



THE ETHNOSEMANTICS OF SORCERY IN *HOUSE MADE OF DAWN*

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Abstract:

Early to mid-twentieth-century ethnographies are consulted for the stylolinguistic interpretation of the ethnosemantics of sorcery in the native world of *House Made of Dawn*. Utilizing the resources of linguistic anthropology with a focus on ethnoscience, a portion of the cognitive system which reveals possible strategies for the identification of practitioners of witchcraft has been reconstructed.

Keywords: American Indian literature, stylolinguistics, ethnoscience

1. Introduction

The theme of American Indian sorcery permeates N. Scott Momaday's novel *House Made of Dawn* and provides much of the context from which the protagonist's motive and agency are derived. Yet the narrative voice alludes to witchcraft in cryptic fashion, tending to obfuscate rather than justify Abel's resort to deadly violence. Perhaps it is the town's parish priest, Father Olguin, who best summarizes this conundrum in his testimony at Abel's trial for murder:

"We are dealing with a psychology about which we know very little. I see manifestations of it every day, but I have no real sense of it--not any longer, I relinquished my claim to the psychology of witchcraft when I left home and became a priest. Anyway, there is no way to be objective or precise about such a thing. What shall I say? I believe that this man was moved to do what he did by an act of the imagination so compelling as to be inconceivable to us." (Momaday 1968, 101-102)

Although inconceivable to outsiders, this seemingly irrational act of the imagination was firmly rooted in a native logic with which Momaday was familiar by having grown up at Jemez Pueblo, a native community of Towa speakers in New Mexico. Since his entire novel was framed by the Towa mythic discourse markers for invocation,

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“Dypaloh” (Arrowhead Lake), and benediction, “Qtsedaba” (stop), Momaday’s appeal for his work to be elevated to mythic textual status is strongly suggested (Parsons 1925, 136; Scarberry-Garcia 1990, 8). Therefore, taboo topics, such as sorcery, were handled with a quasi-restricted code by only satisfying the semiotics of local knowledge and by avoiding explanations of the obvious to native insiders.

Fortunately, a great deal of Southwest Indian traditional knowledge was recorded in the older ethnographic literature of the early to mid-twentieth century, which Momaday himself consulted extensively in drafting his novel (Scarberry-Garcia 1990, 6). It is the purpose of this paper to explore that ethnographic record, which happens to predate, or to coincide with, the period covered in the novel, the 1940s and 50s, for the interpretation of the ethnosemantics of sorcery implicit in the world of the text. The attempted interpretations of those native meanings draw heavily on the arsenal of stylolinguistics, which makes available to the analysis of literary texts the resources of general linguistics, in this case, the subfield of linguistic anthropology, particularly ethnoscience, with its focus on native cognitive systems (Fowler 1996).

It was also in the 1940s and 50s, according to his memoir, *The Names*, that Momaday spent his adolescence in Jemez Pueblo, a town of about a thousand Tanoan tribesmen, who struck him as “*a very close, integrated community, concentrated upon the plaza. . . It is a principle of theirs that the pueblo people move ever towards the center. Their sacred ceremonies are performed in the plaza, and in the kiva.*” (Momaday 1976, 122)

But in the periphery surrounding the Pueblo, especially at night, danger lurked everywhere:

“Some children came to tell us that witches were about. ‘Come, we will show you,’ they said, and they led us outside and pointed with their chins into the night. There, at ground level and far away, were lights, three or four, moving here and there, back and forth. The children watched very solemnly, without alarm, and I understood at once that they were not playing tricks; neither did they care one way or another what I thought of what I saw; only they imagined that I might find it interesting to see witches. You are deceived, I thought; there are men with flashlights, running around in the distance, that is all. But then one of the lights flew suddenly into the air and, like a shooting star, moved across the whole dome of the sky.” (Momaday 1976, 136)

Curiously enough, this is the only recollection Momaday offered regarding witchcraft, even though the intention of his memoir was, in part, to highlight those firsthand experiences that had informed the writing of his novel. Considering the salience of sorcery in *House Made of Dawn*, that paucity seems striking. Nevertheless, the seriousness of what young Momaday had been shown was clear to him, and the indifference of the children regarding his acceptance of their reality made him appreciate that witchcraft was for them an inevitable “fact” of life.

2. Southwest Indian Sorcery

That inevitability was also impressed upon Elsie Parsons, an early ethnographer, who was able to penetrate Southwest Indian culture to a remarkable degree, considering its secretive nature and its posture of reserve towards outsiders. Referring to their origin myth, her native informants opined that witchcraft had always been present in human life: "*A witch pair, male and female, come up from the under worlds after the other people and bring with them two gifts—death to keep the world from being crowded, and corn.*" (Parsons 1927, 106) The association of both death and corn with sorcery reveals the ambiguous nature of witchcraft as both evil and good. Thus, in past times of warfare, for example, shamans simply "corrupted" their curing prayers into harmful spells and hurled them against enemies in defending their communities. Although a curer could never be a witch at the same time, it was always feared that any shaman with a grudge might in anger become a sorcerer by distorting his curative powers into lethal curses against his own community (Basso 1969, 31). This ambiguity was shared by some of Parson's informants, who impressed upon her that the shamans always knew exactly how many sorcerers were active because the "*witches are the people they themselves (the medicine-men) choose.*" (Parsons 1925, 49)

Certain family branches or bloodlines were suspected to be particularly prone to sorcery through inheritance (Hoebel 1952, 588). As Southwestern Indians reckon descent matrilineally, it was assumed that an individual learned how to cause illness, death, and the destruction of property from a close maternal kinsman who knew how to harness and manipulate power (Basso 1969, 34). And since in the origin myth both male and female witches emerged with the tribe from the underworld, members of either sex were eligible to apprentice the craft. However, male sorcerers were said to be more common because men were characterized as experiencing hatred more intensely than women (Basso 1969, 33; Kluckhohn 1944, 26).

The alleged techniques involved poisons, sharp objects, spells, and the stealing of the victim's heart. Besides extracting natural poisons from snakes and scorpions, sorcerers supposedly manufactured their own concoctions from the powdered skin of corpses, menstrual blood, feces, urine, and dried bits of wood taken from trees struck by lightning. Thus, great vigilance was required on everyone's part to avoid having such substances secretly mixed with one's food, thrown through one's door, or dropped into one's mouth or nostrils while asleep. A sudden stab of pain was often interpreted by a victim as a hit by a sharp object, such as a cactus thorn or a piece of glass, which had presumably been propelled by the sorcerer at such a high speed as to render it invisible. In casting a spell, the witchcraft practitioner was imagined uttering phrases derived from purposely corrupted curing rituals or to simply engage in malicious thoughts without necessarily having to encounter the victim face-to-face (Basso, 1969, 33-35). Spells were also blamed for the loss of property, such as livestock, crops, and large-scale disasters, such as caterpillar or grasshopper infestations, droughts, and destructive winds (Parsons 1925, 63). As the center of life, one's heart was regarded as particularly

vulnerable to theft by witches, who were therefore always regarded as two-hearted beings (Hoebel 1952, 588).

Though seemingly of human form, witches were defined, according to Alfonso Ortiz, himself a Puebloan, as those "of a different breath" who "live on the unexpired lives of their victims" and "must continually kill or perish themselves." (Ortiz 1969, 15, 140) Especially active at night, sorcerers purportedly flew through space as balls of fire seen as flashes of light; whereas, at close range, they were pinpointed as animals into which they had metamorphosed by previously having put on the skin or feathers of the creature or by passing through a magic hoop made of yucca fibers (Parsons 1929, 62; 1927, 106-107; Stevenson 1905, 403). Hence, anyone who was seen roaming about at night, especially lurking among the crops, near the house of a sick person, or peering into windows, arose suspicion. Other forms of deviant behavior, particularly those disruptive of social relations, such as self-assertion, aggression, surliness, dishonesty, envy, jealousy, recklessness, or non-cooperation, were also considered markers of potential witchhood. And in a relatively egalitarian tribal culture, possession of wealth from unknown sources, especially if displayed ostentatiously, was postulated to have been derived from pawned grave loot (Kluckhohn 1944, 26). Parsons' informants cited envy and grudges as the most frequent motives for sorcery (Parsons 1927, 108).

If a sorcerer were seen or heard practicing his craft, he ran the risk of being apprehended and killed by the War Captain of the Pueblo. After cessation of warfare in the late nineteenth century, this ceremonial officer's main duty became the pursuit of witches, whose slaying would not have been questioned by the community (Hoebel 1952, 588). In addition, the revenge killing of a witch by a close kinsman of the victim was justified if identification of the sorcerer had been established with certainty (Goodwin 1942, 423). Yet, by the mid-twentieth century, the time of the setting of *House Made of Dawn*, the long reach of federal law enforcement on Indian reservations had reduced the occurrence of such extreme measures. Therefore, a more common remedy involved an appeal to one of the curing societies, whose shamans claimed to possess an inventory of rituals to neutralize poisons, sharp objects, spells and to return stolen hearts to their rightful owners (Parsons 1939, 708). Not unusual was the consultation of curers with reputedly special abilities from neighboring tribes. A still wider path of curative diffusion occurred in the early to mid-twentieth century with the arrival of the quasi-Christian Peyote Cult of the Native American Church from Oklahoma tribes such as the Kiowa.

Among Puebloans, one of the supposedly more potent curing ceremonies involved the attempted harnessing of bear power for ritualistic hunts, capture, and destruction of witches. Shamans, dressed in the skins of bears and armed with bear claws and flint knives, "ran down," and then "shot" or "beat to death" the malevolence represented by a rag doll. As a consequence, the suspected individual whose body had served as the host of the evil spirit was expected to die shortly of a mysterious illness. Unfortunately, since evil could never be eliminated completely, the inevitability of the malignancy invading another susceptible victim's body was therefore generally expected (Parsons 1939).

3. Diablo Blanco

At Abel's murder trial, Father Olguin, testifying for the defense, was at a loss for words in his attempt to decode the native concept of sorcery for the jury:

"I mean," said Father Olguin, "that in his own mind it was not a man he killed. It was something else."

"An evil spirit."

"Something like that, yes." (Momaday 1968, 101) .

When pressed further, the priest could only offer vague notions of cultural relativity: *"Homicide is a legal term, but the law is not my context, and it certainly isn't his —"* (Momaday 1968, 102).

In his own testimony, though its "transcript" was left out of the narrative, Abel told his version of the killing in terms of the "rationality" of his native worldview and then refused to speak for the rest of the proceedings. In his exasperated interior monologue, he divulged the native "common sense" underlying his action:

"He had killed the white man. It was not a complicated thing, after all; it was very simple. It was the most natural thing in the world. Surely, they could see that, these men who meant to dispose of him in words. They must know that he would kill the white man again, if he had the chance, that there could be no hesitation whatsoever. For he would know what the white man was, and he would kill him if he could. A man kills such an enemy." (Momaday 1968, 102-103)

Whereas native culture may have sanctioned such an extreme measure in traditional times, it is questionable whether by the mid-twentieth century reservation communities were still encouraging such a radical course of action. Nevertheless, according to Kluckhohn (1944), new stresses imposed by acculturative forces from American society may have at times increased levels of violence out proportion with the nature of the grievance. Thus, Abel's affliction with post-traumatic combat stress experienced during World War II, which has already been addressed ubiquitously in the critical literature, must certainly be acknowledged as a contributing factor in his decision of having taken matters into his own hands. A psychologically more balanced tribesman might have channeled his accusation of sorcery to the curing societies.

That the narrative voice refers to the murder victim as "the white man" adds to the confusion of the sorcerer's identity. However, his lineage was clearly traced to an 1875 entry in an old journal Father Olguin found in the parish records:

"I heard today of a strange thing here on the 3d & so went to see a child born to Manuelita & Diego Fragua. It was what is called an albino whiter than any child I have seen before tho' it had been of the white race. . . I advise to baptize this same day & do so at 3 o'clock. It is given a name Juan Reyes." (Momaday 1968, 50)

The critical literature misidentifies the albino sorcerer as the infant baptized in 1875 as "Juan Reyes," which would have made him seventy years old in 1945, when competing with Abel in the rooster pull (e.g., Scarberry Garcia, 1990, 14). Parsons (1925, 49), commenting on the incidence of albinism at Jemez in 1922, identified a fifty-year-old albino, named Juan Reyes Fragua, as having a five-year-old albino nephew. Jones's (1964, 269) genealogy of Pecos immigrants and descendants listed Juan Reyes Fragua's albino nephew as Frank Fragua, born in 1916. This latter individual would have been of similar age as Abel, who was born in 1919, and was thus the more likely source for the character in the novel (Momaday 1968, 13).

The incidence of albinism at Jemez Pueblo has been connected by biological anthropologists to the Pecos immigration (Jones 1964). The abandonment of that Pueblo "*has been cast into a tradition of feud plus witchcraft,*" (Parsons 1939, 15). An ancient source of witchcraft, Pecos Pueblo concealed, according to folk tales, in one of its kivas a giant snake god with a voracious appetite (Roberts 1932, 359). Therefore, the presence of evil snake power was strongly indicated in the albino's Pecos bloodlines, a manifestation of which surfaced in the reptilian imagery of "*the scales of the lips and the hot slippery point of the tongue, writhing*" (Momaday 1968, 82). But a more obvious clue leaped out in Tosamah's derision of Abel's testimony at his trial:

"And do you know what he said? I mean, do you have any idea what that cat said. A snake, he said. He killed a goddam snake! The corpus delicti, see, he threatened to turn himself into a snake, for crissake, and rattle around a bit. Now ain't that something, though? Can you imagine what went on at that trial?" (Momaday 1968, 149)

Mocking aside, Tosamah had apparently heard from the gossip among the urban Indian community that Abel's testimony included references to human/animal transformation, a prominent feature of the native belief system.

Slaying the albino sorcerer, however, did not extinguish the evil snake spirit, which Abel believed he encountered again in the body of the corrupt and abusive Los Angeles policeman Martinez, whom he recognized as a "*culebra*" (snake) (Momaday 1968, 183). In Abel's worldview, Martinez and the albino were connected as persons of a "*different breath*" (Ortiz 1969, 15). Hence, Abel's Navajo roommate, Benally, recalled their violent encounter with Martinez, who would "*breathe, short and quick, like he was laughing*" (Momaday 1968, 175). Martinez's odd-sounding laugh and breath were similar to the albino's "*old woman's laugh, thin and weak as water,*" which "*carried too high on the scale and ended in a strange, inhuman cry*" (Momaday 1968, 81). After Abel had driven his knife into the bowels of the albino, he "*heard the strange excitement of the white man's breath, and the quick uneven blowing at his ear*" (Momaday 1968, 82). Furthermore, while irrigating at dusk, Francisco perceived an instant of "*excitement of breathing*" in his cornfield, and after a pause "*the breathing resumed, rapid and uneven with excitement*" (Momaday 1968, 66-67).

Since shamans at Jemez knew exactly how many sorcerers were active at any given time, it was not difficult for Francisco, himself a medicine man, to recognize the

"diablo blanco . . . Sawish" (devil, white, witch), who was lurking in his cornfield in the evening to surely curse his crops (Momaday 1968, 195). Nonetheless, the narrative voice interceded by offering a more direct connection between the mysterious presence in the cornfield— *"the barren lids fluttered helplessly behind the colored glasses"*—and the albino rider at the rooster pull— *"he wore little round colored glasses"* (Momaday 1968, 67, 42).

Those round colored glasses, which *"lay like pennies close together and flat against the enormous face"* in conjunction with the possession of a *"fine black horse of good blood"* may have been regarded as odd and ostentatious, both traits of self-assertion, in a tribal culture of conformity and reserve (Momaday 1968, 42). But the most anti-social behavior displayed publicly by the albino occurred when he chose Abel as his partner in the rooster pull. According to the rules of this ancient ceremonial game, the rider who successfully pulled the rooster out of the hole in the ground did indeed ritually "beat" a participant of his choosing with the bird, but he also allowed the opponent to catch some part of it and thus to engage in a tug of war until it was dismembered (Momaday 1968, 144-145). However, the albino approached Abel *"with only the mute malice of the act itself, careless, undetermined, almost composed in some, preeminent sense"* (Momaday 1968: 44). In other words, what should have been a solemn celebration of animal sacrifice for fertility was corrupted by excessive aggression, a behavioral trait of witches.

For his recovery, Abel was exposed directly as well as indirectly to specific cures derived from Pueblo, Kiowa and Navajo oral traditions. Bear power, which was considered particularly potent against witchcraft among the Pueblo tribes, was invoked when Angela perceived Abel as a great bear during their sexual encounter, and later tells him of a mythic boy born of a bear and a maiden (Momaday 1968, 64, 187). Benally immediately recognized the story, known in Navajo tradition as "Bear Maiden," and recounted for Abel what he remembered of it (Momaday 1968, 188; O'Bryan 1956, 131-137). At his death bed, Francisco, in his delirium, related a memory of his coming of age during his first bear hunt, as Abel watched over him (Momaday 1968, 204). In his sermon, *"The Way to Rainy Mountain,"* Tosamah included a Kiowa legend about a boy who suddenly turned into a bear and chased his seven sisters up the stump of a great tree, whence they became the stars of the Big Dipper (Momaday 1968, 90, 131).

As a Roadman for the Native American Church, Tosamah aided in Abel's recovery by leading the peyote meetings in Los Angeles. And though the self-proclaimed pastor somewhat inappropriately interjected *"that little old wooly booger turns you on like a light, man"* he conducted the meetings not for the recreational use of peyote but for the healing of personal imbalances caused by physical as well as mental disorders (Momaday 1968, 109). The hallucinogenic effects of peyote were considered spiritual visions that, in conjunction with praying, singing and fasting, were trusted to restore those imbalances. Venerated for their healing powers, *"[t]he moon and the water bird"* (anhinga) served as ubiquitous symbols for the intertribal faithful (Momaday 1968, 120; Howard 1965). In addition, attendees such as Benally, incorporated their individual tribal healing symbols— *"a house made of dawn"*—in syncretic fashion (Momaday 1968, 114).

And finally, it was, of course, Benally's rendition of the *House-Made-of-Dawn* prayer, drawn from the Navajo Night Chant, which became the centerpiece for Abel's

healing (Momaday 1968, 146-147). The critical literature has already dedicated a great deal of interpretation regarding the curative elements in this text as well as in the *War God's Horse Song*, both of which Momaday retrieved from the early ethnographers Washington Mathews (1902) and Dane Coolidge (1930).

4. The Semantics of *Sawish*

Sorcery among Native peoples of the American Southwest of the mid-twentieth century can best be understood as a system of native "logic" which allayed anxiety by providing acceptable rationalizations for disturbing events such as illness, death, and the destruction of property, which would otherwise have gone seemingly unexplained. In addition, speculations regarding such belief systems as institutionalized outlets for the release of disruptive frustrations and aggressions have been advanced (Kluckhohn 1944). In any case, as part of a culture's ideational order, an account of witchcraft should be able to specify how the members of such a community might identify a witch.

Thus, within the given semantic domain of the Towa lexeme *Sawish*, as disclosed by the narrative voice and by the characters' interior monologues in the novel, a glimpse of the protagonist's cognitive strategy for identifying the albino and Martinez as sorcerers can be reconstructed as:

[+ male]—the albino and Martinez were men, and men were more commonly sorcerers because they experience anger more intensely;

[+doomed]—the albino's bloodlines were cursed by the evil snake god of Pecos Pueblo;

[+breathy]—the albino and Martinez were persons of a different breath;

[+transformative]—the albino's scaly lips and writhing tongue were indicative of reptilian metamorphism;

[-sanative]—witches could not be curers;

[+chosen]—Shamans knew who the witches were and, perhaps, even picked them; thus, as a shaman himself, Francisco knew the albino to be a witch;

[+nocturnal]—the albino was heard by Francisco at dusk;

[+nefarious]—the albino was heard by Francisco lurking near his cornfield, presumably to curse his crops;

[+self-assertive]--the albino heightened his odd appearance with *little round colored glasses* and used his possession of a *fine black horse of good blood* as an ostentatious display of wealth;

[+aggressive]—the albino exhibited inappropriately excessive combativeness at the rooster pull;

[+corruptive]—the albino's violent behavior potentially nullified a sacred fertility ritual by denying Abel's full participation;

[+immortal]--the albino's death prompted the evil snake spirit to inhabit Martinez's body.

This list of distinctive features specifies Abel's cognitive strategy for identifying the albino and Martinez as witches. It also represents some of the discriminating criteria indicative of the principles with which the members of his culture, at least in the world of the novel, perceived, categorized, and made judgements about sorcery in general.

Except for shamans, no one else could ever be sure of who might turn out to be a witch. A ceaseless fear of being targeted by a sorcerer owing to inadvertent offenses elicited a value of polite reserve in social interactions. Noel Dumarest, a priest who labored among the Pueblos in the early twentieth century, opined that what he observed as social timidity was connected to their constant dread of sorcery:

"Why are the Pueblos so pacific? Why do they not try even to defend themselves in quarrels? Because from their youth the elders have taught that nobody can know the hearts of men. There are witches everywhere." (Dumarest 1919, 162)

This seeming pacifism is also displayed in the novel by the native characters' pronounced reserve, often marked by silence, *"the older and better part of custom still"* (Momaday 1968: 58). For example, as Angela entered the bathhouse at Jemez Springs *"[t]he attendant said nothing, but laid out the towels in one of the stalls and drew the tub full of smoking mineral water"* (Momaday 1968, 61). Tosamah's disciple, Cruz, facing a native congregation *"stepped forward on the platform and raised his hands as if to ask for the quiet that already was"* (Momaday 1968, 90). Perhaps, the most poignant reference to a silent reserve occurred in Tosamah's recollection of *"men of immense character, full of wisdom and disdain" who "dealt in a kind of infallible quiet and gave but one face away; it was enough"* (Momaday 1968, 134). This same social reserve functioned as a mask for shunning sorcerers discreetly without overtly offending them.

The meager resources of mid-twentieth century reservation life were expected to be shared. The narrative voice commented that *"[t]he people of the town have little need. They do not hanker after progress and have never changed their essential way of life"* (Momaday 1968, 58). While the native ethic affirmed satisfaction with modest means and expected the redistribution of abundance, it considered conspicuous consumption and excessive

energies directed toward personal aggrandizement aberrant. Hence, to needlessly put oneself forward or to excel at anything carried a risk of being pegged as a witch, whose motives were deemed egotistical rather than communal. In general, the supernatural phenomena emanating from sorcery were believed to disturb the order of the universe. For a culture that estimated its material as well as its social equilibrium as precarious, any disruption of harmony sought a natively derived explanation for the incidence of trauma and anxieties.

5. Conclusion

By reviewing the early ethnographic record, which Momaday is known to have consulted, this paper has attempted to interpret the ethnosemantics of sorcery implicit in the native world of *House Made of Dawn*. Drawing on the resources of linguistic anthropology, especially ethnoscience, a glimpse of the protagonist's cognitive strategy for identifying sorcerers has been reconstructed. Thus, this explication addresses, in part, the seeming mystery of Abel's motive for murder, so often underscored in the critical literature. This inquiry also suggests that due to the taboo nature of witchcraft in the native worldview, the narrative voice approaches sorcery in a restricted code by limiting its semiotics to the tacit meanings of the local knowledge of the mid-twentieth century. By avoiding explanations obvious to native insiders and by framing the narrative with the Towa discourse markers for invocation and benediction, Momaday seeks the admission of his text to the native mythic canon.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares no conflicts of interests.

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