

# **Chapter Two**

## **Symmetry**

### **in**

## **Navajo Philosophy and World View**

Many fundamental concepts about symmetry, as is true of so many other notions about the nature of the universe, are generated from perceptions of the human body. Two principal kinds of symmetry derive from the constitution of the human body: bilateral and inverted. Bilateral symmetry occurs in the left/right symmetry of the body, based on the spinal column as a vertical axis. Centrally located organs such as the nose and the uterus also display forms of bilateral symmetry. This bilateral symmetry, however, is not exact. The left side of the body is not exactly like the right side of the body, but there is enough similarity between the left and the right sides of the body to make the body appear strongly symmetrical.

One of the most intriguing aspects of bodily symmetry is the significant incidence of organs occurring in pairs, despite the fact that the body could function fairly well with only one of these organs. Two principal kinds of pairing exist in the organs of the body: isomorphic pairing and enantiomorphic pairing. The eyeballs, the ureters, and the testicles are examples of isomorphic or nearly isomorphic pairs. The hands and the feet are the best examples of enantiomorphic pairs. Enantiomorphic pairs are similar but different because they are inverted in orientation. To one extent or another, this is also true of the kidneys, the lungs, the ears, the legs, and the arms. The brain with its two different yet complementary halves is the most intriguing organ of them all. Enantiomorphic pairs possess a correspondence of form that certainly is symmetrical, but it is a symmetry that is different from bilateral symmetry. This form of symmetry could properly be called inverted symmetry or enantiomorphic symmetry.

While bilateral and enantiomorphic symmetry prevail in the structure of individual species and in the specific features of the natural world, the larger cosmos

is dominated by what many scholars call asymmetry (i.g. Gardner 1979:134-138). The use of the term *asymmetry* in this arena is meant to suggest not a lack of correspondence of form but an inversion of form or orientation. Inversions or oppositions possess a correspondence of form that is certainly a kind of symmetry. Much of what is called asymmetry consists of enantiomorphs, binary pairs, and complementary opposites. Male/female asymmetry is the most prominent and most widespread example of a binary pair that possesses complementarity and correspondence of form, but not exact symmetry. While the correspondence as well as the contrasts between the sexes cannot appropriately be categorized as bilateral symmetry, they do provide an example of enantiomorphic or inverted symmetry.

Rather than thinking of the interrelationship of the sexes as a form of binary opposition, I prefer to call it bipolar symmetry. Bipolar indicates that the two items in question exist as parts of a whole that has contrasting, opposing, or inverted polarity, such as the symmetry of electromagnetic fields. Bipolar symmetry indicates the correspondence, the complementarity and the inversions found in the male/female juxtaposition.

Bilateral symmetry exists in the mirror imagery of the left and right sides of an axis. Bipolar symmetry is the symmetry of opposite ends of a pole or an axis. Bipolar symmetry suggests the unity and the complementarity of binary oppositions. When opposites possess complementarity, harmony, and balance, they are expressing symmetry and holism. Binary pairs constitute polarized aspects of a single phenomenon. The polarized differences create a fertile and dynamic ebb and flow of contrast and complementarity.

In ancient Chinese philosophy, all experiences as well as all the patterns inherent in the universe can be understood in terms of various manifestations of the bipolar symmetry of **yin** and **yang**. **Yang** is the bright, male, creative power associated with the sky above. **Yin** is the dark, receptive, maternal dimension associated with the earth below. **Yang** is in motion; **yin** is at rest. **Yang** is rational; **yin** is intuitive. The original meaning of the two words is said to be associated with the sunny and shaded sides of a mountain.

There is a dynamic interplay between the **yin** and the **yang**. When one side reaches its peak, it gives way to the other dimension of the equation. The philoso-

phy behind the **yin** and **yang** is symbolized by Figure 1. Certainly this visual representation of the concepts of **yin** and **yang** indicates the underlying symmetry of these bipolar notions. This symbol is called the **T'ai-chi T'u**, representing the Supreme Ultimate. The two small circles of opposite shade reflect the idea that, when one side reaches its fulfillment, it will retreat in favor of the other side because it already has the seed of the opposite side planted within it.

The pair of **yin** and **yang** is the grand leitmotiv that permeates Chinese culture and determines all features of the traditional Chinese way of life. 'Life,' says Chuang Tzu, 'is the blended harmony of the **yin** and the **yang**.' As a nation of farmers, the Chinese had always been familiar with the movements of the sun and moon and with the change of the seasons. Seasonal changes and the resulting phenomena of growth and decay in organic nature were thus seen by them as the clearest expression of the interplay between **yin** and **yang**, between the cold and dark winter and the bright and hot summer. The seasonal interplay of the two opposites is also reflected in the food we eat which contains elements of **yin** and **yang**. A healthy diet consists, for the Chinese, in balancing these **yin** and **yang** elements (Capra 1975: 107-108).

Traditional Chinese medicine, too, is based on the balance of **yin** and **yang** in the human body, and illness is seen as a disruption of this balance.

Bilateral and bipolar symmetry are very important aspects of the Navajo understanding of the world. Whereas bilateral symmetry is common to individuals and to various other specific entities in the universe, bipolar and enantiomorphic symmetry are the major organizational patterns of the larger, holistic Navajo cosmos. **Hózhó** -- holistic harmony, health, and beauty as a simple gloss -- is generated in the Navajo universe by the supreme bipolar pair **Sa'ah Naaghái** and **Bik'eh Hózhó**. In order to comprehend more fully the meaning and significance of this pair in the Navajo cosmos, some ethnographic background information must be provided here. We will start with a brief sketch of the story of the origin of the Navajo world.

## The Emergence

The gods and forerunners of the Navajo emerged to this world through four<sup>1</sup> underworlds or previous stages of existence. The place of the emergence is thought to be somewhere near what is now Navajo Lake. The world at the time of the Emergence was without form, shape, or dimension. The **Diyin Dine'é** who emerged to this world were called into a great sweathouse, wherein they discussed and planned how the world should be. Then they sang and prayed the world into existence, according to the thoughts and plans they had made. They were able to do this as a result of their previously gained knowledge and ritual power acquired through experience in the underworlds. An important aspect to this story of creation is the medicine bundle that First Man brings with him from the underworlds. The sacred mountains are said to have existed in the underworlds, and First Man brings soil from each of them with him. From these mountain soil bundles, he is able to recreate the sacred mountains in this new world.

Another important part of this sacred bundle was the inner forms -- life-giving and animating powers -- of various vital dimensions of this world. The world was, in part, organized by controlling and directing these inner forms to take their places and to fulfill their roles in this newly prepared world. The inner forms included, among others, those for the sun and moon, the water and mountains, and the cardinal directions. The world was organized into daily patterns of night and day, with the sun to dominate the day and the moon to dominate the night. Birth, growth, decay, and death were set as basic dimensions of this world. Plants and animals, fabrics and jewels also were made as fundamental aspects of the world. The **Diné** (those today whom we call the Navajo) or **Nihookáá' Dine'é** "Earth Surface People" were not yet created. This was solely the domain of the **Diyin Dine'é** "The Holy People" or "the Gods."

In the third underworld, some of the people engaged in abuses of their capacity to reproduce. These abuses included incest, adultery, masturbation, and immodesty. The consequences of these abuses did not become apparent until the females started to give birth to various sorts of monsters that began to terrorize and devour the people. The capacity to reproduce was lost, with death and despair

prevailing. The Navajo regard the power to reproduce or regenerate to be one power that is manifested in all creation. This capacity for regeneration is considered the most awesome, the most wonderful, and the most beautiful of all aspects of the world. Its violation and loss produced, therefore, a very great trauma.

To save the world and the people, First Man came up with a plan. Possibly this plan may have been in the scheme of things from the beginning. The two most beautiful and powerful of all inner forms arose from First Man's medicine bundle. This pair was known as **Sa'ah Naaghái** Boy and **Bik'eh Hózhó** Girl (Wyman 1970: 126, footnote 111; Witherspoon 1977:17-40). This pair were to be the parents of Changing Woman, who was found as a baby on the top of Gobernador Knob (Wyman 1970: 139-143). According to First Man's plan, Changing Woman would save the world by first restoring the power of reproduction, and secondly by giving birth to the Twins who would slay the monsters.

Changing Woman grew to puberty in four days. The onset of her puberty was the cause for great joy, and all the people came to her home to celebrate this event. In it they saw the salvation of the world because she was in the process of restoring the power of regeneration to the world. Parts of the Blessingway ceremony now known as the **Kinaaldá** were performed for her as a puberty rite. This ceremony subsequently became the ceremony for all Navajo girls at the onset of their puberty. The Blessingway, its power and its beauty, became Changing Woman's, since it was given to her at the end of the ceremony.

The ceremony prepared Changing Woman for conjugal union with the inner form of the Sun, resulting in the birth of twin boys, known later as Born for the Water and Monster Slayer. The Twins lived at their mother's home. They wanted to discover who their father was, embarking on a journey to his home. They went through trials and tests along the way, finally, finding their father, the Sun. From their father they got the bow and the other weapons with which to kill the monsters.

While the Twins were on their journey to find their father, they noticed smoke coming out of a hole in the ground. They looked in to investigate, and they found an old woman weaving: Spider Woman. She invited them in, and the Twins descended into the home on a ladder with four rungs. After the Twins told Spider

Woman where they were going, she was pessimistic, but to insure their success and to protect them in their battles with the monsters, Spider Woman gave the Twins a bundle of talking prayer sticks, usually called “life feathers,” and several protective formulas. These gifts protected the Twins in their travels and also prevented them from succumbing to several of the monsters' tricks.

The Twins returned to the home of their mother, showed her the weapons they obtained, and then proceeded to take on and slay each of the monsters. Monster Slayer -- or Alien Slayer -- takes a more active role in these battles than does Born for the Water, who is more of an assistant, a lookout, and an aide, helping to protect Monster Slayer. Monster Slayer does the actual killing.<sup>2</sup> When all the monsters are killed, there is relief but not yet complete joy. The earth is still not purified; the ghosts of the dead monsters still haunt the Twins and contaminate the beauty and purity of the earth. Another ceremony is needed to rid the world and the minds of the Twins from the haunting and contaminating effects of the enemy ghosts. To do this, the Enemyway (more exactly the Alienway) ceremony is performed over the Twins.

Once the Enemyway is performed and the world is purified of the ghosts of the dead monsters, harmony and beauty -- **hózhó** -- are restored to the world. There is great rejoicing, and Changing Woman is now ready to create the four original clans of the Navajo. She does this from powers she acquired from her parents and from the Blessingway ceremony, representing the origin of the Navajo as the “Earth Surface People.” It seems that everything previous to this point had been done in anticipation of or in preparation for the coming of the **Diné** (Navajo).

With the creation of the People of the Earth's Surface, the Holy People all disappear into their outer forms. Their inner forms are never to be seen again. The Navajo were told, however, that they would be able to discern the presence of the Holy People in the future when they hear the voice of the wind and the singing of the bluebirds and observe the growth of the corn. Any living or growing being indicates the presence of the Gods (Fishler 1953:92). By these signs, the Navajo confirm the continued presence of the Holy People.

Before Changing Woman left the Navajo to themselves, she gave them the Blessingway ceremony. She also gave them the seeds of food plants and the livestock they would need for food (sheep) and travel (horses), and she gave them the fabrics and jewels they would need for clothing, adornment, and offerings. She gave them everything they would need to sustain their lives. She is their mother; she created them and continues to sustain them.

The identification of Changing Woman with all of the things that bless, sustain, enrich, and beautify the life of her children, the Navajo, is thoroughly noted in the songs of Blessingway:

Now I am the child of Changing Woman  
come, do come!

Now at the center in the home of Changing Woman  
come, do come! . . .

Child of various fabrics come my child, come!

Child of various jewels come my child, come! . . .

Now as I am really the child of Changing Woman  
it [her inner form] rises with me . . .

Now from the center in the home of Changing Woman  
it [her inner form] rises with me. . . .

Precisely the child of various fabrics, of various jewels,  
it rises with me. . . .

Precisely the child of one always increasing,  
never decreasing,  
it rises with me.

Now I am long life [**Sa'ah Naaghái**],  
now Happiness [**Bik'eh Hózhó**],  
precisely its child,  
it rises with me. . . .

Before me it is blessed [**Hózhó**],

behind me it is blessed,  
precisely its child,  
it rises with me,  
it rises with me.  
(Wyman 1970:276-280)

Other important, life-sustaining, and life-enriching features of this world are enumerated here. I just list fabrics and jewels to indicate their identification with Changing Woman. There is another relevant set of lines that is found in the closing songs of Blessingway, in which Changing Woman bids farewell to the people and her children. Through ritual identification with Changing Woman, a patient in the Blessingway acquires these blessings, powers, and endowments from Changing Woman and her parents:

Now Sky's surroundings are her surroundings,  
a beautiful one is dressing me in them.  
Now Dawn's pollen and the pollen of various fabrics are sprayed upon her, f a b-  
a beautiful one is dressing me in them.  
To be ever increasing, never decreasing,  
a beautiful one is dressing me.  
Thereby I become various fabrics,  
a beautiful one is dressing me in them.  
Now to be continuously increasing [**Sa'ah Naaghái**] in  
beauty [**Bik'eh Hózhó**],  
a beautiful one is dressing me.

Before me beauty radiates to the Mountains,  
a beautiful one is dressing me in it.  
Behind me beauty radiates to the Mountains,  
a beautiful one is dressing me in it.  
Above me beauty radiates to the Sky,  
a beautiful one is dressing me in it.



Below me beauty radiates to the nadir of the Earth,  
a beautiful one is dressing me in it.  
All around me it is beautiful,  
a beautiful one is dressing me in it.  
My speech is blessed,  
a beautiful one is dressing me in it.  
This beautiful one is dressing me in it.

Surrounded by Sky's surroundings,  
now look upon me!  
Sprayed with dawn's pollen and the pollen of various fabrics, now  
look upon me!  
An ever increasing, never decreasing one,  
now look upon me!  
Transformed thereby into beautiful fabrics,  
now look upon me!

Holy Ones as many as there are,  
now look upon me!  
Now I am continuously increasing [**Sa'ah Naaghái**]in  
beauty [**Bik'eh Hózhó**],  
now look upon me!

Before me it is beautiful, now look upon me!  
Behind me it is beautiful, now look upon me!  
Below me it is beautiful, now look upon me!  
Above me it is beautiful, now look upon me!  
All around me it is beautiful, now look upon me!  
My speech is beautiful, now look upon me!  
All my surroundings are beautiful, now look upon me.

It is thrilling my grandchild, now look upon me!  
It is thrilling my grandchild, now look upon me!

(see Wyman 1970:315-317)

Changing Woman, as the inner form of the earth, controls the seasonal cycle of life on the surface of the earth. She has the power to rejuvenate each time she gets old and near death. In the spring, Changing Woman is said to be a young girl. In the summer, she grows and develops. In the fall, she matures; in the winter, she becomes elderly. At the beginning of each spring, she rejuvenates and the earth's cycle begins again. This capacity to mature and rejuvenate is indicated by the name Changing Woman. Earth Woman is another one of her names, as is White Shell Woman.

## Cosmic Symmetry

**Sa'ah Naaghái** and **Bik'eh Hózhó** represent the underlying bipolar symmetry of the universe. **Sa'ah Naaghái** is the inner form of **Bik'eh Hózhó**, which is the outer form of **Sa'ah Naaghái**. **Sa'ah Naaghái** is the static dimension of the universe, while **Bik'eh Hózhó** is the active dimension. **Sa'ah Naaghái** is the thought of the universe, while **Bik'eh Hózhó** is its speech or voice (Wyman 1970:398). **Sa'ah Naaghái** is male; **Bik'eh Hózhó** is female. The dynamic, fertile, and omnipotent union of these two dimensions of the universe is what produces **hózhó** (Witherspoon 1977:16-46).

**Hózhó** is exemplified in the profound personality of Changing Woman, who is now the inner form of the earth. The dynamic, regenerative, and holistic beauty and harmony seen on the earth's surface are outer manifestations of the inner beauty, harmony, and power of Changing Woman. This concept of holistic essence -- **hózhó** -- is found in every aspect of Navajo language, art, and culture.

**Hózhó** is the grand theme or design of the Navajo universe. It is what the Blessingway ceremony is designed to enhance and what other ceremonies are designed to restore. **Hózhóójí** (Blessingway or, more accurately, Along the Pathway of **Hózhó**) was first performed for Changing Woman, and she imparted it to the Navajo, her children. The source of **hózhó** -- that which generates and radiates **hózhó** -- is the parents of Changing Woman, **Sa'ah Naaghái** (father) and **Bik'eh Hózhó** (mother). The Blessingway rite is one of the most important channels to

that source. Changing Woman, **Sa'ah Naaghái**, and **Bik'eh Hózhó** are the principal deities and dimensions of the universe with whom the patient in every healing rite is identified and from whom the patient absorbs curing power.

The name and term **Sa'ah Naaghái** has been loosely translated as “long life” by Father Berard Haile, and this translation has been adopted by many others. Elsewhere I have discussed in greater detail the meanings of this term (1977:47-52). Briefly, the term refers to endless repetitions of the complete life cycle of all living beings, including the earth. This is a four-phased cycle that goes from birth to youth to old age and, finally, to death and is renewed in each birth. The proper age to die for humans is considered to be 102. **Sa'ah Naaghái** refers to the infinite continuation of the generations of all living beings.

**Bik'eh Hózhó** is the outer form of **Sa'ah Naaghái**. **Bik'eh** means “according to it.” The **bi-** object prefix refers to what preceded it, in this case, referring to **Sa'ah Naaghái**. A longer yet still inadequate translation of both of these terms would be something like this: “according to the infinite generations of the Earth and all living beings, there is beauty, harmony, and well-being everywhere.” These abstract concepts and the profound persons who embody them represent the single source from which all species get their power of regeneration.

Changing Woman, as the child of **Sa'ah Naaghái** and **Bik'eh Hózhó**, synthesizes the dynamic bipolarity of the universe into a holistic symmetrical union that is daily and annually seen in the ever-changing, ever-repeating concert of life found on the surface of the earth.

## **Symmetrical Emblems of the Cosmic Family**

The Navajo call themselves **Diné**, a linguistic representation of a social, political, and military alliance. The indigenous symbols of this national alliance are:

## Figure 2. Emblems of Born for the Water and Monster Slayer

These are most commonly known as the marks of Born for the Water and Monster Slayer. They have an important history and a rich set of meanings. They also represent some of the basic bipolar symmetries found in the Navajo universe, as well as providing the basic design elements from which many of the patterns of Navajo weaving are derived. Let us first place these emblems in their cultural and historical contexts.

Other than on Navajo rugs and in Navajo sandpaintings, one can find the design motifs shown above in four other places.<sup>3</sup> These are (1) on the staff of the **Diné** in the Enemyway ritual, (2) on the masks, clothing, and attire of the ritual impersonations of Born for the Water and Monster Slayer, (3) in the hair buns of Changing Woman and ordinary Navajo men and women, and (4) on the rock walls of the area called **Diné'tah**. We will start with the latter case first.

**Diné'tah** is a Navajo word that contains the suffix '**tah**', which means 'among', 'through', or 'in the area of'. The usage here is to designate an area that is considered by the Navajo to be special and sacred, because it is their place of origin. It is the area from which the Holy People emerged to this world, and the early events of this world mostly took place there. It is the place where Changing Woman was found, where she grew up, and where she provided her blessings. It is where her children, the **Diné**, first located after they were created at her home in the West. It, therefore, represents the sacred homeland of the Navajo.

This sacred homeland is outlined or demarcated by four sacred mountains: Blanca Peak and Hesperus Peak in Colorado, Mt. Taylor in New Mexico, and the San Francisco Peaks in Arizona (Figure 3). If connecting lines are drawn between these mountains, the resulting shape is an inexact diamond. The center of this diamond is a few miles east and north of Bloomfield, New Mexico. Near this cen-

terpoint are two more sacred mountains, Gobenador Knob and Huerfano Mesa, known to the Navajo as the center or middle mountains. In this center area of Gobenador Knob and Huerfano Mesa, the early events of Navajo history took place. This is one point on which both the Navajo and archaeologists agree. This is the place where archaeologists have found the earliest traces of Navajo residence in the Southwest.

Robert A. Roessel, Jr., an educator and longtime friend and student of the Navajo, has written a book on this area called **Dinétaḥ**. Roessel notes that:

**Dinétaḥ's** import is cultural and historical. It is the homeland of the Navajos according to the written records of Spanish scribes, archaeologists, and other scholars; more importantly, the cultural significance of the area is documented throughout Navajo oral history. . . .

**Dinétaḥ** is thus significant as the birthplace and home of Changing Woman. But it is also the area in which the earliest recorded history finds the Navajo people living. Both Fray Solmeron and Fray Benavides describe the Navajos as living in this region in the seventeenth century. (1983:3-5)

The symbols of Monster Slayer and Born for the Water are found throughout the petroglyphs of this area. Roessel includes photographs of these designs in petroglyphs on pages 6, 29, 30, 50, 62, 114, 126, 128, and 129 of his book. The petroglyphs on page 129 are reproduced here as Plate 1, indicating the Navajo apparently considered the marks of Born for the Water and Monster Slayer to be their emblems and a means by which they conveyed their identity and identified their homeland.

The Born for the Water design is also associated with the hair bun into which Changing Woman's hair was tied during her Blessingway and puberty rite. This tying of the Navajo hair bun is done for all young girls in their puberty rites (Figure 4). Traditionally, most Navajo men and women wore their hair in this type of bun, and many Navajo still do today. It is a strong symbol of traditionalism among

contemporary Navajo and the power, importance, and prominence of this symbol is quite evident when the Navajo daily re-create it with their hair, proudly displaying it as part of their daily attire. The Navajo are one of the few groups of Native Americans to traditionally wear their hair in this sort of pattern.

The bow pattern of Monster Slayer's mark was also with the Navajo almost daily in earlier times. Before this century, the bow was used extensively and proudly displayed when not in use. The distinctive sinew-backed bow of the Navajo was well known among native peoples of the Southwest, and it was one of the most powerful and effective weapons of its kind found anywhere in native North America.

The emblems of Born for the Water and Monster Slayer are also found prominently in Navajo ritual, and they are found on the masks and bodies of those who impersonate these deities in ritual. Washington Matthews in Navajo Legends includes a plate (VII, reproduced here as Plate 2) illustrating the impersonation of Born for the Water. Born for the Water emblems are prominently displayed on the left leg and arm, on the chest, and on the head mask. Matthews adds this description:

His body and limbs are painted with a native red ochre; his hands are smeared with white earth; and eight symbols are drawn on his body in white--two on the chest, two on the arms, two on the legs, and two on the back, partly over the shoulderblades. As with the bow symbols of Nayenezgqni [Monster Slayer], two of the symbols are left open or unfinished -- that on the left leg

(painted first), and that over the left shoulderblade (painted last) . . . The personator wears a mask painted also with red ochre . . . and it is decorated both in front and behind with a number of queue symbols (the number is never the same in two masks, but is always a multiple of four). (1897:253-254.)

Matthews also shows an impersonation of Monster Slayer (1897:Plate IV), reproduced here as Plate 3. Matthews adds these comments about Monster Slayer's attire:

The personator has his body painted black with charcoal of four sacred plants, and his hands painted white . . . .Small, diamond-shaped holes are cut in the mask for eyes and mouth . . . . On his body there are drawn in white clay the figures of eight bows; six are drawn as shown in the picture and two more are drawn over the shoulder blades. All these bows are shown as complete (or strung) except those on the left leg and left side of the back . . . . The symbols must all turn in one direction . . . . The patient prays to him, and gives him a cigarette painted black and decorated with the bow-symbols in white. (1897:252-253)

The emblems of Monster Slayer and Born for the Water are not the only bipolar symmetry found in Navajo art and culture. To complete the holistic symmetry of the divine family, we must also see how Changing Woman is frequently represented by a diamond, unifying the emblems of the Twins into a holistic, symmetrical scheme, resulting in what was formerly a national emblem for the Navajo.

## **The Diamond and Quadrilateral Symmetry**

The Navajo conceive of this, the Fifth World, as a plane in the shape of a diamond (see Figures 5-9). The outline of this world as demarcated by the sacred mountains most closely resembles a diamond. Mother Earth and Father Sky are conceived by the Navajo to be anthropomorphic (Pinxten 1980:14). They are even depicted in a rug, which is reproduced here as Plate 4 (Maxwell 1963:40). Mother Earth is a female who lies on her back with her head to the east. Her torso is shaped like a diamond with four appendages which join to form two Monster Slayer bows. The head is rectangular. This pattern or depiction is also found in the sandpaintings (Wyman 1983:107-108; Newcomb and Reichard 1975:37).

In the bipolarity of the Navajo cosmos, Father Sky possesses the same shape and complementary attributes as Mother Earth. They lie together in the pattern of sexual intercourse. The rain from the sky is analogically associated with semen, and its intrusion into the Earth causes germination, birth, and the sprouting of new life. Born for the Water is said to have acquired his name from the dew from the Sky impregnating Changing Woman, resulting in his birth, depicted by the images in the bodies of Father Sky and Mother Earth. As the inner form of the Earth, Changing Woman is often referred to as Earth Woman and is often associated with or represented by the diamond shape of the Earth, her outer form.

Naturally, a Navajo conception of this world would be four-sided. Inner/outer is the most fundamental bipolarity in the Navajo cosmos, representing not only the interrelationship of **Sa'ah Naaghái** and **Bik'eh Hózhó**, but also the fundamental interrelationship of the **Diyin Dine'é** 'Holy People' (inner forms) and the **Nihookáá' Dine'é** 'Earth Surface People' (outer forms). When bipolar pairs are intersected or subdivided by other bipolar pairs, the result is a multiplication of the original pair into a quadrangular or even larger format (Witherspoon 1977:33).

Father Berard Haile's consultant, Navajo singer Slim Curley, said that other inner and outer forms were paired similarly to Earth and Sky: Mountain Woman and Water Woman, Darkness and Dawn, Evening Twilight and Daylight, Talking God and Calling God, White Corn and Yellow Corn, Pollen Boy and Cornbeetle Girl, Changing Woman and White Shell Woman, **Sa'ah Naaghái** and **Bik'eh Hózhó**. He then indicated that both the inner and outer forms of a pair combine in the song and prayers as Earth/Sky and Sky/Earth (Wyman 1970:133), resulting in four-phased repetitions or cycles.

Orientation in the Fifth World is established by four cardinal directions. This quadrangular format was generated by the intersection of the bipolar directions of east/west and south/north. In the symmetry of the Fifth World, the basic bipolarities of day/night, summer/winter, and alive/dead are intersected by the liminal bipolarities of dawn/twilight, spring/fall, and birth/death, generating three more quadrilateral formats. When the chromatic bipolar pair of blue/yellow intersects with the achromatic bipolar pair of white/black, the resulting symmetry is quadrilateral. All of these quadrilateral formats are analogically associated with



the cardinal directions in the symmetry of the Navajo cosmos. The resulting classificatory scheme is as follows:

(1) east	(2) south	(3) west	(4) north
dawn	daylight	twilight	night
spring	summer	fall	winter
white	blue	yellow	black

The face masks used in **Yé'ii** initiation ceremonies also indicate that the Navajo want their initiates to see the world through the shape of a diamond. The masks that the initiates are required to look through all have triangular-shaped eye openings, their apexes pointing outward and their bases pointing inward, as shown in Figure 10.

Figure 10. Eyeholes of initiation mask.

Examples of these masks can be found in Stevenson (1891: Plate CXV), in Haile (1947:73,86), and in Matthews (1902:18). The masks with triangulated eyeholes also have been found in the Gobernador and date to the **Diné'tah** period (Hester 1972:121 and Carlson 1965:47). All female masks have the triangular eye openings, and these masks are put on the youths during the initiation. When one puts on the mask and looks through the triangular eyes, the resulting view of the world is diamond shaped.

The first ethnographer to observe and undergo the **Yé'ii** initiation was Washington Matthews. His full account is given in his major work, The Night Chant (1902:116-120). I have also undergone this initiation, performed a couple of hours

after sunset on the fifth night of the Night Chant. The initiates enter the ceremonial **hooghan** with their heads bowed and their eyes down. After seating themselves, they cover their heads with blankets.

Navajo children are taught that the **Yé'ii** are fearsome creatures who prey on poorly behaved children. When children misbehave, adults tell them that the **Yé'ii** will come to get them if they do not change their ways, or they threaten to turn the children over to the **Yé'ii** if they do not improve their behavior. Most Navajo children traditionally grow up with a real fear of the **Yé'ii** and bring anxiety to this initiation ceremony. However, by the time of their initiation, they have developed some maturity and are accompanied by their parents or other relatives.

First, one by one, the initiates are called to come out from under the blankets and face the masked Gods. Then Talking God and Female God administer to the initiates. The Female God applies cornmeal to various parts of the initiate's body; then Talking God symbolically whips the initiate with a yucca leaf. This does not inflict pain and the female initiates are only touched with the leaf.

After each of the initiates has been administered to and blessed by the Gods, the candidates again are seated in a row. With their heads bowed and their faces covered, the Gods take off their masks and lay them side by side, face up, with the heads to the east. The men and women who impersonate the Gods then stand with uncovered faces before the initiates, who are told to throw back their blankets and look up, when the secret of the impersonation of the Gods is revealed. Then comes the part of the ceremony that is most relevant to us here:

The next part of the ceremony is the application of the mask. He who masquerades as a goddess takes the female mask and applies it in turn to the face of each of the candidates--proceeding along the row from north to south--and adjusts the mask carefully to the face so that the candidate can look out through the eye-holes and understand fully the mechanism of the mask. The mask is then laid in its former position, south of the other masks on the buffalo robe. The actor takes good care that the

eyes of the candidate are seen clearly through the eye-holes in the mask. (Matthews 1902:119).

The triangulated eyeholes render ideally, if not literally, a diamond-shaped view of the Gods, the other masks, and the world in general. This experience makes a powerful and lasting impression on the initiate. The rite seems to indicate that there is only one sacred and appropriate way for the Navajo to view their Gods and their universe, and triangulated eyes together render a diamond-shaped view. This view is primarily associated with the female, and all female masks have triangular-shaped eyeholes. Only female masks are put on the initiates, regardless of whether the initiates are male or female. Males are allowed to impersonate Female Gods but must wear the masks of the Female Gods. Male masks have variously shaped eyeholes, although square eyeholes may be most common, but the square eyeholes are never used in the initiation ceremony when the mask is placed on the face of the initiates.

Haile gives us a similar version of this rite:

After seeing who the **Yé'i** are the female **Yé'i** moves its mask to the face of each candidate and makes sure that the initiated look through the eye openings of the mask. This manipulation of the female mask appears to be part of the ceremony of 'seeing the **Yé'i**' if not an essential part of it. (1947:55).

Much of the symmetry of the present world of the Earth Surface People is quadrilateral: four cardinal directions, four phases of the day (dawn, daylight, twilight, and darkness), four seasons of the year, four sacred mountains, four principal colors, jewels, and food plants, and four phases to the life cycle. Not surprisingly, therefore, this world would then be conceived of as a four-sided figure. Both the square and the diamond have four sides, but the diamond is aesthetically active, moving, and dynamic in comparison to the more static shape of the square. Active elements or dimensions of paired categories are usually considered to be female, while static elements are considered to be male. Although the difference between the diamond and the square may not seem great, it certainly makes a difference in

the initiation rite, and such a fundamental aspect of becoming Navajo cannot be regarded lightly.

The design of the masks indicates that the Navajo see the diamond as consisting of two equal triangles. The triangle is also an active figure in comparison to the square. The emblems of Monster Slayer, Born for the Water, and Changing Woman as the inner form of the Earth all utilize two bipolar triangles in their construction. Born for the Water's emblem turns them "in," while Monster Slayer's symbol turns the triangles "out" in the same direction. The diamond turns both triangles "out" in opposite directions, suggesting the idea of infinite extension from a center point. This threefold juxtaposition of bipolar triangles is basic to Navajo semiotical geometry.

Changing Woman has a bipolar nature That comes from her parents, **Sa'ah Naaghái** and **Bik'eh Hózhó**, the ultimate source of life, beauty, harmony, order, good, and regeneration in the universe. Changing Woman's beauty and regenerative power result from her being the child of this supreme bipolar pair, and, as such, incorporating both dimensions of this universal power and beauty in her outer form, the earth.

The quadrilateral symmetry of the diamond represents the unification of the ultimate bipolar pair. The diamond integrates the emblems of Monster Slayer and Born for the Water when they are conjoined in one of the basic motifs of Navajo weaving, illustrated in Figure 11.

Figure 11. Basic Navajo cultural motif.

Viewed vertically, this motif shows a doubling of Born for the Water's design. Viewed horizontally, it shows two of Monster Slayer's bows pointed at each other. In the middle, bipolar triangles form a diamond. The diamond links all the

emblems together into a symmetrical pattern that can be infinitely reproduced and regenerated. This pattern, which is first known to us on the petroglyphs of the **Di-nétah** area, occurs extensively in Navajo weaving, particularly during the latter part of the Classic Period (1820-65). Plates 5 and 6 present woven compositions that illustrate the use of the basic motif discussed here. All the symmetrical elements incorporated into this holistic motif occur extensively in Navajo weaving, silversmithing, and sandpainting, since they all are deeply rooted in Navajo identity, history, culture, and world view. This organization of geometric space reflects the same holistic symmetry as do Navajo cultural and intellectual patterns.

## **The Holistic Symmetry of the Navajo Hooghan**

Another important pattern in Navajo symmetry is the hexagon, the basic format for the Navajo **hooghan**. The hexagon is based on the triangle, consisting of six equilateral triangles or three Born for the Water designs in circular format. One can also see two monster slayer bows conjoined by one Born for the Water emblem in the hexagonal format of the Navajo **hooghan**, as illustrated in Figure 12:

Figure 12. Six equilateral triangles of the Navajo **hooghan**.

About 20 years ago, I assisted a Navajo family in constructing a **hooghan** from design to completion. The manner in which the **hooghan** was laid out is particularly interesting and relevant. The man who was in charge of the project had no formal schooling and never used a ruler, yardstick, or tape measure. Instead, he made all his measurements with a rope. He first stretched out the rope, and from one of its ends he took three long strides, covering approximately 8-10 feet. He

then tied a stick to one end of the rope and another stick at the point on the rope where his three strides had taken him.

With one stick driven into the ground as a center stake, he proceeded to mark off a circle. From the center stake, a line pointing directly to the east was sighted in to a landmark on the horizon where the sun comes up at the equinox. The point where this line crossed the circle was marked. The rope was then used to mark a line that was perpendicular to the east/west line. The rope was doubled to find its center, so that the centerpoint of the rope would be at the point where the rope traversed the east /west line that had been drawn from the center stake to the outer edge of the circle. Once the eastern side of the **hooghan** had been established, the remaining five sides were marked on the circle by simply marking each point where the rope crossed the circle, starting with one of the established points. The result was a perfect hexagon, consisting of six equilateral triangles whose sides were all equal to the radius of the circle. The door of the **hooghan** was placed at the middle of the eastern side, and the fireplace was, of course, put in the center.

Figure 13 illustrates the steps in this process. The Navajo construct buildings that are not hexagonal and some hooghans have eight sides, but the triangular format is at the basis of nearly all such constructions. Although the hexagonal format is a common format for housing, it is not a frequent motif in Navajo art. The hexagon is a static and stable image, suitable for a home but not for the dynamic and active patterns found in artistic compositions. Nevertheless, the hexagonal **hooghan** does reflect the same kind of holistic symmetry found in other Navajo ways of organizing geometric space.

## Color Symmetry

As a semiotic system, color can express and codify emotions, encode and classify cosmological and ritual information, symbolize social categories and groups, and convey complex human ideas and feelings through artistic expression and composition. Cultural meanings attached to particular colors are not infinitely

variable. As with much other symbolism, the human body provides much of the metaphorical basis by which color is imbued with cultural meanings.

The symmetrical organization of color is often built on the basic bipolarities of light/dark and chromatic/achromatic. Chromatic red is widely associated with blood. This association has led to red being analogically linked to danger, war, anger, aggression, and intensity. White is widely associated with milk, and this association analogically links white with peace, truce, neutrality and sanitation. Thus we have red ink on the balance sheet and red signs indicating danger, and we have sanitary doctors and nurses clad in white and white papers exemplifying neutrality and objectivity. The Creek Indians had red and white towns metaphorically associated with war and peace.

Always, exceptions exist for every would-be universal. In this case, the Navajo provide an exception to these widespread patterns in color symbolism. For the Navajo, red is not associated with the blood shed in war; it is, rather, associated with menstrual blood, making red not a metaphor of war but of fertility. Similarly, for the Navajo, white is analogous not to milk but to semen; and, in contrast to red, is typically associated with the male gender.

In stories of emergence, the achromatic shades of black and white conjoin to produce the first male. In this case, black is the female side of the equation and white is the male. Blue/green and yellow combine to produce the first female, with the blue being the male or father and the yellow being the female or mother of the first female being. Thus the first male being combines the achromatic shades of light (white male) and dark (black female), while the first female being comes from the chromatic combination of light (blue male) and dark (yellow female). The Navajo color category of blue includes what we call green, but in this case the cosmological association is with the blue sky, which is male in complementary symmetry with the earth female, which is mostly yellow and red in color in the Southwestern desert, encompassing the homeland of the Navajo.

Yellow is also associated with fertility because of pollen, which is the most important symbol of fertility in Navajo culture. Red and yellow are thus frequently interchangeable in Navajo color symbolism.

Color is metaphorically linked to direction and to the cyclical patterns of the day and the seasonal patterns of the year. This quadrilateral format is based on the intersection of several bipolarities, which are linked together by liminal points or states. For instance, the basic bipolarity of summer/winter is intersected by the bipolar liminal periods of spring/fall. The basic bipolarity of east/west is intersected by the bipolar liminal directions of south/north. The basic bipolar symmetry of the daily cycle is day/night, intersected by the bipolar symmetry of the liminal periods of dawn/sunrise and evening twilight/sunset. In this scheme of bipolar color symmetry, the blue (chromatic) south is female in contrast to the black (achromatic) north, which is male. The white (achromatic) dawn of the east is male while the yellow (chromatic) twilight of the west is female in the bipolar color symmetry of the Navajo.

## Conclusion

The Earth is the outer form of Changing Woman, and Changing Woman is the child of **Sa'ah Naaghái** (father) and **Bik'eh Hózhó** (mother). As the only known direct offspring of the ultimate pair, Changing Woman is the concrete and ever-present embodiment of regenerative power and beauty (**hózhó**). Therefore, the children of Changing Woman (the Navajo) experience this beauty and regenerative power in their kinship with the Earth and through the sustenance that the Earth provides them. Because **Sa'ah Naaghái** is the source of beautiful and powerful thought and **Bik'eh Hózhó** is the source of beautiful and powerful speech, song, prayer, and action (including the arts), the People of the Earth's Surface participate in the being and beauty of the ultimate pair when they live in concert with this bipolar cosmic symmetry, as in ritual in particular and in everyday performances in general.

The shapes and meanings found in the bipolar, holistic symmetry of the Navajo cosmos are depicted in the healing power of sandpaintings, consciously and unconsciously woven into the patterns of Navajo blankets, rugs, and tapestries, and sculptured into finely made Navajo jewelry. A discussion of how this is done and visual examples of its accomplishment will be provided in the next chapter.