving too much to others outside of the family; to do so would be dangerous and disrespectful of her family’s teachings.

The changing nature of my own position within this community evidences perhaps the most illustrative example of silence about weaving stories. When I first began my fieldwork, community members were reluctant to share any weaving stories or teachings with me, except for taboos. When I asked weavers and non-weavers questions about weaving teachings or when it was known that the subject of my research centered on weaving, I was often met with silence. At the beginning of my stay, conversations about weaving would often come to a screeching halt as I entered a room. However, over several years I had established myself within the community, and weavers and non-weavers began to tell me more guarded knowledge, including many of the same people who earlier had been hesitant to share information with me. My ambiguous status as a non-Navajo, an anthropologist, and a newcomer, undoubtedly influenced many community members to use silence to protect certain kinds of information. It was only after relationships were established, when my intentions for doing fieldwork were known, and when people had had a chance to judge my moral and personal character, that certain weaving stories were shared with me.

Most importantly, the willingness to share these stories only occurred after it was clear to others that I knew the inalienable nature of such knowledge, and that I too would keep it from circulating widely as well. It was necessary that I become educated in local modes of circulating inalienable knowledge and the cultural patrimony that shape personal and community identities and well-being.

## SHARING TEACHINGS

In contrast to the restricted flow of more inalienable knowledge, other weaving teachings are made to circulate widely and freely, serving as an important source for the social transmission of moral lessons, valued personal characteristics, and the performance of culture. Like taboos, these teachings are conceptualized as alienable, knowledge created to be shared and to align all persons to esteemed personal qualities and behaviors. Teachings blend practical advice, personal or family experience, and traditional stories. One of the most common and venerable teachings—and a teaching that is most often linked to weaving—is what I refer to as the “hand teaching,” a lesson that through the movement of one’s hands teaches about morality and character, and about acquiring material objects, a sense of security, and personal well-being.

The basis for the hand teaching is rooted in Navajo cosmology. In the Navajo language, human beings are *Bíla’ashdla’ii*, literally those with five fingers. As the noun suggests, hands and fingers are central to Navajo

conceptions of persons; beings are human through the commonality of having five-fingered hands. Because hands and fingers are thought to be made by the Holy People, many consider them to be holy instruments, purposely created and given to the *Bilá'ashdlá'ii*, Five-Fingered people, for their survival. Hands and fingers, and the stories or teachings associated with them, can provide humans with what they need to live. There are many occasions when people want to share their knowledge of the importance of hands and fingers and demonstrate to others their familiarity with the social and personal benefits of this teaching. The exchange of this knowledge can occur through formal instruction in educational settings and also during other formal and informal occasions, including community-wide celebrations, ceremonies, and family get-togethers. They are most frequently heard within the fabric of everyday life, as in the following example shared with me one day by Rose,<sup>21</sup> an elder in the community:

My mother always used to tell us, with these hands, you make money, you will have money if you take care of these hands. That is what they are there for, and use them when you are young, because like me with my finger [showing me her arthritic middle finger], you never know how long you can use them to make money. I tell my grandchildren that, but some of them are so lazy. I taught my children and my grandchildren about using your hands, because you can always use them, you have your hands to make jewelry, weaving, to survive, and you will never be hungry.<sup>22</sup>

The teaching from her mother that Rose described instills a particular type of cultural knowledge that instructs persons to implement this lesson in one's own life, guiding personal behavior towards productivity rather than laziness. Rose explicitly relates this teaching to weaving. Weaving knowledge and skill given by the *Diyin Diné* are brought to life through weavers' hands as they weave. In return for implementing this life teaching and being productive, weavers create something that can bring support and material goods to themselves and their family. Rose now shares her mother's teaching to instruct and align her children and grandchildren to valued qualities and behaviors.

I heard many others reference this particular teaching and the importance placed on hands.<sup>23</sup> A conversation with Lilly led me to see how the hand teaching often passes down from one generation to the next. As with many Navajo women I have met who are in their seventies and eighties, Lilly is adept at so many things that it is hard to keep track. She is an expert jewelry maker, weaver, seamstress, cook, and is knowledgeable about traditional ways. On one occasion I was able to tape-record the significance of hands for Lilly when she told me a story that her mother often told her:

And then my mother says, used to say, “if you are so lazy, your hand would be a little pussyfoot, round, you know, it’s just round, you don’t do much with that. But what you have at the end of your arm is a hand fingers. Now those fingers will allow you, its money, its material things that is a necessity to get along so you could have a decent shirt, and you know, things like that. And then you know you don’t go hungry. You’re not hungry, because you . . . what you get out of it is your livelihood.”<sup>24</sup>

Dee, a spry fifty-year-old woman, also equates round hands with laziness. One day she said to me, “you learn a lot with your hands,” and “you can tell a lot about a person with their hands.” She spoke about how elders often make a point of seeing if your hands are hard and calloused when you shake hands with them. This indicates to them that you work a lot. She continued to remark that the last three fingers for the Navajo are very important. “They are what feed you,” she said, and these fingers are to be adorned with jewelry to display their beauty. Making her hand like a ball, she said that people who can’t do things have *bila’ iljool* (rounded hands). Dee continued to tell me that if a person can’t or doesn’t want to work with their hands, they just become people with rounded fingers and become lazy.<sup>25</sup>

The notion of acquiring material wealth and personal well-being through the movement of one’s hands as one works is an important teaching for many Navajo people and one that has been told for generations, instructing persons to implement this lesson in their own life and guiding personal behavior toward productivity and away from idleness. When I asked community members for Navajo sayings about the importance of hands and fingers, they explained that it is often expressed as *bee azáa’ hadiltsod* (with your hands you feed yourself, you put food to your mouth with your hands). All of these accounts of this teaching underscore the centrality of hands and fingers in acquiring material things necessary to live—hands literally and figuratively feed you and your family. The act of weaving exemplifies this lesson.

The hand teaching circulates in a range of social contexts. In the Miss Navajo pageant, for example, contestants draw upon teachings to make visible to the audience their competence in Navajo ways of life as they perform their traditional skills onstage. While presenting her weaving skills to the audience during the 2005 pageant, a contestant quoted a teaching of her mother when discussing the importance of hands: “my mother says, ‘the palm of your hands has a lot of money in it,’ she says to us. ‘Why are you just sitting around? The money is just slipping out of your hands, why don’t you start a loom [a weaving]? From where are you going to get money?’” More than a tool for socializing others, here the hand teaching becomes a way to perform culture. The contestant strengthens her candidacy as a viable Miss Navajo by showing

the audience and judges that her attachments to weaving knowledge extend beyond mechanics and technique, to a teaching that encapsulates fundamental ideas that have become core expressions of Navajo identity.

## SHARING TABOOS

“There are a lot of teachings that go with weaving,” Alice tells me, as we sit on her couch and I watch her spindle swirl. “My mother taught me *a lot* about the dos and don’ts with weaving.”<sup>26</sup> The taboos of weaving circulate widely and are considered to be alienable, able to be shared because they are intended to be used to guide all the Nihookáá Diné (Earth Surface People) toward the proper handling and use of weaving objects and practices. Both weavers and non-weavers in the community are familiar with many weaving taboos, and will share their knowledge of them freely with others, including non-kindred individuals. Taboos are most commonly heard when a tabooed act is about to occur, primarily in order to prevent the improper and potentially dangerous behavior from occurring. They are also shared when individuals learn to weave and, more generally, in everyday conversations about weaving.

Weaving taboos appear in the form of straightforward yet vivid directives—never to weave during a storm out of respect to lightning, and to cover a loom at night to avoid malevolent forces from entering the woven piece, for example—and are sometimes followed by an explanation of what might occur if the taboo is broken. For instance, weaving during a storm can cause blindness or will bring danger or sickness to the weaver and her family. Because lightning and nighttime are thought of as inherently powerful and potentially dangerous, the weaver actively protects herself from negative effects by following these taboos.

It is important to note that, as with other weaving practices, weavers’ opinions and restrictions associated with weaving vary greatly. In my research, while the majority of weavers and non-weavers knew weaving taboos, some did not follow the teachings because they did not believe in them at all, and suggested that they were just “superstitions” and not relevant in “today’s world.” Yet in the context of ongoing social life many of these same people would share their knowledge of taboos with others, particularly when tabooed activities were about to occur. Others believed in some, but not all, weaving taboos, and others followed all of the restrictions they knew. Many knew both the restriction and the outcome if the taboo was not followed, while others knew only that one should follow these teachings to avoid *bahadzid* (danger).<sup>27</sup> My primary interest is not whether the weaver follows taboos or believes them to

be true, but rather the continuing circulation of these taboos by weavers and non-weavers within the community where I worked.

Weavers often say that taboos were followed “without thinking about it” or “just in case they turned out to be true.” At the same time, community members are aware of taboos’ deeper link to Navajo cosmology and core philosophical principles. At this level of abstraction, taboos are a part of the wider social order that highlights reciprocity and relations between individuals, ancestors, and the cosmos. Individuals follow taboos to enhance and fulfill cosmological relations that will ensure harmony and health. According to traditional Navajo teachings, a person is to know and act appropriately to prevent things from affecting oneself, and to maintain *hózhó* and a state of abundant harmony, balance, order, and beauty. Improper acts, done knowingly or not, can create imbalance, problems, and illness for oneself. If one knows how to act correctly and behaves properly, then one has less of a chance of disrupting a state of *hózhó*. Proper and improper behavior are to be learned through teachings and stories—including taboos—that an individual hears throughout his or her lifetime, and which are understood as gifts given by cosmological beings, the Diyin Diné (Holy People) to the Earth Surface People to maintain *hózhó*. If one does not act according to these teachings, such negative consequences as disharmony or sickness can result.<sup>28</sup>

Yet the Holy People equally need Earth Surface People to participate in these exchanges through daily and ritual practices so that they perpetuate and restore *hózhó* in the universe. In doing so, Navajo people give reciprocal returns to the Holy People as they implement these teachings in their daily lives.<sup>29</sup> Robert Johnson, a cultural educator who works for the Navajo Nation Museum in Window Rock, describes the role taboos play in this reciprocal exchange between the weaver and the wider cosmos:

There are even “dos and don’ts” when you’re about to be done with your weaving. The last string that you’re going to go through, if the sun goes down on you, then that’s where you just pick up an ash and make a mark there. Until the next day, the sun comes up, then you finish it. There are a lot of stories that go with it. . . . So I guess what they were saying was all these things were how you do it, and whatever you do to this rug weaving, that’s going to be your life and that’s going to be your history, and that’s going to be your health. So if you do the “dos and the don’ts”—and if you do it correctly, it will not affect you. But if you do it differently, then it’s going to affect your body . . . so those kinds of teachings, all of them—it is a matter of respect.<sup>30</sup>

The enactment of taboos brings to life the cosmological exchanges and relationships that are understood as essential for weaving success. And by sharing their knowledge of weaving taboos with others, participants thereby articulate

their alignment to these ideas and bring additional people into this continuous cycle of reciprocal exchange with the Diyin Diné.

Taboos also express the social ties that connect weavers to other animate or powerful beings associated with weaving. So many weaving taboos circulate today that a full-length scholarly study is warranted.<sup>31</sup> Most taboos address and direct the weaver toward (1) respecting weaving knowledge, objects, and process; (2) avoiding dangerous or malevolent forces; and (3) attending to the relationships that exist between the weaver and weaving objects. Taboos about weaving a Yé'ii bicheii, or a Navajo Holy Person, within a textile, exemplify the main features of each of these restrictions above. For instance, one of the most commonly heard Yé'ii bicheii weaving taboos states that the weaver is not to weave a Yé'ii figure until he or she has had a certain ceremony in order to protect herself, for the act of bringing such a powerful figure into representational form outside of a ceremonial context could endanger the weaver forever. To maintain *hózhó* while weaving a Yé'ii, the weaver is first to be “sung over” within a particular ceremony. This is most commonly performed by a medicine man for the purposes of affirming and reinvesting in reciprocal relations that exist between the weaver, the Holy People, and the wider social universe, relationships that bring balance and harmony to the weaver and her family. By following this one taboo, the weaver is able to show respect for the weaving process, avoid dangerous or unhealthy outcomes, and reinvest in connections.

Sharing one's knowledge of Yé'ii restrictions are a way of using taboos to enhance social relationships. This is apparent in a story told by Angie, a weaving instructor at a local college, who once shared with the class an experience her mother had when she had not followed a weaving taboo. Angie's mother, who had been blessed or initiated to weave Yé'ii bicheii textiles, did not finish weaving the entire right side of a Yé'ii, always to be complete by sundown. The next morning she woke up with terrible pains on her right side. She realized her pain was a result of not finishing the Yé'ii figure, for the right side of the Yé'ii bicheii was left unfinished overnight. Eventually her pain went away as she finished the figure in her weaving. To this day she has never started a Yé'ii without finishing it by nightfall, Angie said.<sup>32</sup>

By telling this story Angie manages to do several things. First, she provides students with knowledge of the Yé'ii bicheii taboo that articulates the proper behaviors for the weaver to follow to ensure the continuation of reciprocal relations with the Holy People, relations that bring both individual well-being and weaving success. Second, she gives students tangible examples that reveal the unfolding course of events and the consequences if this taboo is not followed. And third, by using the lived experience of her mother as an example, Angie demonstrates her familiarity with weaving knowledge to students of the class. In these newer weaving contexts outside of the home, such as a college



classroom, the instructor uses a compelling example of what happens when a taboo is broken, drawing upon her own background and connection to traditional ways. This exchange of weaving knowledge to her students, in turn, strengthens her role as a teacher and illustrates her breadth of understanding and command of traditional knowledge in a nontraditional context.

Interestingly, despite the fact that weaving a Yé'ii bicheii figure into a textile is now a very common, and, for the most part, sanctioned practice, taboos associated with weaving Yé'ii, such as the one described above, continue to be the most frequently shared weaving restrictions heard in everyday life. And while practices associated with weaving Yé'ii bicheii may be changing, the content of these taboos remains virtually unchanged. This, in turn, contributes to the shifting role taboos now play in social life. The timeless quality of weaving taboos is what allows individuals—weavers and non-weavers alike—now to use taboos to indicate their alignment with core principles in Navajo thought, to present their knowledge of traditional ways to others even as those practices may be changing.

## CONCLUSION

Using notions of reciprocity and inalienability, I have examined the many ways that community members share and prevent from circulating certain kinds of weaving knowledge. Weaving stories and teachings must circulate and be protected: they must be shared with others to guide and align persons to valued practices, and they must be protected to maintain their inalienable status as powerful knowledge, as cultural patrimony, and as connected to the cosmological realm. Weaving taboos and the “hand teaching” continue to circulate widely, serving as guides for appropriate behavior, to instill moral and personal character, and foster reciprocal relations between various beings in the Navajo universe. In contrast, some of the most sacred stories and teachings considered as inalienable may be kept out of wider circulation purposely, through strategic acts of silence. In both circulation and silence, taboos and teachings are anchored in culturally specific understandings about weaving knowledge and the role of reciprocity more generally.

This circulation and silence also reveal the powerful place of weaving knowledge today, its ability to be a source for a variety of social activities that help define and sustain community life. Navajo people carefully circulate this information among those deemed responsible enough to be recipients and caretakers. And the very act of sharing and keeping, in turn, provides an opportunity for community members to display their expertise in what social knowledge should and should not be exchanged. Perhaps most importantly,

these exchanges vividly demonstrate that weaving taboos and teachings remain firmly in the hands of Navajo people, who are actively drawing upon their aesthetic knowledge—and adding new layers of significance and meaning—to participate in the circulation of ideas that are shaping community identity today.

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### NOTES

1. See, for instance, Charles Amsden, *Navajo Weaving: Its Technic and History* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1949); Nancy Blomberg, *Navajo Textiles: The William Randolph Hearst Collection* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1988); Frederick J. Dockstader, *The Song of the Loom: New Traditions in Navajo Weaving* (New York: Hudson Hills Press, 1987); Kate Peck Kent, *Navajo Weaving: Three Centuries of Change* (Santa Fe: School of American Research, 1985); Marian E. Rodee, *Weaving of the Southwest: From the Maxwell Museum of Anthropology, University of New Mexico* (West Chester, PA: Schiffer Publishing, 1987); Joe Ben Wheat, *Blanket Weaving in the Southwest*, ed. Ann Lane Hedlund (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2003); Gladys Reichard, *Navajo Shepherd and Weaver* (New York: J. J. Augustin Publisher, 1936).

2. For example, see Gary Witherspoon, *Language and Art in the Navajo Universe* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1977); Roseann Willink and Paul Zolbrod, *Weaving a World: Textiles and the Navajo Way of Seeing* (Santa Fe: Museum of New Mexico Press, 2001); Noel Bennett, *The Weavers' Pathway: A Clarification of the "Spirit Trail" in Navajo Weaving* (Flagstaff: Northland Press, 1975).

3. See for example Kathleen M'Closkey, *Swept Under the Rug: A Hidden History of Navajo Weaving* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2002); Ann Lane Hedlund, *Navajo Weaving in the Late Twentieth Century: Kin, Community and Collectors* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2004); Teresa Wilkins, *Patterns of Exchange: Navajo Weavers and Traders* (Norman: University of

Oklahoma Press, 2008); *Weaving is Life: Navajo Weavings from the Edwin L. and Ruth E. Kennedy Southwest Native American Collection*, ed. Jennifer McLerran (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2006).

4. Gladys Reichard, *Spider Woman: A Story of Navajo Weavers and Chanters* (New York: MacMillan Company, 1934); and Ann Lane Hedlund, "Navajo Shepherd and Weaver, Contemporary Navajo Weaving: An Ethnography of a Native Craft" (PhD diss., University of Colorado, 1984); Wilkins, *Patterns of Exchange*; and McLerran, *Weaving is Life*.

5. An example that touches upon these exchanges includes D. Y. Begay, "ShiSha'Hane': My Story" in *Woven by the Grandmothers: Nineteenth-Century Navajo Textiles from the National Museum of the American Indian*, ed. Eulalie H. Bonar (Washington DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1996): 13–27.

6. See for instance Ann Lane Hedlund, "Contemporary Navajo Weaving: Thoughts That Count," *Plateau* 65 (Flagstaff: Museum of Northern Arizona, 1994); D. Y. Begay, "ShiSha'Hane': My Story;" Gladys Reichard, *Spider Woman*, and also *Navajo Shepherd and Weaver*; M'Closkey, *Swept Under the Rug*; McLerran, *Weaving is Life*; and Wilkins, *Patterns of Exchange*.

7. For alternative studies that examine weaving in terms of Navajo ontology, aesthetic categories, and mythology, see Gary Witherspoon and Glen Peterson, *Dynamic Symmetry and Holistic Asymmetry in Navajo and Western Art and Cosmology* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 1995); Gary Witherspoon, "Cultural Motifs in Navajo Weaving," *North American Indian Anthropology: Essays on Society and Culture*, ed. Raymond J. DeMallie and Alfonso Ortiz (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1994): 355–76; Evelyn Payne Hatcher, *Visual Metaphors: A Formal Analysis of Navajo Art* (New York: West Publishing Company, 1967); Washington Matthews, *Navajo Weaver*, (Colorado: Filter Press, 1968 [1884]).

8. Aaron Glass, "Crests on Cotton: 'Souvenir' T-Shirts and the Materiality of Remembrance Among the Kwakwaka'wakw of British Columbia," *Museum Anthropology* 31 (2008): 1–18; Gwyneira Isaac, *Mediating Knowledges: Origins of a Zuni Tribal Museum* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2007); Jennifer Kramer, *Switchbacks: Art, Ownership, and Nuxalk National Identity* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2007); and Christopher F. Roth, "Goods, Names, and Selves: Rethinking the Tsimshian Potlatch," *American Ethnologist* 29 (2002): 123–50.

9. Classic studies include Irving Hallowell, *Culture and Experience* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1955), and Robert Brightman, *Grateful Prey: Rock Cree Human-Animal Relationships* (Regina, Saskatchewan: Canadian Plains Reprint Series, 2002). In a Navajo context, see David Aberle, "The Navaho Singer's 'Fee': Payment or Prestation?" *Studies in Southwestern Ethnolinguistics*, ed. Dell H. Hymes and William E. Bittle (The Hague: Mouton and Company, 1969).

10. For a more detailed explanation of the concept *hózhó*, see John Farella, *The Main Stalk: A Synthesis of Navajo Philosophy* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1984); and Witherspoon, *Language and Art in the Navajo Universe*.

11. *Ibid.* See also Jill Ahlberg Yohe, "What Weavings Bring: The Social Value of Weaving Objects in Contemporary Navajo Life," *Kiva: The Journal of Southwestern Anthropology and History* 73, no. 4 (2008): 367–86.

12. Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Purity and Taboo* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966); Emile Durkheim and Marcel Mauss, *Primitive Classification* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969 [1903]); Edmund Leach, "Kimil: A Category of Andamese Thought" in *Structural Analysis of Oral Tradition*, ed. P. Maranda and K. E. Maranda (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1971): 22–48; A. R. Radcliffe-Brown, *The Andaman Islanders* (Glencoe, IL: The Free Press, 1948).

13. For contemporary discussions of taboos relating to topics other than aesthetics, see David Akin, "Concealment, Confession, and Innovation in Kwaio Women's Taboos," *American Ethnologist* 30, no. 3 (2003): 381–400; Robert Brightman, *Grateful Prey*; Carolyn Rouse and Janet Hoskins, "Purity,

Soul Food, and Sunni Islam: Explorations at the Intersection of Consumption and Resistance,” *Cultural Anthropology* 19 (2004), 226–49; Valeria Valeri, *Forest of Taboos: Morality, Hunting and Identity among the Huaulu of the Moluccas* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2000); Harriet Whitehead, *Food Rules: Hunting, Sharing, and Tabooing Game in Papua New Guinea* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000).

14. Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies* (New York: Norton Press 1990 [1925]); Annette B. Weiner, *Inalienable Possessions: The Paradox of Keeping-While-Giving* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992); Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, ed. Frederick Engels (New York: Kerr and Company, 1906).

15. Cultural specialists here are defined as people chosen by community members as having expertise of Navajo culture and lifeways. These “public figures” can share this knowledge in many contexts, both private and public, and in this case include particular Navajo traditional practitioners, educators, leaders, and elders. Details of my research can be found in my PhD dissertation, “The Social Life of Weaving in a Contemporary Navajo Community” (University of New Mexico, 2008, ProQuest Dissertations and Theses 304539507).

16. I developed longstanding relationships with community members in various ways, including two years of volunteering daily at a local Senior Center. I also established strong relationships with many mutual Navajo and non-Navajo friends, neighbors, and friends of my husband, who worked at a local elementary and high school. In addition to participating in and observing ongoing daily life, I independently conducted more than thirty interviews, and accompanied a community member on visits with weavers. Several years of Navajo language study allowed me to follow many conversations in Navajo. Ethnographic activities also included learning to weave, participating in three weaving classes and several weaving workshops taught by Navajo weavers, and attending public events where weaving was present. At Navajo Nation events and at public venues such as at museums and trading posts, I interviewed individuals involved in the display and presentation of weaving-related items. My research also included discussions with non-weavers on the importance of weaving in Navajo philosophy and social life, including more than ten cultural specialists (I met with five frequently). I was also able to talk with and interview non-weaver community members. The insights and knowledge shared by non-weavers offer a perspective that is often missing in accounts of Navajo weaving. Many non-weavers have spent a lifetime surrounded by weaving and weavers, have heard weaving stories and learned about weaving since early childhood, and have partaken in broader weaving process, including shearing, washing, and dyeing. Their comments proved key to understanding the contemporary meanings of weaving in various contexts and in finding the place of Navajo weaving within the larger social life of these communities. It should be noted that the findings and analysis are situated in the community in which I worked and lived. Another researcher, working in another community or at another time, may obtain quite different, yet no less accurate, results.

17. See also Wesley Thomas, “Shił Yóól T’Yool Personification of Navajo Weaving,” in *Woven by the Grandmothers: Nineteenth-Century Navajo Textiles from the National Museum of the American Indian*, ed. Eulalie H. Bonar (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution, 1996), 33–42.

18. David F. Aberle “The Navaho Singer’s ‘Fee’: Payment or Prestation?; Clyde Kluckhohn, *Navajo Witchcraft* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1944); Louise Lamphere, *To Run after Them: Cultural and Social Bases of Cooperation in a Navajo Community* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1977); and Witherspoon, *Language and Art in the Navajo Universe*.

19. Johnson Dennison, interview with author, Chinle, AZ, April 13, 2007.

20. Keith Basso, “To Give Up on Words: Silence in Western Apache Culture,” *Southwestern Journal of Anthropology* 26, no. 3 (1970): 229.

21. A pseudonym. Note that first names of all community members quoted hereafter are also pseudonyms to preserve their requested anonymity.

22. Anonymous, interview with author, Window Rock, AZ, March, 2005.
23. For a more detailed analysis, see Yohe, "The Social Life of Weaving."
24. Anonymous, interview with author, Window Rock, AZ, October 13, 1995.
25. Anonymous, interview with author, St. Michaels, AZ, April 3, 2007.
26. Anonymous, interview with author, Window Rock, AZ, December 12, 2005.
27. See also Hedlund, *Contemporary Navajo Weaving*, 287.
28. See also Kluckhohn, *Navajo Witchcraft*; Clyde Kluckhohn and Dorothea Leighton, *The Navaho* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1962 [1946]); John Ladd, *The Structure of a Moral Code: A Philosophical Analysis of Ethical Discourse Applied to the Ethics of the Navajo Indians* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1957); Witherspoon, *Language and Art in the Navajo Universe*; Maureen Trudelle Schwarz, *Molded in the Image of Changing Woman: Navajo Views on the Human Body and Personhood* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1997).
29. John Farella, *The Main Stalk: A Synthesis of Navajo Philosophy*; see also Yohe, "What Weavings Bring."
30. Robert Johnson, interview with author, Window Rock, AZ, October 2005.
31. For descriptions and analysis of specific weaving taboos, see Noel Bennett, *Halo of the Sun: Stories Told and Retold* (Flagstaff: Northland Press, 1987); Ann Lane Hedlund, *Contemporary Navajo Weaving: An Ethnography of a Native Craft*; and Yohe, "The Social Life of Weaving." For a list of taboos, see Ernest L. Bulow, *Navajo Taboos*, Navajo Historical Publications, Cultural Series, No. 1 (Window Rock, AZ: Navajo Tribal Museum, 1991 [1972]); and Franc Johnson Newcomb, *Navajo Omens and Taboos* (Sante Fe: Rydal Press, 1940).
32. Anonymous, "Weaving" (lecture, Dine College, Window Rock, AZ, December 17, 2005).