

# ETHNOPOETIC RETRANSLATION OF A ZUNI RITUAL SONG SEQUENCE

M. JANE YOUNG

## INTRODUCTION

The following is my retranslation of a religious song set collected by Ruth Bunzel in the 1930s from the Zuni Indians, a Pueblo group located in western New Mexico.<sup>1</sup> I undertook the retranslation of this text primarily to emphasize the ethnopoeitic quality of the songs but also to demonstrate that Zuni ritual poetry and sacred narratives are generally organized into major divisions on the basis of temporal components (such as the yearly and daily travels of the sun, the recurrent phases of the moon, the necessary number of days that have passed on the ritual calendar, and so on). The reader will note, for example, that the various sections of the song set (indicated primarily by the combinations of capital and lowercase roman numerals to the right of the text) are determined by phrases that refer to temporal events or directional elements. It is significant that such temporal and cosmological markers are also organizing principles of much of Zuni visual art, operating in secular as well as sacred contexts.<sup>2</sup>

Since my retranslation is based on a text collected by Bunzel, I cannot take into account important ethnopoeitic elements that she did not include, such as breath pauses, pitch, intonation, and vowel lengthening; Bunzel did state that she arranged the text into lines on the basis of "the important poetic stress . . . on the final syllable of the line."<sup>3</sup> In most cases the lines of my retranslation parallel

Bunzel's; unlike Bunzel, however, I have spaced and indented these lines to reveal their structural parallelism. In addition to the repeated overall structure of certain lines, I have based my analysis on the use of identical or strikingly similar initial particles and, in some cases, on the occurrence of the same verb suffixes at the ends of lines. Since the Zuni text is not included here, I have tried to make this resonant poetic structure apparent both in the line indentations and spacing of my English translation and in the translation itself, following Zuni patterns of repetition where possible. The language in which Zuni sacred songs, poems, and narratives are rendered is quite different from the everyday language, which remains the language of social discourse today, although many tribal members are also fluent in English. Zuni sacred language, archaic Zuni, is an esoteric version of the language with its own special forms and meanings; this is evident linguistically and in the nearly codified metaphors and phrases that are repeated in these narrative forms.<sup>4</sup>

The songs that follow constitute the "Songs for Pouring in the Water" of the Great Fire Society, one of the Zuni medicine societies (societies of men and women whose main function is healing). Bunzel indicated that she was permitted to collect the text for only part of the song cycle; those most sacred songs that should not be shared with the non-Zuni were withheld from her.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, she recorded only the words of the songs, not the accompanying music; to my knowledge, this music has never been recorded.

The various repetitions that conclude this sequence emphasize its songlike quality. It is especially significant that the three final songs, which I have set off from the rest of the text by single-spacing and asterisks, are the most songlike of the entire sequence and comprise six "stanzas" apiece. As is obvious in each song set (III, V, and VI), the number six is integral to the network of symbolic associations that the Zuni link with directionality. Each direction is related to a particular beast-god and color: this cosmological scheme also includes six rain priests of the six directions, six rain-bringing winds, six varieties of birds, six kinds of trees, and so on in an almost endless cycle of related elements. According to Zuni mythology, six Beast-Gods guard the world. They are the yellow mountain lion of the north, the blue bear of the west, the red badger of the south, the white wolf of the east, the speckled or all-colored eagle of the zenith, and the black mole of the nadir. Sometimes Knife Wing (the mythical being with wings and a tail of knives) rather than the eagle is associated with the zenith. These directional images are visually rendered on the walls of religious houses and meeting rooms, incor-

porated into the performance of most ritual actions (such as offering sacred cornmeal and smoke to the six directions), and repeated in the religious narratives that frequently describe, and are central to, these ceremonial activities. Zuni regard such repetition as essential to the efficacy of religious behavior and the fulfillment of the requests that conclude ritual prayers (for example, having long life, or "finishing" one's "road").

The song set is performed when the Great Fire Society convenes for the first time each year, in November at the full moon (the fifth through seventh lines of my translation: "there to the east now, / standing full above the horizon, / she makes her days into finished beings"; section II [i] indicates that this occurs before the winter solstice: "yet a little space remained," which is poetically referred to as being attained when the sun father reaches "his left-hand sacred dwelling place"). Before sunset on this day, the male members of this society assemble in their ceremonial house ("our healing water room"). Prior to this time they erected an altar against the west wall of the room, according to customary Zuni ritual practice. The female members of the society bring food to the ceremonial room as well as "perfect" corn ears, used as religious offerings, which will be placed on the altar. At sunset the society's choir begins to sing the songs that constitute "Songs for Pouring in the Water."

The initial part of the song sequence sets the temporal and ritual stage for the remaining lines. Essentially this part of the song describes the ritual actions (offering prayer sticks, sacred cornmeal, shells, seedlings) undertaken by the society members ("those who wish to grow old"). In the second sentence of section II [ii], the actions and pronouns change from third person plural to the first person singular as the medicine-society chief creates the cornmeal painting on the altar and on the floor between the altar and the door opposite ("having finished the cumulus cloud house" of his fathers and "having sent forth their life-giving sacred roads"). At this time he also sets up the corn ears brought by the women and adds other religious items to the altar, including seedlings that have been specially grown for this purpose. Then he positions the bowl for the medicine water (his "white-shell bowl"), mixes the medicine (invoking from the six directions the "healing waters" of the rainmaker priests, sections II[iii]–III[vi]). Integral to the act of mixing the medicine is that of pouring in water from four sacred gourds (four is a number that is related to directionality, as is the number six—both are central to Zuni ritual activity<sup>6</sup>). Next the medicine-society chief appeals to the beast-gods of the six directions (V[i]–VI[vi]), allud-

ing to the fact that at the winter solstice the shamans of the medicine societies *become* these beast-gods ("we shall be one person") as the sick are cured. Finally the medicine-society chief adds sacred pebbles in the colors associated with the six directions to the medicine bowl (VI[i]–[vi]), stating that when society members ("our children") drink these "healing waters," they will have long life ("their roads will be finished"), and they will go to Dawn Lake upon their death.

As Bunzel noted, Zuni ritual poetry and narratives entail the creative and purposeful use of ambiguity, metaphor, and wordplay: "There are passages where subject and object are deliberately confounded, although there are excellent means for avoiding such ambiguity. These sentences are perfectly grammatical and can be correctly interpreted in two ways."<sup>7</sup> More recently, in her discussion of the Zuni system of aesthetics that encompasses both verbal and visual codes, Barbara Tedlock has suggested that the Zuni concept of beauty is predicated on a great love of variety in all things. She describes this aesthetic as dynamic, clear, exciting: multilayered, multilingual, multisensory, multitextured, and multicolored.<sup>8</sup> Although Tedlock does not precisely state this, I believe her discussion points to an aesthetic based on the kind of intentional ambiguity described by Bunzel—an elaborate redundancy of symbolism that gives rise to the operation of a multiplicity of meanings or interpretations in Zuni sacred and secular environments.

The Zuni creatively use multiple meanings or, as termed by Bunzel,<sup>9</sup> "double entendres" in daily conversation as well as in more formal genres of verbal art, such as folktales, myths, and ritual poetry. One might be surprised by the use of wordplay in ritual poems—that is, prayers that are integral to Zuni ceremonialism reveal a number of poetic features, and consist of highly stereotyped phrases and sequential arrangements that the Zuni consider efficacious only when rendered exactly as they were learned, with no change in wording or structure.<sup>10</sup> Yet Bunzel's analysis of Zuni ritual poetry yields a plethora of such examples, suggesting that humor and delight in the use of metaphor are as much a part of the verbal component of Zuni ritual as they are a part of the ceremonial enactments in which such speech occurs.

For instance, in the eighth line of the following text, the phrase "Our spring children" refers simultaneously to members of the Great Fire Society who have drunk from the sacred "spring," or bowl of medicine water on the altar, and to the bowl itself. Similarly, although the meaning is quite esoteric, "Those who at the First Beginning / were given the world, / the bushes, / the forest," in

the fourteenth through seventeenth lines, alludes to the particular kind of wood that is used for prayer sticks (offerings made up of pieces of wood to which bird feathers, functioning to carry one's prayers to the gods, are tied). "First Beginning" refers to the myth time when the people traveled through four underworlds by means of four different trees (and with the aid of four different kinds of birds) to reach the surface of the earth; offering prayer sticks recalls that time. In the first line of the sentence that concludes section I[i], "our daylight fathers" indicates human beings—that is, "finished beings" who are "cooked" as opposed to the "divine ones" (also described as "those who are fortunate" in section I[i]), mentioned in section I[ii], who are "raw beings," a category that includes all the supernaturals and other sorts of nonhuman beings.<sup>11</sup>

Throughout the song set a person's "road" means that person's allotted life span, which may be cut short by various misfortunes; thus, one prays to "finish" one's "road." When the medicine-society members offer sacred cornmeal to the six directions (and the beast-gods who guard those directions), they are "making their sacred roads go forth" (that is, the sacred roads of the supernaturals); they also "bring their sacred roads in" when they invoke these beings to be present during the ritual that is taking place.

Due to the limitations of space, I cannot discuss all of the many ambiguous or highly metaphoric phrases employed in this poem-song; these examples should, however, give the reader some idea of the multivocality of Zuni sacred narrative. This ability to refer to or evoke a number of meanings at the same time contributes to an intensification of experience—a verbal interaction that frequently results in a "tremendous compression of both emotion and concepts" in the metaphoric utterance.<sup>12</sup> It is this compression of emotion and concept that accounts for the affect and, hence, the power of this verbal imagery.



#### NOTES

1. Ruth L. Bunzel, *Introduction to Zuñi Ceremonialism; Zuñi Origin Myths; Zuñi Ritual Poetry; Zuñi Katcinas: An Analytical Study*, in the Forty-seventh

*A Zuni Ritual Song Sequence*

Annual Report of the Bureau of American Ethnology for the Years 1929-1930 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1932), 782-91.

2. M. Jane Young, *Signs from the Ancestors: Zuni Cultural Symbolism and Perceptions of Rock Art* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1988), 95-119.

3. Bunzel, *Introduction to Zuñi Ceremonialism*, 620.

4. Stanley Newman, "Vocabulary Levels: Zuñi Sacred and Slang Usage," *Southwestern Journal of Anthropology* 11 (1955): 345-54.

5. Bunzel, *Introduction to Zuñi Ceremonialism*, 785.

6. See Young, *Signs from the Ancestors*, 98-107.

7. Bunzel, *Introduction to Zuñi Ceremonialism*, 619.

8. Barbara Tedlock, *The Beautiful and the Dangerous: Encounters with the Zuni Indians* (New York: Viking Press, 1992), 51, 191, 232, 269.

9. Bunzel, *Introduction to Zuñi Ceremonialism*, 619.

10. *Ibid.*, 616, 618.

11. Young, *Signs from the Ancestors*, 56.

12. Robert J. Smith, *The Art of the Festival*, University of Kansas Publications in Anthropology no. 6 (Lawrence: University of Kansas Libraries, 1975), 99.

## SONGS FOR POURING IN THE WATER

Now, enough days have passed

I[i]

since the moon who is our mother,  
there to the west,  
still appeared to be small;  
there to the east now,  
standing full above the horizon,  
she makes her days into finished beings.

Our spring children,  
those who wish to grow old,  
carrying sacred cornmeal,  
carrying shells,  
there with prayer  
we make your sacred roads go forth.

Those who at the First Beginning  
were given the world,  
the bushes,  
the forest,  
we meet them there.

Those who are fortunate,  
at their feet  
sacred cornmeal,  
shell  
we offer  
from our fingertips  
as we look to the sacred directions.

Those who are fortunate,  
pulling seedlings,  
drawing them toward them,  
those who stay there quietly,  
their finished roads holding,  
their old age holding,  
we bring their sacred roads in.

Our daylight fathers,  
our mothers,  
our children

to our healing water room  
we make their sacred roads come in.

Enough days have passed

I[ii]

since the divine ones  
with us, their children,  
have lived their days on the earth.

Now this very day

I[iii]

for the beast-god priests—  
for their ceremony—  
we have prepared prayer sticks.

When the sun who is our father

II[i]

was about to go in to his sacred dwelling place  
and sit down,  
when yet a little space remained  
before he could reach his left-hand sacred dwelling place,  
to our fathers  
we offered prayer sticks,  
to our house,  
bringing their sacred roads in.

There from all the directions

II[ii]

those who are our fathers,  
the divine ones,  
with none among them missing,  
their sacred roads we will bring out.

My fathers,  
having finished their cumulus-cloud house,  
having spread out their mist blanket,  
having sent forth their life-giving sacred roads,  
having put down their rainbow-colored bow,  
having put down their lightning arrow,  
I shall sit down quietly.

I shall quietly set down my white-shell bowl.



*THE SOUTHWEST AND SOUTHEAST*

There from all the directions

II[iii]

you, our fathers, will come.

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There from the north

III[i]

rainmaker priests,

carrying their healing water,

will make their sacred roads come forth.

Where my white-shell bowl lies,

four times

they will make their sacred roads come in.

There from the west

III[ii]

rainmaker priests,

carrying their healing water,

will make their sacred roads come forth.

Where my white-shell bowl lies,

four times

they will make their sacred roads come in.

There from the south

III[iii]

rainmaker priests,

carrying their healing water,

will make their sacred roads come forth.

Where my white-shell bowl lies,

four times

they will make their sacred roads come in.

There from the east

III[iv]

rainmaker priests,

carrying their healing water,

will make their sacred roads come forth.

Where my white-shell bowl lies,

four times

they will make their sacred roads come in.

▲

There from above  
rainmaker priests,  
carrying their healing water,  
will make their sacred roads come forth. III[v]

Where my white-shell bowl lies,  
four times  
they will make their sacred roads come in.

There from below  
rainmaker priests,  
carrying their healing water,  
will make their sacred roads come forth. III[vi]

Where my white-shell bowl lies,  
four times  
they will make their sacred roads come in.

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When you have sat down quietly,  
our children  
will drink  
your healing waters. IV

Then, their sacred roads reaching  
to Dawn Lake,  
their roads will be finished.

\*\*\*\*\*

And furthermore,  
there from the north  
you who are my father,  
mountain lion,  
the one who completes my road,  
you are my priest;  
carrying your medicine,  
you will make your sacred road come here. V[i]

Where my white-shell bowl lies,  
four times

*THE SOUTHWEST AND SOUTHEAST*

you make your sacred road come in;  
watch over my spring.

When you sit down quietly,  
we shall be one person.

And furthermore,  
there from the west  
you who are my father,  
bear,  
the one who completes my road,  
you are my priest;  
carrying your medicine,  
you will make your sacred road come here.

V[ii]

Where my white-shell bowl lies,  
four times  
you make your sacred road come in;  
watch over my spring.

When you sit down quietly,  
we shall be one person.

And furthermore,  
there from the south  
you who are my father,  
badger,  
the one who completes my road,  
you are my priest;  
carrying your medicine,  
you will make your sacred road come here.

V[iii]

Where my white-shell bowl lies,  
four times  
you make your sacred road come in;  
watch over my spring.

When you sit down quietly,  
we shall be one person.

\*\*\*\*\*

And furthermore,  
there from the east

V[iv]

*A Zuni Ritual Song Sequence*

you who are my father,  
wolf,  
the one who completes my road,  
you are my priest;  
carrying your medicine,  
you will make your sacred road come here.

Where my white-shell bowl lies,  
four times  
you make your sacred road come in;  
watch over my spring.

When you sit down quietly,  
we shall be one person.

And furthermore, V[v]  
there from above,  
you who are my father,  
knife wing,  
the one who completes my road,  
you are my priest;  
carrying your medicine,  
you will make your sacred road come here.

Where my white-shell bowl lies,  
four times  
you make your sacred road come in;  
watch over my spring.

When you sit down quietly,  
we shall be one person.

And furthermore, V[vi]  
there from below,  
you who are my father,  
mole,  
the one who completes my road,  
you are my priest;  
carrying your medicine,  
you will make your sacred road come here.

*THE SOUTHWEST AND SOUTHEAST*

Where my white-shell bowl lies,  
four times  
you make your sacred road come in;  
watch over my spring.

When you sit down quietly,  
we shall be one person.

\*\*\*\*\*

And furthermore,  
there from the north  
the mossy mountains,  
the mountaintops,  
the middle slopes,  
the ravines opening out,  
you are the one who has the world in your keeping;  
ancient yellow stone,  
you will make your sacred road come here.

VI[i]

Where my white-shell bowl lies,  
four times  
you make your sacred road come in.

When you have sat down quietly,  
our children  
will drink  
your healing waters.

Then, their sacred roads reaching  
to Dawn Lake,  
their roads will be finished.

And furthermore,  
there from the west  
the mossy mountains,  
the mountaintops,  
the middle slopes,  
the ravines opening out,  
you are the one who has the world in your keeping;  
ancient blue stone,  
you will make your sacred road come here.

VI[ii]

*A Zuni Ritual Song Sequence*

Where my white-shell bowl lies,  
four times  
you make your sacred road come in.

When you have sat down quietly,  
our children  
will drink  
your healing waters.

Then, their sacred roads reaching  
to Dawn Lake,  
their roads will be finished.

And furthermore,  
there from the south  
the mossy mountains,  
the mountaintops,  
the middle slopes,  
the ravines opening out,  
you are the one who has the world in your keeping;  
ancient red stone,  
you will make your sacred road come here.

VI[iii]

Where my white-shell bowl lies,  
four times  
you make your sacred road come in.

When you have sat down quietly,  
our children  
will drink  
your healing waters.

Then, their sacred roads reaching  
to Dawn Lake,  
their roads will be finished.

And furthermore,  
there from the east  
the mossy mountains,  
the mountaintops,  
the middle slopes,  
the ravines opening out,

VI[iv]

*THE SOUTHWEST AND SOUTHEAST*

you are the one who has the world in your keeping;  
ancient white stone,  
you will make your sacred road come here.

Where my white-shell bowl lies,  
four times  
you make your sacred road come in.

When you have sat down quietly,  
our children  
will drink  
your healing waters.

Then, their sacred roads reaching  
to Dawn Lake,  
their roads will be finished.

And furthermore,  
there from above,  
the mossy mountains,  
the mountaintops,  
the middle slopes,  
the ravines opening out,  
you are the one who has the world in your keeping;  
ancient many-colored stone,  
you will make your sacred road come here.

VI[v]

Where my white-shell bowl lies,  
four times  
you make your sacred road come in.

When you have sat down quietly,  
our children  
will drink  
your healing waters.

Then, their sacred roads reaching  
to Dawn Lake,  
their roads will be finished.

And furthermore,  
there from below,

VI[vi]

*A Zuni Ritual Song Sequence*

the mossy mountains,  
the mountaintops,  
the middle slopes,  
the ravines opening out,  
    you are the one who has the world in your keeping;  
    ancient black stone,  
    you will make your sacred road come here.

Where my white-shell bowl lies,  
    four times  
    you make your sacred road come in.

When you have sat down quietly,  
    our children  
    will drink  
    your healing waters.

Then, their sacred roads reaching  
    to Dawn Lake,  
    their roads will be finished.