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Timothy Thomason, Northern Arizona University

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Ben Silversmith

Edited by Timothy C. Thomason

Author Notes
Ben Silversmith is a psychotherapist and a Navajo traditional practitioner. Timothy C. Thomason is a Professor in the Educational Psychology Department at Northern Arizona University in Flagstaff, Arizona.

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Navajo psychology is cemented in the four directions, which manifest the concepts of thinking, planning, life and hope. Navajo psychology sees the interrelationship of the mind, bodily functions, the spirit and the environment. It interacts with the holy people through songs, prayers, and ceremonies in order to maintain equilibrium among all factors in one's life. A medicine man is a professional native doctor who performs healing ceremonies to cure or try to cure any ailments or sicknesses, whether they be physical, mental, spiritual, or environmental. There is no question that the chanting, prayer, and music is very beneficial to patients. It is fairly common for an Indian to leave a "White" hospital, then go to a medicine man and be cured.

Little is known about the herbalist's approach, since the locations of herbs, the specific properties of herbs, the diseases they are used for, and the prayers used to enhance their curative powers, are considered professional secrets. Anglo physicians understand that, as a result of centuries of trial and error, herbs that improve certain illnesses have been identified.

Herbalists have the power to heal certain diseases, illnesses, broken bones, body disfigurements, toothaches, etc. They know many different types of plants and mixtures of plants which can be used for healing. Some herbs must be from fresh plants, some must be from dry plants, some herbs come only from the roots, and some only from the pollen. The use of all herbs is directed by the holy spirits through prayers and songs.

Herbs are usually collected for a specific reason and must have a purpose at all times. Some herbalists collect various plants in certain seasons when they are visible. They would then be kept in a safe place and used when necessary. Some herbalists collect their healing herbs only when they are needed. They will pray and tell the spirit who the herb is for and how it will be used. They ask for permission to use the herb for the purpose of healing. To get herbs or various plants, the herbalist has to pay a price to the spirit to get the medicine, not in money, but in corn pollen, corn meal, precious stones, etc. The philosophy of a Navajo medicine man is that in order to receive, you must give, thus completing the cycle.

Healing is a gift bestowed only upon a special few who are able to contact Talking God, Black God, or any of the twelve Holy Ones. The five ways of
contacting the Spirit are hand trembling, star gazing, listening, crystal gazing, and hot charcoal study. Star gazing and crystal gazing are the Navajo X-rays. The healer selects a certain star and concentrates on it, or looks into a crystal and concentrates on it. Before long the star or crystal will yield a detailed picture of the organ within the patient which is diseased.

Ethical medicine men take illnesses or their cause out of the patient's body, while the bad ones put an illness in, as in a witch's hex. An ethical practitioner does not plant hexes, but reverses them. Hand trembling, listening, and charcoal study are all used to determine the type of illness, what ceremony will be used, how it will be done, and sometimes who will perform the ceremony.

There are many kinds of both visible and invisible causes for illness. It can range from mistreating a pet cat to being unkind to the universe. It is known that people are created in the image of the great spirit. One should respect the creation of the universe, the environment, natural phenomena, animals, and human beings. Causes of mental illness include unwholesome or immoral personal action, violent or wicked language, jealousy, witchcraft, incest, handling of corpses, hateful thoughts, robbing, killing, abortion, suicidal attempts, or any other emotional stress.

Creatures such as mammals, amphibians, and reptiles are probably the most dangerous species that bring mental illness. Ordinary contacts with domestic or pet animals and the viewing of the normal behavior of wild species normally does not bring misfortune. However, if you mistreat domestic or wild animals, it will affect your body, mind, and spirit tremendously. It could bring sores to your body, disfigure your body, or lead to blindness, deafness, articulation defects, cancer, respiratory problems, rheumatism, seizures, mental disorders, diarrhea, vomiting, problems with urination and bowel movements, sudden broken bones, etc. Unborn children are particularly sensitive to such illnesses, and the illness will become known after the child is born. The sickness might come at an early age, at adult age, or it might not come at all. The child might be stricken with various mental or physical defects. Illness in children may result from misbehavior on the part of the father or mother.
illnesses can be corrected, but some are beyond the help of both Anglo doctors and native medicine men.

It is known that natural phenomena such as the sun, moon, wind, rain, and especially lightening can cause illness. It is well known through legends, songs, and prayers that all animals are protected by lightening, wind, water, and earth. Illness can result from beating, killing, eating, dissecting, and even some touching of animals. There are significant and unique patterns to follow, from killing to butchering or dressing the animal. Songs and prayers are sometimes used throughout the process. Other illnesses could result from getting bitten by an animal or from viewing the mating act of animals, especially the bear, deer, and snake families. This can quickly disfigure your body and is the chief known cause of mental illness. Illness results from sexual intercourse with these animals and this cannot be cured, since the process is no longer known by herbalists or medicine men.

Another mental illness or irritation results from involvement with non-Navajo beings, including casual contact. One of the most dangerous and forbidden acts is to have sexual intercourse with non-Navajo beings. Today inter-marriage of Navajos with people of other races is common. Mental illness can result from contact with corpses, or touching or smelling their blood or odor. If a person dies with this spell on himself, mental illness will result. This is why a soldier who has been in combat will return with evil sickness on his mind. It is always best to purify him with enemy chant songs and prayers to restore his image, identity, and self-awareness to correct his mind.

One of the most dangerous and forbidden acts is abortion, which to the Navajo has been considered at the same level as murder. The act of conceiving is a gift from the spirit. In order to be complete, a person must obey the natural laws. Abortion is an unfortunate, unapproved act which is detached from spirit and nature. It results in various illnesses, such as cancer, paralysis, disfigurement, seizures, deafness, blindness, etc. The sickness is similar to the nature of an infant - complete helplessness. Miscarriage is somewhat similar, but this is beyond one’s control and usually there are herbs or cures for various illnesses.
Counseling and psychotherapy is another way of curing an illness. However, first the medicine man must describe the behavior. Sometimes it is not possible to observe behavior, and the medicine man has to talk to family members to get some history or description of the behavior. Diagnosing will determine how to treat the patient or what medicine to use. Smoking mountain smoke with a sweat bath may be used for purification of one's mind and soul. Through this process the medicine man sings and prays. The medicine man may have to perform a ceremony more than once before the cure is complete, but once is usually enough if the diagnosing and ceremonies are done correctly.

The medicine man is a practitioner of Navajo healing science, which is accepted among Indians and even some non-Indians. Various medicine men consult with Anglo doctors on the staffs of the reservation hospitals. The new respectability of healers arises from the renewed interest in native healing and religious traditions among young politically aware Navajos, and has been supported by several Anglo doctors in the U.S. Public Health Service. However, there is a controversial claim that "85% of all illness is psychosomatic in origin." Anglo physicians are cautious, yet they still endorse the usefulness of the natural approach.

One doctor said "I've never seen a medicine man make a miraculous cure of something like cancer, but I have seen their approach cheer up and bring temporary improvement to terminal cancer patients. But as far as psychosomatic ailments are concerned, they are far more effective than an Anglo psychiatrist." I believe we should enlist medicine men in treating the reservation's principle medical problems like alcoholism and mental illness. I speculate that at least two-thirds of admissions in any hospital are connected with either alcohol-related illness or accidents. Some hospital doctors cannot diagnose the illness of an Indian, so perhaps Native American doctors should be utilized.

The Navajo traditional ceremony is meant to be a very vital and secret process before the holy gods. The patient is to plan and almost has to sacrifice and should try to be open-minded for the curing process. The medicine man has to sacrifice his time, thoughts, and soul to communicate with the gods for ritual
processing. He is subjected to disease if he misleads the patient or performs improper behavior during the ritual. He is to confine himself to an isolated condition and eliminate his normal life pattern. If he performs some ritual ceremony without the blessing of his teacher, or sings some songs or performs prayers without being blessed, he will be subject to mental distress.

Today many Navajos do art work such as sand painting or rug weaving. Many young artists get designs from books, photos, or from viewing the process of painting at a sing. They are not blessed to perform these paintings or weave rugs. They do not know the significant prayers, songs, or the spiritual names of the gods, water, snakes, birds, or animals, and yet they draw them. This results in illness. Ceremonies can be done to bless the person's thoughts and performance.

The clan system is very important among the Navajo. It is through the clan groups that Navajo life is recognized by the holy gods. There used to be some 250 different clans a long time ago, but there are about 53 still in existence today. It is forbidden to intermarry within one's own clan group. The mother's clan group are one's brothers, sisters, nephews, cousins, uncles, etc. This continues into each new generation. The father's clan system is the same, but will branch off or dissolve by the fourth generation or so. Each person should know the clan system through the legends and history of their own family, but many people do not know it. For this reason, sometimes marriage takes place within one's own clan, resulting in mental illness in the person or their offspring in later years.

In every religion, there is love, there is the great spirit, there is God. Every religion is the same; we all pray, sing, and rejoice in God's love. People often say "which god?" but we say God is one, the only God, the Great Spirit. It is the spirit who heals, not the medicine man. The patient heals himself through mind and faith. The medicine man only helps the patient concentrate and believe in himself. The medicine man communicates with the Great Spirit, interprets the language, prays, and sings to the holy spirit. The medicine man only facilitates the healing process, and this holds true for Anglo doctors, too. The medicine man gets himself in harmony with the universe, earth, and nature to practice medicine and cure ill patients mentally, physically, and spiritually.