Episode 704, Story 3: Navajo Rug

Eduardo: Our final story examines the mystery behind this unusual Navajo Rug. To the Navajo, weaving is more than a simple craft— it is a spiritual practice, connecting the weaver to the spirits of earth and sky. Their symbols tell stories from Navajo beliefs – a cross can mean spider woman, the deity who is said to have brought the gift of weaving. A wavy line can represent the snake, bringing danger and threatening livestock. But tradition also holds that some symbols are too sacred for the loom - to capture them risks harm to the weaver or their family. Bob Peterson of Lompoc, California has uncovered a rug with a series of baffling symbols.

Bob: When I first saw the design on this rug, I thought, wow, this is something. I have never seen anything like it.

Eduardo: I’m Eduardo Pagan. In my work as a professor of history at Arizona State University, I’ve done some research on Navajo culture, so I’m curious to see what Bob’s discovered. Bob, I’m Eduardo.

Bob: Welcome.

Eduardo: Bob, this is extraordinary. Tell me about it.

Bob: I am a collector of Native American beaded bags. And, as I was searching the internet I saw this rug. And, immediately was drawn to it.

Eduardo: What was it that caught your attention?

Bob: That central figure. The… the arrows and the… the… the design of it. It, uh… looks to be, uh, something very different, something special.

Eduardo: Do you know where this rug came from? Bob tells me he bought the rug from a family who inherited it from a Wyoming rancher.
Bob: He would go to the southwest, New Mexico, and spend the winters there, and they believe that he purchased this rug, uh, sometime between 1916 and prior to 1930.

Eduardo: What can I help you find out?

Bob: I would like to know the history behind the symbolism, the figure in the middle. And, uh, perhaps, uh, we could put a...a identify on the weaver.

Eduardo: Bob, these are very interesting questions. I'd like to take the rug with me. And I hope I could come back with some interesting answers.

Bob: That would be great.

Eduardo: The fabric is pretty thick. This certainly feels like its wool. But, I'm not a textile expert and I've never studied rugs. Bob believes this is a turn of the century Navajo rug, though he doesn't have any proof. I grew up in Arizona among Navajo kids, and Navajo culture has always been an interest of mine. So I do know a little bit about Navajo beliefs. And certainly some of the symbols on the rug – the feather, the arrow, - those are from American Indian culture. But whether this is a period Navajo rug I can't say. The one image that catches my eye is this symbol down here. Many people would associate it with the swastika. But, it’s an image that predates Nazi Germany, and many cultures around the world have used this image. To Buddhists, the symbol represents good fortune - and for the Navajo it’s known as the whirling log and symbolizes the four cardinal directions. The central figure is certainly compelling, though I’m not certain what it represents. Anthropologists believe the Navajo have lived in the southwest since the early 1300’s – their first woven works were likely straw baskets. From the beginning their weaving was connected to their creation stories. In the Navajo creation narrative, the Dine or the people were led from the underworld to the southwest by the holy people. Using sunshine, lightning, and rain, spider man taught the Navajo how to build a loom and spider woman taught them to weave. Through trade with the Spanish in the 1600’s, the Navajo acquired sheep. The neighboring Pueblo Indians introduced them to the upright loom. Navajo-made horse blankets and eventually rugs became the most sought after in the southwest. I’ve discovered a lot of helpful information about Navajo rugs, but I’m not finding what I need about the symbols. I’m headed to Chinle, Arizona; the Navajo nation covers 26,000 square miles, with land in 3 states.
Today there are over 180,000 Navajo living here. Johnson Dennison is a Navajo medicine man trained in healing songs and prayers. Mr. Dennison.

Mr. Dennison: Yes.

Eduardo: Yá’át’ééh. I’m Eduardo.

Mr. Dennison: Come on in.

Eduardo: Thank you. Can you tell me whether the symbols on this rug are part of Navajo culture?

Mr. Dennison: Yeah, they, uh…these are the common symbols in the Navajo. But it’s not common for weavers to weave something like this. About a warrior, it is about a warrior who is holding…the lightning bolt. And in our mythology, the great warriors of the Navajo people, use the, uh, lightning bolt to destroy. As you can see, there’s three feathers that he has on the forehead. Uh, that is the warrior’s plume.

Eduardo: He says the figure is known as monster slayer, a character who battles evil forces in the Navajo creation story. The monster slayer together with arrows and snakes, are often found in sand paintings, a key part of Navajo healing ceremonies. In the ceremonies, medicine men use colored sand to depict these symbols in elaborate paintings.

Mr. Dennison: When that sand painting is constructed, the patient sits on the sand painting for healing.

Eduardo: The sand paintings call in protective deities on behalf of the sick. But when the ceremony is complete, the painting and its symbols are destroyed, releasing the summoned spirits. Mr. Dennison explains that these images were never meant to be permanent.

Mr. Dennison: Some Navajo say that shouldn’t have been done. But on other hand, the weavers, uh…it’s…it’s really up to the weavers to decide what and how they weave. Even though that, uh, the weaving of the deity design are forbidden in the Navajo culture, some people still do.
Eduardo: Mr. Dennison suggests that to really understand the prohibitions regarding Navajo symbols, I'll need to talk to a traditional Navajo weaver. Crownpoint, New Mexico has been home to Navajo weavers for decades. Hi, Bonnie. I'm Eduardo. Bonnie Benally Yazzie, is a traditional Navajo weaver.

Bonnie: Weaving is very important to our Navajo culture, because it teaches us the stories, and the songs, and the histories of the Navajo weaving. And it also makes us, um, a whole person again. That's how I usually feel when I finish my rug. I feel like I completed a story. I completed a world.

Eduardo: Bonnie has offered to show me the basics. So now I just slide that through...

Bonnie: There, you missed one string.

Eduardo: Ok then...

Bonnie: Don't be afraid!

Eduardo: Ok, hard?

Bonnie: Yes. Uh huh. You're doing good.

Eduardo: Bonnie gives the rug a blessing honoring the its weaver, and the gods of the four directions. Bonnie, what is your impression as a weaver?

Bonnie: It's a very powerful rug to me. When I first saw at a first glance, was a black god, that represents the protection way.

Eduardo: The “protection way” is one of the traditional Navajo healing ceremonies that Mr. Dennison told me about. He called the figure a warrior, but Bonnie calls it a ‘black god,’ representing the night sky. Bonnie says this symbol, like many of the others, was never meant to be woven into a rug.
Bonnie: This whirling log, the wind way, it’s supposed to have been temporary. It’s supposed to have been erased in…before the sun goes down. But it’s permanent now. And, um, the black god I consider it a holy being, uh, a holy person. Um, because he’s holding that lightning. That is too bold for a weaver to, uh, to weave.

Eduardo: Bonnie, did the weaver break a taboo in weaving these sacred symbols in this rug?

Bonnie: Um, yes, she did break a lot of taboos. And, they did say that, uh, when you break a taboo, what nature’s laws you have broken, you will walk into it in the future. And it will harm you.

Eduardo: I ask Bonnie why a weaver would contradict Navajo practices. She tells me that her community’s weaving tradition shifted over a hundred years ago, after a tragic chapter in Navajo history. In the mid 1860’s thousands of Navajo and Apache were herded from their lands and held captive around Fort Sumner, New Mexico. I remember this from my reading. After a five year enforced exile, the Navajo returned to their homeland to find their herds decimated and fields destroyed. Trading became an economic necessity, and Bonnie says this had an effect on weaving, and its connection to the Navajo’s spiritual life.

Bonnie: The traders had a lot to do with influencing and changing the way of Navajo weaving. They told the weavers to start weaving a more bolder type of design that will sell.

Eduardo: As tourists began arriving on the newly completed Santa Fe railroad in the 1880s, weavers began producing more colorful patterns and eventually, around 1910, even rugs with sacred Navajo images.

Bonnie: Maybe even this rug, the trader maybe influenced this weaver to become bold and weave in what she was not supposed to have woven.

Eduardo: Bonnie says that while traders viewed these rugs as a profitable commodity, to the weavers, their work was always sacred. Is there any way for you to know who wove the rug that I’m investigating?
Bonnie: I would not know the name of the weaver. Because the weavers from back then, in the
early time, did not weave for recognition.

Eduardo: She says that few weavers’ names were remembered. But she can guess something
about the weaver.

Bonnie: I think… of a weaver that is really fearless. She’s bold - her family would have told her not
to weave that. I still would like to know that weaver.

Eduardo: Now I’m really intrigued. I’m at the Notah Dineh trading company and museum in
Cortez, Colorado, which sells Navajo rugs, purchased from local weavers. They also have a small
museum of rare antique rugs. I’m Eduardo, nice to meet you. Laurie Webster, is a cultural
anthropologist and specialist in Navajo textiles. She recognizes the central figure immediately.

Laurie: Most scholars identify this as a Yeibichai figure. Um… the Yeibichai is a… a human who
is impersonating one of the holy people in the Nightway ceremony.

Eduardo: Is there any way to date this?

Laurie: Well… it’s really hard to date this just on the materials in the rug because it’s all
handspun, and the dyes are a synthetic aniline dye. And those materials show up in rugs from
late 1800’s all the way up into the mid to late, 1900’s. The best way to date this rug is on the
basis of its style.

Eduardo: Laurie tells me that the whirling log motif disappeared by World War Two. Many Navajo
served in the military, and the symbol took on Nazi connotations.

Laurie: It’s…this is part of a genre of rugs that, um, was made in the Farmington, New Mexico
area between about 1900 and 1920.

Eduardo: She says after 1920 the style changed - weavers stopped making the single figure rugs
- and a new style, featuring a whole row of figures, became more popular with tourists and
traders.
Laurie: There’s probably only about maybe 20 of these that were made, so this a really rare rug.

Eduardo: Is there any way to determine who made this rug?

Laurie: There’s very few rugs that are actually associated with a known weaver’s name. One of the exceptions is actually rugs that are attributed to a weaver named Yahnahpah. She is known to have made at least 2, possibly 4 rugs just like this.

Eduardo: Yahnahpah grew up in the Gallegos (guy-yay-gose) Canyon area of New Mexico, the daughter of Hoshclessnetso, a prominent Navajo elder. She would have been intimately familiar with the symbols and stories of the Navajo. Laurie tells me that when Yahnapah was 16, she married Richard Simpson, an Englishman who ran the local Indian trading post. It’s believed that she wove her first Yeibichai rug soon after her wedding. Why would she risk breaking a cultural taboo to weave this figure?

Laurie: Well, it’s difficult for, um, a non-Navajo or the non-weaver to really know. But, certainly...we do know that these rugs were selling for several hundred dollars, and so they were very, very valuable rugs. Now, it’s possible that they modified the design in some way, um... to protect themselves. Um, other scholars have pointed out that perhaps it was safer for weavers to weave, um, a Yeibichai, a human impersonator of the holy people, as opposed to weaving the actual deity.

Eduardo: Laurie wants to show me a rug on display in the museums’ collection.

Laurie: This is, uh, one of two rugs known to have been made by Yahnahpah. It’s believed this rug was made about 1911.

Eduardo: So... these look very similar. Is there any way that I can determine whether this rug that I’m investigating was woven by Yahnahpah? Laurie says there are some telltale signs that reveal an individual weaver’s technique. One of these is the way the weaver ties her selvage cords.

Laurie: These are the colored cords that run along the edge of the rug.
Eduardo: Laurie carefully compares selvage cords, and other aspects of the rug’s craftsmanship. What Laurie tells me next will thrill Bob. Bob, in a lot of ways this story is much larger than just a rug itself, but involves the history of weaving among the Navajo people; both from an economic perspective, but also from a spiritual perspective. The first question you asked me to answer is who was the central figure in this rug.

Eduardo: I tell Bob that Mr. Dennison saw the figure as a monster slayer, Bonnie interpreted it as the black god, and Laurie’s verdict was a Yeibichai dancer. All are ceremonial figures.

Bob: Very interesting.

Eduardo: And the weaver that I spoke with shared with me that the images in this rug are so powerful that she would never weave them herself, or display them in her home.


Eduardo: And you also asked me to discover who wove this rug and when. And I have to tell you that these were very tough questions to answer. But I was lucky enough to find an expert in historic Navajo textiles who was able to provide some of the answers.

Laurie: There’s definitely a lot of similar attributes between these rugs. The lazy lines are laid out in the same way, the tapestry joins are made in the same way, the end cords and side cords are twisted in the same direction.

Eduardo: And what does that tell you?

Laurie: It tells us that we can’t rule out the possibility that these rugs were made by the same person. And that that person would have been Yahnahpah.

Eduardo: Laurie tells me even if the rug Bob found wasn’t made by Yahnahpah, it was probably made by someone close to her. I tell Bob that this rug illustrates a unique moment in Navajo history. The influence of non-Navajo traders changed the craft of weaving. But rugs made for sale
had also provided a commercial lifeline at a time when the traditional Navajo way of life was under siege. What you have here is a very rare and important piece of history.

Bob: Phew! I am speechless. Yeah. This is a lot bigger than what I thought it was. This is a...a significant artifact.

Eduardo: Yahnahpah is only known to have made four rugs in her short lifetime – she died at 24 of Tuberculosis, one of the most common causes of death at the time. Native Americans are often divided on what to do with these rare rugs. Some believe they should be ‘repatriated’ or returned to tribal representatives. Others feel appropriate museums are a good home, where they can be cared for and exhibited as examples of Native American artistry. Contemporary weavers face their own complex relationship with their work. Some believe “spider woman” has endowed them with a talent to provide for their families and communities. Others hold that the commercial marketplace is not appropriate for a spiritual gift.