

UCLA

American Indian Culture and Research Journal

Title

"Some Kind of Power": Navajo Children's Skinwalker Narratives. By Margaret K. Brady

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/6xr9153h>

Journal

American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 9(4)

ISSN

0161-6463

Author

Hoilman, Dennis R.

Publication Date

1985-09-01

DOI

10.17953

Copyright Information

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

ing Indian adornment, economic activity, or other facets of Indian culture. In addition, Dickason's endnotes provide valuable commentary upon subjects mentioned in her text. Although the volume is more comprehensive than innovative, *The Myth of the Savage* is an important contribution to the study of early contacts between the inhabitants of the New and Old Worlds.

R. David Edmunds

Texas Christian University

"Some Kind of Power": Navajo Children's Skinwalker Narratives. By Margaret K. Brady. Foreward by Barre Toelken. Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1984. 224 pp. \$14.95 Cloth.

In traditional Navajo belief, a skinwalker is a human witch who wears a coyote skin. Dr. Margaret K. Brady collected over one hundred skinwalker stories from forty-three Navajo fifth and sixth graders in 1976, and in *"Some Kind of Power"* she analyzes the children's storytelling behavior, the development of their narrative competence, the function of the skinwalker figure in traditional Navajo culture, and the nature of the children's skinwalker narratives themselves. This makes for a fascinating and informative book that will interest not only Navajo experts but also folklorists, anthropologists, literary scholars, and indeed anyone at all who is interested in children or storytelling.

The stories were collected in a Catholic school in the Fort Defiance-Window Rock area of northeastern Arizona, and most of the children in the study were from highly acculturated, relatively urbanized and affluent families. Therefore, the persistence of these skinwalker stories in their lore demonstrates the tenacity of traditional symbols in the imaginations of the younger generation.

Of course, caution must be exercised in accepting the conclusions of research such as Brady's. The researcher may have, consciously or unconsciously, influenced the subjects' behavior, and subjects who know that they are subjects inevitably alter their own behavior. Brady, however, took care to minimize these problems: she did not interfere with the children in any way other than to introduce a tape recorder—which they soon came to ignore—into their classroom. The children initiated storytelling

themselves, and the groups and topics were self-selected. Brady later culled the skinwalker tales from among all the different kinds of stories that were recorded, and she never prompted the children to tell skinwalker stories. In fact, when she began taping, she was unaware that skinwalker stories existed in Navajo childlore. And, since these children told plenty of other "scary stories," including many typical Anglo-American ghost stories, their frequent recourse to skinwalker tales was obviously not a result of the paucity of their narrative repertoires or of Brady's prompting.

Among her most interesting findings are Brady's observations of the children's storytelling behavior. It was characterized by cooperation, turn-taking, a distinct lack of aggressive or disrupting behavior, and sensitivity. The children never challenged the beliefs of their peers or the truthfulness, no matter how doubtful, of their stories (92-94), and they never pleaded or became aggressive in order to be included in the storytelling. They waited patiently until invited, and then happily joined the group (99).

This exemplary behavior Brady attributes to the influence of Navajo culture, but this is surely only a partial explanation. The training the children received from the nuns who ran the school could be expected to be a factor in their cooperative and non-aggressive behavior, and some studies suggest that Navajo children from birth are less active, less vocal, less given to tantrums and other displays of temper than are Anglo babies, raising at least the possibility of a genetic factor being involved. Even if her answers are not always entirely satisfactory, the issues raised by these aspects of Brady's study are of enormous interest in terms of their suggestiveness for future research.

Another major significance of Brady's study is its extensive and carefully documented discussion of narrative competence. She demonstrates that Lavov's six elements of narrative structure—abstract, orientation, complicating action, evaluation, result or resolution, and coda—give us "the formal terms for the same important structural dimensions that Navajo children evaluate in the stories they tell each other . . ." (109). Excessive complicating action, for example, brings on negative evaluations while, on the other hand, formulaic codas ranging from a simple "the end" or "that's it" to an eclectic "we lived happily ever after, amen, the end" are used to signal closure, and if omitted by the

storyteller, provoke an exasperated "that's it?" or "that's all?" from the other children.

Brady does not, however, discuss the possibility that these evaluations may be the result of the children's application of standards derived from non-Navajo rather than traditional Navajo narratives. Furthermore, her analysis of narrative competence focuses exclusively on structural features and makes only passing reference to dramatic style, which is also very important in evaluations of narrative competence in oral storytelling.

Finally, Brady offers a very interesting exploration of the nature and function of the skinwalker figure in traditional Navajo culture. She points out that skinwalkers violate Navajo sexual and eating taboos by taking part in bestiality, necrophilia, incest, cannibalism, and carrion eating. The function of this taboo-breaking, she argues, is to resolve cultural discord. The Navajo always view social relationships as potentially dangerous; consequently, fear of strangers and non-relatives develops at a very early age, and anxiety is an inevitable element in any social relationship. But, on the other hand, the Navajo worldview stresses the importance of cooperation to avoid disrupting the harmony and balance which sustain the universe. The disjuncture caused by these two conflicting cultural "givens" is resolved by skinwalker stories. The skinwalker "is infused with the power to destroy the ideal of order and harmony . . . by symbolically reenacting the potentially unstable nature of social relationships," while at the same time the process of social interaction through storytelling symbolizes the cooperative imperative and resolves the cultural discord (48).

Most interesting of all, however, are the children's stories themselves. Reprinted exactly as recorded, they constitute more than sufficient reason to recommend this book. They make it well worth the time of those who already have an interest in the areas with which none previously existed. Brady deserves our thanks for her care in collecting them, for her interesting and useful analyses of them, and, most of all, simply for making them available to us.

Dennis R. Hoilman
Ball State University