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Review Essay

American Indian Tribal Religions Series: A Review Essay With Suggestions For Future Research

Clara Sue Kidwell

Father Berard Haile. *Love-Magic and Butterfly People: The Slim Curly Version of the Ajilee and Mothway Myths*. American Tribal Religions Series, No. 2. Flagstaff: Museum of Northern Arizona Press, 1978. 172 pp. \$13.95

Karl W. Luckert. *Coyoteway: A Navajo Holyway Healing Ceremonial*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press; Flagstaff: Museum of Northern Arizona Press, 1979. 243 pp. \$24.95; pap. \$13.95

Karl W. Luckert. *A Navajo Bringing-Home Ceremony: The Claus Chee Sonny Version of Deerway Ajilee*. American Tribal Religions Series, No. 3. Flagstaff: Museum of Northern Arizona Press, 1978. 208 pp. pap. \$14.95

Karl W. Luckert. *The Navajo Hunter Tradition*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1975. 239 pp. \$10.50; pap. \$5.95

Karl W. Luckert. *Navajo Mountain and Rainbow Bridge Religion*. American Tribal Religions Series, No. 1. Flagstaff: Museum of Northern Arizona Press, 1977. 157 pp. pap. \$6.95

Navajo chant practice, with its richly developed symbolism and ceremonialism and its wide-ranging social implications, constitutes one of the great religious systems of the world. The Navajos' origins as a distinctive People, Diné, began in darkness and ignorance in worlds below this, according to their own traditions.¹ Historically, it is known that they appeared as nomads in the Southwest around 1500 A.D.,² and that their Athabaskan language links them with the Athabaskan speakers of the interior of Alaska. From these very humble beginnings, they have evolved

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a highly complex system of religious belief and practice that constitutes the basis of the Navajo Way.

A great deal has been written about Navajo religion, and yet the subject is so complex that it appears that a good deal more could be written. The works of Washington Matthews on the late 1800's, Father Berard Haile, Gladys Reichard, Franc J. Newcomb, and Leland Wyman and Clyde Kluckhohn during the 1920's and 1930's established a strong tradition of scholarship in the field,³ and the continuing work of Wyman and Karl Luckert has carried on the tradition. Luckert has established the American Tribal Religions series through the Museum of Northern Arizona. The three volumes of that series, *Navajo Mountain and Rainbow Bridge Religion*, *Love-Magic and Butterfly People*, by Father Berard Haile, *A Navajo Bringing-Home Ceremony* and Luckert's other works, *The Navajo Hunter Tradition* and *Coyoteway: A Navajo Holyway Healing Ceremonial*, constitute a major body of literature on Navajo religion.

Luckert, who teaches humanities at Northern Arizona University at Flagstaff, Arizona, brings to the subject of Navajo religion a historian's training rather than a linguistic interest. He has chosen a theme, the Navajo hunter tradition, and he explores various ramifications of it through the collection of chants that he has compiled. The theme of the hunter tradition has rich possibilities for interpretation. It is certainly a part of the historical experience of the Navajo, who were nomadic hunters in their apparent migration from the north into the southwest (a migration that may historically have taken hundreds of years).⁴

The changing culture of the Diné responded to the proximity of Pueblo agriculturists, and with the introduction of sheep by the Spanish in the 17th Century, the Navajo became pastoralists and agriculturists. The changing patterns were the subject of study by W.W. Hill in the late 1930's.⁵ With this change in subsistence patterns, the hunter tradition receded in importance. However, it remained an important underlying element in the formation of a distinctive Navajo culture, and its consideration is an essential part of an understanding of the significance of Navajo religion generally.

In *The Navajo Hunter Tradition* Luckert introduces the idea of "pre-human flux" to describe

... man's primeval kinship with all creatures of the living world and the essential continuity among them all. . . The creative event, which ended the primeval condition of prehuman flux, has fixed permanently—at least in the realm where ordinary mortal men now live—different groups of 'people' to particular types of garments, shapes, and sizes. Prior to that creative

event, while the condition primeval and prehuman flux prevailed all appearances were as fluid as clothes are interchangeable.⁶

With this statement Luckert introduces the theme that characterizes his interpretations of the chant materials that he has collected. The intimate connections of the deities, the spirits of animals and plants, and human beings, are the basis for Navajo Chant practice. The changeability of nature is described in their changeability of animal and human forms. In the Ajilee ceremony the hero is surprised by Coyote, who blows his hide onto him. Coyote then takes on the man's form and clothing and takes the opportunity to sleep with his wives. The hero, in the meantime trapped in Coyote's hide, has to survive as best he can on berries and fruits until he is rescued and restored to his own form by being ceremonially passed through five wooden hoops.⁷ The identification of the patient in *Coyoteway: a Navajo Holyway Healing Ceremonial* with the dieties portrayed in the sand-paintings of the ceremony is evidence of the power in the intimate connection of human and holy forms.⁸

Robert Redfield in his discussion of world view defines the term as "...the structure of things as man is aware of them. It is the way we see ourselves in relation to all else..."⁹ To Redfield the primitive world is characterized by the fact that human beings do not distinguish themselves from their surroundings. There is not a clear distinction between *Man* and *Not-Man*.¹⁰ It is interesting that an aspect of culture that Redfield characterizes as primitive becomes the foundation of complexly developed ceremonial and symbolism in the Navajo world view. The mutability of form and aspect between humans and the dieties is part of the mythic past and at some point, as Luckert remarks, the separation of forms was brought about and made permanent; however, identification through symbolism and ritual persists.

Luckert finds the Navajo Hunter tradition the most ancient of Navajo traditions, dating back beyond the emergence into the Southwest, back to the days of the Athabaskan nomadic ways.¹¹ And yet significant parts of it have survived, and these are the parts that Luckert has made his special province. The chants that Luckert has collected include several versions of various branches of the Ajilee, the Mothway, the Coyoteway, and the Deer Huntingway. The Ajilee, called by Father Haile Prostitutionway and by Gladys Reichard Excessway,¹² is a curing ceremony for what Luckert calls "general craziness, made manifest in sexual passion, prostitution, divorce, wildness, shyness, disorientation, hallucination, intoxication, restlessness, roaming, and Anglo American mobility".¹³ The theme of the Ajilee is that the wildness of game animals can be transmitted to human beings, who eat their meat, thereby making them crazy and given to excessive behavior. For a society that values control and

moderation in behavior,¹⁴ any excessive or reckless behavior becomes a kind of sickness.

The two versions of the Ajilee story given by Luckert are different aspects of the basic theme of excess craziness. The Claus Chee Sonny version in *A Navajo Bringing-Home Ceremony* is a curing rite associated with the Enemyway tradition, i.e., the exorcism of evil. The Slim Curly version in *Love-Magic and Butterfly People* is associated not only with curing, but the power of the chant might also be used to attract the power to compel other people's behavior through Love-Magic, a form of sorcery. The juxtaposition of the two versions is interesting as an example of the two sides of the coin of power as perceived in Navajo chant practice. The Chanter through his knowledge of myth and ceremony compels the attendance of the dieties at the ceremony and the release of their powers. Those powers may be used in a positive sense to attract good to the patient, or they may be used in the exorcistic sense to drive evil forces from the patient's body. But the power may also be manipulated by the singer for his own ends, and thus the singer may be able to practice witchcraft to cause negative (in this case compulsive) powers over others. He can attract women sexually through his powers. Although Luckert does not explicitly comment on this point of comparison the interpretation can be made from his introduction to the *Navajo Bringing-Home Ceremony*.

The Mothway myth (also included in *Love Magic and Butterfly People*) is an extension of the Ajilee tradition. The Butterfly People ignored clan restrictions and became wild with sexual passion. They flew into flames and burned themselves up, thus demonstrating the consequences of their excesses. The Coyoteway ceremonial is closely allied with the Ajilee myth. Illness comes from the Coyote from the East,¹⁵ as in the Ajilee story it comes from eating the meat of game animals who had eaten certain poisonous or hallucinogenic plants as protection against hunters.¹⁶ Thus Coyoteway, like the Ajilee, might be associated with the hunter tradition and the primal relationship between human beings and animals, both the physical creatures and their spiritual prototypes.

The particular value of Luckert's work, both in the American Indian Tribal Religions series and his *Navajo Hunter Tradition*, is that he has provided a coherent basis for interpretation of several myths that show their unity of theme, and yet in the differing versions of the Ajilee myth he provides a basis for examination of some of the divergences of material within that theme. The materials that he has gathered thus contribute a significant aspect of understanding of Navajo chant practice.

Attempts to synthesize the multitudinous aspects of chant practice into systems has led to several classification schemes, all of which must be recognized as intellectual constructs. As Gladys Reichard pointed out,

"none of my Navajo informants concurred in the classification of the ceremonies, each being deeply concerned with the details of his own knowledge but only vaguely or hesitantly with the entire scheme."¹⁷ The most basic generalization concerning Navajo chants seems to be the distinction between those that attract good and those that exorcise evil—Holyway and Evilway chants.¹⁸ Classification on the basis of form has been attempted to distinguish chants from other kinds of rituals. Haile defined ceremonials as those that used rattles and rites and those that did not. Wyman and Kluckhohn published their original classification of Navajo chants in 1938,¹⁹ with specific reference to Haile's distinction based on the rattle. Gladys Reichard included a system of categorization in her book *Navajo Religion*,²⁰ and Luckert makes reference to a new classification scheme by Wyman.²¹ The complexity of chant practice arises from the numerous ways in which parts of major traditions may be combined to provide treatment for a very specific condition. An attempt to rationalize the overall system is the almost antithetical to the specificity of circumstances of the individual patient.

It would be impossible, in practice, to classify chants according to the diseases or conditions that they are used to treat. The role of the diagnostician becomes important in Navajo curing practices because the mystical powers of clairvoyance attributed to the diagnostician indicate the specific circumstances of the patient's illness, and illness is as much circumstantial as generic in nature. The diagnostician can prescribe the cure. But the singer alone has the power to manipulate the elements of chants a cure he knows to effect. Thus the complexity of chant practices is the cause of their greatest efficacy, and although it may take several tries to hit upon the proper combination of chant elements, once the proper sequence is performed, the compulsive nature of the chant will effect the cure.²² The power of the chants has been acknowledged not only by the Navajo but he knows to effect a cure by psychiatrists and the U.S. Indian Health Service as well.²³ Luckert has added to the large body of materials that exist concerning the complexity of chant practice. By indicating the relationship of various parts of those texts to each other, he has provided valuable information for an element of synthesis, providing the hunter tradition as a unifying theme.

To the list of already available texts of Navajo traditions, Luckert brings the Coyoteway, a ceremony classified as extinct by the Franciscan fathers in 1910.²⁴ Wyman and Kluckhohn, however, included Coyoteway in their classification scheme²⁵ without indicating that it was extinct or obsolescent. Reichard, in 1950, did not include the Coyoteway in her classification scheme at all.²⁶ Luckert's recording is the first for this ceremony and thus preserves this particular element of chant practice.

An important aspect of Luckert's work is in the preservation of oral traditions. He seeks such information as a historian of religions. He does not have the linguistic expertise that Father Berard Haile or Gladys Reichard had. His recordings have been done through interpreters; he has participated as observer, rather than, like Gladys Reichard, as patient. A major motivation of his work in establishing the American Tribal Religion Series has been by his own account the large number of unpublished works by Father Berard Haile.²⁷ Luckert's publication of Father Haile's recordings of the Slim Curly version of Ajilee and Mothway is the first of these two important texts. His account of the Coyoteway restores to its place in the system or religion this supposedly extinct chant.

The preservation of a religious tradition was also the instance for the writing of *Navajo Mountain and Rainbow Bridge Religion*. The flooding of Rainbow Bridge, a natural sandstone arch in southern Utah, threatened one of the sacred places of the Navajo. The arch is a Rainbow person, a personification of holy powers. In the rising waters of Lake Powell several sacred sites would be lost. Luckert undertook the task of documenting the significance of these sites through historical research and collections of oral traditions from several Navajo informants. The ceremonies associated with the Rainbow bridge area can be used to bring rain or to cure bad colds or skin eruptions (smallpox, measles, etc.).²⁸ The major rites associated with the Navajo Mountain area are those of Protectionway and Blessingway. Because Protectionway is an evilway ceremony, associated with exorcism of evil forces and enemy ghosts, Luckert associates the Protectionway with the Navajo Mountain region as the outgrowth of the warrior mentality of that region. During the 1864-68 era (the imprisonment of the Navajo at Fort Sumner), certain bands of the Navajo escaped the captivity and remained in the region. The defensive mood of the people led to the performance of Evilway ceremonies, i.e. those of an exorcistic nature to drive out alien influences.²⁹ The major theme that emerges from the book is the distinctiveness of the Navajo Mountain region. The earlier works of Malcolm Carr Collier and Mary Shepardson³⁰ characterized quite well the cultural features that made Navajo Mountain distinctive within the general patterns of Navajo culture. Luckert adds to an understanding of the uniqueness of religious belief in this area.

The works of Karl Luckert contribute significantly to the body of literature on Navajo ceremonialism. What makes his contribution distinctive is his approach to the subject. He is above all a sympathetic recorder of oral traditions. He seeks, however, to record not so much from a linguistic or symbolic perspective (As Haile, Reichard and Wyman did) but from a more historical view with the Navajo Hunter Tradition as a grounding. Luckert can explain the underlying psychological preconceptions about

the nature of the world and the relations between human beings and their environments. Those conceptions spring from the daily experience of hunters with their prey and from basic conceptions about the spiritual nature of the environment. He is certainly concerned with the symbols of the ceremonies he describes, but his explanatory text and notes provide a broader interpretation of a particular tradition and how certain ceremonials are thus related to each other within tradition. By making his recordings the major part of his books Luckert emphasizes the integrity of origin traditions, and then shows the intimate connections between the traditions and the ceremonial that arrive from them. Even in this manner of organization, Luckert's work differs from that of Wyman, for instance. In *Coyoteway*, rather than catalogues of linguistic or ceremonial details, Luckert conveys a unified impression of origin stories and ceremonial details that follow from them.

The American Indian Tribal Religion series is an important contribution to the understanding of the many complex elements of Navajo ceremonialism. It is the historical perspective that Luckert brings to bear on Navajo Religion that makes the contribution unique.

The complex nature of Navajo Chant practice offers rich possibilities for further research efforts. Father Berard Haile's papers, now housed at the University of Arizona at Tucson, contain much information that remains to be published, and it can be hoped that Karl Luckert and other scholars will continue to bring this wealth of information into published form. Recording of chants that are still being performed on the Navajo reservation is another important aspect of research. It may be possible to preserve some aspects of this remarkable system of thought that have either gone unnoticed or have been inaccessible to recorders in the past. Yet another possible area of research would be on changes that have taken place in the chants themselves from past recordings to the present. Scholars have commented upon the remarkable stability of the chants as presented by single chanters over time, but they have also noted variants in chants performed by different singers. It would be a valuable study of continuity and/or adaptation in Navajo culture to trace a chant through a singer and various of his apprentices to understand factors of persistence and change in culture. As the Navajo have elaborated their culture over hundreds of years in the Southwest, so the study of their system of thought embodied in their chants promises to be, and indeed should be, of continuing interest to scholars.

NOTES

1. Hasteen Klah, *Navajo Creation Myth*. Recorded by Mary C. Wheelwright (Santa Fe: Museum of Navajo Ceremonial Art, 1942), pp. 39-45.

2. Evon Z. Vogt, "The Navajo," in *New Perspectives in American Indian Culture Change*, ed. Edward H. Spicer (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1961), p. 285.

3. See, for example, the following sources as representative of this body of scholarship: Father Berard Haile, "Navajo Chantways and Ceremonials," *American Anthropologist* 40 (1938): 639-52; Haile, "Origin Legend of the Navajo Enemy Way," *Yale University Publications in Anthropology* 17 (1938); Haile, *Origin Legend of the Navajo Flintway* (Chicago: University of Chicago Publications in Anthropology, 1943); Washington Matthews, "The Mountain Chant: A Navajo Ceremony," in *Fifth Annual Report of the Bureau of Ethnology to the Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution, 1883-84* (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1887), pp. 379-486; Matthews, "Navajo Myths, Prayers and Songs," *University of California Publications in Archaeology and Ethnology* 5(2), (1907): 21-63; Matthews, "The Night Chant, A Navajo Ceremony," *Memoirs of the American Museum of Natural History* 6 (1902); Franc J. Newcomb and Gladys A. Reichard, *Sandpaintings of the Navajo Shooting Chant* (New York: J. J. Augustin, [1937]); Gladys Reichard, *Navajo Medicine Man* (New York: J. J. Augustin, 1939); Reichard, *Navajo Religion: A Study of Symbolism*, 2d ed. (Princeton: Bollingen Foundation, Princeton University Press, 1974); Reichard, *Prayer: The Compulsive Word*, Monographs of the American Ethnological Society, #7 (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1944); Leland C. Wyman, *Beautyway: A Navajo Ceremonial Myth* recorded and translated by Father Berard Haile; with a variant myth recorded by Maude Oakes; and Sandpaintings recorded by Laura A. Armer, Franc J. Newcomb, and Maud Oakes (New York: Pantheon Books, 1957); Wyman, *The Mountainway of the Navajo* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1975); Wyman, *The Red Antway of the Navajo* (Santa Fe: Museum of Navajo Ceremonial Art, 1965); Wyman, *The Windways of the Navajo* (Colorado Springs: The Taylor Museum of the Colorado Springs Fine Arts Center, 1962); Wyman and Clyde Kluckhohn, "Navajo Classification of their Song Ceremonials," *Memoirs, American Anthropological Association* 50 (1938).

4. Vogt, "The Navajo," pp. 284-86.

5. W. W. Hill, "The Agricultural and Hunting Methods of the Navajo Indians," *Yale University Publications in Anthropology* 18 (1938).

6. Karl W. Luckert, *The Navajo Hunter Tradition* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1978), p. 133.

7. Father Berard Haile, *Love-Magic and Butterfly People* (Flagstaff: Museum of Northern Arizona Press, 1978), pp. 47-49.

8. Karl W. Luckert, *Coyoteway* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press; Flagstaff: Museum of Northern Arizona Press, 1978), pp. 146-53.

9. Robert Redfield, *The Primitive World and its Transformations* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1953), pp. 86-87.

10. Redfield, *Primitive World*, pp. 98-99.

11. Luckert, *Navajo Hunter Tradition*, p. 135.

12. Luckert gives some background to the nature of their debate in his introduction to *Love Magic and Butterfly People*, pp. vii-xi. He says that there is no exact English equivalent to the word.

13. Karl W. Luckert, *A Navajo Bringing Home Ceremony* (Flagstaff: Museum of Northern Arizona Press, 1978), p. 3.
14. John Ladd, *The Structure of a Moral Code* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1957), pp. 298-99; Reichard, *Navajo Religion*, p. 49.
15. Luckert, *Coyoteway*, p. 6.
16. Luckert, *Coyoteway*, p. 6.
17. Reichard, *Navajo Religion*, p. 314.
18. Luckert, *Coyoteway*, p. 6; Reichard, *Navajo Religion*, pp. 310-19; Haile, "Origin Legend of Navajo Enemyway," p. 10.
19. Wyman and Kluckhohn, "Navajo Classification of their Song Ceremonials."
20. Reichard, *Navajo Religion*, pp. 310-19.
21. Luckert, *Coyoteway*, p. 6.
22. See Alexander H. Leighton and Dorothea C. Leighton, "Gregorio the Hand Trembler," *Peabody Museum Papers* 40(1), (1949).
23. A project to train Navajo Medicine men was carried out for several years beginning in 1970 by the Indian Public Health Service in Shiprock, New Mexico. The project was directed by Robert Bergman, a psychiatrist with the Indian Health Service. See Robert Bergman, "A School for Medicine Men," *American Journal of Psychiatry* 130 (1973): 6. See also the recent study by Donald Sandner, *Navajo Symbols of Healing* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1979).
24. Franciscan Fathers, *An Ethnologic Dictionary of the Navajo Language* (St. Michaels, AZ: St. Michaels Press, 1910), p. 392.
25. Wyman and Kluckhohn, "Navajo Classification of their Song Ceremonials," p. 6.
26. Reichard, *Navajo Religion*, pp. 322-23.
27. Haile, *Love Magic and Butterfly People*, p. vii.
28. Karl W. Luckert, *Navajo Mountain and Rainbow Bridge Religion* (Flagstaff: Museum of Northern Arizona Press, 1977), pp. 90, 105.
29. Luckert, *Navajo Mountain and Rainbow Bridge Religion*, p. 30.
30. Malcolm Carr Collier, "Local Organization Among the Navajo" (Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago, 1951); Mary Shepardson and Blodwen Hammond, *The Navajo Mountain Community* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1970).