

SECTION 3: WITCHERY WAY (ʔánt'í·ží)¹ AND WERE-ANIMALS (ye·na·lʌo·ši·)

Digest

When an English-speaking Navaho refers to “witchcraft” or a cognate it is most often ʔánt'í which he has primarily in mind. First Man and First Woman were the originators of Witchery Way, the beginnings of which are thus placed in the pre-emergence period.

The classic Witchery Way technique is that mentioned in the emergence legend. A preparation (usually called “poison” by English-speaking informants) is made of the flesh of corpses. The flesh of children and especially of twin children is preferred, and the bones at the back of the head and skin whorls are the prized ingredients. When this “corpse poison”² is ground into powder it “looks like pollen.” It may be dropped into a hogan from the smokehole, placed in the nose or mouth of a sleeping victim or blown from furrowed sticks into the face of someone in a large crowd. “Corpse poison” is occasionally stated to have been administered in a cigarette. Fainting, lockjaw, a tongue black and swollen, immediate unconsciousness or some similar dramatic symptom is usually said to result promptly. Sometimes, however, the effects are less obvious. The victim gradually wastes away, and the usual ceremonial treatments are unavailing.

Witches are associated with death and the dead. They are likewise closely associated with incest. Suspicion of incest means by that very fact suspicion of Witch activity and vice versa.

Both men and women may become witches (ʔádaánt'í),

although references to male Witches are considerably more numerous. Almost all the female witches mentioned in actual anecdotes are old women; some informants insisted that only childless women could be witches. It was agreed generally that transvestites were neither more nor less likely than ordinary persons to become witches. Witchery is most often learned from a parent, a grandparent or a spouse, but a spouse also often remains ignorant that the partner is a Witch.³ Killing a near relative, normally a sibling, is a part of the initiation into Witchery Way. Persons become Witches in order to wreak vengeance, in order to gain wealth or simply to injure wantonly—most often motivated by envy. Wealth is obtained by robbing graves or by a practice of fee-splitting. The one Witch would make a person seriously ill and his partner (a practitioner) would treat him, and the two would split the fees. Or, the Witch-(singer) would cause illness, then the diagnostician would recommend treatment by the same singer-(Witch). Direct black-mail is seldom mentioned, but victims are most often rich individuals.

Were-Animals

(ye·na·llo·ši·).⁴ Witches are active primarily at night, roaming about at great speed in skins of wolf, coyote and other animals (bear, owl, desert fox, crow). This is one bit of witchcraft lore with which even the youngest Navaho is familiar. Indeed, ye·na·llo·ši· and maʔi·coh (“wolf”) I have found to be the most common colloquial terms for “witch.”

Witches are tracked, normally the morning after an incident: when dirt falling in from the hogan smokehole, unusually loud barkings of the dogs or “strange” noises or other occurrences have made the dwellers in a hogan feel that a Witch has been there. The tracks of were-animals are usually spoken of as larger than those of the actual animals. Sometimes the trail is followed⁵ a long distance, only to end at the home of some Navaho. In other cases the Witch is caught and often recognized as a clan or real sibling. The trapped Witch tries to buy freedom with beads or other jewelry, but these are refused with horror. Sometimes the Witch is shot at night or at such a distance that

recognition is impossible. Then some Navaho (often at a distant spot) turns up with an unexplained wound,

Witches' Sabbath

Witches as were-animals meet at night to plan concerted action against victims, to initiate new members, to have intercourse with dead women, to practice cannibalism, to kill victims at a distance by ritualized practices. The place of assembly (*ʔánt'í báho·yan*) is most often said to be a cave. (There was general agreement that all types of witch activity must be carried on away from home.) The Witches sit in a circle, surrounded by piles or baskets of corpse flesh. Some informants said that rows of identifiable human heads were likewise stored in the cave. The Witches are naked save for masks⁶ and many beads and other articles of jewelry. Their bodies are painted in a fashion reminiscent of that carried out in ceremonials. The proceedings are directed by a chief Witch "for whom all the others just work." This chief Witch and other leading Witches are thought of as rich, but they are assisted by a class of menial "helpers," and these are said to be poor—so poor that sheer self-preservation demands that they "work for" the Witches.

English-speaking informants will describe the proceedings as "kind of like a sing" or "just like a bad sing." Most informants agreed that songs were sung and dry paintings (often described as of "colored ashes") made. Some informants specified that the paintings represented the intended victim. One interview⁷ suggests that the assembled witches spit, urinate and defecate upon the sandpictures. A few stated that the chief Witch shot a turquoise bead with a small bow at some definite part of the figure represented in the painting. Some informants assert that the bows are made of human shin bones.

Disagreements

On the whole, there is substantial agreement between informants on the major features of Witchery ideology. Night activity, were-animals, association with corpses and incest, killing of

a sibling as part of initiation, various points of technique—these traits are mentioned in interview after interview and are not denied explicitly or implicitly in any. This concordance holds also for the literature. Every statement about Witchery in Matthews and the Franciscan Fathers is confirmed by several or more of my interviews. A very few points in the published material are not specifically mentioned by my informants.⁸

In short, the general outlines are very consistent. Variation is almost entirely restricted to details of technique, costume, description of the meeting place, and the like. And then there are certain features with which some informants were not familiar or were less familiar. The use of a bearskin by the Witch was mentioned by only two of my informants.⁹ Only one informant spoke of the use of the genitalia of corpses. Other details (such as necrophilia, for example) were referred to spontaneously by only three informants. It was not possible to test all of these embellishments with all informants, but most of them were checked with the group of twenty-five. In most cases, the check informants would say, "Oh, yes, I have heard of that" or "Yes, some people say that" or something of this sort. Thus in the case of necrophilia twenty-three informants admitted that they had heard tales involving this feature.

Active disagreements center around such matters as what creatures could be were-animals. All agreed on wolf (almost invariably mentioned first) and coyote. Nine of the check group denied bear and eleven, owl. Only three would admit desert fox, and only one, crow. One of Hill's informants spoke of were-animals stealing sheep, but this was denied by all of my check group. Two of this group denied body painting for were-animals. Eight of the check group felt that songs were not used in Witchery Way but only in Frenzy Witchcraft.¹⁰ Twenty-two of the check group insisted that plants likewise were used only in Frenzy Witchcraft. (Actually, "runs into the mouth"¹¹ is the only plant spontaneously mentioned in connection with Witchery;¹² it is also mentioned by one informant in connection with Wizardry.)¹³ The check group explicitly denied data in the literature only with respect to some statements by Newcomb.¹⁴ All denied the association of red with witches and that the heart