

# “Thank my vagina” said First Woman to First Man: Female Empowerment in Traditional Navajo Myths.

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# The separation of the sexes.

- ▣ A myth that acknowledges the matriarchal dimension of Navajo society in mythological terms.
- ▣ It also advocate for a balanced gender representation of the spiritual realm and the political powers on Earth.
- ▣ Relating to myths to foster new models of female empowerment

# Construction of Navajo bodies: the role of sexual intercourse as a creative power.

- ▣ Sexual desire and sexual intercourse = creative forces in the universe.
- ▣ The Navajo's ancestors were insects, birds, reptiles who kept arguing with each other because they looked for sexual partners outside their own species.



# Sexual desire and pleasure.

Painting by RC Gorman



From Goddard 1933: 138-139

- ▣ “She decided that both men and women should have medicine to attract each other. She made a penis of turquoise. She rubbed loose cuticle from the man’s breast. This she mixed with yucca fruit. She made a clitoris of red shell and put inside the vagina. She rubbed loose cuticle from the woman’s breast and mixed it with yucca fruit. She put that inside the turquoise penis.”

# Three major concepts in Navajo spiritual realm

- Existence of four genders: male, female, masculine female-bodied *nádleeh* and feminine male-bodied *nádleeh* (berdache)
- Human-beings' bodies, independently of their gender, are composed of a female part (the right side of the body) and a male part (the left side of the body).

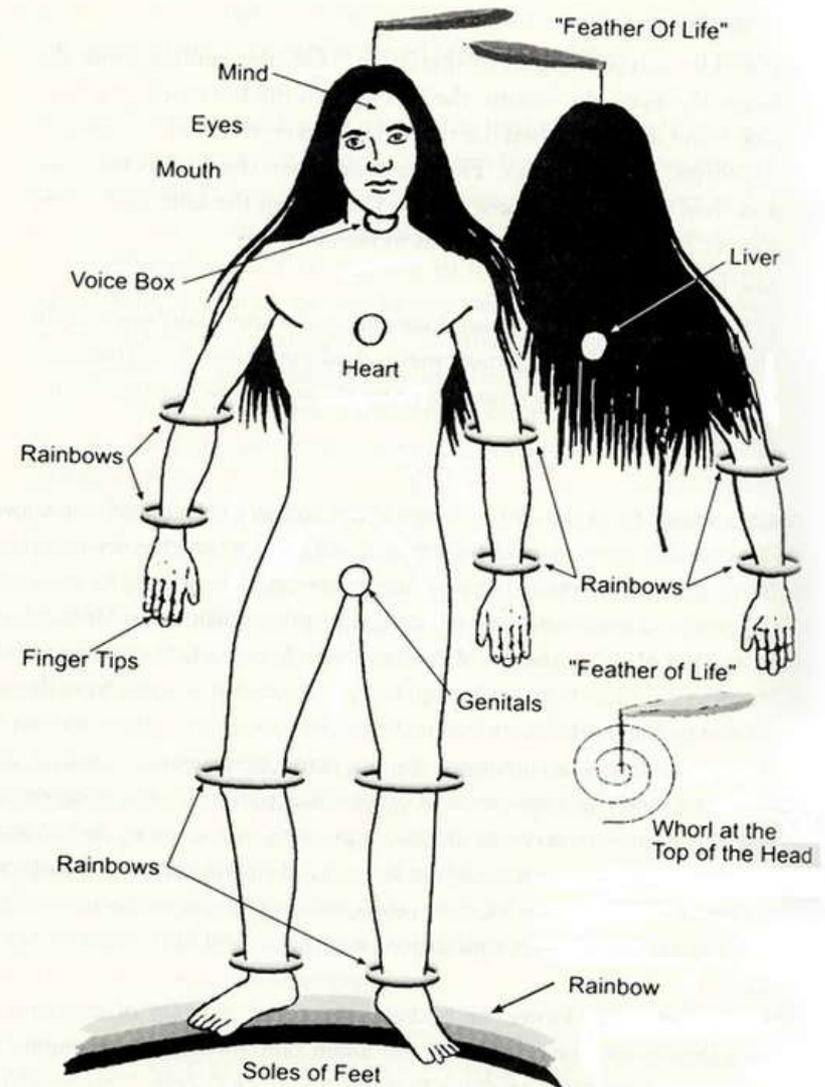
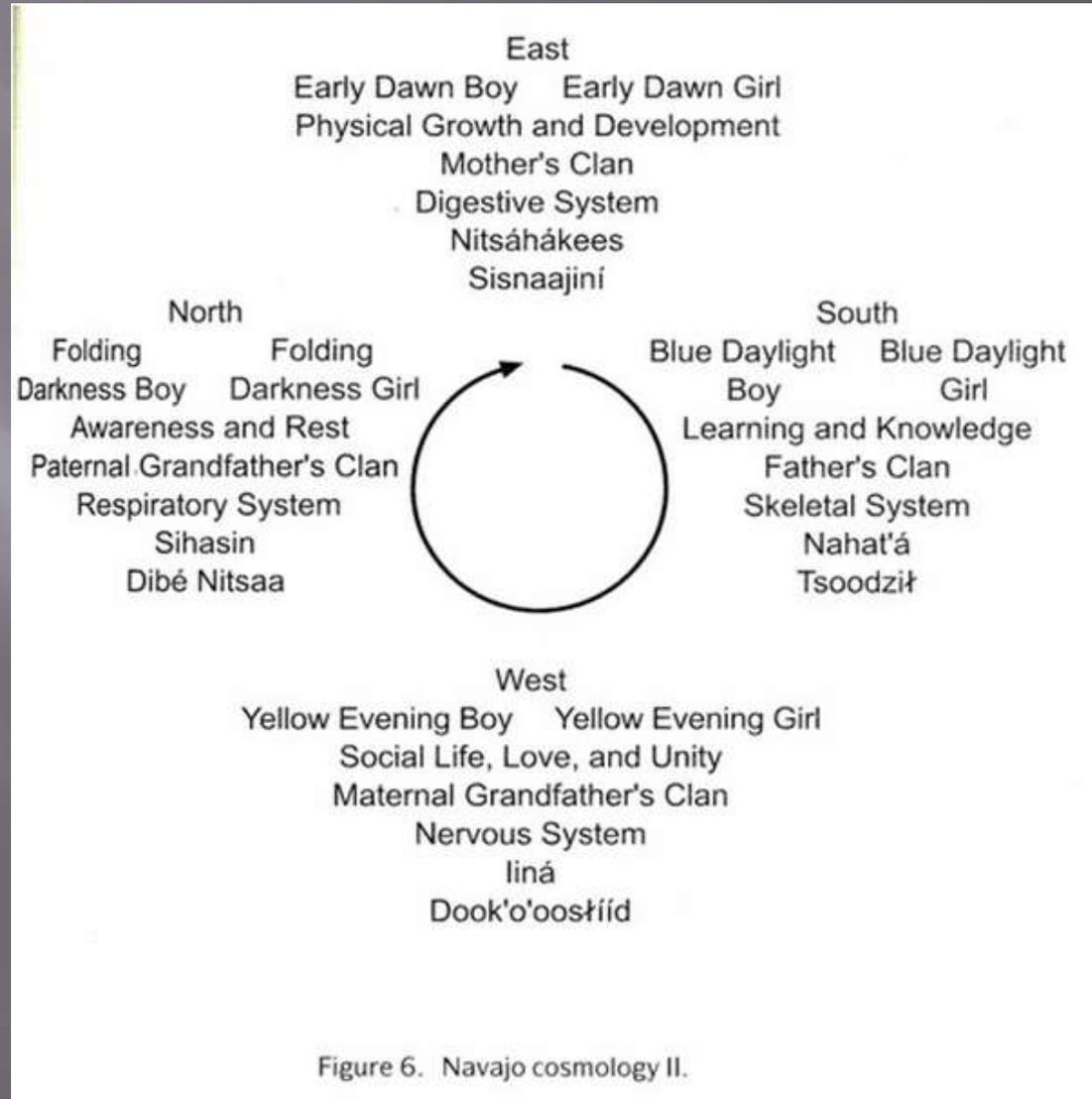


Figure 7. The complete Navajo person, or *diné*. Original sketch by Harry Walters; redrawn by Greg Schwarz.

Complementarity  
between male and  
female through the  
action of couples  
or pairs : Mother Earth  
and Father Sun, Dawn  
Girl and Dawn Boy...

▣ Exogamy



# The separation of the sexes: a tale of female (?) misbehaviour.

Navajo Basket by Peggy Black,  
“Separation of the sexes”

- ▣ “It is *joosh* the vagina who hunts. Were it not for *joosh* you would not have killed that deer. Were it not for her you would not have carried it here. You would not have skinned it. You lazy men would do nothing around here were it not for *joosh*. In truth, *joosh* the vagina does all the work around here.”



# Aim of the separation of the sexes episode.

- It denounces the danger of pride (the Greek *hybris*) for men and women alike.
- It insists on putting the blame on women for the Navajo People's future predicaments.
- Women who felt lonely had indulged with animals and penis-like shapes vegetables. According to Catholic anthropologist Berard Haile, some women used long smooth stones, thick feather quills, hooked cactuses.

## Consequences :

- Birth of monsters which soon started devouring the remaining kids.
- Women's reproductive powers endangered.
- Future of the human race threatened.

Raymond Johnson,  
Stories of Traditional  
Navajo Life and  
Culture, Navajo  
Community College  
Press, page 223.



- ▣ Even if traditional myths also mention the men abusing animals and different types of vegetables, the blame seems only to rely on the women.
- ▣ Return to order linked to the assignation of gender roles to women.
- ▣ “Each made herself useful about the home by putting things in order and cleaning up, sorting the meat, and so forth. And when their husbands entered, they extended their hands in welcome: ‘How are you, my husband? You were right. We are not in a position to provide for ourselves but must rely on you.’” (Haile)

# Restoration of order through another female figure

- ▣ Changing Woman symbolizes :
  - cycle of seasons, regenerative power of Earth,
  - victory of life upon death.
- ▣ She is endowed with the greatest powers in the world but she is also a passive being who surrenders to the Sun in a poetic rape scene by the river.
- ▣ Birth of twins : they will get rid the Earth of monsters.

The finding of Changing Woman by First Man,  
the birth of the Twins who would later eradicate the monsters  
<http://www.chinleusd.k12.az.us/office-of-federal-programs/curriculum-center/>



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# Contemporary women's views on the blame put on females.

- ▣ How contemporary women relate to both parts of the myth?
- ▣ Have they tried to reconquer part of the responsibilities (most notably in the sacramental field) that were taken away from them after the separation of the sexes?
- ▣ Eunice Manson : “ And since then, the man has taken the position that ‘you females cannot be trusted. Because of what happened, you cannot be a practitioner or a leader.’ But that’s not true, the wrongdoings were equal on both sides.”

# Women in the political field

- ▣ First woman to sit at the tribal council was Lilakai Neil in the late 1940's.
- ▣ Annie Wauneka, the daughter of Chee Dodge, president of the tribal council from 1942 to 1946, served on the council for 27 years in the Health and Welfare Committee.

# The 2010 tribal election

New Mexico State Representative Lynda Lovejoy ran for Navajo president.

On primary election day, Navajo reservation was damaged by monsoon storms.

Navajo traditionalist associations issued statements that Lovejoy's primary win and the storms occurring on the same day were a bad premonition.



# New models

- ▣ Lori Arviso Alvord.
  - First Navajo woman surgeon.
  - She wrote *The Scalpel and the Silver Bear*.
  
- ▣ Dorothy Lameman Fulton, first woman chief of police.
  
- ▣ Claudeen Bates Arthur, first woman chief justice of the nation.



# The making of myths

- ▣ To study how myths were collected : from a Navajo male to a Christian Navajo interpreter to a white male scholar.
- ▣ Andrew Curley's concept of *retrospective falsification*.
  - Diné scholar who studied extensively how indigenous oral narratives tend to conform to dominant forms of power when transcribed in order to “balance inconsistencies between traditional and contemporary politics.” (Curley, 2010).