

DYNAMIC SYMMETRY AND HOLISTIC ASYMMETRY IN NAVAJO COSMOLOGY

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Bilateral and bipolar symmetry are very important aspects of the Navajo comprehension of the world. Whereas bilateral symmetry is common to individuals and to various other specific entities in the Navajo universe, bipolar symmetry or holistic asymmetry is the major organizational pattern of the larger Navajo cosmos.

Sa'ah Naaghái and **Bik'eh Hózhó** represent the underlying bipolar symmetry of the Navajo 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. **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** - holistic harmony, health, and beauty as a simple gloss.

Hózhó is the grand theme or design of the Navajo universe. **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 cosmology. The source of **hózhó** - that which generates and radiates **hózhó** - is **Sa'ah Naaghái** (father) and **Bik'eh Hózhó** (mother), the parents of Changing Woman.

The term **Sa'ah Naaghái** refers to endless repetitions of the life cycle of all living beings, including the earth. These are four-phased cycles that go from birth to youth to old age and, finally, to death and are renewed in each succeeding birth. **Sa'ah Naaghái** refers to the infinite generations of all living beings.

Bik'eh means "according to it." The **bi-** object prefix refers to what preceded it; which, in this case, is **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." Together they represent the underlying dynamic, bipolar asymmetry of the cosmos.

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

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 conjugal union. 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.

The children of Changing Woman (the Navajos) experience this beauty and regenerative power in their kinship with the Earth and through the sustenance which 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 (the Navajos) participate in the being and beauty of the ultimate pair when they live in concert with this bipolar cosmic asymmetry.

The shapes and meanings found in the bipolar symmetry or holistic asymmetry 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 (Witherspoon and Peterson 1995).

References

Dynamic Symmetry and Holistic Asymmetry in Navajo and Western Art and Cosmology, Gary Witherspoon and Glen Peterson, Peter Lang Publishers: New York, NY. 1995