



NAVAJO RELIGION

The Way of Beauty

Navajo Religion in Today's World

- There are 573 federally recognized tribal nations. Most textbooks on the world's religions often attempt to collapse these nations into one chapter on Native American religion.
- But their religions are in many cases at least as distinct as Hinduism is from Islam
- We are going to look at just one--the Navajo or as they call themselves the Dine.



- The Dine are the largest Native American nation in terms of territory and the second largest (after the Cherokee) in terms of population.
- The Dine are widely regarded not only for their fine arts, including Navaho rugs and silver and turquoise jewelry, but also for their extraordinarily complicated religious stories, beliefs and rituals.
- Navajo art and religion are inseparable. Virtually all Navajos are artists because of the place of honor given to creativity and movement in Dine life and thought.



- Today, the Navajo nation claims 300,000 officially enrolled members.
- Not all practice traditional Dine religion. Many attend Christian churches
- Many participate in a new religious movement called Peyotism because of its reverence for and ingestion of peyote. About half of all Navajos are peyote practitioners and 30% practice Christianity exclusively. Most see the benefit in each and feel free to mix and match.



- In a 2014 study, in the Southwest, where tradition is strong, 54% of the people reported that the “aboriginal” traditions are very important to them, while 36% and 34% respectively, said that their Christian and Native American Church (NAC) beliefs were very important. This same study found that there was a considerable amount of overlap.



Navajo Religion 101

- Navajo religion includes stories upon stories, each with multiple interpretations, all connected to the real world of farming, animals, labor, humor, art and medicine.
- Study is further complicated by little interest in their religious thought or creating orthodoxy.
- Like other religions, traditional Navajo has changed over time and is internally diverse. It has survived colonizers and missionaries, broken treaties, economic depressions, forced assimilation, capitalistic appropriation of their cultural treasures, assaults by infectious disease epidemics, and what was referred to as the “American” Holocaust which killed an estimated 100 million Native people.
- “The destruction of the Indians of the Americas was, far and away, the most massive act of genocide in the world.”



- Because many Dine beliefs and practices are revealed only to the initiated, those who hold these secrets are understandably unwilling to divulge them,
- They feel like religion is private and set apart from more public aspects of human life.
- Michael McNally argues that the traditions of Navajos and other Native nations may be better described as “lifeways” rather than as “religions”.



Hocho

- According to Dine oral traditions, the world is an, interrelated whole in which human beings are in relationships with one another , with the Holy People and with nature.
- Good and evil are present in almost everything
- Evil is not an independent power of force. It is part of a good-and-bad spectrum. The goal is not to eradicate evil but to balance it so that the original harmony of the universe can be restored

- According to the Navajo way, the central problem of human life is **hocho**, which refers to disease, disharmony, ugliness, chaos, conflict, misfortune, and evil.
- It is produced by some action or inaction that causes the individual or the community to fall or otherwise depart from the original beauty.



Hozho

- The solution is to revert to hozho by restoring the individual or community to beauty, harmony, and balance.
- This difficult to translate word is the central concept of the Navajo way. It is invoked repeatedly in prayers and the Blessingway ceremony. It describes the condition that existed right after the world was created.



- It is the longing for and pursuit of hozho that marks Navajo religion as a way of beauty.
- **Sa'a Naghai Bik'e Hozho** (SNBH) Navajo goal of life, often expressed in stories, songs, prayers, and everyday conversations; translations include “in old age walking, is trail beautiful”.



Holy People

Changing Woman The most beloved Holy Person. The epitome of goodness in the Navajo Way, she brought the Dine into being and embodies the cycle from birth to puberty to maturity to happy old age.

First Man and First Woman The first male/female pair, they planned, modeled, and brought into being the Earth Surface World after emerging from the lower worlds.

Father Sky and Mother Earth



Coyote Major character in the emergence story, has been likened to trickster figures in other literature and folktales. A creature of chaos, his lying, lust, and gluttony lead him to disrupt whatever harmony he may encounter.

Holy Wind This life force, reminiscent of *qi (vital energy)* was present at creation and is present today. Everything is interconnected by this life force. Today it exists inside all forms of life, which is capable of imparting wisdom to anyone who interacts with them.



Who Are the Holy People? (YouTube)

Coyote



Changing Woman



Native American Church

- In 1918, representatives from various tribes came together to charter the **NAC**, which they hoped would help win for them the religious liberty protections of the First Amendment.
- It's purpose was to “foster and promote...the Christian religion with the practice of the Peyote sacrament ...
- As similar organizations were incorporated, roadmen spread the good news of **Peyotism**.
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- Peyotism developed, the words of one anthropologist, into “one of the strongest pan-Indian movements in the United States.”
- Peyote gained in popularity because it was viewed as ancient and local rather than modern and imported.
- Peyotism spread because it offered an ethical way of life, which included not gambling, not drinking, not lying, and faithfulness in marriage.

Ceremonies

- Ceremonies are the central practices in traditional religion. Unlike Saturday synagogue services or Sunday church services, they are held on an as-needed basis.
- The ceremony must be performed properly in order to compel the Holy People to help.
- This work is done largely through song. In Dine religion, the key utterance is not a sermon or a scripture reading. It is not even a prayer or a dance, though they are part of many ceremonies. The central utterance is the song, the central act singing.



The Blessingway

- The **Blessingway** which is likened to the Backbone of the Dine body or the main stalk of a corn plant, is the most popular of the Dine ceremony. “It is the main ceremony that ties...all ceremonies together.”
- It re-enacts the Creation in an effort to re-create its beauty, harmony, and blessings
- Unlike most ceremonies, the Blessingway is preventative rather than curative. Blessingways are conducted for childbirth, puberty, weddings, and long life. They are also performed to bless medicine bundles and new homes.

Other Ceremonies

- Other ceremonies include Enemyway, Mountainway, and Nightway.
 - **Enemyway** restores right relationships between patient and non-Navajos
 - **Mountainway** restores right relationships between patient and animals
 - **Nightway** restores right relations between patient and subset of the Holy People known as the Ye'ii or Fail-to-Speak People. May be appropriate for a patient who is blind, deaf or paralyzed



Navajo Religion at a Glance

- **Problem:** hocho, or ugliness, chaos, disequilibrium, and all that is bad
- **Solution:** hozho, or harmony, beauty, balance, and all that is good
- **Techniques:** prayers, offerings, and ceremonies meet to restore individuals and the community to health and harmony
- **Exemplar:** Changing Woman and other creation story heroes who turn ugliness into beauty and sickness into health
- In short the Navajo religion is a way of beauty in which medicine people and their patient work together to cultivate health and harmony through various ceremonies.

Contemporary Conflicts

Navajo Religion and the Law

- Oregon v. Smith
 - Peyotism
- The Navajo Nation v. U.S. Forest Service
 - Snowmaking on Sacred Mountains

