

The Navajo Tradition -Transition to the Bahá'í Faith

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Most American Indians have remained traditional in their cultural belief systems and have not converted to an outside religious system without coercion of some sort. Yet, in the early 1960s large numbers of Navajo Indians, or more correctly, *Diné* Indians, *tradition-transitioned*, to use the terminology of psychologist and theologian Lewis Rambo, to a little-known eastern religion, the Bahá'í Faith. Rambo explains that a tradition-transition takes place when an individual or a group of individuals converts “from one major religious tradition to another” and says that if scholars are to be “phenomenologically true to the experiences and the phenomena of conversion, we must: 1) examine the religious ideology that shapes the conversion process, 2) examine the religious imagery that influences the consciousness of the convert, and 3) examine the religious institutions that are the matrix in which conversion takes place.”¹ I argue that those Diné tradition-transitioned for three primary reasons: fulfillment of Diné prophecies; access to autonomy and empowerment individually and culturally; and through the Bahá'í principle of the protection of culture Diné Bahá'ís can practice most of their traditional ways without opposition or disapproval from the non-Indian Baha'is. The Diné have two ancient prophecies that Navajo Bahá'ís believe are fulfilled by the coming of the new religion. I examine those prophecies from a religious, psychological, and sociological standpoint. Drawing on interviews and archival evidence, this paper demonstrates that Navajo Bahá'ís relate the prophecies contained in their ancient oral stories as significant reasons for their tradition-transition to the Bahá'í Faith.

A major conversion or tradition-transition occurred in 1962 when members of a well-known Diné family organized the Great Council Fire Unity Conference held near the Pine Springs Chapter House on the Navajo reservation. The Kahn family had recently accepted the Bahá'í Faith *en masse*, with grandparents, parents, and adult children all coming into the new religion within a short period of time. During the Council Fire, attended by a thousand people from various reservations, states, and countries, over three hundred Navajo Indians publicly declared their belief in and acceptance of the Bahá'í laws and principles revealed between 1844 and 1892 by the two prophet-founders of the Faith, the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh.² Archival material shows that the Bahá'í Faith was introduced to the reservation in the late 1950s by non-native Bahá'ís known as “home-front pioneers.”³ Self-described as the latest in a series of progressive world religions,

¹ Lewis R. Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 11-14.

² “The Native American Baha'i Institute,” *In Service to the Common Good: The American Baha'i Community's Commitment to Social Change* (Wilmette, IL: National Spiritual Assembly of the United States, Dec 2004), 30.

³ “American Indian Service Committee,” Archives. *Teaching Brochure of the American Indian Service Committee* (date unknown, comments indicate 1952-53).

devoid of clergy and based on the grassroots initiative of its members, the Faith's cornerstone principle calls for the practice of "unity in diversity" between individuals and cultures that inculcates respect for and the protection of diverse cultures.⁴

I interpret the ancient oral stories of the Warrior Twins and the Unity Chant as conversion narratives that shaped the Diné's traditional belief system and provided a bridge for those Navajos who converted to the Bahá'í Faith. How cultures and their stories are interpreted may be influenced by the *emic* or *etic* position of the researcher. Historian of religions, Catherine Bell defines "etic" as being on the outside of a culture.⁵ "Emic," or inside a culture, refers to the understandings and categories of a religious tradition that the adherents themselves recognize. Bell notes that etic scholars might inappropriately impose interpretative categories on a religion, for example, by labeling prophecies as myths. However, the historian of religions Bruce Lincoln designates myth as a "small class of stories that possess both credibility and authority" for the culture those stories arose in.⁶ Lincoln defines as authoritative a narrative for which successful claims are made, not only to the status of truth, but to the status of *paradigmatic* truth.⁷ This sense of authority in myths is "akin to charters, models, templates, and blueprints, but one can go beyond this formation and recognize that it is also—and perhaps more importantly—akin to that of revolutionary slogans and ancestral invocations, in that through the recitation of myth one may effectively mobilize a social grouping."⁸ I argue that through the Great Council Fire Unity Conference the first Navajo Baha'is effectively mobilized such a social grouping, and that through the recitation of the mythical stories of the Warrior Twins and the Unity Chant important forms of credibility and authority were provided for those Diné as traditional charters, models, and blueprints that led directly or indirectly to their tradition-transition.

Return of the Warrior Twins: Shaping Religious Ideology

Paul Zolbrod writes that when responsibility for the world was given to the *Nihookáá Diné* (the First Navajos), Changing Woman and the other *Diyin Dine'ē* (Holy People) gave the First Navajos the components of their ancestral knowledge in songs, prayers, ceremonies, and stories.⁹ These together formed a charter for life, a contract or covenant between the First Navajos and the Holy People who gave them the right to live within *Dinétah*, the original Navajo land between the four sacred mountains in Arizona,

⁴ Moojan Momen, *The Phenomenon of Religion: A Thematic Approach* (Oxford: Oneworld: Publications, 1999) 198.

⁵ Catherine Bell, "Action and Practice" in *Ritual Theory/Ritual Practice* (Oxford 1992), 70.

⁶ Bruce Lincoln, "Myth, Sentiment and the Construction of Social Forms," in *Discourse and the Construction of Society: Comparative Studies of Myth, Ritual and Classification* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 24-25.

⁷ Thomas Kuhn first used the term of paradigm shift in his famous book, *The Structure of Scientific Revolution* (1962) to describe the removal of anomalies or common misconception by the scientific community. The term has come to apply to other realms of human experience and indicates a major or radical change in thought patterns.

⁸ Lincoln, "Myth," 24-25.

⁹ Paul G. Zolbrod, *Diné bahané: the Navajo Creation Story* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1984), 22-23.

New Mexico, and Colorado. The Diné would be under the special protection of the Holy People as long as they stayed within the guidelines or boundaries of this covenant. Zolbrod quotes Diné historian Harry Walters:

Origin stories offer guidance to contemporary people because they compress historical knowledge and human experience into vivid narratives that can illuminate and educate. All components of Navajo culture are based on four main levels of knowledge, each of which can be subdivided into three additional levels of abstraction. Twelve distinct levels of knowledge are encoded into each episode of the origin stories. Navajo educators draw upon these levels of abstraction to illuminate ancestral teachings.¹⁰

The origin story of the Warrior Twins illuminates those ancestral teachings that influenced Diné Bahá'ís to accept the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh as the return of the Warrior Twins. Anthropologist Maureen Trudelle Schwarz tells the story of the Warrior Twins through the Diné creation stories of *Álltsé Asdazáá* (First Woman), *Álltsé Hastiin* (First Man), and Changing Woman. Changing Woman was found by the “holy spirit” Talking God as an infant, “lying under a dark cloud with a rainbow and soft, falling rain; strapped into a cradle made of rainbow, lightning, and sunbeams.”¹¹ The infant was given to First Man and First Woman who raised her in a “miracle way” with “sunray pollen from clouds, plants and flower dew so that she matured miraculously, coming into womanhood within twelve days.” Changing Woman gave birth to the Warrior Twins named Monster Slayer and Born For Water who were fathered by the Sun. Later, Changing Woman created the *Nihookáá Diné* (First Navajos) brought to life by her breath and the Holy Winds entering into their bodies. As young men, the Warrior Twins saved the world by slaying all Monsters except for Death, Disease, Hunger, Poverty and Old Age. The Monster Slayers then gave the weapons of sacred ceremonies and prayers to the *Nihookáá Diné* to use for “healing and the good life.”¹² Archival material written by an anonymous Diné Bahá'í explains that the Monster Slayers were expected to return to the Diné, “reborn by the iniquities of all humankind,” and give to all humankind “the spiritual weapons to battle and slay all the Monsters.”¹³ Spoken of as the “New Day” and signaled by “terrible trials for the Diné,” the Wise Ones knew that they would see “the death throes of the Old Era and the birth of the New Era.”¹⁴

Historian of religions Karl Luckert unexpectedly came across a reference to “a new age” when he was documenting a soon-to-be extinct *Ajilee* ceremony in 1976. Eighty-year old Claus Chee Sonny was relating ceremonial knowledge from Lava Butte and the different kinds of snakes in many colors, stripes and spots that the traveling Deer People saw there. Sonny said, “And we see all of these kinds today. Information was

¹⁰ Zolbrod, *Diné bahané*, 248, n. 11. Harry Walters, Cove, Arizona, is Chairman of Diné Studies and Director of the Ned Hatathli Cultural Center Museum at Navajo Community College in Tsaile, Arizona.

¹¹ Maureen Trudelle Schwarz, *Molded in the Image of Changing Woman: Navajo Views on the Human Body and Personhood* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1997), 23-24; 26; 45.

¹² Schwarz, *Molded*, 24.

¹³ “Navajo Prophesy and its Fulfillment in the Bahá'í Faith,” (author’s personal archives: author and date unknown).

¹⁴ “Navajo Prophesy,” 1-4.

given to them [the Holy Deer People]: ‘When a new age begins, these snakes will appear at various places—different ones who have never been seen before.’¹⁵ Luckert did not know what to make of Sonny’s statement, noting it “seems somewhat out of place” and said he was “inclined to interpret it as a spark from the ancient Middle American ideology.”¹⁶ Sonny’s impromptu disclosure to Luckert in the middle of documenting the *Ajilee* ceremony takes on new meaning when examined in the context of the eschatological return of the Warrior Twins. Snakes are sacred symbols of healing to the Diné and the Holy Deer People’s statement that in a new age, new snakes will appear in various places are interpreted by Diné Bahá’ís as the new spiritual weapons brought by the return of the Warrior Twins. A grandson of the founders of the Great Council Fire, twenty-one year old Navajo Bahá’í and architect Alfred Kahn, Jr., explains:

The Monster Slayers came again in the form of Bahá’u’lláh and the Báb and the ways we overcome the afflictions, the spiritual afflictions, are the [Baha’i] Writings. They are the weapons that we face the spiritual afflictions with. They are the ways we defeat the monsters that are afflicting the Navajo right now. There is a divine remedy that has been given to us. It’s not really like the Twin Monsters Slayers came and slay them for us, but that the Monster Slayers have come and given us the tools to do it. There is a quote in the Bahá’í Faith that says, ‘The native people, when properly trained and educated will be so enlightened as to illumine the whole earth.’ There is a special station for native people. And it’s always been referenced by this understanding that when properly trained and educated, which means that through that proper education and training we can arm ourselves with the weapons of the Twin Manifestations[Bahá’u’lláh and the Báb]. So we can become the monster slayers but we need them to bring us these tools and weapons.¹⁷

Prayers, essential in Diné traditional belief and in Bahá’í theology, are used as tools for healing, spiritual education, and protection. Zolbrod identified the fourth level of knowledge in the origin stories as the Protection Way ceremony, limited to those Diné who hold specialized knowledge of ceremonies. Linda Wilson is one of those Navajos who accepted the Bahá’í Faith at the Great Council Fire. Wilson links the Báb’s seven-directional “Prayer for Protection” to the Warrior Twins. The Báb, forerunner of Bahá’u’lláh, changed Islamic religious practices, instituted a new calendar, and revealed new laws that were to be supplanted by the greater prophet who was to follow him. The Báb, translated as the “Gate,” was publicly executed in 1850.¹⁸ Wilson remembers:¹⁹

¹⁵ Karl W Luckert, ed., *A Navajo Bringing-Home Ceremony: The Claus Chee Sonny Version of Deerway Ajilee* (Flagstaff: Museum of Arizona Press, 1978), 126.

¹⁶ Luckert, *A Navajo Bringing-Home Ceremony*, 126.

¹⁷ Alfred Kahn, Jr. Interviewed by the author in August, 2008 at his home in Albuquerque, New Mexico.

¹⁸ Moojan Momen, *The Phenomenon of Religion: A Thematic Approach* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 1999), 15.

¹⁹ Linda Wilson. Interviewed by the author on August 2, 2008 in Albuquerque, New Mexico. Baha’is signalize the divine stations of the Twin Manifestations by capitalizing any reference to them, and I have honored that format in the informants’ interviews.

Someone told me a story about the Báb, on His martyrdom and on the second time when they brought out the regiment to shoot and kill Him at mid-day on July 9. He said, 'I have not finished yet.' The first time that they shot, they didn't shoot Him. They had just shot the rope that was around His neck and He was free. He was back in the cell that he was in. And He was finished the second time they took Him out. They were looking for Him and they found Him still writing. He says, 'Now you can take me I'm finished.' There is a prayer that He did; it is the Protection Way prayer.²⁰ At the very end of that Protection Way prayer is 'immeasurably exalted art Thou' and it goes that you will be protected to our right and to our left, to the front, to the back, below our feet and above our heads and all around. This is the Navajo Blessing Way Chant. Before our Twins left, this is the prayer that you say, when you finish all the other prayers. They left back to their Father. Before the Báb left to His Father, this is the prayer He said.²¹

In her interview, Wilson links the Twin Manifestations of the Bahá'í Faith to the mythical return of the Diné Warrior Twins and to the pivotal Diné Blessing Way Chant for healing. Donald Saunder, a Jungian psychiatrist, studied Diné healing symbols and ceremonies to learn how Diné healers create harmony within their patients. Saunder identified four central principles basic to protection and healing in the Diné culture: a return to the origins; confrontation and manipulation of evil; death and rebirth; and a restoration of the universe.²² Saunder's principles parallel the eschatological expectations that Navajo Bahá'ís hold for the rebirth and restoration of the Diné universe through these Twin Messengers of the Bahá'í Faith. A tract developed by Baha'is living on the Navajo reservation for the 1972 Bahá'í Unity Conference reinforces this expectation of the restoration of the universe for Diné Baha'is. Titled "The Straight Path," with Diné symbols of Father Sky and Mother Earth on its cover, the tract resonates with Diné cosmology:²³

The All-Wise Creator of earth and heaven has from the beginning which has no beginning sent to His peoples Divine Messengers to guide them to the Straight Path. These Wise Ones have come to establish the unity of the Kingdom in human hearts. This evolutionary process of building the organic unity of the human race has entered a new stage with this mighty message of

²⁰ The prayer Wilson refers to was, "written in the Báb's own hand, in the form of a pentacle," and has been given the title of the seven-directions prayer by indigenous Baha'is. See: Bahá'í Prayers: A Selection of Prayers Revealed by Bahá'u'lláh, the Báb, and 'Abdu'l-Bahá (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 5th ed., 2002), 151-153.

²¹ The Diné prayer Wilson refers to is central to Diné theology. For an excellent explanation of the Blessing Way Chant see Luckert, *A Navajo Bringing-Home Ceremony*, 165-168. The public execution of the Báb is well-documented, not only by Bahá'í historians but by Western journalists of the day. See: William S. Hatcher and J. Douglas Martin, *The Bahá'í Faith: The Emerging Global World Religion* 4th ed., (Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 2002), 18-22.

²² Donald Saunder, *Navaho Symbols of Healing: A Jungian Exploration of Ritual, Image, and Medicine* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1979) 74.

²³ Saunder, *Navaho Symbols of Healing*, 206, Figure F8#4. Saunder shows a sandpainting that matches the symbols on the tract and identifies them as the Mother Earth and Father Sky sandpainting from the Male Shooting Chant.

Bahá'u'lláh. His voice is the voice of the Great Spirit. His love for humankind is the voice of the New Age. He who sends the rain, who causes the sun and the stars to shine, the rivers to flow, the winds to blow and the earth to give forth her bounties has in this Great Day sent to all mankind Bahá'u'lláh. It is this Great One who has opened the door of divine knowledge to every soul. It is His teachings that will establish world unity and bring about universal peace.²⁴

Such a melding and blending of religious ideology and religious imagery from the origin story of the Warrior Twins and from this Bahá'í statement are examples of Rambo's "influencing the consciousness" of the Navajo Bahá'í convert.²⁵ The Unity Chant further reinforced this influence by the powerful images it contained of a restored universe.

The Unity Chant: Religious Imagery

In 1963, Navajo Bahá'í Annie Kahn, one of the organizers of the Great Council Fire Unity Conference, wrote down for the first time the oral story of the Unity Chant given to her by her grandfather and the old "Holy Medicine Men" of the Navajo tribe.²⁶ Annie writes in the Unity Chant that "He who is the All-Wise, the All-Knowing" brought something to the Navajo people "like a Holy Book," except they couldn't read or write at the time so the "Great One" gave it to them in chants. The Unity Chant says that a new light will come from the east to send its rays to those few Indians who are watching from the tops of the mesas. The "glorious new light" will be recognized by two signs. The first sign is a nine-pointed star whose points symbolize completeness and the love and unity of all religions, races, and nations. Annie explains that nine is the "sign of the highest unity because all the numbers can be found in this one number." The nine-pointed star, one of three Bahá'í religious symbols, is significant because the numerical value of Bahá is nine.²⁷

The second sign instructs the Diné to look for a "great chief with twelve feathers" or "twelve great principles." There are twelve basic principles in the Bahá'í Faith. Annie writes that "if we search carefully we will find that these twelve principles of world unity have already come to the world and, even in this day, are beginning to bring people together in unity, understanding and love." The Unity Chant also instructs the Navajo people to "look when they see the Glory coming." Bahá is the root word for Bahá'u'lláh and Bahá'í, which translate, respectively, as "the Glory of God" and "follower of the

²⁴ *The Straight Path* was based on a letter from the Universal House of Justice to "the friends in Navajoland" and was produced by the Local Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is of Ganado, Arizona.

²⁵ Rambo, *Conversion*, 11-14.

²⁶ Annie Kahn, "The Unity Chant," in *Four Remarkable Indian Prophecies* ((Happy Camp, CA: Naturegraph Publishers, 1963), 3-11. Anne's first name is used to distinguish her from the other Kahn informants.

²⁷ Abu'l-Qásim Farzī, *The Greatest Name of God: The Explanation of the Greatest Name*, 2nd ed., Reprinted by permission from Bahá'í News, October 1968 (Wilmette, Illinois: National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is of the United States; (National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is of South Africa, 1998), 1-20.

Glory.”²⁸ For Navajo Bahá'ís these images of glory connect Bahá'u'lláh to the “Great One” in the Unity Chant who will “come like the dawn” and who “gathers His flock, bringing all the wandering sheep back together again.” Annie quotes one of the Holy Medicine Men as saying that the “Time of the End” is like two stages: in the first stage the “Spirit of the People” shall live again and in the second stage “people shall melt into one,” meaning that “true love” between people will be practiced. Annie writes that the “love of the Great Spirit and of mankind that comes in the new day is so great that all the world’s afflictions and its dangers can in no way harm us.”²⁹

The religious imagery Anne conveys in her rendition of the Unity Chant connects with Bahá'í theology, which allowed that “credibility and sense of authority necessary to establish a new charter for life” for Diné Baha'is.³⁰ Such religious imagery led into the Diné practice of *beauty language* that fits Bell’s *practice* that is “descriptive of human nature and all human activity” as way to be more “prescriptive in action.”³¹ Anne Kahn became more prescriptive in action when she decided to write down the ancient Unity Chant following her tradition transition to Bahá'í. Bell redefines practice as a *redemptive hegemony* that highlights four features of human activity: situational, strategic, embedded in misrecognition of what it is in fact doing, and able to reproduce or reconfigure a vision of the order of power in the world.³² Clearly, Anne saw her worldview as *reconfigured* by her acceptance of Bahá'í—a worldview that gave Anne the *power* to interpret the Unity Chant both for herself and for her culture.

Bahá'í Institutes: Examining the Religious Matrix

The Diné’s loss of sacred homeland and the severe deprivations they suffered during their enforced Long Walk and imprisonment in *Hwééldi*, “the place of suffering” at Ft. Sumner, New Mexico, and the disapproval or suppression of their traditional ceremonies by the dominant culture surrounding them upon their return to *Dinéyah* (1863-1868), stayed strong in Diné cultural memory and influenced their willingness to consider what the religious matrix of the Bahá'í Faith had to offer them by the late 1950s.³³ The impact of the federal government’s overseer role in the Diné economy weakened the culture instead of strengthening it, including the well-intended but failed sheep policy.³⁴ Results of the disastrous assimilation and education of Diné children in faraway boarding schools created a deep scar in Diné collective psyche that remains generational.³⁵

²⁸ Farzǐ, *The Greatest Name of God*, 1-20.

²⁹ Kahn, “Unity Chant,” 11.

³⁰ Zolbrod, *Diné bahané*, 22-23.

³¹ Bell, “Action and Practice,” 75.

³² Bell, “Action and Practice,” 81.

³³ Peter Iverson, *Dine: A History of the Navajos* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2002), 49-56.

³⁴ George A Boyce, *When Navajos Had Too Many Sheep: the 1940's* (Indian Historian Press, San Francisco, 1974), 29-38.

³⁵ Iverson, *Dine*, 81-83. Iverson says the “peace policy” shifted considerable responsibility for Indian education to the churches.

The Bahá'í religious matrix, encapsulated within the privately-elected administrative institutions of Local Spiritual Assemblies (LSAs), National Spiritual Assemblies (NSAs), and the Universal House of Justice (UHJ) offered the Diné a spiritual solution to economic problems, along with the principle of independent investigation of truth that advocates everyone can find truth for oneself. These two principles alone were especially empowering and appealing to the Diné. Such positive reinforcement of independence of choice and action addressed the Diné's need for autonomy in light of their past history when choices were denied them, especially in the arenas of self-governance and education of their children. Self-governance extended into the clergyless religious realm. The Navajo Baha'is annually elect by secret ballot nine adult members to serve on their LSAs. Each LSA functions on the Bahá'í principle of consultation, in which all elected members have an equal voice to oversee the affairs of their individual religious communities while applying the universal principles and guidelines established by the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh, the Twin Messengers of the Bahá'í Faith.

Although there are indigenous Bahá'ís on nearly every Indian reservation in the United States and on a number of the First Nations reserves in Canada, the Native American Bahá'í Institute (NABI) is the only native-oriented official Bahá'í institution in North America. NABI, established on the Navajo reservation near Pine Springs in 1977 by a small group of Navajo Bahá'ís, provides a meeting place suitable to the unique needs and cultural background of the Navajo people. The forty-acre campus includes a highly-symbolic, traditional Prayer Hogan located behind the main building, also constructed in the shape of a Hogan.³⁶ Saunders said that the Navajo Hogan was “established by *Álltsé Hastiin*, First Man, as a miniature cosmos with its opening toward the east, its fork posts representing deities, and all the powers of the universe arranged in their appointed places on the north and south side around the center, which was also the center of the world.”³⁷ Navajo Bahá'í Alfred Kahn Sr., is the youngest son of those early founders of the Great Council Fire and was five years old when he attended that famous event. During his interview held in NABI's Prayer Hogan, Alfred explained that:

Navajos built Hogans as a metaphor for the spiritual world based on honoring the four directions because anywhere one turns in the world, there is a spiritual world around you. Within the Hogan is healing through the sandpaintings and through other ceremonies, and we can tell our children and grandchildren about this wonderful, powerful healing. All this, all the sandpainting, is about healing. They put it right in the middle of the Hogan here. On the west side there past the fireplace is where you put the foot. So when they are praying, right and left foot and they sit down, it's heaven! That's healing for the patient. And come back with the Holy People to that place of safety and it's all different. The symbol of the different spirit of healing, calling them, calling them like a Concourse on High, say come and

³⁶ “The Native American Baha'i Institute,” *In Service*, 30. NABI underwent two name changes from Navajo Bahá'í Institute to Southwest Native American Institute before arriving at its more inclusive name. In 1998, NABI was designated a training institute by the NSA to provide services to the Navajo Reservation and to outlying regions.

³⁷ Saunders, *Navaho Symbols of Healing*, 115.

look at your child, see your child having problems, having problems with themselves. Different ways or breathing or air, there is air ceremony.³⁸ People will be coming here to be saying prayers, coming with whatever garbage you might have and leave it here and come back and say, 'I feel better.' And I have great gratitude for the sun, the air, Mother Earth and our Father Sky up there to bless us with the rain and cool us down for our people here, for our plants and animals and our beautiful Hogan.³⁹

Framed Navajo sandpaintings, with the calligraphic Arabic emblem of the Glory of God embedded in the center of ancient Navajo symbols, grace the timbered walls of the Prayer Hogan and bring to mind the prophecies of the Unity Chant. Bahá'í prayer books, scattered around the low circular seating above the red dirt floor, give emphasis to the Prayer Hogan as Rambo's religious matrix in which tradition-transition continues to take place.⁴⁰ This is obviously an especially sacred place for Alfred, one that years after the Great Council Fire, he helped to construct and bring into being.

Turnings: A New Reality

Rambo defines religious conversion as a "turning from and turning to new religious groups, ways of life, systems of belief, and modes of relating to a deity or the nature of reality."⁴¹ Rambo's definition of conversional tradition-transition bears modification for Diné Bahá'ís because Diné Bahá'ís did not *turn from* or discard salient parts of their traditional belief system. Instead, Diné Bahá'ís saw themselves as turning from prior non-productive patterns of thought and behaviors created by colonization by *turning to* the new teachings; teachings that infused new life, new meaning and new spirit into their traditional belief system rather than eliminating it. The term "convert" becomes a stumbling block to the understanding of tradition-transition because conversion implies the giving up of one set of beliefs for another. Sociologist Michael McMullen, however, states that this implication does not hold true in the case of a conversion from any other religion to Bahá'í because Bahá'ís do not discard their parent-religion when "becoming Bahá'í."⁴²

According to Rambo, those converts who continue to interact with a new religious group after the initial encounter find that their interaction with the new group intensifies through the crucial elements of relationships, rituals, rhetoric, and roles. These elements create and consolidate emotional bonds to the new group, provide rituals through the repetition of physical actions that embody holistic knowledge, and provide new uses of language, new metaphors, and new narratives that reframes the self and place the self in

³⁸ See James Kale McNeley, *Holy Wind in Navajo Philosophy* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1981, 4th ed., 1993) for an explanation of holy wind. McNeley quotes Katherine Spencer (1947) in "the most central and most sacred of stories." Kahn is making reference here to Wind ceremonies.

³⁹ Alfred Kahn Sr., "Interview," July 30, 2009.

⁴⁰ Rambo, *Conversion*, 11-14.

⁴¹ Rambo, *Conversion*, 3; Peter J Kahn. and A. L. Greene, "Seeing Conversion Whole: Testing a Model of Religious Conversion," in *Pastoral Psychology*, Vol. 52, No. 3 (January 2004): 233-234.

⁴² Michael McMullen, "Carriers and Converts" in *The Baha'i Faith: The Religious Construction of a Global Identity* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2000), 15-17.

the larger scheme of the new “world” created by the new group. Language, Rambo notes, “is the rhetoric of transformation.”⁴³ Other scholars suggest that something much more fundamental than beliefs and identities change when one undergoes true conversion. Rather there is a change in one’s “sense of ultimate grounding” or “root reality;” a paradigm shift in the “informing aspect” of one’s life, termed as a “universe of discourse.”⁴⁴ In this regard, conversion fundamentally displaces one universe of discourse for another and raises it to the status of a primary authority, making the universe of discourse discernable in a convert’s speech and reasoning. Alfred grew up experiencing the developmental growth pains of the Bahá'í Faith among diverse groups of people both native and non-native at NABI and within his large family. Alfred demonstrates such changes of growth in his own “universe of discourse” when he voices his thoughts on self and language:

It’s still taken time for people to live together, understand each other. It’s the languages; it’s the communication that’s different. We’re all different. There might be somebody out there or even in here that would totally go against the Faith or even my own tradition. You know there is some prejudices still—all the “isms” like we say, classism maybe. And somebody might dislike me because I’m wearing old tennis shoes and long Indian hair. But it doesn’t bother me. It gives me power. So it doesn’t bother me a bit. So, I’m here, being who I am.⁴⁵

Being who he is conveys a powerful statement of self-knowledge for Alfred that allowed him to grow and develop within the religious matrix of the Bahá'í Faith. Change comes, Lincoln argues, not when groups or individuals use “knowledge to challenge ideological mystification,” but rather when they employ “thought and discourse,” including modes such as myths and ritual, as effective instruments of change.⁴⁶ The ancient oral stories of the Warrior Twins and the Unity Chant were effective instruments of change for Diné Bahá'ís. Tradition-transition from Diné to Bahá'í can be found in its significant relationships to Diné mythology with its symbols, and between the teachings of the Twin Manifestations that upheld and fulfilled significant parts of the traditional belief system for those Diné who “became Bahá'í.”⁴⁷ Alfred Kahn, Jr., like his father before him, grew up within his Bahá'í family on the reservation near NABI. Alfred Jr., also employed thought and discourse when he was asked about autonomy and self-empowerment:

The highest stage of development is in service to all mankind. It’s not about an office you take that you can get money and have power over people. It’s humility, a humble mode of learning. You learn from each other. You never feel above anyone else. The perfect Exemplar talks about that station: ‘Make

⁴³ Rambo, *Conversion*, 104-118; Kahn and Greene, “Seeing Conversion Whole,” 235-236.

⁴⁴ Richard A. Snow and Richard Machalek. “The Sociology of Conversion” in *Annual Review of Sociology*, Vol. 10 (1984): 70, 167-190.

⁴⁵ Alfred Kahn, Sr., “Interview,” July 30, 2009.

⁴⁶ Lincoln, “Myth,” 3-5.

⁴⁷ McMullen, “Carriers and Converts,” 15-17.

me as dust in the pathway of Thy loved ones.’⁴⁸ It’s a spiritual power to be a servant to mankind. And you’re not longing for the earthly power; not longing for the earthly goods or material benefits. You’re longing for the spiritual, which has no connection with the material, you know. You might see the most humble person and he is serving all mankind and you can’t see the spiritual station. You can’t see the spiritual loftiness. I think when you look towards native people; you don’t see a lot of earthly power. We’ve been trained to look for that earthly, material prosperity in terms of wealth and riches; it’s not there. There was so much spiritual dignity, spiritual loftiness in the native culture before the western culture came. Not that it was perfect you know. Navajos were a warrior society. We went and raided Pueblos, but every day you prayed and your life was a prayer.⁴⁹

Alfred Kahn Jr.’s beauty language in his statement is replete with sacred symbols. According to renowned anthropologist Clifford Geertz, “It is the sacred symbols that function to synthesize a people’s ethos—the tone, character and quality of their life, its moral and aesthetic style and mood—and their world view—the picture they have of the way things in sheer actuality are, their most comprehensive ideas of order.”⁵⁰ For Diné Bahá’ís, it was this idea of *order*, a re-ordering of the Navajo cosmology, of what to expect in their future outlined for them by their ancient oral stories of the Warrior Twins and the Unity Chant that became effective instruments of change when viewed through the lenses of the Twin Manifestations. When the Diné Bahá’ís combined their ancient oral stories with the teachings of the Bahá’í Faith, the result was a “model of and a model for” a new world view—a new “reality.”⁵¹ I argue that this new world view and new reality are exemplified by Rambo’s definition of tradition-transition in that the Navajo Baha’is see themselves as having turned to a new religious group, a new way of life and a new system of belief, expressed in new thoughts and discourse, and with a *renewed* way of relating to their own Diné reality.

⁴⁸ Alfred Kahn, Jr., is referring to Ábdu’l-Bahá, the son of Baha’u’llah, who was designated by his father as “the Perfect Exemplar” and is known as one of the “Three Central Figures” of the Faith.

⁴⁹ Alfred Kahn, Jr., “Interview.” August, 2008.

⁵⁰ Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Culture: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 89.

⁵¹ Geertz, *Interpretation*, 93.