

## **COYOTE IN NAVAJO RELIGION AND COSMOLOGY**

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### **ABSTRACT/RESUME**

Coyote is a key figure in Navajo mythology, representing both good and evil, humans and gods, and of course animals. He is unpredictable and ambivalent, a characteristic of all these beings. At the same time, however, by testing and pushing the limits of behaviour, he demonstrates and reinforces concepts of harmony and order for the Navajo.

Coyote est un personnage important dans la mythologie Navajo, représentant à la fois le bien et le mal, les hommes et les dieux, et bien entendu les animaux. On ne sait jamais ce qu'il va faire et il est ambivalent comme tous ces êtres. En même temps, toutefois, il démontre et accentue les concepts de l'harmonie et de l'ordre chez les Navajo à travers des épreuves qui délimitent la conduite.

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Coyote figures prominently in the religion and mythology of a number of Native American tribes, mainly as a Trickster figure, about whom there are extensive mythological tales. The broad area in which Coyote, as opposed to other Trickster figures, is found in parts of the Plains, the Great Basin and California as well as the Southwest. This area may correspond to the original range of coyotes, who were originally Plains animals, but Trickster tales across the continent have much in common, whether attached to Coyote or to Raven, Blue Jay, Hare or Spider as they are in other areas. It is not my intention here to discuss in any detail the characteristics of the Trickster figure particularly, however, as there is an extensive literature on the Trickster and Culture Hero figures in North America (Ricketts, 1966; Hultkrantz, 1984). I intend rather to look at the position of Coyote in Navajo religion and cosmology, as this sheds an interesting light on both the historical development of Navajo religion and on the character and role of Coyote vis-a-vis our understanding of Navajo cosmology.

There are four areas, almost separate, in Navajo religion where Coyote has a prominent position and I would like first to delineate these one by one.

### **1. Coyote in the Creation Myths.**

The Navajo Creation Myths (there are a number of recorded versions) are Emergence myths, positing the upward movement of various beings through a number of different worlds, most commonly four, from origins in a world of mist. First Man and First Woman are the first beings mentioned who provide light and beginning to this process, but Coyote also seems to have existed from the beginning. All are believed to have originated from the primordial medicine bundle, from which all creation ultimately originates. As such, First Man-First Woman-Coyote constitute the prime movers on the mythological stage until the bringing into being of the present world by a new class of beings, the Holy People, deities who supercede First Man and First Woman. First Man and First Woman, who provide the power and impetus for the whole Creation process, through the possession and use of the medicine bundle, are, with the emergence to prominence of the Holy People, relegated to a position more associated with evil and witchcraft and henceforth play little part in the religious, as opposed to mythological, life of the Navajo. This appears to relate to a definite break between earlier, pre-emergence events and the present world (Gill, 1983:502-505), and a break between First Man's group, seen as tainted with evil, and the Holy People representing the new harmonious world. Coyote, however, although attracting some negative implications, continues to play an active, indeed major, role in Creation events.

In the Creation Myth generally known to Navajos, Coyote's roles are few: he causes the flood, originates death and interferes with the placing of stars, as well as generally poking his nose into everyone's business. Even here, however, he is accorded a knowledge above that of the other beings. When there is uncertainty over the desirability of death, for example, the myth states "No one knew what to do; so they asked Coyote" (Yazzie, 1971).

In the Creation myths relating to Blessingway, the core Navajo ceremonial and one concerned chiefly with the creation of the present world, which are more extensive, Coyote makes many appearances and his character and role is more elaborate (Wyman, 1970). He is a character who wanders off by himself, turning up and proffering advice and instruction. For the most part he appears as an essential being to the process of creating and ordering the world. He gives names to Talking God and Calling God, two major Navajo deities, suggests the 12 hogan songs, insists on the Mountains being given life, is enlisted by Changing Woman, the most beloved of Navajo deities, to steal dream (conceived as a part of sleep) from people to give to the Holy people, so that people would receive forewarning and a sign that a Blessingway ceremonial was needed. He sanctifies Sun, Moon, corn and plants and in his capacity as a wise philosopher is responsible for the ordering of what are now regarded by Navajos as proper and necessary life patterns, even to the extent of insisting on patterns of life, such as crop growing, which will ensure the people's survival. He is himself designated a Holy Person, with his own offerings and is responsible for providing warnings and signs to travellers. From pieces of his fur are made all coyotes, different colours for the 4 different directions, and Coyote himself is placed at Earth Center Water.

Coyote is, however, repeatedly associated with First Man's group, who, as a whole, have negative connotations because of their association with evil and witchcraft. Blessingway's concern is with the state of *hozho* or beauty and the exclusion of evil and Coyote himself is usually referred to as "disrespecter" or "First Scolder" (due no doubt to his practice of adopting a patronizing, egotistical and critical stance towards the other beings). He is one of the spies of Big Ye'i, a monster who threatens the Hero Twins and is elsewhere associated with meanness and uncontrollable sexual passion.

The picture derived of Coyote from the Creation Myth therefore is of a rude, interfering and restless individual, who is nonetheless vital to the process of ordered creation, a being who is one of the original beings produced from the medicine bundle (representing original knowledge on which the world rests and functions<sup>1</sup> with great astuteness and one who, through his manifestations in animal form, gives omens and signs to Navajos. Although the general tenor of the Creation Myth is to assume

Coyote's more tricksterish characteristics, the impression in the Myths is much more of the Culture Hero than the Trickster.

## **2. Coyote in Trickster Tales.**

The Trickster characteristics of Coyote are to be found in an extensive body of Trickster tales, which are probably a separation of his Trickster characteristics from the Creation myths and an extensive elaboration of them. These tales are similar to other Trickster tale cycles found elsewhere in North America and do not carry the same sacred quality as the Creation Myths (Hultkrantz, 1979), in the sense that the situations in which they may be related are much less ritually bound than for ceremonial and Creation myths. These Trickster tales relate to foolish, mischievous and occasionally disastrous activities of trotting Coyote. They describe encounters with other animals and beings, attempts to trick them, to become like them or to outwit them, attempts which inevitably rebound. Coyote's characteristics here are thus of the typical Trickster figure: greedy, vain, foolish, cunning and, occasionally, displaying a high degree of power. Such Trickster attributes have been well described in the literature (Radin, 1956). A recent work by Luckert (1984) attempts to encapsulate the range of activities of Coyote across a spectrum of status levels, from corpse to god. To a certain extent, of course, it is the events described in the tales which are of importance, tales which have been elaborated by raconteurs over time, and Coyote could be seen as being a mere vehicle for the description of a range of topics. And yet, despite an extraordinary elasticity in character, Coyote remains the central character of these tales, the same Coyote as in the ceremonial and Creation myths.

The tales are amusing and entertaining and are, among the Navajo, the most frequently told tales to children, but this does not mean that Coyote has become merely a figure of amusement and ridicule. As Toelken (1969) discovered through interviews with a Navajo Coyote storyteller, the perception of the Navajo was that the stories are not funny per se. He stated: "Many things about the story are funny, but the story is not funny" (Ibid:221). The purpose of the stories is to convey both a moral message in an entertaining (and therefore memorable) way, particularly to children, and also, as far as adults are concerned, to demonstrate possibilities and limitations in the world. Toelken's informant stated that "If he did not do all those things, then those things would not be possible in the world" (Ibid). Thus Coyote, through various actions and responses both extends the area of activities that have been and may be attempted and correspondingly demonstrates the limitations and/or consequences of such actions.

The range of the stories, in terms of actions, incidents and emotions is very wide covering a spectrum from hunting, killing and death to transfor-

mation and healing. As Toelken's informant noted, the tales, although often seemingly etiological, were not taken as such by Navajos, indeed were not taken as making statements necessarily about Coyote, but were to do with introducing a method whereby a whole range of topics could be considered; for instance, there is a story concerning Coyote losing his eyes in a gambling game, to be replaced by eyes of pine pitch, which, although allowing him to see, start to melt when he approaches fire. This, superficially, shows why coyotes are afraid of fire and have yellow eyes. But the more important aspect of this tale to Navajos is that it allows such topics as eye disease and injury and blindness to be considered.

These tales are serious, as Toelken's informant emphasized. Coyote is still regarded seriously, even in the most foolish tales and although the tales may be distinct from other myths recited on ritual occasions, they are to do with the same sacred being. Coyote is a unique being, one who, in Toelken's words "experiences everything: he is, in brief, the exponent of all possibilities" (Ibid:231). In common with Tricksters generally, he serves to test the bounds of possibilities and order. Navajo religion and cosmology rests on a conception of order, necessary for survival and health. Coyote challenges and thereby authenticates and legitimizes the order established in the Navajo universe. Thus, in the Trickster tales, Coyote fulfils a vital function and retains an important and serious position within the Navajo universe, even though the tales have a different status and position to ceremonial and origin myths.

### **3. Coyote in Coyoteway Ceremonial.**

The third area where Coyote is prominent is as the tutelary spirit of a Navajo curing ceremonial called Coyoteway. This ceremonial was long considered to be extinct, even in the time of Berard Halle at the beginning of the century. However, Karl Luckert came across a still extant form of this ceremonial in the 1970's and recorded a detailed performance of it (Luckert, 1979).

Coyoteway is a ceremonial falling into the Holyway group of Navajo ceremonials; those aiming to restore harmony with an offended Holy person or persons, in this case Coyote People. It follows in structure the basic pattern of Holyway ceremonials, having two, five and nine night sequences. It also, like a few other ceremonials, has masked impersonators, in this case those of Talking god, a Female Holy Person and a Coyote impersonator. The ceremonial has, of course, to do with illnesses resulting from attacks by offended Coyote People. In common with the Creation myth, the cosmological conceptions of Coyote in Coyoteway are of different coloured Coyotes situated in the different directions. It should be pointed out that the Navajo

word for Coyote - *Ma'ii* - is a generic term covering not only foxes, but also wolves; all are considered Coyote People. The symptoms associated with Coyote illness have been variously described as twisted mouth, cross-eyed vision, loss of memory, fainting, mania, prostitution and rabies. A central core of mania, nervous malfunctions and rabies seems to be attached to Coyote illness symptoms. Coyote, or Coyote People, therefore act in Coyoteway in much the same way as other Holy People do in relation to other ceremonials - an attack by an offended Holy one, through some form of contact with its bodily earthly form, most obviously by killing a coyote. The singer whom Luckert consulted stated that Coyote-induced illness increased dramatically prior to 1948 due to a bounty offered on coyote skins and the subsequent extensive killing of coyotes. Since that time, coyote illness has declined, and today, a Navajo would prefer a whiteman to kill coyotes. Coyote People, then, function much like other Holy People in Navajo ceremonialism.

However, Luckert also notes that another Coyoteway apprentice believed that an illness could be traced to the great Coyote in the east, who sent illnesses through the Sun and Moon, thence via predatory animals to humans. This is clearly a much more powerful Coyote god, responsible for all illness and utilizing Sun, Moon and all predatory animals to inflict illness on humans. It is impossible to say, however, whether this view refers to a time when Coyote was more powerful, whether it is the often natural tendency of practitioners of particular ceremonies to elevate the position of their tutelary spirit (as occurs frequently in shamanic rituals) or whether, because this informant was highly christianized, he tended to grant Coyote more power than tradition would warrant. It is however the case that this view corresponds with the etiology of another ceremonial called Excessway, which also posits a great Coyote sending illness via Sun and Moon, but thence to humans via game animals who have eaten poisonous or hallucinogenic plants. This ceremonial posits a more negative view of Coyote and indeed is associated with witchcraft. The Coyote we find in Coyoteway, therefore, is a being who lies behind all Coyote People and, when offended, responds by sending illness, necessitating a performance of Coyoteway. Although Luckert found knowledge of this ceremonial still extant, it seems likely that this ceremonial will soon die out and this particular aspect of Coyote activity will then indeed become extinct.

#### **4. Coyote in Folk Belief.**

I refer here to folk belief as a general category to indicate the views non-specialist Navajos have of Coyote other than through their exposure to the myths so far mentioned. I noted earlier that, in the Creation myth, Coyote

was given a role as providing signs and omens to travellers. This view prevails today and even more westernized Navajo teachers can cite instances of people who had suffered through ignoring a coyote crossing one's path. The view, which probably was held earlier, that Coyote can be helpful in providing signs, indeed may be employed as a useful divinatory device, as seems to have been the case in the last century (Navajo Community College Press, 1973), seems to have been submerged under a distinctly negative view of coyote appearances. The general view of Coyote in folk belief is unremittingly negative in fact, particularly in relation to death and witchcraft. Kluckhohn's classic account of Navajo witchcraft (Tyler, 1975:159-183) is full of references to Coyote as associated with witchcraft. He is prayed to by witches, is seen in association with witches, witches can adopt coyote form (were-animals) and can throw his skin on people, necessitating a hoop ritual to remove this enchantment. Sexual excess, greed, meanness, lack of self-control and other attributes of witches are seen as those of Coyote and thus the two are linked. On this general level, therefore, Coyote has a very negative reputation for Navajos. These, then, are briefly the four areas in Navajo culture where Coyote has a major role. In the general cultural context of the Southwest, most of the Navajo concepts regarding Coyote can be found in the neighbouring Apache and Pueblo cultures. Mythic motifs regarding, for instance, the scattering of stars, the origin of death and the incessant prowling of Coyote are to be found in a number of Pueblo cultures (Ibid). However, Pueblos generally have a fairly low opinion of Coyote, seeing him mainly as a Trickster figure, but also associated, along with Owl and Raven, with evil omen and with witchcraft. Furthermore, the Pueblos do not have a taboo against the killing of coyotes, which are destructive to both livestock and crops.

Apache cultures tend to have a higher assessment of Coyote as an important, more positive Trickster and Culture Hero. Social institutions of the Jicarilla and Western Apache can be traced to Coyote (Tiller, 1983; Basso, 1983). Among the Mescalero, Coyote is perceived as lending useful supernatural power for war, hunting and running, although he is also seen as a potentially evil animal of the night and can bring illness to the unwary (Opier, 1969:78). An important factor here is the different economic lifeways of traditional Apache and Pueblo cultures. Apache cultures are traditionally based around hunting, warfare and the individual pursuit of supernatural power, whereas the Pueblos are concerned chiefly with agriculture, their societies are sedentary and religious activity is organized on more priestly lines. Coyote would therefore tend to have a more positive value to the Apache than to the Pueblos.

In this light, it is important, therefore, that the historical context of Navajo culture is included in any assessment of Coyote. The picture derived from the Origin myths and the Trickster tales is of an ancient deity, existing from the beginning and, as such, exhibits the general characteristics of the Culture Hero-Trickster, although, as there is no single creator figure in Navajo cosmology, Coyote interacts with a number of creator figures. Since the Navajo are known to have migrated from their main cultural grouping in the subarctic, their religion has obviously undergone change (Cooper, 1984). Among the Athapascans of the North, Raven is the Trickster-Culture Hero and this fact emerges obliquely in Navajo culture, as Raven (or Crow, the Navajo do not distinguish the two) is linked with Coyote in Myth and there is an obsolescent ceremonial - Ravenway - which Navajos believe is linked to Coyoteway. Raven and Coyotes are also observed in association in nature. Raven emerges, in the form of Crow and Black God, as Master of Animals in hunting myth, a position denied to Coyote who of course is a predator. Raven has been superseded by Coyote at some stage in Navajo history. Coyote in myths attains the position of Holy Person, with his own offerings and this is consolidated in Coyoteway, the ceremonial to restore harmonious relationships between humans and Coyote. As a predator he is associated with hunting. Hunting is, after all, a form of trickery requiring cunning, and there is no better survivor in nature than coyote. In fact, the paradigm provided by coyote as an animal is ideally suited to the status as Trickster figure. It is not only the Navajo, or indeed other Native Americans, who have developed an extensive lore regarding coyotes, from observations of coyote behaviour in the wild (Dobie, 1961); Mexican and Anglo cultures are rich in tales regarding the antics of this remarkably adaptable and enterprising animal. Hunting strategy is also adaptable to warfare strategy and it is not surprising that the two are linked in Navajo culture. The Navajo word for Coyote, *Ma'ii*, as well as being a generic term for wolves and foxes and, by extension, all predatory animals, is also an old Apachean word for animal. Since Coyote is the only prominent animal Deity in the myths - all others are anthropomorphic beings - it seems possible that, at one time, Coyote stood as the representative of all animals. Such a view would lend weight to the view previously expressed by the Coyoteway apprentice of Coyote as the prime instigator of all illness. Illness in Navajo culture came originally from animals, mainly through lack of observance of correct hunting ritual and it is significant that one of the masked figures appearing at Coyoteway ceremonial is that of Talking God, guardian of animals.

Historically, therefore, we have Coyote appearing on both mythic and religious levels. In myth he is the archetypal Culture Hero-Trickster figure, whilst on the level of everyday religion, he is the tutelary deity of Coyoteway



and lends power in hunting and warfare.

I have elsewhere discussed the historical changes affecting the development of Navajo religion (Cooper, 1984) and I need here only outline the main feature, which was a move from shamanism, hunting and warfare to an agricultural/pastoralist economy and a religious system based on knowledge rather than personal experiences. The reformulation of Navajo religion - in particular the adoption of Emergence mythology and cosmology, the structuring of the Chantway system - occurred under Pueblo influence following the Pueblo Revolt in the late 17th Century. Warfare adopted many of the techniques associated with hunting, which declined in importance with the adoption of the agriculturalist and pastoralist economy. Both hunting and warfare became associated with witchcraft, particularly following the trauma of incarceration in Fort Sumner between 1864-1868, caused by the suppression of widespread Navajo raiding, and Emergence cosmology and mythology is dominated by anthropomorphic deities who supersede the animal gods so important in hunting and shamanism. It is not therefore surprising that Coyote, whose power is associated with hunting and warfare, thus became also associated with witchcraft. The transformation abilities of Coyote, both to change his appearance and to throw his skin onto others, are closely identified with the werewolf syndrome, which forms an important part of Navajo witchcraft beliefs. Werewolves are believed to paint their faces in a similar way to Coyote, or First Scolder. Prayers to Coyote are believed to make you rich. Such a view could stem from the period when prayers to Coyote lent aid in hunting, warfare and its correlates, gambling and love. Nowadays however, one who is very wealthy is likely to be regarded as deriving their success from witchcraft practices. Coyote was associated already with witchcraft through his connection with First Man and First Woman, from whom, according to Navajo belief, witchcraft originated. This also provides Coyote's association with death, since the dead return to the underworld, from whence came First Man's group. Coyote originated death, feeds on carrion and often dies in myth and, as a sign of ill omen, can signify to the Navajo the imminence of evil or death. Furthermore, the transition from hunting to agriculture meant that coyotes, hitherto fellow predators of the hunt, now become a threat to the economy through attacks on lambs.

Coyoteway gives Coyote a much more positive role on a religious level, although the link between Coyoteway and Excessway, which is associated with witchcraft, tends to mitigate the positive role. With the passing away of Coyoteway, however, the last vestige of a positive religious link with Coyote seems destined to disappear. Whilst the mythic aspects of Coyote therefore provide both positive and negative roles for Coyote, on the religious

everyday level Coyote will be seen in overwhelmingly negative terms.

The characteristics of Coyote, therefore, span the range from Culture Hero to Trickster to Evil Coyote, covering the entire range of roles found in Trickster figures across North America, although it is unusual to find all aspects present so strongly in one culture.

Navajo cosmological thinking tends to emphasize the state of *hozho*, or harmony, established in Emergence mythology and the separation of this from evil. The existence of evil is acknowledged by Navajos, indeed the widespread prevalence of witchcraft and witchcraft fear are only too obvious on the Reservation, and this evil exists as a counterpart to the harmony sustaining rituals and observances of religious belief. The emphasis is on the harmonious, not only because this is seen as the natural and desired state, but also because mentioning or thinking of evil is thought to increase the likelihood of evil occurring. This emphasis on the good has seemingly misled some scholars, notably Gary Witherspoon (1977), into presenting the Navajo world as overwhelmingly harmonious and beautiful. This ignores the healthier Navajo view that evil exists and the world is composed of a balance of good and evil. Coyote appears as a figure roaming the Navajo world, poking his nose in and testing and experimenting. He does this, not merely because he thinks he knows better, although being egotistical is part of his nature, but because his role is to test the boundaries and the categorization of the world. As such he fulfils a vital role, but one which does not guarantee him a positive rating. It is part of Navajo religious thinking that the acquisition of knowledge is gained in myths by disobeying or questioning order; heroes of the ceremonial myths only discover the knowledge of the particular chants through disobeying or ignoring rules, becoming ill and receiving ceremonial knowledge from the Holy People. This is the genesis of the ceremonials. Coyote fits into this general view, but of course is different to the hero figures of the myth, since Coyote is a god, not a human and can be seen as continually refusing to obey rules binding everyone else. This makes him a figure about whom Navajos must feel somewhat uneasy.

Coyote is a figure who not only tests boundaries, but transcends boundaries. In myth he operates in the worlds of humans, animals and gods, in nature he operates in both human and animal worlds, taking food from both nature and human settlements. He is associated with First Man and yet lends sound advice to the Holy People, he is responsible in no small way for the current state of the world and has had a pervasive influence, through his deeds in myth, on the way the Navajos have led their lives. He has ensured the survival of the Navajo and made the world a balanced whole and yet he is also unreliable, pompous, greedy, disruptive and dangerous. Reichard noted (1963:423) that in the assembly of gods, whilst the good sits on the

south side and the evil on the north, Coyote sits near the door so that he can ally himself with either side, as it suits his whim. Much of the world is regarded as under Coyote's control and he is a major deity and yet he is often worse than a human. His human characteristics are obvious, although this is something of course common to many Trickster figures. His characteristics of greed, meanness, lack of control, lying, egocentricity and so forth are characteristics of humans, who display all the ambivalences of the character of Coyote. This is recognized by the Navajo. McAllester and Wheelwright (1956), in a study of the Big Star Chant myth note that "The Star People announce that there must always be three kinds of people, Snake Men, Coyote Men and Star Men...The Snake is the awakening, the Coyote is man's animality and the Star is man's spirituality". Thus, not only does Coyote display human characteristics, but humans display Coyote characteristics.

Coyote is an essential being in the world, who represents a vital force of restlessness and energy, which moves between the categories of human-gods-animals, good and evil, testing the forms and realities of the world. It is not surprising, then, that he displays contradictions and ambivalence; no cosmology is capable of being a healthy, living, breathing whole if it does not accord a place for the unpredictable and the restless spirit.

Coyote is an essential part of the order and harmony so important in the Navajo world. As a Creator and as tutelary of Coyote way, he aids in establishing that order, as Trickster, he tests and authenticates that order, as well as providing a means of conceptualizing order and disorder, and, as a figure associated with evil and witchcraft, he violates that order.

Coyote is thus a vital part, not only of the Navajo universe as it is, but also of the historical development of that universe. By way of finishing, it may be noted that if the animal coyote is the model, then the Navajo have, in some ways, chosen wisely, since no other animal displays quite the same adaptability and capacity for survival in the face of great odds.

#### NOTES

1. See Witherspoon, 1977. He *analyses* the conception and importance of knowledge in Navajo cosmology.

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