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## Nostalgia and Degeneration: The Moral Economy of Drinking in Navajo Society

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*This article focuses on how some members of Navajo society use narratives regarding alcohol and drinking to comment on cultural degeneration and the decay of the traditional Navajo moral economy. These narratives of drinking are seldom solely about alcohol but refer to a host of distinct yet interrelated concerns involving moral values, individual and collective identities, underdevelopment, imagined histories, psychic conflict, and social contention. This article sheds light on how evaluations of alcohol and drinking problems, as encapsulated in narratives of degeneration, fit into the overall context of contemporary Navajo society. Narratives of degeneration juxtapose a degenerate present to a nostalgic past and in the process direct moral censure toward two primary groups in Navajo society, namely, young people and others who drink to excess. [drinking, Native Americans, Navajo, narrative, alcohol]*

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No one should doubt that alcohol and the abusive, pathological drinking too often associated with it constitute a significant health, social, and political problem on the Navajo reservation. Indicators of alcohol problems are apparent in the many abstract measures that quantify the effect of abusive drinking among Navajo people. Statistics on alcohol-related mortality and morbidity, including those related to alcoholic cirrhosis, motor vehicle accidents, fetal alcohol syndrome, alcohol dependence, and violence associated with alcohol abuse all provide compelling evidence of the character of drinking in Navajo country (Katz and May 1979; Lamarine 1988:143–155; May et al. 1983; Navajo Area Indian Health Service 1990). Prevalence studies of alcohol dependence, one widely cited measure of alcohol-related problems, indicate that the rate for this syndrome among the Navajo is six to 20 times the U.S. rate (see Haraldson 1988:138; Indian Health Service 1993:53).<sup>1</sup>

Navajo concerns about the negative aspects of alcohol use intersect with a variety of distinct but interrelated concerns involving moral values, individual and collective identities, underdevelopment, imagined histories, and social contention. The stress and discord revealed in these aspects of contemporary Navajo society stand in stark contrast to a substantial ethnographic literature that emphasizes an

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underlying cultural stratum of harmony, adaptation, and growth in the face of change and adversity. How do evaluations of alcohol and drinking problems fit into this overall backdrop of continuity and change? How do Navajos comment on alcohol and drinking? What place and value does alcohol have in Navajo society today?

In what follows I provide some preliminary insights into these questions by focusing on several narratives collected from Navajos living on the western reservation. These narratives reveal commentaries on alcohol and drinking that emphasize certain histories, value judgments, and affects. As we shall see, these narratives, rooted as they are in social process, historical change, and personal experience, are seldom solely about drinking but index a variety of different moral values, cultural meanings, and social memories.

### **Narratives and Nostalgia, Disease, and Well-Being**

I situate this article within a broader field of anthropological research concerned with the cultural meanings and social uses of narratives. Here, my basic approach follows Urban (1991), in that I contend discourse to be one of the many publicly accessible sign vehicles that constitute what anthropologists (but not necessarily Navajos) call culture. Discourse in this treatment is utilized for its theoretical referentiality and analytical power (cf. Baumann 1996:10–11; Lutz and Abu-Lughod 1990:7); it is simply a level of language use that provides a concrete analytical nexus for studying the language–culture–society relationship, a relationship that has been an important focus of theory and inquiry in American anthropology since its inception (Boas 1911; Sapir 1921; Whorf 1956).

A discourse-oriented approach to culture emphasizes an analysis of language rooted in social settings. One of the most important assumptions of this attitude is that speech acts are motivated, that is, there are underlying, setting-sensitive meanings in language that are appropriately, and often purposefully, accessed by people in specific social contexts (Briggs 1988; Lutz and Abu-Lughod 1990; Sherzer 1987).

As Besnier points out, “Discourse is one of the most commonly invoked and least frequently defined terms in contemporary scholarship” (1994:199). For this reason, it is appropriate to explicate in some detail what this term means in the present context since a complex spectrum of studies concern themselves with discourse. These include postmodern approaches emphasizing the historically situated symbolic aspects of discourse that serve to structure various social arrangements, actions, and bodily practices (Foucault 1990). Other studies focus on discourse as a site for counterhegemonic resistance as well as a socially mediated representation of emotion and self and a mode of constructing person (Abu-Lughod 1986; Lutz 1988; Stromberg 1993).

Following the general focus of these studies, the present treatise sees linguistic practice as grounded in and informed by social action and cultural understanding. In this light, a discourse-centered approach to culture considers as its object of inquiry the relationship between linguistic practice and the sociocultural world in which it emerges. This approach seeks to understand how discourse serves to constitute participants’ actions and experiences in particular settings or

how linguistic practices provide a locus in which culture is created, confirmed, and debated (Besnier 1994:201).

One particular genre of discourse, the narrative, has provided the analytical locus for a great deal of productive anthropological investigation highlighting issues relating to the cultural and historical parameters influencing the construction of meaning and identity in different communities (Farmer 1992; Garro 1990; Good 1977; Lang 1989; Stromberg 1985). Beyond a concern with the technical aspects of narratives, for example, how the clauses of a narrative relate to the sequence of actual events being portrayed (Labov 1972), narrative research has highlighted how discourse is constantly fashioned and reformulated as one means to create a coherent sense of self and evaluate current circumstances (Linde 1993). Other research suggests that a wide variety of cultural constructs are embedded in narratives that evoke certain often taken-for-granted cultural sentiments, propositions, and evaluations (Chafe 1980; Polanyi 1989; Price 1987; Strauss 1990).

More germane to the present discussion, other studies focusing on health-related issues have emphasized how narratives about illness can be used to make commentaries and evaluations that center not only on disease itself but also on historical events, social transformations, self-identity, and cultural change in Native American communities. Lang's (1989) study of the Dakota, for instance, illustrates how narratives about diabetes index a host of other issues and concerns involving Dakota history, loss of culture, and ethnic identity (also see Garro 1990). Diabetes is a potent symbol associated with the lost life of the traditional Dakota. In times past, the Dakota people ate well, were healthy, and lived to an old age. Changes in subsistence associated with confinement to the reservation adversely affected Dakota health and were responsible for an upsurge in diabetes, a condition that had previously been unknown. Thus, narratives about diabetes are not simply stories about an illness but a powerful indicator of a life out of balance with traditional ways and a culture drastically changed by Euro-American contact.

Spicer's (1998) research in a Minneapolis Native American community examines how drinking narratives and other forms of discourse not only reflect concerns regarding culture change but also illuminate important personal and collective concerns relating to self-identity and moral values. Spicer organizes the discourse he collected from members of this community into a typology that includes "narratives of redemption" and "narratives of decline." Narratives of redemption are usually associated with individuals attaining a certain degree of social responsibility and maturity, and they depict, in sometimes dramatic terms, how people left drinking behind them. Often these narratives are linked to the teller's spiritual development and increasing community service. Narratives of decline, in contrast, are organized around the predominant themes of loss and suffering linked to drinking, including stories of personal degradation. In these narratives, drinking is linked to lack of success and a host of difficulties and frustrations.

What makes these narratives particularly germane to the present article is the fact that they are organized primarily around moral meanings. Spicer summarizes:

In fact, moral issues are far more central to these stories than is any biomedical notion of alcoholism as a disease. The interviewees do not orient their drinking stories around how they came to understand their "alcoholism." Rather, they represent alcohol use in terms that are almost exclusively moral, and they make a

series of judgments about themselves based on the moral order in which they live. The central issues in their discourse, I would argue, are these moral concerns, and it is these that provide us with crucial information to help us understand. [1998:159]

Thus, within this Native American community, talk about drinking provides a socially useful idiom for communicating a host of moral concerns and identities.

Similar insights are provided in O'Neil's (1996) thoughtful historical and ethnographic exposition on Flathead Indian identity, loss, and depression. O'Neil demonstrates how narratives in this Indian community link together a number of interrelated themes and issues, including authentic Indian identity, the dispossession of land, culture loss, oppression, depression, and anger. Flathead narratives about "real Indians" create a rhetorical world that no longer exists. Nonetheless, these narratives help to construct contemporary individual Indian identities. These stories place authentic Indians in an idealized, distant historical past, a past that contemporary Indian life always falls short of. This rhetorically created world populated by "real Indians" fulfills an important social function, as today's Flatheads use narratives about "real Indians" to position themselves and others on a continuum of authentic Indian existence. Narratives characterize individuals as being either close to or distant from an imagined "empty center" of authentic Indian identity, a social and rhetorical space that contains idealized Indian ancestors who serve as a moral gold standard against which contemporary Flatheads are frequently measured. These narratives have a socially important disciplinary function. They are often directed at young people who are rhetorically characterized as "untraditional" because they reject the teachings and values of the ancestors (i.e., "real Indians"). In a world without "real Indians," narratives provide a potent means for individuals to make claim to being "more Indian" than others.

Thus, in the context of Native American communities, research has shown that narratives underscore several important issues. Narratives provide a wide-ranging commentary on issues that may include illness and also embrace evaluations of historical events, individual and collective ethnic identities, social transformations, morality, well-being, and cultural change.

### **Fieldwork on Navajo Drinking**

The narratives presented here were collected as part of a much larger case-control study of alcohol dependence and conduct disorder among Navajo Indians. The interview instrument for this study consisted of structured and semistructured items focusing on demographics, family and personal background, education, conduct disorder, and drinking history.<sup>2</sup>

As part of this larger research effort, I conducted 200 interviews while living and working for a year in a small community on the Navajo reservation (Western Agency) in northeastern Arizona. While living and working in this area, I not only formally interviewed informants but also attended community events and developed relationships with people I had interviewed and with my field assistant and her family. Each of these experiences shaped my perspectives on Navajo drinking. Ultimately, my research came to focus on documenting local Navajo perspectives on drinking. More specifically, my research centered on three main goals: (1) describing the local semantics of alcohol and drinking on the western Navajo reservation;

(2) documenting Navajo commentaries and evaluations of drinking; and (3) illustrating the variety of meanings linked to alcohol and drinking in contemporary Navajo society.

Because the social context within which linguistic practice emerges is of critical importance to the study of narratives, it is pertinent to make the following observations. Several social parameters influenced the conduct and content of the interviews on which this article is based. Over the course of the following exposition, many of these parameters will be made clear. At present I will note that interviewees viewed me in many different ways, some of which I was unaware, that no doubt affected the interviews. Since this study was carried out under the auspices of the University of Rochester (New York), many interviewees saw me as a “researcher” from “back East” even though I have lived in the Southwest all my life. My role as a researcher investigating alcohol issues no doubt helped establish a context where some individuals consciously shaped their comments about their own drinking and alcohol use in general in certain ways.

Other limitations to the current study should be noted. The nature of the research project from which this study derives was such that all interactions were extremely time limited. Ideally, it would have been preferable to speak with people over a long time period and at multiple time periods and also to have observed these same individuals in different contexts, noting how, and if, they talked about alcohol and drinking as well as their own drinking behaviors. Likewise, this study shares the limitations of all qualitative research—it provides insight into what some individuals from a limited area of the Navajo nation think but does not and should not be understood to represent the thoughts, opinions, or speech of all Navajo people, or even Navajos from other areas of the reservation.

Finally, one of my main arguments is that some Navajo people use alcohol and drinking as a way of commenting on and evaluating present circumstances and states of being in Navajo society. Throughout this article I have purposefully chosen narratives that highlight this aspect of Navajo drinking. Other themes (including more positive ones) were articulated by interviewees, and I have explored some of these elsewhere (Quintero 1997, 2000). Members of the Navajo Nation Health Research Review Board pointed out that,<sup>3</sup> through my focus here, I am also emphasizing what may be perceived as a negative aspect of Navajo society, that is, pathological drinking.<sup>4</sup> In response to this critique, I will note that this emphasis should not be misunderstood to mean that all Navajos are pathological drinkers, that Navajos cannot drink in a nonpathological way, or that Navajo society is totally negative, degenerating, unviable, and lacking in growth. This would be a great misperception, since many Navajos do not drink (or drink in a responsible manner) and Navajo culture is in many ways healthy and continues to grow. In addition, it should be pointed out that there are narratives about many things in Navajo culture, good and bad. To only focus on what are perceived as negative narratives may provide too narrow a characterization of Navajo society to an uncritical reader. I would also note, however, that many of the Navajo people with whom I personally spoke emphasized these negative aspects themselves.

All of these factors should be taken into consideration throughout this presentation.

### Drinking and Nostalgia: Narratives of Degeneration

The discourse on alcohol in Navajo society, in the form of narratives and moral commentaries, points to a set of interrelated meanings that link together social history, cultural identity, and morality and, in so doing, reveals a rift between cultural ideology and social practice. Degeneration narratives linked to drinking reference a moral plane where the “good road” or “the Navajo way” of life is juxtaposed to the “bad life” of “the alcohol road.” In this way, the discourse on alcohol provides entry into a mode of consciousness linked to collective frames of identity, meaning, and value in Navajo society.

Here I focus on the theme of cultural degeneration permeating Navajo narratives on drinking by examining passages from several different interviews. Throughout their discourse, many Navajos use alcohol to juxtapose a pristine past to a corrupt present. Consider the following statement, offered by a 47-year-old Navajo man:<sup>5</sup>

Alcohol abuse is a serious problem on the reservation. I know this from my own personal experience with alcohol and what it has done to me. They should make it illegal for Indian people. It is destroying us. The people in my grandparents' day lived longer since they didn't use alcohol. Today it's making our life short. My grandmother lived to be 115 years old and my grandfather lived to be 95. Navajo people don't live that long today because they don't follow the good life. For this next generation of young people the problem will be worse. These youngsters are even drinking hair spray today.

Drinking represents a rift between an idealized cultural past and a harsh contemporary existence. As a symbolic wedge between an idyllic yesterday and a less celebratory contemporary existence, drinking encapsulates, in one potent symbol, the degeneration of Navajo culture. The culturally valued “long life” was available to those who lived in the traditional Navajo way in the past, but today Navajo people do not live as long.

In narratives of degeneration, alcohol is a key means of re-creating past and present circumstances. The perceived increase in alcohol problems in contemporary Navajo society is a direct result of the fact that people are not following the traditional Navajo way of life. This degeneration is most clearly expressed in the fact that youngsters are even drinking hair spray, a culturally salient indicator of the drinker gone too far. Drinking, a nontraditional Navajo practice, is one significant sign that the future generations so greatly valued in Navajo culture are becoming less and less Navajo.

Next, consider this commentary on alcohol offered by a 65-year-old Navajo man:<sup>6</sup>

Today it is different from what it was in the past. Today even young people are using it. They, as individuals, will not listen to anyone. Back when I was using it was mainly the older men that drank. This has all changed. Now I hear of family problems where young people are using alcohol. They lose their lives to it. I hear that now marijuana has been introduced to the reservation and that this is causing many problems with young people. It seems that respect for family and elders is gone. It is not like when I was growing up.

I do not really know how to make this problem any better. It seems that people are a blank, that there is nothing in them. There is nothing inside of them strong

enough to stop drinking. They have nothing inside them and they cannot really think for themselves. Even though they go out and get help, they come back and use it. It seems that they have no will power in today's generation. Some people listen to their parents and put it aside, but others work just to make some money to buy alcohol. There is more money spent on alcohol than on proper nourishment.<sup>7</sup> I see too much of this happening now and I fear for the young generation. These people do not seem to realize what they are doing to themselves. There is no respect for what has been handed down from generation to generation—holding a job, a family, a home. It's so different now.

Alcohol is implicated in the loss of traditional Navajo values especially in the form of the culturally salient and socially valuable "teachings" handed down from one generation to the next.<sup>8</sup> This moral and ethical system, which includes dedication to job, family, and home, is central to Navajo life. This discourse also indicates that a system of ideological and social divisions is being violated. As represented in this narrative, drinking was formerly an activity engaged in by older males outside the domestic sphere; today it is the routine of young people and has entered into the private, familial realm of the home. This broad motif of the collapse of ideological divisions and the social practices that they channel points to a pervasive idea that alcohol has entered into arenas where it is out of place and exerts a malign influence. Culturally, the symbolism referred to here could not be much more potent: alcohol is now part of a traditional context where it does not belong, the home.

This violation of cultural boundaries is discussed again, along with other themes, in the following statement, made by the 51-year-old son of a medicine man:

Alcohol was only made for an occasion. The home brew was made for a special occasion back in the old days. Now it is store bought and there is too much available. A lot of self-respect has been lost by my people and that's why they are drinking more. Everything costs more than it used to. Maybe they can't make it so they turn to alcohol. Those that sell also turn to that to make more income. They have just lost all self-respect and don't respect the preaching of the elderlies. If they would, they would stop. They would listen or remember. I remember. I listened. The teachings; that you only have one heart and you should take care of it. The heart is important in a person's body. My mother and father always told me that it was very tender and to not misuse it. Maybe these people aren't told that today. Even the young people use it today.

Although it would be easy to frame this statement as a commentary on Navajo political economy, the rationalization of social relations, and the overall economic marginalization of the Navajo, such a characterization would miss a fundamental point. This and other narratives of degeneration point not only to a political economy of dispossession but also to a Navajo moral economy stripped of its teachings and values and a socioeconomic context that often makes traditional ideals seem unobtainable. As such, this discourse is as much an expression of loss and regret as it is an indictment of present economic circumstances and an insider's perspective on deprivation.<sup>9</sup> Many I spoke with indicated an underlying economic aspect to Navajo drinking, but in doing so, they were, I believe, making not only an economic but also a moral statement. Alienation from land and other resources, the displacement of subsistence economies (and the social and moral structures associated with them), unemployment, and underdevelopment all constitute a drastically

changed context in which drinking is somehow a viable option even when compared to adherence to traditional modes of life.<sup>10</sup> But drinking violates traditional teachings, as it goes against family, home, job, and the accumulation of valued possessions. In short, it cheats the moral economy that constitutes Navajo ethics and livelihood.

One 55-year-old Navajo man discussed this system of ethics in recounting how his mother offered her “teachings” to him when he was young. In retrospect he now credits these words for providing him with a guide to good living:<sup>11</sup>

I never got into alcohol because of my mother’s preaching. She told me, “The wine and alcohol line will not give you anything. Look at people staggering in the streets looking poorly because of drinking. Is that what you want to look like? Do you want to follow that path? You will not get anything from drinking.”

I look at the friends that I grew up with, and some of them are not in good shape because of drinking. Some of them don’t even have homes and some are dead. I am glad I didn’t take that road. I think that if I did ever get into it, I might be gone or look like one of my friends now. There are many things attached to alcohol, so it’s hard to say what could be done for this problem. My ancestors knew ceremonies, when I was small, for this kind of thing, but now they don’t have it anymore. . . . I wish people would be aware of the traditional way that is decreasing now. That is another means of getting help. They go to the hospital for help but they should see that if they went the cultural way they would get help, too. What I have said is good, and I hope that it will help you in what you are trying to accomplish. I am glad that you talked to me because I have not thought of those days in such a long time, and I am glad that I didn’t choose the alcohol road and that I have had a happy and prosperous life.

Alcohol leads people away from the traditional Navajo way of living. In a sense, the “teachings” provide an inoculation through injunction against improper behavior and culturally devalued ways of being in this world. One critical point here is that the truth of these words and the moral system they advance do not exist only in an abstract sense but are instantiated by people one sees every day, some of whom are even friends and family, whose lives are adversely affected by alcohol. There are roads to take and choices to make in this life, and the younger generation should utilize “the traditional way”—a mode of life that emphasizes good thinking and leads to long life and happiness. A life with alcohol, which is associated with a lack of control, is linked to another, devalued way of being.

Sentiments relating to the moral aspects of alcohol discourse are also apparent in the following statement offered by a 39-year-old Navajo man:

People are getting killed by drunk drivers, and they just let the drunk drivers go. One happened about two months ago in Gallup—somewhere in New Mexico—some guy killed somebody and he didn’t get any jail time. Just like O. J., he only killed two people but this guy killed six people from 38 to 2 years old. Those bootleggers, they go out to the store at Gray Mountain and Hank’s and they start selling to people.<sup>12</sup> They kill people, I think. Especially in winter—people freeze. It’s hard to stop them from selling and the company from making it. Some people make their run to Gray and they never come back. It’s really hard to stop it. I worry now. Too many young people are drinking and getting killed. White people use guns to kill each other. On the rez they use alcohol. There are gangs now and they fight each other. And the bootleggers make a good living bootlegging. They make about fifty or sixty thousand a year. There’s bootleggers here with four or five

4x4s and with remote control everything in their house. That's one thing that's a problem. They're all sitting back being high-tech Indians.

This statement points to a variety of interrelated concerns including drunk driving, gangs, responsibility, justice, bootlegging and the violation of the moral order, and the authenticity of an "Indian" identity. The figure of the bootlegger is a prominent one in alcohol discourse on the Navajo reservation and, in this context, points to notions of social responsibility, accountability, and morality. The bootlegger is represented as a "high-tech Indian" who sits back and makes a living off others. Bootleggers sell alcohol, a foreign substance, to their own people in order to make a living and, in doing so, cheat the traditional social system and economy. From a philosophical point of view, this sentiment is consistent with the fact that the traditional paths to prosperity—the old Navajo way of harmony achieved through industry and attention to family, home, livestock, and the accumulation of goods—is being subverted by a new immoral economy. Bootleggers participate in the culturally valued accumulation of possessions but do so in a socially unacceptable way.

Women, particularly mothers and grandmothers but also wives, aunts, sisters, and daughters, are particularly important in setting limits and utilizing "teachings," the discourse of tradition, as a resource in shaping the thoughts and actions of Navajo men. This aspect of social interactions was well summarized by a 46-year-old Navajo man in an exchange with me:

My grandmother had a lot of teachings about those things. She put a lot of values in our heads. She said alcohol was bad for you. It could tear your family apart and you could lose your job. It was best to leave it alone. It wasn't good for you, and she didn't allow it around the house. These were her values—the traditional Navajo values. . . . I think she was right. She talked that way to all of us. It's just traditional teachings. You are not supposed to do this or make fun of old people. There's lots of don'ts. Her other grandkids didn't have these teachings, and there's a lot of difference between us and them. We all got a college education and the others tried education but they just weren't dedicated. They didn't finish school. There's hardly anybody of my relatives . . . there's only one that's getting a college degree; compared to my mom's kids—half of them have degrees.

These days kids are more wild. They don't really have respect for authority or older people.

This discourse not only reveals the important role of women in the transfer of "teachings" but also emphasizes the core Navajo values of the "good life," including family and proper means of livelihood. Grandmother kept certain cultural boundaries distinct by not allowing alcohol into the home. Others' lack of success is proof of the truth these teachings contain. Once again tradition is characterized as providing a guide to proper behavior, an inoculation against moral and social failure. Teachings are words that strike you and stay in your mind throughout life.<sup>13</sup> This, of course, is not the only recurring theme. Note once again the commentary on the "wild" younger generation that has no respect for tradition and elders.

Finally, consider the words of a 35-year-old Navajo man, who explained to me why he drank only once:

[Why didn't you drink again after that first time?]

I was told that we had this religion here and they don't mix together. When I was growing up my dad told me, "I used to drink a long time ago but today after the NAC (Native American Church) I never did. You, you are a boy but you're going to grow up. Don't use it. It's bad for your health. It causes you problems. Don't use it. It just causes pain. Just use NAC. Just go this route."

[Why do you think some people abuse alcohol?]

There's not much to do around here. If there was work they could work but there's nothing to do, just drinking.

[Do you think anything could be done to stop alcohol abuse on the reservation?]

How do you put a stop to it? How can we put a stop to liquor on the reservation? What can we do? The reason it's disturbing is that we have ceremonies—the Squaw Dance, the *Ye'ii Bicheii*, even NAC. People drink. It disturbs me. I wish we could use whatever religion we have. I wish we could use it right. Pray and sing and use it right. We could teach our children but then there's always a drunk man walking right in there. So I think, how can we put a stop to it? Do we have to go to the Chapter? Do we have to go to the President of the Navajo Nation? How do we do it? Alcohol prevents you from using religion in the right way. It starts with the parents. If you do things you aren't supposed to do, your child will see it and follow you.<sup>14, 15</sup>

In this passage we once again hear the themes of internal divisions and cultural collapse vocalized. The specifics offered in various narratives of degeneration may differ. The vocabulary might index the domestic and the nondomestic, the old and the young, or, as in this case, the sacred and the profane, but all of these particulars are reiterations of the more general theme that two essential modes of life, drinking and Navajo culture, are categorically exclusive. When the boundaries between these ways of life collapse or are compromised, cultural degeneration and illness in the social body are the results.

### The Navajo Moral Economy

The moral economy that these narratives of degeneration refer to, that is, the norms, values, relationships, and expectations that have traditionally shaped and organized Navajo, or Dine'é, culture, are richly documented in the ethnographic literature. Traditional Navajo culture focuses on living a balanced, harmonious life in a world that is natural, social, and supernatural. By following the prescriptions of the Navajo moral economy, the individual seeks to live to a ripe old age in universal beauty and happiness. Central to this process is a system of relations organized around a cultural aesthetic of health, beauty, and well-being (*hózhó*).<sup>16</sup> This aesthetic is socially enacted within a system of extended kinship networks and obligations (*k'é*), characterized by cooperation and autonomy and the possession and accumulation of "soft," "hard," and "flexible" goods (Farella 1984; Lamphere 1977; McNeley 1981; Reichard 1974:123–127; Witherspoon 1977; Wyman 1970:34–35). The key Navajo concept that encompasses and summarizes this way of life is *sa'ah naagháii bik'eh hózhó*, which is often glossed as "in-old-age-walking-the-trail-of-beauty" (Reichard 1974:46–47).<sup>17</sup>

Ladd (1957), who provides a thoughtful and detailed examination of the Navajo moral world, argues that the philosophy underlying Navajo society is predicated on "rational ethics," a system based on good thinking and good speaking. Within this system, bad thinking is considered a vice and a direct threat (as

well as an affront) to the functioning of society. As a result, mind loss (e.g., insanity) and unsound thinking (e.g., drunkenness) are negatively valued within this philosophical framework. Perhaps most instructive in the present context, Ladd notes that “Drinking is especially wrong because it makes you lose your mind” (1957:205).<sup>18</sup> In other words, drinking, as a form of mind loss and unsound thinking, is devalued since it threatens the integrity and stability of social relationships and undermines the basic precepts of the Navajo moral economy. This sentiment itself may be related to culturally important notions of control in Navajo philosophy, where thought is seen as fundamental to action and a lack of control in thinking would lead to lack of control in all aspects of life (Farella 1984; Reichard 1944, 1950, 1974; Witherspoon 1977).

According to Ladd, the Navajo “moral code” promotes “harmonious social relations” by making economic individualism and prosperity culturally valued goals and activities (1957:208; cf. Lamphere 1977). Certain cultural prescriptions, such as acquiring “goods” and thereby accumulating valued possessions, are viewed as a necessary prerequisite to being a good, prosperous, and socially mature person. Other goals within this system include “caring for yourself” and avoiding sickness, trouble, poverty, and disdain. By following the precepts of this moral economy, Navajos aim to attain wealth and long life. These moral prescriptions are often used by elders as warnings directed at young Navajos in the form of “teachings.”

In sum, the Navajo moral economy is encapsulated in idealized notions of a “good life”—a way of being measured not only by a person’s relations to family and other kin but also by their industriousness as indicated by the accumulation of certain valued possessions (*diyódti*). These relationships, like relationships with all aspects of the natural and supernatural environment, must be in harmony for Navajos to experience beauty and well-being. The main threats to this way of life are those actions, events, feelings, and entities that result in the destruction of beauty and balance. This “ugliness,” or *hóchó*, includes disharmonious social relations often associated with drinking.

In broad outline, it is to this traditional moral economy that narratives of degeneration, to one degree or another, speak.

### **Narratives of Alcohol and Degeneration in a Wider Sociocultural Context**

One important issue that emerges from consideration of these narratives of degeneration concerns their relation to the wider sociocultural context of contemporary Navajo life. How might these narratives about alcohol be situated within the larger sociocultural and historical consciousness of the Navajo people? Do narratives of degeneration share any themes and meanings with other forms of narrative discourse? What sorts of tensions and issues might these narratives point to in contemporary Navajo culture?

Degeneration is a focal theme that serves to index the loss of authentic Navajo culture and frame the expression of collective histories. In doing so, this discourse helps construct individual and group identities. These narratives of drinking not only illustrate a polarization in contemporary Navajo society but also provide a medium that re-creates the collective Navajo past through an evaluation of present circumstances. These discourses delimit the boundaries of what is right and proper

by indicating some of the social and behavioral components that should ideally constitute Navajo culture. When this frame is applied in social interactions or to individuals and groups of people within Navajo society, it serves to structure relations and situations in particular ways and gives certain behaviors set meanings and values. In this way, these narratives direct censure toward two groups in contemporary Navajo society: the younger generation who follow the wrong path and those Navajos whose excessive drinking is linked to social, cultural, and, ultimately, moral irresponsibility. As a verbal window onto past existence within a frame of contemporary events, narratives of degeneration provide an idiom for recollecting, organizing, and reflecting on transformations taking place in Navajo culture. In doing so, these narratives furnish local commentaries on these changes and point out how Navajo culture has shaped and, in turn, been shaped by these phenomena. But more than that, these narratives offer evaluations on these transformations.

These narratives help illustrate how certain changes are represented and evaluated within an interpretive community on the western Navajo reservation. Narratives of degeneration comment on existing patterns of alcohol use among Navajo young people and evaluate these as a sign of cultural and moral decay. Whatever positive functions alcohol and drinking have in Navajo society, and there are many, both point to what is essentially not Navajo. Through exclusion, these frames of drinking provide the means to create a mutual representation of alcohol on a collective level, that is, they are points of entry into a collective consciousness of a cultural (and moral) intrusion resulting in morbidity, decrease, and decay.

In contemporary Navajo society, alcohol and drinking have a prominent place in narratives; they help shape the consciousness some Navajo people have of themselves *as Navajos*. Narratives of degeneration, along with other narratives of deprivation and suffering tied to the Long Walk,<sup>19</sup> epidemic diseases, dispossession, relocation, and stock reduction, are important organizing texts that structure the representation of collective experience in contemporary Navajo society. These texts, drawn together and situated within social fields through interaction and exchange with both Navajos and non-Navajos, are narratives of shared experience and history that represent, in part, the experiences and identities of the Navajo people.

Intense historical experiences and the social transformations that arise in their aftermath can play a large role in the structure and development of a collective identity. Such events serve as linchpins in the framing of past events and current circumstances; they help circumscribe the positions from which individuals and groups create identities through processes of representation such as discourse. Thus, alcohol and drinking have come to serve as heuristics through which many Navajos and other American Indians apprehend themselves on both individual and multiple (e.g., tribal, pan-Indian) collective levels (see, for example, Trudell 1975).

In order to assess the place of alcohol degeneration narratives within the contemporary Navajo sociocultural context, it may be instructive to compare these narratives to other prominent discourses with similar motifs. The twin themes of cultural degeneration and the irresponsibility of young people are prominent ones in contemporary Navajo discourse. Indeed, a number of other nonalcohol-related commentaries focus on the lack of respect made apparent by the behavior of young

people and the link between these developments and the loss of a distinctive Navajo cultural identity.

For instance, the so called "mystery illness," a widely publicized hantavirus outbreak in the Four Corners region of the Southwest that took place in the summer of 1993, generated a number of stories and comments by Navajo people that echoed the themes of degeneration narratives in many important ways. Several medicine men and other Navajo tribal leaders attributed this illness to the abandonment of traditional Navajo culture evident in young people's behavior. This illness was interpreted, by some, as a message from the Holy People that the Navajo must maintain their culture. As one Navajo noted, "A lot of people are saying that maybe for this reason, the spirit is trying to awaken us, so we can start rebuilding our culture" (*Arizona Daily Star* 1993).

In 1997 other events and stories pointed to similar concerns. In the early summer of that year thousands of people flocked to the small community of Rocky Ridge, Arizona, attracted by stories that were then circulating about what a 96-year-old Navajo woman and her daughter had seen there on May 3. Around noon on that day, the mother and daughter had heard a loud noise outside their home and then a knock on their door. When they opened the door, they saw two elderly Navajo men, who told them that they were Holy People, Navajo deities. The Holy People asked them why the Navajo did not live in accordance with traditional teachings and why they did not offer prayers to the Holy People. Finally, they provided a warning for the two women to pass on. If the Navajo people did not begin to live in the traditional way, they would be in great danger (*Arizona Republic* 1996).

Other stories that reiterate fears of culture loss and degeneration emphasize slightly different specifics ranging from concerns regarding witchcraft and gang problems to the cultural effects of drought and sheep cloning. Each of these concerns highlights a pervasive fear of culture loss or, at the least, a concern with maintaining Navajo culture amid drastic change. It was in this vein that one elderly Navajo woman, a respected leader in a small community in the western Navajo reservation, shared a prediction with me. She noted that one day soon a Navajo would be born who was racially white, with blond hair and blue eyes. This would be a sign that the Navajo, as a distinctive group of people, would be no more.

On a philosophical level, by focusing on cultural degeneration and the rupture of significant social relationships, these narratives may point to a core problematic in contemporary Navajo culture that has roots in the past. Indeed, one tradition within Navajo culture to which these narratives seem to speak deals with the fundamental importance of establishing, maintaining, and insuring kinship and relatedness (Farella 1984; Witherspoon 1977). The guidelines for this good life, originally set forth for the Navajo by the Holy People, are traditionally encapsulated in all aspects of Navajo life, including ritual, myth, the socioeconomic system, and teachings. As part of this system, all generations have a direct relationship with and responsibility to each other. Part of this responsibility includes the preservation and transmission of certain forms of knowledge and values that we might think of as constituting Navajo culture. Drinking, especially by young people, is a sign to some that this fundamental responsibility is not being fulfilled.

The cultural and personal implications of this state of affairs could hardly be any more troubling. The transmission of knowledge from older generations to younger ones is requisite for living a productive, full life.<sup>20</sup> Without such sharing,

many Navajo elders face the prospect of being unable to fulfill one of their most important cultural roles. Farella notes, "By not allowing (or not making it appropriate for) older people to teach, we do not allow them to complete their lives and we do not allow them to attain the relative egolessness that is a part of the 'ideal' death" (1984:180). Thus, the Navajo moral economy furnishes a system for people to be part of the past, present, and future. Lack of knowledge transmission subverts this plan.

It is interesting to consider in what other ways this type of discourse may relate to existing patterns in Navajo culture. Why are negative changes emphasized in these narratives, and why are the interrelated themes of degeneration and nostalgia so prominent? Why are young people so often the target of these narratives? In approaching these questions, I find the commentaries provided by colleagues working with other Native American groups particularly illuminating. O'Neil's (1996:45-73) insights on the social uses of Flathead discourse are particularly instructive. O'Neil (1996:61) cogently argues that the contemporary Flathead discourse on Indian identity, although shaped by a number of changes, probably reflects a much older form of discourse used to discipline young people.

Here I would like to follow the lead of my colleague and suggest that Navajo narratives of degeneration likely reflect older patterns of discourse and authority. A sizable ethnographic record illustrates the cultural importance of stories and "teachings," not only among the Navajo (Dyk 1938; Faris and Walters 1990; Johnson 1977; Ladd 1957; Zolbrod 1984) but also extending to other southern Athabascans, as well (Basso 1990, 1996). Such moral modes of discourse have likely been an active part of Dine'é culture for some time. Alcohol, however, may provide a relatively new means of reiterating an old theme: the cultural degeneration of youth and the imperative to maintain a distinctive cultural identity.

## Conclusion

Narratives on disease seldom focus only on disease itself but highlight a wide range of cultural sentiments, propositions, and evaluations. In the discourse community of the western Navajo reservation, narratives of degeneration index a number of social and cultural changes signified by alcohol and drinking. These narratives, rooted in historical events and social transformations, direct censure toward Navajo young people and others who reject the traditional good life by drinking irresponsibly. At the same time, these narratives provide a potent commentary on changes in Navajo culture by using alcohol as a vehicle to compare an idyllic past with a relatively corrupt present.

Narratives of degeneration are permeated with a mood of nostalgia and invoke themes of dispossession and bereavement over the loss of a moral economy with its set of teachings and values. This discourse illustrates how many Navajos see alcohol as a foreign agent that has infringed on the traditional way of life and has corrupted the Navajo social body. These narratives of drinking not only illustrate a polarization in contemporary Navajo society but also provide a medium that re-creates the collective Navajo past through an evaluation of present circumstances. The discourse on drinking in contemporary Navajo society delimits the boundaries of what is right and proper by indicating the lifestyles that should ideally constitute Navajo culture. Although alcohol has no place in the traditional

master narratives of the Dine'é, the organizing texts consisting of origin myths and other traditional stories, it has found a prominent place in the new narratives of the Navajo people. As such, alcohol and drinking have become important ways of framing, thinking about, and talking about Navajo morals, experience, and identity on individual and collective levels.

## NOTES

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1. These sharp contrasts must be interpreted with caution. In fact, some commentators advise against such comparisons and, instead, prefer to compare Navajo alcoholic mortality and morbidity rates with those of other groups with similar class and regional backgrounds (cf. Kunitz and Levy 1994:168–191). When these factors are taken into account, differences between the Navajo and other groups of people with respect to these indicators are much less dramatic. Although the pathological and abuse aspects of Navajo drinking have been emphasized, other patterns have been largely overlooked. Many of the most abusive Navajo drinking careers, for instance, do not end in any substantial physical, psychological, or social sequelae. Furthermore, not only do a substantial proportion of Navajo people abstain from alcohol entirely but many of the heaviest abusers also eventually stop drinking, often without recourse to any formal treatment program. In addition, May and Smith (1988:326) note that 48 percent of those surveyed in an alcohol study on the Navajo reservation indicated that they were currently abstainers. Levy and Kunitz (1974:136) report lifelong abstinence rates ranging from 23 to 46 percent. These seemingly paradoxical indicators point out that Navajo drinking is a complex phenomenon.

2. For a fuller description of this larger study, see Kunitz and Levy 2000.

3. The Navajo Review Board began reviewing research conducted on the Navajo Nation in January 1996. The ostensive mission of this Board is to “create research opportunities to meld the interests and the visions on the Navajo people, public health care providers and researchers.”

4. Given this critique, it is somewhat ironic to note that, historically, anthropologists have been taken to task for consistently providing accounts that “deflate” the negative aspects of drinking in the societies they have studied (see Room 1984). More recently, Spicer has argued that anthropological accounts of American Indian drinking tend to overemphasize the functional aspects of this phenomenon, with “the unfortunate effect of creating the impression that people are untroubled by their drinking, and in the cultural area of North America nothing could be further from the truth” (1997:306–307).

5. Unless otherwise indicated, these statements were made to me in English.

6. Translated from Navajo by my field assistant.

7. One member of the Navajo Review Board noted that this statement is not true. Unfortunately, the data I have to speak to its veracity are limited. Although it may be demonstrated that, on the whole, Navajo people spend more money on food than on alcohol, such an argument may not hold true for a specific case to which this informant may well be referring. Given the limited nature of the data available both to the Board member and me, I

would respectfully argue that neither one of us is in a position to unequivocally determine the empirical "truth value" of this statement. In any event, the more interesting question in my mind is why this informant would represent drinking in this way, especially in a context where the characterization may not be supported by empirical evidence. Perhaps whatever truth there is in this statement is found not in empirical reckoning but in moral logic?

8. Moral teachings of this sort are a recurring theme in the biography of a Navajo man presented by Dyk (1938).

9. A member of the Navajo Review Board took issue with the truth value of this characterization, noting that the reservation in fact has seen a great deal of positive economic expansion and development in recent years. Although this may be true, I would argue that this informant, along with others, was not referring strictly to economic development but to a moral economy. In fact, in this system of cultural logic, positive economic expansion could be perceived as having a direct, inverse effect on the moral economy.

10. Other observers might prefer to see such commentaries as statements regarding overdevelopment, in the sense that the creation of various infrastructures and the move toward wage labor have brought too much of the white man's world to the Navajo, including alcohol (see, for instance, Levy and Kunitz 1981).

11. Translated from Navajo by my field assistant.

12. Hank's is a "trading post" and bar located about 60 miles south of Tuba City, Arizona.

13. See Basso 1990:99–137 for an account of how another Athabascan group, the Western Apache, utilizes narratives to instill moral values.

14. With regard to the Native American Church, see Aberle 1966 and Stewart 1987.

15. *Chapter* refers to a local tribal political unit roughly analogous to a city council.

16. There are, of course, other complementary traditions within the Navajo worldview. See Faris and Walters 1990 and Luckert 1975.

17. The meaning of these and other related terms, however, are clearly more complex and, on an esoteric level, often refer to a host of other intangible and abstract qualities, entities, and experiences (see Farella 1984; Witherspoon 1977; and Wyman 1970:7).

18. The association between alcohol use and the lack of good thinking appears to be a persistent one in Navajo culture. Excessive drinking, in particular, is associated with various disorders linked to bad thinking. See Levy et al. 1987.

19. The forced relocation and incarceration of thousands of Navajos by the U.S. government in the 19th century.

20. In this context it is worthwhile to note that the figure that epitomizes the cheating of this moral economy, the witch, is often characterized as someone who consciously refuses to pass on his or her knowledge (Farella 1984:179).

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