

**Source of the Sacred: Navajo Corn Pollen**

*Hááne' Baadahoste' ígíí* (Very Sacred Story)

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“The Navaho have that wonderful image of what they call the pollen path. Pollen is the life source, the pollen path is the path to the center. The Navaho say,  
*“Oh, beauty before me, beauty behind me, beauty to the right of me, beauty to the left of me, beauty above me, beauty below me, I’m on the pollen path.”*  
—Joseph Campbell

## **Introduction**

On a snowy day in a tiny town in southwestern Colorado just after Thanksgiving of 2007, I sat drinking coffee with a Navajo elder, Milton Bluehouse. He spoke softly of how the Navajo tradition and language are poetry, and that the Diné (“The People”) live in a culture of metaphors. Metaphors are symbols and figures of speech in which the storyteller brings meaning to their story, their point, or the anecdote. The Navajo tradition, Milton told me that morning, is built on powerful stories and symbols that teach virtue, vice, and meaning indirectly. Therefore his tradition can only be interpreted by a poet. “You are a poet,” he told me. He spoke of how non-Indian anthropologists, ethnomusicologists, explorers, and tourists have portrayed and understood the Diné people. “We are misrepresented,” he said. They are misunderstood because the complexity of the Navajo culture cannot be understood by the average traveller or scholar. Our conversation inspired me to write about the Navajo people.

For clarification and to explain myself, I am not saying I am above the average traveller or scholar, nor am I an academic authority on the Navajo people or their traditions. I have known Milton Bluehouse, his wife Irma, and his brother Phil, who will enter this study later, for most of my life. My father and the Bluehouses are close friends, and we have made many trips down to their sheep ranch out near Ganado, Arizona on the reservation, and they have come up to Colorado on many occasions. I therefore base my vantage point in this study on trust and access; their trust enabled my access. My personal

connection to a few Navajo elders has allowed me a special perspective into what those Navajos think of their culture, and how they talk about their long history. My conversations with the Bluehouses (and another Navajo woman I'll soon introduce) didn't have the common filters or restrictions that often affect other researchers of the Diné. I have been blessed to have these conversations and this time with these Navajos. Though the Bluehouses inspired me to embark upon this project, another Navajo woman is the focal point of this paper.

Many months after my initial conversation with Milton Bluehouse, in June and then again in October 2008, I stayed with a traditional Navajo medicine woman, Patricia Belinte (also a friend of my father), and her family way out in the pinyon and juniper hills near Vanderwagon, New Mexico. Patricia was taught by her father, who was also a medicine man.<sup>1</sup> Her particular way of healing patients is through smoke and coals. She can read illnesses, the past, future, and omens in charcoal and her crystals, and people come to her for various ceremonies. She has an immense wealth of knowledge of the natural world, of the plants, microclimates, seasons, animals, and geography of Navajo land. Last July, we drove her big blue pick-up out to the edge of the Canyon, as she called the big gorge in the otherwise hilly country, and would talk about things. She knows exactly where she can find a fine red mud used in a drink to relieve menstrual cramps, or along which overgrown old roads through her property the flower called Navajo Tea flourished, or where various rare flowers and herbs grew that she used for ceremonies. She knows where fine layers of yellow, blue, red, white, or black sands used for traditional sandpaintings can be found. Using Patricia's ecological knowledge of the

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<sup>1</sup> Medicine bundles are passed down through generations within a Navajo family, so when the holder dies, that medicine within the bundle and from the previous medicine person goes to the successor. In this case, Patricia inherited the power of her father, and is now a prominent medicine woman.

lands surrounding her home, we went out and found a yucca plant, dug up its root, and cut a section to make soap. We replanted the yucca, so it would continue to grow strong. I was captivated by her knowledge of the natural world. My head brimmed. Through these explorations and conversations, I detected the casual reiteration of a certain word, *táádidíín*, or corn pollen. I became drawn to this ubiquitous presence in the Navajo tradition. Later that fall, after I'd gone to school and then gone back to the reservation, we talked about corn pollen.

In my conversations with Patricia Belinte and Milton Bluehouse, I found the Navajo tradition to be fantastically complex. All its stories create a web of interconnecting explanations and way of life. Thomas Raitt, Religious Studies professor from the Ohio College of Wooster, remarks on the complexity of Navajo tradition, and has wondered if a source of unity holds the traditions together: “Navajo religious rituals are so multifaceted that one has trouble perceiving any centre of gravity. The inevitable question is: What are the sources of unity behind the diversity?”<sup>2</sup> In this paper, I consider Raitt’s question and answer it how I have come to believe the Navajo culture is centered. I’ve named the common underlying thread that connects the complexity of myth, metaphor, and tradition of the Diné people the source of the sacred. The source of the sacred is corn pollen.

Corn pollen lies at the heart of this study, called *táádidíín* by the Navajo. In my literature review and personal interviews, I have found differences in the meaning ascribed to corn pollen, though most observers and culture members agree that it is sacred. These differences are especially interesting in light of the centrality of corn pollen in Navajo culture. This paper will discuss the ubiquity of corn pollen in ceremonies,

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<sup>2</sup> Raitt, p. 525

rituals, and daily life. The complexity of *táádidíín* fascinates me, and the challenge of understanding it intrigues me.

Corn pollen is also relatively unexplored. Nowhere is there a near-complete examination of corn pollen's meanings and uses. Raitt's "Ritual Meaning of Corn Pollen Among the Navajo Indians" was the only study I found that came relatively close to doing justice to the multiplicity of corn pollen, though his paper is only five pages long. Many standard texts, such as Trudy Griffin-Pierce's *Native Peoples of the Southwest*, and Steven Trimble's *The People* do not even *mention* corn pollen, or corn for that matter, in the entire body of the book.

Corn pollen is to me a deeper study of a single part of Navajo culture, because corn pollen to the Navajo is an omnipresent part of their tradition. As I've said, as well as Raitt and many others, Navajo tradition is fantastically complex. Milton Bluehouse told me that one has to *really* understand corn pollen to even begin to write about it; "you mean it, or you don't mean it," he said. An understanding of corn pollen necessitates the cultural knowledge of generations, and to "mean it" is to grasp the literal, poetic, ritual, and daily value of corn pollen. To "not mean it" is to simply write about corn pollen, for the sole purpose of an assignment or casual dabble in writing. Out of respect for Milton's remarks, I again want to clarify; I do not attempt to offer a complete explanation of corn pollen here. It is my hope only to try to give some depth to one aspect of Navajo culture. I hope to discuss this source of the sacred through the significance of corn pollen.

My route in this paper is meandering, there is no traditional beginning—middle—end flow. My tone reflects general Navajo discourse, which is highly indirect: the Navajo rarely get right to their point in a story, as they take you around on their words and

meanings and anecdotes. Often you've forgotten your original question by the time a Navajo elder pauses, though you've learned many more things than you'd anticipated, in a wonderful way. The Navajo story-like way of talking comes from their roots in an oral tradition. Therefore, I write with this same leisurely pace to honor their style of discourse and thinking.

Patricia Belinte and Milton, Irma, and Phil Bluehouse are the Navajos I have talked to about corn pollen and their traditions, and I want to emphasize that they are the focus of my paper. I've spent time with these elders and listened to their stories firsthand. Part of my intent in this project is to show the intersections between the Navajo account of corn pollen and the way scholarly literature describes corn pollen, through the academic research I've done. I have found that corn pollen lacks sufficient attention in standard texts on the Navajo tradition, and so I focus my study on conversations with the Bluehouses and my interview with Patricia Belinte. Patricia means more to me than texts because her knowledge evolves out of her life, history, and experience, and not from a book. I want to give readers a primary account of Navajo traditional culture, without the misinterpretations usually common in scholarly methodology.

Having given some background on Patricia Belinte, I want to give some to the Bluehouses as well. The family has a rich political, traditional, and historical past. Milton was the Speaker of the House on the Navajo Nation council, and then the appointed fourth President of the Navajo Nation in 1999. Irma's great grandfather, Henry Chee Dodge, was the first president of the Navajo Nation in the late 1800s. He led the Navajo people back to their tribal lands from Fort Sumner, New Mexico on the horrific Long Walk from 1864-1868. So the Bluehouses have a grounded history, with deep

understanding and reverence for their tradition. Understanding the history of the Diné and corn is important in establishing a foundation for understanding corn pollen's role in Navajo traditions.

## **The Navajo**

### *History of the Navajo and corn*

The Navajo arrived in the American Southwest about five to six hundred years ago.<sup>3</sup> The Navajo are now recognized as the largest tribe in the United States, with about 269,202 tribal members, and 15 million acres of land in the Four Corners area of New Mexico, Arizona, and Utah.<sup>4</sup> Despite their modern strength and numbers, the Navajo have had a tortured history with European settlers and the United States federal government.<sup>5</sup>

The textbooks say the Navajo were a branch from the larger Athabascan tribe of Alaska, and they had to learn how to live in the Southwest from the other Native Americans in the area, mainly their Hopi neighbors. The oral stories of the Diné disagree with the textbooks. The Navajo creation story tells of the people coming up into this world (the Navajo fourth world), into the Southwest, to where the Holy Ones and the Creator meant them to be. I will recount sections of the creation story in a later section.

Following academic accounts, the Navajos learned corn cultivation from the Hopi, who call themselves “Children of Corn.” Maize came to the Hopi from the

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<sup>3</sup> Toelken, p. 42; number based on the assumption of the amount of time the Navajo have been in this area, as the certain tribe we have know them to be.

<sup>4</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, “The American Indian and Alaska Native Population: 2000”: numbers based on number of people responding as members of the Navajo Nation Tribe

<sup>5</sup> For more on Navajo history, see Duane Champagne's *Chronology of Native North American History: From Pre-Columbian Times to the Present*, 1994; Wilcomb E. Washburn's *Handbook of North American Indians*, Vol. 4 (*History of Indian-White Relations*), 1988.

indigenous peoples of Mesoamerica who domesticated *teosinte*, the wild ancestor of all cultivated maize varieties, in northern Mexico more than seven thousand years ago.

Corn's entrance into the livelihood of Native Americans transformed the landscape, as tribes cleared forest and grasslands for the cultivation of maize.<sup>6</sup> Maize became a part of the Navajo identity, just as maize had for the people of Mesoamerica.

William Doolittle, professor in the geography department at the University of Texas at Austin, describes and discusses agricultural practices in North America prior to the arrival of Europeans, predominantly the Spanish. In *Cultivated Landscapes of North America*, Doolittle talks about how diverse landscape elements encourage different agricultural strategies, and so distinctive agricultural land patterns are formed.<sup>7</sup> For the Navajo farmers of the desert Southwest, the aridity of the landscape determined cornfield cultivation patterns, and they devised methods that allowed them to take advantage of early spring flooding and loose, light, sandy soils. Corn cooperated with farmers with its high tolerance to heat and aridity, and the people shaped their fields, erosion control, and water conservation according to corn. Doolittle's text demonstrates that cornfield layout, location, and other particular characteristics prove how farmers, including the Navajo, are intertwined with the earth systems. These systems include sun, climate, weather, aspects (northerly—southerly directions), moisture, and especially microclimates in planning field locations. An understanding of geography also shows the transition and importance of maize from Mesoamerica to the peoples of the Southwest. Navajo country is diverse in its desert geography, and important to the history of the people, in relation to the way they've lived, survived, and practiced their traditions.

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<sup>6</sup> Price and Morrow, *Canyon Gardens: The Ancient Pueblo Landscapes of the American Southwest*

<sup>7</sup> Doolittle (2000)

*The Land*

In the beginning of my interview with her, Patricia spoke of how the Navajo came to be where they are now, and why they are who they are. The creator did these things:

The creator created man and woman—and different types of race, the nationality, I guess you would say, so he created all the different colors of people he wanted... and so he put us here... He made the white man and gave them their own world, in England, and put them there... As he created them, he gave them all their religions: this is what you're going to be like, this is how you're gonna worship me, this is how you're gonna take care of all these creations that I'm going to do for you, you're gonna live this way of life. This is your tradition. That's how he created each one of us. Native Americans and America, you know, he created different—the American Sioux, Navajo, the Hopi—those things, those of us that are related, close neighbors you can say, and Hopis pretty much use corn pollen... In the old times we were pretty much sharing a lot of stuff with [the Hopi], until somehow all this land dispute came about. (2:00)  
They kind of shared the same information... The natives, they pretty much share this corn pollen. (1:40)

The Holy Ones placed all the peoples on the earth where they were meant to be; the Navajo were placed between the four sacred mountains. In a later section of the interview, Patricia said, “Where we landed is where we were put, this is the Navajo Nation” (32:16). The four sacred mountains of the Navajo people are Mt. Hesperus in Colorado, marking the northern reach of Navajo Land; Mt. Blanca in New Mexico, marking the east; Mt. Taylor in New Mexico as well, to the southeast; and San Francisco Peak to the west. The actual, official boundaries of the Reservation are smaller.

As for ecological location, about ninety percent of the Navajo Reservation lies in the Upper Sonoran and pinyon/juniper zones, between 3,000 and 7,000 feet in elevation. The reservation consists entirely of a section of the Colorado Plateau. There are both subtle and dramatic climatic and ecological differences in the vast area of the reservation,

including the kinds of plants found in certain areas. These differences include soil, moisture, and altitude changes.<sup>8</sup>

### *Creation*

The Navajo creation story is fantastically long, complex, and detailed. I will recount a fraction of it, for the purpose of giving more substance to corn pollen. Irma Bluehouse told me, “you can’t just talk about certain things, you have to know the story to it.” I choose to recount the creation story version written out by Leland C. Wyman (1897-1988), a renowned anthropologist who spent some 50 years of his life researching Navajo ethnology, living with the Diné, participating in their ceremonies, and writing down their traditions. Through his commitment to studying the Navajo, Wyman has become a non-Indian authority on Navajo tradition. I choose his version also because it is clearly written, and is the story that the majority of academic texts refer to when referencing Navajo creation.

A part of the creation story tells of how pollen came to be sacred. As told by Wyman’s informant River Junction Curly, in *Blessingway*, pollen became sacred to the Diné through Changing Woman, the mother of everyone. The story goes like this: in the very beginning, the gods were holding meetings, discussing what kind of guidance they would live by, led by Talking God. They met and met every four days and discussed in vain, even in the places where the Holy People lived it was discussed in vain, meaning the meetings accomplished nothing, and no conclusions were drawn as to how to live. The gods kept alluding to the dews and pollen in their meetings; “Even then, when they

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<sup>8</sup> Harrington and Leonard, p. 440-443; Elmore 1944

all came together again, they talked about the dews gathered from many places and the pollen from everything, it is said,” said Curly.

Meanwhile, Changing Woman had set forth to Blanca Peak, and she heard a cornbeetle singing. She sang back to it, and sat before it covered in dew, “it was a remarkable sight to see her covered with so much dew as she sat there. She had a lot of Earth’s dew on her.” So she gathered up the beetle, the dews, and the pollen from the flowers. And so, “this is the way she acquired these things,” Curly remembers.

The gods were still discussing in vain, though this time Coyote rushed in. He was called First Scolder Coyote and told to go away, as “he had no respect for holy things,” and what they were doing there was holy. Coyote flashed back, “Why don’t you say that I am the wise one... Why have you forgotten your mother? She has what you are looking for,” he said. “She has that with which you will live.” So they consulted Changing Woman, the mother of everyone, and she gave them the holy Cornbeetle Girl and Cornbeetle Boy, Pollen Boy and Pollen Girl, White Corn Boy and Yellow Corn Girl.<sup>9</sup> Changing Woman dressed those first six holy people with pollen, and so pollen came to be holy, personified in these Holy Ones. So goes a literature version of the creation story, one version of many, I’d imagine. Navajo creation stories are all fundamentally similar, but they differ in how they are told and on subtle points.

I here mention parts of the creation story from my interview with Patricia Belinte to go with the literary telling. Patricia began by speaking about the creation of pollen, going back to the creator.

When I think about corn pollen, when we’re talking about it, the creator, I guess, it goes back to the creator. Back to the creation story, coming out of the four

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<sup>9</sup> Wyman, p. 618-9

worlds. And the story that was, you know, told by a lot of Navajos, maybe traditional medicine persons, and stuff like that. (0:00-1:40)

The creation story of the Navajo emerging up from through the worlds, into the fourth world, parallels the growth of plants up from the earth. The parallel between the growth of plants and the birth of the Navajo is symbolic; plants are highly sacred. Navajo ethnobotanist Donna House said of plants, though not of corn particularly, “they know you, have a relationship with you. It's a sense of recognizing the plants, the animals, the insects as beings. They were here way before the five-finger people.”<sup>10</sup>

Patricia said 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. She says:

And so when the Creator, you know, created the Diné, he also gave them food. This will be your food, this is very sacred. It will be your prayer. There is a prayer in it. When you plant it, you will see it. it will will grow, It will be your corn and your prayer... you will see it grow. It's amazing how the creator made all of us, created everything... The Diné, once they were given the corn and this was going to be your food, and this was to be your prayer. They were given things that they were gonna carry out in life. As they were going through the four worlds where they were being created, they were given in each world they were given things that they came out with, and when they came to the fourth world, where it was they were given the corn, and this is the real base of all those things, the fourth world.

Patricia says that 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.

When we were created, when the Diné people were created, we were given a female and a male corn. It was the sacred corn, a kernel, just a small kernel, a seed.

ME: One female kernel and one male kernel?

Yes. So, in all our different ceremonies that we do, the different things that we do, there is always that male and a female version of a lot of things. There has to be.

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<sup>10</sup> <<http://www.nytimes.com/2004/09/09/garden/09HOUS.html>>

Just as they were told this was sacred... they were told this is a female corn and this is a male corn... The woman was given the female, and the male was given the male corn.

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. Milton Bluehouse told me that corn pollen is used all across the Indian tribes, as did Patricia. Their statement is broad, and they likely mean that corn pollen is primarily used by the tribes in the Southwest. Corn pollen is especially important to the Navajo, though other tribes give pollen ritual significance as well. Milton emphasized how connected the world is, and the importance of the interconnection for harmony between peoples and the natural world. He said everything is connected and linked, and that reality is a living thing.

## **Corn**

### *History of Corn and botanical success*

I will start with the basic history of corn<sup>11</sup>, and establish a broad background for the significance of corn pollen, and its cultural place in the southwestern United States. Corn has succeeded in permeating most food cultures across the globe, so given its success, you'd think of corn as incredibly efficient in reproduction. Corn is, counterintuitively, incredibly inefficient. Physiologically speaking, independent plant growth is virtually impossible, as the protective corn husk prevents individual kernels

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<sup>11</sup> I will use the words *corn* and *maize* interchangeably throughout this paper: *maize* derives from the Spanish form (*maíz*). Maize is how the plant became known in Europe, after Columbus brought it back from the Americas. In the U.S., we say *corn*, which originally referred to any grain, but now refers only to maize. Corn is short for "Indian corn," interestingly.

from spreading or growing upon contact with soil. Also, the density of kernels on a cob prevents their growth, as the seed shoots would crowd each other out completely upon their hypothetical contact with the soil. Thus, corn is incapable of reproduction without human help, and so known as an obligate domesticate or “hopeless monster” by botanists.<sup>12</sup> Corn is hopeless because of its utter dependancy on people, and a “monster” due to its immense, landscape-changing success in infiltrating food cultures across the world. The Cornbelt of the American Midwest is exemplary of corn’s “monstrous” success.

To whom or what, then, does corn owe its success? Toelken remarked that the botanical development of corn is a classic “example of a scientific process embedded in culture.”<sup>13</sup> Corn epitomizes the ethnobotanical relationship between plants and people: corn has created a culture so dependent upon it that its continual propagation is guaranteed. In “Botanical Perspectives of Ethnobotany of the Greater Southwest,” Bye defines ethnobotany as the “investigation of the biological, including ecological, bases of interactions (i.e. mutual influences) and of relationships between plants and people over evolutionary time and geographical space.”<sup>14</sup> Corn is human-made, and has an extraordinary history, making it an ethnobotanist’s dream because of this rich history of plant-people interdependence. Corn presents an excellent case for study by ethnobotanists.

The case of maize is highly perplexing. Hugh Iltis, botanist and director of the University of Wisconsin herbarium, said corn presents the one-hundred-year controversy,

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<sup>12</sup> Fussell, p. 20

<sup>13</sup> Toelken, p. 172

<sup>14</sup> Bye, p. 376

where, when, and from what did this crop evolve?<sup>15</sup> Most argue maize evolved from its wild ancestor, *teosinte*, into the more useful, domesticated cob corn via early gatherers actively selecting different hybrid varieties they desired. But Iltis argues there is a large gap in the evolutionary spectrum of corn, and that maize could not have just jumped into being; Iltis asks why no intermediaries have been found in nature or in the archaeological records between today's corn and the ancient *teosinte*. Iltis argues that there are almost no distinctions between *maize* and *teosinte*, except for the female inflorescence (or silk) present in maize. Therefore, they are indeed closely related, and Hugh Iltis hypothesizes that today's corn came to be through a "catastrophic sexual transmutation," meaning that a random sexual mutation via pollination changed corn's nature and changed its course of evolution into what we see today. This pollination event was catastrophic in the dramatic change it had on the corn plant.

Corn has a highly permeable pollination barrier and so hybridizes very easily. Corn is said to have more variations than any other crop species, with thousands of varieties in the world, so those early gatherers had many options for selecting the most useful types.<sup>16</sup> Domestication is considered to be a continual process of perception, selection, maintenance, and spatial diffusion by people.<sup>17</sup> Over generations, the people of Mesoamerica slowly selected varieties that grew faster, produced more abundantly, and tasted sweeter. Eventually the relatively inedible seed grass gene was lost, corn developed kernels, and then came to look like what we know today, a large, juicy golden

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<sup>15</sup> Iltis, p. 886

<sup>16</sup> Toelken, p. 172; Fussel, p. 15

<sup>17</sup> Johannessen, *et al.*, abstract

ear. The importance of the effects of human behavior on the genetic composition of maize cannot be underestimated.<sup>18</sup>

*People of corn*

Maize adapts readily, due to its ease of hybridization and “wild promiscuity,” as archaeologist and landscape architect Morrow described corn’s adaptability.<sup>19</sup> Corn does well, therefore, in extreme climates and varied soils. The ability for maize to grow in arid lands and the diversity of the plant’s uses ensured its incredible success among the landscapes and people of the Southwest. All peoples of the Americas dependent on some degree of cultivated living grew maize as a dominant part of their food crops, unless they were living in places that were too cold. Corn is highly integrated into the livelihood of the people of the Southwest, and you could say people and corn evolved together.

Patricia spoke of corn as given to the people by the creator, and corn’s relationship with the Navajos:

Each corn the plant gives you, you’re gonna already know what it’s for. And how it’s used. And so [the Navajo] planted the corn, and when they saw the corn growing, they gave it water. And they saw the corn, and everything that came out of it.

And so the Diné worshipped and ate corn, whose Navajo name is *Naadaáá’*. Many indigenous peoples call themselves children of corn, as do Maya, Inca, Aztec, Zuni, and the Hopi today. All these groups, including the Navajo, hold both ritual and practical reverence for corn. With corn as the main source of food for the traditional Navajo (though not as much any longer), the saying *you are what you eat* can be taken literally

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<sup>18</sup> Johannessen, *et al.*, pp 1; for further information, see Anderson, Edgar. “The Evolution of Domestication,” in *Evolution After Darwin*, ed. Sol Tax, Vol 2. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960. p. 67-84.

<sup>19</sup> Morrow and Price, p. 101

here. Navajos also make little corn people from husks, called corn maiden dolls. Toelken discusses the interdependence of corn and people as a relationship of sacred balance and reciprocation. In recognition of this relationship many native peoples, including the Navajo, have given corn sacred power and created gods and goddesses in its name. The Zuni also regard corn as sacred, saying “Love and cherish your corn as you love and cherish your women.” Corn and people seem more and more similar as I write these things.

Corn in some Navajo myths is primeval, as the First Man had some in the first level of Navajo worlds. Other myths say corn is a gift from the Holy Ones. In all myths, the importance of corn is constantly emphasized.<sup>20</sup> In essence, corn represents to the Navajo people what Talking God said to the sisters Whiteshell Woman and Turquoise Woman, “There is no better thing than this in the world, for it is the gift of life... That is good, for corn is your symbol of fertility and life.”<sup>21</sup> Most Native Americans, including the Navajo, consider the earth to be a sacred symbol of universal motherhood, and the success and abundance of corn makes it a special gift from the sacred mother Earth.

Corn produces abundantly, is nutritious and sweet, grows fast, and is relatively low maintenance compared to other major crops. Corn stands at the height of people, it looks you in the eye and reaches out its leafy arms. No wonder gods and goddess were created in its name. The Navajo have a plethora of holy corn figures. Slim Curley said in 1938, “When a man goes into a cornfield he feels he is in a holy place, that he is walking among Holy People, White Corn Boy, Yellow Corn Girl, Pollen Boy, Corn Bug Girl, Blue Corn Boy, and Variegated Corn Girl. If your fields are in good shape you feel that

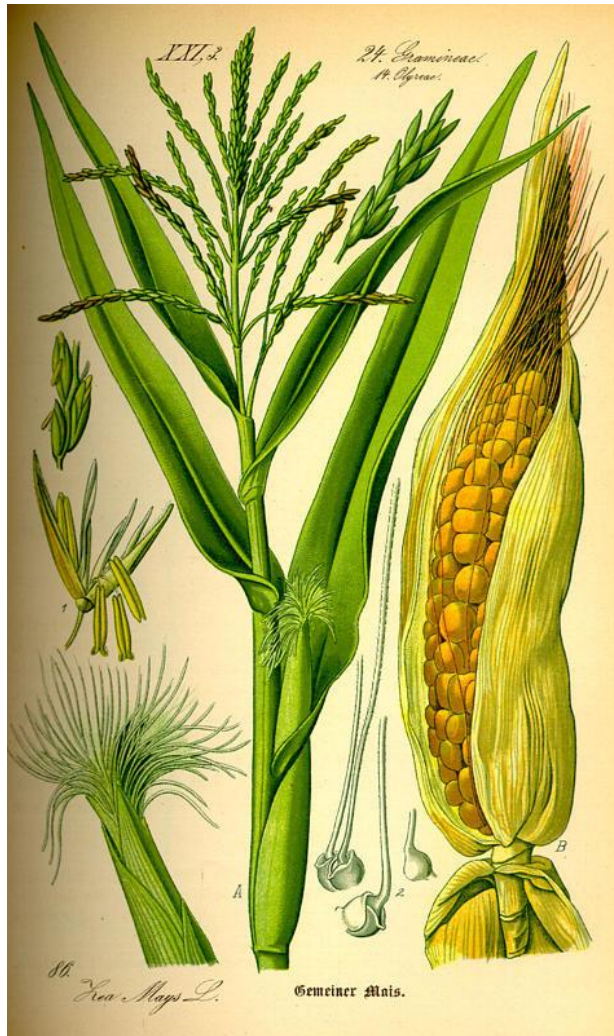
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<sup>20</sup> Reichard, p. 23

<sup>21</sup> Goddard, Matthews, Newcomb in Reichard, p. 23

the Holy People are with you, and you feel buoyed up in spirit when you get hack home. If your field is dried up you are down-hearted because the Holy People are not helping you.”<sup>22</sup> Corn and pollen, botanically ordinary, are anthropomorphized into holy beings.

*Uses of Corn*



**Figure 1: The corn plant, and its parts<sup>23</sup>**

<sup>22</sup> Fussell, p. 95

<sup>23</sup> Image courtesy of Otto Wilhelm Thome, “Zea Mays,” *Flora von Deutschland Österreich und der Schweiz*, 1885. <<http://drarchaeology.com/herbal/ethno/corn.htm>>

The Navajo use corn in an immense variety of ways and use all parts of it. First, I present uses of corn I found in the scholarly literature, though I do not give a complete list due to the extensive amount of information. Then I present Patricia's description of corn. Rainey and Adams compiled an extensive collection of ethnobotanically used plants by Native peoples, in their "Compendium A: Ethnographically Documented Uses of Plants."<sup>24</sup> In their compendium, Rainey and Adams list over one hundred uses of maize among the Navajo people alone. To name a few, the Navajo use the corn husk for rolling tobacco in ceremonies, and they eat fresh ears raw or roasted over cedarwood fires. But the uses get more complex: the kernels are ground into meal; the cornmeal is eaten as mush or baked into bread for food and ceremonial purposes.<sup>25</sup> The pit-baked earth bread is used for a woman's puberty ceremony, or Blessingway.<sup>26</sup> I have had this earth bread, at a Blessingway I went to when I was thirteen. The Navajo dig a circular pit in the evening before the nighttime ceremony, three feet deep, and line the pit with corn husks. They then pour the corn mush into the pit, the mush that the women hand-ground and whisked all the day before. The batter is covered with more corn husks, coals are placed on top, and the whole pit is filled in with dirt again, as if nothing was ever there—returned to the earth. The men dig the bread out in the morning, and they serve it steaming and gently smudged with ash and sand. I remember being overwhelmed with the taste and the honor of that sacred bread.

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<sup>24</sup> Rainey, Katharine D. and Karen R. Adams. "Plant Use by Native Peoples of the American Southwest: Ethnographic Documentation," Crow Canyon Archaeological Center, 2004.

<sup>25</sup> Ethnographically Documented Uses of Plants  
<[http://www.crowcanyon.org/ResearchReports/Archaeobotanical/Plant\\_Uses/qryEthnobot\\_Uses.asp](http://www.crowcanyon.org/ResearchReports/Archaeobotanical/Plant_Uses/qryEthnobot_Uses.asp)>

<sup>26</sup> Bailey 1940, p. 281 <<http://drarchaeology.com/herbal/ethno/corn.htm>>

Corn mush is also used to make figurines of a kit fox, coyote, and various animals in the Coyote Chant, a bear in the Mountain Chant, and a wildcat in the Bead Chant.<sup>27</sup> Cornmeal batter can also be baked into small cakes used for Wind Chant offerings.<sup>28</sup> The leaves of the corn stalk can be mixed with other plants to make the Night Chant medicine.<sup>29</sup> And I once had blue cornmeal mush pancakes that Patricia had made, mixed with juniper ash, a special combination that can also be made into bread.

Patricia goes on to say that even after the initial harvest of corn, the Navajo utilize all parts of the corn plant. Her account of the corn plant's uses overlaps some with the literature, but she adds much more. The pollen is sacred and gathered by the women. The husks are used to line the circular pit dug into the ground for baking ceremonial earth bread. Most of the corn ears are hung up to dry, then the dry kernels are ground into meal or are set aside for next year's spring planting as seed corn. Some of the fresh corn is cut from the cob and mashed up for round cakes eaten fresh. Patricia's daughters are especially fond of those round cakes. The cob is used to light up smokes in ceremony.

Patricia describes some of the ways her family uses all of the corn plant:

We steam the corn and they call in kneel down bread all kinds of things like this. Nowadays, we clean out the kernels and put them in ziploc bags in the freezer so they stay fresh. In the winter, we use it for stew, or something. It is good. So we do all the cleaning up of the corn. We don't just throw them away, we use all the corn stalk. So once the corn is taken off, then we also save the corn husk. We use it for underground bread... and then we'll also use them for ceremonies... So once we take all the corn and everything off, there's just the corn stuff by itself sticking up out of the ground, and so we cut that down. We feed it to the sheep or livestock... Then the corn, we try to save some from each year that we do the planting, so we take them out. And we also separate the white from yellow, and stuff like that... And we save them.

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<sup>27</sup> Elmore 1944, p. 30; see <<http://drarchaeology.com/herbal/ethno/corn.htm>>

<sup>28</sup> Franciscan Fathers 1929, p. 208; see <<http://drarchaeology.com/herbal/ethno/corn.htm>>

<sup>29</sup> Elmore 1944, p. 28; see <<http://drarchaeology.com/herbal/ethno/corn.htm>>

Patricia explains that traditional Navajos only use a few kinds of corn – the yellow, white, blue, and the rare red or black corn kernel varieties. The people must have all the colors, definitely white corn and yellow corn, in their home for ceremonial purposes. She says:

You're supposed to always have a white and a yellow corn in your home. For ceremonies, you have to have them in your home.

ME: Do you ever mix them? Or are they sacred separately?

We never mix them. The main ones used are the white, the yellow, and the blue. The other ones we just use for certain, very rare times that we use the red ones. Certain rare ceremonies that they use. We hardly plant the red ones, very seldom we'll have them.

Then we have black ones. The black ones is very sacred too, they use that one only for the men, you know, the hunting. So that one's used separately.

The other three are mostly daily use.

The black and red corns are only planted in years the family thinks they'll need them, which may be seldom. Corn varieties are never mixed together in ceremony or daily life. Despite the ease with which corn hybridizes, and the thousands of varieties of corn, Navajo families have maintained their traditional varieties for generations, by passing the seeds down and saving them from harvest to harvest.

Recently, a genetically modified variety of corn has been introduced to Navajo land. In the section on Change, towards the end of the paper, I discuss the implications surrounding this issue. The introduction of the corn could be drastic to the Navajo biodiversity and native ecosystem, through the potential of 'genetic pollution.' Pollen traces from the alien corn could blow or be carried to the traditional varieties that have been preserved. Corn pollen, the very entity the Navajo regard so sacredly, could ultimately turn around and bring the indirect, unanticipated demise of their traditional ways; strange to think, as corn pollen *is* the Diné tradition. The yellow, white, blue, black, and red corn varieties that have been maintained within Navajo families for

generations, could be at risk in light of this new corn type. The difference between the historical way of manually selecting corn to be a certain way differs from this new form of plant modification in a fundamental way. The former is physiological change, and the latter is actual genetic mutation, thus *taking away* innate qualities of the corn plant (i.e. pollination and reproduction). This difference is bizarre, and strange to the traditional Navajo.

## **The Botanical**

### *Traditional Ecological Knowledge*

Having just described the broader cultural and historical context of corn, I want to point out the parallel between the western scientific understanding and the native understanding of the natural world. The discussion of these parallel, but mainly separate, viewpoints comes as a prelude to my account of the botanical properties of corn. It is important not to put one view over the other, or give one side more merit.

For the purpose of this section, I define “science” as the practical methodology for the systematic and objective study of the workings of the natural world, through observation and experimentation. Science involves hypothesis-testing, which we call the scientific method. Phil Bluehouse told me that most, if not all, Navajo metaphors can be traced back to science, meaning traditional wisdom is also scientific, in his view. He spoke of his culture as represented through metaphors, yet grounded in its scientific knowledge of the natural world. Similarly, Toelken writes about folklore being the foundation of understanding the natural world, saying “so it is well to remember, no matter whose culture we are discussing, that even though biological, psychological, and

environmental factors seem like antiseptic functions of nature, they are almost always interpreted in the evaluative framework of culture, and the medium for this ongoing interpretation is folklore.”<sup>30</sup> So the Navajo personify the flora and fauna of their surroundings in explanation of the way things are. This brings up the classic debate of the distinction between science and folklore, or is the distinction artificial? In Navajo culture, there is no difference between the *science* of their natural world, and the way the natural world is explained or has come to be through *stories* and myth. Their science is their folklore, and thus, to answer my query, the distinction between them is artificial.

Research has been done on the connection between native peoples and their environments. Fikret Berkes, researcher of human ecology and community-based resource management, defines traditional ecological knowledge (TEK) as a “cumulative body of knowledge, practice, and belief, evolving by adaptative processes and handed down through generations by cultural transmission, and the relationship of living beings (including humans) with one another and their environment.”<sup>31</sup> TEK is, in short, the wisdom that cultures have accumulated in regards to their surroundings, through trial and error. This accumulation of knowledge is of the utmost importance for indigenous cultures’ survival, and so the information on seasons, plants, medicines, and geography is passed down through generations. Native cultural adaptation to often challenging surroundings is the result of this information transmission process.

Western scientists used to regard native peoples as “primitive,” because they have none of those hard weighing, measuring, labeling, and scientific techniques that make up our scientific method. The general attitude towards traditional knowledge was dismissed

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<sup>30</sup> Toelken, p. 19

<sup>31</sup> Berkes, p. 8

as simply folklore, because it doesn't fall within our "scientific" framework. Toelken discusses how scientists were skeptical of traditional knowledge of flora and fauna because indigenous peoples had "no real science," in our sense of that term.<sup>32</sup> But their lived experience is also valid. In "The Nature and Utility of Traditional Ecological Knowledge," Milton Freeman, professor of Anthropology at University of Alberta, Canada, argues that the recent findings of modern physicists and other scientists are becoming similar to the views held by many ancient mystical traditions, long before Europeans started practicing the scientific method.<sup>33</sup> The Mayan and Aztec Calendars are examples of incredible traditional knowledge, the Calendars mapping out the cycles of the moon, sun, seasons, and equinoxes based on movements of the celestial bodies. The Aztec year was 365 days, which we now all acknowledge and go by in the Gregorian calendar system. Freeman's paper on traditional ecological knowledge exemplifies the increasing acknowledgement on behalf of the western scientific community of native knowledge of their surrounding flora and fauna.

Charles Wilkinson, Indian lawyer for the Native American Rights Fund and professor at the University of Colorado-Boulder, writes how it is important to be reminded of "how much knowledge exists in Indian country and how Native people have always lived the science of ecology's central premise that our species is tied to all nature."<sup>34</sup> The Navajo elder Charlie Ashcraft, quoted in Barre Toelken's *The Anguish of Snails*, said "just about everything the old-timers knew, it was given to them by the animals and the plants."<sup>35</sup> Jan Vansina discusses the weight of traditional knowledge

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<sup>32</sup> Toelken, p. 167

<sup>33</sup> Freeman, "The Nature and Utility of Traditional Ecological Knowledge," p. 4

<sup>34</sup> Wilkinson, p. 326

<sup>35</sup> Ashcraft in Toelken, p. 165

passed down through stories from the elders. In his *Oral Tradition as History*, he remarks how native peoples' reliance on memory does not necessarily deprive an oral tradition of being a valid source for natural history.<sup>36</sup> The natural world teaches natives how to live, eat, and pray. Nature is imbued with sacredness in the Navajo culture, and there is no separation between that natural world and their traditional culture. The Navajos follow the cycle of corn, planting and harvesting corn according to the time of year, which means understanding available moisture, sunlight, and optimal temperatures. Traditional Navajos have a vast mental database of herbs and plants of the area. They know where to find them, and when during the year they will be most prevalent. Patricia spoke of a little blue flower (she didn't know its English name) that grows only sometimes in May and June, when the ground is softest and the growing conditions optimal. The flower also only grew in very specific places, in the shade of pinyon/juniper, and Patricia had these places mapped out in her mind. The Navajo base the timing of their ceremonies on seasonal changes, abiding by the outcomes of natural processes. When the first snow of winter comes, so then begins the the dance of the *ye'i*, who are the holy Grandfather Spirits of the Navajo. The *ye'i* also symbolize intermediaries between the gods and humans. The *Ye'ii Bicheii* dance is a nine-night long performance, and marks the New Year.

Navajo traditional ecological knowledge comes from their immersion experience in the natural world, and with that experience comes an understanding of the minute workings of the seasons, water patterns, and plant life cycles. The cultural importance corn embodies for the Navajo mandates the people's understanding of its physiology.

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<sup>36</sup> Vansina, xii

Understanding the minute physiology of maize is also important for interpreting its journey into the traditions of the peoples of the Southwest.

*Physiology of Maize*

Corn is a grass, in the botanical family *Poaceae*, taxon *Zea Mays*, genus *Zea* L. The plant is drought resistant, though it needs the periodic rains occasionally given by the desert. Corn is opportunistic, jumping into floral activity in the event of moisture, and the male tassel flowers, offering up its pollen to the wet winds following a rain. In parallel, Patricia told me that pollen comes after the rains. Also, the male tassel flower regularly sheds its pollen every morning because of the dew and cool temperatures of dawn, before the heat of the day sets in. Some research indicates that pollen shed decreases after temperatures surpass 86 degrees F.<sup>37</sup> As the heat rises, the pollen dries out and becomes brittle, and easily blown in the breezes of the day. Desert air becomes increasingly turbulent as the day progresses. The increasing heat of the sun causes uneven heating of the land's surface, creating turbulent currents of air and the breezes that blow the corn pollen from the plants' tassels.

The fine yellow or white "dust-like" pollen that you see blowing from a corn tassel consists of millions of nearly microscopic, spherical, yellowish- or whitish translucent pollen grains. Nielsen estimates the total number of pollen grains produced per tassel range from 2 to 25 million, a large range but fascinating nonetheless.<sup>38</sup>

These botanical processes are important to the Navajo way of life. Those Navajos still in touch with their tradition know the timing for mid-summer corn pollen gathering,

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<sup>37</sup> Nielsen, "Tassel Emergence & Pollen Shed," 2001

<sup>38</sup> Nielsen, 2001: <<http://www.agry.purdue.edu/Ext/corn/news/timeless/Tassels.html>>

when to plant the first corn in spring, and the timing of corn maturity, so they can perform the rituals of harvest and after. Patricia spoke of the importance of timing in gathering corn pollen, saying you can't wait too long into the day or too late in the summer:

You only have that one whole month when [pollen is] ready, you only have that time to clean it. Otherwise it starts blowing, and once it dries up, it just flies off, I guess. So I made a lot this summer...

Corn is an annual, meaning it grows, flowers, and dies all in the span of one year. An understanding of this life cycle is also important in timing of various aspects of the cultural interdependence of corn and the Navajos.

#### *Dew, dawn, and pollen*

The relationship between morning dew and pollen is important physiologically as well as ritually. River Junction Curly, in *Blessingway*, told how Changing Woman, the mother of the Navajo, said to the people, “You will speak for us with pollen words. You will talk for us with pollen words... I made you, my children, because I dressed you with corn pollen, because I dressed you with dews.”<sup>39</sup> These words highlight the importance of pollen and the dew of morning together. Traditionally, Navajo women harvest pollen in the early hours of morning, when also dew is most prevalent and the sun is low. As I explained above, dew makes the pollen more dense, which makes for easier collecting. Only the women can perform the task of gathering pollen, and a woman in the Navajo tradition is considered as one who has been through the Blessingway puberty ceremony.

Traditionally, Navajo women must get all their tasks done—greeting the dawn, chores, gathering corn pollen, and bathing—before the morning is over. It is said that

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<sup>39</sup> Wyman, p. 620-1

Changing Woman, the mother of everyone, dressed the first young people in pollen, and she did it before noon.<sup>40</sup> Patricia said she was in the corn fields by 7:30 every morning of the first three weeks of July. Pollen's prime lies in the month of July. She'd gather pollen for a few hours, holding a big bowl under the tassel, and shaking the pollen in. The bowl has a fine net over the top, sifting out the small bugs and impurities. Sifting is the only way to clean pollen. Gathering is a careful process requiring complete attention; the women wear scarves on their heads to keep them focused forward, and are forbidden to look around when performing the sacred task of gathering corn pollen. Patricia said that the early Navajo noticed:

That towards the middle of summer, on the corn flower, the pollen started coming out, and they saw the hummingbirds. They're the ones that showed them, this is where you—the beautiful things that are gonna come to you, that you want. The hummingbird is a symbol of beauty. Symbol of richness, things that are beautiful, so the hummingbird was the one that was picking on the corn pollen, telling the lady its your job to come over, its your job to do this. It's the male's job was to plant the corn... So the hummingbird came up to the female, and shook the pollen, look this how you do it, look. And the hummingbird went up there and fluttered down the corn stuff way on top and he fluttered his feathers, and sure enough there is a sprinkle of it coming down. And the ladies saw it, and he said Ok, you know, you have to cover—you have to put a scarf on. And you only have do it early in the morning, before the sun kind of goes up high because...

ME: Before sunrise, or just before—while its still low?

Just morning, you have stop before noon.

ME: Why is that, early morning only?

That's just what the hummingbird told her, and she said you cannot pick up corn pollen after that, because its used in the morning. There's going to be a purpose for just doing it before noon, because all the corn pollen in your ceremonies is going to be used early in the morning, dawn. There's prayers being done, so its going to be used in the morning...

You can't be looking around when you're out there, picking the corn pollen. You can't be looking around, you have to be there, and focus on your corn pollen, what you're doing. Only the female can do that... Once you bring the corn pollen back, when you sprinkle it, when you shake it and sprinkle it onto a bowl or something, it looks dry. So once you're done, and take it home, you'll notice it looks wet. There is a lot of moisture on it. So when you bring it back to your

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<sup>40</sup> Wyman, p. 620

home, it will be wet, so you have to set it out in the sun inside to dry. It has to sit there for awhile, maybe for about four days. So it will dry up.

ME: Is the pollen still alive then? Is that why it takes so long to dry up?

Yeah... and eventually when it dries up, then is the time to smooth it out with your hands, it's just powder...

Patricia described how the pollen gathered is a moist paste at first, sweet to the taste, and full of life and the dew of morning. Perhaps the act of sifting makes the pollen as wet as it is, she wonders. The dried pollen then accumulates in a glass jar until the harvest is complete. The harvest usually takes a month, the month of July, while the pollen is still plentiful and easily gathered. Patricia said:

So, that's how they do it. And then they store it in a jar or something, and in those times they stored it in a pouch. And before people began to use it, they had to take it through a ceremony.

Pollen eventually must go through a Beautyway ceremony to be blessed and become sacred. I explain this further in the section on corn pollen ceremony.

### **The Ritual and Ceremonial**

It is important to understand the distinction between the terms *ritual* and *ceremonial*. Ritual is the order or way of performing a ceremony, and can be formally ordered or random. A ceremony, on the other hand, is an occasion, often a celebration of a specific thing, as in a Navajo Blessingway puberty ceremony. The ritual of the Blessingway is how the medicine man conducts the ceremony. These subtle definitions reflect the complexity of corn pollen's use. Pollen's sacred quality is the foundation for the Navajo ritual and ceremonial.

*Sacred corn pollen*

In the literature, I mostly found that pollen represents life and fertility, in nature and for the Navajo. Wyman says corn pollen is essentially a metaphor for fertility, as well as happiness and life itself.<sup>41</sup> Gladys Reichard, ethnologist and a significant scholar of the Navajo culture, tells of how Talking God said to the sisters Whiteshell Woman and Turquoise Woman, “There is no better thing than this in the world, for it is the gift of life...That is good, for corn is your symbol of fertility and life.”<sup>42</sup> Gladys Reichard, however, completely fails to mention corn pollen in her monumental studies of Navajo tradition, an exclusion that Raitt points out in his “The Ritual Meaning of Corn Pollen Among the Navajo Indians.”<sup>43</sup> I found this surprising, as in my time on the reservation I frequently saw and heard of corn pollen. Given that my interview was based on corn pollen, I heard about it a lot, though I also saw the family’s collection of pollen pouches, perhaps six or more different ones.

Patricia’s family has many pouches of corn pollen, and there are distinct levels of purposes of pollen use. There is a pouch for family and daily use. There’s one for strictly healing ceremonies. And there’s a pouch for animals. Those pouches used for animals and for humans must be kept separate. The corn pollen for animals is used to bless a hunt and in hunting ceremonies, as well as for the health of their sheep, cows, and horses. Then, medicine people have many other pouches for specific holy purposes. There’s one for the sole purpose of passing around and blessing the participants of a ceremony, and one for blessing the eagle feathers that are so sacred in any ceremony. There’s one for an animal fat harvesting ceremony, which Patricia explained honors the animal and prays for

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<sup>41</sup> Wyman, p. 31

<sup>42</sup> Reichard, p. 23

<sup>43</sup> Raitt, “The Ritual Meaning of Corn Pollen Among the Navajo Indians,” p. 525

abundance and health. There are more corn pollen pouched, though we didn't go into them all.

Fussell writes in *The Story of Corn* that “pollen is the way, the truth and the light of the Navaho ceremony in which the singer draws two pictures in the cornfield and two in the hogan and links them by pollen trails.”<sup>44</sup> And Donald Sandner writes, “Corn is the Navaho staff of life, and pollen is its essence.”<sup>45</sup> Pollen is an “outstanding symbol of life and protection, fructification, verification, and the continuity of life and safety,”<sup>46</sup> said another. And then another still said that pollen is to cleanse, as it is ‘pure’ and ‘immaculate,’ and a symbol of attractive cleanliness. Corn pollen is a mysterious and sacred power, elusively defined by the scholars. The Navajo simply say corn pollen is prayer.

Patricia Belinte made the definition simpler as she explained that corn pollen is used to pray with—its most important significance. Corn, she said, represents life and growth, though not exactly fertility. Pollen is always about prayer, this is its truest meaning. Corn pollen’s spiritual nature can be compared to the way a priest of the Jesuit faith uses bread, wine, or water in the most holy communion with God. In a similar way, Raitt explains that both gods and humans eat corn pollen, and so sharing that same ritual substance effects communion between humans and the Holy Ones.<sup>47</sup> Wyman also writes that the “pure, immaculate product of the corn tassel is food eaten by gods and man.”<sup>48</sup> In her book, *Pollen Path: Collection of Navajo Myths Retold*,<sup>49</sup> Margaret Schevill Link, a

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<sup>44</sup> Fussell, p. 329

<sup>45</sup> Sandner, Donald (1979), in *Navaho Symbols of Healing*; in Fussell, p. 330

<sup>46</sup> Frisbie, *Kinaalda*, in Raitt, p. 526

<sup>47</sup> Raitt, p. 528

<sup>48</sup> Wyman, p. 30

<sup>49</sup> Link, preface

poet—artist—folklorist, presents a poem about the “pollen path” from the Night Chant, alluding to a connection created by pollen between life, gods, and people.

In the house of life I wander  
on the pollen path.  
With a god of cloud I wander  
to a holy place.  
With a god ahead I wander  
and a god behind.  
In the house of life I wander  
on the pollen path.

The poem expresses the harmony that should exist between gods and the people.

Pollen could also be considered as an offering. The Navajo use it as a prayer to the Great and Holy Spirits according to Milton Bluehouse. Those Spirits created everything so we should offer thanks to them. Because corn pollen *is* prayer, there is no actual prayer *for* pollen. Corn pollen is used for good things and ceremonies. Corn pollen means the Holy Ones are there to help you, and pollen is an offering through which the Holy Ones come to the Diné, Patricia told me. Slim Curly, a Navajo informant for Wyman in *Blessingway*, told how Changing Woman sang of the link between the people and the Holy Ones through corn pollen, praying:

White Corn Boy at the center of wide cornfield,  
His pollen feet become my feet,  
His pollen legs become my legs,  
His pollen mind becomes my mind,  
His pollen voice becomes my voice,  
His pollen headplume becomes my headplume,  
Because of pollen he is an invisible one therefore I become an invisible one,  
Pollen which rises with him is rising with me as I say this,  
Pollen which moves with him in bulk moves along with me as I say this,  
Pollen by which blessing radiates from him radiates blessing from me as I say this  
Pollen by which blessing has encircled him has thereby encircled me as I say  
this...<sup>50</sup>

And on and on as such, the Navajo songs are magically repetitive.

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<sup>50</sup> Wyman, p. 204-5

The hummingbird showed the women how to gather pollen, and the hummingbird is the symbol of beauty to the Navajo. Similarly, Wyman wrote, “Pollen, the beautiful, is a fit gift for the gods. Their paths should be strewn with it.”<sup>51</sup> I remember learning and falling in love with a Navajo blessing when I was young. I found a version of the chant in Margaret Schevill Link’s *Pollen Path*:

In beauty, I walk.  
With beauty before me, I walk.  
With beauty behind me, I walk.  
With beauty above me, I walk.  
With beauty below me, I walk.  
With beauty all around me, I walk.  
With beauty within me, I walk.  
It is finished in beauty.  
It is finished in beauty.<sup>52</sup>

I remember hoping that would always be true in my life. My time with Patricia was very much a time surrounded by beauty, and a period of time for which I am blessed. Pollen, shown to the Diné by the symbol of beauty, the hummingbird, also plays a role in the transitions of life.

### *Life cycle*

Corn pollen is used to mark the stages in a person’s life. There are four main ceremonies of life—the celebration of birth, the baby’s first laugh, the puberty ceremony of the Blessingway, and the wedding. Corn pollen plays a primary role in transitioning a person through these ceremonies of life. Corn pollen plays no role in the ceremonials of death, as death is the end, and pollen is life.

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<sup>51</sup> Wyman, p. 30

<sup>52</sup> Link, p. 155

You are supposed to start at the beginning, when a baby is born, you do a Beautyway ceremony for the baby. Welcoming the baby into the world, into the home, into the family. They bless the baby with corn pollen.

As it grows up, there are ceremonies for the baby... There is the first laugh. Then their first birthday, and then they reach their puberty, and then their wedding. This stage repeats itself... It's about life and the corn will represent life, the growth—it grows. Like corn grows, you start a family, and it grows. They say everything grows, even a ceremony grows.

Growth is important, thus the sacred nature of plants. And these ceremonies of life are marked by a person's growth. Patricia finishes this thought in talking about corn pollen and marriage, the last celebration of life, saying:

So that's what they use. And that's where the main blessing of life is, where the young couple [in the Beautyway] are using the Táádidín.

*Every day use and travel*

Corn pollen is also used for every day use. Many elderly Navajo have their own pouches of pollen, that they keep with them always. Patricia Belinte emphasized that the Navajo must always have corn pollen with them when they travel, as anything can happen when they leave home or Navajo land. For example, crossing the path of the messenger Coyote, crossing a body of water, leaving the area within the four sacred mountains, or finding a sacred herb requires corn pollen offerings. Navajo were told long ago not to cross large bodies of water. So when they do, they throw pollen to the river or to the body of water. Here are Patricia's words on the prevalence and importance of the Diné having corn pollen with them always:

And other than that, [corn pollen is] used pretty much everyday, in everyday use. We have it with us when we travel, we have to have it with us all the time.

*ME: Corn pollen? Why is that?*

We have to have it with us all the time. When we go outside of the four sacred mountains, that's when we have to have it. So its when we go beyond it, that's when we have to have it, so that we come back safely.

Corn pollen itself, well, we have to have the corn pollen as the Diné. Everywhere we go we have to have it. So we usually have it here with us, there is always some in the truck. I always have some with me here in my purse or something.

The Diné don't want to be without their prayers, so they carry corn pollen with them always. And so it is with healing—corn pollen is the means to restoring health and balance in a patient's life, and so pollen must be ever present in ceremony.

### *Healing*

Navajo traditional medicine came from the Creator. It was a gift of knowledge. Corn pollen is the base of traditional medicine, as prayer. Similarly, “medicine” is equivalent to the “spiritual” in Navajo terminology. “Medicine” for the Diné is more magic-reaching than the White-man's conceptions can understand. All Navajo ceremonies are curative: “medicine” and “ceremonial” are spoken interchangeably.<sup>53</sup> The Navajo worldview concerns balance and harmony, or *hozho*. They believe that one can become unbalanced, and so become sick. The primary purpose of ceremonials lies in keeping one in harmony with the universe.<sup>54</sup> Corn pollen facilitates this by offering prayers to the Holy Ones, to restore balance and harmony between the patient and the total environment of plants and animals.<sup>55</sup>

The Navajo also use corn pollen to heal the sick, Patricia says. The patient's body is painted in colors similar to corn pollen.

There are certain ceremonies that they use when they have a patient that is very ailing from certain things. They use corn pollen to do paint, to paint on the body that resembles the four colors as well, and the four mountains as well. For the four sacred colors that they use, they use the sacred corn pollen. Each ceremony has to

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<sup>53</sup> Harrington and Leonard, in the “review of *Ethnobotany of the Navajo*,” p. 442

<sup>54</sup> Locke, *The Book of the Navajo*, p. 47

<sup>55</sup> Toelken, p. 170

use the corn pollen, the patient is blessed, and every ceremony is blessed through song, and at the beginning they are blessed with prayers before start...

The traditional ritual of a Navajo seeking healing is beautiful. This ritual is not often practiced any more, and Patricia believes laziness and lack of knowledge in the majority of the Navajo people are responsible. Traditionally, someone who seeks healing goes to a medicine man or woman, who instructs the “patient” to go out into the wilderness and find the specific plant needed for a healing ceremony, for example, a yucca plant. In doing so, the patient gathers his or her own plant medicine, the personal connection Patricia stressed, as the plant should know the patient. The patient goes out into the pinon/juniper or sagebrush country to find a specific yucca plant. The person kneels before it, tells the spiky yucca their given Navajo name and what the yucca will be used for in ceremony, sprinkling corn pollen before it. The corn pollen is the prayer for the plant’s power, well being, health, and strength for growth. By offering corn pollen to the plant, you are saying thank you. It is important to say thank you, Patricia insists, to the creator who made the plant. The patient should then take a small part of the root, so as not to kill the whole plant. If another kind of plant were to be harvested, such as Navajo tea or asters, one would offer pollen prayer to one plant, then harvest the one beside it. In order to not kill off populations, there must always be a healthy population of the plant being harvested.

Patricia says plant medicine is stronger when harvested for personal or family use. When she goes out and gets a plant for her girls or for Larry, her husband, the plant senses her heart’s intent and familial connection. Patricia insisted that you have to use all the supply you have, and only take what you need before you go out and get more of a plant. You cannot be greedy with medicinal plants, this is bad for the medicine. Navajo

respect for plants and population systems is strong, and this respect shows their traditional ecological knowledge of the flora and fauna of their world. Medicine men and women have been using and conserving sacred and medicinal plants for generations and, in the semi-arid landscape of the Navajo Reservation, this is an art and a challenge. Nowhere in my literature review, surprisingly, could I find any description or even acknowledgment of this sacred ritual of harvesting plants. Patricia spoke often of this ritual and its importance in medicine, as corn pollen creates the necessary connection between a plant's medicine and the patient seeking healing. A significant part of being healed is being cleansed bodily as well as spiritually.

In a healing ceremony, the patient must always be washed with yucca root soap. The males are thus washed and then dried with white corn meal. The same applies to the females, though they are dried with yellow corn meal. Yucca is cleansing; corn pollen sanctifies that cleansing power, Milton Bluehouse told me, because pollen is offered to the gods. Corn pollen gives yucca its cleansing property in answer to the patient and medicine person's plea to the Holy Ones to be cleansed following the healing powers of a ceremony. After the yucca bath, the patient is cleansed, healed, and their *hozho* balance has been restored.

### *Ritual use*

Again I emphasize that *ritual* is the way a ceremony is performed. Ritual order is important due to the complexity of Navajo ceremonies. Every sequence, placement, length, or timing of components to ceremonies stands for something. This meaning in the way a ritual is performed also applies to corn pollen. Leland C. Wyman lists a few ways

corn pollen is used ritually, saying corn pollen is “applied to everything for consecration and sanctification, to the hogan, to the patient, to prayer sticks, to dry paintings and ceremonial paraphernalia, to the suds of the bath, to cornmeal mush to be eaten ceremonially, to the spectators.”<sup>56</sup> Patricia described the use of pollen in ceremony. Corn pollen is used in *all* ceremonies—from the Blessingway, the Ye’ii Bicheii, the Enemyway, Beautyway, etc. Every ceremony begins similarly. The order the ceremony begins with is the ritual component. First, before everyone arrives, the hogan or place of ceremony must be blessed with corn pollen. Upon entering the hogan from the east-facing door, the medicine man or woman of the ceremony walks clockwise to the south. He or she sprinkles pollen at the south, west, north, and finally the eastern reaches of the hogan. The men sit in the southern half of the hogan, and the females in the north.

In every ceremony corn pollen has to be used. Before a ceremony starts, you know, you have to bless the house first, the hogan. You have to put it right on the south side of the door, then bless the house on the west, then the north, then goes on sprinkling it all the way around [the hogan], onto the North side of the door again. Then to the east, on the inside. You use it to pray with...

Second, the first songs are to bless the hogan. Then after the songs for the house are sung, the medicine person passes two pouches of corn pollen, one to the right to the men in the south and one to the left for the women in the north. (Note the directional reference: in ceremony, right is always male and left is female.) Navajos bless themselves with pollen in three places, each of which have spiritual significance. The symbolic act, ritually frequent in any ceremony, signifies an offering to the Holy Ones. Navajos first place a pinch of pollen on top of their head. The top of the head is where people grow from. Patricia said each one of us has a feather on top of our head that is invisible to us, but the feather is for the Holy Ones to see us, and bless us there. Milton Bluehouse said

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<sup>56</sup> Wyman, p. 31

you must think of the world, mankind, and beauty when you dip in the first time. Then, the second pinch of pollen is for the lips or tongue. Putting pollen in one's mouth signifies godly speech, and saying kind things. Wyman wrote, "when put in the mouth [pollen] really is a gift to the person."<sup>57</sup> The mouth is very holy, Patricia emphasized, and so we have to be careful of what we say because we are holy, she says, all of us. Milton also talked about how every human life is so sacred, and he said so because of our eyes. Our eyes are like windows to our soul, and we can see and take in so much! Pollen is put on the tongue so that the Holy People will hear the people's prayers. The third pinch Navajos sprinkle in front of themselves, signifying an offering to all, so that all may be blessed with the beauty of corn pollen. One must *always* dip back into the pouch each time between places, signifying fresh corn pollen for the Holy Ones each time, Milton said. This is the ritual of blessing oneself with corn pollen.

At the end of ceremonies, the medicine man sprinkles pollen out the door to the east, signifying putting the blessing of pollen out into the world. And after the ceremony has closed, the participants stay in their clothes, so that the Holy Spirits recognize them by their dress and the pollen on them. Then they take a ceremonial yucca bath on the fourth day after to cleanse themselves wholly. The *hozho* of the ceremony participants has now been fully restored, and they are sacred in the eyes of the Holy Ones.

### *Making corn pollen sacred*

There are two ceremonies that bestow sacred power in corn pollen, that bless the pollen and make it holy. The designation of holy means blessed and highly regarded by the Holy Ones (great spiritual beings), and so corn pollen must be blessed by the Holy

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<sup>57</sup> Wyman, p. 30

Ones, and thus imbued with its sacredness. A night of singing in the eight-night Ye'ii Bicheii ceremony blesses the pollen, and then the deerskin pouch that will hold the corn pollen is blessed by a Beautyway ceremony. Pollen is considered unholy until it has been through these ceremonies. Patricia said:

So, that's how they do it. And then they store it in a jar or something, and in those times they stored it in a pouch. And before people began to use it, they had to take it through a ceremony.

*ME: Take the pollen through a ceremony?*

Yeah, it will be a Beautyway ceremony, and that's how they use that...

*ME: Is the ceremony specifically for blessing the pollen? A whole ceremony for that?*

The main Beautyway, is where they do offering [of corn pollen]... that one of itself is kind of a long story, but the corn is used there. And the corn pollen is put there, to the east and spread in the four directions.

There is no ceremony *for* corn pollen, as pollen is prayer itself; the pollen just goes through these ceremonies, emerging sacredly endowed at the end.

The corn pollen is blessed in the Ye'ii Bicheii ceremony. The Ye'ii Bicheii is the end of the year ceremony, and it is about creation. There is one night they perform the ceremony... and right before the dances are done, they have the all night singing done inside, and they put all those traditional offerings out there, and a lot of offerings underneath their blankets. It's beautiful, it's really nice. And that's when they have their Táádidííns blessed too, they put all that stuff out there. That's when everything's blessed. After that you can fill up your corn pollen, in your pouch.

Once it has been blessed in a Ye'ii Bicheii ceremony, the corn pollen has to be held in a sacred deerskin pouch, just mentioned by Patricia at the end of the last quote. The deer can only be shot with bow and arrows, not guns, and by a relative of the person for whom the pouch is to be made. Traditionally, the pouch is made and blessed in a Beautyway ceremony, by a medicine person. Patricia continues:

When they make the ceremony, the Beautyway ceremony, they have to have a deer skin, it has to be one that's made by men that was hunting. They can't have the commercial type. Have to use the deer that's shot by arrows. Only arrows.

Though nowadays, people can buy pouches commercially made, and Patricia says some people today have the pouches made “with a sewing machine, I see them all over the place. But that’s not how it was.” Patricia mentioned this as a sign of laziness and loss of traditional Navajo knowledge. She doesn’t think that these commercial pouches necessarily hurt the pollen, though they may diminish pollen’s sacred power. She believes pollen is pollen, and it still holds some power by its very nature.

I return to Patricia’s closing description of the Beautyway and blessing the deer skin. She was talking about the way men get the deer skin, and then:

After that, they have to have the Beautyway ceremony, that’s when they use it, they bring [the deerskin] in, and the medicine man will cut it up. This is the time to have your *Táádidíín* pouch made for you by the medicine man. So he cuts them out, and he sews them in there as he sings... so he sings, and it is put together in the ceremony.

I read of another version of the way a deer must be taken in order to be used in ceremony.

Toelken describes a kind of sacred deerhide, from the hide of an unwounded deer. To come by such a hide, Navajo men must *catch* the deer, and smother it with sacred corn pollen, which seems quite the feat. The deer hide is then removed in a special, ritually prescribed way.<sup>58</sup> As told by Yellowman, men are able to catch deer because, in Navajo culture, deer are regarded as relatives, and want to help the Navajo by giving them food and clothing. The Navajo hunters offer the deer prayers, via the sacred corn pollen, and the deer offers them its body. The reciprocity here is acknowledged with corn pollen, as corn pollen “translates” the deer hide to be used in ceremony, into a sacred animal.<sup>59</sup>

Again, corn pollen’s power is evident in this story.

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<sup>58</sup> Toelken, p. 45

<sup>59</sup> As described by Yellowman in Toelken, p. 45-47

The ritual of catching the deer is given in story form, and the meaning behind the ritual is symbolic for the reciprocal relationship between the Navajo and their natural world. This symbolism (or the metaphorical) is representative of the way the Diné portray the natural world around them and their history.

## **The Metaphorical**

### *Metaphors and stories*

Metaphors used by the Navajo storyteller or any Navajo brings meaning to a story, a point, or an anecdote. Metaphor is a figure of speech in which a word or phrase is applied to something to which it is not literally applicable. Or metaphor represents a thing symbolic of something else,<sup>60</sup> with its origins from the Greek *metapherein* ('to transfer'). So metaphor is a transfer of meanings from one concept to another. For example, the hummingbird in Navajo lore represents beauty. Because the bird is beautiful, most things beautiful in Navajo culture are attributed to being from the wise hummingbird or shown to the Diné by the hummingbird (as in corn pollen).

Storytelling in Navajo culture is circumlocutory, Phil Bluehouse says, as a way of teaching virtue, vice, and meaning without directly telling. The story framework is powerful; moral precepts are taught through a body of stories. The Navajo tell about the plants, sun, moon, creation, Coyote, their ancestors—everything through story and myth. The intricacy of the metaphors and meanings within Navajo tradition is impressive. Diné identity is woven by threads of stories. Similarly, the Western Apache Indians place power in the story framework and place-names. In *Wisdom Sits in Places*, Keith Basso describes the importance of language and meaning in the landscape of the Apache, saying

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<sup>60</sup> Oxford English Dictionary definition, <[www.askoxford.com](http://www.askoxford.com)>

how often a single name of a particular place will “accomplish the communicative work of an entire saga or historical tale.”<sup>61</sup> In addition, the Indians of the Columbian Plateau have a body of “Coyote stories” they tell:

To appreciate the meaning these stories convey requires an intimate knowledge of the local natural environment, local animals and plants being the main characters and local places the stage on which they act out the human drama. Children learn the moral precepts that will guide them in their social and ecological relationships by listening to their elders tell these stories.<sup>62</sup>

I use this quote because it conveys the similar role stories hold in Navajo culture. Hugh Yellowman explains why they are told, saying “everything is made possible through stories.”<sup>63</sup> Traditional Navajos, certainly the elders, have intimate knowledge of their surrounding flora and fauna. This knowledge both fuels and resolves the search for answers as to why and how things are the way they are. The Navajo answer this age-old question by attributing symbolism, stories, and metaphors to everything in their world. For example, the footprints of Coyote, the messenger, hold meaning in the direction they run. Patricia described this myth:

When we travel, they say when we’re travelling, there might be a coyote that might pass your path. You have to go over there and have your corn pollen, and put it in their footprints, and do a prayer. He’s only crossing your path because he’s giving you a message. He’s a messenger... It depends on which way he is running—clockwise or counterclockwise. And if running clockwise, he’s telling you have to pray... good things might come your way. If they are running the other way, this is where you need a protection prayer done. He’s just a messenger.

Holy Ones are often described in the landforms of Navajo land. Nature and geography are especially sacred; “these sacred mountains are our father and mother. We come from them; we depend upon them... Each mountain is a person. The water courses are their

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<sup>61</sup> Basso, p. 89

<sup>62</sup> Hunn in Berkes: box 1.1, 7

<sup>63</sup> Yellowman, in Toelken, *The Anguish of Snails*, p. 110

veins and arteries. The water in them is their life as our blood is to our bodies.”<sup>64</sup> The Diné take the stories embedded in their places seriously. The Indian lawyer Charles Wilkinson notes how the native peoples regard their land as alive with stories as well as with animals, vegetation, soil and rocks, and weather. In Wilkinson’s *Blood Struggle: The Rise of Modern Indian Nations*, Vine Deloria, Jr., a Lakota Sioux Indian, reflects that “Indians can be unhappy, but I do not think that Indians are ever lonely. They are never alone. The plains, the canyons all have so many stories.”<sup>65</sup>

Weavings are another way the Navajo way of life is told through metaphor. Toelken writes, “for the Navajos, weaving arises from everyday life (though not everyone is a weaver), and the rugs dramatize that way of life, expressing the culturally understood interaction of people and nature.”<sup>66</sup>

Plants are also embodied in story and through metaphor. Navajos attribute meaning to all plants, as plants represent “a symbol of vegetation without which neither man nor animal could exist.”<sup>67</sup> Vegetation is considered the ‘dress’ of the earth and the mountains. Plants are a gift bestowed at creation, and are therefore sacred and regarded with incredible respect.<sup>68</sup> For example, virtually every story and myth about corn attributes energy and fertility to the plant. Corn is seen as a relative of the people that gives nourishment in return for the peoples’ nourishment of it,<sup>69</sup> which reflects my prior comments about corn’s inability to survive without the care of humans. The reciprocal relationship between the corn plant and people is told through the corn gods and

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<sup>64</sup> Stephan in Reichard, *Navaho Religion: A Study of Symbolism*, p. 19-20

<sup>65</sup> Wilkinson, p. 305

<sup>66</sup> Toelken, p. 44

<sup>67</sup> Reichard, p. 144

<sup>68</sup> Reichard, p. 22

<sup>69</sup> Toelken, p. 172

goddesses created by the people, alluding to the importance and sacredness of corn.

Herein, again, the story tells the meaning.

Phil Bluehouse said the idea of corn pollen always comes back to meaning and metaphor, no matter how one approaches it. Corn pollen is used ceremonially in parallel to pollen's role in nature, though not in regards to fertility exactly, as is often interpreted by academics. As mentioned, the mother plant strives to ensure successful growth for her offspring. The light pollen from the corn silk female flowers blows away from the mother plant, out in the four directions. Physiologically, this ensures diversity in pollination, and healthier fertilization as pollen finds its way to the male flowers of other plants across the corn field. In parallel, the Diné scatter pollen, tossing it ceremoniously out to the four directions—North, South, East, and West. This parallel exemplifies the ethnobotanical relationship between the corn plant and the Diné. The two have intertwined together over the generations.

## **Change**

### *An oral tradition*

The Navajo are a culture of metaphors and stories; this we have seen. The Diné were originally and still are predominantly an oral tradition, where their traditions are kept through storytelling and song. Toelken writes of the power within a story, and passing it down, saying “the survival of an orally transmitted story is in itself a testimony to its ongoing validity as an expression of cultural meaning in dramatic terms.”<sup>70</sup> He recognizes the incredible feat of keeping these stories—their creation stories, herbal lore, songs, and prayers, which are all fantastically complex, for countless generations. I find

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<sup>70</sup> Toelken, p. 14

this remarkable. In *Oral Tradition as History* (1985), Jan Vansina remarks, “how it is possible for a mind to remember and out of nothing to spin complex ideas, messages, and instructions for living, which manifest continuity over time is one of the greatest wonders one can study, comparable only to human intelligence and thought itself.”<sup>71</sup> Vansina’s remark accentuates the marvel of passing down a tradition through thousands of years.

In the past, outsiders have been the scribes of the Navajo tradition, interpretations which are inherently biased to the anthropologist or ethnologist. Herein lies the fault Milton Bluehouse finds with the portrayal of his culture; the academic bias found within his culture’s portrayal. Navajo culture is commonly misrepresented and mistold by scholars, and Milton thinks all the books out there on Navajo religion and culture do not capture the intricacy. His statement amazes me, as a lot of the literary descriptions of religion and culture I read *were* actually dauntingly complex, and that he would say the literature *isn’t* intricate enough, is testimony to the difficulty western scholars have in creating descriptions and texts on the Navajo tradition. I want to recall something I mentioned earlier to emphasize the point of incomplete cultural interpretation. I pointed out that many of the “complete” (a claim often in the subtitle) texts on Navajo culture do not have corn in their indexes, nor do they mention corn pollen. The omission exemplifies the idea that Navajo culture has not been adequately put forward by western scholars, or perhaps has simply been left out. Why are western scholars the only ones coming up on the screen of Navajo cultural representation?

There is no original written language, as it is an oral tradition. So scholars from the outside are the main recorders of Navajo traditions. Both Patricia and Milton Bluehouse, traditional Navajos who practice and live the Navajo way, claim their culture

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<sup>71</sup> Vansina, p. xi

has been incorrectly portrayed. Corn pollen and many other aspects of their culture have been misrepresented by academia. Academia sees the Navajo culture in a literal and concrete way, though the culture is one of metaphors and spirituality. Oral tradition lives in metaphor and spiritual culture that is difficult to write down. Milton spoke of a dire need to voice Navajo tradition in a poetic voice, with a poetic interpretation, which means using metaphor.

The Navajo use of oral tradition, living amongst a textual culture, is changing. Western influence on the reservation, scholarly influx, and disinterest in Navajo tradition among the young is changing the way stories are passed on. Many are written now, but many have been lost.

In one of my conversations with Patricia, the topic of genetically modified (GM) corn came up. She thought that a certain variety, engineered to not grow a tassel, has made an appearance in Navajo land. She could tell me nothing concrete, only the tragedy of the corn's modified nature. Patricia is my only source on this controversial appearance. When I asked Patricia and others where the GM variety of corn on the reservation was, no one knew, and I as well could not find any information on the GM corn's extent.

*Controversy: genetically modified corn*

Geneticists have bred a variety of corn to grow without a tassel, or male flower. The tassel is the site of pollen production, so no tassel means no pollen, and no pollen for the practice of Navajo traditions. The variety seems beneficial, however, in terms of the issue of cross pollination contamination. No pollen means no risk of contamination of natural neighboring varieties. The possible risks posed by traveling transgenes are not

thoroughly understood to date, but plausible scientific reasons for concern about potential hazards to Navajo agricultural biodiversity as well as natural ecosystems remain.<sup>72</sup>

Research shows that a mere 15 mph wind can blow pollen grains as far as a half mile in a few minutes,<sup>73</sup> which is significant.

The modified corn issue is cultural, and goes beyond scientific; the implications are ceremonial, not monetary, for the Navajo. Corn without pollen is blasphemy, and should this variety ever significantly permeate Navajo land, the GM corn could sever the relationship between the Diné and corn. In doing so, the connection between plants and the people would also be severed. The consequences of this alien corn variety would be dire, should it ever come to be. Corn pollen is a notable thread weaving the tapestry of Navajo culture: the substance is used in nearly every ceremony, composing a large part of the Navajo creation myth and coming of age rituals to simple harvesting of daily and sacred herbs. The concept of corn without pollen has tragic implications. Should the GM corn take over, through offered economic and corporate incentives to the people, a supreme ceremonial component will be lost.

The corn variety that doesn't have the ability to produce pollen is one of the most bizarre varieties yet concocted. But corporations want control of the corn plant's reproductive process, in the classic trend of human desire for control. Kathleen McAfee, mentions the economic and resource-control conflicts involving corn in Mexico.<sup>74</sup> The transgene corn pollen presents the potential for 'genetic pollution' between native corn plants and GMO corn, and would effect the local agrarian population. McAfee's research in Mexico also holds implications for the Navajo people: transgene corn pollen

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<sup>72</sup> McAfee, p. 18

<sup>73</sup> Nielsen, 2001

<sup>74</sup> McAfee, p. 18

introduced to the reservation by corporations could pollute Navajo corn varieties historically held by families.

The corn we eat has all been modified by generations of humans. The ancient strains have all been shaped via cross pollination, the changes of time, and more recently by the genetically modified plant experimentalists. Most Navajo corn growers on the reservation have maintained cultivation of their own varieties of ancient strains. Corn seed is passed down through generations, through each harvest. A portion of the harvest is dried, scraped from the cobs, and set aside in storage to be planted for next year's crop. In this way, familial strains are maintained. The Pueblo people of Taos, New Mexico are another example of cultural maintenance of traditional corn varieties. Native people in the Southwest have thus managed to hold onto the varieties that have fed their people and with which they have blessed themselves for countless generations. Now corn as well as other plants are becoming commodities for sale.

### *Selling medicinal plants*

Harrington and Leonard write, in a review of Elmore's *Ethnobotany of the Navajo*, "Not only are the White-man's weeds encroaching on the native plant population of the reservation, but plant uses and even plant names are being forgotten by the Navajo, especially those of the younger generation, to a distressing extent."<sup>75</sup> Patricia often spoke of the decline in Navajo knowledge of herbs, their gathering rituals, and the ceremonial uses of them. Patricia says the people have become lazy.

Today, there are a lot of changes, you know. Sometimes it's just sad, that some don't remember these ways, that some have lost contact with their traditions and

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<sup>75</sup> Harrington and Leonard, in *American Anthropologist*; book review of Elmore's *Ethnobotany of the Navajo*, p. 441

their culture. There are a lot of them that are like that, I see that all the time. I always wonder about it.

ME: What about Navajos gathering herbs, now, and selling them like some do? Maybe—maybe its just as holy as the other one. Maybe, if you really think about it, the corn itself is holy. It's just that—well it's just that the way [the herbs are] being given, I guess... the people don't have access anymore. And there's not a lot of people that knows about all these herbs anymore, as well. (44:55-46:30) The bottom line, I guess, is when there is a patient that is ailing, and they come forward to you, and they ask you to make them herbs or something, and prepare medicine for them.

So I go out and collect herbs for them, and prepare medicine for them. If I do that, I have to ask them their name, you know, their traditional name, and then when I go out there and take my Táádidíín, and give my offering, and say, this is for this person. For this purpose, I give the offering. So, that way versus just selling [the herb]. There is no offering, so I wonder how she did that, and if she can sell it like that. So, I don't know, does that work as good as the other one, you know? There is no offering... I guess they need that money. (46:40-48:35)

Tom Yellowtail, a Crow Indian, tells of travelling through a canyon and stopping to pray to the plants. He believed that medicinal plants would only reveal themselves and their curative properties to those who prayed appropriately to the plants, with ritual meaning, but not to those people who wanted to gather them for commercial exploitation.<sup>76</sup> Yellowtail's account goes with Patricia's thoughts on selling medicinal plants. He says that one can not sell them, as those plants would have no sacred or curative power. Patricia hesitates on this issue; it is an obviously difficult question, and one that can be painful to traditional Navajos. Selling medicinal plants is like blasphemy, some say. Most medicine people would say that purchased herbs don't work, because the gathering ritual is so important to the ceremonial power of plants. A person's relationship to the plants, by telling the medicine plant their Navajo name and the purpose for which the plant will be used, is so important in valuing the earth, the earth our Mother.

Using traditional ways for monetary gain has become increasingly prevalent.

Since the influx of Europeans in North America in the 1700s, the native cultures have

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<sup>76</sup> Tom Yellowtail's account is found in Toelken, p. 174; see original in Fitzgerald, 1991

changed immensely. The motley crew who created the United States by the Declaration of Independence in 1776 introduced the money system to Native Americans.

Traditionally, the Dine were traders for their various commodities, medicines, jewelry, and supplies. The white man intruded, and began all his dealings with the Indians using money. The U.S. broke treaties, and paid the Indians money compensation; it took “guaranteed” Indian lands, and paid them money; it damaged Indian natural resources, and made up for its westward expanding greed with money. But Native Americans are people of the land, and didn’t then understand this new system—what kind of trade was money for their ancestral lands? The money economy destroyed many Indian tribes, including the Navajo. Some of the Dine became greedy as money created competition, both among themselves as well as against the traditional way. Many other factors were involved in those few centuries of change for the Navajo, though for my purpose here, I only wanted to give a brief history of the influence of money on the Navajo people.

Patricia spoke of greed, corruption, and selfishness among the Diné. For example, medicine people used to do ceremonies for simply the benefit of the patient, for the power of helping someone in need. Nowadays, though, Patricia says medicine men charge high rates for their services. She requested a ceremony a little while ago for her daughter, who was sick. The medicine man charged her family a few thousand dollars for his services, and then they had to bring fifteen quality Crown Point Navajo blankets. This is extravagant, though increasingly common. Patricia says she does not ask for fees as a medicine woman; when people come to her asking for a ceremony, she just does it, if it is within her power. There are not many of her kind anymore. She sadly remarks on the greed of many medicine people as they raise their prices, contributing to the overall

decrease of ceremonies. People often can't afford to have ceremonies done now, Patricia says, and so many go around unbalanced and sick at heart because of the lack of ceremonies.

Another significant contributor to the decreasing traditional way of life lies in the lack of corn fields among families. Families often don't have fields to grow the sacred corn, used in such a myriad of ways. Many Navajos have fallen to buying pollen and "Indian corn." In my time on the reservation, I went shopping once at the Gallup, New Mexico Walmart with the Belinte family. Near the check-out lines, where you would find magazines, gum, batteries, and chocolate, there was a box of "Indian corn," for .99 cents each. "Indian corn" is the name non-Indians dubbed the variegated, highly colorful corn varieties belonging to Native Americans in general. Strangely however, the Navajo people at least do not grow any variety of mixed colored corn; they only grow blue, white, yellow, and sometimes red or black. Never do they mix colors, as each color is symbolically important in various ways, going back to Changing Woman and the Navajo creation story. Indian corn is probably a product of the tourism industry, and our fascination with the bright colors of the Native American traditions.

So what would the Navajo world look like without corn one may ask. I cannot imagine. That question has increasing prevalence today, though Patricia's family, however, does not grow indian corn and hers is one of the few families blessed with a corn field. The corn field is central to a traditional Navajo family's daily life.

That's where we give offering to everything in life, that's why we do these ceremonies... Everything that we do, we do it that way. Some people are so used to living modern everything. They're not back to basics.

ME: Do you think most of the people have lost that basic connection?

Yeah... Some of us, we still have those connections, and we try to practice that. We practice and we teach it to our kids. We don't want to lose that value, its very

sacred and I think that, it makes you complete at times. When you have worries, why are you sitting there worrying? Get your corn pollen. Go out there and get a sagebrush, and things like that. What's wrong is a laziness that has taken over. You have to do it for yourself... if you teach these to your young kids, they're aware of it... We live out here, we're in Nature. (49:00-end)

These were Patricia's last words to me, in the context of our interviews. She and her family live way out in the pinon and juniper hills near the Arizona-New Mexico border. They live in nature, and are blessed with corn fields that have been passed down for generations, as the land was Patricia's grandmother's before her. Patricia's mother, now in her mid-nineties, lives in a house a few steps away. Pat's two daughters still live with her, ages 15 and 18. She is blessed in many ways, having corn fields and her family all around her, living out in nature. I would say her family is back to basics, as Patricia put it.

The question remains what Patricia Belinte's girls will do, and her grandchildren. Will they continue to stay on that land out in the pinon and juniper? Or will they follow the norm for Navajo youth, and head into the bigger population centers of Navajo land, or out of the reservation all together? I know Patricia has brought her girls up very rooted in their tradition. The girls participate regularly in ceremonies, their illnesses have been healed with medicinal plants, and they listen to the stories of their past and the metaphorical meanings of the natural world around them. Not many Navajo children are brought up this way anymore. Patricia's girls are exceptional.

## **Conclusion**

Corn pollen's sacred quality comes from generations of a connection between the Diné and their natural world. This connection is inherent in Navajo culture, and the basis of their ceremonies, rituals, and daily life. Corn pollen has a magical omnipotence. I

previously mentioned that corn pollen has many associations, the most common one by non-Indians being the link to fertility. I have shown, however, that this is not necessarily true, and that corn pollen is more the Navajo ceremonial basis of prayer. That fine, yellow powder is used for everything in Navajo tradition, except one thing: corn pollen is never used for rituals or ceremonies involving death. All else—life, growth, food, ceremony, birth—all else is blessed with corn pollen. Death has a negative connotation, and corn pollen is only for good things, for restoring beauty and *hozhó*.

I love the concept of beauty as keeper of balance in the Navajo worldview. This further illustrates the folkloric nature of the Diné culture. Understanding the folklore of the Navajo tradition mandates an understanding of all the other stories and meanings involved, all the way back through their creation story. I recall Milton Bluehouse's words that the world is utterly connected. I wonder if the members of western culture can be or should be given the power to document the Navajo tradition. Can our anthropological or sociological frameworks grasp the intricately folkloric language and culture of the traditional Navajo? I too am an outsider coming into another world as an observer. Yes, I've had the special opportunity of knowing a few Navajos and being able to talk to them about corn pollen, but I am still an outsider nonetheless.

Patricia expressed to me her hope that someone out in the Western world, as in the world of probably everyone who reads this paper, will read my words and be moved; that they will pick up this story (as Patricia called this study), and be inspired and awed. She wanted people to know these things. And so the purpose of my paper was to tell a story, a story for the greater body of Navajo stories, this one written, those ones told across thousands of years. And so I gave it to you, in the meandering way of the Navajo.

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