

The Tree of Life Design

From Central Asia to Navajoland and Back (with a Mexican Detour)

Part 3

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The Navajo Tree of Life

According to Navajo myth, the Dineh or the People were led to the Southwest from the underworld by the Holy People. Spider Boy taught the Navajos how to make a loom from sunshine, lightning and rain. Spider Woman taught them to weave. Weaving is a sacred art, embodying creation stories, prayers and ceremonial practices, the ancient and historical past. In weaving, the individual preserves hozho, a concept that combines order, beauty, balance and harmony.

The Navajo, an Athabaskan-speaking people, live in the Southwest of the United States, mainly in the states of Arizona and New Mexico, and in the Four Corners area of Colorado and Utah, in exogamous matrilineal clans. Archaeologists say they migrated south from Canada into New Mexico sometime before 1500. However, they began to exist historically at the end of the 15th century, just before the Spanish entradas, and as a nation in the European sense, through a series of interactions with the USA in the 19th and 20th centuries. The history of Navajo weaving begins not with the Navajo people themselves, but with the Pueblo Indians. Although they remained nomadic, the Navajo did have settlements, and it was here that they learned how to weave from the neighboring Pueblo people. Navajo women, however, expanded the range of patterns by skipping over threads in the weft. Thus they were able to create angles that yielded patterns, rather than simply striped bands of color made by the Pueblo.

A landmark event in the making of the Navajo nation was the coming of the traders onto the reservation in the 1880s, when Navajo weavers stopped weaving for home consumption and began to produce for the outside market on their prehistoric vertical looms, using commercial yarns. Since American Easterners would use the weavings as rugs on the floor, rather than garments as the natives did, the traders encouraged the Navajo to create a heavier weave. They also had paintings made so that their Eastern customers could see the designs they were buying; at the same time, they had the painters create designs which incorporated motifs from the popular Oriental carpets that many Easterners owned. This way influences from Persia, Turkey and Central Asia crept into Navajo weavings, side by side with those of the Pueblo, the Spanish and other cultures the Navajo had interacted with. The importance of the traders cannot be underestimated; in fact the existence of a meeting place such as the trading post also influenced Navajo settling patterns.

The influence of the customers – either traders, collectors or museums – also favored 'pictorial' rugs, portraying naïf scenes of Navajo everyday life, 'life trees' with flowers and birds, as well as 'sandpainting' rugs reproducing religious subjects. The first Pictorials were woven in the 1890s-1920s: those made before the 1940s are relatively uncommon and usually command a premium price. The Tree of Life design, also referred to as a Bird Pictorial, first appeared around the turn of the 20th century and originated around the Cedar Ridge area in the northern part of the Navajo Nation. The weavings show birds perched on corn stalks, trees, or generic plants, sometimes with the vegetation growing out of a Navajo wedding basket. Flowers, bees, and butterflies also may appear along with the birds. Various species of birds may be represented such as blue jays, cardinals, finches, hummingbirds, or even woodpeckers, and sometimes rabbits, squirrels or even farm animals may be included. (Wide Ruins Traders, <http://www.rugtrader.com/styles/treelife.htm>)



Navajo Yei rug pictorial 1-2 c. 1930



Navajo Yei Rug Pictorial c. 1960

Shiprock Corn Yei c. 1980



Navajo Cornstalk Yei c. 1910

Navajo Corn Tree of Life c. 1915-20

Corn Yei Tree of Life with Eight Birds c. 1930

Possibly some of the first Navajo pictorial textiles portraying a Tree of Life design or a sacred corn plant are two rugs in Dockstader's *The Song of the Loom* (1987:48-49). The first, weaver unknown, a wall-hanging (Germantown yarn, circa 1880, New Mexico), is a multicolored sampler with a different design in each of the forty-five squares; eleven of them look trees of life. The second one, a rug or wall hanging, weaver unknown (Germantown yarn, ca. 1880-90, New Mexico), depicts a Yei design on an unusual solid red background, with Holy People standing on Rainbow bars, four Yeiba'ad on clouds, and four sacred plants (two on each side). A wall hanging woven (p. 62-63) by Mrs. Gladly Manuelito, one of the nieces of Hosteen Klah, the famous

medicine man, from Newcomb, NM, depicts Humpack Gods with their staffs, Frongé Mouth Gods and four Yeiba'ad, surrounded by a Rainbow God. A sacred corn plant is in the center, growing out of an earth mound, with a bird on its tip (Sandpainting Night Way style, hand-spun yarn, ca. 1945). A wall hanging by Vera Begay from Oak Springs, AZ (p.76-77) shows a sandpainting in the Red Ant Way style (commercial yarn, ca. 1950-66); it depicts, among other things, deer, antelope, sacred plants with a bird on their tips growing out of the center of the Emergence Lake. A wall hanging by Mrs. Big Joe from Farmington, NM (p.64-65), shows a sandpainting in the Beauty Way style (commercial yarn, ca. 1967). Four pairs of Holy People stand on Rainbows, holding rattles and sacred paraphernalia; in the center is a sacred corn plant growing out of the earth, with a bird on its tip. At one side eight weasel-skin medicine pouches, two Dontso Messenger Flies guard the rainbow opening. In the caption Dockstader says: "Due to the compulsion among White observers to give names to Indian designs, this is known popularly as the Navajo Tree of Life- but not among the Navajos themselves."



Navajo Tree of Life or Bird Pictorial (cornstalk design) 1-2- 3



Navajo Tree of Life (cornstalk design) with farm animals 1-2

Despite the obvious symbolism of patterns such as the Tree of Life, most pictorial motifs had no specific religious meaning. The major exceptions to this rule, however, were weavings that portrayed Yeis, or Navajo Holy People, and weavings that recreated sacred ceremonial sand paintings. A small number of weavers made Chant Rugs, also called Sandpainting Rugs, as early as the 1890s in the area around Two Grey Hills. Most famously, the medicine man Hosteen Klah made a series of sand painting rugs with the help of his mother and nieces between 1919 and 1936. Nevertheless, Sandpainting rugs were very rare before the 1960s when weavers in the Ganado area began producing them in larger numbers. (Mark Sublette, [http://www.medicinemangallery. Com/](http://www.medicinemangallery.Com/)).

The so-called Chant Weaves, or Chant Rugs, an unfortunate label according to Dockstader (1987:13), since they technically are styles, not weaves, were the product of a small number of women that were specializing on weaving textiles based on the design of sandpaintings the Navajo created for their ceremonies. They had become more available as the taboo restricting the representations of religious designs began to ease, also because these particular weaves were especially sought for and well paid by some very demanding collectors, who were as instrumental as the traders in both supporting and influencing Navajo weavers.

According to Navajo weavers Rena and Marie Begay, Tree of Life weavings are a special way of describing the creation of Navajo people. In fact, these rugs depict how deities speak to their charges and interpret the Upward Moving Way. At the base of the corn plant there is a symbol, usually a wedding basket, for the emergence or center of all things. This represents the birth of the Earth Surface people and their appearance into this, the fifth world. The rainbow is a guardian figure, guarding both the lower worlds and the upper or present world. It also shows the presence and blessings of the super naturals. The eagle feathers at the ends of the rainbow are considered symbols of communication with the spirit world. Emergence from the lower worlds came about when it was flooded by Water Creature, due to Coyote's theft of his children and withdrew only when his youngsters were returned. The corn plant itself is symbolic in that it represents the Upward Moving Way of the Navajo. The roots of the plant reflect a connection to the lower worlds, the knowledge gained from the experience and the respect for the forefathers. The stalk is reaching upward, looking to the future, strong and supple due to the care and nourishment given by her people through Changing Woman. The fruit of the plant is the people: Navajo people believe they were created of corn, white male corn and yellow female corn, with the aid of Wind and the four directional Yei-be-chei they were given life. The tassel at the top of the plant and silk on the corn, along with pollen represent prayer and the sacredness of life. The twitter and chatter of small birds mean that the Holy beings are nearby. Large birds, like hawks and eagles are powerful fliers and have the ability to carry messages to the sky worlds, they act as intermediaries between the real and spirit worlds. Often the four sacred mountains of the Diné are portrayed, they are territory markers, dwelling places of sacred beings, holy ground and sanctuaries for plants and animals. Above all things are the sky worlds, showing room for further growth and upward movement. (Rena Begay, <http://www.twinrocks.com/products/8119-navajo-tree-of-life-rug-lena-begay.html>)

Birds figure prominently in Diné Bahane' (Navajo for 'Story of the People'), the Navajo creation story as well as ceremonial chants and ritual paraphernalia. Birds enter into various phases of ritual, especially in the manufacture of bundle properties and prayer sticks. Many birds were helpers of the Navajo, even in their early pre-human existence. Some are sufficiently characterized to be listed with deities and helpers; many others are more or less taken for granted except as they enter incidentally into ritual. They are closely associated with game and hunting, and with snakes (Matthews 1897).

What is the Source of the Navajo Tree of Life?

Although the Canadian Dene peoples the Navajo split from share a shamanistic world view, with its soul flights and shamanic journeys, with other hunter-gatherers in the Arctic and Subarctic regions of North America and the herders of the Old World, they do not share the characteristic belief in a World Tree or Tree of Life. Thus, even if Navajo religion still preserves a strong shamanic flavor, the notion of the Tree of Life, either as an actual tree or as a corn stalk, did not originate in the Canadian Great North.

As we have already seen, the Mesoamerican Flower World religion, which heavily influenced the American Southwest with the spreading of maize agriculture, incorporates shamanic traits (C. S. VanPool 2009:177–190). Partly, this shamanistic aspects were shared with, and were influenced by Northwestern Mexican cultures. In the Casas Grandes Medio Period iconography (AD 1200–1450) shamanic journeys can be identified in macaw-headed individuals interacting with the spirit world. Moreover, datura and tobacco visions inspired some of the imagery found on the kiva murals at the 16th-century Pottery Mound pre-Pueblo site, and in general kiva murals from throughout the region. In addition, parrots play a prominent role in Acoma, Laguna, Zuni oral history as well as other Pueblos', and a motif that can be interpreted as an antecedent, if not a real tree-of-life design, appears in Acoma and Sia water jars.

As we have seen before, the Mesoamerican Flower World complex is very widespread among the Uto-Aztecan speakers, and influenced other Puebloans in the American Southwest (Taube 2010 :82). Among its most

common designs there are the round-petalled flower, and the rainbow, actually an abstract figure for the horned serpent, the Southwestern version of Quetzalcoatl. Bowls and jars often symbolize springs, and by extension, passages to the underworld (Shaafsma and Tauber 2006:248). Similar concepts are expressed by the Navajo wedding basket. In Navajo sandpaintings corn stalks or Corn People stand on three roots on a cloud symbol or a body of water. In the Bird Pictorial rug the cornstalk usually stands on an earth mound or a basket (both reminding the upper part of the cloud symbol, a triangle).

Navajo tree of life (tree design) 1-2-3



As we have seen before, the medicine bowl, which represents the navel or point of emergence at the world center in a Pueblo kiva, resembles an open blossom. Moreover, the flaring mouthed flutes are symbols of the reed which was used by the First people and the ancestors of the Pueblo to emerge from the underworld into this world. Therefore, the flute/reed is conceptually a type of tree of life (Taube 2010:111), an idea borrowed by the Navajo myth of emergence, and conceptually related to the cornstalk.

In the Pueblo IV murals of Awat'ovi and Kawayka'a gently rounded mounds with projecting flowers resemble both contemporary ritual sculptures of the Hopi Flower Mound or Sitsomo as well as Teotihuacan censer portrayals of the Flower Mountain. The cornstalks topping rounded mounds (representing the Flower Mound) also appear in Pueblo sandpaintings (Taube 2010). Being conceptually linked to the reed of the emergence into this world and representing the world center in the underworld, the corn stalk on a (Flower) mound can be considered the Pueblo version of the Tree of Life, which influenced the Navajo sandpaintings as well as Yei and Tree of Life Pictorial rugs. In fact, several common motifs and early identifiable deities appear in both.

Sacred designs were hidden from outsiders until the late 1800's, when a Navajo woman used a sacred design in a rug, the first time the ceremonial design was used in a non-traditional manner. When the Navajo weavers started to weave pictorial rugs, they also started to manufacture rugs which depicted yei (Holy People) and cornstalks, because of the importance of corn in their lives. Corn is invariably used for hogan blessing, for sandpainting sprinkling, and as a drier after the bath in all the rites, Evil as well as Holy. Often it serves as a substitute for pollen, since corn meal is plentiful and pollen scarce (Reichard 1983).

Dykeman and Roebuck (2008:5) point out that the emphasis on maize in the early sites is consistent with the Navajo's own account of their origins. Most origin accounts claim that: 1. maize was present from the beginning, 2. many of the Navajo divinities are made from maize, 3. maize figures prominently in the creation of this world and the conditions for the flourishing of the earth surface people in this world, 4. the Navajo people themselves were created, in part, from maize, 5. aspects of maize agriculture were learned from/influenced by the Pueblo. The emphasis on maize is also consistent with the earliest Spanish historical accounts referring explicitly to the Navajo.

The Navajo credit the knowledge of sandpaintings to the 'Holy Ones' who instructed them in the healing ways. These Holy People maintained permanent paintings of sacred designs on spider webs, sheets of sky, clouds, and

some fabrics, including buckskin. When the First People, the Dineh, created by Changing Woman, were guided by First Man into the present world, they were given the right to reproduce these sacred paintings to summon the assistance of the Holy People. But ownership of them could lead to evil. Therefore, it was decreed that they must accomplish the paintings with sand and upon the earth, to be destroyed at night. The Navajo, however, actually borrowed both agriculture and weaving, with the attached religious notions, from the Pueblo. They also borrowed the Flower World complex from Pueblo kiva murals, sandpaintings and pottery.

Hence, following Schaafsma and Taube (2006) and Taube (2010), we can see that a typical Pueblo IV design, a central stalk of corn atop a mound which represents the Flower Mound appears not only in the kiva murals of contemporary Pueblos, but also in many Navajo sandpaintings. All Southwestern symbols originate from the Formative period Mesoamerica: in particular an Olmec cosmogram with a stepped mountain topped by a World Tree with directional motifs seems the ancestor of the Flower Mound topped by a cornstalk.

In my opinion, the so-called Tree of Life design has a double origin, which merged in some examples to create the so-called Tree of Life/Bird Pictorial. The first source of inspiration comes from the Chant Weaves, or Saindpainting rugs: the oldest wall hangings and rugs show a type of design that alternates yei and cornstalks, almost always with a bird on their tips. As we have already seen, the Cornstalk on top of a mound is the Pueblo version of the Tree of Life, and the Navajos took their agricultural religious notions, among them the cornstalk on top of a mound, from the Pueblo. The second source comes from the Asian and Middle Eastern carpets and rugs, as we will see later.

The Evolution of the Cornstalk/Yei Pictorial into a Bird/Tree of Life Pictorial

As Dockstader remarks (1987:24), sandpainting designs are "powerful holy works that must be treated with caution. Earlier, they were not even sketched or drawn: they were far too dangerous for any but the hatali (shaman or ceremonial singer) to deal with. But little by little, the religious strictures eased. Yet, the weavers are usually careful to change their designs slightly, so as not to risk offending the dangerous power of the deities."

Newcomb and Reichard (1975 [1937]:67), when explaining the main sandpaintings of the Shooting Chant, note that plants are depicted extensively, but except for Corn, there is only one case in which they become People. Corn, however, is used frequently, as one of the corner medicines and also as a main character, in which case there are Corn People. When described in the myth the feature stressed is the number of ears or leaves the corn plant has on each side. The more common arrangements are either six ears on each side or an ear and a leaf on the right side and an ear and two leaves on the left. In the sandpaintings corn, like other herbs, springs by three white roots from a cloud or from a body of water. The cloud symbol looks like a triangle resting on its tip on a bar. It can easily be seen how this cloud symbol was transformed into a basket in Pictorial rugs. The cornstalk is often surmounted by a bird: some medicine men say it should always have a bird on its tip because there is a close connection between birds and good crops. Corn people have these roots instead of legs and the leaves and ears are arranged similarly along the sides of their elongated bodies. In some sandpaintings the arms seem to take the place of the upper pair of leaves, an arrangement that can be seen also in a number of rugs. Corn People carry a ripe ear in the right hand, in the left, a small circular basket containing vegetation pollen and dew. Heads of the Corn People are exactly like those of other People (rectangular), but there is always a prominent corn tassel arrangement as a headress. Sometimes this 'headress' is placed above a large dark cloud symbol. Often the central theme is surrounded by a Rainbow Person. The discovery of the curved rainbow man among the wall paintings in the prehistoric kivas at Pottery Mound, near Los Lunas, New Mexico, dating from the fourteenth or fifteenth century, gives us a possible clue to the origin of the curved Rainbow People in Navajo art. In the Pictorial rugs the yei or Holy People may have either feet or clouds symbols or rainbows, while realistic cornstalks often have a triangle at the bottom, which looks like a mound of earth, but is actually the upper part of the cloud symbol (cfr. Dockstader 1987).

The Wedding Basket

In the Tree of Life rugs it often appears a wedding basket. It is an important vessel, not only used in wedding ceremonies, but in ceremonials such as girls' puberty rites, and traditional healing ceremonies. It has a distinct pattern of representation, but there is no agreement about the details of the symbols. According to Navajo

former court judge Leo Natani and his wife Sarah, the edge of the basket, a lighter color, represents the brightening skies as dawn approaches. The center design features four points to represent the Navajo's four sacred mountains, and the opening into the center (which Navajos believe should never be pointed downward) signifies an outlet for our thoughts. The bright red weave is the hallmark of sunshine, and is a blessing for Navajo health and spirituality. Black is for darkness, and a time to restore our bodies and minds. The lacing of the weave around the basket's edge represent our roots and human life. And the very center of the basket is representative of the emergence of the Dineh, the opening for the First Holy One to come into the First World. (Natani 2002)

Robert McPherson (1992) writes that the Navajo wedding basket often contains all six sacred mountains, including Huerfano and Gobernador Knob, though the size of the basket may determine the number of mountains in the design. The center spot in the basket represents the beginning of this world, where the Navajo people emerged from a reed. This is where the spirit of the basket lives. The white part around the center is the earth, the black symbolizing the sacred mountains upon which are found water bowls. Above them are clouds of different colors. The white and black ones represent the making of rain. A red section next to the mountains stands for the sun's rays that make things grow.

Echoes of the Shamanic Tree

A Navajo Studies course at Reading Area Community College, on May, 2002, reads: "To the anthropologists, the Navajo are an Athapaskan-language people, closely related to those living in northern Canada in the region of the Great Slave Lake. It is believed that these northerners broke away from their southern counterparts centuries ago. These northerners call themselves Diné, as do those living in the American Southwest areas of Utah, Arizona and New Mexico in an area now known as the Navajo Nation. The Navajo refer to their land as Dinétah. ... There is some evidence that the Navajo may be related to the Khanty (pronounced "han-tee") of Siberia. Several articles published in 1996 and 1997 by the Salt Lake Tribune point to not only a connection, but a "reunion" of sorts when the Navajo and Khanty embarked on several student/teacher exchanges. "I was amazed," says Mose, one of 11 San Juan County educators who visited the village of Kazym in January. "Even though we didn't speak the language, we immediately connected, like a magnet. We had a sense we were actually with our own relatives." ... To symbolically mark the reunion of the ancestral cultures, medicine man David Yanito of Bluff [Utah] performed a sacred ceremony in Navajo that joined the two nations together "as brother and sister." In another article, published by the Salt Lake Tribune in November, 1997, Mose discusses his experience visiting with a shaman in the Khanty village of Kazym. One of the "most astonishing" Khanty stories, says Mose, was of the Khanty "Ancestral Trail," the path Alexei says was taken by his Asiatic ancestors over the Bering Strait, traveling between Asia and America. "This is the same theory the Navajo hold regarding the Hak'az Dine'e or People of the Cold, who separated from us long ago and went north," says Mose. "This and other stories of the shaman convinced me of the ties between these people of the near Arctic region and my own Navajo tribe. They are what my people call the Naa' Diné -- the other people." ... (Smith 1996, 1997 at <http://www.anthro4n6.net/navajo/>).

What is interesting in these two articles is that this is another version of the origin of the Navajo, more in agreement with scholarly wisdom about a migration from Asia. The Khanty (known in older literature as Ostyaks) are originated from the south Ural steppe and moved into their current location about 500 AD. Their ancestors appear to be the prehistoric metalworking Andronovo Culture, a collection of similar local Bronze Age cultures that flourished ca. 1800–1400 BCE in western Siberia and the west Asiatic steppe. But what is more interesting is the fact that the Andronovo culture is strongly associated with the original Indo-Europeans, and is often credited with the invention of the spoke-wheeled chariot around 2000 BCE. and the spread of peoples speaking Proto-Indo-European languages (Okladnikov, A. P.1994:83). A 2004 study established that, during the Bronze/Iron Age period, the majority of the population of Kazakhstan, a country that was part of the Andronovo culture during Bronze Age, was of west Eurasian origin (with mtDNA haplogroups such as U, H, HV, T, I and W), and that prior to the thirteenth to seventh century BC, all Kazakh samples belonged to European lineages (C. Lalueza-Fox et al. 2004). Given the importance of the Tree of Life among the shamanic cultures of the herders in Siberia and Central Asia, is it possible that a pale remembrance of it may be seen in Navajo rugs? However alluring this hypothesis may be, the cultural importance of maize in Navajo culture points to a different direction: Mesoamerica.

In her study about the importance of corn pollen in Navajo religion Copelin (2009) writes: "the Holy Ones told the Navajos in the beginning, Corn will be your food, your prayer. Corn, the Navajo tree of life, was given to the Diné at creation as a gift in the fourth world, the number four emphasizing its sacredness. ... everything that grows, everything that is alive, is both male and female. Therefore corn, too, is both male and female, so there is always Corn Girl and Corn Boy—yellow corn is female, and white is male. ... So in doing things ceremonially, the right side always represents the female, the left the male. White and yellow corn varieties must always be in good supply in a family home, and this is important in terms of balance and harmony in the Navajo worldview. This symbolizes harmony with nature, and is a prayer for the family." (Capelin 2009:12-13)

When the Navajo weavers wove a real tree, not a corn stalk, however, inspired by Oriental models, they were reproducing the Central Asian shamanic tree with the soul-birds perched on its boughs, but also recognized the fundamental identity of the cornstalk and the birch, spruce or larch tree of the Asian nomads as symbols of life and connection with the spiritual world.

When the Navajo weavers started to weave pictorial rugs, they also started to manufacture rugs which depicted yei (Holy People) and cornstalks, because of the importance of corn in their lives. Gladys A. Reichard (1983: 540) describes how "Corn, na'da, in myth and ritual at least, is reaffirmed as belonging to the Navaho from time immemorial and there is probably no rite or ceremony in which corn does not function in some form or another. The feeling about corn is expressed: 'Corn is more than human, it is divine; it was connected with the highest ethical ideals.' When Talking God gave corn to the lonely sisters of the eagle Chant legend, ... he said again, 'Corn is your symbol of fertility and life'." And again (p. 541) "Corn meal, na'daka'n, is one of the commonest forms of corn in ceremony. It is coarsely ground, white for a man, yellow for a woman, mixed if there is a patient of each sex. Sometimes it must be ground by a virgin or at some particular place or time in the ritual cycle. It is invariably used for hogan blessing, for sandpainting sprinkling, and as a drier after the bath in all the rites I have seen, Evil as well as Holy. Often it serves as a substitute for pollen, since corn meal is plentiful and pollen scarce. It usually denotes the same thing, life and success along the road, exemplified by footprints laid in cornmeal." As to Hunchback god ya'ackidi, which may appear in some rugs, Reichard writes: "Matthews defines him as 'a god of harvest, a god of plenty, a god of mist'. Stevenson says the hump is of clouds containing seeds of all vegetation. Sapir's text has the hump made of rainbow (p.443)."

Reichard (1983:48) also remarks about Navajo sense of place: "On the surface of the earth we find beauty or happiness (bike xòjòn) in plants, water, trees, and mountains." And she notes a detail from a chant (p. 58), which explains the design of a 1910 rug depicting yei heads among the corn leaves on a corn stalk: "they often saw the heads of the gods sticking out from the roots of trees and stones, from springs and swamps." The latter remark makes us understand that the Navajo world is not only animated, but it shares the same notion with the Mesoamerican peoples, such as the Maya, who often depicted gods' faces together with or instead of maize ears.

Traders state that there is no religious meaning in either the Tree of Life, the Yei rug or the rugs portraying sandpaintings. However, previously we have seen that many weavers explain their textiles in religious terms. Moreover, there is a special spiritual relation between the weaver, her loom and the textiles she produces. Not only the loom is 'alive', but the process of creation of a rug implies the weaver's thought and actions, a fact that in some way 'embeds' a part of the weaver's creative power within her creation. Teresa J. Wilkins (2008) notes that weavers with their looms create persons in the form of blankets or rugs, they feel a sense of communication with the rugs they make and "feel" them in the trading post or traveling the world. Thus, the complexity of the rug-weaver relationship shaped Navajo weavers' understanding when copying rug designs from Oriental carpets.

From the Islamic Paradise to the Navajo Tree of Life

Demand and popularity for Oriental carpets by Easterners influenced traders such as Hubbell, Cotton and Moore to create their own design concepts incorporating the Oriental designs with older Navajo ones to create unique designs which they also displayed at their trading post for their local weavers. The outcome was such a popular success that these Eastern design elements would eventually be incorporated in Navajo weaving across the reservation and forever change the look of the Navajo textiles. Borders began to appear during the "transitional" period and the product encouraged by these and other traders was a shift in function from the woven blanket for wearing to the woven rug for display.

Dockstader (1987:108) shows an interesting floor rug woven by an unknown Navajo weaver in the area of Chinle (Arizona) in 1934 circa. The caption reads (note the loose use of the term 'artist'): "This is a striking example of the Oriental influence: an Islamic prayer rug complete with mirhab, but by a Navajo artist. It is interesting to note that none of the elements included in this textile is basically Navajo. In use, the pointed end of the design is directed toward Mecca, to guide the Muslim in prayer. This rug was acquired from Tom Woodard, a present-day trader in Santa Fe, who indicates that it was one of two commissioned in 1934 by Clinton N. Cotton, a well-known Gallup trader, as a challenge to show that Navajo weavers could produce a textile design equal to Persian weaves". Actually, the trouble here is that this is a rug and not a carpet, technically much more difficult to weave, as the original is.

In many cases, however, the rugs produced by Navajo weavers are more an interpretation than a slavish copy of Oriental models, also because of the limitations imposed by their archaic vertical looms. It was not very difficult for Navajo women to re-interpret Islamic and Central Asian tribal motifs according to their sensibility as well as religious taboos.

An example is the re-interpretation of the Oriental 'vase' motif, that is the Floral Vase, which uses vases as the sources of flowering sprays. The term 'vase' is applied to a number of compositions employing a vase, or group of vases, as the principal design element. The motif was most probably introduced into Persia from China, and is found primarily on workshop rugs from Persia, Anatolia, India and Pakistan, particularly when incorporated as subsidiary element into prayer rug, tree of life and medallion and corner schemes. The Oriental vase motif became a Navajo wedding basket, which in turn substituted the cloud symbol of the Yey Pictorials, in both cases a symbol of fertility and spiritual harmony. The flowers in the vase became corn stalks, and the pillars of the prayer field of a prayer rug might be conceived as the elongated bodies of yei. In turn, the two pillars with a tree or a vase with a plant in the mirhab echoed an ancient Mesopotamian motif. Yet, it is also was a transformation of the Corn Yei sandpainting. Hence we can say that the Tree of Life design in Navajo textiles incorporates motifs from both Asia and Mesoamerica.

Conclusion

The Tree of Life design is thought to be originated in Central Asia possibly from shamanic cultures, and can be seen as a favorite pattern in many carpets and rugs produced throughout a huge area, from Afghanistan to Eastern Europe. On the other hand, Mesoamerican versions of Tree of Life are fundamental aspects of the so-called Flower World religious complex that spread together with maize agriculture all over the American Southwest. In late 19th century-early 20th century, American traders who brought Oriental carpet patterns to be reproduced by Navajo weavers made the Asian Tree of Life design known to them, but it was only after the 1970s that the pattern has had a real success together with other pictorial rugs.

Mexican serapes and blankets, such as the Saltillo serapes and the Chimayo blankets, which influenced the early Navajo weavers, do not sport this design. Yet, the Tree of Life as a cosmological axis mundi is very common in Mesoamerican pre-Columbian cultures. However, although the Navajo design is often definitely NOT a tree, but a corn stalk, usually growing from a wedding basket, in spite of that, it had a Wittgensteinian 'family resemblance' with some Oriental as well as Western patterns one can find woven, embroidered, painted or carved everywhere in folk art.

Hence I started a survey of the possible source or sources of the Navajo Tree of Life pattern, and illustrated the origin of carpet weaving, the development of an Eastern-Western trade, the first examples of Oriental carpets in the wealthy homes of Europe, the origin of the Tree of Life concept and its development both in the Old World and New, and the fashion of Oriental carpets as status symbols both in Europe and the USA.

Carpet -weaving in the Old World dates back to the fourth-third millennium BC in Azerbaijan, but the earliest-known surviving example of a hand-knotted carpet is a Scythian one, the Pazyryk carpet. A stylized tree with obvious religious significance already occurs as an art motif in fourth-millennium Mesopotamia, and, by the second millennium B.C., it is found everywhere within the orbit of the ancient Near Eastern oikumene, including Egypt, Greece, and the Indus civilization. The meaning of the motif is not clear, but its overall composition strikingly recalls the Tree of Life of later Christian, Jewish, Muslim, and Buddhist art. The Caucasian Tree of Life has also been influenced by the nearby Mesopotamian cultures. Actually, the idea of the Cosmic Tree, often

called Tree of Life, is common to many peoples around the world, and in the Old World it is shared along an eastern-western route from Korea and China to Scandinavia and the Mediterranean world. The Scythian-Sarmatian peoples of the steppes represented a very important connection ring in a chain of cultural exchange going from east to west and vice versa.

The Tree of Life or Cosmic Tree in Siberia and northern Asia is strictly connected with shamanism. The world tree as a kind of cosmic pillar is central to shamanic ideology: the shaman climbs the tree-axis mundi clad in a bird costume, his drum had been prepared with the wood from the world tree, on the drum it is painted the world tree and the universe articulated into three cosmic levels, and so on. All shamans had a so-called mother-animal sometimes pictured as a large bird with grabbing claws and beak. A mother-animal takes the soul of a future shaman and descends to the underworld and raises this soul on a branch of a spruce, larch or birch tree. As birds help shamans ascend through difficult, multilayered cosmic terrain to capture lost souls or find spirits of sickness, they loan shamans their qualities. According to Eliade (1983:296-297) the mythologies of the central and northern Asian peoples were influenced by southeastern civilizations. Yet, he thinks that the motif of the soul(child)-bird-World Tree is specific of central and northern Asia. Michael West (2007:346-47) remarks that the notion of a World Tree, so important in Indo-European cultures since the beginning, probably is an import from Northern Asiatic cosmology.

According to Sheila Paine (in Brown 2009 part 1), trees can be depicted in embroidery as a tree goddess, a vase of flowers, a fountain, or some symbol of local iconography, such as an eagle or a heart. When the tree of life is depicted as an actual tree, it is often stylized to convey mythological significance. In these instances, foliate patterns or simple branched devices signify the tree of life. The Tree of Life with birds in Islam symbolizes the bridge between Paradise, the world of men and the world below. It is usually used in conjunction with a garden, vase or prayer rug design. This theme is also used on the gravestones in Anatolia.

In the 16th, 17th and 18th century, a number of Anatolian areas gained importance as rug-weaving centers. Transylvania, Romania continues to be the repository of the richest and best preserved corpus of Antique Turkish rugs outside the Islamic world, probably introduced centuries ago by the controlling Ottoman Empire. However, modern Rumanian carpets and rugs have a strong regional character: in particular, Oltenian rugs reflect nature, with flowers, trees and birds, Moldavian ones have patterns of little branches repeated in rows to create a tree of life.

In the New World, depictions of world trees are found in cultures such as the Olmec, Teotihuacan, Izapan, Maya, Aztec, Mixtec, and others, dating to at least the Mid/Late Formative periods of Mesoamerican chronology. Directional world trees are also associated with the four Yearbearers in Mesoamerican calendars, and the directional colors and deities. Mesoamerican codices which depict the Tree of Life motif include the Dresden, Borgia, Vendobonensis, and Fejérváry-Mayer codices. Tableaus from the Western Mexico shaft tomb tradition, show a ceramic village model with a multi-layered tree with birds that may represent souls who have not yet descended into the underworld, while the central tree may represent the Mesoamerican world tree.

Uto-Aztec peoples of Mesoamerica and the U.S. Southwest, together with neighboring Pueblo and Mayan groups, share a system of verbal imagery evoking a flowery spirit world. Scholars think Flower World cosmology came to the Southwest/Northwest with proto-Uto Aztec speakers and agriculture. In particular an Olmec cosmogram with a stepped mountain topped by a World Tree with directional motifs seems the ancestor of the Flower Mound topped by a cornstalk.

The people of many modern Pueblos associate macaws and parrots with the south and with the sun, and birds are among the most ubiquitous and ancient religious symbols in the Pueblo iconographic system. Archaeological evidence of exotic trade birds has been discovered from Chaco Canyon to the San Francisco mountains and areas of the Rio Grande. Feathers have been found at many early Pueblo sites, indicating their wide-ranging ritual use. Kiva murals at Pottery Mound and Kuaua illustrate the widespread use of bird feathers in Pueblo IV period ceremonial contexts, connected with a typical Pueblo IV design, a central stalk of corn atop a mound which represents the Flower Mound, the center of the underworld.

The figures of the Acoma pottery jars are also symbols of the Flower World complex: the round-petalled flower, the fleur-de-lis flower, the arch of the horned serpent, sometimes identified as a rainbow. Moreover, the jar itself can be considered a 'rainmaker': bowls and jars often symbolize springs, and by extension, passages to the underworld; pottery vessels are intimately connected to landscape metaphors and sources of moisture.

As symbols of the world center, or navel, both the Hopi sipapu (the point of emergence into this world) and the medicine bowl (also a symbol of world center) conceptually relate to flowers. The flaring gourd mouths of Pueblo flutes are explicit flowers: they are symbols of the reed which was used by the First People and the ancestors of the Pueblo to emerge from the underworld into this world. Therefore, the flute/reed is conceptually a type of tree of life.

In addition, the center of the Sitsomo, or Flower Mound of the Hopi, is the dwelling place of Muy'ingwa, god of all clouds, and of maize, growth and germination. As Taube (2010) notes this hill, Flower Mound, recalls the widespread concept of Flower Mountain. Examples of it, cornstalks topping rounded mounds, have been identified in the Pueblo IV murals of Awat'ovi and Kawayka'a as well as in Pueblo sandpaintings. Being conceptually linked to the reed of the emergence into this world and representing the world center in the underworld, the cornstalk on a (Flower) mound can be considered the Pueblo version of the Tree of Life, which has influenced both Navajo religious thought and the so-called Tree of Life rugs .

The Tree of Life design or Bird Pictorial in Navajo rugs first appeared around the turn of the 20th century. Usually this style portrays either a cornstalk or a tree growing from a basket. Birds are perched on them, and flowers, bees, and butterflies rabbits, squirrels or even farm animals may also be included.

In my opinion, the Navajo Tree of Life design has a double origin, which merged in some examples to create the so-called Tree of Life/Bird Pictorial rugs. The first source of inspiration comes from the Chant Weaves, or Saindpainting rugs: the oldest wall hangings and rugs show a type of design that alternates yei and cornstalks, almost always with a bird on their tips or portrays Corn People as cornstalks with yei heads with birds perched on the leaves. As we have already seen before, the Cornstalk on top of a mound is the Pueblo version of the Tree of life. The second source comes from Asian and Middle Eastern carpets and rugs. When the Navajo weavers, inspired by Oriental models, wove a real tree, not a cornstalk, however, they were both reproducing the Central Asian shamanic tree with the soul-birds perched on its boughs, and recognized the fundamental identity of the cornstalk and the birch, spruce or larch tree of the Asian nomads as symbols of life and connection with the spiritual world.

In many cases, the rugs produced by Navajo weavers are more an interpretation than a slavish copy of Islamic and Central Asian tribal motifs. The Oriental Floral Vase motif became a Navajo wedding basket, which in turn substituted the cloud symbol of the Yey Pictorials, in both cases a symbol of fertility and spiritual harmony. The flowers in the vase became cornstalks, and the pillars of the prayer field of a prayer rug might be seen as the elongated bodies of the yei. The two pillars with a tree or a vase with a plant in the mirhab in turn echo an ancient Mesopotamian motif. Yet, it was also a transformation of the Corn Yei sandpainting.

Hence we can say that the Tree of Life design in Navajo textiles incorporates motifs from both Asia and Mesoamerica. And the Zapotec weavings? The Zapotec were those who created the Saltillo serapes that first inspired the Navajo serapes and "eye-dazzler" blankets in the 19th century. Like the Navajos before them, Zapotec weavers were given card models by USA American traders to reproduce cheaper Navajo-style rugs and wall hangings, the Tree of Life rugs among them. They did not weave Mexican or pre-Columbian Trees of life in these imitations, although they also started an 'ethnic' production of rugs inspired to pre-Columbian designs, such as the Macaw on top of the Tree of Life. In a strange, circular way, Navajo textile manufacturing went back to where it began: Mexico. Not only: in a similar way, also the Tree of Life design went back to the point of origin: the Mesoamerican Flower world of the Zapotec and other Mexican weavers' ancestors.

Today, traders give card models of fashionable Navajo and Zapotec rugs to weavers from Afghan refugee camps, to Central Asian republics, to Romania to reproduce cheap textiles for the lower segment of customers, 'hit-and-run' tourists and the like at a lower cost. Again, back to the original source of carpets and rugs, and in part to the Tree of Life design.

In a general way, we can suggest with Appadurai (1986) that with luxury commodities like Oriental rugs, as the distance between consumers and producers is shrunk, so the issue of exclusivity gives way to the issue of authenticity. The Navajo have two separate spheres of production and consumption: industrially-manufactured commodities for themselves and hand-made commodities ideologically protected as "disinterested" ethnic/tourist art, not work, for outsiders. The latter type of commodities constitute a special commodity traffic, in which the group identities of the producers are tokens for the status politics of the consumers. Whereas Navajo rugs appeal the highbrow segment of the US market as an art investment, Zapotec ones cover the

middle-to-lower segments. But, as there is a trend to rise some Zapotec textiles to the top segment as “art,” other competitors also sell low-priced rugs (Wood 2000, 2001). As we have seen, Navajo-style rugs are woven in Romania, Bulgaria, Ukraine, Peru, Ecuador and the Orient, where Tibetan-Nepalese and Afghan-Turkmen refugees in India and Pakistan are now imitating Navajo patterns. Thus we have come the full circle. In the 1890s American merchants went to the Far West to get the Navajos to copy Bukhara and other Asian rugs; in the 1990s they went to the East to get Asian weavers to copy Navajo copies of Oriental rugs.

It is always a false problem to want to restore the truth beneath the simulation, which is the generation of a real without origin or reality, that is a hyperreal (Baudrillard 1983). In some way, the Navajo rug is an example of Baudrillard's 'precession of simulacra.' The 'authentic' Navajo rug, copied in Pakistan, is sold to American tourists whose grandparents would have never taken it into consideration as an acceptable cheaper alternative in their game of distinction. In Baudrillard's terminology, the Navajo simulacrum has become true, the copy has become the original, or even better than the original. It is a typical American game, given that Oriental carpets are still the real stuff of European conspicuous consumption. This particular game of distinction (Bourdieu 1979) involves segments of highbrow American society, but not all of them. In fact many of the trendiest New York “briefcase buckaroos” and Hollywood stars love Zapotec textiles and Taco Deco interiors. Moreover, the romantic fascination for the Mexican Revolution is still very strong in Europe.

Hand-woven textiles and rustic accessories are the metonymic representation of the touristic experience, the concrete markers of the “abstraction of the journey” (Baudrillard 1993, MacCannell 1976), the tangible evidence of the travel to the Holy Grail often shared with family and friends (Graburn 1989:33). As Cohen (1995:21) puts it, if the mode of the modern tourist has been a serious quest for authenticity, the post-modern tourist's mode is that of playful search for enjoyment. In sum, tourist arts are structured around redundant messages, and for a tourist looking for a souvenir, 'authenticity' is less important than the fact that it looks 'Indian,' that is it is a sign of 'the Southwest.' Moreover, the evidence of a pilgrimage Over There has the added bonus of a design, the Tree of Life, which appeals Western buyers as both familiar and exotic. In fact, the Tree of Life design has been rooted into European and Asian cultures for millennia, and appears everywhere in the Old World folk art, but the fact that Navajo and Zapotec rugs are woven by 'real' Native Americans adds an exotic spice to the flavor of this very ancient folk motif.

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