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**What Weavings Bring: The Social Value of Weaving-Related Objects in
Contemporary Navajo Life**

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Navajo weavings have been exchanged between people and groups for centuries, and their circulation has attracted the interest of scholars, collectors, and weaving enthusiasts for years. Numerous anthropologists and historians have traced the trade of Navajo textiles through time and studied how weavings both enter and leave the marketplace (Amsden 1934; James 1988; Kent 1985; M'Closkey 2002; Powers 2001; Rodee 1995; Volk 1988; Wheat 2003, 1988; Wilkins 1999). In these studies, significant attention has been placed on the effects of sellers, buyers, and market forces on the value of woven products. Far less attention has been paid to local conceptualizations of the exchange systems within which these transactions take place or to Navajo weavers' perspectives on the exchange of their weavings.

In this article, I examine some of the less-studied aspects of Navajo weaving by focusing on the circulation of woven rugs and weaving tools. My thesis, informed by two years of ethnographic fieldwork with weavers, community members, and cultural specialists in the Window Rock area of Arizona, and by important theoretical insights on the anthropology of exchange and material culture studies (Appadurai 1986; Myers 2001; Munn 1986; Weiner 1992), is that certain types of weaving objects circulate widely, whereas others do not. For the most part, Navajo weavings are made to be exchanged outside of the family for something else, for what they bring in return. Weaving tools, in contrast, are usually made to be kept and used within the family. As I will discuss,

however, there is considerable variability in these patterns and the ways in which Navajo people view these exchanges.

Annette Weiner's (1992, 1994) work in the Pacific illustrates that many objects that circulate do so to keep other more valuable objects out of circulation. She calls this the "paradox of keeping while giving" (Weiner 1992, 1994). Certain Kuna shells, for instance, are widely circulated, and as they are exchanged, they can bring prestige and fame to the participants. At the same time, these exchanges can keep other things, such as prized kuna shells and cloth out of circulation. The objects that are withheld are often the most valued possessions within family lines. In Weiner's view, an object that is more freely traded and kept in circulation is considered *alienable*, or detachable from the person with which it is connected. In contrast, an object that is kept out of circulation because of its high value, or because it symbolizes a person or family lineage so strongly that it remains connected to that person or lineage, is *inalienable* and considered "symbolically dense" (Weiner 1994: 394, see also 2001: 289-290).

Most Navajo woven textiles are made to be sold and widely circulated. Thus, such objects are more alienable, or unattached to a person, than weaving-related objects that are retained within a family. Weaving tools that are kept out of wider circulation can be considered inalienable possessions because they connect Navajo people with their kin. Such objects embody the reciprocal relationships among people, their families, and the ancestors. This view is not universally held by all weavers, however. Many consider the exchange of weavings less of a cosmological affair and more as an economic transaction to provide for one's family. As I will illustrate, there is a great deal of variability in the

ways weavers think and talk about the circulation and alienability of weaving-related items.

In my research on Navajo weaving, I use Weiner's work in a way that considers different levels of inalienability and alienability in particular contexts and moments in time. I argue that a given weaving-related object is not fully alienable or inalienable. Rather, there are degrees of alienability depending on the social context, the social players, and the interactions that take place between people and that object. Weaving-related objects can become more alienable or inalienable as they circulate in different spheres and at different times. Moreover, the level of alienability of an object can shift as its use changes in particular contexts. Certain weavings are more inalienable than others, and their inalienability can increase through their attachments to people. This is most evident in the case of weavings that are kept as personal keepsakes. Conversely, weavings can also become more alienable, such as rugs given as graduation presents that are meant to be sold for their cash value (Hedlund 2006, personal communication). Although most weaving tools are meant to be kept and passed down and exchanged between family members, tools that are made to be sold become more alienable as they enter the marketplace. This formulation of Weiner's work, I suggest, takes into account the variability and flexibility that is necessary when describing aspects of Navajo culture. In the Navajo world, weaving tools are not intrinsically inalienable, nor are weavings intrinsically inalienable. They are so in certain degrees, and at certain levels, depending on the social use and contexts within which they circulate.

What Weavings Bring

In the late summer of 2003, my husband and I packed up our belongings and moved to a community just west of Window Rock, Arizona, so that I could begin my dissertation fieldwork on Navajo weaving. After spending several months getting acquainted with the people and place, I began to document the role of weaving in the lives of Navajo people today. My husband and I continued to live and work in this community for several years, and during this time I became closely acquainted with many Navajo weavers, families of weavers, and cultural specialists. With the guidance of weavers and community members I shifted the focus my research to learning how Navajo people view the exchange of weavings and weaving-related items and knowledge. My discussions with Nelly Mae,ⁱ for instance, led me to understand how weavings can bring “valuables” and “returns” to a weaver and her family. Among many other things, Nelly Mae is a master weaver, shepherd, retiree, mother, and grandmother, in essence all of what a 70-year-old Navajo woman should be. One fall morning, Nelly Mae asked me to take her on an errand, and I welcomed the visit with her. On the ride, we discussed such things as recent events in our lives, the long last three inches on her rug, and whether it would rain all day. After a long moment of silence, as we drove down the highway where sunflowers meet the sides of the road, Nelly Mae spoke up, remembering the words of her mother. Looking ahead as she shared her mother’s instructions for life, she said:

My mother told me these things. Always take care of the sheep. Never forget the sheep. *Dibe, dibe*, [shifting for a moment into Navajo to say sheep], they will feed you. They clothe you. They bring you things. Weaving is like that. It brings you things. It will clothe you. It will feed you. It can bring you things.

A few months later, I called Nelly Mae on the phone, and after we caught up with our lives, I asked her for a Navajo term for Navajo life and weaving. She said to me, “Remember what I told you about that one time? It is *naalyehe*. Weaving brings things, the *naalyehe*, it brings things like the sheep, the jewelry, the food. You get things from weaving.”

These conversations stayed with me for a long time. I couldn’t seem to fully comprehend what Nelly Mae wanted me to understand. Nelly Mae, and other weavers I spoke with, kept telling me that weaving “brings things” and that when they weave, they “receive good things” and that things “come your way.” The words they used seemed to point to something more than a transaction taking place in a shop or trading post, and implied a greater exchange, one that involved a reciprocal relationship with someone or something else.

After more than a year had passed, I began to understand. For Nelly Mae and many other weavers like her, the sale and exchange of weavings involve more than acquiring material goods for themselves and their families. Weaving also involves notions and acts of reciprocity, respect, and exchange beyond the marketplace. In the telling, Nelly Mae brought to life how weaving is tied to a way of viewing the world and how it references such things as weaving origins, its purpose, and its use for Navajo people today and always. Embedded in these statements are deeply rooted systems and weavings’ meanings and uses in life. For her, selling a weaving is not only a viable source of income. It is also part of a cosmological exchange among Navajo weavers and the Holy People, or the *Diyin Dine’e*, and the world around them.

For some weavers, the skill and knowledge required to make a Navajo textile are understood as being given to the Navajo people by the Diyin Dine'e. Weavings were given to the Navajo people by their ancestors, in part, for trade, to be exchanged for the things they bring in return. Weaving was created by the Holy People to provide material goods for the Navajo people, for their survival and prosperity. The making and selling of weavings involves a symbolic exchange between weavers and their ancestors as they practice the skill the Diyin Dine'e created for their benefit.

What struck me most as I talked with weavers was how often they would say that weaving "brings things" to themselves and their family, or that if one weaves, material goods will "come your way." Not only is the consistency of these statements remarkable, but the phrases are inclusive and broad enough that they can include a range of meanings and uses for exchange. These expressions allow for weavings to be able to "bring" many other kinds of things to the weaver and her family and imply that things will "come your way" based on a reciprocal relationship.

Consider the following statements as a means of illustration. The first was narrated by an elder in the community as we talked about her upbringing:

That's how she raised us. You have to earn your shoes you buy, or clothes, and weaving brought that.

Another Grandmother, while sitting by a window warping her loom, remembered her family's teachings as she talked with me one day. She told me that when it is quiet around the house, she remembers her mother, her father, her grandfather and grandmother telling her about weaving. Weaving is for her life, a way of life, and that she could receive good things from it and depend on herself, her family members would tell her.

During another interview, one young weaver in her 20s said that her mother told her, “Doing rug weaving is hard goods, they come your way...” Another young weaver told me, “And weaving, there are things that are in weavings, all that goes into it, like the prayers and the singing, the things that you offer to it, it is all in there...you take care of that, and it brings you things.”

Comments such as these that relate that weaving “brings things,” that one can “receive good things,” and that things are “coming your way,” suggest a local form of talking about exchange, reciprocity, and value that references Navajo social and cosmological systems. “Bringing things” also speaks to a symbolic exchange with ones’ ancestors. Weavers like Nelly Mae and the others quoted above state that weaving can bring tangible objects or other goods necessary for life. Weaving knowledge was given to Navajo people by the Holy People in order that these weavings could be sold or traded, thus a weaving can have equivalence in economic transactions. In Navajo, the term for these tangible goods is *naalyehe*, which translates as a person’s acquired wealth, or material things.

The Circulation of Navajo Weavings

Weavings have been highly valued trade items for centuries. Although some scholars suggest that Navajo weavings may have been traded as early as the middle or late seventeenth century (Rodee 1995; Wheat 1988, 1996) it is certain they were being traded with Spanish settlers by the early eighteenth century (see Amsden 1934; Kent 1985; Rodee 1995; Wheat 1988, 1996, 2003). In exchange for items not locally available or made, Navajo weavings were frequently traded among different groups residing in the

Southwest, including Spanish settlers and Native groups such as the Hopi and Zuni.

Through regional trade routes, these weavings also found their way to broader markets in the northern and southern Plains and in Mexico.

Weavings were highly valued as trade goods, as well as their practical uses as clothing, saddle blankets, bedding, and a variety of other purposes. Thickly woven saddle blankets made for more comfortable rides on horseback. Handwoven blankets and serapes were used for warmth and adornment. In late nineteenth-century photographs, one can see individuals from various tribes wearing Navajo chief-style blankets draped over their shoulders (e.g. Wheat 1996:74). Men and women wrapped themselves in Navajo blankets for protection against the wind and cold, and Navajo women and girls wore a woven dress, or *biil*. Occasionally, weavings were exchanged for payment or trade within the community, such as payment for a Medicine Man to perform a ceremony (Amsden 1934; Wheat 1996, 2003).

Johnnie, a cultural specialist with whom I talk frequently, describes many of the same historical uses of weaving that non-Navajo weaving scholars mention:

...but at that time, you know, the rug weaving was more or less for, utilitarian usage, you know, to be used in the hogan, whether to use it as a bedroll, or to use it as a blanket. Or to use it, to weave it for a Medicine Man for a Medicine Man to do a prayer, or something, that was very valued, that's how it was looked at. And, at that time there was no (trading posts), and then again, with the trade. First I guess it started out among the people, you know, a small clan over here, saw something another clan over there that had something of value, and then if they liked it, they would go over there and ask the other ones, 'I have a rug over here, can we trade,' so that's how they used it.

From the late seventeenth century until their forced relocation and incarceration at *Hweeldi*, or Fort Sumner, in 1863, most Navajo extended families led self-sufficient lives and were reliant on shepherding and farming for survival. This was an economy and a

way of life based on subsistence living, dependent on the natural environment and what it could provide. Plants provided medicine, food, and forage for sheep, and the sheep ensured wool for weaving and meat for survival. Weaving was just one of the many activities that came from the land (Brugge 1983; Hedlund 1996).

During their period of captivity at Hweeldi, Navajo people were forced to live in oppressive conditions on unproductive land. They relied on rations doled out by the government rather than on their own livestock, farming, and trade. During this time, contact with Spanish and Anglos strongly influenced Navajo weavers' work. New weaving materials, including commercial cloth and yarn for weaving, and new styles and patterns, such as the Rio Grande Saltillo style, were incorporated into weavers' repertoires. Despite the adoption of many new patterns, styles, and materials, the weaving technique remained the same and does so to this day (Wheat 1996; Hedlund 1984, 2004; Kent 1985).

After their return home from Hweeldi, Navajo people faced additional changes as new trading posts were built and groups of Spanish and Anglo settlers moved onto their land. The local economy changed from a subsistence economy to one that included a cash economy and new forms of exchange within a different kind of marketplace. Because Navajo weavings already functioned as objects of exchange, the transition from trading them through local and regional trade networks to selling them at trading posts was relatively smooth. Weaving still contributed an important part of a family's income and provided necessary items not locally available. During the trading post era (ca. 1870-1920), weavings were commonly traded for such tangible goods as commercial fabrics, flour, and sugar. Whereas trading posts offered Navajo weavers new opportunities to sell

their work, they also interrupted local networks of trade and exchange (Amsden 1934; Hedlund 1984).

With the imposed stock reduction of the 1930s, Navajo reliance on an economy based on herding sheep and small farming decreased even further. Many people sought wage work outside the home, and if unable to find work locally in neighboring border towns or through the Navajo government, relocated to cities such as Albuquerque, Phoenix, and Los Angeles. Still, weaving continued. Some families relied heavily on weaving to provide most of their income, whereas others used weaving to supplement the family income. Despite centuries of change, weaving persisted as an important source of exchange for Navajo families (Hedlund 1996; Lamphere 1977).

Previous anthropological and historical studies of Navajo weaving exchange systems have emphasized historic trade networks, the influences of traders and buyers on weaving and market forces, and external exchanges within the larger national and global context (e.g., Amsden 1934; Kent 1985; M'Closkey 2002; Rodee 1995; Wheat 1996; Wilkins 1999). At the opposite end of the spectrum from this material-based or economic approach is an interpretive one that underscores the importance of relationships and interactions among weavers and Navajo cosmology (M'Closkey 2002:234-252; Witherspoon 1995; 1977; Willink and Zolbrod 1996). Instead of attending to the material circulation of weaving objects, this latter approach focuses on symbolic interactions and the incorporation of wider Navajo philosophical principles. More attentive to local conceptual systems than ethnographic details, it relates weaving to core concepts in Navajo philosophy. Such concepts include *hozho*, generally understood to mean a state of balance and harmony with the world, and *k'ee*, the centrality of ties with family and the

wider universe (e.g., Witherspoon 1995,1977). Both woven objects and the act of weaving embody hozho, and it is reflected in the balanced asymmetry of the designs, colors, and patterns of a rug. Both also embody reciprocal exchanges in relationships in k'e, or family ties. Seen in this way, weavings are manifestations of wider, more symbolic forms of reciprocity within the Navajo universe.

Other ethnographic studies have examined weavers' opinions and decision-making strategies for making and selling their work (Hedlund 1984, 1992, 1996, 1999, 2004; Reichard 1934, 1936). Recently, Navajo weavers' own perspectives about the exchange of woven objects and the "internal" circulation of weaving tools through family lines have appeared in weaving exhibits and catalogs in the form of short biographical sketches and life stories (e.g., Begay 1996; Thomas 1996).

Whereas the more economically and historically based studies focus on the circulation of textiles through external markets and on the strategies weavers have employed through time, the conceptual and ethnographic approaches touch upon the "internal," more symbolic exchanges involved in the weaving of textiles. What I propose here is a perspective grounded in *both* local understandings of exchange *and* the reciprocity of weaving objects, within the family and the marketplace, symbolic and material. Most important is to take into account, both at the conceptual level and the level of practice, the variability of opinions that inform the everyday lives of weavers. This is critical for any discussion of Navajo weavers today. Many weavers, for example, consider their weavings not a manifestation of hozho, but as a source of food for the table. Others view weaving as an appropriate way of making a living and acknowledge the traditional stories from which it came (see also Hedlund 1984, 1996, 1999).

Exchange with the Diyin Dine'e, the Holy People

In the Navajo language, weaving-related objects are considered to be *naalyehe*, or tangible material goods; sometimes they are also identified as *yodi*, or soft goods, and *nitl'iz* or hard goods (Walters 1977). The Diyin Dine'e made weaving to be *naalyehe* and to exchange for other *naalyehe* to provide for the family. *Naalyehe* includes such items as livestock, jewelry, or other material goods. Objects like these are often considered to be *yodi*, soft goods, or valuable personal possessions. Hard goods, *nitl'iz*, include objects like precious stones or jewels used in ceremonies. Both *yodi* and *nitl'iz* are mentioned in the Chief Hoghan Songs of the Blessingway, the central curing ceremony meant to restore *hozho*, or harmony and balance, within oneself, one's family, and the universe (see Farella 1984; Franciscan Fathers 1968; Salabye and Manolescu 2004). In the Blessingway, soft and hard goods are valuables that are given to and received by the patient and those in attendance through an exchange with the Holy People. Through songs, prayers, and ceremonies, the patient asks the Diyin Dine'e for blessings, which include such possessions as jewelry, sheep, and horses. The Diyin Dine'e cannot help but give "returns" to the Earth Surface People as they hear the songs sung correctly, and they bestow the *naalyehe* on those who participate if the ceremony is done in the proper way (Farella 1984; Lamphere 1983; Reichard 1950; Witherspoon 1977; Wyman 1970, 1983).

Whereas soft goods are understood to bring more immediate value when they are exchanged, hard goods have a more long-lasting value. *Naalyehe* can be sold as soft goods for its quick return or held onto for awhile and sold as hard goods at a later time as

its value increases. An object, such as a weaving, can be both soft goods and hard goods (Walters 1977). It was explained to me, for instance, that weaving can bring value over the short term as it is exchanged in the marketplace for money or for other tangible goods such as groceries, or it can accumulate value, such as an older weaving kept for a period of time.

The Diyin Dine'e say that weavings will bring returns to the Navajo People if they are used and approached with respect. The art of weaving was given to the Five Fingered or Earth Surface People, the *Nihookaa Dine'e* (the Navajos of today), for their survival and prosperity (Thomas 1996; Walters 1977). Each time a Navajo person weaves in the "correct" manner, that is, according to the teachings of the ancestors, he or she is, in essence, engaging in an act of symbolic exchange with the Holy People. Every object that is made and traded fulfills the teachings of the Diyin Dine'e because weaving was created by them for Navajo people to exchange. If a weaver makes an object with respect and reverence, he or she is involved in a reciprocal exchange with the ancestors.

This ongoing exchange involves not only the Holy People, but the larger Navajo universe, the natural and cosmological world. The exchange of knowledge passed to the *Nihookaa Dine'e* acknowledges that part of the natural world that is essential in making a rug. As a result, weaving should be approached in a certain way. Natural objects incorporated into a weaving are drawn into the exchange between a weaver and the cosmos. This exchange is based on notions of reciprocity. The elements that go into making a rug--the dye plants, an animal's fleece, the water used to clean the wool and process the dyes--are things that inhabit and are a part of the natural world. In order for the exchange to be a reciprocal act, these components of weaving must be properly

treated and taken care of by the Earth Surface People. As one person explained it to me, “If you take care of the plants, take care of the sheep, take care of the water, all of that will bring things your way.” These natural objects are essential for the production of a weaving, and if treated with respect, will, in return, bring the weaving to fruition as an object to be sold for the survival and prosperity of the Nihookaa Dine’ e. The

interrelationship of these elements and naalyehe was explained to me one winter morning when I was talking with Tony, a teacher and a cultural specialist whose job it is to explain such complex notions of traditional ways:

Naalyehe is a reference to you know, tangible goods, like, Naalyehe baa hoghan is a trading post, where material, material goods is housed, that’s what it means... Nature, that you possess, but that’s what it means, Naalyehe. And so, those, those kinds of things, you approach it in the same way. Like, know how to use it, and then, what it returns to you. Like they say, livestock, sheep, horses, cattle, they say that its returnable, and gives us what we need, and survival, and it will provide, and it will support you... So, nowadays, we go to the store and buy it. In the old days, we had our own sheep, and we processed our own wool. How you raised the sheep, what approach that you use, how you tend to it, how you talk to it, how you care for it. That tends to how your weaving, how your rug is going to be. So it extends like that. And then, the kind of person that you are. And then the money that you get when you sell. How do you use it? How do you use it? Do you use it for food for your family, clothes for your family, household goods and things like that... that’s how it should be.

In traditional teachings, in order for an exchange to be reciprocal and complete, one must give something back to its source, back to the Diyin Dine’ e and the cosmos. To get things, or put another way, for weaving to “bring things,” one must give “returns” to keep the cycle going. You give returns for the returns it bestows on you through an act of symbolic reciprocal exchange with the Holy People and the cosmos (Farella 1984; Lamphere 1983; Reichard 1950; Wyman 1970, 1983).

An example of this is the collection of plants. One must make an offering to a plant that you pick, give something back in return for what it gives to you. One day, I was asked to help gather plants with a weaver, as she was almost out of certain colors of dyed wool. On a beautiful late summer morning, we headed up toward Narbona Pass to gather the plants that she needed. On our way, Margaret constantly looked around at the plants on the side of the road and beyond, pointing out plants and trees that were used to dye wool. We arrived at our destination and stopped near a creek bed, a marshy green area under a canopy of tall pine trees. Cars whizzed by on the road as we made our way down to the water to reach the alder trees. Margaret found the ones she was looking for and guided me towards the right trees. There were two of the kind that would make the color she needed. She leaned over a fallen limb and carefully lifted the bark from the wood. The dye from the bark had stained the wood a beautiful rich reddish brown. This was used for moccasin dye, she said. Before cutting the bark from the dead limbs of the tree, she made an offering to the tree, with *tadidiin* (corn pollen), and at the same time, said a quiet prayer in Navajo. “It is always to be done this way,” she told me, and reminded me not to pick from the one to which we had made the offering. We then began collecting the dye material, carefully avoiding the special piece that she had blessed.

Margaret considered this act of exchange involving the gathering of plants as a cosmological or spiritual event, a continuous reciprocal symbolic exchange with the cosmos and the Diyin Dine’e. Not all weavers think or act this way, however. Many weavers do not approach weaving according to traditional ways. Rather, they consider the selling and making of weavings primarily in terms of its economic opportunities and what it can bring to their families. Others view the selling of a weaving both as an

economic exchange and an activity sanctioned by the Holy People for survival. In exchange for their weavings, weavers can buy groceries or gas, make a car payment, or take the family to dinner in town. Weaving can bring spending money, a trip to Las Vegas, the ability to work at home and take care of children, a respected livelihood. In other words, weaving can bring many things to a weaver and her family.

The following examples illustrate some of the diverse opinions expressed by a group of weavers. A young weaver, originally from a very rural part of the western area of the Navajo Nation, now living and working in Window Rock, said:

I grew up with it, and I grew up with knowledge of, of the stories behind it, and, at the same time, its like a job almost, you treat it as a job, the way you sell it, so its just kind of like a different kind of thing in my family. I'm sure its like that for all, or a lot of weavers...more the way I see it, its more a livelihood I guess, a job, a task for Navajo women, to support their families...

A woman in her 50s, an accomplished weaver and jewelry maker, who also works for the tribe said:

You know, my mother and grandmother always used to tell us to weave, because it is your way for support. They always said that our husbands would leave us (laugh), so you had to know to weave to support yourself.

Another weaver in her 50s, who sometimes teaches weaving at local schools, said:

Some of these days, you learn how to be a secretary, or some director, and then all of a sudden that job is taken away, you rely on this, so you have a back up for paying your bills or your automobile.

An elder grandmother in St. Michaels has said to me on many occasions that:

You might not have a job, and you will survive by your weaving.

And a full time weaver in her 30s or 40s one day told me:

It helps me a lot, pay my bills, payments, kids, you know. I remember I wove a big one, the first time, and I got a truck for it.

As the above quotes illustrate, the concept of weaving “bringing things” is inclusive and broad. Bringing things means different things to different people. Weaving can bring things as a source of income, a livelihood, something in exchange for ones’ work. Weaving can also bring things to weavers as part of a symbolic exchange with the ancestors and the world around them. Or it can be a mixture of the two.

Variability and Alienability

This variability of opinion also extends to the alienability of weavings. According to traditional views, weavings can be alienable from the person who made them because they were given to the Navajo people by the *Diyin Dine’e* for the express purpose of exchange. Weavings are made to circulate outside the family, and they become less attached to a person as they move into the marketplace. Traditionally, things that are made to circulate outside the family are understood to be more alienable than those that remain within the family. For example, *Jish* (ceremonial paraphernalia) and personal items such as clothes or jewelry, usually do not circulate outside of the family. The most inalienable objects are not exchanged or circulated, in part, because of their power to affect the person they belong to. In essence, such objects are “part of,” or inalienable, from that person (see Frisbie 1987; Schwarz 1997).

The level of alienability of a weaving is dependent, too, on how a weaver views its creation and purpose. For some, weavings made for exchange can retain a “part of” the maker and are considered inalienable at certain moments in time. For example, for some weavers a weaving object can be imbued with the thoughts of the maker who created the rug. The level of inalienability decreases as a weaver actively disengages

from the object she wishes to sell through such measures as ceremonies, songs, and, as I discuss later, the weaver's pathway (Bennett 1974; Hedlund 1994, 2004). Weavers can also intentionally increase the inalienability of a weaving, usually for their own or their family's personal use, by putting objects into the weaving that give it the power of that object (Willink and Zolbrod 1997). For example, a family may request a *biil* (woven two-piece dress) for a *kinaaldá* (female puberty ceremony) from a weaver whom the family feels will impart blessings and skills to the young girl through the dress (Schwarz 1997). Willink and Zolbrod (1997) also report the addition of horse tendons from an especially strong horse to a saddle blanket to imbue the object with the power of the animal.

Some weavers do not believe that they can ever fully detach themselves from a woven object. Rather, they believe that the weaving will always contain a part of them. Many view their weavings like children, as objects that will always be a part of them, and like children, need to be watched and cared for (Hedlund 2006, personal communication; Thomas 1996:37). Others believe that the thoughts of the maker are contained in the rug and will transfer over to the buyer. Those weavers who believe that their attachment to the rug is permanent, or inalienable, also recognize the power of the weaving and take measures to ensure it ends up in proper hands. Two weavers, both in their early twenties, spoke about the attachments between a rug and its maker:

...but when you're weaving a rug, always have that positive thinking, that spiritual mind with you, because whoever buys it, will have that same thinking and same thoughts as your weaving, you always have those positive thoughts in there to create a good weaving, a good design.

I always look for people that are special to buy my rugs, and that's going to appreciate it, and, not just to anybody, and I'm sure it's the same with all of the Navajo weavers as well. They want somebody to take care of that rug because its,

it's their heart and soul in that rug, and they don't want anybody to buy it, and abuse it later on. Because, you know, they've put all their thoughts into it, and that's just the way I am, I have to look at people to make sure I can trust them, before they can take it.

If a rug contains good thoughts and planning, then these attributes will be bestowed on to the next person who buys it. Thus, the weaver must be sure that her weavings are traded to those who will be respectful of that power (see also Hedlund 1994:14).

Because there are varying levels of belief and practice of Navajo customs and traditional ways of life, there is also great variability in whether or not weavers consider a rug a "part of" themselves. Many weavers who regard weaving as more of an economic activity do not believe that the weaving ever contained a "part of" themselves. They see weavings primarily as commodity items for what can be acquired in exchange. Weavers unfamiliar with traditional ways or who practice certain forms of Christianity may not consider the weaving inalienable or attached to that person at all, but more as an article of trade. Weavers sent to boarding schools at an early age or never taught the traditional stories of weaving origins and their connection with the cosmos often do not believe that a weaving can be attached to the weaver.

The Spirit Line

The variability of weavers' opinions about the alienability and inalienability of woven rugs also extends to the use of the *ch'ihonet'i*, the spirit line or weaver's pathway of a rug. In Navajo, the *ch'ihonet'i* is broadly defined as an exit or way out. In the case of weaving, the spirit line is a purposeful line that extends from the inner design field through the border of a rug, or sometimes across the whole rug (Bennett 1974; Hedlund 1984). Whereas most spirit lines are visible, others can be hidden. In most cases, they are

put into a weaving to release the weaver's thoughts from the object for sale. A detailed ethnographic study of the ch'ihonit'i was conducted by Noel Bennett (1974) in the 1970s. Through interviews with weavers and a *hataalii*, or Medicine Man, from the Western area of the Navajo Nation, Bennett explored the variability of weavers' opinions on the purpose and use of the ch'ihonit'i and found that there were many different ways of weaving a pathway, different frequencies in their occurrence, and differences in their placement in a weaving. Bennett's work, like other studies of the weaver's pathway, suggests that the ch'ihonit'i is put in to relieve a fear of enclosure (Bennett 1974; Hedlund 1984, 1994). Most weavers consider it a release mechanism, a pathway or way out, to release one's thinking within the rug. Unless one is put in, a weaver's thinking can become unclear and scattered. In the worse case, a weaver will remain "inside" the rug, weaving her thoughts within the object. A ch'ihonit'i is also a preventative measure, one that wards off the side effects of excessive weaving and restores the health of the weaver. It may also be added to release one's thinking toward the next rug and future weavings. In another interpretation, Harry Walters (1996) suggests it is a purposeful mistake put in by the weaver. Nothing in life is perfect, and the weaver adds the spirit line to acknowledge this truth.

The weavers I spoke with had various understandings about the inclusion of the ch'ihonit'i. In general, their responses were similar to Bennett's findings of over three decades earlier. When asked, all described the pathway as a way out. For many, the ch'ihonit'i was put in for the benefit and the release of their thinking. All thoughts that went into the making of a rug had to be released, and the weaver's pathway was one way to release their thinking so they could continue weaving and so that the practice of

weaving could continue in their families in the future. Just as Bennett described in her study, some described the pathway as an act of undoing the effects of excessive weaving. Others noted that the ch'ihonit'i could prevent sickness and imbalance and eliminate the effects of weaving. It could relieve simple aches and pains caused by weaving too much or more serious problems such as blindness, deafness, and insanity. Interestingly, only non-weavers suggested that weavers added a pathway to make a purposeful mistake. One elder grandmother, a non-weaver, said that it was put in "because nothing or nobody is perfect." A weaver in her 70s who lives west of Window Rock suggested that the ch'ihonit'i is put in for the design's sake, not for the weaver's. She said that the designs are alive and want to go visit each other. If a pathway is added for every large design element in the rug, the designs will remain unstuck and be able to visit each other within the weaving.

The pathway also releases the weaver and her thoughts from the rug she creates and sells. The addition of the pathway is an act of detachment, of making the weaving alienable from the maker so it can be sold. Whether the ch'ihonit'i is put in to release the thoughts that went into a rug or to ensure the continuation of weaving for future generations, the pathway makes the woven object more alienable from its maker. If a weaver believes that a rug she sells contains her thoughts, she will purposely release her thinking; the pathway is a way to make the weaving more alienable. The weaver's pathway then, is recognition of the attachment and possible inalienability of the weaving, and a purposeful act to make it less so. Just as weavings can "bring" material goods, or naalyehe, to a weaver and her family, a weaving can "bring" unwanted or uncertain elements to it as well. Some weavers mention that if you don't put the pathway in, you

will “go deaf” or “go crazy” because the weaving holds a part of you within the object. Measures such as the spirit line release the thinking and the inalienable nature of the object to the weaver so it can become something alienable, free to be exchanged with others.

Many weavers do not weave a spirit line into their rugs. As noted, many weavers reject the idea that their weavings contain a “part of” themselves and are inalienable. Some weavers put a pathway in their work some of the time, but not always, or may include the pathway primarily as a selling point for buyers (Hedlund 2006, personal communication). In other words, just as there is a multiplicity of understandings about the purpose and uses of weavings, so too are there multiple notions of what a woven object can hold. Many weavers think that weavings made to be sold are “just weavings” and were never inalienable to begin with. Weavings are a way to provide for themselves and their families, nothing more.

Tools Exchanged

Sadie Joe once told me a story about her mother’s weaving tools. Youthful in her 70s, Sadie still works everyday at one of the local Head Start schools in the area as a Foster Grandparent and assists teachers with the students in the classrooms. One of Sadie’s jobs is to teach young children through her own experiences, to instill traditional teachings in the classroom. One of the teachers asked her if she could teach the children to weave. The next day, she brought in her tools, tools that her father had made for her mother, ones she had inherited when her mother could no longer weave. She set up several looms for the children, and sat down to instruct the children the traditional way,

learning by watching. She moved the batten back and forth smoothly, and the rhythm captivated the children, frozen in their seats as she wove. As she moved one heddle to make the weaving tight, she turned the batten to make a shed and suddenly it broke in two. She picked up the batten, now in two pieces, and put it back in her bag. “I wanted to cry,” she said, “just thinking of my mother when they broke. I still have the two pieces to this day.”

After telling me this story, Sadie went into the other room to find her mother’s tools. She brought them out in the fabric they were stored in, and carefully unwrapped the cloth so I could see her mother’s batten, still in two pieces. For Sadie, her mother’s weaving tools, even in their broken state, remained valuable possessions because they contained a part of her mother and memories of her. Weavers like Sadie, and non-weavers too, often develop a strong attachment to weaving tools, especially inherited ones, because they can hold strong memories of their loved ones. Tools are made to be durable enough to be used throughout a weaver’s lifetime and are often passed down through family lines. As they move through the generations, they keep the weaving tradition of families alive (see Begay 1996; Thomas 1996).

Just as weavings bring economic and symbolic valuables to a weaver and her family as they are exchanged, tools bring these same valuables even as they are kept within families. Tools are essential for weaving. Without them, Navajo rugs as we know them would not exist. Because tools are necessary to weave, they are also necessary for acquiring what weaving can bring to a weaver and her family.

For the most part, tools are intended to be kept out of wider circulation. They are kept within families because of their durability, purpose, and use, and also for their

lasting significance. As they are kept within families and out of circulation, they become more “symbolically charged” and “dense” objects (Weiner 1994:394). As weaving tools are passed down through family lines, they become more inalienable and are imbued with the lives of those who made and used them.

The weaving toolkit usually consists of one or more batten sticks (*bee nik'i'niltl'ish*), weaving combs (*bee adzoií*), and spindles (*bee 'adiií*), and can also include the loom (*dah 'iistl'o*). The most important physical feature of weaving tools is their sturdiness and strength. They are usually made from a hard wood, such as oak. Oak trees are found in certain areas of the Navajo Nation, and knowledge of where to find the best material for tools is often passed down through families. The wood collected and brought home by weavers or their family members is used to carve battens, spindles, and combs. These are made to be smooth and strong, and are fabricated according to family traditions. Traditionally, men make the weaving tools for their female relatives who are weavers. Certain songs are sung and techniques followed as the tools are made (see also Hedlund 1984; Thomas 1996).

As indicated earlier, in Navajo society, objects that circulate only within of the family are generally understood to be more inalienable than those that are circulated widely. Weaving tools fit the former category. Like *jish* (ceremonial paraphernalia) and other important objects, tools are passed down through the family. Although many objects, such as clothing or other personal effects, are destroyed after a family member passes, weaving objects are usually passed down to a weaver within the family. There is no formal or strict pattern within Navajo society that dictates who in the family inherits weaving tools. Most are passed down to those family members who continue to weave or

take an interest in weaving or in the tools themselves. Like Sadie Joe, many weavers inherit their tools from their mother or maternal grandmother. Others inherit tools from their *nali*, or paternal grandmother. Most hold on to their family's tools even if they don't weave. Sometimes, inheriting tools is an incentive to start weaving again or to learn to weave. Those that do weave usually favor the inherited tools because they are worn and are said to work better than newer, unused ones. Weavers often become quickly attached to inherited tools and prefer them over others.

Weaving tools may be some of the most cherished inherited possessions within a family. They are prized for their practical utility and daily uses. Without them, weaving in the Navajo way would be virtually impossible. Many regard them as heirlooms as well as utilitarian objects. For some, the tools are alive, and like *jish*, are meant to be safely kept and taken care of by family members. As one Navajo consultant explained to me one day:

...all of the tools that you use to create that has really become a part of you, they are really a part of you so when one of them break, when they wear out, you just don't throw them in the trash, you know. You take them out to a place where and deposit under a young juniper tree, and if there's no tree a bush or something like that, give it back to the elements, that's what it is...they have an inner being they have a soul, and they can be passed on.

Tools are kept because they are among the most valued possessions. Tools can become attached to a person and the family that uses them and will become more and more inalienable and "symbolically dense" as they are used and remain in families. Most tools stay out of wider circulation precisely because they are an essential part of perpetuating weaving traditions. These objects literally and symbolically keep weaving traditions alive. Weaving tools such as the comb, batten, loom, and spindle were made by the *Diyin Dine'e* for protection to ward off dangers. Tools are an important teaching device

in the home, are used during the kinaalda (female puberty ceremony), and in general are highly symbolic objects (see Thomas 1996:40-41). They are womens' weapons against such eternal conditions as poverty and hunger. Tools are a material link between the past, present, and future and memorialize people, kin ties, families, weaving knowledge, skill, and traditions.

Weaving tools can also be understood as alienable. Tools are not intrinsically inalienable, they are made so by people. Some weaving tools are made to be sold in the marketplace just as weavings are, and can be seen for sale and display in many trading posts and local stores. Locals and tourists buy weaving tools at flea markets, at trading posts, and in stores in Gallup. Thus, just as some weavings are kept within families as heirlooms and become inalienable possessions, so too are some weaving tools intended to be sold or exchanged and become alienable goods.

Conclusion

This article has discussed some the culturally specific ideas associated with the circulation and exchange of Navajo weavings and weaving tools. What Nelly Mae and other Navajo weavers wanted me to understand is that weaving is a way to bring returns and valuables to a weaver and her family, however broadly conceived. To some, weaving a rug is a symbolic reciprocal exchange with the Holy People and the cosmos. To others, the act of weaving and exchanging a rug is more of an economic transaction.

I have emphasized the wide range of opinions that weavers hold today about these ideas and practices. Opinions vary about the alienability and inalienability of weaving-related items. Weavers who consider weavings to be inalienable often take active

measures to protect themselves. They might include a weaver's pathway in their weavings, whereas others do not. Although weaving tools are more often inalienable and weavings more often alienable, weaving tools meant to be sold can be alienable, weavings kept within families can be inalienable. What this illustrates is that weaving-related objects are not intrinsically alienable or inalienable, but are made so by people at particular moments in time.

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