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THE LEGEND OF THE NAVAJO EAGLE-CATCHING-WAY¹

W. W. HILL AND DOROTHY W. HILL

The legend of the Eagle-catching-way was recounted by Pete Price of Fort Defiance, Arizona, in explanation of the origin of ritual and methods employed by the Navajo in the pit-trapping of eagles² The informant designated the myth as part of the Beadway, and this is confirmed by the parallelisms which appear in the published legends of that ritual.³ It is interesting to note in this connection evidence of the stability of Navajo religious pattern. The following account and Matthews', recorded sixty years before, show almost complete identity.⁴

There was a man who lived near Mount Taylor. He frequently traveled between his home and Jemez Pueblo. On the west side of Mount Taylor there was an Eagle's nest. The young were almost ready to leave. Each day the Jemez Indians went there to see if the eaglets had left. This is what the young man found on the mountain.

He went to the Jemez Indians. The Jemez had an idea that they would deceive him. They decided to care for the boy, and asked him to stay and live with them, and become one of the tribe. When he had become acquainted and decided to stay, they intended to lower him over the high cliff on a rope, so he could bring up the eagles for them.

The Pueblos decided they should reward the man for obtaining the eagles. Each person contributed some jewelry. When the boy arrived they told him that all this wealth would be his if he captured the eagles. They also told him he was to have charge of the horses and might use them whenever he wished. He was also to have a voice in anything that was done at the Pueblo.

The man said he did not believe that all their promises would come true. He decided not to do as they wished. The Indians told him he must obey. They decided to hold another meeting the following evening. The boy was called and he saw twice as much jewelry piled up as he had seen before. The Jemez promised him that he would be made head of the neighboring Pueblos, as well. They told him that it would only take him a few minutes work to obtain the eagles.

The boy decided to go home and consult with his brother. Before he left, the Jemez asked him how many sheep he wished killed. They wanted to have a feast for him when he returned. The boy said that

1. In accordance with the established policy of the University of New Mexico Press, the authors have consented to adopt the Spanish spelling of Navaho, rather than their preferred form.

2. See W. W. Hill, *The Agricultural and Hunting Methods of the Navaho Indians* (Yale University Publications in Anthropology, no. 17, 1938), pp. 161-8.

3. Washington Matthews' *Navaho Legends* (Memoir of the American Folk-Lore Society, vol. 5, 1897), pp. 195-208; Dane Coolidge and Mary R. Coolidge, *The Navajo Indians* (Boston, 1930), pp. 233-4; Gladys A. Reichard, *Navajo Medicine Man* (New York, 1939), pp. 26-36.

4. Matthews, *op. cit.*

as there were a great many people there, they should kill one sheep in each flock.

The following day the man left to see his brother. The Jemez gave him food for his trip. The boy arrived at his brother's home and told him what the Jemez had offered him to get the eagles. He asked his brother to decide whether or not he should do it.

The next day the boy and his brother built a sweat house. They discussed a plan. The brother said the boy should do as the Jemez wished. He said that even though the Pueblos deceived him, the Navajo would benefit. They decided that even though they were tricked, they would be able to collect the reward.

The next day the brothers started for Jemez. When they arrived, the feast was being cooked. When the feast was prepared, servants cared for them. After the feast another meeting was held. The Pueblos told the boy that after being away for two days he must have decided what he was going to do. They spread the ornaments before him and said again that he was to be head-man of Jemez.

On the journey back to Jemez the boy and his brother had visited the place where the eagles were located. It was on a high cliff and the eagles were in a kind of cave. The boys could not see how far back the cave went; all they could see were the two young eagles sitting on the ledge, ready to leave. They were about ten feet below the top of the cliff.

At the meeting, the younger brother said that if the Jemez did not deceive them they would do what they had been asked. He said that if there was trickery it would be remembered, and at a future time, steps would be taken to right the wrong. The Jemez said they would keep their promises and no trickery would take place. The boys agreed to get the eagles.

The Jemez gave them the jewelry and told the boys that they were now head-men of the Pueblo. They said that they would be accepted as real brothers and treated as such.

The boys decided to leave in three days. On arrival, they would camp for the night and on the fourth day go after the eagles. The following day the younger brother left for home. The Pueblos went in four directions to obtain sumac and four pieces of oak to build a basket in which to lower the man to the nest. The oak was strong enough to support a man. When these were gathered they began making the basket. The basket was constructed like a carrying basket, but heavier. In four days the basket was completed. They collected yucca leaves and from them braided a rope.

On the afternoon of the third day they all left and camped that night at the base of the cliff where the eagles were located. There was a large party of men and women.

In the morning they were ready. Four men went with the boy; the rest of the party scattered along the base of the cliff. The five arrived on top and the men placed the boy in the basket. Two strong yucca ropes were tied in the rim of the basket. The helpers wrapped

the ropes around the trees and the boy carrying two sticks with which to dislodge the eagles, was slowly lowered into the eagle's nest.

The man got out of the basket, and with his two sticks, was ready to dislodge the eaglets. All this time the parent eagles were flying nearer and nearer. The boy started toward one of the eaglets. The eaglet asked him what he intended to do. Then the boy discovered that the two eaglets were really men. They told him their names; one was Doiniki, the other Kiniki. When he realized the eaglets were men he did not push them off; he just remained there with them.

The Jemez had decided that as soon as the boy dislodged the eaglets, they would pull up the basket and leave him. The men on the cliff left the basket with the ropes around the trees and went below. The boy could see the people below him. They shouted to him to push the eaglets off but he would not obey.

The boy remained all afternoon and until sunset, when he asked the eaglets where they obtained their food and water. The eaglets told him that their parents brought it to them. They said their parents would soon arrive. Just at dusk one of the eagles flew back; he was the father. He brought a rabbit. Then the mother came and she also was carrying a rabbit.

The mother and the father both spoke. They called the boy Doiniki, and said they were grateful that he had not pushed their children off the ledge. They said that they would see what they could do to remove him from the ledge. They asked him what he ate and he said, "Everything." He told them he could eat rabbit, but that it must be cooked. The eagles told him that he would eat. One went into the cave and brought two clay bowls; one contained ground nactcizi. The boy said he was thirsty and the eagles told him he would drink. He heard a noise above him; Dove flew down and brought with him four jointed blades of grass, all filled with water. Eagle poured the water into the bowl. (Of course, there was more water than was indicated by the size of the grass.) Then Eagle poured some water into the cornmeal and made a kind of mush. He told the boy to eat. The boy said that it was odd that no matter how much he ate, the bowl remained full. He poured the mush into his mouth as if it were drinking water. Then he thanked Eagle for relieving his thirst and hunger.

The eagles told the man to remain in the nest for four days. They told him that on the morning of the fourth day they would see what they could do to help him to leave. Eagle told him that on the morning of the fourth day the Red-tailed Hawk People, Yellow-beaked Eagle People, and Chicken-Hawk People would help the two Eagles to take him to the heavens. These birds had the Lightning to help them.

On the morning of the fourth day the birds arrived. They wrapped the Lightning about the boy; Zigzag Lightning around his feet and chest, Straight Lightning around his hands and waist. Then the birds carried him to the sky. Before they could reach their destination the birds became so tired that they could go no farther.

The Arrowsnakes came down from the sky and helped the birds. However, they, too, became tired and could not go on. Then Fringed Mouth came down from the sky and placed his hat on the boy; that took him to the sky like the wind.

In the sky the boy was to learn the Beadway and Eagle-catching-way. There were people in the sky and there were houses; white in the east, blue in the south, yellow in the west, black in the north. The Eagle people lived in the east, Red-tailed Hawk People in the south, Yellow-beaked Eagle People in the west, and Chicken-Hawk People in the north. There were also many varieties of Eagles living there.

When they arrived the Eagles were tired and sweating. They took off their clothes and dried them in the sun. When their clothes were off they were just like men.

All the Eagles met and talked to each other about the boy who had come from the lower world. Then the boy began to learn the Beadway. Within four days he had learned almost all the songs, prayers, and sand paintings. Within twelve days he had learned the Beadway and the 'bringing the eagles' the Eagle-catching-way. When he had learned these they told the boy that he would return to his home.

Before the boy left, he told the Eagle People how the Pueblos had tricked him. He said he had not known the Eagles lived in the heavens and that he had thought only birds lived here. He said he had planned to push the two young eaglets from the cliff for the Pueblos to kill. The Eagle People said that he had done the right thing by not killing the young eaglets. The boy told them that the Jemez wanted the eagles for their feathers. They told him that instead, they would give him feathers from all the various kinds of eagles, and with these feathers he would be able to deceive the Jemez.

Eight Eagles took the boy home. They placed him on Mount Taylor and left him there. The boy went to his brother; the two boys were glad to see each other.

The boy began to teach his brother the two chantways. First he taught his brother the Beadway, then the Eagle-catching-way. A few days later the boys learned that a Mountain chantway was being held; the final night was four days hence.

A man came to the boys' home and told them where the Mountain chantway was being held. He sprinkled cornmeal on them. [That is, invited to perform at the Fire Dance.] The man also went to the Jemez and invited them to the dance. They all came to the Fire Dance on the last night of the ceremonial.

When the boys arrived they saw a number of Jemez Indians, whom they knew. The Jemez were glad to see them. The older brother was to do the dancing. The two boys had decided that they would get all the jewels which the Pueblos had promised, and the older brother would wear them while dancing. The boys asked that they be the last to perform. They wished this because the older brother intended to take the beads back to the sky with him. The boy had told his brother

how he would make ceremonial use of the jewels when he reached the sky.

The performers were in a small circle near the large corral. The Pueblos came and asked to borrow feathers from the brothers. They offered to lend jewelry to the boys when it was time for them to perform. When they were ready to dance they borrowed the jewels from the Jemez.

Their turn to perform came early in the morning. The older brother wore nothing but beads; from the wrist to the elbow he wore turquoise beads; around his neck and shoulders white shell, turquoise, and red stone beads.

They left the corral to give their performance. They used a basket drum. The older brother was to dance on the rainbow. He instructed his brother which verses to sing. He told him to sing the same verse over and over until he had sung it twelve times.

The younger brother sang and beat the basket drum. Each time he beat it, the boy rose higher and higher in his dance. On the fourth beat and verse he was higher than anyone could reach. The Jemez noticed the man going up into the sky and they became excited when they saw their beads disappearing. They rushed forward to get their beads but the boy was too high for them to reach. After awhile all they could hear was the beads rattling in the sky. In a short time they could hear nothing; this was when the brother sang the twelfth verse. The boy had disappeared into the darkness. The Jemez ran about lamenting the loss of their beads; they did not know what to do.

(This was the only time this ceremony was ever performed at a Fire Dance. It was performed because the Jemez had attempted to deceive the brothers and keep their beads. Even today you cannot sprinkle pollen on a Beadway singer and ask him to perform at a Fire Dance. Before the boy left he had said this ceremony should never be performed again, except over a sick person. This is how the Beadway and Eagle-catching-way originated.)

The younger brother wished to try what he had learned. He chose three men to go with him and each had his allotted task; one was to cook, the second to gather wood and supply water, the third to care for the horses. They decided to leave in four days. In the interval they prepared lunches of parched and ground cornmeal.

On the fourth day they left and traveled to a place near Grants, New Mexico. The leader gathered wild grasses with which to hide the opening of the pit. Instead of a ladder they used a tree limb which had branches on it. They dug the pit in four days; it was six feet long, four feet wide, four feet deep. Across the pit they laid poles and covered these with dirt. To make it appear natural, grass was placed over the dirt. At the entrance to the pit they hung a yucca mat, covered with grass.

When the work was completed the leader left the three men in the camp. He wore no clothes; he was painted with white clay and spotted with corn smut. He captured a live rabbit and went to the pit.

He used braided yucca to tie the rabbit to the stake, near the entrance of the pit. He placed the log ladder in the pit and climbed down.

He began to sing. When he had finished singing he said his prayers. [The prayers acted as compulsive magical formulae drawing the eagles from the sky by progressive stages, closer to the trap.] When he had finished his prayers he heard a noise; an eagle had come down. When the eagle tried to catch the rabbit, the boy reached out, seized it, and drew it into the pit.

His brother had instructed him to catch only four eagles, the first time he hunted. He was to kill two and release the other two, after he had plucked their plumes and tied white shell beads around their ankles. After the first hunt he could catch as many as he wished. He did as he was told. When he had caught the four eagles, he went back to camp. The following morning the men left for home.

(The actual hunt is similar to that which I have described in the last part of this story.)

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