An Analysis of Navajo Place-Names[1]

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WITH ITS THREE MAJOR CULTURAL TRADITIONS, American Indian, Spanish-Mexican, and Anglo-American, the Southwestern United States has a particularly rich legacy of place-names. Of modern Indian groups, the Navajo Tribe is the nation's most numerous and has the largest area of occupancy (about 25,000 square miles, or larger than West Virginia), in three of the four states surrounding the Four Corners. Not surprisingly, many official place-names in northeastern Arizona, northwestern New Mexico, and southeastern Utah are of Navajo origin, either by Anglicization of the Navajo names or by translation.[2] In addition to those that have become part of universal usage, there are, of course, innumerable place designations used only by the local Navajo inhabitants;[3] both categories of names are considered here, with emphasis on the more widely known place-names.

Because of the several languages and cultures that have been involved in the history of the Southwest, a single place may carry or have carried, successively, more than one designation. The name for Red Lake on the western border of New Mexico is simply an approximate translation of the Navajo *Be'ek'i' Halchí:'*[4] (literally

[1] A preliminary version of this article was presented as a paper at the 1966 Annual Meetings of the Southwestern Anthropological Association (also presented at these meetings was a paper entitled, "Place-Names and Concepts of Space in a Navajo Community," by Terry Reynold, San Fernando Valley State College, Northridge, California). Acknowledgement is made to David M. Brugge, Navajo Land Claim, for suggestions relating to this article.

[2] More surprising is the dearth of place-names of Apache origin; Byrd H. Granger, *Will C. Barnes' Arizona Place Names*, The University of Arizona Press (Tucson, 1960), p. 236.

[3] See, for example, Reynold (note 1); Robert W. Young and William Morgan, "Navajo Place Names in Gallup, New Mexico," *El Palacio*, vol. 54, no. 12 (Santa Fe, 1947), pp. 283–5.

[4] Navajo place-names in this article are written in italics, and pronunciation is indicated by the closest possible equivalent in Roman letters. However, since

"lake place it is red"). However, in many cases, the Anglo and Navajo names have no connection: Gallup, New Mexico, is *Na'ńzho:zhí*, "at the bridge." A place may also have names in two or more Indian languages. The Hopi Indians call one of their villages Walpi ("the gap"), while the Navajo refer to it as *De:z'â:jĩ'*, "toward the point," an appellation descriptive of its location on the end of a finger-like projection of a mesa. Anglos use the Hopi name for the pueblo. A geographic feature may also have more than one Navajo name, one or more of which may be considered archaic and/or purely ceremonial. The San Juan River is variously referred to as *Nó:da'á Bił)ho:h*, "Ute's river," *Sá:n Bił)ho:h*, "old age river," *T)ho:h Bakà'í*, "river's male," or simply *T)ho:h*, "river."

A certain spring and its environs east of Gallup, New Mexico, is known to the Navajo as *Shash Bił)ho:d* or "spring used by bear." Presumably through translation, the Spanish name for this same spot was *Ojo del Oso*, "Bear Spring." The locality was known to early Anglo-Americans by the Spanish name and its English translation until the establishment here in 1860 of an army post, Fort Fauntleroy. This name was changed to Fort Lyon in 1861, when Colonel Fauntleroy joined the Confederacy. The fort was abandoned the same year and re-established in 1868 as Fort Wingate, which had been the name of another, nearby, post that existed from 1862 to 1868;[5] Fort Wingate is the present English designation of the post-1868 Fort, although the Navajo name continues to be used by many Navajo-speakers. Another example of a succession of place-names for a single locality is that of a mountain in southern Utah. In order, these names were Sierra Azul, Sierra Panoche, Mount Seneca Howland, and, today, Navajo Mountain. Concurrent

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some Navajo phonemes have no close English equivalents, a few additional symbols have been utilized: ***h*** (boldface) is a strong, unvoiced aspirate, equivalent to χ (chi) in Greek or *jota* in Spanish, and γ (gamma) is the same sound voiced; ł is an unvoiced, strongly spirant lateral; the tilde, ˜, over a vowel indicates nasalization; an apostrophe stands for a glottal stop. A colon following a vowel indicates a lengthening of that vowel. A parenthesis separating a "*t*" and an "*h*" indicates that they are to be pronounced separately, not as "th." Navajo is a tonal language, and high tone is indicated by an acute accent, ´, falling tone by a circumflex, ^, rising tone by a grave, `; unaccented vowels are pronounced with low tone.

[5] Harold L. James, The History of Fort Wingate, in Frederick D. Trauger (ed.), *Guidebook of Defiance—Zuni—Mt. Taylor Region, Arizona and New Mexico*, New Mexico Geological Society (1967), pp. 150–8.

with all of these names but unknown to their coiners were the Navajo name *Na'tsis'á:n* ("enemy hiding place"), the Paiute name *Tucané* ("black peak"), and the Hopi name *Toko'nabi* or *Dokot'navi* ("high place"?). The mountain is also the head of the highland chain which is ceremonially referred to as *T)hádídí:dzi:l*, "pollen mountain."[6]

Naturally, most places that have Navajo names are in the Navajo Country. This region is bounded roughly by New Mexico Route 44 on the east, U.S. Route 66 (Interstate 40) and New Mexico Route 53 on the south, the Colorado River on the west, and the San Juan River on the North. Leland Wyman writes,

> Place is of the utmost importance to the Navajo. The need is felt ritually to recapitulate mythical toponymy and topography in song and prayer. The geographical details of long journeys of the protagonists of the myths almost literally bound the Navajo Country; at least they state its landmarks.
>
> Most of these landmarks are mountains, perhaps because... they are believed to be the homes of the supernaturals.[7]

The legendary boundaries of the Navajo area are the four sacred mountains: *Sis Na:zhiní*, "at horizonzal black belt," to the east (exact location debated; perhaps Pelado Peak, New Mexico or

[6] For a list of Hopi place-names, see Elsie Clews Parsons (ed.), "Hopi Indian Journal of Alexander M. Stephen," *Columbia University Contributions in Anthropology*, vol. 23, pt. 2 (New York, 1946), pp. 1152–69. An onomatological sidelight is Zane Grey's use of the name "Nothsis Ahn" for Navajo Mountain in *The Vanishing American* (Harper & Brothers, New York, 1925), a novel of the Indian's dilemma in the modern world; the book has a thinly disguised setting in the western Navajo ("Nopah") Country. In this and certain others of his novels (such as *Lost Pueblo*, Grosset & Dunlap, New York, 1954), Flagstaff is called "Flagerstown," Moenkopie is "Copenwashie," Tuba City becomes "Mesa," Red Lake (Tonalea) is "Red Sandy," and Kayenta is "Kaidab." Even the fictional Kayenta trader "Withers" can be identified with John Wetherill, a historical personage.

[7] Leland C. Wyman, *Beautyway: A Navajo Ceremonial*, Pantheon Books, Bollingen Series 53 (New York, 1957), p. 36. This book contains an analysis of the geography of Beautyway; a similar analysis is found in Leland C. Wyman, *The Windways of the Navajo*, The Taylor Museum of the Colorado Springs Fine Arts Center (1962). See also E. L. Watson, "Navajo Sacred Places," *Navajoland Publications*, Series 5 (Window Rock, 1964) and Aileen O'Bryan, "the Dîné: Origin Myths of the Navajo Indians," *Smithsonian Institution, Bureau of American Ethnology, Bulletin* 163 (Washington, 1956).

Blanca Peak, Colorado; the location may have shifted over time as the Navajo migrated); *Tso: Dz:il*, "tongue mountain" (Mount Taylor, New Mexico), to the south; *Do:k'o'oslí:d*, "shining on top" (San Francisco Peaks, Arizona), to the west; and *Dibé Ntsa:*, "Bighorn Sheep" (a peak in the La Plata Mountains, Colorado, possibly Hesperus Peak), to the north.

In addition to place-names referring to their own country, the Navajo have names for a number of localities on the peripheries of this region. The external areas covered by their designations extend principally to the south and east, in the first instance into the country of their linguistic cousins, the Western and Chiricahua Apache with whom the Navajo had frequent contact and from whom they received additions both to their population and to their ceremonial system, and secondly to the Rio Grande Pueblo country to the east, where trading and raiding were carried on; Puebloans, particularly during the half century following 1692, brought many new culture elements to the Navajo.

On a modern map of the Navajo Country and its immediately adjacent surroundings,[8] 43 settlements (12 per cent) have names directly derivative from the Navajo language, as have 25 landforms (18 per cent) and five water features (12 per cent). A minimum (and undoubtedly there are others) of 14 settlements (5 per cent), three landforms (3 ½ per cent), and three lakes (7 per cent of all water features) have English names that are translations of Navajo names. The word "Navajo" itself appears in 11 names. The map also has 15 settlements (5 ½ per cent) and three landforms (3 ½ per cent) with names derived from the Hopi Indian language, as well as 12 place-names of Shoshonean (Ute-Paiute) origin. One Zuni language name occurs, as well as six instances of "Zuni" in place names. The names "Montezuma" and "Aztec" result from fallacious attribution of Puebloan ruins in the region to the Aztec Indians of Mexico. In addition to names of Indian origin, the map shows 42 settlement names (11 ½ per cent), 21 landform designations other than those simply containing "mesa" or "canyon" (15 per cent), and 13 water-body appellations (13 ½ per cent) in the Spanish language (some of these names, however, were given by Anglos rather than by Spanish-speakers).[9] (Footnote 9, see next page)

[8] Stephen C. Jett and James Cutter, *Map of the Navajo Country*. Sierra Club (San Francisco, 1967); this map also appears as part of Philip Hyde and Stephen

Elements in Navajo Place-Names

An excellent source of information on Navajo place-names is Berard Haile's *A Stem Vocabulary of the Navajo Language.* The majority of the place-names considered in the present article are listed in the second volume of this work, and their meanings were translated with the aid of Volume One. Other sources were also used, however.[10]

Navajo place-names, being largely applied to natural features in an unurbanized land, very strongly reflect the natural environment. However, this reflection is selective, and an examination of the differing emphases on different elements of the environment reveals something of how the Navajo sees his habitat. A list of some 350 Navajo place-names was analyzed, and a tabulation was made of the frequency of occurrence of the most common descriptive and commemorative elements in these names, representing a total of 472 occurrences (see Table).

C. Jett, *Navajo Wildlands: 'as long as the rivers shall run,'* Sierra Club (San Francisco, 1967).

[9] For a map showing some places in the Navajo Country and their names during the Spanish-Mexican period, see David M. Brugge, "Long Ago in Navajoland," *Navajoland Publications,* Series 6 (Window Rock, 1965); see also Richard F. Van Valkenburgh and Frank O. Walker ,"Old Placenames in the Navajo Country," *The Masterkey,* vol. 19 (Los Angeles, 1945), pp. 89–94.

[10] Berard Haile, *A Stem Vocabulary of the Navajo Language,* 2 vols., St. Michaels Press, (St. Michaels, Arizona, 1950, 1951). Another important source is Granger (cf. footnote 2) which has, in turn, drawn data from various sources, particularly Herbert E. Gregory, "The Navajo Country: A Geographic and Hydrographic Reconnaissance of Parts of Arizona, New Mexico, and Utah," *U. S. Geological Survey Water-Supply Paper* 380 (Washington, 1916) and Richard F. Van Valkenburgh, *Diné Bikéyah,* U. S. Dept. of the Interior, Office of Indian Affairs, Navajo Service (Window Rock, Arizona, 1941, mimeo). Additional lists of place-names examined for this paper include T. M. Pearce (ed.), *New Mexico Place Names: A Geographical Dictionary,* University of New Mexico Press (Albuquerque, 1965); Rufus Wood Leigh, *Five Hundred Utah Place Names* (a condensation of *Indian, Spanish, and Government Survey Place Names of the Great Basin and Colorado Plateaus: Their Origin and Significance*), Desert News Press (Salt Lake City, 1961); M. E. Hecht, *Township and Range Index of Arizona,* Bureau of Business and Public Research, the University of Arizona, (Tucson, 1963); and U. S. G. S. topographic maps. An important additional source on Navajo place-names, not utilized for this study, is Norman M. Littell, *Proposed Finding of Fact in behalf of the Navajo Tribe of Indians in Area of the Overall Navajo Land Claim (Docket 229),* Vol. 4, appendix A–1, pp. i-xxiv (Washington, n. d.). Other data were drawn from diverse sources, including Navajo informants.

Table. Frequency of Selected Common Elements in Navajo Place Names.

English	Navajo	Frequency*
water (spring)	t)**hó**	97
rock	tsé, ché-	83
house	kin, ki-	30
mountain	dził	28
it flows (stream)	-lí, -líní	20
lake	be'ek'id, be'ek'i'	13
cottonwood	t'ees	11
canyon	tséɣi', tsékoh, bikoh	10
reed	lók'a:'	9
"adobe" clay	bis	9
individual persons	———	9
point (of land)	de:z'á	7
river	t)**ho**:h	6
meadow	**ho**:tso	5

* In a list of 472 selected elements.

Water. In this predominately semi-arid to arid environment, the specific location of water assumes an importance far greater than in more humid areas. Clearly a paramount need for man and stock alike, it is not surprising to find a large number of references (140) to water features, for it is these that are goals on journeys or in daily activities; reference must frequently be made to them. The commonest form of reference to water (98 occurrences) is ***t)hó***, "water" or, in geographic names, "spring." ***T)hó*** commonly occurs in conjunction with the name of some animal or plant associated with the water source. Thus, ***Hasbídí Bit)hó'*** (as north of Round Rock, Arizona) means "Mourning Dove's Spring," the "*bi-*" being the third person singular possessive. Terms for "it flows," *i.e.* "streams" – *-lí, -líní*, as in Chinle, Arizona (*Ch'ínlí*, "flows out") – occur 20 times, very occasionally with ***t)hó***. "Lake" (*be'ek'id, be'ek'i'*) occurs 13 times, "river" (*t)ho:h*) six times. This is a land where lack of water is not distinctive, and "dry" or "waterless" occurs only three times in the list of names analyzed, twice in the context of "dryness next to water."

Landforms and Earth Materials. Although water features are the commonest of the elements analyzed, relief features, being particularly prominent in the spectacular and often treeless Navajo Country, are a close second in terms of frequency (111 occurrences).

The word for "rock" (*tsé*; occasionally *ché*) dominates these, with 83 occurrences in addition to six occurrences in names for rock canyon. An example is Rough Rock, Arizona (= *tse ch'ízhí*). "Red" (*-chí:'*, *łichí:'*) and "white" (*-gai*, *-łagai*) sometimes modify "rock"; "black rock" (*chézhin* or *tsézhin*) refers specifically to basaltic rock, found in lava flows, dikes, and plugs. Most "rock" place-names refer to specific landmarks. Other earth materials are occasionally mentioned, the most common (nine times) being "adobe" clay (*bis*), as found in the Triassic Chinle Formation and in certain Cretaceous, Tertiary, and other formations. Sand is surprisingly infrequently found as an element in place-names, perhaps because it is so common but perhaps also because many of today's active dunes are a relatively recent result of overgrazing. Soil is also referred to occasionally. Mountains (*dził*) are frequently mentioned (28 occurrences), as are, occasionally, hills, ridges, summits, and ledges. Gaps and valleys are rarely referred to, but canyons are more commonly encountered in place-names (ten occurrences). There are two forms referring to rock canyons, *tséyi'* ("rock interior"), as in Tsegi Canyon, Arizona, and *tsékoh*, a shallower and/or broader rock canyon. The term *Bikoh* seems usually to refer to a canyon or watershed cut into soft materials, such as shale or clay, and often means an arroyo. The word *de:z'áh*, "point" (of a cliff or mesa), was encountered seven times, but the words for "mesa" and "cliff" themselves are surprisingly rare.

Flora. Plants, which are considered to be the dress of the earth, are very commonly referred to in Navajo place-names (51 occurrences). Of these, the cottonwood (*t'ee:s*) is the commonest (11 occurrences). The well known Navajo rugmaking center Tees Nos Pos (*T'ee:s Názbãs*, "cottonwood circle") uses this element. Other trees mentioned include the willow, the Weeping Willow (not native), the oak, the alder, the Piñon Pine, the juniper, the spruce, and the shrubs greasewood, Aromatic Sumac, and Juneberry. Other plants are the reed, *lók'a:'* (nine occurrences), as in Lukachukai (*Lók'a:' Ch'ógai*, "white patch of reeds extends out"), the cattail, the goldenrod, the onion, the yucca, and the Barrel Cactus. The Pumpkin and the potato are cultivated plants encountered, as is Maize (twice), one occurrence being the word for "farm" (literally, "Maize for place"). "Meadow" (*ho:tso*, "yellow place") is found five times, "the range" once, and "forest" or "timber" once.

Fauna. There are 32 occurrences of animal names, but only the bear (*shash*) and the Coyote (*mã'i:*, "the roamer") are mentioned more than twice; they are important legendary characters.[11] Other animals in place-names include the Bighorn Sheep, the deer, the Pronghorn Antelope (including one reference to an antelope trap), the rabbit, the beaver, the bat, the badger, the gopher, the prairie dog, the Mountain Lion, the bison (in captivity only), and the domesticated cow and horse. Astoundingly, the traditional economic mainstay, the sheep, is mentioned only once, and goats are not mentioned at all. This may be related to the fact that wild animals, especially game animals, are ritually important personages whereas domesticated animals are considered to be property, not sentient beings.[12] Too, they are locationally related to the Navajo camp, not to natural features. Birds referred to include the Mourning Dove, the Sparrow Hawk, the owl, and the Sandhill Crane. Fish are twice mentioned.

Man-made Features. Thirty-nine place-name elements refer to man-made features of the landscape. Thirty of these include *kin*, "house," in some form. This term is applied to pueblo ruins, and, as part of a compound, to modern pueblos (*ki:s'â:ni*, from *kin*, "house," *si'ą́*, "it is there," *ni*, "people"; the Hopi are *'Ayahkini*, "at underground houses," *i.e.* subterranean ceremonial "kivas"). The root *-an*, "home," (as in ***ho:γan***, "place-home," the traditional Navajo dwelling), occurs four times. Only four references to features of Anglo-American origin occur, even in names referring to Anglo towns. This is no doubt partly a function of the fact that settlements often took the names of nearby, already named, natural features, especially springs, which were important in influencing settlement locations. Foreign peoples are mentioned in several names, often in reference to an historic event, such as a battle. Mexicans (or Spanish) are mentioned six times, as in *Na:kai Bit)hó*, Mexican Springs, New Mexico (but *na:kai*, "Mexican," is also the name of a Navajo clan). "Enemies" appears five times. One reference is made to a scalp taken in war. Anglo-Americans, who are late comers, are not referred to.[13] Unlike the situation over much of the United

[11] The badger is also frequently mentioned in legend. Arthur F. Halloran, "The Mammals of Navajoland," *Navajoland Publications*, Series 4 (Window Rock, 1964), pp. 3, 5.

[12] Gladys Reichard, *Navaho Religion*, 2 vols., Pantheon Books (New York, 1950), p. 142.

[13] This point has been noted previously in Nicholas Mirkowich, "A note on

States, where town-names commemorating individuals form an important component of place-names, only nine Navajo place-names could be interpreted as referring to individuals. One case is Waterflow (Warren), New Mexico, which is called *Ch'ídi: Lichí':*, "red ghost," the name by which the local trader was known.[14] Navajos normally do not name anything after a person unless it belongs to him since this might attract to that person too much attention from the supernaturals; to the Navajo, a store can be owned but not the land or any part thereof.[15] The masked gods (*ye'i*) are referred to once, due to the resemblance of a rock formation to ceremonial dancers, and "walking cane" occurs in one name.

The Heavens. In the list examined, the moon is referred to once, the stars once, and, possibly, a meteorite ("iron fell down") once. Blowing wind occurs twice, lightning once, but weather is otherwise not referred to.

Other Elements. In addition to descriptive and commemorative elements, Navajo place-names frequently contain verbal, locative, and other elements. Important among these are ***ho-*** or ***ha-***, "place," and *-í*, which means, roughly, "at." A few (5) place-names in the list studied are entirely undecipherable, at least to the present author. However, all but a relatively small number of Navajo place-names contain one or more of the elements described above. The translatability of almost all of these names reflects the relative recency of the Navajo's arrival in the Southwest.

Ceremonial Place-Names. Although all of the place-names considered in the above analysis are used in everyday references to locations, there are, in addition, many place-names not analysed here which are referred to in the origin legends of the important Navajo ceremonials (see note 7). Many real and well known localities are mentioned in these legends, but the names used are often, though not always, different from the everyday names for these

Navajo Place-Names," *American Anthropologist*, vol. 43, no. 2, pt. 1, pp. 313–4 (Menasha, 1941).

[14] Examples of stores in a town being designated according to peculiarities of their owners rather than by the nondistinctive features of the stores themselves are found in Young and Morgan, *op. cit.* (note 3). These names were not included in the present analysis.

[15] John Ressler, personal communication; Berard Haile, "Property Concepts of the Navaho Indians," *Catholic University of America, Anthropology Series*, vol. 17 (Washington, 1954).

places. Other legendary localities can no longer be identified with known places. Those that can be identified refer to all parts of the Navajo Country and also refer frequently to locations in *Dinét)hah*, the "original" Navajo country, which lies between the Rio Grande and present-day Navajoland (*Diné Biké:yah*). The Rio Grande itself is called *T)ho:h Ba'â:di*, "river's female," or *Na:kai Bit)ho:h*, "Mexican's River," but in the legend of the Shootingway ceremonial, it is referred to by the partially untranslatable (and therefore probably archaic) name *Semí T)ho:h*.

Summary

The multiplicity of cultural traditions in the American Southwest has resulted in great variety in the origins of place-names in that region; a single geographic feature or locality may have possessed successively or may possess simultaneously two or more place-designations of different linguistic origins: English, Spanish, and one or more American Indian languages.

The Navajo Indians have had a particularly noticeable impact on official Southwestern place-names, many of which are of Navajo origin, either directly or through translation. In addition, numerous Navajo place-names exist which are used only by the Navajos themselves. Analysis of a list of Navajo place names – including many local names as well as more widely known ones – has shown that most Navajo place designations describe features of the natural landscape, terms for water features, rocks, mountains, canyons, and wild plants being particularly common. Frequent too is the word for house in names of prehistoric pueblo ruins, but names referring specifically to other man-made features or to individuals are relatively rare.

The study of Navajo and other Indian place-names is valuable as a means of throwing light on the attitudes of these cultures toward their environments and toward themselves. In addition, such studies add immeasurably to the knowledge of how rich a place-name legacy the United States, and particularly the Southwest, has. It is hoped that this article has made a contribution in this regard and that further interest in American Indian place-names will have been stimulated.

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