
Non-Human Agency and Experiential Faith among Diné Oodlání, “Navajo Believers”

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Abstract: The neo-Pentecostal Oodlání movement is on the rise among Diné (Navajo) of the US South-West, characterized by independent Navajo-led churches and charismatic worship. In this article, I focus on the experiential nature of neo-Pentecostalism to argue that its growth, over and above other forms of Navajo Christianity, capitalizes on a type of resonant rupture with traditional Navajo spirituality. Specifically, I focus on the Oodlání relationship with non-human (supernatural) actors. While experientiality provides an avenue for deeply felt continuity, a close look at Oodlání non-human actors (and the options for interacting with them) demonstrates that neo-Pentecostalism fundamentally forges cultural rupture.

Keywords: Pentecostalism, Navajo, experientiality, non-human actors, rupture, resonance

Résumé : Le mouvement néo-pentecôtiste *Oodlání* est en pleine expansion parmi les Diné (Navajo) du Sud-Ouest américain, une région caractérisée par les églises indépendantes Navajo et le culte charismatique. Cet article se penche sur la nature expérientielle du néo-pentecôtisme, faisant valoir que ce mouvement, plus que tout autre forme de christianisme Navajo, se développe en tirant profit d'un type de rupture qui entre en résonance avec la spiritualité Navajo traditionnelle. Plus précisément, l'article examine la relation que le mouvement *Oodlání* entretient avec les acteurs non humains (surnaturels). Si l'expérientialité favorise un sentiment profond de continuité, l'étude des acteurs non humains *Oodlání* (et des possibilités d'interaction avec eux) montre que le néo-pentecôtisme effectue, fondamentalement, une rupture culturelle.

Mots-clés : néo-pentecôtisme, Navajo, expérientialité, acteurs non humains, rupture, résonance

Introduction

The first time Navajo pastor Wallace Begay encountered the Holy Spirit, he says that he experienced the presence of God in a very “real” way—it threw him against a wall. He says:

When I got baptized with the Holy Spirit, I was at a Pentecostal meeting and I was standing up there in the bleachers.... I raised my hand and I asked God to fill me.... The anointing fell, people were dancing, they were shouting, and all of a sudden ... I heard, like a wind, like some kind of force that was coming. And ... a force, a tremendous power just hit me, threw me back against the wall. I blacked out right there.... I'd probably say for like two or three minutes, I was ... lost. And when I came to, I was speaking in tongues and my ... my hands were just shaking.... I was just shaking all over, just, you know ... When I tried to say something ... words were just coming out in tongues. [interview with the author, July 17, 2008]

This physically and materially manifest presence of God, in both dramatic and quotidian ways, is one of the theological hallmarks of the neo-Pentecostal movement that has been widely spreading exponentially among Navajos since the 1950s. In testimonies, sermons and interviews, leaders and participants alike often use the word *real* to describe their interactions with God. Through experiential interactions, like Pastor Wallace's, participants in this movement loudly and repeatedly proclaim that “God is real.”

As in other places across the globe, experientiality is the key to understanding the appeal of neo-Pentecostalism among Navajos. Led by independent and unaffiliated Navajo charismatic ministers, the Navajo neo-Pentecostal movement I have researched ethnographically since 2006¹ now represents a powerful religious constituency on the Navajo Nation. As charismatic (or “Spirit-filled”) Christians, believers experience God's presence through faith healing, dancing in the Spirit and speaking in tongues

(glossolalia). Navajos outside the movement call participants *Dimoí namaasí* or *Dimoí dachaaíí* (literally, “Christians who roll” and “Christians who cry”). But the Navajos who lead and participate in this movement have a different term to describe themselves. They consider themselves to be *Oodlání* (Believers).

For Navajos who participate in the *Oodlání* movement, their faith is fundamentally experiential. In what follows, I demonstrate how this experientiality forms a type of resonant rupture with traditional Navajo spirituality. This religious change is resonant because Navajo neo-Pentecostals interact with supernatural (non-human) actors in concrete ways with material results, just as their ancestors have for centuries.² I demonstrate that this experiential continuity is one reason that neo-Pentecostalism has grown so much more rapidly than other forms of Christianity among Navajos. However, I also contend that a close look at the kinds of non-human actors believed by *Oodlání* to populate the cosmos (and the options for interacting with them) demonstrates that neo-Pentecostalism represents a rupture with traditionalism more than it does continuity.

Without doubt, research with a Native neo-Pentecostal community raises ethical concerns. Christianity has a contentious history among Native Americans. As George Tinker (1993) reminds us, Christianity has been implicit in many different aspects of the cultural genocide practised on Native People: politically, economically, religiously and socially. Further, the confrontational theology of the *Oodlání* movement often sets itself in direct opposition to the goals of cultural revitalizationists and critical Diné scholarship. I have found that it is important that I make clear my position in relation to this movement. I am not a missionary but an ethnographer, and I describe a movement that is led not by Anglos or outsiders but rather by a small but vocal minority of Navajos. My research is descriptive, not prescriptive, and I am exploring the spiritually enlivened worlds that exist, not recommending missiological best practices for cultural contextualization. My research rests on a position of empathetic neutrality, based in the anthropological first principle of religious relativism.³

In what follows, I contextualize the *Oodlání* movement as part of the contemporary Navajo religious landscape. I demonstrate the resonance of Pentecostal experientiality by describing the types of non-human actors encountered by both *Oodlání* and traditionally-practising Navajos. I then explore the fundamental differences between the two systems in the types of non-human actors and the rules for interacting with them, arguing that, rather than simple continuity or discontinuity, the *Oodlání* movement facilitates a type of resonant rupture.

Diné Oodlání and the Contemporary Navajo Religious Landscape

Navajos are one of the largest tribes in the United States, with over 300,000 enrolled members (Donovan 2011) and a reservation land base in the South-West covering an area roughly the size of West Virginia. Linguistically related to other Athabaskan-speaking people, Navajos refer to themselves as *Diné* (literally, “the people”). Despite over a century of concerted effort at conversion to Christianity (including through forced attendance at assimilationist boarding schools), most Diné continue to participate in the ceremonials at the heart of the lifeway of their ancestors. Contemporary Navajo scholars are using these traditional philosophies to reclaim sovereignty over Navajo history (Denetdale 2007) and education (Aronilth 1994). These scholars and others like them are encouraging contemporary generations of Navajos to embrace the wisdom and strength inherent in the teachings of their ancestors. In particular, the traditional Navajo bedrock philosophy of *Są’ah Nagháii Bik’eh Hózhóón* (loosely translated as “the path to long life and happiness” and abbreviated SNBH) has become central to these projects (see Lee 2014).

Despite this strong cultural, spiritual and philosophical revitalization movement, the religious landscape of the Navajo Nation has changed dramatically over the past 50 years. New religious movements like the Native American Church and the Church of Latter Day Saints (Mormons) have made rapid gains in Navajo communities (Frisbie 1992). Much like Catholicism, which has a longer historical presence among Navajos, these new religions are often practised pluralistically, in combination with a SNBH outlook and participation in traditional healing ceremonials (Csordas 2000; Pavlik 1997).

In contrast, the *Oodlání* movement is a new religious movement that eschews traditionalism yet is gaining adherents at a rapid rate. Recent statistics indicate that exclusive Christianity is now practised by around 30 per cent of Navajos, with Pentecostalism the most practised form of exclusive Christianity (Milne 2011:527). Some of the appeal of this movement rests in its decentralized nature; independent Navajo pastors use charismatic authority and kinship networks, rather than formal training or ordination, to found and build churches (Marshall 2015).⁴ Some of the appeal rests in the way neo-Pentecostalism directly addresses the material concerns of people still experiencing the trauma of settler colonialism in the form of high rates of alcoholism, chronic health conditions, depression and suicide (Indian Health Service 2003; Navajo Nation 2010), a connection that I established among others (Aberle 1982; Blanchard

1977; Marshall 2011).⁵ In this article, however, I focus on the cosmological relationship between humans and non-humans as a point of resonance that has helped experiential neo-Pentecostalism to localize among the Navajos, a people who have always expected experiential relationships with non-human others.⁶

Diné Oodlání Experientiality

In contrast to other forms of Christianity, Pentecostalism (and related charismatic faiths) emphasize experientiality. Whereas rational Protestantism concerns itself with questions of belief (Keane 2007), Pentecostalism places a significant value on “practice theology” (Anderson 2004; Warrington 2008).⁷ This experiential emphasis has enabled Pentecostalism to localize in many places around the globe where religious traditions have been less concerned with what an individual believes about non-human (supernatural) actors than with how those non-human actors are experienced in practical and material ways in the world. How helpful are supernatural actors in curing illness? What can they do to help one financially? Experientiality is something that characterizes both traditional Navajo ceremonialism and Pentecostal Christianity.⁸ To demonstrate how this practice theology helped the Oodlání movement to resonate among Navajos better than other forms of Christianity, I first discuss how Oodlání faith is experiential.

The Oodlání movement grew out of the Pentecostal healing revival of the 1950s (Marshall 2015). Like the growing global Pentecostalism to which it is connected, this movement draws on Pentecostal/charismatic theologies. These include the doctrine of “second baptism” by the Holy Spirit, manifest in experiential “gifts” such as speaking in tongues, faith healing and prophesy. These spiritual gifts find biblical precedent in the story of Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit descended upon the apostles with the sound of a mighty rushing wind, and the appearance of tongues of fire touched them and caused them to speak in many different languages (Acts 2:1–31). For Pentecostals, the charismatic gifts brought by the Holy Spirit to the apostles in the Bible are still in operation today. Charismatic behaviour was common in the particular Oodlání church community among whom I conducted fieldwork in north-western New Mexico, led by a Navajo pastor I refer to as Pastor Wallace (see above). Many people in this congregation became Oodlání through the experience of practical benefit, most often healing but also the amelioration of their poverty or domestic troubles.

Experiential religions rely on a particular set of ideas about what kinds of beings populate the cosmos; experientiality generally presupposes the active presence

of non-human actors exerting agency in this world. In fact, for experiential religions, what we know about non-human actors comes from observing what they do (as opposed to, for example, descriptions in a written text). For Oodlání, the non-human actors who influence their material lives include benevolent actors (God, Jesus, the Holy Spirit) and malevolent actors (the devil and his troupe of demons). As an anthropologist, I am less interested in the underlying theology of these beings than I am in how they are experienced by believers. In the remainder of this section, I focus on the ethnographic life of the non-human actors among Oodlání, arguing that experientiality is key to Oodlání understandings of the nature of these holy and unholy beings.

God

Beverly Joe believes that “God is real” because He spoke to her. She said:

I woke up and I went around in the house and then nobody was up. And I didn't see anybody talking to me.... But in my ear I could hear Him talking to me. And the way He was talking to me, I could hear the loud noise, you know, that loud talking. As though, you know, when He spoke to me I could feel the earth trembling, you know? ... At that time I wasn't a believer. And I was an alcoholic at that time ... my family was going through poverty. We didn't have anything. We were so poor.... And, you know, it's a good thing that God revealed Himself to me and I heard His voice ... that's how I knew that God is real and I know He's real today. [interview with the author, July 6, 2008]

For Joe, a divine God as a non-human actor is real, based not on faith alone but on her experience of this divine presence.

For Oodlání, God is both powerful and personal. He is considered both the creator and the all-powerful ruler of the universe, a personified force interacting with Oodlání in individual ways and in daily life. Oodlání use the English word *God* when referring to him, and the Navajo Bible, *Diyin God Bizaad* (*Diyin*, “holy”; *God Bizaad*, “God, his word”) also uses the English name for God. One of the ways in which God is experienced is as a powerful protector. Several thematic statements repeated almost formulaically in Oodlání testimonies and sermons include those about the power of God: “He's a miracle-working God,” “God can move mountains” and “My God is greater [than the devil].” This is all very reminiscent of what an elderly Navajo woman told Elizabeth Lewton and Victoria Bydone: “A long time

ago men used to pray like that—‘I will walk in beauty and live in beauty with my children.’ Now everybody just relies on God. We pray, ‘Take care of us, God.’ That’s more powerful that way” (2000:488).⁹

It is important to point out that, for Oodlání, the relationship with God is also very personal. Instead of claiming that they have been “saved” (a concept that does not translate to Navajo very well), Oodlání will often identify themselves as “a child of God” or, more specifically, *Diyin God bee awéé* (literally, the “baby of God”). The formula in testimony statements includes phrases that reflect the intimate involvement of God, such as “God will never forsake you.”

For Oodlání, the appropriate interaction with this both supremely powerful and intimately involved non-human actor is in expressions of praise and worship. The English stock phrase “Praise God” is a common place-holding gesture in pastor oration, but the Navajo equivalent (*God baa hashniih*) is often used as well. Oodlání Navajo-language testimonies often open with the phrase *Diyin God baa hashniih*, which literally translates as “I am praising the Lord.” In fact, in Navajo the entire genre of testifying (a central act of faith in this community) is known not as giving a testimony or telling stories about being saved but as *Diyin God baa hashniih*. The primary theme of these testimonies is the way that God is encountered in the life of each testifier.

Jesus

Jesus is another non-human actor experienced by Oodlání in material ways, most often as the one who offers powerful protection against attacks by other non-human actors. In one instance, a Navajo preacher I was interviewing began telling me about a near-death experience. He said his health problems were getting worse and worse until, finally, he stopped breathing. An ambulance took him to the hospital, but he remembered leaving his body, floating through the veil and hearing the voice of God. When he started to describe turning around to see the face of Jesus, he became very upset and emotional and he asked me to turn off the tape recorder. Instead of continuing with the interview, he began to pray for God to anoint his voice so that everyone who heard the interview would be blessed in their health and marriages. In particular, he asked for God to “draw the bloodline of Jesus” around us to protect us. Once the pastor had finished this prayer, he calmly continued with the interview.

In this case, as in others I observed throughout my fieldwork, the substance of Jesus’ blood is understood to be a powerful shield against harm. Oodlání join many Christians in the belief that Jesus was God incar-

nate and that his crucifixion was an atoning sacrifice to save from eternal damnation those who repent of their sins and profess faith in Him. But rather than an abiding concern with next-world salvation, Oodlání tend to emphasize the this-world effects of Jesus’ death, materially conceptualized as his spilled blood. This blood is seen as a protecting shield, particularly against the power of the devil, and Oodlání will often open a prayer or a church service by “pleading” the blood of Jesus to be around them.

Holy Spirit

For Oodlání, experiencing the presence of God and Jesus is dependent on the third member of the trinitarian Godhead, the Holy Spirit. They believe this Holy Spirit is active in the world today, not only in transmitting spiritual gifts, but also in aiding the worship (and thus warfare) of Oodlání against the devil. For example, one very hot afternoon in June 2008, the church community had donned work clothes and was labouring together to raise the large tent under which the annual camp meeting would be held the following week. Raising a massive tent to hold hundreds of people is a difficult task, taking dozens of people many hours of physical effort pounding stakes, lacing canvas and tying lines. As the mercury topped 39 degrees Celsius in the late afternoon, the preparations reached a critical stage—the raising of hundreds of feet of heavy canvas on the three main weight-bearing poles. Women and children took hold of the edges of the tent and lifted a bit, while a handful of men, bent halfway over, walked the poles into the centre of the large sheet of tent material. Once the tops of the centre poles were tied in place, they began to count down to coordinate the extraordinary physical strength it would take, as a team, to raise the roof of the tent off the ground.

At precisely this moment, the hot and still air was broken by a strong whirlwind that blew through, lifting the tent and allowing the poles to be raised effortlessly under it. This wind was joyfully interpreted as the Holy Spirit, assisting in the holy battle, and the video footage I had been absent-mindedly recording throughout the afternoon became an instant hit in the community, with several people asking for a copy and Pastor Wallace asking me to post it to the church website, as a testimony to the active support of the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit, then, is the key to Oodlání experiences with benevolent forces. It is through the Holy Spirit that Oodlání can access the anointing of God in their lives. The concept of the anointing is key here: it is understood as “the presence of God” or, more specifically, “the power of God that comes down” (Begay, inter-

view, July 17, 2008). The Holy Spirit transmits this anointing to believers in an active and materially manifest way. According to Pastor Wallace, experiencing the anointing of the Holy Spirit can take different forms: sometimes it is experienced as chills down a person's back or as warmth rising from the feet to the head. "Some people," he said, "feel it in the palm of their hands, like fire" (interview). He explained that Oodlání view the anointing as "fuel" that helps a person live a Christian life. The relationship with God becomes "a personal relationship." And baptism in the spirit takes a person to "another level" in his or her relationship with God.

According to Pastor Wallace, if a church service is going well and people are really worshipping and "the Body of Christ becomes as one," then the Holy Spirit comes down onto the service and begins to "fill the hearts of people." Pastor Wallace commented that although encountering the anointing for the first time can be frightening, people should not be afraid. Of the anointing, he said, "He moves in a beautiful way when He moves among His people. And miracles take place. Healing takes place. Salvation . . . deliverance takes place, you know?" (interview, July 17, 2008). So the anointing, in some senses, is at the root of how God is experienced by Oodlání. It is the present power of God, required fuel for all of the more visible charismatic "gifts of the Spirit," such as speaking in tongues, dancing in the Spirit and faith healing. But as the comments above evidence, the anointing transmitted by the Holy Spirit is not mere theology. Quite the contrary, it is experienced by Oodlání as the physical presence of God through feelings of warmth, fire on the palms, bodily chills or the powerful and earth-shaking voice of God. It is these physical experiences that constitute evidence for Oodlání that God is undeniably real.

The Devil and Demons

Although Oodlání experience the benevolent forces of non-human actors in many ways, they also contend with traumatic and devastating experiences, like hatred, jealousy, suicide, illness and death. Critical scholars would point to the structural violence of a settler-colonial order in perpetuating the economic, gendered and racial conditions that keep Navajos at unacceptably high rates of poverty, substance abuse, suicide and chronic health problems. For Oodlání, however, the root cause of all of this trauma is the nefarious work of the devil and demons.

One of the major ways that the activity of the devil and demons is experienced among Oodlání is through ill health. For example, when one pastor visiting a revival

could not sing because of laryngitis, a friend explained to those assembled, "The devil is taking my pastor's voice away." Occasionally preachers would say that the devil and the doctor were the same because they would tell you that you are sick, whereas God can heal anything.

The devil was also seen as constantly trying to prevent believers from worshipping God, with worship itself understood as a kind of spiritual warfare against the devil. The devil's work is experienced in many ways, including controlling the weather. One night, before a camp meeting service, I was helping out in the kitchen and the sky was grey and windy, threatening to bring down the tent and ruin the service. Pastor Wallace kept checking on the weather by looking, and repeatedly declaring, "We rebuke you, devil!"

In one of the more experientially dramatic moments of my fieldwork, a bad storm hit one night during a camp meeting. I took shelter with some of the other church women (with whom I regularly cooked) in the temporary lean-to kitchen that had been built beside the church. Suddenly, the wind began to blow with such tornado-like force that the plywood walls and roof of the temporary structure threatened to collapse on us. We leaned against the walls, attempting to brace them against the wind. In the pitch darkness, and as the brutal wind howled down on us, the calm voice of Pastor Wallace's mother repeatedly prayed aloud, "I rebuke you, devil, I rebuke you!" For her, this terrifying experience was clearly an interaction with a non-human actor bent on interrupting the work of the church.

The Experiential Nature of Diné Binahagha'

Experientiality is central to traditional Navajo forms of spirituality as well.¹⁰ As Charlotte Frisbie has pointed out, "there is no word or phrase in the Navajo language that can be translated as 'religion' in the Western European sense of this term" (1987:xxiii).¹¹ The word that has often been used to translate the European concept of religion into Navajo is *Diné Binahagha'*, which is actually more accurately translated as people "moving about ceremonially" (xxiii).¹² In contrast to Western religions, *Diné Binahagha'* is an all-encompassing way of life, part of "that by means of which Navajos live" (Werner et al. 1983:589). Less elegantly, we might call it simply "the Navajo way." It is the holistic system that includes ethics of behaviour, kinship and relatedness, mythology, cosmology, spirituality, ecology and philosophy, as well as the overt ritual of healing ceremonials. Furthermore, the healing ceremonials that comprise *Diné Binahagha'* are practical: they are used to restore the patient (and

the surrounding environment) to *hózhó*, a “state of balance and harmony” (Frisbie 1987:3–8). Thus, Diné Binahagha’ is not an expression of “some underlying system of meaning” but instead a way of gaining access to the “immediate effects and powers” of the rituals that make up this ceremonial complex (Gill 1987:151).

The efficacy of the traditional Navajo ceremonial complex (the ability of the ceremonies to return the patient to a state of *hózhó*) is directly connected to the involvement of non-human actors in the lives of individual Diné.¹³ Navajo healing ceremonies (also called chants, ways or sings, depending on the translation of the Navajo enclitic *-jî*) are held whenever a need is felt for one, most commonly by an individual and often in response to a concern about health (Gill 1981:58). According to traditional practitioners, the world was created in a state of balance (*hózhó*). Furthermore, the imbalance caused by the in-fighting of early proto-humans was negated by the actions of the hero twins (Monster Slayer and Born-for-Water) and their benevolent mother, Changing Woman (Yazzie 1984). The actions and teachings of these mythic figures provided a template through which *hózhó* could be preserved and ceremonially restored.¹⁴ This “corn pollen path” is regarded as the “natural law” of the universe, which can be seen “to work all the time and every minute of our life, they are in every breath we take and in the working process we call Sa’ah Nagháii Bik’eh Hózhóqón” (Aronilth 1994:10).¹⁵ Ceremonies, then, restore Diné to the corn pollen path by reciting and having the patient embody the great mythological stories of their ancestors, emplaced in the landscape (Lewton and Bydone 2000:492). But these ceremonies also combine offerings and prayers to reaffirm a grandfather–grandchild kinship relationship with the Holy People, assuming all of the attendant reciprocal obligations (Gill 1987:118). Thus, when a Diné correctly performs a ritual and states, “I have made your offering to you / My mind restore for me” (Reichard 1949:68), he or she is linking the efficacy of ritual (to heal) to the power of the non-human actors (Holy People) to effect such action.

Just as with other religious world views that expect material efficacy, the traditional Navajo spiritual orientation has particular ideas about what kinds of non-human actors might be amenable to influence, as well as which non-human actors to avoid. The most important of these non-human actors are the Diyin Dine’é (Holy People). Unlike the Judeo-Christian concept of a supreme, all-knowing and wholly good God, the Diyin Dine’é are a class of beings set in contrast to the Nihookáá Dine’é (Earth Surface People). Just like Earth

Surface People, the Diyin Dine’é are multitudinous, have personalities and contain the capacity to work for good or evil (Reichard 1963:381–505). In fact, according to anthropologist Gladys Reichard, some “are almost wholly evil” (1963:49). They are distinguished from Earth Surface People not because they are more perfect or morally upright but by the strength of their power to influence the natural world and human thought and behaviour (Frisbie 1987:2). Through the ritual ceremonial framework, the Holy People may be compelled (through persuasion or formula) to restore a state of health, long life and happiness: a state of Sa’ah Nagháii Bik’eh Hózhóqón (Lee 2014).

In addition to the Diyin Dine’é, two other important kinds of non-human actors animate the traditional Navajo world: *ch’íidii* and the *Níłch’i Diyinií*. *Ch’íidii* are understood by traditional Navajos to be the malevolent ghosts of the departed, and in the past Navajos have practised strict avoidance of the dead for fear of contamination by the malevolent *ch’íidii* (ghost) that remains near the body of even the most kindly deceased Navajo mother.¹⁶ Frisbie argues that although standard translations gloss this word as “ghost,” the English-language concept of ghost is inadequate for understanding the full meaning of this term, which can encompass things imbued with evil power as well. *Ch’íidii* are often conceived of, in the traditional Navajo view, as shadowy and ethereal beings, sometimes said to live in a ghostland called *Ch’íiditah* located to the north (Frisbie 1978:304). According to this view, *ch’íidii* can return to the living, usually at night, to “avenge wrongdoings” (304), and can cause illness, misfortune and premature or unnatural death. Consequently, according to Frisbie, “*Ch’íidii* are dangerous and greatly feared by the Navajos: much attention is directed toward avoiding them” (304). This avoidance extends to dead bodies, the house where a person has died and anything in contact with the body. According to Reichard (1963), all these things are considered *ch’íidii*, “that is, full of dreaded power, potentially for evil” (48–49).

The *Níłch’i Diyinií*, on the other hand, is primarily benevolent and is considered one of the Diyin Dine’é. *Níłch’i Diyinií* means “Holy Wind” (*níłch’i*, “wind”; *diyinií*, “the one that is holy”) and this Holy Wind is understood to be the experiential force of the Holy People, “who stand in the four directions” and are themselves the “symbolic representation of the power of Sa’ah Nagháii Bik’eh Hózhóqón” (Aronilth 1994:96).

In traditional Navajo philosophy, wind is an animating force in all living things, giving both life and breath as well as thought, motion and communication (McNealey

1981:1). In the mythic creation of Diné, Níłch'i Diyinii "entered between the covers of the sacred deer skin and gave us the precious breath of life. It also entered at the top of our heads and [exited] our fingers and toes, this is why we can still see the Wind's trail at the tips" (Aronilth 1994:33). As the internal personification of SNBH, the "in-dwelling" wind inside one is also a moral force, providing moral guidance when combined with proper instruction, thoughtful reflection and correct actions (McNeley 1981:36–49). In this sense, wind is a non-human actor, a holy person experienced by traditional Navajos in every breath, through markings on the body and through the very thoughts and speech of each individual. As Aronilth sums up, through the Níłch'i Diyinii, "We are SNBH" (1994:96).

Whether by effecting healing, threatening misfortune or providing moral guidance in daily life, non-human actors have an experiential presence in the lives of traditional Diné. Given the experiential focus of this tradition, neo-Pentecostalism does seem to build on a type of continuity for Navajos. This may help to explain why Pentecostalism has grown so much more rapidly than other forms of Christianity. By the time of a large-scale survey of Christian churches on the Navajo Nation conducted in 1977, Pentecostal churches (both denominational and independent) accounted for 162 congregations, in contrast to 146 congregations of all of the other forms of Christianity—Catholic, Mormon, evangelical and mainline Protestant—combined (Dolaghan and Scates 1978:41–42). This gap in numbers has continued to grow. A random-sample survey on an unrelated topic conducted throughout the Navajo Nation by Derek Milne in 2000 collected demographic data that hint at the contemporary influence of Pentecostalism among Navajos. Milne (2011:527) reports that, of the 30 per cent of respondents reporting exclusive practice of Christianity, Pentecostalism was the most popular form, followed by Mormonism and Catholicism, and that these three accounted for almost 90 per cent of the Christian total. At current population estimates (Donovan 2011), this percentage represents upward of 27 thousand Navajos affiliated with the neo-Pentecostal (Oodlání) movement.

However, while the resonant continuity of religious experientiality does appear to help explain the popularity of Pentecostalism over other forms of Christianity, a closer look at the types of non-human actors associated with each experiential system (and the rules for interacting with them) reveals significant rifts in this neat ontological continuity.

The Resonant Rupture of Experiential Faith

Many scholars have observed the rise of independent Christianity among Navajos. Some have claimed that, at its core, this new religion actually represents very little fundamental change to the traditional Navajo spiritual world view. As William Hodge argued for Navajo Pentecostals in 1969, "only those elements [of Pentecostalism] which could be fitted into a traditional conceptual framework were accepted" (89; see also Aberle 1982; Blanchard 1977; Shepardson 1982). Others have been very alarmed by the rise of Pentecostalism and other anti-traditional sects, arguing that their influence is detrimental to the traditional Navajo lifeway (Shepardson 1982:205) and language (House 2002:74). Recent scholarship on Pentecostalism in northern North America has demonstrated the problems with assuming this movement is either "within culture" or "against culture" (Westman 2013). In this section, I argue that the growth of neo-Pentecostalism among Navajos can be attributed to neither of these extremes but rather to a kind of "resonant rupture" that neo-Pentecostalism possesses for Navajos. Experiencing the presence of non-human actors represents one point of resonance (as explored above). But the continuities of the Oodlání movement, which resonate at the level of affective attachment, belie deep and fundamental rifts at the level of meaning. At its heart, the Oodlání movement promotes rupture with the fundamental underpinnings of the "Navajo way." In this section, I will illustrate these fundamental ruptures by closely examining the ways that non-human actors are encountered in each experiential tradition.

Holy People and Ch'íidii

One of the ways in which the connections between Navajo Pentecostalism and Navajo traditionalism break down is in how these two systems understand divine characters. Divinity itself is somewhat of a shared concept, and in Navajo both the traditional set of deities and the Christian God share the descriptor *diyin* (holy). However, while *Diyin God* refers to the Christian God who is all-powerful and wholly good, the concept of an all-powerful and wholly good being is almost completely foreign to Navajo conceptions of the Diyin Dine'é (Holy People). From a Navajo perspective, the term *diyin* does not denote beings set apart as rulers or lords, but instead categorizes beings who hold great power that the individual may be able to access by persuasion or formula (Reichard 1963:50–51).

The divine character of Jesus is problematic from the perspective of traditional Navajo religion as well. Traditionally, Navajos have practised strict avoidance of the dead for fear of contamination by the malevolent *ch'íidii*. This “ghost fear” was such an integral part of traditional Navajo world view that Reichard named it a “tribal phobia” (1949:67). Given that the redemptive power of Jesus’ sacrifice is rooted in his resurrection from the dead, Reichard claims that “the last, the greatest achievement of Christianity, is positively abhorrent to Navaho psychology” (67).

Interestingly, the only aspect of the Christian Godhead that is typically translated by Oodlání into Navajo is the one most active in the daily lives of believers: the *Níłch'i Diyinii*.¹⁷ As mentioned above, the Holy Wind in Navajo philosophy is both a holy person outside of one and an in-dwelling force facilitating growth, speech and even thought. Given this philosophy, the traditional Navajo and Oodlání concepts of Holy Wind share some characteristics. Both are able to dwell within a person. Unlike the traditional *Níłch'i*, however, the Oodlání concept of the *Níłch'i Diyinii* is as a separate entity, one that fills a believer for short periods but fundamentally dwells apart from the person. For Oodlání, the *Níłch'i Diyinii* (Holy Spirit) is unrelated to processes of life, breath, thought, communication or personality.

Both Navajo traditionalism and Oodlání Christianity recognize the constant presence of non-human negative forces. One of the primary supernatural sources of this evil in the traditional Navajo cosmology is *ch'íidii*, the malevolent ghosts of the departed. *Ch'íidii* are also an important part of Oodlání cosmology; however, for Oodlání the *ch'íidii* are not malevolent ghosts but, instead, demons.

As mentioned above, *ch'íidii* are traditionally viewed by Navajos as shadowy and ethereal beings, the wandering spirits of the departed that can cause misfortune, sickness and even death. Since the traditional Navajo cosmology holds that humans contain “wind souls” that depart at death, but additionally contain a part of the self that becomes *bich'íidii* (his or her ghost), these beings are essentially of human origin. Alternatively, among Oodlání the term *ch'íidii* refers more specifically to a class of demons, devils and bad spirits. The devil (when distinguished) is referred to as *Ch'íidii binant'a'íí*, or the “boss” of the *ch'íidii*. And, in contrast to the generalized sense of *ch'íidii* as anything associated with the dead, for Oodlání *ch'íidii* are strictly conceptualized as personified actors of supernatural origin.¹⁸ *Ch'íidiiitah* continues to be the dwelling place of these demons, but for Oodlání the location *Ch'íidiiitah* is below this world (hell).

Interacting with Non-Human Actors

Another method of revealing how neo-Pentecostalism practises rupture with traditional Navajo spirituality is to look at the ways in which non-human actors are experienced. These interactions reveal the fundamentally different ways in which both benevolent and malevolent non-human actors are conceptualized by Navajos who participate in these distinct traditions. Three of the main ways that participants interact with the non-human world are praying, securing blessings and making offerings.

Tsodizin (Prayers)

Both traditional Navajos and Oodlání use the word *tsodizin* to describe prayer, indicating a point of continuity between certain kinds of traditional prayer and Christian prayers. Traditional Navajos use both individual/informal and ritualistic/litany (or “responsive”) prayers. Litany prayers are common in traditional Navajo healing ceremonies and provide a recitation (call and response) between the patient and the ceremonial practitioner (Frisbie 1987:19). Gill describes these as “highly formulaic” prayers and adds that they are usually performed with the patient sitting “in a ritual position with legs extended, facing east, head slightly bowed and holding a ritual object” (1987:96). Gill adds that this prayer “intonement” may take from a few minutes to over an hour. Oodlání eschew this kind of verbal call and response as “empty ceremonialism.”¹⁹ Oodlání prayers are more similar to the traditional prayers that are individual or impromptu. This type of prayer (also called *tsodizin*) is said “in one’s ‘own words’” (Frisbie 1987:117) and expresses an individual’s own thoughts and petitions.

Despite the similarity between Oodlání and traditional impromptu prayers, Oodlání *tsodizin* have a character all of their own that stems from the history of Pentecostalism and healing revivals. There is no emphasis on brevity in Oodlání prayers: the more extended the prayer, the “harder” a person is seen to be praying and the “better” the prayer. Topics covered seem open but tend to elaborate on things Oodlání feel need attention called to them for blessings, from the local to the global. In addition to prayers for blessings, Maureen Trudelle Schwarz (2008:264–269) has pointed to the importance of prayer in Oodlání concepts of healing.

In addition to a more conversational tone, Oodlání regard prayer as a message, a communication with God. Prayers that are said while one is speaking in tongues are thought to be particularly pure messages, because they are incorruptible by the devil who cannot speak this “heavenly language.” In traditional Navajo philoso-

phy, however, prayers are more than messages; they can be considered *messengers*: beings who know everything, are all-powerful and can take people on journeys (Gill 1987:113). As personified actors, these prayers act as intermediaries between humans and the distant Holy People who have removed themselves to the cardinal points.

Another major difference between Oodlání and traditional Navajo conceptions of prayer is in the extent to which they are considered able to compel the action of non-human actors. For Oodlání, the source of the power of a prayer always resides in the Christian God, accessed through faith. Oodlání prayers are requests made to an all-powerful and (ideally) sympathetic God. But the efficacy of prayers also lies fully in the hands of God, and unanswered prayers are often explained through reference to the “will of God.” In contrast, traditional Navajo prayers are designed to be “compulsive” (Reichard 1944). Gill (1987) expands on this point to argue that the prayers of traditional Navajo religion are compulsive not because they are some kind of magical charm but because they seek to remind the Diyin Dine’é of the mutually obligating rules of reciprocity, “which even the supernaturals are compelled to recognize” (Frisbie 1987:3). Thus, through the creative act of ritual prayer, as well as widely recognized social norms of reciprocity (especially between kin), the Diyin Dine’é may be counted on to act on behalf of humans.

Securing *Ak’ihojidli* (Blessings)

Another way interactions between human and non-human actors have changed for Oodlání is the way in which blessings from non-human actors are secured. The Navajo word for blessings (or blessedness), *ak’ihojidli*, is used in both traditional and Oodlání contexts. For Oodlání, blessings are perceived as all the good things in life, such as home, family, land, a job, health and wealth, and these blessings may be requested through prayer. From a traditional Navajo perspective, the connotations of blessings are a bit more complex. For traditional Navajos the prayers *are* the blessings.

In part, differences in understandings of blessings (*ak’ihojidli*) rest in differences in understandings of where blessings come from and how they are activated. For Oodlání, blessings are understood to be gifts from God in response to petitions. Blessings originate from an all-powerful and wholly good divinity and are distributed or withheld according to his divine and unknowable will. This attitude towards blessings is derived directly from a Judeo-Christian world view. Most commonly, the blessings of God are activated by prayer that is improvisatory and seen as a communication that takes place

in that exact moment between the believer and God. The presence of God is seen as intimate in the lives of Oodlání, so no intermediary is required to carry the bequest to God. Whether the request for blessings will be granted, or not, lies in the complete control of God. Oodlání are assured in general terms that God loves them and wants them to be happy. But the response of God to any one particular petition is never totally secure.

Often the Oodlání search for blessings incorporates experiential ideas about healing and prosperity. In addition to being activated through prayer, blessings from God can also be activated by contributing money to the church. Blessings are believed to be offered to people who give their money because they are being “obedient” to God. And what we might call the “return” on this “investment” is said to be dramatic. The oft-repeated phrase used by Oodlání pastors when calling for sacrificial giving is that the blessings will be returned “a hundredfold” (from the biblical chapters Mark 29–30). Yet, again, these assurances of return are given in general terms. The response of God to any particular request or act of sacrificial giving cannot be assured because ultimately God’s divine will is unknowable.

In contrast, for traditional Navajos, blessings are the pre-established guidelines set forth for the Holy People as a pathway to living a good life. This distinction is rooted in Navajo mythology, which recounts creation and the events immediately following as characterized by a general state of chaos and disorder. Order and harmony were created with the birth of Changing Woman and the exploits of her hero twin sons, who slayed many of the monsters that were plaguing the newly formed Earth Surface People. Changing Woman taught Navajos how to maintain this balance of harmony, *hózhó*, through ritual observances, songs, prayers and avoidances (Frisbie 1987:2). These guidelines for living in a state of *hózhó* are the “blessings” bequeathed to the Diné by the Holy People. Thus, when I asked my research assistant, Larry King, whether the Diyin Dine’é could bless someone, he responded:

The prayers that they laid down at the beginning, when you repeat that and then you repeat them, and that’s how you are imbued with that blessing. Because they laid down at the very beginning and said, you know, this is how you will go about it, this is how you will say it, this is how you’ll recite it... And this will rebuild you. So blessing, in a sense, is we’ll lay this good path for you and go abide by it. And that is a blessing. [interview with the author, June 16, 2008]

From the perspective of traditional Navajo spirituality, then, the primary blessing is not a particular object or

healing event but sets the guidelines for living, handed down from the Holy People in the ancient past, who perpetuate a state of blessedness (*hózhó*), by which good health, peace, beauty and good fortune will be forthcoming and, through proper ritual, can be restored.

Thus, while blessedness remains an important way of experiencing the presence of non-human actors in both traditions, the concepts of where the blessings are coming from and how they are accessed show a lack of direct continuity. For Oodlání, blessings are gifts from God that are cumulative, are constantly changing and could be removed at any minute. God is understood to be the source of all blessings, and his will in any specific instance is uncontrollable and unknowable. From a traditional Navajo viewpoint, however, a state of blessedness is the responsibility of humans to maintain. It is the result of the proper functioning of the world, which was set up in ancient times, and can be restored through ritual.

Making *Náá'iniih* (Offerings)

A third way that the interaction between human and non-human actors differs significantly between Oodlání and traditional Navajo practice is in the making of offerings. The Navajo term for offerings (*náá'iniih*) is used in both contexts and literally means “you go and offer.” While the term *náá'iniih* continues to be employed by Oodlání to describe the practice of giving an offering, there are dramatic differences in what Oodlání consider an appropriate offering and what offerings are thought to do.

In Oodlání contexts, offerings are called *béeso náá'iniih* (*béeso*, “money”; *náá'iniih* “offering”), referring to the fact that Oodlání offerings are monetary. This money is taken up as a collection at certain points during the church or revival service, usually by placing a bucket in front of the pulpit and having people come up to put money in the bucket while music is played. The money is used to pay musicians, visiting evangelists and sometimes pastors and others to run the ministries. Non-monetary gifts would not be referred to by Oodlání as *náá'iniih* but rather as blessings.

In traditional Navajo settings, on the other hand, offerings are usually not monetary; rather, they take many different forms of valued natural objects. Particularly common are *ntł'iz*, or “hard goods offerings” (jewellery, precious stones, etc.), that are used as a gift to the deities to “make a connection” (King, interview, June 16, 2008). These goods are laid down to both initiate and to finalize a prayer. More broadly, traditional offerings are known not as *náá'iniih* but as *yeel*, which refers not only to the offering but also to the knowledge

of what to do with them. According to King, one would say “‘Shiyeel hóló’ (‘I have a yeel’), meaning ‘I have a knowledge ... and traditional paraphernalia to practice’” (interview, June 16, 2008).

In significant contrast to the monetary offerings that are given by Oodlání with no certain guarantee of direct benefit, Reichard (1949:68) has emphasized that traditional Navajo offerings are made “in the spirit of barter” and as a way of establishing reciprocal relations with deities to achieve a desired outcome. As Frisbie explains:

The Navajo ceremonial system ... [is] based on a chain of reciprocity which stretches between the sacred and profane worlds and that includes everyone, from the Holy People and singers to the one-sung-over and students. In such a system, one is required to make gifts or “offerings” (*yeel*) to those whose services and assistance are desired. Once such gifts are accepted, the receiver is compelled to respond; the gifts simultaneously compel and insure the efficacy of the performance.²⁰ [1987:89]

This bartering attitude is encapsulated in the way that *yeel* are presented in the words of traditional Navajo prayers as well: “I have made your offering to you / My mind restore for me” (Reichard 1949:68). As explained above, from an Oodlání perspective, God’s action can be appealed to, but God, as the all-powerful ruler of the universe, cannot be compelled to any action.

In all of these cases (praying, securing blessings, making offerings), Navajos interact with non-human beings in materially manifest ways. It is a religious orientation that resonates. This point of resonance helps to explain why Pentecostalism has grown among Navajos over and above other forms of Christianity. The experiential nature of neo-Pentecostalism fits traditional expectations of how non-human actors should relate to human actors.

However, resonance is different from continuity. As an acoustic principle, resonance explains the amplifying but not equivalent aspects of two tones, an analogy that applies here as well. The experientiality of neo-Pentecostalism may resonate with the experientiality of traditional Navajo ceremonialism, but neo-Pentecostalism represents, at its core, a type of dramatic cultural rupture. This cultural rupture is revealed when one carefully considers both the types of non-human actors that Oodlání believe to populate the cosmos, and the ways in which they interact with these non-human actors. It may be a type of resonant rupture, but at its core, Oodlání neo-Pentecostalism is still rupture.

Conclusion

As in other global contexts, scholars have often attributed the spread of neo-Pentecostalism among Navajos to the way it preserves traditional ontologies, such as the persistent experience of non-human actors in material ways, both good and bad. For instance, the persistence of witchcraft beliefs seems to be a recurring theme in scholarship that concludes that Navajo conversions are “soft” or somehow incomplete (Blanchard 1977:40; Frisbie 1987:197; Hodge 1964; Wood 1982:178), as has the persistent Navajo Christian concern with finding supernatural means for self-protection from the “invisible” threats of witchcraft, curses or ghost sickness (Aberle 1982:219). Many scholars have concluded that these pathways for religiosity, based more on practice than on belief, reveal the superficial nature of Navajo Christianity.

In contrast to these long-held scholarly understandings of the relationship between traditional Navajo religion and Navajo Christianity, my research suggests that experientially based religious expression is not sufficient evidence for “unstable” conversion. The experiential basis of neo-Pentecostalism is present wherever on the globe it localizes (Anderson 2004:195; Warrington 2008:48). By emphasizing the experiential and charismatic aspects of faith, Oodlání are not only framing Christianity in a way that makes sense to them as Navajos, but also participating in the broader theology of global neo-Pentecostalism. Through affective connections, such as the experiential nature of non-human actors, Oodlání practice resonant rupture.

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Notes

- 1 Research for this article was conducted under Navajo Nation Historic Preservation permit C0614-E, Indiana University Human Subjects Research Review Board protocols 06-11039 and 07-12188 and University of Oklahoma IRB protocol 0560, as well as with the permission of local church leaders.
- 2 Michael David McNally (2000:836–837) has pointed out that an emphasis on religion as “belief” over “practice” has always characterized a misunderstanding of Native American spirituality by outsiders.
- 3 This is an interpretive framework that I feel we must maintain even when (and perhaps especially when) confronted with spiritual-warfare Christianity.
- 4 Neo-Pentecostalism is a global religious movement that practises charismatic manifestations of faith but that, unlike historical Pentecostalism, operates without denomina-

tional affiliation. It has been the driving theology behind the spreading Oodlání movement, where believers align themselves with independent Navajo pastors, not denominations.

- 5 According to the Indian Health Service’s 2002–3 Annual Report, Navajos die of diabetes at over twice the US national average, of alcohol-related causes at 6.6 times the national average and of “Injury and Poisoning” (a category that includes “motor vehicle accidents, other accidents, suicide, homicide, injury undetermined whether accidentally or purposely inflicted, and injury resulting from operations of war”) at 4.5 times the national average (2003:56, 62–63). In 2010, the Navajo Nation reported a suicide rate nearly twice the US national average, and domestic abuse rates that are well above the US national average as well (67). There is little doubt that these material realities influence people’s religious life.
- 6 This point of resonance exists in the broader Native North American Pentecostal context as well and may have connection to what some scholars have named *animism*. As Clint Westman has pointed out for northern Cree communities, “spirits exist who must be placated or shunned—on the part of both Pentecostals and traditionalists” (2013:144).
- 7 As Allan Anderson (2004:195) has argued, experiencing the Spirit has proved the “essence” of Pentecostal theology globally. Keith Warrington adds that it is a matter of “fundamental importance to Pentecostals ... that the Spirit is to be encountered and experienced” (2008:48). What these authors and others have argued is that Pentecostalism “cannot and should not simply be identified with a rationalistic evangelicalism” (Anderson 2004:196).
- 8 Although beyond the scope of this article, experientiality is key to understanding Pentecostal localization in other Native American contexts as well (see Westman 2013:142).
- 9 Moreover, as Lewton and Bydone (2000:488) point out, unlike the protection of traditional Navajo religion, the power of the Christian God is not geographically bounded by the four sacred mountains and can be accessed anywhere.
- 10 New research on Navajo traditional religion by outsiders is strongly discouraged by the Navajo Nation. All information on Navajo traditional religion in this article comes from published sources, such as Aronilth 1994; Frisbie 1987; Gill 1981; Haile 1938; Kluckhohn and Wyman 1940; Lee 2014; Reichard 1963; Wyman 1983; and Yazzie 1984.
- 11 Dorothy House (2002:xxvi) does point out that, in a changing linguistic situation, the English word *religion* is now widely understood among Navajos.
- 12 Taxonomically, the concept of Diné Binahagha’ has been shown to comprise multiple concrete actions and objects, such as *hatáál* (ceremony), *biyeel* (offering), *hané* (legend or myth), *sin* (song), *sodizin* (prayer) and *bee’ ééhózinii* (premonitions) (Werner et al. 1983:589). So in some sense, “religion” from a traditional perspective is the “doing” of ritual.
- 13 In other contexts, this bridge between the seen and unseen worlds is facilitated by a figure anthropologists classify as a shaman. In both the traditions examined here, however, experiencing the power of non-human actors is the province of all believers (see Hultkrantz 1985).

- 14 Gladys Reichard states, "[The deities] brought them into being and designated, through long suffering and teaching of one object lesson after another, the control man should exert over himself and his natural surroundings. Through them he learned what was good and what was harmful, and how evils and dangers could be converted to good" (1963:49).
 - 15 This Corn Pollen road of life is seen as walking in the "sacred foot prints of white corn and yellow corn" laid out by the Diyin Dine'é (Holy People) (Aronilth 1994:92).
 - 16 According to Frisbie, "Only those who die of old age and those infants who die before using their voices are not credited with *ch'íidii*" (1978:304).
 - 17 Alternately, they may refer to the Holy Spirit as *Nítch'i Yá'at'ééhii* (wind that is good) or *Nítch'i Nizhóni* (wind that is beautiful).
 - 18 Although not specifically discussing charismatic Christians, Reichard (1963:48) first made this distinction between the non-personified *ch'íidii* of traditional Navajo religion and the personified "ghost" or "devil" of the English-language gloss.
 - 19 They avoid call-and-response prayer as both Protestant Christians (rejecting the formalism of Catholicism) and born-again believers (rejecting the liturgy of traditional Navajo practice).
 - 20 For further discussion of *yeel* (particularly in reference to the payment made to singers) see Aberle (1967), who writes the term *gheel*.
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