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Barre Toelken

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Beauty Behind Me; Beauty Before (AFS Address)

ABOUT FIFTY YEARS AGO, when I quit school in 1954 (during my sophomore year), I did not know of the lifetime of folklore upon which I was embarking. A forestry major at Utah State, in northern Utah, I quit for only a term—or so I thought—to think of other majors, for one thing, and to try my hand (like everyone else) at finding uranium, a new search “going on” in southern Utah, a place I wanted very much to see. And see it I did: from investigating remote parts of the reservation and marrying a Navajo woman, to catching pneumonia and being cured by a medicine man. Oh yes—and also finding some uranium, gypsum, copper, and manganese. The Navajo reservation is roughly the size of Belgium, and in those days about 50,000 Navajo lived there, plus any number of uranium prospectors. Away from our camp, we might see one or two others a day; when we got down into Montezuma Canyon we saw no one, except the occasional sheep herder.

Two years later I was out of money, out of a job, out of just about everything except my friendship with the Yellowman family in Montezuma Creek—in southeastern Utah, the only place in 1956 where the reservation reached north of the San Juan River. There were no paved roads, and the unpaved roads were seldom passable, because of sandstorms. The nearest neighbor was around three miles away and out of sight. Surrounded by cliffs of sandstone, I heard stories every evening during the winter, ranging from Coyote’s adventures with Yei Tso (a monster who is lured into a sweat lodge where he breaks his own legs, thinking he has discovered a natural treasure), to Coyote’s disastrous encounter with the beaver (he bets his hide, loses, and has to be buried for a year for his hide to grow back), to the story about how Coyote played dead to trick the prairie dogs into coming close enough to kill.

All of these stories were told by Little Wagon (ca. 80) and by Yellowman (ca. 60), all of them accompanied by smiles and laughter, all of them functioning—so I was told—to illustrate for us all, especially the children, what was normal behavior. In other words, what Coyote *does* is something we should *avoid* (most of the time, for Coyote represents good as well as bad). I eventually returned to school and changed my major to English, but I never forgot the figure of the old Coyote. I had caught “the Navajo bug,” and it has been with me ever since, turning me (in more recent years) slowly from Old English, Middle English, and other trivia, to the depths of Navajo language, storytelling, and religion, and from kids’ stuff to the things that make *adults* nervous and sick.

In 1966 I went back with proper equipment and recorded Yellowman. He and his family now lived just off the reservation in a house in Blanding, Utah, and although

things were not ideal—primarily because of white neighbors who were baiting him—we got several stories recorded, and I went home to begin work on one of them. This resulted in a brief paper at the annual meeting of the American Folklore Society, which later became an article in *Genre* (1969) and was then republished in *Folklore Genres* (1976). It was called “The ‘Pretty Language’ of Yellowman,” which, though it touched on a number of good issues, did have several flaws, among them a few things in the text that I had not heard. The positive thing was that it was translated into prose, which let me rationalize some things that did not quite make sense. I could gloss over them. I delivered the paper and at least felt I got some value out of my years among the Navajo. The tales seemed a good-natured attempt to get kids to behave: “You wouldn’t catch *me* acting like that; people would laugh” (Toelken 1969).

But so many questions came to my mind (and to the minds of others) that I obtained the help of a young Navajo graduate student, Tacheeni Scott, and retranslated the text, not into poetry exactly (though in time I thought of it as such), but into lines that equaled the lines of delivery. I discovered through this means that there were *lots* of words I had not even heard. One of them, *hááhgóóshítí*, was the key to something I did not fully know about, but it deals with the urgency of the action. I hurried into print with the results. In “Poetic Retranslation and the Pretty Languages of Yellowman” (Toelken and Scott 1981), Scott and I argued for a more complete notion of the Navajo tale, noting that there was—in addition to the humor—a serious level, a moral level addressed to the *grownups* about how we should comport ourselves, and that was the reason that grownups took the stories so seriously. Notice that I was the only one excited about this finding. For the Navajos, it was sort of obvious. Now I saw two levels of meaning. This was about twenty-two years ago.

Later, as a result of this excitement and talk, I was invited to be the only non-Navajo speaker at a round of talks about the direction of Navajo culture, held at Sweetwater, Arizona. Navajos were more numerous than ever (now more than 200,000) and there were now more speakers of the language than there had ever been. But did that mean that the culture stayed the same or that it was changing? My part of this conversation was minor: what are the whites teaching about the Coyote tales these days? Was he still depicted as a childlike buffoon? I was proud to open up my *years* of study (by now reaching thirty), and show them that, at least in my work, he was not. A long, friendly discussion ensued, followed by a long silence.

After a polite pause, singer and medicine man Little John Benally said that it was now probably time to tell me what was *really* going on in the Coyote tales—and he followed with about an hour or more of how the stories are index points of Navajo *medicine*: for example, it does take a lot of patience to heal bones, and to have them healed, just as Coyote said, even if in the story it is said to Yei Tso (the monster with broken legs) in mockery. So there is a *third* level of meaning, not even apparent to all Navajos, but there nonetheless, and more serious.

Later that night as I tried to clarify this with another medicine man with whom I was staying, he suddenly asked quietly whom I wanted to kill. “No one,” I answered, wondering what made him ask the question. Then he told me that witches spoke differently of the tales, something I was apparently doing. The next day I stopped by

Yellowman's place to ask him about the subject of witchcraft and killing in relationship to Coyote tales and found him unwilling to talk about it. "We don't mention it," he said dryly. The medicine man I had stayed with, Yellowman explained, had probably asked because he was also a witch playing both sides of the street. He no doubt wanted to be my witchcraft mentor. I rushed into print with "Life and Death in the Navajo Coyote Tales" (1987), saying I was not taking the subject any further, especially on this fourth level—the witchcraft level. This was about seventeen years ago.

Shortly thereafter, Yellowman died—on his way out of a sweat lodge where he had been trying to rid the family, including me, of the affects of witchcraft. The family is now spread all over Utah and the northwest. My sister is living by herself in a brand-new building, in Blanding, on the site where the old one used to be, but no one in the family is telling the tales. There were white people in Los Angeles who were heard telling Yellowman's version of a story during a *summer* festival (the *wrong* time of year for these stories).

About eight or nine years ago, my sister insisted that the stories should be returned to her, so she could destroy them. In 1996, I returned to my sister all the tapes I had—about sixty hours of tapes—and I wrote about it in the *Journal of American Folklore*, in a piece called "The Yellowman Tapes" (1998), taking up the positive aspects of my action from a Navajo perspective. In the end they were Navajo stories, not mine.

I waited to hear that she had destroyed them, but she has not (as of the last I heard). I did eventually get one tape back: the one Yellowman told every time I came to him to collect—about how Coyote tricks the prairie dogs—the one in which Coyote fools himself into thinking he has all the prairie dogs, but he has only four skinny ones, and he throws them away. Then I overheard her—in 2000—say about me, "I wonder why he didn't want to hear *my* versions of all those stories."

And that brings us to the crux of this report. After almost fifty years, why *didn't* I collect her versions as well as his? After all, the Navajo culture is matriarchal, matrilineal, and matrilocal. Hers should have been even more loaded with cultural references. Perhaps she would have had different, more complete, versions. But *I never heard one; I didn't ask*. Trying to avoid a cultural clash (a young white male "chasing" a Navajo woman), I inadvertently created a bigger cultural gap by pretending disinterest. And you have to *ask* to hear these stories as far as this family is concerned. What at first started as a choice turned into a habit.

In *Writing Culture*, James Clifford, following Vincent Carpanzano, characterizes "ethnographers as tricksters, promising like Hermes not to lie, but never undertaking to tell the whole truth either" (1986:6). In this case, I *thought* I was telling the truth because I *thought* the tales were the same between the sexes. In fact, in addition to my fear of upsetting the cultural apple cart, I thought that mainly men told them. I thought the meanings were in the tales; now I am certain that the tale provides different perspectives for meaning determined by the context. And whose context is paramount? The woman's is, in this case, for she is paramount. I should have been collecting *her* tales, with a reference to his, because they are no doubt different—in vocabulary, in action, in inference, in tone, and most of all, in content. To put it professionally, I would now say (although it sounds silly to say it now):

1. Men and women hold different but complementary details; collect from *all* members, starting with the women in a matriarchal culture.
2. *Coauthor* articles on other cultures. This would have made me ask questions about everything; as it was, I simply did not ask. Besides, “author” carries some distinction in function, not just a matter of politeness. It is meaning of a different *sort* (not right versus wrong).
3. More important, my long-range view is substantially different from the short range. This was a simple tale (1956); a complex double-level tale (1981), a reference to medicine (1987), and finally a depiction of witchcraft (current). The four are connected, but you can see how my concerns have shifted: from tales that do not hurt anybody to tales that do (and what happens when they do?).

It took fifty years for the full range of meaning of Navajo storytelling to become clear in my mind, and it has taken its toll.

Navajo includes more than 200,000 people, more Navajos than ever in history, more people speaking Navajo than ever before. My studies have foregrounded *one man*, a part of one family (the less culturally important part, at that). In other words, I have spent fifty years studying the *lesser* of the two traditions. So, to that end, *you* must ask the women (you who will continue this type of research), not necessarily with feminism in mind, but to look in another direction: what *does it mean* when a woman tells these tales? And what does it *mean* that all the main characters are men? And it must be preceded by the question: do you know Coyote stories? Otherwise you will not get anything. And the next fifty years?

I am having a Navajo healing in late November, arranged by my Navajo sister. Recently I suffered a stroke, which has affected my arm and leg. You will recall that Yellowman died coming out of a sweat lodge: his legs—the legs of a man who chased deer until his seventies—had given out. Yellowman’s wife—my sister—is now at the hospital, checking to see if she needs new hips—her legs having given out. In addition, there have been three strokes in the immediate family. Is there a connection here? The Navajos say there is, and it is time to address them.

Those three stories at the beginning of this paper: Yei Tso breaking his legs at the sweat lodge; Coyote buried for a year until his fur grows back; Coyote throwing away *everything*, keeping nothing. Is there a connection here? The Navajos say there is. I don’t know yet; I’ll have to ask my sister about it.

Note

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