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Language of the Loom: Unraveling Navajo Weaving

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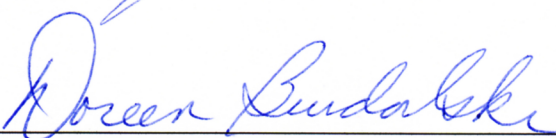
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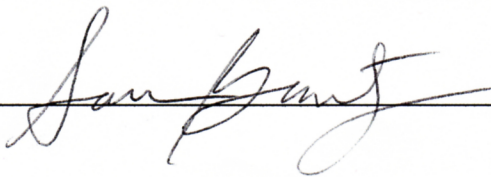
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Language of the Loom: Unraveling Navajo Weaving

Weaving is an art form that is central to the Navajo, or *Diné*, which means the people. For centuries, weaving was an essential task in the everyday life of the Navajo woman. The skill was a gift that was passed down from generation to generations, almost like a rite of passage. It brought women together as they perfected their craft over years of hard work.

Navajo weaving is believed to date back to the 17th century (Broudy 71). Since then, it has grown and changed, shaped by the history and the struggles of the Navajo people. Navajo weaving has gone through three main periods, each with their own characteristics. The patterns evolved, often becoming more intricate and difficult to produce. As Gladys Reichard states, “The Navajo, largest and most colorful Indian tribe in the United States, is superficially the best known” (*Navajo Religion* xxxiii). Navajo weaving, too, has transformed to be a commodity that is superficially known.

The Navajo way of life and traditions are strongly connected with Navajo religious beliefs. As weaving is such a fundamental part of the Navajo culture, it too is “imbued with the sacred” (McManis and Jeffries 5). Everything from the elements of balance and harmony to the individual symbols and deities which are central to Navajo religion and way of life are reflected in each weaving. In *Navajo Religion: A Study of Symbolism*, Gladys Reichard states that the symbols have become so integrated in the Navajo way of life that when it comes to discerning a

symbol's individual meaning, "most Navaho would be surprised to learn that anyone should want to" (147). She goes on to say that despite this sentiment, it does not mean that the significance of a symbol cannot or should not be examined or understood. The same can be said for weaving. While a weaving could seem to be just a source of income and the patterns may just look like a series of geometric shapes, it too should be examined.

Navajo weaving is not just a decorative art form; it is a medium through which the culture of an entire people is manifested. Everything from the loom on which the weaving is created to the type of wool and the colors used serves a purpose. With careful study, the stories, myths and greater significance can be unraveled.

Just like the culture it represents, Navajo weaving has a rich history that combines both the actual and the allegorical. While historically, the Navajo learned how to weave from the Pueblo, it is impossible to separate the history of the origin of Navajo weaving from the story of Spider Man and Spider Woman.

Spider Woman is considered one of the "Navajo Holy People" (McManis and Jeffries 4). Spider Woman and Spider Man come from the first of the four lower worlds, each of which was destroyed before the inhabitants came to the surface of the world that exists today (*Native American Religions* 23). In Navajo mythology, Spider Woman often "plays dual roles of helper and one who is dangerous" (*Dictionary of Native American Mythology* 282). She is arguably most known for bringing the art of weaving to humans.

As the legend goes, Spider Woman taught Changing Woman how to weave on the condition that Changing Woman would teach the skill to the Navajo people (McManis and Jeffries 4). Spider Man created the first loom:

“The crosspoles were made of sky and earth cords, the warp sticks of sun rays, the healds of rock crystal and sheet lightning. The batten was a sun halo, white shell made the comb. There were four spindles; one a stick of zigzag lightning with a whorl of cannel coal; one a stick of flash lightning with a whorl of turquoise; a third had a stick of sheet lightning with a whorl of abalone; a rain streamer formed the stick of the fourth, and its whorl was white shell” (*Spider Woman* iii).

Navajo religion and way of life are directly related to harmony, balance, and, especially, nature. The influence of nature is evident in this mythological creation of the first loom. Not only does it emphasize the importance of spiders, natural weavers of webs, but it also incorporates natural elements and stones.

Spider Man uses abalone, turquoise, and white shell in the construction of the loom. These are three of the four sacred stones in Navajo culture. The fourth is obsidian (Levy 45). They play important roles in the origin of the world in Navajo religion and are associated with the four sacred mountains, which represent the four corners of the Navajo World (*Native American Religions* 23). The mountains include Sinaaji (White Shell Mountain), Tsoodzil (Turquoise Mountain), Dook’o’sliid (Abalone Shell Mountain), and Dib’nitsaa (Obsidian Mountain) (Levy, 45).

Lightning and rock crystal, the other materials used by Spider Man, have a history of being used as building blocks in other creation stories. Lightning often appears as a zigzag symbol that is considered evil, but can be harnessed to create something good (*Navajo Religions* 5). First Man and First Woman made the sun out of “a large turquoise disks, surrounded by red rain, lightning, and various kinds of snakes” (*Navajo Religion* 17). The moon was also made of white shell, rock crystal, and forked lightning (*Navajo Religions* 17).

Spider Woman's involvement in weaving does not end with bestowing the knowledge of how to weave on the Navajo people. She also blesses each female baby with the gift of weaving through a ritual performed shortly after birth (Broudy 63). Spider Man says to the people:

“...from now on when a baby girl is born to your tribe you shall go and find a spider web which is woven at the mouth of some hole; you must take it and rub it on the baby's hand and arm. Thus when she grows up she will weave and her fingers and arms will not tire from the weaving” (Broudy 63).

A series of traditional customs related to weaving accompany the myth and “sacred origin of weaving” (McManis and Jeffries 4). According to Navajo legend, October marked the month of spiders who “came out of their dens and covered the ground before going into the world below” (Pendleton 13). Due to the connection between spiders and weaving, weaving was taught during October (Pendleton 13). Praying and singing before weaving and while weaving is believed to bring success (McManis and Jeffries 5). Customarily, unmarried girls could not weave (Pendleton 13).

Historically, the Navajo learned to weave and construct looms from the Pueblo Indians during the Pueblo Rebellion at the end of the 17th century, when the Pueblo rose up against the Spanish in order to take back their lands (Broudy 70). In 1692, the Spanish returned and were victorious against the Pueblo resistance (Broudy 70). During this time, many Pueblo moved into the territory of the Navajo for refuge (McManis and Jeffries 7). In traditional Pueblo society, men were the weavers while Navajo weavers are traditionally women. It is likely that there were intermarriages between Pueblo and Navajo and that the Pueblo men taught their wives how to weave (McManis and Jeffries 7). Another explanation for Navajo women learning to weave is that Navajo men were the hunters and warriors, both tasks that require the men to be away from

the home. Weaving is a “sedentary art” which could be easily practiced by women who spent more time at home (Broudy 71).

The Navajo loom itself is based on the Pueblo vertical loom (Broudy 66).

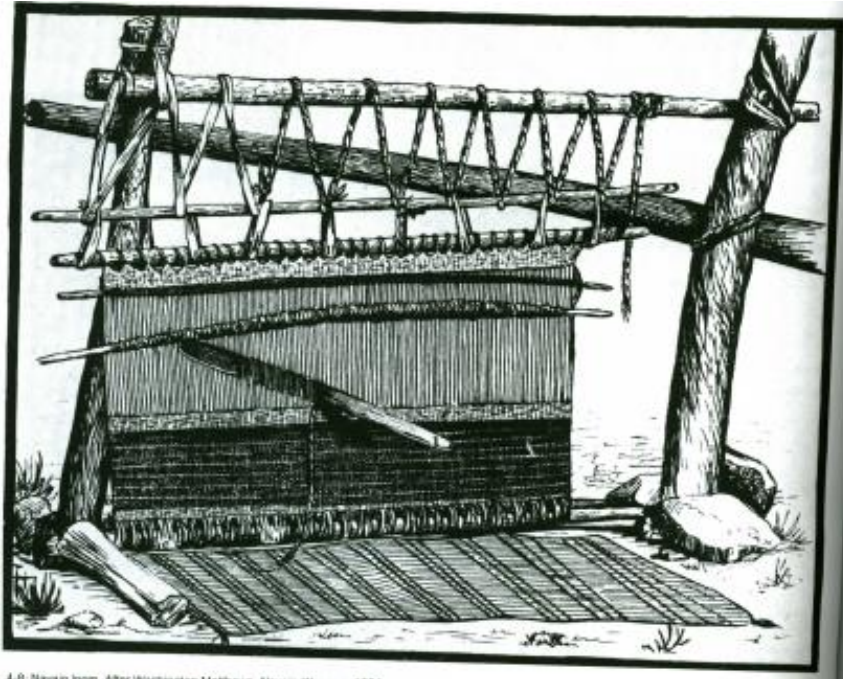


Figure 1 Navajo Loom

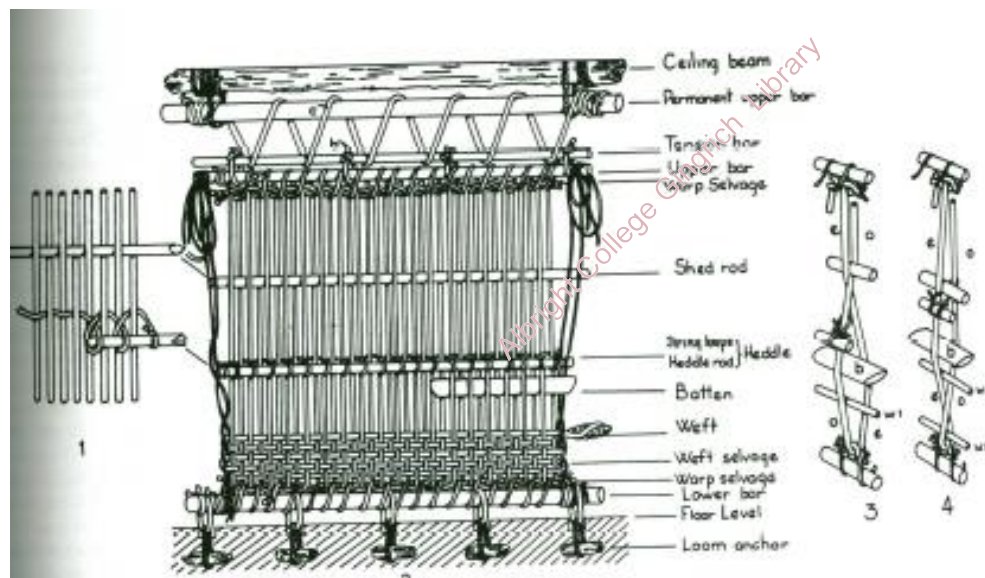


Figure 2 Pueblo Loom

It has slight variations, but the general structure is the same. A Pueblo vertical loom is located indoors and has an upper bar that is suspended and secured to a ceiling beam. The bottom bar is attached to weights that are buried below the floor's surface in order to create tension (Broudy 67).

There are many variations of the Navajo loom (Broudy 71). The loom may be set up indoors or outdoors (Broudy 73). Two upright beams support the top horizontal bar of a Navajo loom. If outdoors, two trees may be used as upright beams (Broudy 71). When cut, beams are often left rough to prevent them from slipping when they are tied together (*Spider Woman* 10). Heavy rocks (Broudy 71) typically weigh down the bottom bar of a Navajo loom. A temporary loom frame may be constructed on the ground so that the warp can be easily strung (*Spider Woman* 11). Once the warp is strung, the temporary frame is affixed to the upright structure with string. Reeds and loops of string are used to create the heald, also called the heddle (*Spider Woman* 12). The heddle is attached to certain warp, lengthwise, strands so that it can be manipulated to pick up some warp yarns and create a space through which the weft, cross, yarns may be woven. The space that is created between the warp yarns is called the shed (*Spider Woman* 12). Another reed may be used to help manipulate the warp yarns that are not attached to the heddle (*Spider Woman* 12). A very smooth stick, the batten, is used to push down the yarn as it is woven through to ensure that the weft is tightly packed (*Spider Woman* 17).

Originally, the Navajo used cotton to weave (McManis and Jeffries 7). The presence of the Spanish introduced the Navajo to horses and sheep. The Navajo raided Spanish colonies in order to procure animals and discovered a new material for weaving in the form of sheep's wool (McManis and Jeffries 8). The Navajo preferred wool for weaving and, "by 1800, wool had virtually replaced cotton in Navajo textile production" (McManis and Jeffries 8).

Specific weaving techniques is one of the things that make Navajo weavings unique. Many weavers still card, spin, and dye their own yarn. Barbara Ornelas and her family raise sheep for their wool. Other prominent weavers use commercial yarn that is brightly colored to supplement home spun yarn (Hedlund 33). After the sheep is shorn, either the fleece is washed or it is carded as it is. Carding is the process of using special paddles to brush or comb out the wool fibers so that they lie parallel to one another. In the 1930's, Gladys Reichard went to live with a prominent Navajo family in order to learn how to weave and to experience the daily life of the Navajo. She describes the process of carding and spinning in *Spider Woman: A Story of Navajo Weavers and Chanters*. She writes, "contrary to the common notion, wool is not usually cleaned before it is carded. Washing mats it and makes it difficult to card" (25).

Spinning is the next step in the process of preparing the wool. Spinning is the process of drawing out and twisting the wool fibers to create yarn. As Reichard discovered during her time with the weavers, "not all women can spin, even though they are good weavers..." and some women "specialize in warp yarn, and others in weft" (*Spider Woman* 25). Warp yarn must be stronger than weft yarn because it must withstand greater tension during the stringing of a loom.

Different colored wools were created either through dyeing or through carding different colored wools together. In an interview with Barbara Ornelas, she stated that to achieve the colors used in her renowned Two Grey Hills weavings, she cards different amounts of black and white wool together. Other wools were dyed using vegetal (vegetable based) or aniline (mineral based) dyes (Hedlund 30). Indigenous plants were boiled to create brown, yellow, gold, green, pink, and purple dyes. For example, the flowers of rabbitbrush were boiled to create a yellowish-gold dye (Hedlund 43). In *Stories of Traditional Navajo Life and Culture*, Deescheeny Nez Tracy describes how his mother would "gather the plants, roots and bark that are needed for

dyeing” (151). He credits the use of vegetal dyes to the fact that buyers prefer rugs that use vegetal dyes (Tracy, 151). Aniline dyes are coal tar dyes that were used to create vivid colors such as deep reds or oranges (McManis and Jeffries 12). Indigo was used for blue dye.

Navajo weaving techniques are very similar to those of the Pueblo. A tapestry weave is used for rugs (Pendleton 45). A tapestry weave is typically a plain weave (over one, under one). It has multiple colors of weft threads (crosswise threads) woven into it to create patterns. Navajo weavings have four selvage ends (finished edges) and typically do not have fringe due to the technique of wrapping the warp in a figure eight (Broudy 73). Navajo weavers also weave as much as they can in one spot before moving on to the next area. This creates what are dubbed “lazy lines” where the various areas of weaving meet (Broudy 73).

The history of Navajo weaving can be divided into three periods: The Classic, The Transition, and the Modern. The Classic Period began in about the circa 1650 when the Navajo first began weaving and ended in the mid-1800’s (McManis and Jeffries 8). The Transition Period began in about 1863 when the U.S. government forced the relocation of the Navajo to Bosque Redondo during what is known as the Long Walk. This period continued until the turn of the 20th century (McManis and Jeffries 16). The Modern period of Navajo weaving includes weaving from the early 1900’s to the present. Some sources don’t recognize the Modern period of weaving.

The Classic period served as the foundation for all Navajo weavings. The loom, techniques, and patterns that give Navajo weaving its unique characteristics were developed during this period. These things have been passed down through generations and are still used by weavers today. During the Classic period, primarily chief’s blankets were woven. Patterns and variations included first phase, second phase, third phase, and Moki chief’s blankets. First phase chiefs

blankets were very simple with a series of striped lines. Indigo, brown, and white yarn was typically used. Second Phase Chief's blankets had vertical red bars interspersed around groups of horizontal lines (McManis and Jeffries 9).



Figure 3 Second Phase Chief's Blanket

Third phase blankets incorporated diamonds in place of lines (McManis and Jeffries 10).



Figure 4 Third Phase Chief's Blanket

As seen by the images, the weaving designs became more complex as the Classic Period progressed. With each phase, the pattern became more difficult to produce. This is a logical progression with any weavers. As the weaver becomes more skilled, he or she moves from weaving stripes to diamonds and figures.

The Transition Period was a very difficult time in Navajo history and, in turn, changed the face of Navajo weaving. The Long Walk to Bosque Redondo was an effort by the U.S. government to force the Navajo to leave their homelands and “farm at Fort Sumner” (McManis and Jeffries 11). As settlers expanded westward in the mid-1800’s, the Navajo and other native tribes met them with resistance. After a series of raids and massacres in the early 1860’s, initial plans for the Long Walk were set into motion (Weiser). On October 31, 1862, U.S. Congress approved the creation of a reservation for the Navajo and Apache at Fort Sumner in New Mexico (Weiser). The Navajo surrendered to Kit Carson in 1863 after he initiated a “scorched-earth campaign, destroying the Navajo crops and slaughtering their sheep” (McManis and Jeffries 11). Over 2,000 people died either on the walk to Bosque Redondo or during their time there (McManis and Jeffries 11).

The time spent at Bosque Redondo was a pivotal part in Navajo history that changed the way weavings were done and the patterns that were used. Prior to the Long Walk, during the Classic Period, “Navajo patterns consisted primarily of stripes and terraced figures” (McManis and Jeffries 12). Many of the chief blankets made before this point used a series of horizontal and vertical stripes. As a part of the rations they were given at Bosque Redondo, the Navajo received blankets woven by the Spanish. These contained patterns with serrated diamonds based off the traditional Mexican Saltillo (McManis and Jeffries 12).



Figure 5 Maximillian. Mexican Saltillo

The serrated diamond pattern was adopted by the Navajo and can be seen in many weaving designs.

The Navajo were permitted to return to their homeland with the Treaty of 1868 (Weiser). The treaty was more than a peace treaty between the Navajo and the United States Government; it strove to compensate for the forced imprisonment. The treaty marked the creation of a

reservation and buildings on the reservation including, a warehouse, chapel, and a school. It also stated that land, farming equipment, monetary compensation, and other goods would be paid out to the tribe (*Treaty between the United States of America and the Navajo Tribe of Indians*). The treaty started a “ten year annuity period during which the government issued rations to the Navajo” (Wilkins 22). Article XII of the treaty states that funds will be appropriated for “the purchase of fifteen thousand sheep and goats, at a cost not to exceed thirty thousand dollars” (*Treaty between the United States of America and the Navajo Tribe of Indians*).

The Navajo lost most of their sheep during the Long Walk and in turn, lost the raw materials used to produce weavings. The sheep they used previously were obtained from raiding the Spanish and were Churro sheep (Wilkins 23). These sheep had wool with characteristics that made it excellent for weaving (McManis and Jeffries 12). The wool fibers were very long, making them easy to spin and thus producing a stronger yarn. The sheep that were given to the Navajo as a result of the Treaty of 1868 were Merino sheep that had a relatively greasy and short fiber, which made it difficult to spin (McManis and Jeffries 12). The yarn produced from Merino wool was of a lower quality than the yarn produced from Churro wool. This led the Navajo to increase their use of commercially produced yarn, specifically Germantown yarn.

Germantown yarn was manufactured in Germantown, Pennsylvania and was known for its bright colors. Navajo weavings made with this yarn are referred to as Germantown weaving patterns which were often produced in the Transitional Period (McManis and Jeffries 12).



Figure 6 Germantown Weaving

Other than being brightly colored, Germantown weavings are unique in the fact that they are fringed. This is the only example of a Navajo weaving pattern with fringe. The reason for this exception is not explained.

The United States government also gave the Navajo cotton string to be used for the warp string when weaving (Wilkins 24). While these changes to the materials used for Navajo weaving may seem minor, it had a large effect on the overall look and feel of the weavings.

The Treaty between the United States of America and the Navajo Tribe of Indians is said to be the start of the Navajo dependence on commercial trade goods. Many new trade items were made available to the Navajo. While certain goods were embraced, other things such as “spinning wheels, European-style looms, and drum carders” were rejected in favor of traditional weaving tools (Wilkins 22).

Many would argue that Navajo weaving was forever redefined at the end of the Transitional Period by the owners of trading posts that were set up around the edge of the reservation. The most well-known trader to have an effect on weaving is J. L. Hubbell. Hubbell is often thought to be the creator of the designs associated with Navajo weaving today. Hubbell began as an “army sutler” who “encouraged the Navajo to trade their surplus wool for extra rations” (Wilkins 23). In the late 1870’s, Hubbell purchased a store just south of the reservation border. He and his partner, Clinton N. Cotton, ran a successful trade business (Wilkins 28). Cotton pushed the idea of “marketing Navajo blankets as rugs to adorn the floors of eastern homes” (Wilkins 29). Traders such as Hubbell began to request rugs woven with specific designs and colors based upon their buyers’ taste. They would have paintings created of the designs they wanted (“Traders’ Influence on Weaving”). In the 1890’s, Hubbell “began commissioning the blanket paintings through which he attempted exercising his own aesthetic preferences” (Wilkins 29). Hubbell asked his weavers to use the designs he had had illustrated. Many traditional weavers would not make exact copies, because they believed each rug was a separate living thing (“Traders’ Influence on Weaving”).

The influence of traders on rug designs was not exclusive to Hubbell. J. B. Moore, another trader, asked his weavers to use patterns from Middle Eastern rugs (“Traders’ Influence on Weaving”). J. B. Moore is credited with the creation of the Storm Pattern.



Figure 7 Elsie Whitehorse. Storm Pattern Weaving

In 1911, a rug with “a central rectangle, four zigzag arms radiating to the corners, and bold, isolated geometric motifs along the ends and the sides” appeared in Moore’s catalogue (Hedlund 85). Nothing like this pattern had been produced before. Moore claimed that this type of rug pattern was extremely religious (McManis and Jeffries 23). The rectangle at the center is compared to the emergence point at the center of the universe or the *hogan*, meaning home. The emphasis on the four corners are said to represent the four sacred mountains. The zigzag lines could represent lightning (Hedlund 85). The storm pattern uses multiple colors that are both natural and dyed. The increased opportunities for trade meant that weavers could better provide for their families.

While the influence of the trade and the traders was very evident in Navajo weaving, the Long Walk left its mark as well. These two things together caused a shift in the materials and styles of weavings. It is the reason for the large shift from producing blankets to producing rugs. People could now easily trade for blankets while they produced rugs for a greater profit. The

'new' weaving designs reflected the transition in history, but the designs also continued to represent the Navajo principles that have been present in weavings from the Classic Period through the Modern Period.

The Modern Period of Navajo, beginning at the turn of the 20th century, includes a revival period. By 1920, "weaving had reached its all-time low" (Broudy 75). Very little weaving was being done due to a cultural shift. The revival that shortly followed included a return to more traditional patterns and colors from the Classical Period. Several new designs were developed in this period as well. The Navajo territory is comprised of various regions, each of which developed signature-weaving designs (McManis and Jeffries 17).

A rich red color is associated with the weavings of Ganado, Arizona. This deep Ganado red has become one of the characteristics most associated with Navajo weavings (McManis and Jeffries 17). Patterns that are representative of weavings from this region include Two Grey Hills and Burntwater. The Two Grey Hills pattern is a geometric weaving pattern. The basic pattern can be described as having a diamond or diamonds in the center and a border around the weaving. It only uses natural wool colors (Hedlund 30). The Burntwater pattern is similar to that of the Two Grey Hills Pattern. The only large difference is that vegetal dyes are used to color the wool of Burntwater weavings to achieve a warm color palette of brown and rust.



Figure 8 Barbara Ornellas. Burntwater Weaving

The Four Corners region also has some specific designs. These include the Teec Nos Pas and the Red Mesa patterns (McManis and Jeffries 20). These designs are somewhat similar to the bordered designs of the Ganado region. Teec Nos Pas is a geometric pattern. This is a good example of the influence from Asian rugs. The geometric shapes within the border are positioned on or in relation to the centerline.



Figure 9 Pearl Ben. Teec Nos Pas Weaving

Red Mesa patterns are defined by the “all over zigzags” and are occasionally referred to as “eye dazzlers” (Hedlund 30).



Figure 10 Jason Harvey. Red Mesa Weaving.

Both of these patterns have multiple colors.

Another category of design, of which there is evidence in the 1800’s but became more prominent in the Modern Period, is the pictorial weaving. Pictorial weavings range from the religious weavings (such as the Sand Painting, Ye’ii, and Ye’ii Bicheii) to the more commercial (such as the Snoopy Christmas Pictorial).



Figure 11 Snoopy Christmas Pictorial

Used in healing ceremonies, sand paintings are created on the floor in a hogan and, by the end of the ceremony or shortly thereafter, are destroyed. A space is marked out for an ailing person to sit in the center of the sand painting. From that space, lines extend out to the four corners. Mythical figures related to the specific ceremony are drawn within the sand painting. The mythological beings are said to “inhabit” the sand painting during the ritual (*Native American Religions* 63). Ye’ii is the term for the beings that are illustrated in sand paintings (*Dictionary of Native American Mythology* 356). Ye’ii bicheii are dancers who represent the ye’ii in these healing ceremonies (Hedlund 93). Sand painting weavings are modeled after the painting created on the Hogan floor during healing ceremonies. Other weavings, Ye’ii and Ye’ii Bicheii rugs, just depict the holy figures.



Figure 12 Nellie Nez. Ye'ii Rug. 1990

Sand Painting and Ye’ii rugs are controversial among weavers. Traditionally, “Navajos strictly forbid making representations of sand paintings, and they are never kept as aesthetic objects” (*Native American Religions* 66). Some highly religious weavers even believe it is

harmful to weave such things and will seek ritual protection from a medicine man if they intend to do so (Hedlund 93).

The Modern Period continues to the present. Although some consider Navajo weaving a fading art form, it is still passed down by the generations. In order to fully understand weaving designs from the all phases of Navajo Weaving, one must look at Navajo religion and culture.

In *Navaho Religion: A Study of Symbolism*, Gladys Reichard writes, “Navajo dogma is based upon a cosmogony that tries to account for everything in the universe by relating it to man and his activities” (3). She goes on to state that religion and ritual are one in the same (*Navajo Religion* 3). Every single aspect of Navajo life relates back to their myths, religion and culture. This includes weaving patterns, from the stripes of the chief’s blankets to the figures in Ye’ii rugs.

While some representations in weavings are more literal than others, all of the designs follow the principles of balance and harmony. These two things are emphasized repeatedly in Navajo Religion. Commonly used colors are representative of elements. Symbols such as zigzag lines can represent evil, darkness, lightening.

Another trend that is seen in Navajo myths and weavings is the importance of the number four, which shows up multiple ways in their cosmogony. This includes the four sacred mountains and the first peoples being presented in multiples of fours. Many traditional weaving patterns can be divided into four quadrants, which are usually symmetrical. All of these principles relate back to the origin of the world. According to myth, four worlds were created and destroyed before the ancestors of the Navajo came to the present world (*Native American Religions* 22). The first world can be described as follows:

“The First World, Ni’hodilhil, was black as black wool. It had four corners, and over these appeared four clouds. These four clouds contained within themselves the elements of the First World. They were in color, black, white, blue, and yellow” (Levy 42).

First Man and First Woman were also created in this First World. First Woman represented “darkness and death” and she brought white shell and turquoise with her (Levy 43). These materials were used by Spider Man in the creation of the first loom. The colors of the four clouds are repeated throughout many myths and are some of the more commonly used colors in weaving patterns. Yellow and blue appear in the more colorful weavings from the Transitional Period. Black and white are natural wool colors and are used in just about every variation of Navajo weaving.

First Man represented “The Dawn and was the Life Giver” (Levy 43). After First Man and First Woman, two more beings came, making a total of four. Four more beings joined them in the form of the yellow Wasp People. Soon after came the red spider ants, the black ants, Spider Man, Spider Woman, and other insect people (Levy 44). The story of the First World not only introduces Spider Man and Spider Woman, the founders of weaving, but it also presents the importance of the number four.

This First World was full of “strife, disorder, and confusion” (*Native American Religions* 23). Due to this, the inhabitants were forced to climb up into the Second World that was positioned directly on top of the First World (*Native American Religions* 23). This was process repeated several times. In all cases, the inhabitants climbed through a hole in the center of the world, known as the emergence point. The Second World was the Blue World. A variety of beings already lived in this world; all of them were said to be blue. The beings from the First World did not get along with those of the Second World, which resulted in violence and a state

of unrest (Levy 45). Great Coyote Who Was Formed In The Water, First Man, First Woman, and Coyote discovered “an opening in the World of Blue-Haze; and they climbed through this and led the people up into the Third or Yellow World” (Levy 45). This passageway was located in the center of the Blue World.

The Yellow World only contained six mountains, the Male River, and the Female River (Levy 45). These mountains appear to be predecessors of the four sacred mountains that bound the Navajo territory and represent its four corners. Those same mountains are named for the four sacred stone used by Spider Man in the creation of the loom.

Many people lived in this world, including four chiefs: Big Snake, Bear, Mountain Lion, and Otter (Levy 47). First Man, First Woman, Turkey, and Big Snake cultivated some of the crops that were grown by the Navajo. First Man and First Woman brought white and yellow corn (Levy 46). It is said that Turkey came forth and “danced back and forth four times, then he shook his feather coat and there dropped from his clothing four kernels of corn, one gray, one blue, one black, and one red” (Levy 47). The importance of corn is highlighted time and time again in these myths. The colors of the kernels highlight the importance of yellow, black, white, and blue. It also introduces the colors of red and grey. Grey is another color that is a natural color in wool or can be created by carding together white and black wool. Red is arguably one of the most prominent colors in Navajo weavings. It is the defining color of the Ganado weaving pattern and is used in a wide array of others.

The Third World was also one of chaos and violence. According to myth, all of the men and women separated after First Man found another man at his home with First Woman (Levy 47). At the start of the separation, things were peaceful. As time went on, both the men and the women “had no way to satisfy their passions” and turned to murder (Levy 48). First Man saw the

destruction in these actions and brought everyone back together and things returned to the way they had been. First Woman, who is constantly represented as making mischief, asked Coyote to kidnap the two children of Water Buffalo (Levy 49). As a result, Water Buffalo destroyed the world by flooding it and causing it to sink. All of the inhabitants escaped to the Fourth World by climbing through a large reed (Levy 50). Each of them brought something with them that would serve them in the next world. In terms of weaving, the most significant was the cotton that was brought by Spider Man and Spider Woman. Cotton was the staple for weaving blankets before the Navajo acquired sheep by raiding the Spanish.

The Fourth World was the final world before the present world. This was the White World (Levy 50). This world was destroyed like each of the ones before and the beings emerged to the Fifth World. According to myth, the Fifth World was completely covered in water and did not at all resemble the world known today (*Native American Religions* 23). The beings drained the water and began to create everything in the world. First Man used his medicine bag to create a map of how the world would look (*Native American Mythology* 23). Inside the bag were pieces of earth from each of the six sacred mountains and various precious stones from the previous worlds (Levy 49). In his hogan, he performed a ceremony that turned the map into a reality, thereby creating the land of the Navajo. This included the creation of the four mountains that mark the four directions and bordered the Navajo land. First Man created the world so that everything was ordered and balanced:

“The principle of order followed in these acts of creation was one of creating complementary pairs and placing them across from each other so that they balance on the rim of the emergence place... The result of the creation of the earth surface was a world in which

everything was in order and placed properly so that its forces were delicately balanced against all other forces on the center point” (*Native American Religions* 23)

This delicate balance extends to everything within Navajo culture. The reason for the destruction of the other worlds was their lack of order, which is the moral of the story. The symmetry and balance of traditional weaving patterns is one of the most notable things about them and is a part of the beauty of the weavings. The idea of the center point being the crux of balance translates into weavings in the form of a geometrical shape in the center of a weaving. Thus, each weaving could serve as a representation of the sacred map that First Man brought into reality.

Color plays an important role in Navajo mythology as a whole, as indicated by the origin myth. White indicates purity, divinity, sacredness, and maleness. It can also mean “well-being, supernatural favor, and wealth” (*Navaho Religion* 187). The color yellow is typically associated with the female, pollen, and the ability to reproduce (*Navaho Religion* 193). Blue is associated with the south, water, and the sky (*Navaho Religion* 190). It also represents the “fructifying power of the earth” (*Navaho Religion* 192). Black is the color of evil and darkness (*Navaho Religion* 194). Red represents “danger, war, and sorcery” (*Navaho Religion* 197). Because of its similarities to black, the two colors are often put together. Red is also the color of blood and flesh (*Navaho Religion* 200). Grey is the color of evil or something dirty. Brown is considered a variation of grey (*Navaho Religion* 203).

Many common symbols used in Navajo weaving can be related to the origin myths. The equilateral cross is present in a vast number of weavings. This likely represents the direction delineated by the four sacred mountains. The cross can also be used to divide the sand painting or weaving into quadrants (*Navaho Religion* 62). A zigzag line, especially one paired with red or

black, signifies something powerful and dangerous such as a snake or lightning (*Navaho Religion* 197).

Geometrical shapes can denote the gender or familial relationships of beings. Males are shown with round heads, while females are shown with square heads. One figure with a circular head paired with a square-headed figure typically signifies a married couple. Two figures with heads of the same shape are most likely siblings. Snakes are usually represented by diamond shaped heads (*Navaho Religion* 176).

Weaving as a whole is intertwined with Navajo history, and thus Navajo culture is imbedded within the fibers. An understanding of weaving history, Navajo myths, important colors, and basic symbols can be used to unravel the essence of Navajo weavings. This knowledge may be used to systematically break down the designs and symbols.

For example, a system of “reading” a weaving is applied to the 1991 Teec Nos Pos rug by Marian Nez.



Figure 13 Marian Nez. Teec Nos Pos Weaving. 1991

As a traditional Teec Nos Pas pattern, it is a bordered rug with a large diamond motif positioned at the center. The weaving has four symmetrical quadrants and thus maintains order and balance. At the center of the weaving is a white circle with arrows pointing out to the four directions radiating from the center point. The circle could signify the center of the world or the emergence point around which everything is balanced. Each time the first peoples traveled to the next world, the emergence point served as a passageway. The fact that the circle is white could connect it to First Man. In the creation stories, First Man brought white corn with him to plant in the Third World. He is often associated with leading the inhabitants through the emergence point and creating the map of the current world. The arrows radiating from the center point could refer to the four directions. The larger, brown triangle shapes that mark the corners of the rug may represent the four sacred mountains that bound Navajo territory and are often looked at as

deities. The large serrated diamond shapes represent the influence of Spanish blankets during the forced relocation at Bosque Redondo. Vegetal dyes were likely used to create the shades of brown used in this weaving.

It is easy to see how J. B. Moore's assertions about the religious meaning of the storm pattern could be true while evaluating the 1995 Storm Pattern Weaving by Jason Harvey.



Figure 14 Jason Harvey. Storm Pattern Weaving, 1995

This weaving also has the now familiar four-way symmetry. A central rectangle has zigzag lines radiating off of it towards the corners. A zigzag line often signifies lightning, which is both powerful and dangerous. The danger or evil of the 'storm' in the storm pattern is further emphasized by the use of reds and blacks.

While it is difficult to ascertain who the individual figures are in the 1987 Sand Painting rug by Anna Marie Tanner, a knowledge of the meaning of geometric shapes provides a basic understanding of the weaving.

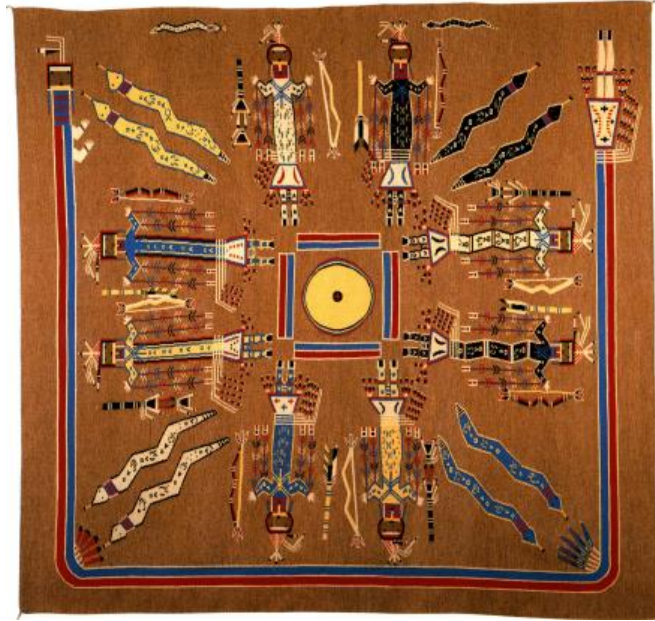


Figure 15 Anna Marie Tanner. *Shootingway. Sand Painting Weaving. 1987.*

The weaving is not symmetrical, but it can be divided into four separate quadrants which maintains the balance. All of the symbols are positioned around a central circle that, in an actual ceremonial sand painting, would be where the ailing person would sit for the ceremony. Four pairs surround the circle. Two pairs with round heads are likely males while two pairs with square heads are probably female. Four pairs of snakes that point out to each of the four directions. The snakes are identified by their diamond shaped heads and zigzag bodies. There also appears to be images of corn, feathers, bows and arrows. The red could indicate blood while the blue could indicate water and its purifying effect.

Reading weavings to discover their meaning is a controversial subject. Weavings mean something different to each Navajo weaver. Mary Walker, a weaver and informal scholar of Navajo weaving, said, "People always want to know what the weaving means, but to most weavers, it just means that they can provide for their families." This became the case for many weavers in the Transitional Period after the Long Walk. With traders like J. L. Hubbell and J. B. Moore set up around the reservation, it became easy to sell weavings and make a profit. As

Deescheeny Nez Tracy describes, “My family was poor and my mother had to support us. She wove rugs and sold them in order to buy what we needed” (151).

Mary Walker describes herself as an “in-law” of Navajo culture (Personal Interview). She began weaving when she was 21 years old and has continued to informally study it. She runs a website, *Weaving in Beauty*, which strives to educate about and increase the appreciation for Navajo weaving. She believes that before the 1890’s, weavers wove for themselves. Nothing after that is completely Navajo because it is under the influence of J. B. Moore and J. L. Hubbell. Therefore, the pattern does not matter and has no significance. Walker represents one end of the spectrum.

On the other end is Barbara Teller Ornellas, a widely known and respected weaver from the Two Grey Hills region. Her weavings are published in books on Navajo weaving. She has a slightly different take on the meaning behind weavings. Ornellas is a 5th generation weaver. Her children are 6th generation weavers. She was taught to weave at a young age by her mother. Her grandmother taught her the stories, and her sisters taught her the patterns. Ornellas became a professional weaver when she graduated from high school. Her loom is based on a traditional one. It was built by her father, brothers, and brother-in-law, as was the historical norm. She is best known for Two Grey Hills weavings.



Figure 16 Barbara Ornellas. Two Grey Hills. 1995

To Ornellas, weaving is a living art, and she hopes that people appreciate it. It contains the spiritual. Weaving represents the family and the tribe. It held everyone together during the Long Walk and saved tribes. Her weaving is her story.

While these two ends of the spectrum exist, it is clear that Navajo weaving is a product of their religion and culture. Mary Walker makes a valid point in that there is a shift in the weaving designs after the Long Walk and that, to many people, weavings are a way of making a living. In some way, every art form is a product of the culture and time in which it is created. This is the same for Navajo weaving. After the Long Walk, weavings evolved. Weavers adapted to their current situation. The meaning and history embedded within each fiber of a Navajo weaving was not lost; it evolved as well.

Navajo weaving is known for its colors, geometric shapes, and intriguing patterns, but there is so much more that lies beneath the surface. Weaving embodies the history, the triumphs, and the struggles of the Diné. It is something that defines an entire people. With a basic knowledge of the culture and myths, logical conclusions can be drawn about the meanings of colors, lines, and shapes. The question is not whether or not the meanings within the fabric exist. The real question is whether or not somebody should take the time to draw the meanings out. In the case of Navajo weaving, the answer is yes. A singular, beautifully crafted textile serves as a window into such a rich culture. One weaving potentially yields as much information as a book on the Navajo.

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