

Patterns of Exchange: Navajo Weavers and Traders.* Teresa J. Wilkins. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2008. 248 pp.

Reviewed by Maureen Trudelle Schwarz

In *Patterns of Exchange: Navajo Weavers and Traders*, Teresa Wilkins has broken new ground on what is often considered a hackneyed topic through inclusion of Navajo cultural conceptions of reciprocity or “helping,” personhood, *k'é* (or ‘kinship’), and journeying. As noted by the author in the book’s introduction, heretofore scholars have tended to focus separately on weavers, traders, or dealers rather than on the interactions between these groups. In marked contrast, she chooses to focus on the shared conversations that have shaped and defined these groups as well as the culture of the Navajo trading post through time.

In her opening chapter, Wilkins demonstrates through nuanced analysis how traders carefully marketed Navajo textiles in the 1880-1920 period to Euro-Americans struggling with an identity crisis brought on by a sense of being “over-civilized.” The resulting anti-modernist movement and the growing desire for “Indian Rooms” in Victorian homes offered the opportunity for increased sales of textiles by so-called primitive craftspeople. The rug boom was on!

To date, many scholars of Navajo weaving have claimed that traders dictated what rugs should look like in terms of color and design. The penultimate example of supposed trader influence are the rug paintings commissioned by John Lorenzo Hubbell between 1897 and 1907, which are now found on the walls of the rug room in the Hubbell Trading post in Ganado, Arizona. Most authors cite these paintings as an attempt on the part of Hubbell to revive the old textile patterns through encouraging weavers to copy the designs. By means of analysis of historic rug catalogue texts from several prominent traders including Hubbell, C. N. Cotton, and J. B. Moore, review of journals of the day, and ethnographic research with family members of weavers who worked for these traders, Wilkins turns this argument on its head. She demonstrates instead that Navajo women considered the designs and color choices used in their textiles to be their own.

In chapter 4, Wilkins employs Navajo understandings of personhood, agency, and individual autonomy to discredit this long-standing misunderstanding. Navajo exegeses reveal that an accommodation and resistance analysis does not take into account the fact that weavers’ consider their woven products to be “alive and related to their producers, nor does it address the implications of inalienability for the copying process” (p. 99). Because rugs embody the personal qualities of their producers, consultants reported being able to feel the persons of the weavers of old rugs they were asked to copy (p. 103). Their refusal to do so was based on fear of contracting illness or other problems due to contact with a deceased individual (p. 104).

In chapters 5 and 6, Wilkins demonstrates how the Navajo concepts of reciprocity and kinship illuminate the trading relationship. In discussing relations with traders in English, consultants consistently use the term “helping.” This refers to Navajo beliefs about never refusing aid when it is requested. From the perspective of those whom Wilkins interviewed and those whose voices

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have been captured in oral history interviews, good traders were always there to help out when needed. Narrative after narrative demonstrates how they loaned money, offered credit, bought every rug offered, and gave food to the hungry.

In chapter 6, Wilkins discusses how weavers used *k'é* to facilitate relations with traders. Fictive kin relations were established with traders for community members to fit them into their social world. Navajo people understand what their obligations are to relatives; and they quickly taught trader-relatives what their social obligations were as well. How such relationships worked for the benefit of both parties is well demonstrated in a touching section on stories about the sale of first rugs in chapter 6. These accounts effectively reveal the interdependency of weavers and traders as well as the vulnerability of traders. Elderly women still remember the praise received when they brought in their first rug and perhaps the kind hearted teasing when they returned with their second. Weavers recall traders encouraging them to use evenly spun yarns, to keep the edges straight, to use harmonious colors, etc. They remember this as helpful advice rather than as criticism. Clearly, each trader wanted to encourage nascent weavers to continue to weave because their very existence depended on the skill of weavers in the local community.

My only quibble lies with chapter 7. Here Wilkins attempts to tie the importance of motion and action—evidenced, in Navajo language, by the 356,200 known conjugations of the verb “to go” and, in Navajo culture, by the origin story that recounts emergence through multiple subterranean worlds—to the concept of journeying. There is no question that journeying is a cultural imperative, however, as the chapter stands it lacks clarity. In my opinion it would have been stronger if it had opened with the historical material about Navajo weavers and their families who worked for the Fred Harvey Company or traveled to Worlds Fairs, Expositions, or to other venues as demonstrators and if the examples had been kept in chronological order.

In sum, Wilkins is to be applauded for seeking out the relational aspects of trading experience through time, for not limiting her analysis to the historical period, and most importantly, for using Navajo cultural perspectives—helping, personhood, kinship, and journeying. These latter mentioned concepts shed much needed light on a complex set of human relationships that has too often been reduced to economics.

Maureen Trudelle Schwarz is a Professor in the Department of Anthropology at Syracuse University. She is the author of many works, including the books: Blood and Voice: The Life-Courses of Navajo Women Ceremonial Practitioners (University of Arizona Press, 2003) and Navajo Lifeways: Contemporary Issues, Ancestral Knowledge (University of Oklahoma Press, 2001). Her newest work explores how Navajo people accommodate biomedical technology within their religiously and medically pluralistic world and is titled I Choose Life: Contemporary Medical and Religious Practices in the Navajo World (University of Oklahoma Press, 2008).