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ORALITY AND NATIVE AMERICAN RELIGIONS

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Spring 2005

SEMESTER

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COURSE & # (E.g. Hist)

54M (C:11)

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E-RESERVES: COVER SHEET
A mong the Omaha, it was a custom at the funeral of a highly respected man or woman for several youths to make two incisions in their upper left arms which they kept open by inserting a willow twig. With blood dripping from their wounds, as an expression of their grief, they danced before the lodge that housed the dead and sang songs with bittersweet cadences suggesting birds, sunshine, and lightness. This practice bears the Omaha belief that song is capable of carrying human thoughts and aspirations beyond the human world. The songs of the youths cheer the dead as he or she goes into the world beyond.

Native Americans commonly view songs, prayers, stories, and other oral events as manifesting powerful forces. Certain words when spoken or sung affect the world, give it shape and meaning. Words can cause pain and suffering as well as create beauty and orderliness.

In several Pueblo stories of creation, the first figure to exist—who, in a sense, has always existed—was Thought-Woman. The world was literally formed as she thought what form it should take. Her partners in creation followed her act of creative thinking by naming those things given form by Thought-Woman. Thus, her acts of creation became humanly meaningful through language. Names gave distinction and identity to the forms created.

In Central California, thought and speech are personified as the cosmic creators. Many of the creation stories feature a figure who creates the world as he thinks of it or speaks about it. This figure is countered by Coyote, a sort of trickster, whose acts undo or reverse the way the world is created. In this way,
the difficult aspects of the human plight, including death, are introduced. The story is similar to the Seneca tale of the Twin Brothers. For the Achomawi of California, thought and speech are independent creators, as evident in their creation story.

Apponahah speaks and sings to himself, in his own mind, and thus imagines himself to be the creator of the world. But in the first conversation between Apponahah and Annikadel, who is the personification of speech and was carried as a child in the bosom of Apponahah, Annikadel declares his role in creation by telling Apponahah that thought alone is insufficient as a creator; that thought must be born into the world and that this requires an act of speech. Annikadel proclaims himself as “a man of the air,” as “the man who will make all sounds,” and thus as the partner of thought in creation. He even declares that he made Apponahah think of all that he had done, thus indicating the dependence even of thought on speech.²

In the Navajo stories of creation, similar roles are played by thought and speech.

After the people who were to perform the acts of creation emerged from lower worlds onto the mud-covered earth surface, there was a display of the forces that would create life on that surface. It was done by the personification of the objects in the medicine bundle, the womb of life. From the bundle arose a youth and a maiden of incomparable beauty. Their hair was long, and their bodies shone brilliantly. They appeared only this one brief time on earth, but they revealed that they were the means by which all things would be given life; they were to be the very means of life.³

The youth and maiden are the personifications of thought and speech, and their names are Long Life and Happiness. Joined together, they comprise the force that carries life through time. Even their names are used together by the Navajo as a term that designates the goal of life. All Navajo prayers and songs evoke the names Long Life and Happiness (sa’dh naghai bik’eh hózhó), for thought and speech are the forces necessary to create life and maintain the conditions and means by which people live in good health through a long life to attain fulfillment by death in old age.

In these examples, the acts of thought and speech, though playing an array of valued roles, are of special religious significance to many Native American people. The creative power of the word is reminiscent of the passage in Christian scripture in the Book of John: “In the beginning was the Word…”．

Until the application of linguists’ orthographic (i.e., writing) systems, Native American languages had never been written. A system of writing was also introduced by the Cherokee man Sequoya in 1821. At present, few Native Americans read their own languages, although some cultures like the Navajo and Hopi have developed a considerable literature published in their own languages. The modes of communication used by cultures importantly shape aspects of their way of life. Because the whole academic enterprise and the modern Western world highly value writing, it is tempting to think of Native Americans as preliterate or illiterate or, to try to be less judgmental, as nonliterate. Still these are negative terms, even if positively intended, focusing on what Native Americans do not do or do not have. It is an easy step from here to denigrate or romanticize them. Perhaps a little better term is exclusively oral, though inelegant and even in its positive, the statement is still rooted in the negative. On so many of these matters the awkwardness continually reminds us that Western and outsider perspectives with their built-in values can never be fully set aside.

How is it possible to understand and appreciate the importance of Native American modes of communication without either denigrating them with the implications of terms like illiterate or romanticizing them with terms like preliterate? No small imagination is required to appreciate and gain a feeling for the character of exclusively oral cultures. The consideration of Native American examples will initiate this act of imagination as well as correct certain likely erroneous associations.

TO BREATHE IS TO MAKE POETRY

In the Ammassalik Eskimo language, the word for “to breathe” is the same as the word for “to make poetry,” and it stems from the word referring to the soul or force of life. The Netsilik group of Eskimo have the same idea, as shown in comments made by the man named Orpingalik. He was a great hunter, archer, kayaker, and religious leader or shaman. As a shaman, he could engage in the world beyond the human with the aid of spirit helpers and guides who had chosen him. He communicated with the spirit world, or it communicated through him, by entering a state of trance. He called his spirits and spoke with them by singing their songs and by speaking in the special metaphorical language of Netsilik shamans. His powers gave him the capability to see game and to hunt successfully, to heal as well as to injure his enemies. He could call the caribou to him through the power of his songs.

Wild caribou, land louse, long legs,
With the great ears,
And the rough hairs on your neck,
Flee not from me.
Here I bring skins for soles,
Here I bring moss for wicks,
Just come gladly
Hither to me, hither to me.⁵

Orpingalik’s songs and poetry were the base for his success as a hunter and a measure of his stature as a human being. His food as well as his dignity was inseparable from his songs. The Eskimo consider a person’s songs as his or her property and no one would perform the song or poem of another without permission and compensation for it.
Orpingalik spoke provocatively of songs.

How many songs have I cannot tell you. I keep no count of such things. There are so many occasions in one’s life when a joy or a sorrow is felt in such a way that the desire comes to sing; and so I only know that I have many songs. All my being is song, and I sing as I draw breath. . . . It is just as necessary for me to sing as it is to breathe.  

This identification of song with the riches of life is addressed in the poignant statement of a Navajo man, “I have always been a poor man. I do not know a single song.”

To make song is an act of vitality no less than to breathe. To sing is rooted in the heart, the seat of life and center of emotions. To sing is not only a sign of life, but, as importantly, an act of life. It is creative in the most primary sense. Orpingalik spoke eloquently of this.

Songs are thoughts, sung out with the breath when people are moved by great forces and ordinary speech no longer suffices.

Man is moved just like the ice floe sailing here and there out in the current. His thoughts are driven by a flowing force when he feels joy, when he feels fear, when he feels sorrow. Thoughts can wash over him like a flood, making his breath come in gasps and his heart throb. Something, like an abatement in the weather, will keep him thawed up. And then it will happen that we, who always think we are small, will feel still smaller. And we will fear to use words. But it will happen that the words we need will come of themselves. When the words we want to use shoot up of themselves—we get a new song.

There is great depth in Orpingalik’s view. Singing glib songs of joy to celebrate a life of bliss that is never actually realized by human beings is not the song he is referring to. Rather it is the songs that are concerned with the measure of life with all its complexities and overwhelming difficulties. The mind only grasps life’s meaning as it finds a vehicle of expression and manifestation in words, songs, and poetry.

Only these forms can capture a measure of the incomparable sadness of a mother who loses her son because he has been banished from the community after he accidentally killed a hunting companion, as happened in Orpingalik’s family. The poem that came to Orpingalik’s wife, Uvlunaq, arose from this event.

When message came
Of the killing and the flight,
Earth became like a mountain with pointed peak,
And I stood on the awl-like pinnacle
And faltered,
And fell.

Owners of powerful words are themselves often powerful and prestigious in their cultures, but they are also subject to the suspicions of community members when anything goes wrong. Because powerful persons can engage in religious actions that have powerful effects, they are suspect when something goes awry, even when they are the only ones who suffer. Often the only thing that distinguishes sorcerers and malevolent beings from shamanic healers and clairvoyants is the intent or nature of their effects on the world. The powers of one who can bring the dead back to life, heal the ill, or call the animals are dangerously close to those of the sorcerer whose curse or spell can cause illness, deprivation, or even death. The death of another of Orpingalik’s sons was judged by the people of his community to have resulted from Orpingalik’s attempts to use his powers to kill a rival shaman. They said that the powers of the rival were thus proven the stronger because the efforts of Orpingalik were reflected back upon him, killing his son in an accident.

Perhaps at this point, efforts to appreciate the strong interconnection among thoughts, words, and life and the distinctive character of speech acts may be aided by a general and naive comparison of oral and written modes of communication.

Speech is an act that is fragile, impermanent, and intimate. Every speech act is unique, engaging a speaker and a listener in a specific existential situation. All that transpires is the formation of words, symbols of sound, stemming from thoughts. When uttered by the mouth in an act that requires the expiration of breath, these thoughts fill the surrounding space within the power of the sounds. The listeners, including the speaker, receive the sounds through their ears. There remains nothing of the speech act except the impressions it leaves in the memories and effects it renders upon the world. Speech by its nature is personal. It cannot occur other than from person to person, from speaker to listener. It is an act of the mouth, breath, heart, ear, and mind. Speech is of the body. A speech event cannot be audited, replayed, or reorganized. There is a limited capacity for recall even in the memory it produces.

Communication in writing is quite different. Writing certainly stems from the mind and often the heart, but it is an act of the hand, usually produced less spontaneously and more slowly and laboriously, because a system of alphabetic symbols must be engaged to translate the stream of mental symbols into visual images. For this price, however, the written message may be audited, corrected, or erased before it need be submitted to a receiver, a reader. And the reader may reread, reorder, and rephrase it without loss of the original message.

Writing and reading are usually private acts, done by oneself in isolation from others. Reading is physically more directed than is listening. One may much more easily choose to read something than to hear something. Sight is also greatly directed by the viewer, who changes the direction of vision and focuses according to desire. It is said that persons who are blind until adulthood, then given eyesight by an operation, cannot at first discern one object from another but see only a complex configuration of shapes. This is because they have not yet learned how to look, how to direct the vision toward the desired centers of attention.
CHAPTER THREE

Acts of writing are not as fragile as are speech acts. Whatever one writes is more or less stable, permanent, and can be read at any time by anyone who knows how to read the language. Negatively, as anyone who has written secret notes in school knows, there is less control on who receives the message. Once it is written, neither the intended receivers nor the context in which the message is intended to be read can always be controlled.

Although these points are fundamental and reveal no new information, to recount them will develop a perspective from which to understand some aspects of Native American religions shaped by exclusive orality.

THE COCK AND THE MOUSE

The oral poetry of Native Americans is often described as stable in its form and composition. Until recently, folklorists approached the collection of stories, songs, and prayers in Native American cultures largely with the attitude of checking the occurrence of a certain type of tale or song in an effort to record the lore and oral poetry of a particular culture. Variations of a tale or song were usually not considered as separate incidents and they were reconciled by putting all of the versions together to form an abstract of what was then considered as the complete story. This approach tends to give the impression that each Native American people had a fixed tradition of poetry and that actual performance of it was always some corruption or extraction of the full form. Many folklorists have also documented the stability of various forms of oral poetry over long periods of time. Others have shown that many forms—such as origin stories, songs, and especially prayers—are highly formal and their exact recitation is often rigidly followed.

The measure of flexibility, innovation, and creativity can be shown by considering an incident that occurred during the late nineteenth century at Zuni. Frank H. Cushing, an ethnographer, listened to several Zuni men tell folk tales during the summer of 1886. The custom was for everyone to contribute stories in turn. When Cushing's turn came to tell a story, he had to resort to tales that had their roots in Europe. On one occasion, he told them the tale of "the cock and the mouse." A mouse asked a cock to go with him to collect some nuts from a nearby tree. The mouse climbed the tree to gather the nuts, but the cock was unable to fly up to the tree and asked the mouse to throw him a nut. When the mouse did so, the nut hit the cock, breaking open his head. The remainder of the story is a chain of events in which the cock must go to a series of sources in order to cure his head. The total series comes to an end, when the fountain gave the cock some water, which he gave to the forest, which gave him wood, which he gave to the baker, who gave him bread, which he gave to the dog, who gave him two hairs, which he gave to the old woman, who gave him some rags, which the cock needed to cure his head. This tale was then unknown to the Zuni.

Cushing returned to the Zuni about a year later. One day in a similar session of telling tales, Cushing heard his own story of a year earlier told by a Zuni. Cushing's recording of the story enables the examination of the changes it underwent during the period of a single year. While the basic tale remained intact, the story was adapted to Zuni culture and worldview. The Zuni story was more than fivefold the length of the tale told by Cushing. The Zuni developed a more complicated relationship between the mouse and the cock and they added many details to give the story concrete images associated with Zuni life ways. The conclusion of the story exemplifies this process of adaptation. When the cock reaches the source of water, a spring, the spirit of water had a message for him.

Long have men neglected their duties, and the Beloved of the Clouds need payment of due less than ourselves, the Trees, the Food-maker, the Dog, and the Old Woman. Behold! no plumes [prayer feathers] are set about our border! Now, therefore, pay to them of thy feathers—four floating plumes from under thy wings—and set them close over us, that, seen in our depths from the sky, they will lure the Beloved of the Clouds with their rain-laden breaths. Thus will our streamway be replenished and the Trees watered, and their Winds in the Trees will drop the dead branches wherewith thou mayest make payment and all will be well.

For behold the Takaku [the cock] plucked four of his best plumes and set them, one on the northern, one on the western, one on the southern, and one on the eastern border of the Pool. Then the Winds of the Four Quarters began to breathe upon the four plumes, and with those Breaths of the Beloved came Clouds, and from the Clouds fell Rain...11

Thus, the cock was able to get the bristles from the dog so that grandmother would cure his head. The Zuni see opportunity in the story to recount the origin of various things in the Zuni world. For example, the head injury gave origin to the red fleshy cock's comb. The practice by which each party required payment for what it gave coincides with a medicine master requiring payment for his services and medicines; there is no virtue in medicine of no value.

What this Zuni example illustrates is the potential of oral traditions to adapt to the specific cultural needs and circumstances. In only one year, the telling and retelling of a new tale was thoroughly adapted to the Zuni worldview and made to bear a number of messages regarding proper action, proper conduct, the interrelationship among all living things, the dependence of life on spiritual levels of reality, and the dependence of life on proper religious actions. Folklorists have warned that it is naive to consider that any folktale has a specific meaning for a culture that tells it. They note that one can find the same basic tale, such as "the cock and the mouse," in many cultures. But, while the basic elements of this tale remain the same, clearly in this example it has been greatly adapted to Zuni culture and religion.

This example provides background for the consideration of various factors involved in the transmission of culture. Many objects in material culture play
a vital role in the transmission of culture, yet speech acts are important and, because they can be interpreted and translated, provide access to outsiders. In cultures without written records, the whole history and character of the tradition must be maintained in the memories of its living members. Culture is transmitted in acts of face-to-face communication, a chain of interlocking conversations. Every member of an exclusively oral culture must personally and directly experience the tradition because it is largely transmitted in verbal acts. The relationship between words and their meanings is experienced directly and concretely. Tradition is highly socialized because it is communicated only between people through social interaction.

Because the whole of tradition must be held in the memory, cultures commonly adopt various devices to aid the task of remembering. Certain processes are inseparable from the oral transmission of culture. The forms of speech themselves—stories, songs, and prayers—as well as requirements for the exact recitation of certain speech acts serve to shield the memory from extensive change due to influences of the immediate present. Yet, while remembering is essential, forgetting nonetheless serves to eliminate from the tradition anything that becomes irrelevant or meaningless. Only what is humanly relevant is retained in the memory; the rest, in time, is forgotten. The processes of incorporating present experiences in the tradition corresponds with the elimination of details through forgetting. This dynamic transmission of culture, including the function of remembering and forgetting, can be viewed as a process of digestion. New elements are constantly being added, though these alter the whole character of cultural identity only very slowly in a growthlike process. But as the culture is fed by new experiences, certain aspects of tradition that have become irrelevant may be sloughed off by being forgotten. Yet, even the forgotten details retain an effect by having contributed to the ever-changing shape that distinguishes a culture.

Story is an ideal form for effecting this process of transmitting culture. Even the simple tale of the cock and the mouse has, as the Zuni example shows, almost unlimited potential for elaboration and development. It is notable also that the Zuni primordialize the story, thus giving it world-defining authority. This is also done in the etiological or explanatory elements at the story’s end. To attribute to the story an explanation of how the cock got its comb, is a way of validating the story. Because it is evident that cocks have combs, it follows that the story is relevant to the Zuni world of experience.

The consideration of Native American stories is often driven by a desire to comprehend what they mean. Stories somehow are not adequately satisfying in their being heard. Sensing that stories are pregnant with meaning, there is an insatiable hunger for articulateable meaning. My experience has suggested that such an approach may not be fruitful. After spending much time asking Native American people questions like “What does this story mean?” and feeling, by their lack of response, that it must have been a stupid question—or having gained answers completely incompatible with the story—I have had to seek new ways of understanding how these stories bear meaning and how to best appreciate them. Surely any understanding of Native American religions will be lacking until this problem is considered.

Consider certain olfactory experiences. I cannot smell the odor of juniper smoke without it evoking a series of particular images and feelings related to experiences I had while living among Navajo people. If asked what the smell of juniper smoke means to me, I would at first be confounded, for such a question seems inappropriate. The smell bears no translatable message, although it has an emotional impact. The experience is full of meaning, but has no meaning at all in the sense of bearing a message. Listening to music often evokes similar sorts of meaning by awakening a certain emotion, often a series of images or memories connected with the music through one’s personal and cultural history.

The speech acts in Native American cultures certainly convey information that can be discerned by familiarity with the language and its conventions. But these speech acts have an emotional impact, a significance much more far-reaching. In their performance, they are not simply streams of words whose full significance lies in the information they convey. They are complex symbols, networks of sounds that evoke odors, forms, colors, temperatures, and rhythms. All of these nonverbal features and many more create the patterns through which reality is perceived, by which cultural reality is created. They create the moods and goals that give orientation to life. They provide a presence in which actions take on value. Consequently, any story, any song, any prayer is a stimulus that frees strings of associated images, emotions, and patterns. The significance is inseparable from the whole experiential field they evoke. To ask what these speech acts mean and expect a translatable message or a simple explanation is almost always to ask an inappropriate question.

**PERFORMANCE**

So far I have said things about oral traditions in Native American cultures that may appear contradictory. I have contended that, from the Native American perspective, certain verbal utterances are creative acts of the highest order. But I have also maintained that the stories do not have their greatest meaning in terms of bearing abstractable messages. The notion of performance will help resolve the tension and give further insight into the nature of the oral aspects of culture that are so important to Native American religious traditions. Consider the Navajo prayer to the crane.

Dark Male Crane,
I have made a sacrifice to you!

Coming from the home of dark cloud, from the floor of dark cloud, from the square rooms of dark cloud, along the out-trail controlled by dark cloud, along the trail at the tip of dark cloud, you who travel along with the aid of dark cloud!
When you have come upon me by means of your feet of dark cloud you have thereby wholly restored my feet! [Line repeated four times, changing feet to legs, body, mind, and voice.]

May the power that enables you to inhale also enable me to inhale, may the power that enables you to exhale also enable me to exhale, may the power that enables you to utter a word also enable me to utter a word, may the power that enables you to speak also enable me to speak!

May the means that keep your feet in health also keep my feet in health! [Line repeated four times, changing feet to legs, body, mind, and voice.]

With its aid you have nicely made me whole again, you have perfectly restored me! You have put me back into my former condition! May you nicely raise me on my feet, do walk me out nicely!

May you cause me to walk about nicely!
May it be pleasant wherever I go!
May it always be pleasant at my front wherever I go!
May it always be pleasant in my rear wherever I go!
Pleasant again it has come to be, pleasant again it has come to be!

(Father Barad Haile, Origin Legend of the Navajo Flintway, 1943. Reprinted by permission of The University of Chicago Press.)

This prayer to the crane is repeated addressing several others: White Female Crane, Blue Male Crane, Sparkling Female Crane, Wind, Big Fly, Changing Woman, Sun Carrier, Pollen Boy, and Cornbeetle Girl. Appropriate changes are made for the corresponding house descriptions and related phenomena. The other prayers in this ritual process known as Flintway differ only in the names mentioned and the corresponding phenomena.

This prayer may be appreciated in a number of ways. It is aesthetically pleasing in its imagery, symmetry, and rhythms. It conveys relevant information about Navajo culture. The prayer apparently addresses Dark Male Crane in reference to a ritual sacrifice made to it, then describes the figure coming from its home. It then beseeches Dark Male Crane to restore the body of the one praying, concluding with a statement that the restoration has been accomplished and describing the pleasant experience of being restored. This summary may seem like a satisfactory understanding, but there is much more to it.

Knowledge of Native American religions usually comes to people seeking an academic understanding in the form of written texts, usually in collections of texts or in ethnographies. In written text presentations, the oral component is completely lost as is the original language. The text is stripped of the tradition, separated from its cultural context. In this form it can speak only to the reader’s sense of meaning and value. Readers lack the perspective of those who live it. While an English-speaking Navajo who knows the quoted prayer might write it down, perhaps to appear just as I have presented it, this act of writing down a prayer has nothing to do with the performance of Navajo traditions. Writing prayers is not an act of the culture. The prayer, when performed as a religious act, is carefully placed in a ceremonial context according to an extensive set of rules. Indeed, Navajos do not recite the prayer outside of highly specified contexts. Clearly all cultures distinguish between talking about certain aspects of the culture’s traditions and actually performing the acts as part of a living religious tradition. Remember the Navajo man who considered himself poor because he did not have a single song? His poverty was not because he was not familiar with any songs, but because he had no songs that he could assume the responsibility of performing as religious acts.

It is impossible to recreate in writing the experience of a Navajo in the context of the performance of any prayer, for it is an act that engages all of the senses and a lifetime of personal experience in the culture. But even a brief description of the prayer performance adds much to an understanding of the cultural and religious processes engaged as well as a sense of the experiential dimensions evoked by the performance.

The particular prayer quoted is performed as part of a healing ceremonial known as Flintway, which focuses on healing internal injuries or those involving a loss of consciousness or vitality. The complex ceremonial may last a number of days and nights and includes many different ritual processes. It occurs in a Navajo hogan that is sanctified by a ritual blessing. This rite identifies the house with the creation hogan built at the place where the Navajo deities emerged on the earth surface. This blessing establishes the house as a microcosm. The part of the ceremony in which the prayer is performed invokes the ritual bathing of the individual who is being treated, the tying of a flint or jewell onto a medicine pouch, and the recitation of the prayer in a litany fashion by the one being treated and the “singer” or official responsible for performance of the entire ceremonial and the knowledge of its ways. The correspondence of ritual and speech acts contributes to the significance of the performance.

Furthermore, this whole ritual process exists in the context described in Navajo stories. The origin of Flintway is recounted in the story of the healing of the hunter by Gila Monster, outlined in chapter 2. This story is well known to the Navajo people, and, in some sense, it is dramatically brought before them in the ceremonial performance of Flintway. The Flintway ceremonial is performed in the cultural context described in the stories of emergence and creation. That context is evoked with the blessing of the ceremonial hogan in the very first ritual act.

In the performance of the Flintway ritual bath, songs are sung that refer to Gila Monster and to the powers of his medicine bundle. Songs are sung that identify the bath with the preparation for creation of the world in the beginning. The performance of the ritual bath purifies and places the one being treated in the environment of the cosmic forces of creation.

During the prayer, the person being treated ties a flint, a bead, or a jewel onto a medicine pouch as an offering. This is the sacrifice or offering referred to in the prayer. The pouch is identified with the source of the powers that restored the lives of Gila Monster and the hunter in the story. In that story, it was Gila Monster’s medicine pouches that performed the restoration. They were described as two human-shaped agates that restored life by stepping over the reassembled body of Gila Monster. When Gila Monster initiated the hunter youth into the knowledge of Flintway, he prepared a representation of
his agates for use by Navajos. This was the origin of the Flintway cranebill pouches. The construction of these pouches is significant. They are made by removing the flesh and organs from the bodies of a male and female crane and drying their flesh and organs in the sun. The dried parts from the cranes are then replaced in the bills in their natural order. Within the skin of the crane that is left attached to the bill are placed large hollow reeds used as medicine containers. All of the medicines are ritually prepared. One pouch is identified as male, the other female. Only one is used, corresponding to the gender of the person being treated by Flintway.

Even the construction of the crane medicine pouches is a replication of Flintway. The cranes are disassembled and then reassembled in their proper order. They have many other associations with Flintway through the complex preparation of the medicines they contain.

Nor is it without significance that the crane is chosen as a central religious figure of Flintway. In the songs of Flintway, the crane is of interest to the Navajo in this context because of its migratory habits. It is a bird who always knows where to find the best conditions for life. It is a good parent because it always takes its young to a life-giving place. Navajos shout when they see the crane return, for it marks the return to Navajoland of good weather and life-giving conditions. For purposes of Flintway, through all of these associations the crane represents the power of restoration or return of life.

These few observations outline only the most dominant features of a rich, complex network of associations. But, remembering that many additional levels exist, a fuller appreciation of the prayer is possible. It is intoned in a litany fashion by the singer and the person being treated, that is, the singer intones a phrase, and the other person repeats it. The sound of Navajo people praying is distinct, in itself evoking many potent images to anyone familiar with it, especially to Navajos. The person being treated holds the appropriate cranebill pouch while praying and sits on the floor of the hogan, legs extended, facing east.

Flintway prayers are usually performed in sets, that is, the prayer quoted earlier is intoned a number of times with only minor changes in the wording from one recitation to the next. Each set addresses one of two types of figures in the initial line. One set addresses any of a group of deities associated with the waxing and waning of life, seasonal cycles, or diurnal rhythms. This group includes such figures as the Thunders, Cranes, and Sun Carrier. Flintway prayers may also address a second type of figure, entities associated with the cause of the injury or illness being treated. If one is injured in a fall, for example, the Earth, as an entity, may be addressed. Other changes in the wording of the prayer maintain correspondences with the figures being addressed for specific applications of the prayer.

In the first recitation of the prayer, an offering is attached to the pouch at the mention of sacrifice in the prayer. The description that follows of the journey of the figure addressed in the prayer refers to the incident in the Flintway story when the proper help must be found and brought to the person in need, recalling the efforts of the family of the hunter youth to acquire the help of Gila Monster. At another level, this part of the prayer recalls the life-giving associations with the return of the crane or the thunder. The journey itself as described is associated with the return of life.

In the next passage of the prayer, the cure is effected by a process of identifying and associating the one praying with the crane. By being identified with the crane, Navajos believe one obtains the life-giving attributes associated with the crane. The identification process is extended to full body by naming the feet, legs, body, mind, and voice, which in Navajo thought are the vital centers of the body and must be invoked to realize wholeness as well as holiness.

The conditions of restoration associated with ordeliness, wholeness, and mobility are described in the prayer. The changes in verb tense through the prayer, future becoming present, consist of a series that draws attention to the effectiveness of the prayer performance. In this way it is shown that the effects sought by the prayer are accomplished in the very act of performing it.

Consider the power and meaning of the prayer performance. It is not difficult to understand how the prayer performance engages a Navajo person and to appreciate the creative and healing powers of the prayer. Note that the verbal meaning of the prayer is obvious. For all involved, the prayer bears little news. They know that restoration is desirable and that religious help is needed. The performance of the prayer, however, is a complex religious act that engages all the senses in response to its smells, sights, tastes, sounds, colors, and temperatures. It evokes meaningful images based on personal and cultural history. Much of the power proceeds from the network of interrelated images associated with the stories of Flintway and the creation of the Navajo world and to the invoked associations with aspects of the natural world like cranes and thunder.

In the cultural ritual performance of the prayer, the set of images may be carefully channeled to address the specific needs of the motivating situation. The effort is to identify the specific situation with cosmic processes and primordial events. In Flintway, one not only learns that he or she suffers with a heroic figure, but that it is also in the nature of life for one to be subject to such sufferings. There are occasions in its very process that life appears to wane. That is the lesson of the crane, of the sun, and of thunder.

**Conclusion**

When Knud Rasmussen was studying the Eskimo in the 1920s, he had an interesting experience. In collecting information on various aspects of Eskimo life among the Iglulik people in the Baffin Bay area he recorded statements about the rules of life, customs, and taboos. But he noted that whenever he asked them why they did or did not do these things, they did not answer him. Nonetheless, Rasmussen continued to ask for justifications. Finally Aua, chief spokesman for the people, took Rasmussen outside where the bitter wind was
harshly blowing the snow. He pointed across the frozen landscape and said to Rasmussen,

In order to hunt well and live happily, man must have calm weather. Why this constant succession of blizzards and all this needless hardship for men seeking food for themselves and those they care for? Why? Why?

Receiving no answer from Rasmussen, he took him to a nearby home. They entered, and Aua pointed out two shivering children huddled beneath skin rugs. Again Aua addressed Rasmussen,

Why should it be cold and comfortless in here? Kuglo has been out hunting all day, and if he had got a seal, as he deserved, his wife would now be sitting laughing beside her lamp, letting it burn full, without fear of having no blubber left for tomorrow. The place would be warm and bright and cheerful, the children would come out from under their rugs and enjoy life. Why should it not be so? Why?

Again Rasmussen could not answer, and Aua led him to yet another home. This was the home of his sister Natseq, who was very ill. To Rasmussen he said,

Why must people be ill and suffer pain? We are all afraid of illness. Here is this old sister of mine; as far as anyone can see, she has done no evil. She has lived through a long life and given birth to healthy children, and now she must suffer before her days end. Why? Why?

This exchange illustrates the fundamental issues raised in this chapter.

Many of the traits associated with exclusively oral cultures, such as personalization, immediacy, and concreteness, may also be found in traditions that contain written records and texts. The performance of culture is largely oral whether or not there is writing, and oral characteristics are certainly not absent from written communications. Aua’s point, it seems, was that Eskimos are not peculiar in being unable to explain in simple statements the nature of existence or certain acts of culture. When confronted with the same questions he asked the Eskimos, Rasmussen too was unable to answer Aua’s questions about the nature of existence in the Eskimo environment and doubtless he would have been little more successful at answering such questions in his own Danish environment. Yet, when Rasmussen confronted the details of Eskimo culture, a culture alien to him, he could not resist asking questions like “Why? What does it mean? Why do you do this?” I suggest that such questions are the product of a removed perspective and correspond more closely with literacy, with understanding through interpreting writing, than for the immediacy of orality and the performed aspects of culture. For the exclusively oral cultures of Native Americans, such questions do not arise.

Differences in modes of thought correspond with the presence or absence of writing in a culture. While I would firmly hold that all humankind is equal in terms of mental capacity and faculties of reason, I would also hold that writing introduces possibilities for exercising certain modes of thought that are difficult, if not impossible, without it. Certain ways of scrutinizing discourse and language events are facilitated by writing. The semi-permanency of writing permits and encourages more extensive criticism and analysis. It overcomes the impossibility of juxtaposing language events that occur at widely varying times and places. When writing is present, the capacity of memory and the mental processes of recall and data comparison are not constraints on thought and the possibilities of certain kinds of intellectual activities are expanded. Certain cultural processes can also occur as a consequence. Based on the analysis and criticism of texts, one person may write his or her understanding of certain aspects of these documents. These writings, along with the texts on which they are based, can be scrutinized and written about by another person, and so on, thus forming a second order tradition of criticism and a type of intellectulation impossible without writing. This achievement comes at a price, of course, for writing is often only an abstraction or interpretation of a performed cultural event. Writing may also create a distance between a person and his or her verbal acts. The point is that approaching exclusively oral cultures, or even the performed aspect of any culture, from the perspective nurtured by writing may well result in forced conclusions and misunderstandings.

Returning now to the Eskimo example, Rasmussen’s questions arose out of his own cultural past, the post-Enlightenment tradition of thought characterized in part by the collection, comparison, analysis, and criticism of data from a variety of cultures, an effort that greatly expands the range of human communication and knowledge. But the existence of this kind of enterprise depends on literacy. Questions of meaning and justification are the stock in trade of this kind of intellectual tradition for they are necessary in bridging the radical differences in surface appearance.

These differences in modes of thought have nothing to do with mental capacity or with stages in human or mental development. Rather, they are related to differences in modes of communication, to the presence or absence of writing.

Approaching an understanding of Native American religions from a Western academic tradition based in literacy, it is necessary to be sensitive to the significance of these differences for they underlie certain distinctive aspects of Native American religions as well as some of the difficulties that must be overcome in order to gain an understanding of these religions. Where European-American academic thought tends toward analysis and criticism—that is, the breaking down of our subjects of interest and seeking principles that hold the pieces together—Native Americans tend toward synthesis and reflection—that is, they attempt to place the object of interest into a broader, often cosmic context—and they note the compatibility that gives expression to the significance of the object. An illness becomes bearable and curable if it is seen as part of the processes that are distinctive to the culture. A life is meaningful if its sufferings and joys, defeats and victories, degradations and elevations can be imagined as part of the human story. This process is inseparable from what I call religion.
Action and Performance

O
n a cold, moonless February night, I walked the zigzag road up the mesa to the Hopi village of Shupaulovi. Most of the houses were dark. Light came only from the hatchways atop the several kivas of that tiny village. The yellow lantern light glowing from these partially subterranean ceremonial chambers gave away the places from which the sonorous songs softly permeated the crisp night air. As I arrived at the top of the mesa, a young Hopi man came from a dark house and asked my business. Finding that I had come to see the night dances, he accompanied me to the top of one of the kivas, where we peered through the hatchway to watch the kachinas dancing within. Several other blanket-wrapped young people joined us in the cold.

The line of awesomely beautiful masked figures sang to the drummed accompaniment and danced in a stately fashion around the perimeter inside the kiva. Small children, married adults, and elders lined the rectangular kiva on wooden benches. From the middle of the floor beneath the ladder that led into the kiva a stove spread warmth throughout.

While we watched the dance, a second group of kachinas approached from below the mesa edge, having finished their dance in a kiva there. Some removed their masks and chatted quietly as they waited for the group of kachinas in the kiva to conclude their performance. One kachina who remained masked would occasionally approach the top of the kiva and utter a distinctive call to announce the presence of his group.