

# NAVAJO WORLD VIEW AND CULTURE PATTERNS OF SPEECH: A CASE STUDY IN ETHNORHETORIC

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THERE is a concern in contemporary rhetorical theory to discern "first principles" of rhetorical systems, to discover in a body of ideas the underlying structure which makes it truly a "rhetoric" or "rhetorical system."<sup>1</sup> The usual approach in such work is the analysis of a written rhetorical treatise or the treatises of a period in rhetorical history. While the search for first principles and underlying structure is a useful tool for explicating written systems, the method might also be used in the discovery of rhetorics or rhetorical systems which are implicit in the world view of a people who have no written or systematized theory of rhetoric.

This paper reports an attempt to construct a native system of rhetoric based on published accounts of the world view, or ethnophilosophy, of the Navajo. The purpose of such an inquiry is to discover what the Navajo conceive the art of rhetoric to be and whether that conception shows evidence of significant cultural patterning. While exotic practices and "queer customs" are interesting in their own right, it is a theoretical curiosity which motivated the present study. Inquiry into the cultural variation in the patterns and uses of rhetoric

may increase awareness of traditional presuppositions about rhetoric and may suggest new ways of viewing traditional problems. Specifically, the Navajo example provides an interesting instance of the ways in which ideas about rhetoric are not independent of other aspects of culture, or total world view, but are ". . . dependent upon the epistemology, psychology, and metaphysics of the system in which they occur."<sup>2</sup>

Use of the terms "epistemology," "psychology," and "metaphysics" is necessarily tentative and entails the risk of culture-bound distortion. Such a limitation is not to be regretted, however, for one intention of this paper is an exploration of concepts and categories which may serve as a heuristic framework in constructing cultural systems of rhetoric. The Duhamel statement is used heuristically, and is therefore itself a principal object of study in the present paper. It raises the critical question of what part of our traditional conception of rhetoric is culture-bound and what part has applicability across cultures. Further, it suggests a methodology for testing the related notion advanced by Burgess that philosophical presuppositions ". . . directly influence strategic choice and thus affect the so-called styles of different rhetorics."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Douglas Ehninger, "On Systems of Rhetoric," *Philosophy and Rhetoric*, 1 (Summer 1968), 131-144; James J. Murphy, "The Metarhetorics of Plato, Augustine, and McLuhan: A Pointing Essay," *Philosophy and Rhetoric*, 4 (Fall 1971), 201-214.

<sup>2</sup> P. Albert Duhamel, "The Function of Rhetoric as Effective Expression," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 10 (June 1949). Reprinted in Joseph Schwartz and John A. Rycenga, eds., *The Province of Rhetoric* (New York: The Ronald Press Company, 1965), p. 37.

<sup>3</sup> Parke G. Burgess, "The Rhetoric of Moral Conflict: Two Critical Dimensions," *QJS*, 56 (April 1970), 123.

## METAPHYSICS

The first presuppositions of a rhetorical system are metaphysical; that is, presuppositions about the nature of reality, what there is, how it came to be, or, in Duhamel's words, "the existence of certitude."<sup>4</sup> When Aristotle writes in *The Rhetoric* that "we deliberate about such things as appear to admit of two possibilities"<sup>5</sup> he makes explicit a metaphysical presupposition of a rhetoric based on probable truth, in contrast to Plato, who valued the absolute and would admit to the status of art only a rhetoric which could secure absolute truth. The difference between the Platonic and Aristotelian conceptions of rhetoric was inseparably bound up with different conceptions of the existence of certitude. "Plato sought constantly the Truth, whereas Aristotle was willing to admit the inadequacy of our knowledge of some things and to establish an art with probability as its ultimate goal."<sup>6</sup>

What the Navajo conceive the art of rhetoric to be is also bound up with metaphysical presuppositions. While the Platonic-Aristotelian difference over absolute and probable truth is a fundamental controversy in traditional theory, the distinction is culture-bound and not a useful one when applied to the Navajo. Certainties and probabilities are appropriate concerns for a rhetoric based on metaphysics which presupposes doctrinal exclusivism, disjunction, and conflictual dualism.<sup>7</sup> The contrast between such traditional concerns and the Navajo case reflects large-scale cultural variation, for the Navajo world view is phrased in an

additive, relational way,<sup>8</sup> and certainties and probabilities are not appropriate terms for the concerns of such a system. Discourse for the Navajo is designed to secure order and harmony and balance—appropriate concerns of an additive, relational system. Accordingly, one might expect rhetoric for the Navajo to be an instrument for securing truth subsumed under the prior values of maintaining harmony.

The idea of harmony pervades the Navajo belief of what things are and what they ought to be. Such an idea is directly traceable to the Origin Myth, the account of how things came to be as they are. In the myth, it is told that prior to The Peoples' creation on earth, there was a period in which the supernatural beings lived in the four underworlds. In this time, the supernaturals were arbitrary and unreliable and the relations among events and beings were not fixed. Upon the emergence of the Holy People to the earth's surface, many but not all of the life-threatening monsters were destroyed and ritual techniques were devised to control and to balance the good and evil forces in the universe. This knowledge, these techniques of harmonious control, were taught to the first Navajo man and woman who passed the ancestral wisdom on to succeeding generations.<sup>9</sup>

In the brief origin account can be traced the fundamental presuppositions of Navajo metaphysics. The Navajo view the world as "an intrinsically harmonious order of causally related events and entities."<sup>10</sup> "Binary monism" is the phrase Albert uses to characterize the belief that the world (and its persons) consists of a unity of contrasting elements, in which events are characterized as a

<sup>4</sup> Duhamel, "The Function of Rhetoric . . .," 37

<sup>5</sup> Aristotle, *The Rhetoric of Aristotle*, trans. by Lane Cooper (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1932), p. 11.

<sup>6</sup> Duhamel, "The Function of Rhetoric . . .," 42.

<sup>7</sup> Ethel M. Albert, *Cultural Value Systems: An Exploration in Ethnophilosophy* (unpubl. ms., n.d.), p. 131.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 132.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2.

<sup>10</sup> Ethel M. Albert, "The Classification of Values: A Method and an Illustration," *American Anthropologist*, 58 (April 1956), 227.

unity of safety and danger and persons as a unity of good and evil.<sup>11</sup> The greatest conceivable good in a universe so marked by threats to well-being is balance, order, and control. The means for achieving balance is correct knowledge and performance of rituals (correct utterance of verbal formulae in speech to the Holy People) and correct speech in interpersonal relations. The emphasis on right speech is characteristic of a fundamental Navajo belief that speech is causally efficacious in maintaining harmony in the universe.<sup>12</sup>

The Navajo sees himself as living in a universe filled with dangers for the unwary and uninformed. The Holy People as well as ordinary human beings are capable of creating good and evil. A balanced universe is pervasively threatened by chaos. Yet the universe and those who occupy it are capable of control, if one has the knowledge of what to say and how to say it. Rhetoric in such a universe has as its primary function not discovery but use, and its uses are carefully prescribed, sanctioned by ancestral tradition, and functional in maintaining the world as it ought to be.

#### EPISTEMOLOGY

A people's epistemology includes ways of knowing, what can be known, and sources of authority. For the Navajo knowledge is the result of empirical, pragmatic reasoning. Mystical experience, authoritarian dicta, and uncontrolled conjecture are not sources of knowledge.<sup>13</sup> Subjective experience must have a demonstrable correlate in the sense world. Empiricism extends even to

ideas handed down by an older person (whose judgment is deferred to in matters of opinion, if not knowledge), by one's parents, or by the Holy People. A characteristic epistemological habit is revealed in the modal sentence phrased by Albert:

My father told me about that [taking care of sheep, the effects of alcohol, the existence of Holy People who look after good men], but I did not believe it; then I saw it worked out that way.<sup>14</sup>

Speculative ideas are not merely without meaning but may also entail harm. Improper speech can threaten harmony and destroy unity. Taking liberties with words and thoughts can be dangerous, and should be avoided.<sup>15</sup> The same is true for the speaking of persons' names. Names are a power to The People and to use a name very often would wear out its power: "if the name is kept fresh and full of strength, uttering it may get its owner out of a tight hole sometime."<sup>16</sup> Thus is the causal efficacy of speech further demonstrated, as is the potential evil entailed in the wrong or improper use of spoken knowledge.

Investment of such faith in empirical data calls for qualifications, lest too stringent an empiricism becomes disorganizing to the system as a whole. Navajo epistemology includes devices which "prevent skepticism from becoming disorganizing."<sup>17</sup> One device is that positive confirming instances are counted as evidence, but not negative ones. A belief can thus be proven empirically and thereafter be beyond refutation.<sup>18</sup>

Closely related to what has been described as Navajo empiricism, is a cor-

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> John Ladd, *The Structure of a Moral Code: A Philosophical Analysis of Ethical Discourse Applied to the Ethics of the Navajo Indians* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1957), p. 204.

<sup>13</sup> Albert, "The Classification of Values . . .," 229.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> Clyde Kluckhohn and Dorothea Leighton, *The Navaho* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1946). Rev. ed., 1962, p. 115.

<sup>17</sup> Albert, "The Classification of Values . . .," 230.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

responding philosophic rationalism.<sup>19</sup> Moral prescriptions must have reasons and these are stated in conversation. Ladd, a philosopher who studied Navajo ethics, writes:

Whatever one is told to do or not to do can be justified by some reason, and these reasons are generally mentioned in the course of discussion. In my interviewing, I rarely had to ask the informant for a reason for some prescription he had mentioned—he gave it to me automatically.<sup>20</sup>

The Navajo, at least in his moral judgments, is a rationalist; he requires good reasons for ethical prescriptions.

Rhetoric and epistemology generate a further tie evident in the interrelationship of speech ("talking things over") and thought. Speech for the Navajo is something more than the public presentation of private and individuated thoughts, and this difference can be traced to metaphysical beliefs already introduced:

. . . the emphasis on public deliberation embodies the essential core of ethical rationalism—the view which stresses the crucial and necessary function of reason in moral life. Although Western philosophy has traditionally assumed that reasoning is an intrasubjective process, taking place privately within the mind of the thinker, I have suggested earlier that we may consider talking to be a form of thinking, and perhaps thinking in private to be a kind of "talking to oneself." Hence, public deliberation is not an accidental by-product of intrasubjective thought processes, but as natural a manifestation of thinking as private deliberation. Accordingly, an emphasis on talking may be regarded as an emphasis on thinking publicly.<sup>21</sup>

Just as the Navajo metaphysical belief suggests a power in right speech, so the epistemological belief suggests a power in talking and thinking in situations of inquiry and decision-making. It is be-

lieved that: (1) "talking it over" is the way to straighten out troubles (disputes of one type or another), (2) talking is the most important means of persuasion, and (3) virtue is knowledge, knowledge is the power to achieve happiness—and, of course, speaking and thinking are ways of energizing and securing knowledge.<sup>22</sup>

The Navajo has been described as a rational empiricist, and as believing that virtue is knowledge and can therefore be taught. This does not mean, as it does to a Platonic rationalist, that knowledge is certain and adequate. For the Navajo believes that he can never be certain that things will go as planned; that mistakes are inevitable; and that everyone is always learning.<sup>23</sup> Empirical reasoning helps to certify knowledge and ritualistic speech energizes and secures it.

There is, however, another more distinctly epistemological use of speech. In the search for knowledge—especially when there are no infallible guides for choice among alternatives, i.e., in the rhetorical situation—speech takes on a culturally defined function as an epistemological device. When a decision must be made, and when doubt or controversy cloud that decision, the Navajo have a culturally patterned way of energizing knowledge for practical use. That method is extensive public discussion. Decisions must be discussed with all who happen to be around, it being especially important to consult the older and wiser family members. The ". . . emphasis on public discussion is a theme deeply rooted in Navajo culture, since their religious myths are full of accounts of family councils among the Holy People who 'talked it over before doing anything about it.'"<sup>24</sup> The stress placed on "talking it over" and on providing reasons for arguments can be contrasted

<sup>19</sup> Ladd, *The Structure of a Moral Code*, p. 206.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 203.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 204-205.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 205.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 203.

with systems which rely upon "ex cathedra utterances of an authority or which base moral choices on unquestionable intuition, for in such systems discursive thinking plays only a subsidiary role."<sup>25</sup>

As a people with a rationalist, empiricist mind, the Navajo place great emphasis on giving reasons for moral judgments and practical decisions. Giving reasons is a form of public speech, an intersubjective process of thinking. Navajo epistemology emphasizes the place of rhetoric as a means of social control and as a means to proper inquiry. That man is capable of rational inquiry and reasonable deliberation is a view closely related to a description of Navajo psychology.

#### PSYCHOLOGY

A people's psychology includes their view of the nature of man. This statement provides a starting point for a description of Navajo psychology, but the traditional category should be modified and extended to do justice to the facts of the case. Navajo definitions of the nature of man, just as their beliefs in reality and theories of knowledge, are culturally defined. As initial evidence of cultural variation, an account of human nature must include the supernaturals, culture heroes, and other "persons." The Navajo think supernaturals to be living creatures, capable of good and evil and subject to rhetorical influence. Such beings are capable of persuasion, as are earth surface people, and their potential for good or evil is to be reckoned with in daily life.<sup>26</sup> All men are mixtures of good and evil and the natural and proper state of affairs is to achieve a balance, a harmony, between the two.

An account of Navajo psychology should emphasize two things. First, that

man is a rational being, capable of persuasion. Second, that the "well-being of the individual is coextensive with that of the group and is the specifically human expression of harmonious order."<sup>27</sup> These are interrelated concepts in that Navajo decision-making requires familial consensus, and its achievement requires that persons must be capable of persuasion. Such a view is part of an overall philosophic pattern which has harmony as its chief concern. The nature of man, the importance of harmony, and the causal efficacy of speech form a further interrelationship, for it is through public speech that both supernatural and earth surface people are influenced and controlled.

That man is rational is a critical concept for constructing a Navajo ethno-rhetoric. Such a belief implies the importance, and the potential, of persuasion in practical and religious affairs. Furthermore, skill in persuasion and reasonableness are complementary to unanimity as the dominant principle in decision making. A belief in man's rationality also entails a positive valuation of the person who is willing to change his mind in response to persuasive discourse. Such an act is seen as the reasonable thing to do. Such a valuation is closely linked to the Navajo value judgment that harmonious interpersonal relations are the primary objective of actions.

Harmony, rationality, unanimity, all suggest a special, culturally defined view of man as social being. While the Navajo recognizes himself as an individualist, membership in a matrilocal, familial residential group imposes upon him rigid restrictions and obligations to many people. But they are mutual obligations and thus the group restrictions allow a freedom which is strengthened and secured by group loyalties. The no-

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 204.

<sup>26</sup> Albert, "The Classification of Values . . .," 231.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

tion of a complementary individualism and conformity is consistent with an additive, relational world view. In terms of viewing the Navajo as an auditor capable of making informed choices, one can consider Ladd's comment that "A good Navajo is . . . an individual who can and may make his own decision, but he is most stable if he has social corroboration."<sup>28</sup>

### RHETORIC

Navajo ethnophilosophy, briefly described above, provides a context for explicating Navajo ideas about rhetoric. That the metaphysical, epistemological, and psychological ideas of the Navajo are directly related to their ideas about rhetoric should be at least partially demonstrated from the preceding account. A comprehensive construction of a Navajo system of rhetoric is beyond the scope of this paper. However, the ideas already provided should give sufficient background for a treatment of two principal and representative Navajo rhetorical situations. An analysis of the Navajo use of ritual as a rhetorical device and the use of speech in decision-making will give some insight into the total patterning of Navajo rhetoric.

#### *Ritual speech*

The Navajo uses ritualistic prayer as a means of maintaining or restoring order in the universe, because speech is causally efficacious, and because the supernaturals as living beings are capable of persuasion. Prayer is thus interrelated with Navajo metaphysical, epistemological, and psychological beliefs.

Prayer is a fully developed rhetorical form, formulaic in the sense that it is exacting and functions because of its completeness and its order. The prayers are

unending systems of symbolic associations, which can in no way be considered "free" since they are too orderly and depend upon decree.<sup>29</sup> A Navajo prayer "has content, it has context which may be easily understood narrative and its major purpose is compulsion by exactness of word."<sup>30</sup>

Prayer is a rhetorical form, too, in its nature as "addressed." The intended auditor of the prayer is one of the deities whom the speaker hopes to influence. Deities are capable of good and evil and prayer is therefore used to restore or maintain order in the universe, harmony in the speaker's social relations, or well-being in the speaker's body. That the deities are appropriate auditors of rhetorical discourse is evidenced by Kluckhohn's classification of Navajo supernaturals, accordingly, as:

- Persuadable deities
- Undependable deities
- Helpers of deity and man
- Intermediaries between man and deity
- Unpersuadable deities
- Dangers conceived as deities
- Beings between good and evil
- Order of monsters, dangers, and beings-in-between.<sup>31</sup>

Two rhetorical strategies used in the religious situation can be identified. One is the use of formulaic rhetoric. In this context, for speech to be efficacious it must be exact. A prayer must be learned in its entirety, or not at all. It must be recited word-for-word. Deviations not only render the speech powerless but they work negatively to bring harm to the speaker. Right speech carries with it, though, what Reichard has called a "compulsiveness" and what this writer

<sup>29</sup> Gladys Reichard, *Prayer: The Compulsive Word* (New York: J. Augustin, 1944), p. 8.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.

<sup>31</sup> Clyde Kluckhohn, "Navaho Categories," in *Primitive Views of the World*, Stanley Diamond, ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1964), p. 106.

<sup>28</sup> Ladd, *The Structure of a Moral Code*, p. xl.

previously termed a causal efficacy. Reichard writes:

The reward for accuracy in reciting prayers is stated by the gods to Dawn Boy, "You have learned the prayer well; you have said it properly and you have done right in all things. Now you shall have what you want. . . ." <sup>32</sup>

The Navajo ascribe to prayer an automatic determinism which goes beyond even the fundamentalist's maxim that "Prayer Changes Things." For the Navajo, the power of prayer does not depend on the whim of the gods, but on the exactness of its utterance by the speaker. Speech is, literally, "compulsive word." Since thought is the same, or has the same potentiality, as words, compulsive prayer may therefore exist without words. Thought may therefore be compulsive even as a symbol, but words may add to the compelling force. <sup>33</sup>

A second rhetorical device is the identification of the speaker with the powers he addresses. By using ritual speech, the speaker *identifies* with the supernatural whose blessing he seeks and with the supernatural's symbols. In so identifying, the speaker secures the powers of the deity through repetition of the deity's name in juxtaposition to his own, as in this brief excerpt from a prayer to Changing Woman:

Changing Woman, your child I am.

Changing Woman, your grandchild I have become. <sup>34</sup>

To the Navajo, like can cause like, and association with a supernatural power through ritualistic invocation of its name is a means of rhetorical identification. This is true even with dangerous powers, upon occasion, for it is only through such identification that one can

gain the power to drive away evil effects associated with the power. <sup>35</sup>

### *Public Discussion*

The Navajo uses public discussion as a means to maintain or restore harmony, because speech in such situations is causally efficacious, and because earth surface people are rational beings capable of persuasion. The extensive, dominant influence of speech in practical affairs is, then, like prayer, interrelated with metaphysics, epistemology, and psychology.

While procedures for interpersonal decision-making are not as carefully prescribed in terms of formulae as are prayers, there are guiding principles and motives in such situations. Chief among these is the achievement of unanimity, or consensus, on decisions. In the absence of consensus, talk goes on interminably, with great respect for the conventions of oratory. Such conventions prescribe courteous references to preceding speakers and endless repetition of matters previously discussed. When a Navajo family goes to a meeting, they go for all day. Discussion continues until unanimity is reached, or at least until those in opposition feel it is useless or impolitic to express further disagreement. <sup>36</sup> Such procedures are appropriate for a people who value order, control, and harmony above all else.

A second explanation for the emphasis on consensus is the epistemological belief in the value of talking things over. This tendency has the sanction of ancient tradition for, as the Navajo moralist Bidaga told Ladd, "Way back there, the Navajo didn't have any kind of law. They used to just talking it together—maybe three or four people talking together." <sup>37</sup> Extensive deliberation is

<sup>32</sup> Reichard, *Prayer*, p. 15.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.

<sup>36</sup> Albert, "The Classification of Values . . ."

<sup>37</sup> Ladd, *The Structure of a Moral Code*, p. 204.



the path to truth and a causally efficacious way of straightening out troubles and settling disputes. Just as the spoken word has a certain compulsiveness in ritual speech, so the process of speaking together has a compulsiveness for the Navajo in practical disputation.

The People themselves are the real authority in any dispute. Control of individual action rests in the people as a group, especially the residential family group, and not in any authoritarian individual or body. Ultimately, unanimity is reached; reluctant individuals are the object of verbal persuasion, and the importance put on harmony is itself a powerful unifying factor. "The right to come to one's own conclusion is respected though the decision itself may be 'talked down' in a family or local council. The individual is persuaded; he is not high-pressured into a judgment contrary to his own."<sup>38</sup>

#### CONCLUSION

The Navajo has no written rhetorical theory but his discourse is guided and

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xxxiv.

governed by principles of right and strategic action. These principles are intricately related to his conception of the nature of truth, ways of knowing, and the nature of man. At the same time, his system of rhetoric is something different from the traditional rhetorics of Western civilization. Rhetoric as a functional aspect of life is, for the Navajo, culturally defined. Rhetoric, for the Navajo, is functional as a means to restore and maintain order, balance, and harmony. This function is exercised through the use of causally efficacious, culturally patterned rhetorical devices, appropriate for auditors who are rational and thus capable of persuasion. Harmony can thus be seen as the dominating function of effective expression and the dominating motive of rhetorical appeal. For the Navajo, rhetoric is related to ". . . the epistemology, psychology, and metaphysic of the system" in which it occurs, but in the Navajo case these categories, as well as rhetoric itself, are products and expressions of cultural variation.



