

CURT CACIOPPO: WOMB OF THE SACRED MOUNTAINS



IV. Monsterslayer (*Nayéñžgani*)

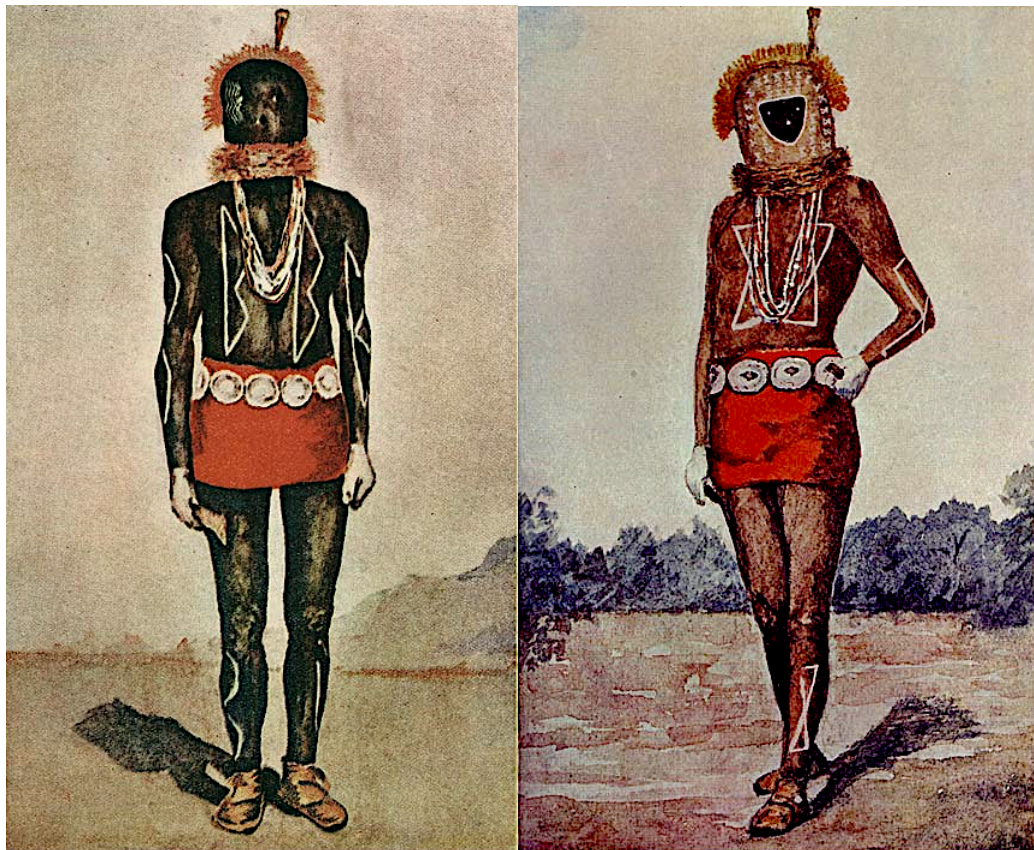
Navajo creation stories tell of a battle which made the world safe for human emergence. The episode involves five central players. Four of these belong to a holy family, and they are: Tsóhanoai, the Sun Carrier and his wife Estsánatlehi, Changing Woman (the principal Navajo deity, who is under the power of none); and their sons Nayéñžgani, Monsterslayer (the main hero figure in Navajo belief), and his brother To'badžistsíni, Child of the Water, also known by his war name Naidikísi, He Who Cuts the Life out of the Enemy. Then there is the child eating monster giant Yéitso, who disturbs all sacred harmony. The boys (whom Yéitso threatens to eat for lunch someday) were brought into the world primarily for the purpose of tracking down and destroying this monster, who ironically turns out to be their older sibling, the illegitimate product of their father's infidelity. The two youths receive weapons from the sun god, counsel from Changing Woman, training from other holy beings beyond their family, and aid from Níłch'i, the wind. Riding on flexible bands of rainbow, they hunt down the monster, exchange insults with him and enter into combat. Dodging his heavy arrows, they fire their volleys, and with an assisting blow struck by Tsóhanoai, triumph in felling Yéitso. Serenity and security are restored, and though Yéitso's body is transformed into raw materials that people can use to good ends, the youths remain vigilant.

The Navajo expression of this fundamental story line holds deep significance for me personally and as a student of Native American culture. The number four is sacred in Navajo religion, and in writing for our western string quartet, I saw the obvious parallel. With the idea in mind of basing a programmatic work on the Nayéñžgani story, a further parallel emerged. Navajo legends come down in various forms as a result of oral transmission. Sources agree that Nayéñžgani and To'badžistsíni are brothers, but differ as to their exact relationship. One version suggests that they are twins (another has them as half brothers, and one interpretation sees them as the passive and dynamic components of a single personality). I thought of the correspondence between twin brothers and the twin instruments in the string quartet (the two violins), and assigned roles to the two other members of the ensemble as well: the viola represents Changing Woman, and the cello -- after tuning its c string down a half step to b -- represents Yéitso. The sun deity, as well as other characters in the story -- Níłch'i the wind, and the four mysterious beings from the cardinal points -- are represented by the ensemble sound as a whole.

The brothers in the story further correspond to my two sons, Charles and Nicholas, who are represented in the musical material of the piece. In the Scherzo, one of the

motifs that the instruments toss around is a little figure I heard Nic singing one morning during his pre-school days. The ostinato of the last movement originated in the following way. While packing to move house from Boston to Philadelphia years ago, I was repetitively writing Chuck's name in magic marker on the many boxes of his belongings. The swish of the felt tip against the cardboard created a distinct rhythmic pattern, which eventually turned into the present ground.

The principal material of the work evolved out of a system of scales, intervals, chords and rhythms that I derived from numerological, directional and other elements of Navajo cosmology. Although the connected movements more or less follow sonata form, song form, scherzo-trio-da capo and rondo form respectively, the sequence of ideas is often abstractly determined in correspondence with Navajo song structures, particularly those of the yeibichai melodies. The performance technique called for in the first movement of batting the string with the taut hair of the bow alludes to the drumming practiced in the Enemyway ceremony -- every stroke of the beater is said to drive the ghosts of dead foes further into the ground. Sliding from note to note in certain melodic passages approximates the style of music played on the Apache fiddle, a tubular one or two stringed instrument made out of a length of mescal root. The broad structure of the quartet models itself after that of most Navajo ceremonies, in which an initial purification rite paves the way for recitation of chosen episodes from the creation story. This quartet concludes the cycle of four that make up WOMB OF THE SACRED MOUNTAINS.



Nayénězgaṇi

To'badzıstsíni