



**Book review:**

***Son of Old Man Hat: A Navaho Autobiography*  
recorded by Walter Dyk, foreword by Edward Sapir,  
University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln, 1938  
(Second Bison Book printing 1968)**

**MARIE-FRANÇOISE GUÉDON**

*Son of Old Man Hat* has been a classic from the time of its first edition: published before the second World War, it continues to provide a major contribution to our knowledge of the Navajo world. Told in the first person, it is an unadorned autobiography which was the result of a long encounter between an older Navajo man, born in 1868 and known as Left Handed, and Walter Dyk, an anthropologist. At first primarily interested in collecting material about clans and kinship functions in the Navajo society, well known for its enduring matrilineal kinship structure, Dyk began work on the Navajo reservation in 1934 with Navajo men living in the region of Lukachukai (Arizona, USA). Then he asked Left Handed to relate the course of his life, and the ensuing book actually takes us from the Navajo man's birth to his twentieth birthday and his marriage, along with his daily routine as well as his steps in becoming an adult in his community. Edward Sapir, a leading anthropological voice at the time, contributed a short foreword that has not lost any of its



methodological importance and is well worth reading today, if only for what it implies about the idea of culture.

In the late nineteenth century, Navajo life was practically semi-nomadic, with most families moving from site to site with their sheep, cattle, and horses. The Navajo society was (and still is) organised in exogamous matrilineal clans; one belongs to one's mother's clan. Left Handed, the narrator of this autobiography, was a member of the Bitahni clan through his mother; his father belonged to the Many Goat clan. Because Left Handed's first mother was sick at the time of his birth, he was adopted by his mother's sister (whom, by custom he would already have addressed as 'mother'); she later remarried a former husband named Old Man Hat. Old Man Hat was also a member of the Many Goat clan and, therefore, belonged to Left Handed's father's clan as a 'father's brother' - whom Left Handed would also have addressed as father. This short introduction gives us a first clue about the cultural context of a society where most interpersonal ties are defined by kinship.

Left Handed's narrative was translated from Navajo into English, but otherwise did not borrow much from the Euro-American society. And it directly reflects a Navajo perspective on the human and non-human aspects of the world. This is a Navajo story, in form, in style, and in content. This perspective demands from the reader a willingness to accept the fact that there are different ways to live, think, and make sense of the world, the Navajo ways being truly distinct from the contemporary dominant Euro-centric worldview in both explicit and implicit terms.

The book is addressed to a general but learned public. Today's reader must also take into account the mores and language of the times, almost ninety years ago, especially in the foreword by Edward Sapir, and the preface by Walter Dyk. These authors use the term 'primitive' several times in lieu of First Nation or Indigenous, as well as the expressions 'American Indian' or simply 'Indian;' these latter remain common today in the USA both within and outside of Navajo communities.

Through his research, Dyk developed an interest for an aspect of culture rarely noticed today, perhaps because it does not attract much attention even though it lies at the very core of the cultural context. He summarised it and the intent of this work as follows, contrasting it with ethnological theoretical discussions and the usual focus on important events that can be observed as focal points of a society:

Valuable as anecdotes are, they tend naturally to cluster around such highly dramatic events as birth, death, murder, suicide, incest, witchery.... They tell nothing of the common place, the homespun stuff from day to day with which

life everywhere is so largely concerned. To get this, some long slow narrative that recalled the ordinary, the petty, the humdrum insignificant affairs as well [is needed]. With a view to obtaining such material, not alone for the light it might throw on the functions of clan and kin but on Navaho life in general, I asked one of my informants, an old man, Left Handed by name, to relate what he could remember of his life, insisting that he leave out nothing, no matter how trivial. (Dyk 1938, p. xi)

In order to record Left Handed's narrative with minimum manipulation and respect for the integrity of his account, Dyk had to consider the circumstances of the recording. He summarises his methodology in the preface as follows:

Like most Navaho of his age, Left Handed did not know English, and therefore the story had first to be told bit by bit to an interpreter who then translated each fragment in turn. [the interpreter was Philip Davis, a Navaho man from Lutkachukai.] As it is set down here it differs in no essentials from that first telling. I have tried to add nothing and left out only some few minor experiences and repetitious episodes, beside recurring passages, such as the details of moving from day to day, when it seemed to me these would only burden the reader and add neither to his knowledge nor to his pleasure. Likewise it seemed advisable to rearrange the episodes of early childhood into what would appear to be a more exact chronological order from that in which they were originally given. (Dyk 1938, xi-xii)

The resulting narrative itself is a remarkable document: It is not a book about Navajo society nor about Navajo culture or history. This is a book about a man remembering his own past.

Important aspects of Navajo world view are revealed as one follows the day-to-day routine, moves, hardships, and happy moments of a Navajo family seen through the eyes of a child remembered by an old man. But where an American anthropologist of the early twentieth century would identify and single out particular traits allowing us to define 'Navajo culture,' the recollections by the son of Old Man Hat flow from one day to the next, one season to the next, in a life obviously shaped by a cultural context one can recognize as distinct from the dominant society, but without any opportunity to define or construct it as a 'cultural' system' and, therefore, an outsider's perspective. Instead, we follow an individual moving through life, land, and people as related by an insider. As Edward Sapir remarks, in the foreword, there is no attempt here to inject an analysis of the cultural context or psychological interpretations, not even from the narrator himself.

Let us quote Sapir's words in full, as they reveal an essential aspect of what we call 'culture.' That is to say, it is an 'artifact.'

Before we undertake to estimate the meaning and value of this truly remarkable document, let us be clear as to what it is not and does not pretend to be.

In the first place, it is not a cultural museum. There are historical novels and primitive romances, also a few primitive records of individuals [*notably Paul Radin's fascinating Winnebago autobiography, Crashing Thunder; see Jung's review this issue*], which aim to show a given culture in operation, as it were. Such works are dramatizations of cultural patterns, of the mechanics of custom, rather than human documents in the simple sense. [...] There seems, indeed, to be something inhuman about the conscious articulation of custom, just as there is something in us all which rebels at the analysis of words. There is no doubt - at least, I presume there is none - that the Son Of Old Man Hat is as completely in the grip of his own culture as any other Navaho. No doubt the detailed picturesqueness of sand-painted gods and goddesses, perhaps even the secret of divining and witchcraft, are as present to his cultural consciousness as to that of any Navaho who is urged, or paid, to talk about such matters. But there is no declaration of them in this book, merely a quiet subtle assumption of their reality in the minds of men. [...] Navaho culture, so clearly patterned as an ethnological artifact, is here in the mind of the narrator an electrically charged solution of meanings, and Dr. Dyk has been skilful in the transcript, leaving out little that was essential, injecting nothing out of the spirit of romance or scientific curiosity. (Dyk, 1938, vii-viii)

Clifford Geertz, who warned us about the pitfall of ascribing our own scholarly concepts and cultural constructs to the society or the individual we are attempting to describe, would have been, I think, sensitive to this primacy of an individual testimony free of judgment and analysis. As Sapir explains:

Nor is this book a heavily documented contribution to individual psychology. It is in no sense the study of a personality. It is a sequence of memories that need an extraordinary well-defined personality to hold them together, yet nowhere is this unique consciousness obtruded upon us. We are in constant rapport with an intelligence in which all experiences remote and proximate, "trivial" and "important" are held like waving reeds in the sensitive transparency of a brook. Such concepts as "ego" or "frustration" seem heated and out of place when we try to feel with this intelligence. (Dyk 1938, viii)

As an ethnographer, I am here reminded of my experiences in Northern Athapaskan communities (linguistic cousins of the Navajo) where the older people who attempted to teach me how to behave so as not to disrupt their daily lives ignored such terms as 'culture,' 'ritual,' or 'traditions,' even 'kinship' or 'clans.' They prefer to talk about their 'ways,' or not to talk at all, inviting me to simply imitate their actions. Culture as a constructed object to be analysed by the observer was instead replaced by life lived.

From the beginning of this autobiographical document, we realise that we are not in a Euro-American social setting. And as we follow the memories first of the child, then the older boy, and the young man, we are presented with a version of childhood and growing up alien to most of us and yet strangely precise. The cultural setting we reconstruct from this account is organised, with norms and rules, meanings and values, purpose and ways of doing things, with stories and jokes; it is learned, and we learn with the child growing up.

Childhood here is matter-of fact: learning about winters and summers, about sheep and horses, about attacking snakes, and coyotes snatching puppies away, about having not much to eat and about hospitality and sharing meat without restraint, about playing with the lambs, and about learning the responsibility imparted to a five- or six-year-old child shepherding several dozen animals sometimes with other kids, most of the time by himself. These memories are sharp:

I was so small. I went out with the sheep like a dog. I just walked along with them and stayed right in the middle of the herd. I was afraid to go around them, but while I was in the middle of the sheep I wasn't afraid of anything.  
(Dyk 1938, 8)

This childhood is also about watching the adults, kin or strangers, without judgment but with much awareness of their actions and the consequences of their conflicts and shortcomings. It sometimes has to do with witnessing the pain, grief and death of others, and being overcome by emotions before they can be named, and crying without restraint or recriminations. Physical and emotional upheavals are recalled without comments, as part of the day-to-day life of all beings.

It is also about discovering the pleasures of sexuality in an environment uncluttered by the biblical original sin or notions of sexual impurity, or even the physical dominance of one gender over the other, and where children explore without any explanations, but with models that are more likely to come from the herd animals than from human adults.

There were many Paiute girls, and once I went among them and began to play. They said to me, "We'll be goats, all of us girls will be goats, and you be the billy-goat." That's how we started, and they said. "Do to us as the billy-goat does to the goats. Get on top of us." I did that. Just like a billy-goat I jumped on the girls and laid over them. Some had on only one dress, and when I'd get on them they'd scream and I'd bend over and throw myself back, just like a billy-goat. They sure did like it. After we became acquainted we liked each other, and so we played that way everyday. (Dyk 1938, 10-11)

This is a world where girls are equally likely to initiate sexual encounters. Growing up also entails the need to lie to the adults about such encounters, by omission mostly, partly because all are already aware of potential pregnancies. It is also about learning when and how to lie.

There is no separation between children and the rest of the world. They are all participants in the same community. There is no school to keep children away from the grown-ups. One learns by watching and listening.

While they were talking [*about ritual songs*] I was sitting up listening to what they were saying. My father said to me, "Sit up and watch the fire. Keep the fire going." So I was sitting there listening, and I was glad he'd told me to sit up. I wanted to sit up and listen anyhow. Everything my father said, I was kind of picking up. [...] When the men started talking, I always liked to hear them. (Dyk 1938, 77)

It is about witnessing the dealings of adults with each other: watching adults support each other as well as lie, fight verbally and physically, steal or even kill others, and how they justify their deeds, and how they judge each others and how they bring about some reconciliation. It is about learning the difference between kinfolk, clan members, and strangers, and the proper behaviour corresponding to each term.

Above all it is about the land, a sometimes frigid, sometimes burning, always dry mountainous desert where one has to find the grassy pastures needed by sheep and horses, together with the rare sources of water. To keep oneself and the animals alive, one has to know the land; day after day, the child develops an intimate relationship with the dynamics of weather, seasons, and the lay of the land where, like his peers, he spends most of his time alone and in silence. The passing of time is tangible and part of reality.

As a young man, Left Handed becomes more involved with the human world; interpersonal connections building up with the management of herds, economic

transactions, participation in ritual events, dances and healing chants, marriages and funerals, and the amorous adventures permeating the lives of both unmarried and married men and women - with women often assuming the initiative.

The death of his father, Old Man Hat, brings grief and hardship, shared with relatives and kicking off another quickening of social life. Crying is an acceptable response, for both men and women, for this is not an isolated event; death is literally part of life, as the singer brought in to assist Old Man Hat repeats in the usual formula:

He said to my father [*uncle*], Choclys Kinsman, "It's all right, my uncle, everybody's dying off. Every creature on this earth is dying. Even the mountains are caving down. [...] He [*Old Man Hat*] was like one of the mountains. He had everything and knew everything, and everyone knew him, and everybody named him. So don't be worrying about him. We'll all be gone. We want to take care of and look after ourselves. While we're still alive we should help and take care of each other. When we die we're gone forever. No one will bring us back. So there's no use worrying so much about it." (Dyk 1938, 275)

Recollecting conversations, admonitions, location, and circumstances in amazing detail, the text takes us into the continuity of a world always in motion. After the death of Old Man Hat, one of his 'brothers' steps into the family as a 'father,' for someone has to take care of the herds and someone has to take care of the old woman.

Contrary to the continuity of life in settled villages, social life here alternates between relatively long periods of isolation, if not solitude, and periods of intense social interactions (which allow for a way out of dispute or conflicts). There is coming and going between herding on the mountain slopes and tending small corn fields and vegetables patches in the valley, between temporary summer camps and the regrouping of relatives in lower sites, between the poverty following drought or winter killing cold, and abundance brought by rainy seasons and grassy green pasture, between the loneliness of isolated hogans and the relief of visitors, as well as trips to the store or the rowdy crowds of festivals, and the gathering of relatives for 'chants' and funerals. There is also coming and going between the non-human world, out on the mountain and in the night, and the human world. While White people would speak of cycles, Dyk's narrative brings the reader to perceive this life more like a pulse.

The book ends when Left Handed, now about twenty years old and a competent adult, seeks a wife. He meets several girls and, with his mother's complicity, rescues a young woman from a hazardous marriage: "...the woman stayed with us there that night and never did go back." (Dyk 1938, 378).

From the reader's perspective, several aspects of the context in which this life is lived announce that the social environment is specifically Navajo. We already mentioned matrilineal clans. But this book is not a book about a matrilineal society; it is about a man's life in a society built on matrilineal kin groups, and one cannot separate the kinship structure from an obviously strong matricultural system nor from the more general context of a Navajo worldview; all these components belong to the same human environment. We immediately notice the constant influence of kinship in all human interactions, and at the same time recognize that the Navajo kin terms do not fit in with European terms, even though the English translation attempts to provide some kind of equivalent meaning. As lived, this social milieu goes without saying; the intricacies of the kinship system are not explained, though they obviously affect the choice of mates and spouses. Neither are differences in behaviour between fathers and father's sisters – which are affectionate, even intimate, and peaceful on the one side – and mothers and mothers' brothers, which are more authoritarian and demanding of respect, on the other side: "I think I never told a lie to my mother." (Dyk 1938, 45)

The text does not provide an explanation about the exogamous rules forbidding marriage with all members of one's mother's, father's, mother's father's, and father's father's clans, no matter how remote the kin connection. Before engaging in conversation with anyone, one has to know who they are and their clan identity. In fact, when introducing oneself in the Navajo context, people supply the names of their mother's clan and father's clan along with their mother's father's clan and their father's father's clan (the clan names of all four grand-parents). We may notice that a man is obliged to contend with keeping track of and supporting his children, that is, his sisters' sons and daughters – his biological nieces and nephews – as they grow up. He is particularly responsible for imparting to his sisters' male children (his nephews) the teachings, lore, and knowledge they need, including knowledge about the land and, of course, the herds, but also medical knowledge (both human and veterinarian) and how to deal with the non-human world. Women are more responsible for educating their daughters and their clan's daughters.

As far as women are concerned, we cannot ignore the many ways in which women make certain their authority, independence, and power. This is a society where one could explore equally how women are treated by men and how men are treated by women, where both men and women can and do leave their mate, fight each others physically, initiate sexual encounters, and are able to live, and move or travel, by themselves.

Left Handed mentions several times his fathers and his uncles lecturing him, and lecturing others, in order to maintain or re-establish peace in the household, and sometimes in the community's ever changing circle of relatives and neighbours. These speeches provide us



with access to a vision of the Navajo moral and political ideals. The problematic aspects of jealousy facilitated by social acceptance of separation and amorous affairs, (though glossed as 'stealing' other people's partners), polygamy, or more often, sororal bigamy, are shared by men and women. Navajo women do not perceive themselves as weaker than men. They can and do make their own decisions and have their own resources: the animals in the herds are individually owned by the various members of a domestic family, even though they are cared for communally. Obviously, this is not a matriarchal society, but women display a status that was, at the time, unthinkable for White women, and their participation in public life and economic affairs confirms their role in family affairs.

Left Handed and his relatives and neighbours are in contact with a number of various ethnic groups, including White people, and are well aware of the cultural and linguistic differences present in these interactions. The son of Old Man Hat could probably have provided a critique of his community's social structure or even an assessment of his way of life, if he had been prompted to do so, although with this, he would have been asked to step out of his own world into our own, since this kind of reflexion would not be part of his daily concerns. And there is no guidance for the reader, an outsider, interested in the mysteries of the ceremonial aspects of healing 'chants,' 'star gazing' rituals, or witchcraft accusations. Furthermore, Left Handed finds no need to provide a systematic description, even less a critique, of a social and ritual environment which is, from his perspective, as normal as a river is to a fish, or as authoritative as the language spoken by one's parents. It is also noteworthy that Left Handed and his relatives share a perception of themselves - and of other living beings, including sheep, horse, snakes, coyotes, and bears - as self-supporting and self-aware individuals, with an ensuing responsibility for self as well as for the human and non-human community.

Altogether, this a remarkable book, both as an introduction to Navajo ways through the recollection of one man's memories, and as an unusual narrative based on both eventful and especially the trivial aspects of one's life instead of a scholarly research report on the cultural context as a whole. Though it would be helpful for the scholarly reader looking for entry into the Navajo world to access a good monograph on Navajo culture before reading this autobiography, that reader might lose the immediacy of an encounter with a real person, and the richness of an individual life if its narration were superseded by a simplified abstract construct. As Sapir concludes in his foreword: '... in all their pages [*the pages of priceless ethnological records*] it is not told what a boy who happens to be about is expected to do when an old man dies.' (Dyk 1938, x).