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# “Our Mother Earth Is My Purpose”: Recollections From Mr. Albert Smith, Na’ashó’ii dich’ízhii

*annie ross (with Mr. Albert Smith, Na’ashó’ii dich’ízhii)*

*We regret to announce the passing of Albert Smith at the time this issue went to press, and offer our sympathy to the author for her deep sorrow at the loss of her friend.*

## INTRODUCTION

How many ways are there, to defend, protect, and resist, to survive the many recurring colonial impositions, threats of extermination, dispossession, destruction of Home/Lands, including those caused by international world wars? Indigenous relationship with Home/Land is millennia-old and manifests in a myriad of ways, such as making and doing (the practice of craft and subsistence traditions in modern life), dreaming (in a nation-specific spiritual context), working, poetry and aesthetic expressions, spiritual practice, and other sources and ways of aboriginal power.<sup>1</sup>

The power of a powerful one over another, of nations over nation: Wars, international conflicts, resource wars, ongoing threats to aboriginal homelands, and even the co-opting of aboriginal spiritual practices for profit by non-Natives prove the myriad modern ways where the struggle continues. Over the past few years many students have asked why Native American/First Nations peoples fight in wars for the United States government when that entity has

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traditionally been the enemy. “Why would indigenous peoples find service in the military honorable work, when the military has caused so much harm?” is a question from many university students. Indian military service has been ably chronicled by Doris Paul, William Meadows, Kenneth Townsend, Thomas Holm, and Alison Bernstein.<sup>2</sup> Holm summarizes it best when he writes in his study of Vietnam War veterans, “the problem that still plagues many Native American veterans is that virtually no one save their own people knows their sacrifices in the war, much less that they had fought in numbers exceeding their proportional population.”<sup>3</sup> As Holm notes, in the mid-twentieth century the organizing principles for Native American armed service were time-honored military traditions, the occupation of warrior, and community support for the warrior ethic. Bearing in mind that Indian warrior traditions predate colonial occupation and US military actions, Holm’s reflections hold true for Indian military service in other great wars of the past, from earliest colonization to the present day, with the goal of continued Indian nationhood viability, and self-preservation, including colonial threat from outside.

The focus of this paper is not to examine military traditions, but World War II military service through the eyes and recollections of one Navajo veteran, Mr. Albert Smith, who selected the name *Na’ashó’ii dich’ízhii* (Grandfather Horned Toad) as his identity for this manuscript.<sup>4</sup> His purpose, motivation, and action in his military service were to defend Mother Earth. This Navajo-centric relationship to Earth is reflected in the color, imagery, and meaning of the modern Navajo code talker uniform.

## NAVAJO CODE TALKER: MR. AND MRS. NA’ASHÓ’II DICH’ÍZHII

As is regular practice in aboriginal communities, and in respectful recognition of the power of men and women working together, a relationship with one member of a family automatically includes that member’s partner or close family member(s). This author first met Mr. and Mrs. *Na’ashó’ii dich’ízhii* at the El Rancho in Gallup, New Mexico, a famous 1937 hotel and restaurant where movie stars of the early twentieth century stayed during the height of motion picture-making in the US Southwest. At that time a classic Two Grey Hills-style Navajo rug at least thirty feet long sat underneath a massive table and filled the length of the grand lobby. Mr. *Na’ashó’ii dich’ízhii* walked me over especially to see it, and said, “they used to make them that size all the time.”

Mr. *Na’ashó’ii dich’ízhii* is a Navajo code talker who served in the US Marines in World War II. He and Mrs. *Na’ashó’ii dich’ízhii* (Navajo and Old Laguna), who is now deceased, raised thirty-three children in their lifetime of work. Living within a traditional spiritual life, these occupations—Mother,

Father, Veteran, Homemaker—are highly honored and noteworthy accomplishments.<sup>5</sup> Our meeting took place early in the morning, before seven, but they had already eaten cereal for breakfast two or three hours earlier. “The biscuits and gravy look real good,” they said together. While we ate them and drank coffee, among other subjects, we talked about the trouble with accurate representation in the Navajo code talker movie *Windtalkers*, for which Mr. Na’ashó’ii dichízhii served as an advisor for six months.<sup>6</sup> We were talking about World War II, and they mentioned other Native people they knew who were part of the war effort: a Navajo man that worked at Los Alamos and is married to a San Ildefonso woman; a Laguna man retired from the facility where they make the H-bomb. And “then, there is Paguate [uranium mine]. The Paguate mine. Mmmmm.” Everyone around the table nodded their heads, and the mood changed from friendly humor to serious contemplation.<sup>7</sup>

There is no denying that Indian reality in United States history includes uranium mining, land dispossession, large-scale and continuing pollution, illness, and the nuclear bomb and its associated affects. After a few moments, we had already gone through a history lesson of sorts: resource extraction and degradation of lands (Paguate uranium mine); turquoise (brought up when Mrs. Na’ashó’ii dichízhii admired it in the hotel gift shop); introduction of sheep and weaving (the fantastic rug in the lobby); Navajo life; the Long Walk; the hard life of deprivation in the old days; boarding schools; challenges of war; healing; and modern life. Mr. Na’ashó’ii dichízhii spoke of how his World War II military service began when he volunteered for the US Marine Corps in the eighth grade:

My older brother was already in, taking military induction at the school for a whole year. The instructors showed us movies such as *The Halls of Montezuma*, and other war films. We were being a part of it. At that time I had gone through a lot of things. You couldn’t put me [classify or think of me] according to [my chronological] age. I was beyond diaper age [not a child].<sup>8</sup>

Before his induction he had heard stories of how terribly hard boot camp would be, warnings of the extreme physical labor awaiting him, how rough it all was. He recalled that many of the non-Indian young men in the 1940s had a terrible time adjusting to the running, physical labor, and the discipline. “Not us Navajo,” he said. “We were used to it already.” He recalled his first meal as a marine, that he was shocked at how much food was available, and the variety of things. He recalled eating all he could, enjoying it, thinking, “well, I don’t know when we’ll eat again.” To his amazement, there was another large meal a few hours later. Mrs. Na’ashó’ii dichízhii said boot camp “was easier than the life he had been living” on the Navajo reservation; this was the first time in his life that he had three meals a day, and such large amounts! He was used

to sleeping on the ground, waking at dawn, and working all day, rain, snow, or heat. In the Marines, “we had comfortable beds, good shoes, and all we wanted to eat.” The war experience itself, of course, was much more intense, and it was the Navajos’ spirituality that helped those that survived to live through it. Others’ accounts testify that surviving the war’s combat was hard for anyone. As Robert Rasmus recalls: “I was in combat for six weeks, forty-two days. I remember every hour, every minute, every incident of the whole forty-two days. What was it—forty years ago?”<sup>9</sup>

Mr. Na’ashó’ii dich’ízhii recalled that the need for a secret language, or code, was presented to him and the other inductees as a crucial problem. As their instructors said, “The Japanese knew the Morse code. They would prepare for what the enemy was going to do. If we went by sea, they were waiting for us. If they went by land, they (the Japanese) were already waiting for them. There was no way of having a secret.”<sup>10</sup> Since Native American languages were “hidden languages,” meaning, in part, few outside of the Nation would have proficiency in them (and Native peoples and their lives were largely invisible to the mainstream and those in political power), the hidden languages of the Indian were “a unique contribution in American military communications during World Wars I and II.”<sup>11</sup> As Meadows notes, government reliance upon Native American languages in producing and using undecipherable secret codes took place previously with the Choctaw in World War I. The Comanche contributed in both World Wars I and II, as well as the Hopi, Meskwaki, and Chippewa-Oneida in World War II.<sup>12</sup> As one peer reviewer of this article notes, “these men are known, listed, and recognized in several tribal and academic publications,” and Choctaw, Comanche, Hopi, Meskwaki, Chippewa-Oneida, Navajo, and other code talkers should continue to be remembered for their work.<sup>13</sup>

Mr. Na’ashó’ii dich’ízhii recalled that in WW II the government had sampled languages and speakers from various tribes, “the resources they had as far as languages. The Navajos were the largest tribe at that time, and we had enough graduates already finished high school, and not into the military at that time.”<sup>14</sup> Of the thirty Navajo men first inducted into the Marines, only one could not pass because of an existing medical condition. The man credited with introducing the idea of using the Navajo language as a US military code to the US military was Philip Johnston, who was raised alongside Navajo peoples. Navajo within the US military developed the code itself, which was created cooperatively among the original twenty-nine inductees and code specialists.<sup>15</sup> Mr. Na’ashó’ii dich’ízhii is proud to recall that the Navajo “used their language against the enemy” in war as other Native Americans had done. At Camp Elliott, a US Marine training communications center is where “they put their heads together,” making a distinctly Navajo code “based on

military language, with its own alphabet.”<sup>16</sup> They relied upon community-held knowledge based upon relationship to Home/Land place, or Native American bioregionalism: place-based knowledge of species-specific behaviors of plants, animals, rocks, and birds, as well as an intimate understanding of the complex (and to this author’s mind, bewildering) Navajo clan relationship system. Such intimate knowledge was imperative for the code to work.

To think about the intentional meaning of Navajo words (how they are meant), non-aboriginal persons must rethink their worldview to open up to the possibility of active, reciprocal, ongoing relationships between all living things. Robert W. Young, the master Navajo linguist, has said that one must “learn to perceive natural objects in terms of shared physical characteristics” which then create classifications or sets within “the meaning of a set of verb stems concerned with the expression of such features as their shape, number, and animate nature.”<sup>17</sup> Commonly heard colloquial phrasings that sum up these relationships include “all things are related,” and “all my relations,” implying that all beings share characteristics, personality traits, talents, physical, intellectual, and spiritual mannerisms, reality, and quirks.

Community-held knowledge based upon relationship to Home/Land place lived in the code talker military community as they used the names of plants and animals to encrypt critical information that held other soldiers’ lives in the balance:

[We/They used names for] The things we were acquainted with at home. We had a respect for various living things. [We] They covered [included, “covered” as acknowledged in a reverent manner] every Thing, the Bear, the Snake, various types of Plants, Minerals; we even used the Navajo clan system to denote military organizations. Some of the names [of Navajo Land living Beings] cannot be used in everyday language out of respect for them [they must be recalled by formal names, or allegorical classifications, or via relationship to another]. We made the first code talker alphabet.<sup>18</sup>

### *Animal Familiars*

Planes, for example, were described for their bird animal familiars: a fighter plane was the *dahiit’ihii* (Hummingbird), as both dart and move quickly and noisily in the air. One can hear them both from a distance. Hummingbird has a spirit association with many peoples, from the Western Shoshone, Pueblo, and Navajo.<sup>19</sup> *Gini* (Hawk) was the animal affinity for the military divebomber, as they both fall fast and drop low to the ground when going in for the kill. Hawk has a long and storied respect among many indigenous peoples, a flesh-eating raptor with the power of concentration and efficacy in the kill. *Né’eshjaa’*

(Owl) observes quietly from his or her silent perch, often goes unnoticed, sees all, and speaks little. When they do speak their language, it is an omen.<sup>20</sup> Owl thus was the perfect companion term for an observation or spy plane.

Similarly, specific attributes of fish and water life were applied to the various types of ships. *Łóó' hashkéhé* (Shark) was allied with naval destroyer ships, as both are fast, constantly in motion, built with high endurance, yet able to change direction to hunt and dispatch prey. Both the destroyer and shark have the reputation as the killing master of the ocean.

*Ch'at* (Frog) was the namesake of the amphibious craft used to bring troops, equipment, and supplies from the ocean water to the land shore. Frog has an important role in the desert Southwest, represented in sand paintings as a dweller of springs and other scarce sources of fresh water, the source of cooler air and drinkable water in an arid landscape.<sup>21</sup>

Navajo names applied to carrier ships were based upon the attributes, character, and personality of different bird species. As the ships carried men, supplies, and bombs, a word association developed between birds and bombs, such as *bird-shooter anti-aircraft* (*chayta gahi bewoldoni*).

A deeper level of complexity and secrecy was built into the code when the Navajo Marines created words with no meaning, so that even a fluent Navajo speaker could not break the code: "those who knew the language but did not know the code could not decipher the code. If they didn't go to the (code talker) school they could not know it. There were a lot of words without any meaning. Even our tribesmen who knew the language could not break the code, we used [purposefully built] a lot of words without any meaning to it."<sup>22</sup> Mr. Joe Kieyoomia, a Navajo soldier but not one of the code talkers, was captured in the Philippines and made a prisoner of war. Held in Nagasaki in 1942, he suffered prolonged torture and deprivation at the hands of his Imperial Japanese Army captors, but Kieyoomia could not reveal the Navajo language secret code, as he did not know of it until years later: "I salute the Code Talkers, and even if I knew about their code, I wouldn't tell the Japanese."<sup>23</sup>

Mr. Na'ashó'ii dich'ízhii related the following story:

When we were on patrol, you just observe, you don't communicate. So this Navajo who was in the navy heard the code talkers down below talking. He asked his commander, "can I listen to that?" The commander saw the navy man smiling, because he heard the code talkers talking about bacon and eggs. We had been having C rations and D rations all the time, and those were getting the best of us. "Maybe we should join them," he said. The code talkers were spelling patrol, p for pig, that was the bacon. The eggs, that was the bomb. The (Navajo) man listening in didn't know that the code talkers were getting ready to go out on patrol in preparation for a bombing mission. He wanted to go and eat the bacon and eggs!<sup>24</sup>

At this point Mrs. Na'ashó'ii dich'ízhii jumped into the conversation with hearty laughter: "that would have been hard to chew on!" We may often speak of the hardness of war, the loss of life, the "hell" in "war is hell," yet it is important that we realize war recollections bring forth very difficult realities and memories into the present moment. Just prior to his wife's laughter, Mr. Na'ashó'ii dich'ízhii had been remembering that each code talker was assigned a marine guard, and they were in the company of one another at all times—eating, sleeping, and working together every day and night. With an ironic smile, he said, "the marine had a sidearm with one bullet just for the code talker." If enemy capture were imminent, the marine would kill the Navajo soldier to absolutely protect the code. Laughter during this interview (and in many others) was and is a form of protection, a method of balancing, a healing practice available easily and readily to all.

Never broken, the code was declassified by the United States in 1968, twenty-three years after the end of World War II:

Communication is the vital part of war. We didn't want documents to fall into enemy hands. The code talkers were the secret documents. Many times I carried medicine. I walked alone across Saipan and Tinian. It was at night, they told me not to do so at night. I was delivering messages, maps, documents that could not be sent over the radio. I did that myself at night, until the battalion officer told me not to. I went by various units at night. They were sleeping.

Mrs. Na'ashó'ii dich'ízhii added that "He still walks slow (meaning quietly). I tell him to at least say 'I'm home' to let me know he is there . . . he scares me!" Mr. Na'ashó'ii dich'ízhii laughs with the joke, waits a while, stares down a bit, effectively and quietly requiring silence between us with his mannerisms. He prepared us in this way and said:

It comes out of this, to us, American Natives.  
My Mother is our main purpose.  
It is men's responsibility to protect Mother Earth.  
And it was one of the things. She stands for everything we have. The freedom.  
Without her, we have no place to go to. To do what we want to, to believe, to pray,  
to use our own language—that was one of the things a lot of people forget. It is  
Earth Nature that gives all of these things.<sup>25</sup>

## A NAVAJO CODE TALKER'S PLACE IN THE UNIVERSE

Mother Earth (the entire Earth), Nature (all of her, including her Living Beings, Super and Natural), and the bioregion of Navajo Nation (that specific place in the American Southwest which are the ancient Pueblo and Hopi



lands) are reflected in the modern Navajo code talker uniform, a ceremonial vestment the code talkers use today in everyday life. Made up of ancient indigenous symbolism and physical attributes tied to Home/Land, it serves as physical and spiritual protection and stands as evidence of military service in World War II. As formally worn in public gatherings of many sorts such as public lectures, fairs, and any occasion that calls for formal attendance by Navajo veterans, the uniform is a statement for the sacred land, her efficacy and integrity.

Of and for the aboriginal peoples of this part of the Southwest, the ancient, sacred Home/Land takes place within four sacred mountains, four holy sentinels who outline the Navajo homeland. To the Navajo, the Home/Land is within the shadows of these sacred beings, and all life is secured and continued with and through them. These cardinal places, mountains, are aligned with cardinal directions, colors, rains, corns, Holy Persons, clouds, precious jewels, birds, animals, sky. One can see all of this, the reason for military service, in the Navajo code talker uniform (see fig. 1).

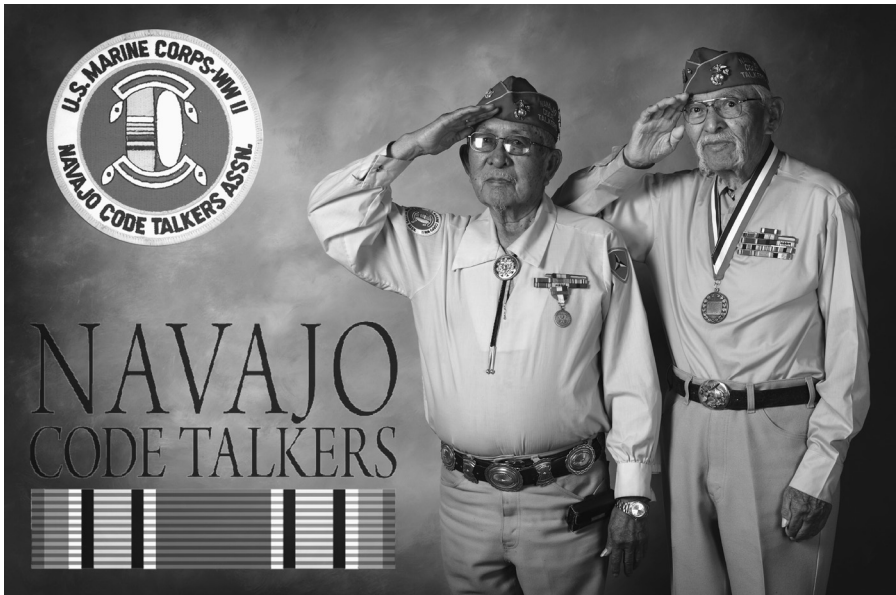
“Our code talker uniform is traditional,”<sup>26</sup> my friend said, emphatically, meaning that it reflects a place-specific indigenous knowledge which has been understood and lived within for millennia; expressing aboriginal recognition of humankind’s absolute dependence upon land and her beings and being-ness; is geographically place-specific, yet also set in, responsive with and to, a vast and affective universe; one that is ages-old, well-practiced, relevant, useful, and



**FIGURE 1.** Navajo Code Talker World War II veterans on Navajo Code Talker Day, August 14, 2011, Window Rock, Arizona. Photograph by Leigh T. Jimmie courtesy of Navajo Times.

reliable in the ancient and the modern time; used and lived continuously; a truly useful, responsive, living, indigenous wisdom tradition.

By seeing how the code talkers surround themselves with iconography of Home/Land in their modern uniform, we may come to understand a little of a Navajo sense of place, at least as much as any non-Navajo speaker can. One must look through the lens of sacred geography to the land that Mr. Na'ashó'ii dich'ízhii protected by going to war, and listen to a very small part of Navajo chants and symbology.<sup>27</sup> Appearing on the Navajo Code Talkers Association's embroidered emblem are two arcs, one at the bottom and one at the top (see fig. 2).<sup>28</sup> Each "signifies a wish" and represents ancient Rainbow Being, a protector who ensures safe travel and made possible the code talkers' safe return home. As in the past and now, this one creates a safe journey "to where we were going, and to return home." The bottom of each rainbow represents a part of the journey. In between the rainbows are "the staffs of Life."<sup>29</sup> At the edges of the Rainbow, four eagle feathers mark the four sacred mountains. Each point of the Southwest sacred geography is dressed by the sacred beings at the beginning of time, in precious natural and supernatural materials and beings, each known for their color, stone, bird, cloud, corn, and butterfly. Navajo Homeland



**FIGURE 2.** Bill Toledo (left) and Albert Smith (right), Navajo code talkers, pose for a photo while visiting Cannon Air Force Base, NM, January 30–February 1, 2013. These New Mexico natives visited the base to speak to Airmen and raise funds to enable their mission to preserve the code talker history, legacy, and language. Photo by Senior Airman Alexis Pons Abascal courtesy of US Air Force.

is surrounded, guarded, made real, maintained, and continues through the power of the sacred four mountains and their beings: Dibé Nitsaa, Obsidian Mountain; Tsoodził, Turquoise Mountain; Sis Naajini, Dawn or White Shell Mountain; and Dook'óoskíid, Abalone Shell Mountain.

### *Black/North*

Dibé Nitsaa (Obsidian Mountain, Big Mountain Sheep) is the sacred mountain to the north (near La Plata Mountains, Colorado). Dibé Nitsaa holds fast the Earth by Rainbow, and wears black beads, many types of plants, and many species of animals. At the very top, in the sacred black bowl rest black beads, two blackbird eggs, covered with sacred deerskin. With grey mist for beauty, and darkness as a shroud, Female (soaking) rain lives here. Tádídíin Ashkii, Pollen Boy, and Nahachagii Ar'ééd, Grasshopper Girl, the Super Naturals, live here forever.<sup>30</sup> Black is used to show the beginning of life, the sacred time of emergence from the previous world to this reality. Mr. Na'ashó'ii dich'izhii continued, "Know your mother, father, your immediate family. [When you know] Your environment expands. That's the beginning of life." Code talkers wear black shoes and socks, since black "obsidian and jet offerings [are used] to talk to our Spiritual Father."<sup>31</sup> Black obsidian is a volcanic glass, jet is a lignite, made geologically when decaying wood transforms over years by intense pressure in the earth. As recounted in a transcribed oral history, at the beginning of the emergence into this fourth world (the fifth world to the Navajo), indigenous American southwest and Mesoamerican Hero Twins, with the help of their holy parents and others, cleared the earth of the monsters who were threatening human existence at the time by using black flint and lightning:

*I, I am Killer of Enemies (Nayenezgani)*  
*My shoes are of black flint,*  
*My leggings are of black flint,*  
*My shirt is of black flint,*  
*My hat is of black flint,*  
*I hold up two pieces of black flint,*  
*Lightning shoots out from me,*  
*I walk to the center of the black water with it,*  
*As it (jagged lightning) shoots, the Giant becomes Frightened,*  
*I, I am Sahanahray Bekay Hozhon.<sup>32</sup>*

### *Blue/South*

Tsoodził, blue bead, or Turquoise Mountain, is the sacred mountain of the south (north of Laguna, New Mexico, called Mount Taylor by non-Indians).

Tsoodził is fastened to Earth with a stone knife, and is covered with turquoise, dark mist, female (drizzling, soaking) rain, and many types of animals. Upon this mountain's top is a ceremonial dish of turquoise filled with two bluebird eggs, covered with sacred buckskin. These are covered again with the sacred blue sky. The supernatural beings who live upon Turquoise Mountain are Dotllizi Lai Nayoali Ashkii, Boy Who Carries One Turquoise, and Nata lai Nayoali At'ééd, Girl Who Carries One [Grain of] Corn. This prayer song is made about the bluebird of Tsoodził:

<i>Tsihayilkáe dóla aní,</i>	Just at daylight <i>Sialia</i> calls
<i>Áyas dotlzi' biza holó,</i>	The bluebird has a voice,
<i>Biza hozónigo, biza holó,</i>	He has a voice, his voice melodious.
<i>Biza holónigo hwihe inli</i>	His voice melodious that flows in gladness.
<i>Dóla aní. Dóla aní.</i>	<i>Sialia</i> calls. <i>Sialia</i> calls. <sup>33</sup>

Turquoise, the ancient blue, blue-green, and green stone, is an ancient indigenous southwest and Mesoamerican stone ally that has been mined, shaped, worn, and used for millennia worldwide.<sup>34</sup> At present many Native Americans and First Nations use the stone as a symbol of aboriginal identity. For the code talkers it is “a symbol of man,” and on the code talker patch, turquoise is symbolized as a blue bar on “the staff of life” representing water, something “every living thing has to use to live.” Mr. Na’ashó’ii dich’ízhii normally wears turquoise every day, but when dressed formally as a code talker, he wears a combination set: a turquoise cluster bolo tie, turquoise ring, and an old-style warrior/hunter wrist guard of leather and turquoise.<sup>35</sup>

### *White/East*

Sis Naajini, Dawn or White Shell Mountain is the sacred mountain of the east (near Alamosa, Colorado, also known as Mount Blanca), a bolt of lightning binding it to the center of the Earth. Atop Sis Naajini is a ceremonial bowl of shells, and with the shells rest two Hasbídí (Gray Dove) eggs, covered with sacred buckskin, decorated with white shell, white lightning, and the home of white corn. It is the place of dark clouds and male (heavy flooding) rain. Living there, forever, are the Holy Ones: Tsegadinatini Ashkii, Rock Crystal Boy, and Tsegadinatini At'ééd, Rock Crystal Girl.<sup>36</sup> Code talkers wear earrings made from white shell to recall Sis Naajini.

### *Yellow (Tan)/West*

Dook’ooskíid, Abalone Shell Mountain, is the sacred mountain of the west, and is held to the earth with a sunbeam (in modern times known as the San Francisco peaks). Dook’ooskíid’s dress is abalone (haliotis) shell, together with

dark clouds that create male drenching rain and flash floods. A bowl of haliotis shell sits ceremonially on its summit, with two eggs of the yellow warbler bird, all covered with sacred buckskin. Over Dook'óostlíd is a holy yellow cloud. Yellow corn lives here, with many types of animals. Natalkai Ashkii, White Corn Boy, and Nataltsoi At'ééd, Yellow Corn Girl, are the Holy People who live there. Tan trousers, the uniform requirement for code talkers, symbolize and recall the dirt, the land, and the larger all-encompassing Mother Earth: "that is why we went to war, for our Mother Earth," Mr. Na'ashó'ii dich'ízhii repeated. Code talkers also wear a golden yellow shirt, reminiscent of corn pollen, carried by wind and insects from corn tassels to female plant structures. Pollen is gathered carefully as a sacred being and carried in a pouch worn close to the body, small enough to be held in the hand and at the ready, opened, a small amount breathed, strewn, cast ritually, for "our prayers and offerings."<sup>37</sup> This author has seen pollen used in a holy way among many nations of indigenous practitioners. It is revered and gives reverence; it is a life-giver, a spiritual food for spirit beings, life, and humans; it is a living spiritual power, joining air, water, soil, plants, natural and supernatural beings. Corn pollen is present in old prayer rituals at Hopi, Zuni, and Navajo; it is and adorns altars, sacred items, blesses homes, protects, and is a spiritually imbued entity that makes life possible.

## SACRED GEOGRAPHY: HOME

As the Navajo migrated into the American Southwest within Hopi recent memory, the nation's success is recalled in the massive panoply of Navajo sacred songs, poems, and ceremonies that name the natural and supernaturals, and are part of what we mean when we say Mother Earth.

Blueeyes explains this concept:

*Díí Dzít ahéénínílgíí*  
*Nihí Bee Haz'aanii áté.*

Our Navajo Laws are represented by the  
Sacred Mountains which surround us.

*Sis Naajini*  
*Tsoodzil*  
*Dook'óostlíd*  
*Dibé Nitsaa*  
*Dzít Ná'oodilíi*  
*Ch'óolǵ'i*  
*Kótéego éi nihá ályaa*  
*Éi nihighan áté.*

Blanca Peak  
Mount Taylor  
San Francisco Peaks  
Hesperus Peak  
Huerfano Mountain  
Governador Knob  
They were placed here for us.  
We think of them as our home.

*Sis Naajini yootgani yee hadit'e.  
Tsoodzil dootizhii yee hadit'e.  
Dook'oostid diichit'i yee hadit'e.  
Dib'e Nitsaa baashzhinii yee hadit'e.*

Blanca Peak is adorned with white shell.  
Mount Taylor is adorned with turquoise.  
San Francisco Peaks are adorned with abalone.  
Hesperus Peak is adorned with jet.

*Dzil Na'ooditii yodi yee hadit'e.  
Ch'ool'i nit'iz yee hadit'e.*

Huerfano Mountain is dressed in precious fabrics.  
While Gobernador Knob is clothed in sacred jewels.

....

*Niletidze ni bit'aaahdege haati'.*

The Sacred Mountains have always  
been where they are now.

*Dzil siml aadi taa koteego  
Nidahiduijaa'ii aadzege bit ha'azna,*

They have been like that from the beginning.  
They were like that in worlds before this.  
They were brought up from the Underworld  
And were put back in their respective places.

*T'aa idaga dzilgit'i ninadaas'nil.*

*Kodi dzil ninadaas'nil.  
Nahasdzaaan analyaa.  
Yadilhit analyaa.  
Hayootkaaat analyaa.*

When the mountains were replaced  
Earth was made.  
Sky was made.  
Dawn was made.

*Nahasdzaaan nihima.  
Yadilhit nihitaa'.  
J'honaa'ei nikikee' diitdin.  
T'ehonaa'ei do'.  
Ei bik'ehgo keehwiit'i.*

*Earth is our Mother  
Sky is our Father.  
Sun gives us light.  
Moon does the same  
All of these were made for us to live by.<sup>38</sup>*

So, all is right, all is as it is meant to be in the Navajo panoply of sacred geography, from the placement or creation of the watchful and helpful sacred mountains, to all the beings that live there. These words, ideas, thoughts, logic, and prayers are very much alive today, as shown in recent e-mail correspondence with a friend of mine. He sent thoughts and prayers of the sacred mountains conversing to one another, conversing to me, and now, conversing to the reader. The Dinetah and prayers sent to me, I in turn send to you by this greeting:

Hi Annie, that was a good thought for the day, in fact that's where my thought was, especially to the east toward 'Tsisnaasjini'—dawn or white shell mountain near Alamosa in San Luis valley, Colorado. Here's the Blessingway chant I like to share with you.

Tsisnaasjini', now Ch'oolii, gazing upon one another, appear.  
Now Ch'oolii, Tsisnaajini', regularly speaking to one another by means of  
rock crystal rainbow, appear,  
Long life appears, happiness appears, that one appears holaghi.  
Tsoodzil, now Yucca Mountain, gazing upon one another, appear.  
Now Yucca Mountain, Tsoodil,



Regularly speaking to one another by means of  
Rock crystal rainbow, appear,  
Long life appears, happiness appears, that one appears holaghi.  
Doko'ooliid, Dzil Na'oodilii, gazing upon one another, appear.  
Now Dzil Na'oodilii, now Doko'ooliid, regularly speaking to one another by  
means of rock crystal rainbow, appear,  
Long life appears, happiness appears that one appears holaghi."<sup>39</sup>

## WHAT DO WE MEAN WHEN WE SAY "WARRIOR"?

Beginning by asking the question of why Native Americans take on service in the US armed forces, this paper now closes with another relevant question: what is a warrior, from an indigenous point of view? Oral histories that belong to a specific tribal group (not individuals) reveal important relationships that carry the term forward into modern times, with the definition of *warrior* varying from nation to nation, specific to that people.

Mr. Na'ashó'ii dich'ízhii never spoke of one aspect of the uniform, but held onto it reverently—his red Marine Corps hat. In later meetings, he wore a red baseball cap with a Navajo code talker embroidered seal. At various code talker meetings and at the Navajo Nation Fair on several occasions, this author has seen the red hat carefully removed, held carefully in both hands, and stroked affectionately. Formally posed questions are not always needed; in response to my look, Mr. Na'ashó'ii dich'ízhii told me about the metal pins on his hat. One pin is an image of the Horned Toad, a fighter, a survivor, who is given the honorific name Grandfather. On one side of his hat are pins from a congressional presentation, one from the defense department, and one a forty-year service pin. "I lost the CIA presentation pin," he lamented. "Maybe they took it back," we then joked, with Indian humor, "—you remember how the government is."

According to one study of Navajo symbolism, because of its "fierce power" red is a power form that animates all life: humans, nonhuman animals, and supernaturals.<sup>40</sup> The color red is used to outline masks in sand paintings, celestial beings such as moon and sun, but never used as a primary or a background color. In older Navajo pieces, "medicine bags usually have a red line along the back to show where the knife slit the hide." A red snake expresses that snake's particularly poisonous nature, while a small red dot on "a serpent's head shows where it carries its deadly poison." The Seven Flint Boys (supernaturals who form the constellation Pleiades) are warriors whose deeds figure in several Navajo legends, including the creation time story. The Flint Boys were clothed in flint by their father, the Sun, to successfully put down the monsters who would destroy all humanity, and "the red arrow-shaped caps worn by the

Flint Boys and the Warriors indicate their privilege and power to slay their enemies.”<sup>41</sup> The famed oral historian Studs Terkel immortalized the phrase “the Good War” for WWII, meaning a war about which there was collective agreement which recognized that a common enemy threatened the “world,” from the point of view of the US and its allies. The Navajo code talker red caps hence allegorically reference the Flint Boys at war with the monsters, telling a story, a legacy, of the WWII veteran in symbolic reality: more than 50 million dead, multitudinous unspeakable horrors, the development and use of the nuclear bomb, concentration camps, ethnic cleansing. The Flint Boys, Monster Killers of the Legend time, and world wars are both real and archetypal battles of good and evil witnessed by a global consciousness, transcending time and pervading memory.

## A WARNING

War may be hell, as the saying goes, yet it is also glorified, as are some expressions of state-sponsored or urban violence. Mr. Na’ashó’ii dich’ízhii recalled his elders speaking to him about coming home after war, after liberation of countries and prisoners of war, when the bombs no longer fell from the sky and life could return to some form of peace, despite victory:

We are told by our elders to “leave our war stories behind” when we came home after the 2<sup>nd</sup> World War. They told us, “don’t tell the children, don’t tell the women [those] who had never been in a war.” [pause] “You are misleading them.”<sup>42</sup>

Mr. Na’ashó’ii dich’ízhii warned that the full truth of war cannot be told via television and newspapers, as these use only two of the senses, sight and sound, seeing and hearing. Justice, truth, about the reality of war can only be conveyed adequately through all of the senses of the mind, body, and soul:

Our elders said, “You tell it [war stories] to the children, and the children are going to look around. [The children wonder] how does it [killing] taste, how does it smell, how does it feel?” Children of our time were not that curious. But children today [such as in] Littleton, Colorado [the site of the Columbine High School massacre], and other places—a Tennessee school, one of the California schools, and in San Diego. The children have become daring, to see how does it feel to kill.

Navajo elders warned the veterans to keep the war stories away from all women, especially mothers, as the war feeling can translate from the mind to the household. Mothers are shielded to take care that any form of anger is not carried in feeding babies and making or serving food. The elders said:



Don't tell the women or the mothers the war stories. They [the women] might have lost a husband, they may have lost a brother. If someone thinks of war stories, while they are cooking, for example, there is turmoil in the mind that travels through the body into whatever they are using to cook and they put that into the food, what they are feeling. The children eat that, and whoever eats that eats part of that feeling. It is the same way with the children, especially when breastfeeding, feeding that angry hostility into their system. There's those connections. You are feeding that child all that bad feeling.

Those who return to their Home/Lands, those who are waiting in the Home/Lands, both the victor and the vanquished, now have the task of seeing what has been in that enormous word, *war*. Horrors, pain, suffering, the unknowable reality, are brought back; perhaps, if admonitions are not held, the memories spread and cause harm in transferring memory from thought to action.

Of those who are changed now by that which was lived in the war experience, how were they changed, and how do they survive with those changes? For Mr. Na'ashó'ii dich'ízhii, this too is a part of the World War II story. He speaks of traditional religion and how those who live within it may be healed, or work towards a healing, by living within a spiritual tradition that places the person (the mind, the soul/spirit, the body) back together, removing any negative thing (idea, spirit, reality, memory) that held on to the returning soldier. Other spiritual concerns and intents remain outside the scope of this author's knowledge and right to mention in print. Mr. Na'ashó'ii dich'ízhii explained:

[In World War II the] men who were rowdy, the men who smoked a lot, drank a lot, the ones with limited religious activities, they were the first ones, without being shot, to lose their thinking, to lose control of their mind, go into shellshock. You don't know what happens. They are the first ones in tight fighting, they can take it maybe half an hour at the most, forty-five minutes continuous heavy fighting, then they lose everything, they just go wild. Somebody sensible has to knock them out, tie them up. [In comparison,] the very religious, they took the two to four days of continuous fighting. They lose some of that religious tone, religious thinking, and go so far as to use a bayonet as target practice on a human.

Terrible things are wrapped in the word *war*. In discussing code talkers, Mr. Na'ashó'ii dich'ízhii ensured we didn't either glorify the work of the soldier or minimize what actually took place. Because he was very careful to explain the story fully, and to express in a small way how war "looks, sounds, tastes, smells, and feels," now the conversation moved toward how best to heal. Western medicine and modern life often look to prescription or street drugs as a cure of sorts. Mr. Na'ashó'ii dich'ízhii stressed that drugs prove harmful to the spirit

of a person by “dividing the personality of individuals” and then changing those divisions, so that:

Their control systems start dividing itself, so that eventually it will take over, what a human is. There will be a time when those various personalities will start controlling him, instead of him controlling himself. It’s possible that our younger generation, if they don’t wake up, it is going to go that way by not controlling [themselves], it [the drugs] gets them.

You control your personality when your mind is still your mind. Once you have no longer have control, then they become controlling. Not being able to control [you become a] hazard to yourself and to your environment. If you could ever bring that person back to their former self? I don’t know. How do you piece it back together?

## LIFE REVEALS WHAT IS NEEDED

At the end of our first meeting, Mr. Na’ashó’ii dich’ízhii and I shared a handshake. (In this instance, a handshake refers to the custom of giving a modest gift as a symbol of friendship, thanks and acknowledgment; it is held in the hand and placed in the hand of the other, without looking at the gift or showing it off.) He accepted it happily, breathed in its blessing, and immediately handed the gift to Mrs. Na’ashó’ii dich’ízhii, who accepted it and placed it in her handbag. No one looked at it or gave it any excess attention. It is the thought and the intent, the heart, which is acknowledged.

Upon our final parting, Mr. Na’ashó’ii dich’ízhii offered a prayer in Navajo for me, as over the years he would do each time we met. We breathed in the blessing. Suddenly, in the parking lot along the busiest of streets in the hard town of Gallup, New Mexico, a disheveled man walked in a zigzag towards us as quickly and purposefully as he could, staring, his arms flailing. In what seemed like an instant, despite his physical difficulties, the man came close to Mr. Na’ashó’ii dich’ízhii, stopped, pulled himself up straight, and gave a perfect military salute. Mr. Na’ashó’ii dich’ízhii saluted in kind. Our friend had recognized Mr. Na’ashó’ii dich’ízhii’s code talker hat. The two men held hands, spoke quietly in Navajo, watching each other deeply, compassionately, while Mrs. Na’ashó’ii dich’ízhii and I stood quietly in support and respect. Almost anyone could see that one was giving thanks, one was humble, and both were earnest; it was as if they had known one another forever. What do they know that need not be said? The Sacred Mountains, Turquoise Woman, Corn Mother, Mother Earth, Flint Boys, all around me is Beauty.

## NOTES

1. In this article the terms *Indian*, *Native American*, *American Indian*, *First Nations*, and *indigenous* mean the aboriginal peoples of the United States.

2. Doris Paul, *The Navajo Code Talkers* (Pittsburgh: Dorrance Publishing, 1973); William C. Meadows, *The Comanche Code Talkers of World War II* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002); Kenneth William Townsend, *World War II and the American Indian* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2000); Thomas Holm, *Strong Hearts, Wounded Souls: The Native American Veterans of the Vietnam War* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996); Alison R. Bernstein, *American Indians and World War II: Toward a New Era in Indian Affairs* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991).

3. Holm, *Strong Hearts*, 11.

4. Franc Johnson Newcomb, Stanley A. Fishler, and Mary C. Wheelwright, *A Study of Navajo Symbolism* (Cambridge, MA: Papers of the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University, Vol. XXXII, no. 3, 1956), 22. According to Newcomb, "The horned toad wears armor of arrow points and carries lightning arrows in both hands and feet."

5. This author capitalizes such words and also names of certain natural and supernatural beings to highlight their efficacy and formal relationship with humans in an aboriginal-centric universe.

6. John Rice and Joe Bateer, *Windtalkers*, directed by John Woo (2002: Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer and Lions Rock Productions).

7. Paguete, an aboriginal name still used by Native people, is a Laguna village. Compared to other northern Pueblos such as Taos, fewer tourists go there, perhaps because of its relative isolation farther from the main highway. It is known to non-Natives as the Jackpile uranium mine, a former open pit uranium mine (1952–1982). As Acoma Pueblo activist Manuel Pino explained in a 1992 speech in Saltzburg, "within the Pueblo of Laguna lay the world's largest open pit strip mine, in operation from 1953 to 1982," "this was a 24-hour-a-day, 365-days-a-year operation for 30 years," employing more than eight hundred Laguna Pueblo Indians, where "24 million tons of ore were mined over a 30 year period." Paguete is infamous for the cavalier method in which it was worked, the destruction it left behind, and how it changed the lives of Laguna Pueblo peoples forever.

Although beautiful and sacred, Paguete Home/Land is divided by obvious, misplaced, artificial hills, the damaged and unclaimed "remediated" landscape still showing the scars of the open pit uranium mine. Pino went on to say, "you know, these are 'world bests' we don't want on our land anymore, we don't want to be known for all the world's deepest and worst uranium atrocities on our land, never again!" The mine closed in the 1980s, but it remains an area largely void of vegetation, and the wind carries the dry sand throughout homes and roadways. Old and unused train tracks lead to and from the mine. A wide, well-kept road passes through, kept that way for the many large container trucks traveling by. The trucks caused worry and conversation in the pueblo, although no one whom this author met knew why and what the trucks were doing. A few small brilliant green ponds line the so-called remediated pit and a strange smell pervades the area, which a former Laguna miner said "is the smell of uranium." Manuel Pino is quoted in *Poison Fire, Sacred Earth: Testimonies, Lecture, Conclusions* (München: World Uranium Hearing, 1993), 146–48; excerpts of Pino's speech are available online at <http://www.ratical.org/radiation/WorldUraniumHearing/ManuelPino.html>. Information on village worries about the trucks and the sweet smell are from personal communication between the author and an anonymous informant, Paguete, Laguna Pueblo, New Mexico, 2010. The mine's formal listing is "Section 26 and 33 T11N R5W," as stated in V. T. McLemore and W. L. Chenoweth, "Uranium Mines and Deposits in the Grants District, Cibola and McKinley Counties, New Mexico," *New Mexico Bureau of Mines and Mineral Resources Open File Report 353*

(rev. December 1991). For images of Paguete, see New Mexico digital online collections such as that of the University of New Mexico: <http://econtent.unm.edu/u2/Marmon>, 30.

8. Mr. Na'ashq'ii dich'izhii, (Navajo) and Mrs. (Laguna Pueblo), Navajo WWII Code Talker. Personal interview with author, Gallup, New Mexico; telephone conversations and mail correspondence 2000–2002, 2010.

9. WW II veteran Robert Rasmus, quoted in Studs Terkel, *The Good War: An Oral History of World War II* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1984), 1.

10. Mr. Na'ashq'ii dich'izhii, personal communications with author, 2000–2002, 2010.

11. Meadows, 67.

12. Meadows meticulously notes other Native American nation members who served in “various communications operations” during their military service, such as the Comanche, Chippewa, Choctaw, Creek, Hopi, Kiowa, Menominee, Navajo, Oneida, Pawnee, Sac and Fox, Seminole-Muscogee, Lakota, Dakota, and Assiniboine, and also notes Muscogee (Creek), Mesquakie (Fox), and Osage (Meadows, 68, quoting Paul (1973), Bernstein (1991) and Rodgers (n.d.). I thank an anonymous AICRJ reviewer for bringing the work of Meadows to my attention. See also Thomas A. Britten, *American Indians in World War I: At Home and at War* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1997).

13. Works cited by this expert reviewer are the 2004 Senate Testimony on Code Talkers; the 2008 Code Talker Recognition Act; and William C. Meadows: “North American Indian Code Talkers: Current Events and Research” in *Aboriginal Peoples and Military Participation: Canadian and International Perspectives*, ed. P. Whitney Lackenbauer, Craig Mantle and R. Scott Sheffield (Kingston, ON: Canadian Defense Academy Press, 2009), 161–214; “They Had a Chance to Talk to One Another . . . The Role of Incidence in Native American Code Talking,” *Ethnohistory* 56, no. 2 (2011): 269–84; “Honoring the Native American Code Talkers: The Road to the Code Talkers Recognition Act of 2008 (Public Law 110–420)” *American Indian Research and Culture Journal* 35 no. 3 (2011): 3–36.

14. Mr. Na'ashq'ii dich'izhii, personal communications with author 2000–2002, 2010.

15. Although in this paper I focus on the testimony of one single Navajo code talker and his personal experience, I note here an anonymous reviewer's comment: “Please clarify Johnston's role in reading about the testing of existing native code talker units in the Army who were participating in the Louisiana War Games in Aug–Sept of 1941. This is what gave him the idea to form a similar unit of Navajo. Paul and Watson are very clear on this. See Doris Paul (1972), Bruce Watson (1993) and Meadows (2002) on this.” See Bruce Watson, “Navajo Code Talkers: A Few Good Men,” *Smithsonian* 24 no. 5 (1993): 34–45.

16. Mr. Na'ashq'ii dich'izhii, personal communications with author 2000–2002, 2010.

17. Robert W. Young, *English as a Second Language for Navajos: An Overview of Certain Cultural and Linguistic Factors* (Albuquerque: Bureau of Indian Affairs, Navajo Area Office, 1967), 75.

18. Mr. Na'ashq'ii dich'izhii, personal communications with author, 2000–2002, 2010.

19. Corbin Harney (deceased), personal communications with author, 1999–2007; Wanpovi, personal communications with author, 1999–2010; and Na'ashq'ii dich'izhii, personal communications with author, 2000–2010.

20. Some aboriginal people state that owls foretell of death, and therefore, are feared or misunderstood. Owls help to deliver messages, and to this author's mind and personal experience, are to be thanked for that help.

21. E. C. Parnwell, ed., *The New Oxford Picture Dictionary*, English/Navajo edition, Marvin Yellowhair trans., Raymond Burns, illus. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).

22. Mr. Na'ashq'ii dich'izhii, personal communications with author, 2000–2002, 2010.

23. Tim Korte, “How Effective Was the Navajo Code? One Former Captive Knows,” *News From Indian Country*, August, 1997.

24. Mr. Na'ashq'ii dich'izhii, personal communications with author, 2000–2002, 2010.
25. As indicated in the main text, all quotations on this page are those of Mr. and Mars. Na'ashq'ii dich'izhii, personal communications with author, 2000–2002, 2010. A few months after this particular interview, at the Native American Music Festival at Diné College, Navajo Nation, Arizona, organizer Ferlin Clark said this year's celebration was in honor of "Mother Earth" for her resources, and the Navajo code talkers for their services. "We are honored and give thanks to the Navajo Code talkers for they sacrificed to enable us to sing our songs for the earth" (Brenda Norell, *Indian Country Today*, June 27, 2001).
26. Mr. Na'ashq'ii dich'izhii, personal communications with author, 2000–2002, 2010.
27. Respectfully, and of course, we uninitiated readers can only know so very little of this panoply of information, it being the purview of Singers, Medicine People, and other learned individuals.
28. Thank you to Ms. Yvonne Murphy of the Navajo Code Talker's Association (NCTA) for her kind and thoughtful assistance in the later stages of this paper. Ms. Murphy met with Mr. Smith, contributed her expertise and advice, and served as a representative of the NCTA to the author.
29. Mr. Na'ashq'ii dich'izhii, personal communications with author, 2000–2002, 2010.
30. Washington Matthews, *Navajo Legends* (New York: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1897); Paul G. Zolbrod, *Dine Bahane': The Navajo Creation Story* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1984).
31. Mr. Na'ashq'ii dich'izhii, personal communications with author, 2000–2002, 2010.
32. David P. McAllester, *Notes on the Music of the Navajo Creation Chants (The Heroes Kill the Giants)* (Cambridge, MA: Peabody Museum of Harvard University, Special Publications, n.d.), 19.
33. Matthews, *Navajo Legends*, 28.
34. "Ally" is used here to mean a helper in the spirit world who influences this physical world; it is translated in mainstream culture as an "amulet" or "talisman."
35. Mr. Na'ashq'ii dich'izhii, personal communications with author, 2000–2002, 2010.
36. Matthews, *Navajo Legends*, 79, 221.
37. Mr. Na'ashq'ii dich'izhii, personal communications with author, 2000–2002, 2010.
38. Claudeen Arthur, Sam Bingham, and Janet Bingham, *Between Sacred Mountains: Navajo Stories and Lessons from the Land* (Tucson: Sun Tracks: University of Arizona Press, 1982), 2–3.
39. A. Sandoval, e-mail communication, Santa Fe, New Mexico, 2000.
40. Newcomb, et al., 16.
41. *Ibid.*, 17.
42. This and all remaining quotations are from Mr. Na'ashq'ii dich'izhii, personal communications with author, 2000–2002, 2010, as indicated in the main text.