Skinwalkers

Native Skeptic

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There is little documented information about the details of "witchcraft" among the Najavo—or Diné, as they call themselves. What is relatively well known is their term "Skinwalker," or "*yee naaldlooshii*," which means, "with it, he goes on all fours." This is a reference to the special ability to transform into a four-legged animal. According to most modern descriptions, this seems to be the only real determinant for defining someone as a Skinwalker. While there are many self-published books and websites that offer some insight into this world of Navajo witchcraft, much of the information is obscure and does not provide any sort of real account for how these stories and their details came into being. In Navajo cultural beliefs, witchcraft itself is regarded as a taboo subject because it deals with concepts and objects surrounding death. Therefore, Navajo people are strictly prohibited from even speaking of such things.

The description of the Navajo witch consists of a rather general description that resembles the more familiar "witch doctor" found in much Haitian voodoo folklore. But even the standard American image of the witch character is depicted as casting spells and, more importantly, possessing the supernatural ability to transform shape; the witch is often depicted as mimicking the form of a black cat. While it is frequently mentioned that the Skinwalker possesses the ability to assume the form of any animal, it is most often reported in the forms of a few key carnivorous animals: a coyote, a wolf, a fox, an owl, or a crow.

Navajo tribal beliefs include the concept of living in harmony with nature, which is anthropomorphized as "Mother Earth." The beliefs also involve two different types of "beings": the "Earth People" and the "Holy People." For instance, "medicine men" are thought to be the bridge between "Earth People" and the "spirit world." Skinwalkers are really just another type of Navajo witch; more specifically, they are considered to be practitioners of what is called the "witchery way." The distinguishing characteristics between these different variations of witches are in the details. For example, one specific type of witch relies on the usage of objects to transmit curses, referred to as the "frenzy way." However, in most contemporary accounts, Skinwalkers often possess certain supernatural abilities that encompass multiple types of Navajo witch.

There is generally a common theme of the number four showing up in both the Navajo and Apache belief systems. Stories usually have spans of four days, tell of four "beings," or contain four elements as part of the theme. Another example, from the 1944 book*Navajo Witchcraft* by Clyde Kluckhohn, states that witches are actually divided into four different groups: witchery, sorcery, wizardry, and frenzy (Kluckhohn 1944, 22).

There seem to be slight variations to the origins of the Skinwalker that permeate the folklore of Navajo people. There is also the notion that this brand of witch started off as a "medicine man" that was corrupted by absolute power. Another suggestion points out that the practice of wearing dead animal skins and emulating them started for hunting purposes. Thus there are countless Native American legends that tell the story of how people were given the ability to hunt by the gods, but these origin stories do not explain the aspects surrounding the bad intentions of Skinwalkers or the Navajo witch.

United States Army surgeon and Civil War veteran Washington Matthews is historically known for his ethnographic study of Native American cultures. In one of his early accounts into Navajo beliefs, “witchcraft” gets first established in the Navajo emergence story “Creation of First Man and Woman,” reported by Matthews in 1894:

> In four days after the last twins were born, the gods came again and took First Man and First Woman away to the eastern mountain for four days. The gods may have taught them the awful secrets of witch-craft. Witches always use masks, and after they returned, they would occasionally put on masks and pray for the good things they needed—abundant rain and abundant crops.
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> Witches also marry people who are too closely related to them, which is what First Man and First Woman’s children had done. After they had been to the eastern mountain, however, the brothers and sisters separated. Keeping their first marriages secret, the brothers now married women of the Mirage People and the sisters married men of the Mirage People. But they never told anyone, even their new families, the mysteries they had learned from the gods. Every four days the women bore children, who grew to maturity in four days, then married, and in their turn had children every four days. In this way many children of First Man and First Woman filled the land with people. (Matthews 1897)

Since both Navajo men and women can become “witches,” technically, women can become Skinwalkers as well. However, the generally accepted view is that mainly men are this type of “witch”; otherwise it is thought to be only old or childless women who may possess these abilities. It is also said in the account of this legend that Skinwalkers are a specific type of “Navajo witch” that have committed some sort of cultural taboo to gain their supernatural ability. Some present the following portion of this legend from Matthews of “First Man” and “First Woman” as the evidence for the origins of witchcraft within the Navajo culture:

> The gods had the people build an enclosure of brushwood, and when it was finished, First Man and First Woman went in. The gods told them, “Live together now as husband and wife.” At the end of four days, First Woman bore hermaphrodite twins. In four more days she gave birth to a boy and a girl, who grew to maturity in four days and lived with one another as husband and wife. In all, First Man and First Woman had five pairs of twins, and all except the first became couples who had children. (Matthews 1897)

There is one other account that rarely gets discussed that involves the origins of the Skinwalker legend: the Navajo “witch purge” in 1878. Apparently, in the 1800s, the people of Salem were not alone in their quest to hunt down witches. As A. Lynn Allison wrote in the introduction of her article “The Navajo Witch Purge of 1878,” which appeared in the Arizona State University West literary magazine *Paloverde*:

> The words “Navajo Witch Purge” might at first call to mind the similar phrase “Salem Witch Hunt” and all the lurid imagery that goes with it. A bit of investigating, however, produces a cultural and historical picture of the Navajo and their tradition of witchcraft profoundly different from anything ever imagined by those early New England Puritans. As the Salem Witch trials in seventeenth-century Massachusetts may have evolved as a societal response to the religious thinking of the day, so the Navajo Witch Purge of 1878 evolved as a cultural response to the effects of colonialism on the Navajo way of life. Witchcraft was always an accepted, if not widely acknowledged, part of Navajo culture, and the killing of “witches” was historically as much accepted among the Navajo as among the Europeans. The events of 1878 were a culmination of situation and circumstance that created the seemingly sensational out of what had been the cultural norm. (Allison 2001)

This reported incident is said to come from the days of the “Long Walk of the Navajo,” the deportation to Bosque Redondo (Fort Sumner) of the Navajo people by the U.S. Government. Apparently, it was during these dire times that some Navajo people would “shape-shift” to escape their impoverished

living conditions. In an attempt to describe some of the conditions that Navajo people were being exposed to while at the Bosque Redondo in 1878, Raymond Locke states in *The Book of the Navajo* that "They were convinced that their gods—even the benevolent Changing Woman—had deserted them" (Locke 1976, 365). Some people, like Ruth Underhill, think that it was these tragic events that left a void in Navajo societies and ultimately lead to the resurgence in accusations of witchcraft: "The indigenous cultural reality and the jealousy that the new rules caused, as well as unexpected sickness that killed both people and livestock, cumulated in an age-old Navajo response: accusations of witchcraft" (Underhill 1956, 160).

The Navajo people used witchcraft to explain a sudden sickness or unexpected tragedies during these times of plight. After they thought their gods had left them, it is believed that witches went unchallenged and became prevalent once again. The struggles that the Navajo people went through during that time are often not fully detailed or well known. Another reason this topic is still reasonably difficult to put together is due to the nature of cultural beliefs differentiating from each other in so many variations from one tribe to another. The general avoidance of death among the beliefs of the Navajo also contributes a great deal to the scarcity of information. However, there has always been witchcraft in Navajo culture since the creation of "First Man" and "First Woman." It is simply part of the "Navajo way" and is considered to be amoral but just another integral part of the spiritual system. l

References

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