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Jesus, Peyote, and the Holy People: Alcohol Abuse and the Ethos of Power in Navajo Healing

Of the three religious healing traditions that coexist within the contemporary Navajo health care system, the Native American Church (NAC) and Pentecostal Christianity are more actively involved in the treatment of alcohol and substance abuse than is Traditional Navajo healing. This article examines these two more recent healing traditions as religious responses to the contemporary Navajo crisis of alcohol and substance abuse as well as to socioeconomic changes. These traditions offer new kinds of power, social networks, and personal meaning that facilitate a transformation of self, a revitalized sense of community, and a new vision of the possibilities of the future for Navajo people who suffer. Examining the ethos of power that underlies Navajo healing can complement the theoretical emphasis on harmony and beauty in anthropological research on Navajo culture and religion. [Navajo, alcohol abuse, religious movements, ritual healing, ethos of power]

Navajo patients frequently co-utilize the multiple components of their local “health care system” (Kleinman 1980), including three religious healing traditions. These traditions exist in a complementary relationship in the sense that for certain health problems, such as cancer or other biomedical diseases, they either address different aspects of the problem or have an additive effect in alleviating it (Adair et al. 1988; Csordas and Garrity 1994; Kunitz 1983; Levy 1983; Begay and Maryboy, this volume). However, among these three traditions, NAC and Pentecostal Christian healing are more actively involved in the treatment of alcohol and substance abuse than is Traditional Navajo healing.¹ This is due in part to their revitalizational and millennial natures, respectively.

Anthropologists have long observed that indigenous religious movements develop among socially subordinate and marginalized groups and have characterized such movements as revitalizational (Wallace 1956a, 1956b, 1969), nativistic (Linton 1943), and crisis oriented (LaBarre 1970). Such movements have often flourished among North American Indian peoples since Euro-American contact in response to rapid and unaccommodating change (Kehoe 1989). They coalesce during

crises of cultural disorganization and distortion marked by increased individual distress, alcohol and substance abuse, crime, and violence. Wallace (1956b) observed that these crises generate a need for novel interpretations of the meaning of life and how it should be lived. These crises are both personal and social and require a reworking of meaning at both the individual and group levels through the formulation of a new sacred code (Bourguignon 1976; Kehoe 1989). The success of the new code requires synthesizing elements of traditional meaning with those of the changing present to create a new vision of the possibilities of the future (Wallace 1956b).

My intent is not to suggest a direct cause and effect. Certain conditions, however, broadly define the taking up of new religious movements. Important among these is social suffering, which in turn predisposes people to seek healing (Kleinman et al. 1997). When the current healing system or systems of any given culture are unable to adequately address certain forms of suffering and, further, are unable to initiate sufficient modifications to address new forms of suffering, it is more likely that new forms of healing will be taken up.

Three major crises have occurred among the Navajo within historical times. The first was their military defeat by the United States and subsequent forced march and internment at Bosque Redondo in the late 1860s (Bailey and Bailey 1986; Bailey 1964). The second was the forced livestock reduction program carried out by the federal government in the 1930s (Aberle 1966, 1982; Bailey and Bailey 1986; Henderson 1989). Aberle (1982) suggests these crises were a shock to the Navajo in that the power of their Traditional religion proved ineffective against them. The second crisis also initiated the disruption of traditional patterns of wealth and kinship and played a significant role in the Navajo inception of the NAC (Aberle 1965, 1966).

I suggest that the third crisis among the Navajo people is the present-day crisis of alcohol and substance abuse.² Alcohol abuse, in particular, is a major factor in the higher rates of morbidity and mortality found among many North American Indian peoples (Lamarine 1988; Mail and Johnson 1993; Manson et al. 1992; May 1982, 1989). American Indian youth are especially at risk (Blum et al. 1992; Fleming et al. 1996). The Navajo alcohol-related death rate, once 20 times that of the total U.S. rate (Haraldson 1988), is currently more than seven times that of the total U.S. rate (U.S. Indian Health Service [U.S.I.H.S.] 1997). The Navajo Nation considers alcohol abuse to be the most serious problem now facing the Navajo people (Navajo Nation Division of Health 1991). A Traditional diagnostician spoke of alcohol as a dangerous enemy that threatens yet baffles the Navajo people:

It is like some kind of spirit that exists with danger and something on the scale of war. It travels around everywhere. People say someone died from this and that and yet it is much bigger. We are at war with this thing yet we don't know, we just don't know where and how it travels to destroy people . . . on the scale of disease. We need to have many medicine men get together and see what is happening to us. We need to discuss what is happening to people. We may never know the real cause but if we fight it together we will curb it.

Navajo use and abuse of substances such as marijuana, cocaine, and amphetamines also constitute a serious problem, particularly among the youth, and "polysubstance" abuse remains a severe problem across ages. The latter involves adolescents who

“sniff” glue, paint thinner, and gasoline (inhalant abuse), as well as alcohol-dependent persons who consume commercial products such as hair spray and mouthwash during desperate attempts to stave off withdrawal. Young children often begin abusing inhalants at a very early age before moving on to alcohol and more mainstream drugs.

Alcohol and substance abuse embodies both an intense personal crisis for individuals who suffer and a crisis that threatens the Navajo people. It would be safe to say that almost all Navajo people have been affected by this crisis in some way, through their own personal suffering with alcohol and drugs or that of a family member, or as innocent victims of alcohol-related accidents or violence. At both the individual and group levels this crisis demands a reformulation of how and why life can be meaningful and worth living. I suggest that the growing popularity of the NAC and Pentecostalism in contemporary Navajo society is due in part to their distinctive ability to address the crisis of alcohol and substance abuse. The taking up of these two new sacred codes assists in the reformulation of meaning for those who suffer.

Navajo Social and Religious Change

The growth of the NAC and Pentecostal Christianity among the Navajo is intertwined with the vast changes taking place in Navajo society today as it continues its transition from pastoralism toward a predominantly wage-labor economy (Kunitz and Levy 1994; Levy 1998; Weiss 1984). On the one hand, these changes include greater educational and economic opportunities for many young Navajos, as well as the emergence of women in more influential public roles (Lamphere 1989). On the other hand, these changes continue to profoundly disrupt traditional kinship networks and their patterns of wealth (Aberle 1989; Henderson 1989; Levy et al. 1989) and substantially diminish the opportunity for participation in Traditional religious life for many Navajos. Contemporary Navajo society is complex and diversified. Faced with a growing population, a limited resource base, and a proportionately poor economic status, it is becoming more competitive, as families and individuals must vie for scarce land, water, jobs, education, and medical services. With the emergence of a new order of educated, white-collar professionals who reap comparatively higher earnings in the government and services sector, it is also to a certain extent becoming more stratified.

The transition toward a wage-labor economy, together with the attendant modernization of the Navajo infrastructure has dramatically increased the mobility of the Navajo people and their access to goods and services in neighboring border towns, including access to alcohol (Bailey and Bailey 1986; Kunitz and Levy 1994). Prior to these developments, alcohol was more difficult to procure, and drinking tended to be carried out in kin group settings in rural areas of the reservation (Kunitz and Levy 1994). Contemporary drinking patterns differ, in part, in that they involve an abundant supply of alcohol accessible to almost all Navajo people and include the added, potentially dangerous element of motor vehicle travel to and from border towns (Kunitz and Levy 1994).

Moreover, Navajo people view alcohol abuse itself as being profoundly disruptive of traditional kinship networks and patterns of wealth. This was forcefully

conveyed in the narrative of one Pentecostal minister, who recalled his life growing up and why he chose Christianity:

I don't remember being taught about kinship and relatives, they never introduced us to . . . clan relations. Our parents were drinking all the time. They never really taught us anything. . . . There was never enough, we used the handouts from different places. . . . We drank up our livestock. . . . So my aunts and other relatives stayed away, they didn't come to help. . . . My dad is a medicine man . . . his father was a medicine man so he became a medicine man . . . and he wanted me to take his place . . . and he was gonna teach us in the traditional way. Instead, the drinking took over.

The diminished opportunity for participation in Traditional healing has been further attenuated as the result of changes taking place within Traditional Navajo religion itself. Although Traditional ceremonies, or chants (*hataáál*), are still conducted frequently across the reservation, there has been both a steady aging and consequent decline in the number of practicing chanters (*hataalii*) and a lack of recruitment of younger men to train (Aberle 1982; Henderson 1982).³ Numerous Traditional chanters we worked with lamented this trend as yet another crisis faced by their people. A related concern has to do with language, a critical element in Navajo culture and healing (Gill 1977, 1980; Reichard 1944; Witherspoon 1977). While the Navajo language is not in immediate danger of becoming moribund, there continues to be a proportionate decline in fluent speakers, especially among the younger generation (Aberle 1982).

Many of the older Traditional practitioners commented that the Navajos are losing their cultural ways, and various scholars have implied this as well (Aberle 1982; Bergman 1973; Farrella 1984). It is not my intention, however, to suggest this. Our research suggests that it is more appropriate to consider the two more recent healing traditions in the context of cultural change than of cultural loss. Traditional Navajo religion itself is predicated on change and adaptation (Adair et al. 1988; Haile 1938; Levy 1998; Wyman 1983). Historically, ceremonial masks and sandpaintings were borrowed from the Pueblos, while hand trembling (*ndishnuih*), a form of diagnosis, and the Chiricahua Windway chant (*Chíshí Biníłch'íjí*) were adopted from the Apache (Adair et al. 1988; Haile 1938; Levy 1998).⁴ Traditional Navajo religion continues to change and adapt today (Levy 1998). Shorter overnight versions of ceremonies are appearing that fulfill the purposes originally served by longer sings. Kunitz and Levy (1994) and Levy (1998) note the growing presence of "New Age" concepts among younger Navajos reinterpreting Traditional Navajo religion and healing practices. Perhaps the most prominent image of change is the Traditional chanter I met who takes calls on his cellular phone while traveling in his pickup truck. In spite of these changes, Traditional healing has become inaccessible for many Navajos, who today lack the traditional resources and social networks necessary to have a major ceremony, as well as the linguistic fluency and familiarity with traditional culture necessary to embrace its ritual symbolism.

The Traditional Chanters we worked with were strongly opposed to alcohol. Yet the overall consensus was that there is no Traditional ceremony to treat alcohol and substance abuse. One Beautyway (*Hoozhónee*) chanter explained:

A person that's become addicted to wine, alcoholic drugs, there is no such ceremony for this. The ceremonies were created I don't know how many million years ago. Wine or alcoholic drugs were created just recently; therefore there are no ceremonies for it. Marijuana is another one that is without a ceremony so there's really nothing that you can do . . . because it's a recent invention.

This is a plausible explanation save that Traditional healing has been extended to other more recent afflictions such as cancer (Csordas 1989). Kunitz and Levy (1994), however, report indications that alcohol was positively valued in Navajo society from the late 1800s through the 1960s and was associated with prestige, wealth, and status. It was especially valued for the sense of power it gave, and some Traditional chanters drank to facilitate manipulation of supernatural power (Kunitz and Levy 1994). This may explain, in part, why Traditional healing never developed a treatment to address alcohol problems.

While the patients we worked with did not directly state that they drank alcohol to gain power, they frequently spoke of alcohol as a power that eventually controlled them. This realization, the consummation of their alcohol-related suffering becoming unbearable, drove them to seek NAC and Pentecostal Christian healing. Moreover, within all three healing traditions, patients frequently expressed a range of other distress besides that caused by alcohol abuse (such as depression or anxiety) in terms of being "out of control" or "controlled by" something, such as a spirit. This further underscores the Navajo experiential salience of power and the proper control of power.

Many Traditional chanters blamed the whites for creating alcohol and bringing it to the Navajo. This was often articulated in relation to themes of pollution and disruption of the natural balance as the result of modern technology thrust upon the Navajos by the dominant society. This highlights the tension underlying the relationship between Navajo and Anglo society and underscores the powerlessness often perceived by Navajos within that relationship, as well as with respect to alcohol itself. A Chiricahua Windway (Chíshí Biníłch'íjį) chanter lamented:

Anglos know more about this, or they should know more about alcohol and alcohol problems because they are the makers of these chemicals. We don't know as healers . . . I don't know exactly why people drink. I think the Anglos and the government are responsible . . . I don't understand, why can't the ones who are responsible for this or the authorities stop or prohibit alcohol? It does not make sense.

Traditional chanters also felt that alcohol and substance abuse, particularly among the youth, was the result of the Navajos losing their traditional ways. As a Blessingway (*Hózhóǫ́jí*) chanter observed:

Some patients now do not know about the ceremonies. The more exposure one has to the ceremonies, then the more familiarity or awareness one starts to have about what is really going on. Language is a big barrier. The youth, there are so many who do not speak Navajo. They speak only English, and the mothers just pray for them. This is a difficult task for us. . . . It is so obvious why the children do not listen and know anything anymore. It is because of the Anglo way of life; the television, the things they have in their ears. So they don't hear you when you try to talk to them. If we turn away from all this, then we will straighten up and recapture our language and culture.

Finally, some chanters felt that one who suffers from alcohol abuse may be the victim of witchcraft, and they made indirect statements such as "There is lots of jealousy among the Navajo, that is probably one of the main causes of all these problems," or "I'm sure someone was meaning to hurt the person, and the patient never did anything about it to prevent this from happening."⁵

Two minor ceremonies, the "Tobacco Smoking Way" and "Turning of the Basket," were often mentioned as possibly beneficial, not specifically for alcohol and substance abuse problems but, rather, for "people with mind problems" and "problems of the emotions." Such problems manifest themselves in a range of inappropriate behaviors, such as "a person who wanders from home or strays away," "violent behavior and trouble with the law," and "overindulging with having sex with women." The tobacco ceremony is used to "help cleanse and straighten out the mind." The basket ceremony is similarly used for "correcting one's mind and thoughts" and for "restoring and maintaining harmony in one's life." The chants talk about how "the patient's mind is ceasing its wandering and returning back home."⁶

Overall, in the words of one among their number, the consensus of chanters was "That's all you have done [can do] for these alcoholics and [those who abuse] drugs. . . . It's up to them, it's really good if they fully give it up. If they still hold on to it, then it's not good and it's not going to work. If they fully give up drinking . . . then the person will live a good life again. If the person keeps returning to drinking, then it's not effective." These themes of inefficacy, Euro-American hegemony, culture loss, witchcraft, and the contingency of patients' personal willpower underscore the pervading sense of the power of alcohol and other substances, and the lack of power in Traditional healing to address their abuse. Another Chiricahua Windway chanter captured this sense of *báhádzid* (dangerous) power in the following way:

If one takes a little sip of the alcohol, the person will just want to do that and it'll get serious and now they are addicted to drugs. There will be something bad sitting on your shoulder and telling you in your ears to drink some more. If you drink some more then you can take pride in yourself, and you will know more, and drink more and more, until you lose your mind and not know what you are doing. That's when he'll desert you. All you're going to see is his tracks going in that direction.

Arlene, one of the Traditional patients we worked with, had the basket-turning and tobacco ceremonies performed for her as she sought to reverse her heavy use and abuse of marijuana, cocaine, and amphetamines. An urbane, yet disenchanted woman of 18, she identified herself as being "addicted to drugs" and suffering from "depression" (see Storck et al., this issue), which she described as feeling like "something evil is trying to control my mind." She also hoped the experience would help her "get in touch with where I come from and who my people are." The ceremonies, comparatively short yet rich in symbolism, were provided for her free of charge by her grandfather, which allowed her to bypass the marshaling of resources that normally hinders people with alcohol and substance abuse problems.

Arlene's lack of knowledge of traditional culture and healing, however, made much of the ritual enigmatic to her, and she was unable to discern any personal significance in the symbols, reporting, "I haven't thought about that much, I'm not

sure what that meant.” Moreover, her lack of fluency in Navajo posed a critical obstacle for her engagement in the therapeutic repertoire of Traditional healing. She acknowledged, “I had a hard time understanding what they were saying . . . I tried to understand parts of it. . . . But it’s so hard because I can barely speak my own language.” Her substance abuse and attendant suffering continued unabated, and months later she still related, “I’m having a hard time trying to understand that, and I’m trying to figure out how I can change that.” Her grandfather observed that “she should have had more benefits from the ceremony,” yet acknowledged that “she probably couldn’t grasp and understand the ceremony fully and reap all of its benefits” because of “the language barrier.” This is not to say that Traditional healing is totally inaccessible to all young or contemporary Navajos. This brief vignette, however, illuminates the predicament faced by Navajos who seek transformation through Traditional healing, yet lack traditional cultural knowledge and Navajo fluency.

The Appeal of NAC and Pentecostal Christian Healing

Part of the apparent therapeutic efficacy of NAC and Pentecostal Christian healing lies in their ability to synthesize cultural, linguistic, symbolic, ritual, and social elements of meaning from the traditional orientation with those of the contemporary Navajo sociocultural milieu. Let us now examine some of the cultural similarities inherent in these healing practices that make them accessible and appealing to contemporary Navajo people.

The NAC is particularly adept at innovation, a quality grounded in its history as an intertribal and syncretic movement. The NAC was introduced to Navajoland in the 1930s by Plains Indians. As practiced by the Navajo today, however, its rituals appear to contain fewer Christian elements than are found among the Plains and eastern tribes (LaBarre 1959; Spindler 1971) and, to a certain extent, fewer than were first observed by Aberle (1966) in the early 1950s. NAC healers are known as road men, because they guide one’s journey through life on the “peyote road.” Some road men began as Traditional practitioners, and we have found that, on the whole, Navajo road men increasingly are creatively integrating more Traditional diagnostic techniques (see Milne and Howard, this issue), treatments, and explanatory models (Kleinman 1980) into their therapeutic repertoire. These include diagnostic practices such as “listening” and “stargazing.” Road men are also beginning to conduct peyote meetings that expressly correspond to Traditional ceremonies such as Blessingway (Hózhó’jǫ́jí) and Lightningway or Shootingway (Na’at’oyee’jǫ́jí), as well as Evilway (Hóchxó’jǫ́jí) and Windway (Níłch’ijǫ́jí). One road man even referred to plans to learn and integrate Traditional sandpaintings into his NAC prayer meetings. Use of the sweat lodge, frequently in a Plains Indian style, is another example of NAC innovation. Traditionally, Navajo sweat baths comprised a rite of purification and preparation for longer religious healing ceremonies. Today, particularly in NAC circles, the sweat bath is beginning to take on the significance of a healing ceremony in its own right. It is frequently employed as therapy for alcohol abuse, particularly for individuals who have grown up experiencing a sense of estrangement from their Navajo identity, language, and culture.⁷

Other researchers have noted that increased participation in peyote meetings is correlated with a decrease in Traditional Navajo ceremonies in some regions of

the reservation (Aberle 1982; Kunitz 1970). This is not necessarily a form of zero-sum competition, however, and can be understood in terms of NAC healing filling a therapeutic niche created by the decline in numbers among Traditional ceremonialists. That is, road men are able to offer services that are meaningful in traditional terms but that are becoming less available from Traditional practitioners. In this sense, the NAC of Navajoland is engaged in the preservation of traditional culture and religion—albeit in a transformed state to which some traditionalists strenuously object—rather than competition and eradication.

Navajo Pentecostal services are conducted at least partially in the Navajo language. Scripture is consulted as a metaphysical and existential blueprint in the same way as the Traditional origin stories. The Biblical imagery and metaphors of shepherding flocks, wandering in the desert, and healing the afflicted are particularly germane to the Navajo experience, and there is a strong emphasis on divine power. Camp meetings and revivals resemble the gatherings that occur during large Traditional sings such as the Enemyway.

Christianity began its contemporary florescence as the result of the vigorous missionary activities of various evangelical sects during the 1950s, and particularly because of their innovative approach to training and ordaining Navajo ministers (Bailey and Bailey 1986). The most recent comprehensive survey indicated that by the late 1970s there were 343 independent evangelical churches, 200 of which had Navajo pastors (Aberle 1982; Dolaghan and Scates 1978). The movement continues to grow, and there is currently an abundance of ordained Navajo Pentecostal ministers. Although there are certainly Navajo ministers who are antagonistic to traditional culture, others we interviewed nurture a deep sense of pride and respect for their Navajo cultural heritage and concern for the preservation of the Navajo language and traditional way of life, both of which are intrinsic to their self-identity, save for their religious orientation. They also express a profound compassion for the Navajo people and the kinds of problems and suffering they face, particularly the youth. In these respects, they are indistinguishable from many of their Traditional and NAC counterparts. The lifestyle of one elderly minister I worked with was strikingly similar to those of elderly Traditional chanters. He spoke fluent Navajo, tended his animals, repaired his own vehicle and home, and prayed when he planted his corn, except that he offered his prayers to Jesus, for Jesus's power had healed him from alcohol abuse.

Theological differences among Pentecostal Christian churches within Navajoland are deemphasized. Ministers of different churches consult with one another regularly, and members of different congregations worship together frequently, particularly at camp meetings and revivals. Overall, there is shared feeling of being Christians, or *oodláni* (believers), rather than members of a particular sect, such as the Assemblies of God or the Church of God Holiness. Congregations are also moving toward establishing more independence from the mother churches outside of Navajoland that sponsor them. Given these elements, it would not be surprising to see a Navajo indigenous Christian church develop in the future, similar to the NAC of Navajoland, which maintains ties with other NAC charters in North America, yet has come to represent a distinctly Navajo version of the practice. When first introduced among the Navajo, the NAC was dismissed by many traditionalists as a foreign religion (Aberle 1966). Today, Pentecostal Christianity cannot be dismissed as merely a foreign religion perpetuated by white missionaries. Rather,

Pentecostalism can be better appreciated as a movement in the process of becoming a bona-fide Navajo religious tradition, one that has been taken up and transformed in response to the specific needs of the Navajo people within their contemporary milieu.

Finally, the preeminence of one's home and family cannot be overemphasized in both NAC and Pentecostal Christian healing. Kunitz and Levy (1994:138) note that in addition to greater access to alcohol and cash, "the absence of functioning kin groups and the responsibilities and values they foster," the "empty nest phenomenon among women in nuclear families whose children have grown and left home," and, in general, "the absence of a sense of community" are elements that foster problem drinking among some Navajos. The distinct ability of both the NAC and Pentecostal Christianity to provide new communities, new moralities, new forms of power, and new forms of control are significant therapeutic elements for individuals who suffer from alcohol and substance abuse problems.

NAC Engagement of Alcohol and Substance Abuse

To a great extent NAC road men share the sentiment of Traditional chanters that white society is to blame for manufacturing alcohol, that the decision to change resides within the individual, and that drinking possibly can be caused by witchcraft. In contrast to the various themes of powerlessness informing the Traditional engagement of alcohol, however, the NAC engagement of alcohol is characterized by themes of hope, transformation, new ways of living, and a sense of power over alcohol. In riveting testimony, road men recounted their own suffering with alcohol abuse prior to joining the NAC. They spoke of how they "could just not have power over alcohol" until they were healed by the "power of the medicine." Indeed, past alcohol abuse is what compelled a substantial number of road men to take up the NAC in the first place. Power is highly elaborated within this healing tradition (Slotkin 1956, 1979). Patients are cured by partaking of peyote and absorbing its "pure healing power." During NAC prayer meetings, the road man and other participants offer prayers to the "Merciful Creator" and the "Holy People," asking them to "bless this patient" and "fill him with the power that he needs." Peyote is said to have the ability to act as "a messenger between you [i.e., the patient] and the Creator." Summarizing the beliefs and values in Navajo peyotism, Aberle sees the practice as being appealing in part because "it offers access to supernatural power to combat misfortunes such as illness, mental distress, and poverty," and he contends that "the peyote experience serves to validate this conception of access to power . . . through the feelings of personal significance" (1966:193–194).

Most importantly, peyote offers the opportunity for self-understanding through ritualized introspection and self-examination. The NAC code embodied in "the peyote road" explicitly stresses, among other things, abstinence from alcohol and drugs, self-reliance, and devotion to one's family. Although beginners learn this new way of life through the informal teachings of older members, they more thoroughly internalize it as a new sacred code through partaking of peyote themselves. Road men encourage participants to "ask the medicine" or "listen to what the medicine tells you" about a certain problem. They point out how the "power of the peyote healing experience can set a person on another course—a life of dedication in

deeper sense,” and they encourage patients to “consider using this experience and testimony in further helping yourself and your family and extending that to others as well.”

In contrast to the arduous and time-consuming formal apprenticeship necessary to become a Traditional chanter, participation in NAC ceremonialism is a less formal process whereby initiates gradually “learn by doing.” This is particularly appealing to someone who has a job and family and cannot devote him or herself to full-time study with a chanter (Kunitz and Levy 1994; Levy and Kunitz 1974). Participants become more deeply involved as they gradually acquire new roles assisting the road man and his wife in the meetings, and they gain self-esteem (Csordas 1999) by becoming good singers, drummers, firemen, or cedarmen who speak well and offer moving prayers. They also join a new community of nondrinkers, which can be highly supportive and therapeutically beneficial (Kunitz and Levy 1994; Levy 1983; Levy and Kunitz 1974).

One of the key therapeutic elements of NAC prayer meetings is their ability to explicitly address the patient’s problem with alcohol and substance abuse. This is facilitated though the counsel and prayers of the officiating road man and his wife, as well as through discussion of the problem by the patient, often in the form of confession. Additionally, although there is a significant degree of formal ritualism, there is opportunity for much spontaneous prayer, which is offered by family members and friends who have come to support the patient. The offering of spontaneous prayers, rather than strictly ritual Traditional chants, creates a more direct and effective communicative process by which to address the patient’s problem. Patients are motivated to engage their problems in a positive and supportive environment, where the persuasion of the peyote-induced state together with the sacred milieu inspire receptivity, honesty, and insight.

One patient we worked with—an elderly Navajo man named Billy who had once “lost all his livestock to whiskey,” was profoundly changed by his experience in an NAC prayer meeting where he “took a lot of medicine,” and where, in spite of their father’s 40 years of alcohol abuse, all of his grown children came to support him and “were real happy to come home.” The ceremony facilitated a transformative realization for Billy:

I lived a carefree kind of life. I was careless with my life and probably did things I should be ashamed of. I cheated on life right along . . . I found out that my belief in God was shallow, not deep. At my age and realizing this is enlightening. I discovered this, my words were shallow and meaningless before. I said I would do this and that and sometimes bragged about things. Well, I realized what that is now. It is like cheating on the truth. I want to straighten this out . . . I was on the edge of the flow of life around me. . . . Now I regret and wish I made a better thing out of my life. I should have done better with my life.

The specific catalyst for this realization, which occurred during the sacred moments in the morning, was the prayer of his son, who was tending the fire. Billy reflected:

My child who took care of the fire spoke to God, but he is speaking to me, too . . . of my past drinking and behavior. He asked God to provide him with a father whom he would be proud of and the father that he always wish to have. I understand what he means. I love him very much and I heard his words and know what

he is asking for from me. I am very proud of him. I never asked him something that he didn't do for me. I value his words. He also has never ask me anything that I didn't do for him. He has come back to help me out.

When we last saw Billy, he was tending to his home and livestock as he eagerly anticipated the return of his children for the Christmas holiday, and he had not had a drink for almost a year. His sense of self had been transformed and was now situated within the love he felt for his family, home, and animals. He articulated this feeling as "like having been away for so long and then you come home. . . . It is like I have come home, and I am thankful."

Many chanters themselves have taken up peyote while still conducting Traditional ceremonies. They reconcile this co-utilization by referring to the Peyote Way as the last and most recent chant given to the Navajo by their Holy People (Wyman 1983). The understanding of peyote by one chanter who practiced Chiricahua Windway presents the Navajo time of origin in a way that almost anticipates the crisis of alcohol abuse:

A long time ago when the peyote was placed on earth, and they were going on down the line naming everything that was created . . . the peyote ceremony was forgotten . . . the herbal medicinal plants were placed and told you will live here. And they had forgotten about the peyote and the peyote spoke up for himself . . . and said, "To this day and sometimes in the future, there will come a time when the people will come short of some ceremonies. Then I will come about. They will straighten up just a little. This peyote is placed in a far away place. . . . When you finally reach the peyote, you will be relieved, and starting from there he will give you hope, and you will start back with hope in you. You will come home." This was what they said about the peyote.

Pentecostal Christian Engagement of Alcohol and Substance Abuse

As in the NAC, power is highly elaborated in Pentecostal Christianity, and it explicitly engages alcohol and substance abuse problems. Indeed, this is the central aspect of its appeal over Traditional healing for the majority of its adherents. The narratives of the Pentecostal ministers are replete with testimony as to how they themselves "could just not have victory over alcohol" until they were healed by the "power of Diyin God" (Holy God). They speak of how "the word of God is powerful and can heal you." They cite scripture describing how "the Holy Spirit fell upon them who heard the word, and it began to change their lives, and they took the word of God into their hearts and were filled with power." They specifically situate the problems of alcohol and substance abuse among young Navajo people in terms of a lack of this transcendent power. One, for example, said, "The younger people . . . they are looking for something to be strengthen with, they are looking for power. . . . They say I'm looking for power for the self. I am high on drugs, how do you get out of it, they say. They say, we can't see it. . . . Young people, where do they find power? . . . A lot of young people they go to medicine men, they go for peyote. . . . There's no power. The power is missing."

Pentecostal Christians are far less likely than other Navajos to co-utilize Traditional and NAC healing. Many point to the drinking engaged in by some chanters and participants at Traditional ceremonies as an example of how such rites are no longer "done right" and "kept sacred," therefore undermining the efficacy

of Traditional healing. Some followers also report a personal aversion to the sometimes unpleasant effects of the peyote experience, such as nausea and anxiety, as part of the reason they chose Christianity over the NAC.

Ministers offer an account of the appearance of Christianity among the Navajo that parallels the peyote story of future hope, saying that "the word of God is a love letter sent to the Navajo people" at a time of special need. The revitalizational quintessence that Christianity encompasses for its adherents was vividly captured in the sermon of one minister as he stood at the pulpit slumped over and invoking the image of the tired warrior in the popular painting "End of the Trail." He then stood up straight with his head held high and shouted, "But we don't want to have a long face! We don't want to be all worn out and fall down. . . . Because we have Jesus! And if you have Jesus in your heart, you're going to be active and happy and alive!"

That Christianity should be chosen by its adherents over the other two traditions is further explained by the kind of power it offers. As another minister explained:

God made the herb so we could use it and get well for our body. This herb won't heal my spirit, won't heal my soul, won't heal my mind, because herbs and spirit won't come together. . . . My body is from the dust and the herb is from the dust, it's from the earth. So that's why you will only cure my body. . . . Even though I am healed I am not totally healed. . . . So what do you think will cure my inner being? Diyin God is a spirit, our inner being is also a spirit. So only spirit can affect spirit. . . . Peyote won't heal my spirit, peyote won't heal my mind. . . . it can heal my body only, but not my soul. . . . the healing that comes from God is the ultimate kind of strength and healing.

Converts experience this "ultimate kind of strength and healing" for the first time when they "are saved" and "give their heart to Jesus." In this sense, Navajo Pentecostal Christianity draws upon a "conversional" therapeutic experience (Csordas 1999). The conversional experience of taking up this new lifestyle is a highly emotional and transformative event for supplicants. One patient recalled how his suffering with alcohol ceased when he was saved and "Changed, God changed me there. God call me I guess, Chosen. I had joy and peace, I was different." Another relates, "From that moment on, for the first time in my life I felt peace, and I felt good. I wanted to start my life all over again."

This experience provides a positive, emotional baseline for supplicants as they engage in further healing prayer when problems arise in their daily lives. One supplicant explained the experience of going to the altar and being prayed over in order to maintain his abstinence from alcohol:

The experience that you feel, you can only feel after you get faith. That's the experience. After that you are very happy and you like hearing the word of God, the power of God. You listen and you get emotional and you become loving of God, so that the source of this feeling is with you, and no matter what you go through during the day you are protected by the Lord, and be with the Lord. . . . It's like going to a sweat house. When you get out of sweat house you feel very light and happy. That experience is like when you come out of the church, that's how you feel. It is wonderful and it makes you happy.

In many respects, Navajo Christianity is based on a “philosophy of moral identity” (Csordas 1999), and this is yet another strength it holds for people who suffer from alcohol and substance abuse problems. In sermons and in counseling sessions, ministers repeatedly encourage supplicants to “realize what alcohol can do to a home, to a family, to yourself” and to “think about these things.”

Even more strongly than the NAC, a significant therapeutic element within Pentecostal Christianity is that it offers converts an entirely new social network. Ministers and supplicants typically come from broken families and fragmented kin networks marked by alcohol abuse, “divorce,” absentee fathers, and domestic violence. Navajo men are most often motivated to seek healing because of their own alcohol and substance abuse problems, and I have yet to meet one who did not offer testimony of healing in that area. Navajo women, on the other hand, appear to be most often drawn to join and seek healing in response to the alcohol and substance abuse problems of their male relatives, be they husbands, sons, fathers, or uncles.

The interaction of congregation members both within and outside of church services provides a highly supportive environment in a community of non-drinkers. Participants gradually acquire new roles assisting in church activities. They may begin with janitorial and maintenance work and eventually move on to more central roles such as playing in the gospel band, conducting Bible study, celebrating communion, and leading prayer. This new social network is even more close-knit than that of the NAC because of the regularity of the weekly services. Participants experience this new community in terms of concrete familial relations—God is my father and mother, I am a child, and the entire congregation is my family, all of whom I can depend on.

This sense of familial love, support, and guidance was conveyed in the words of one supplicant we worked with named Andrew—a 45-year-old bilingual man who was “shamed” into seeking help because he realized his alcohol abuse prevented him from being a providing husband and father to his wife and family and a role model to his children. He “thought of going to the medicine men,” but he “did not own any livestock” and “had nothing” with which to pay for a ceremony. He “decided to go to church,” where, he relates, “I gave myself to the Lord.”

Andrew recounted his drinking before he was healed as “worse, and worse and it got to the point to where I can’t control it . . . I had no control . . . I was controlled by my drinking.” After he was saved and healed from alcohol abuse, he reported, “Diyin (Holy) God . . . is in control of my life.” Although he had been saved and healed from alcohol abuse one year ago, he continued to struggle with temptations to drink. He related the therapeutic experience of the minister’s and congregation’s healing prayer:

I want the people to help me. . . . Sometimes you can’t do it by yourself. You need help, just like lifting something heavy. . . . I depend on God that way. . . . When you are a child of God, you have a sense and feeling that God loves you. So it’s like your mother and father who love you, and you ask for things and they provide it for you. . . . God will have pity on you. . . . And before one day is over, you will know whether a prayer has worked for you—that things pass.

Andrew also explained how the ongoing counsel and support of his pastor and congregation help him resist drinking:

When you are an alcoholic you are sensitive . . . and will turn to drink. . . . if you have a problem. But now it is different, if I have a problem I go to my pastor and sit down with him. . . . Also there are other people I turn to. When I get very disappointed, you know where I would have been, now I can even refuse drink. . . . When the alcoholic is getting better they need the support of all people around.

As the result of this support, Andrew relates, "I was tested by wine but I didn't return to drinking. . . . That is how the Lord has given my manhood back to me."

When we last spoke with him, he continued to abstain from alcohol, and it was clear he had undergone a profound transformation, his sense of self now situated within the obligations he feels toward his family: "I can hope to continue leading a sober life, take care of my family, and try to be a good father. I want to be a role model for my children, before I didn't try, I neglected my duties and responsibilities as a father. I've learned from my past. I will continue my faith. Alcoholism is destructive and can take your life, but it can be overcome."

The Ethos of Power in Navajo Healing

How can we account for the appeal of the NAC and Pentecostal Christianity in cultural terms? The research literature casts Navajo healing within two broad domains. One perspective stresses the centrality of *hózhó*, most often interpreted to mean harmony or beauty, which exists alongside *hóchxó* or evil (Adair et al. 1988; Farella 1984; Franstead 1982; Griffin-Pierce 1992; Kluckhohn 1940, 1949; Kluckhohn and Leighton 1962; Sandner 1973; Shepardson 1982). Although these scholars do not specifically use the term *ethos*, I suggest that the way they interpret Navajo culture and healing assumes an *ethos of harmony*.⁸ Kluckhohn (1949:360), for example, acknowledges that "knowledge is power" in Navajo philosophy, yet contends that "the basic quest is for harmony." The other, less widely represented perspective stresses the centrality of power (Aberle 1982; Reichard 1944, 1950; Witherspoon 1977; Wyman 1983).⁹ The theoretical emphasis on the constructs of harmony and beauty in many respects obscures this other salient ethnopsychological force operating in Navajo culture and healing—the proper control of power. The experiential data on alcohol abuse and religious healing discussed in this article suggest that we may identify a pervading *ethos of power* that motivates Navajo healing.

Lamphere (1969:451) suggests that translating *hózhó* as "harmony and beauty" may imply Western philosophical connotations that are inaccurate to begin with. She calls attention to Haile's (1938) original translations of "pleasant conditions" and "ugly conditions" and observes that "manipulative relationships" constitute an essential quality of Navajo human-supernatural interaction. Reichard (1944:33) suggests that *hózhó* "stands for all things that have been brought about by supernatural control." Similarly, the Navajo notion of something being *báhádzid* ("dangerous") does not necessarily imply that it is inherently negative or evil but, rather, that it is so powerful as to be dangerous (Reichard 1944; Witherspoon 1977; Wyman 1983). Thus, the kinds of phenomena that can invoke illness, such as lightning and wind, are considered to be *báhádzid* because of their power, particularly if their power is not under control in some way (Reichard 1944; Witherspoon 1977; Wyman 1983).

Witherspoon (1977:35) writes of the purpose of Traditional Navajo religious ritual that the Holy People, *Diyin Diné'é*, “are the inner forms of various phenomena and forces, including animals, and are the controlling and animating powers of nature. Navajo ritual is not designed to control the elements directly; it is designed to control the Holy People who are the inner forms and controlling agents of those elements.” Witherspoon (1977:75–77) suggests that “control,” especially “control of power” is “one of the dominant perspectives in the Navajo world view” and characterizes this control as “a willful and pervasive determinism.” He further notes that “all things and beings and their respective powers that are outside of man’s control are dangerous and potentially evil. . . . For their safety, health, and well-being, the Navajos are interested in controlling both themselves and their environment” (1977:186).

Reichard (1950:125) also noted that “the nearest Navajo approach to the concept of sin is ‘being out of order, lacking control.’ ” The notion of manipulation and control, I believe, captures the pivotal nature of power and the role it occupies in Traditional Navajo healing, for, in essence, Navajos do not seek harmony and beauty as much as they seek control of power as the means to attain harmony or, more accurately, pleasant conditions. Thus, returning to the problem of alcohol abuse, within traditional Navajo thought, “drinking is especially wrong because it makes you lose your mind” (Ladd 1957:205), and “excessive drinking is associated with lack of mind control” (Levy et al. 1987). Yet here may also lie the epistemological reason Traditional Navajo healing is unable to specifically cure someone who suffers from alcohol and substance abuse. Reichard writes that

in the Navajo interpretation of duality good is evil and evil is good. The difference between the two is in the presence or absence of control which in its turn, ultimately depends upon knowledge, for control is ritual, decreed long since but taught and learned. . . . According to Navajo belief that which harms a person is the only thing which can undo the harm. The evil is therefore invoked and brought under control by ritualistic compulsion. Because control has been exerted and the evil has yielded to compulsion it has become good for the person in whose behalf it has been compelled. In this way evil becomes good, but the change is calculated on the basis of specific results. Good is therefore that which has been brought under control, evil has not yet yielded to control by man. . . . Hence we may differentiate good, evil, and holy, the last differing from the first since it refers to some power that has been manipulated. . . . One of the major features of ritualistic procedure is the identification of the person afflicted with the powers that can cure him . . . for by such identification only can one gain the power to drive it away. [1944:5–8]

It is plausible that because the phenomenological nature of alcohol is not natural—that is to say, not one of the Holy People (*Diyin Diné'é*)—the afflicted patient cannot effect a ritual identification with it. Therefore, alcohol cannot be transformed from that which is evil to that which is holy (by virtue of its being ritually manipulated), to be compelled into that which is good in order to cure the person who suffers.

Aberle (1965, 1966, 1982) has suggested that the rise of the NAC and evangelical Protestant churches among the Navajo is based on the “kinds of power they provide for converts” (1982:219). He characterized this new power as one that is “transcendent” and “effective over the entire world,” in contrast to the “immanent

power” provided by Traditional Navajo religion, which is only effective over the Navajos in their own universe (Aberle 1982:219). As I have illustrated, and as Aberle notes, these two movements are especially appealing in that they “can be used for healing” and “are opposed to drinking” (1982:219).

Aberle has also characterized the NAC as “a religion of the oppressed, which is responsive to the needs of Indians living under reservation conditions of domination, expropriation, exploitation, and dole (1983:563). Douglas (1970), however, offers an insightful alternative interpretation that goes beyond impoverishment and oppression, as to why the Navajo have taken up the NAC. Based on an interpretation of Aberle’s (1966) original work, Douglas suggests that the highly cooperative and close-knit nature of traditional Navajo society was based not on European ethical standards of love and virtue, but on Navajo ethical standards of fear—fear of withdrawal of support and fear of shame (1970:32). To Douglas (1970:32) the disruptive socioeconomic changes within traditional Navajo society that began with the forced livestock reduction program set into motion the “gradual breakdown of the basis of community moral control.” To illustrate this, she cites Aberle (1966:200–201):

Clan cohesion was impaired as the possibility of mutual aid was reduced. Fear of loss of support in the community also became a lesser threat. And fear of loss of face or shame depends on the degree of involvement in face-to-face community. Not only was the intra-community interdependence lessened and enforcement of morality impaired, but extra-community dependence on wage work, and familial economic autonomy, was increased.

Douglas (1970:32) suggests that the “old Navajo” was coerced by powerful symbols of traditional kinship allegiance and adherence to the highly elaborated strict ritualism within Traditional Navajo religion. By contrast, the fragmentation of community and social and moral control led to a “new Navajo” (at least for those who began to take up the NAC at that time). The “new Navajo’s” orientation to the world was based more on individualism, a morality of personal conscience, and a relationship with a personal God. Douglas likens this to a “small-scale model of the Protestant Reformation” in that God had “turned against ritual” as well as the established social order (1970:33). Amazingly, Douglas made this analogy based on research carried out for the most part before the contemporary florescence of the evangelical Protestant sects.

The therapeutic control of sacred power is salient across the three religious healing traditions. Traditional patients seek the power of *Diyin Diné’é* (Holy People), NAC patients seek the power of *’Aze’ dei’ aai’* (peyote medicine), and Pentecostal Christian supplicants seek to be filled with the power of Jesus and the *Nítch’i diyinii* (Holy Spirit). Researchers have noted the apparent incompatibility of the three religious traditions, particularly Christianity and Traditional Navajo religion (Hodge 1964; Rapoport 1954; Reichard 1950). Hodge (1964:89), for example, noted that most Navajos lacked “a comprehensive understanding of either conventional Christianity or Pentecostalism” and that “only elements that could be fitted into a traditional conceptual frame work were accepted.” This led him to conclude that “Two widely varying ceremonial systems can have grossly different types of practitioners supported by irreconcilable beliefs or doctrines yet each can have the same meaning to those who have experienced both forms” (1964:89). I suggest

that the coexistence of distinct religious healing traditions, with presumable differences in their fundamental philosophies, is reconciled by the commonality of patients seeking power from each in an effort to control their lives. One's religious identity therefore depends to a great extent on which traditions one is able to actualize the most power from, in the way of shared, yet personal meaning. Navajo religious healing rituals symbolically represent the psychotherapeutic manipulation of sacred power for the patient. In this sense, therapeutic efficacy lies not within the context of patients being passive recipients of some unknown mystery but, rather, within the context of patients' active agency and intentionality toward the ritual manipulation of sacred power.

The cultural and socioeconomic changes taking place today, however, have created barriers to the acquisition of power for many contemporary Navajo people, not just socioeconomic power noted by Aberle (1966, 1982), but the transformative power of religious experiences previously located solely and amply within Traditional healing. Moreover, the NAC and Pentecostal Christianity appear to offer a power over the crisis of alcohol and substance abuse that Traditional Navajo healing finds difficult to provide. This new power induces a transformation of self, a revitalized sense of community, and a new vision of the possibilities of the future for participants who suffer. We cannot fully appreciate the varieties of religious experience in contemporary Navajo society without considering the pervading *ethos of power* that motivates Navajo healing. Lacking this, we are left with less than adequate specificity in understanding how and why NAC and Pentecostal Christian healing were taken up and transformed by the Navajo in the first place, save for chance.

NOTES

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2. Of the 84 patients interviewed in the Navajo Healing Project, formal diagnostic interviews (The Structured Clinical Interview for DSM-IV—see Stogck et al., this issue) were successfully completed with 79. Of these, 28, or 35 percent, had a history of life-impairing

dependence on alcohol or other substances at some point in their lives, and another 8 or 10 percent had a history of some degree of alcohol or substance abuse. Among healers we interviewed, such abuse or dependence was self-reported in often riveting descriptions of their own suffering. Although the phrase “alcohol and substance dependence and abuse” is perhaps more compatible with the behavioral and sometimes transitory nature of this affliction among Navajo people (Kunitz and Levy 1994; Levy and Kunitz 1974) than are the terms *alcoholism* or *drug addiction*, my use of the phrase is not intended to minimize the sense of deep suffering and desperation of those who are afflicted, and the sense of distress and pain tormenting those who abuse alcohol and substances and find they are unable to stop.

3. Navajo terms used in this article were standardized using Young and Morgan 1987.

4. One reviewer of this article offered that the Windway ceremony that was borrowed is referred to as Little Windway and that informants say they got it at Bosque Redondo from the Chiricahua Apache.

5. One reviewer of this article observed that many Navajos do not believe in witchcraft, and this is no doubt true. Nonetheless, many of the patients and healers we interviewed across the three traditions made repeated implicit and occasional explicit references to witchcraft as a possible causal factor for a diverse array of illnesses, including alcohol and substance abuse.

6. These two ceremonies appear to be part of the branch other researchers (Haile 1938; Witherspoon 1977; Wyman 1983) have classified as rites rather than major chantways. The Tobacco Smoking ceremony would seem to fit among the ceremonials known as Evilway (Hóchxó'íjǫ́) that exorcise ghosts and chase away evil influences, while the Turning of the Basket would seem to fit in the Blessingway rites (Hózhó'óǫ́jǫ́), which are used to invoke positive blessings.

7. During our pilot research in the summers of 1991 and 1992, I attended several NAC sweat lodge meetings conducted by a Navajo road man who was “ordained” by a Lakota medicine man at a ceremony I also attended during the summer of 1991. The formal, four-hour “ordination” ceremony was a syncretism of traditional Lakota, Christian, and NAC elements, which consisted of an invocation of divine spirits, group and individual prayers, invitation of ancestral spirits to join the participants (a Plains Indian innovation—traditional Navajos take pains to avoid spirits of the dead), and the passing of a Plains-style long-stemmed sacred pipe. The following summer, when I attended a sweat lodge led by the Navajo healer, the ceremony was strikingly different. Not surprisingly, the invitation to deceased relatives and the sharing of the Plains-style pipe had been discontinued. Instead, many Traditional Navajo elements and additional NAC elements had been incorporated into the ceremony.

8. Bateson (1958) proposed the concept of “ethos” in order to better understand the motives of cultural behavior. Bateson defines *ethos* as “a culturally standardized system of organization of the instincts and emotions of individuals” (1958:118).

9. The ethnographic literature is sketchy with regard to how Navajos talk about power in their own language. Young and Morgan (1987) translate power as *dziil* or *bidziil* (meaning “his power or strength”), and also list *álíil*, which they define as “magic power.” In her analysis of the Traditional Hail Chant (and using an older standardized phonology), Reichard (1944:52–53) refers to *'adzi:l* or *'atse* as “spiritual power, that is power derived from ritual.” She also mentions *'ali:l* as “the part left out when a sing fails” and which she further defines as “a person’s total power derived from both his natural strength and his spiritual, ritualistic, or acquired knowledge (Reichard 1944:52). It is difficult to determine precise equivalents in Navajo for the word *power*, just as it is difficult to determine equivalents for frequently used words like *harmony* and *beauty*. Nevertheless, Navajo interlocutors do use the English word *power* to express themselves when discussing how healing works. Schwarz (1997) also notes the salience of power in Navajo culture; her Navajo informants

use the English word as well as a Navajo term, for which, unfortunately, she provides only the translation and not the original.

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