

Topic Page: [Navajo Indians](#)

Definition: **Navajo** from *Philip's Encyclopedia*

(Navaho) Athabascan-speaking tribe, the largest group of Native Americans in the USA. Their reservation in Arizona and New Mexico is the biggest in the country. Today, the population numbers c.150,000.



Image from: [Three Navajo women weaving \(1914\). The early... in Encyclopedia of Race, Ethnicity, and Society](#)

Summary Article: **Navajo**

From *Encyclopedia of Time: Science, Philosophy, Theology, & Culture*

The Navajo, or Diné (meaning “the people”), are the most numerous of the North American Indian tribes, having more than 290,000 people. The Navajo nation (“the big rez”), which is about the size of West Virginia, officially encompasses 25,000 square miles at the juncture of northeastern Arizona, southeastern Utah, and western New Mexico. The reservation itself was created in 1868 by the U.S. government; however, the Navajo live within the four sacred mountains, (Mt. Blanca, Mt. Taylor, San Francisco Peaks, and Mt. Hesperus), a place of great beauty where they feel they belong in accordance with the guidance of their holy ones. This space is actually larger than what is considered the present day reservation.

Life and time are cyclical in the Navajo cosmology, and everything has a place within it. Stories passed down in Navajo culture explain that the people emerged into this location after going on a long and arduous journey during which they passed through four different colored worlds. In the first world (black world), first man and first woman were formed. They passed through the second world (the blue world), the third world (the yellow world), and the fourth world (the glittering world). Quarreling forced them out of each world; they had encountered insect beings, several species of birds, and many mammals, including Coyote, a trickster who is an important figure in Navajo culture. The natural world was put into harmony or balance (*bozjo*) by the Creator or spiritual life force. Finally, a flood brought the Navajo to the fourth world or glittering world of the four sacred mountains. The Navajos are said to have emerged from a hole in the La Plata Mountains.

Early History

Archaeological and linguistic evidence shows that the Navajo migrated from present-day northwest Canada and Alaska to the American Southwest around 1000 CE. Linguistic similarities suggest that the Navajo and Apache tribes were once a cohesive ethnic group, speaking the dialect of the Athabascan and Apachean language family. Navajos were considered highly adaptive to changing conditions and were able to incorporate things from other cultures. They were famously known to their Pueblo neighbors as traders and raiders. The Pueblo groups exchanged maize and woven textiles for meat and hides of deer, antelope, and elk. The Spanish arrived in the 1500s, bringing with them horses, sheep, and goats of European origin. After Spanish colonization in the 17th century, Navajo life became more sedentary as the people established camps to raise sheep and corn. They learned weaving from the Pueblos and silver crafting from their Mexican neighbors.

Shaping of the Navajo Nation

Anglo Americans and Navajos lived in relative peace during the 1800s until a Navajo leader named

Narbona was killed in 1849. In the 1850s the U.S. government began to set up forts in Navajo territory, including Fort Defiance and Fort Wingate. After the Spanish were expelled by the Anglo Americans in the southwestern United States, the Navajos fell under the scrutiny of the U.S. government, which was determined to settle the West. The Treaty of 1868 is a significant event in Navajo history and Navajo/U.S. government relations. Unlike so many other Native American tribes during the 19th century, the Navajo were allowed to return to a portion of their traditional homelands. Attempts were being made to round up tribal groups in an effort to solve the “Indian problem” by creating reservations. In 1863, the dispossession of their lands was a major blow to the Navajo. The U.S. government was trying to prevent raids inter-tribally and on encroaching settlers. In addition, whites suspected that there were valuable minerals on Diné lands. Colonel Christopher “Kit” Carson was called in with his army to defeat the Navajo. Carson commanded his soldiers to shoot on sight men, women, and children. He also wiped out the Diné food supply, burning crops, killing domesticated animals, and torching houses. In February of 1864, the Navajo began to turn themselves in to army forts in surrender.

The policy of Indian relocation set forth by the U.S. government proved to be a disaster. The Long Walk (to Bosque Redondo) is an especially painful moment in Navajo history. The Diné were forced to walk for 3 weeks for more than 300 miles, and hundreds lost their lives. When the Navajo finally arrived at Bosque Redondo, they faced extreme living conditions. The water was unfit to drink, there was no firewood, and they were rationed poor-quality subsidized food from the U.S. government. Around 9,000 Navajos were relocated and were not allowed to return to their lands until the Treaty of 1868, which many Navajo leaders signed to recover their lands.

Navajo Family and Daily Life

The Navajo tribe is a group of more than 100 separate clans, including the four originals: Towering House, Bitterwater, Big Water, and One Who Walks Around. Families consist of extended kinship networks, with clans being traced through the mother's side (“born to”), and the father's side is acknowledged by saying “born for.” Women have an important status in Navajo society. When a man gets married he joins his wife's family, and the wife's brother takes on many roles associated with fatherhood toward her children. Traditionally, marriage within clans is not permitted. Both men and women care for children. The women have land rights, in addition to owning the house, the goats, and the sheep.

When Navajos first meet each other, they state which clan they are from. *Ya'at eeb* is a common phrase, which means “greetings” in the Navajo language. Navajos live in isolation from one another on the landscape. It can be miles between two Navajo sheep camps, the land between can appear to be uninhabited. Physical and personal space is valued. It is estimated that 80% of the Navajo still speak their native language. Language, customs, and lifeways have been preserved and passed down in the Navajo culture despite strong outside Anglo influences to assimilate.

Hogans

Traditional houses are called *hogans*. The houses are eight-sided, domed, and nearly circular in shape. Old timers still use these as a dwelling, while more often in contemporary times these structures are used for ceremony. They are made of wood poles and earth with the doorway open to the east to welcome the morning sun and receive positive energy and blessings. The sun is an important symbol of the divine and Creation; however, the sun itself is not worshiped in Navajo religion. The Navajo find balance with an orientation within the four directions. East represents the dawn and thinking, south

signifies planning and what needs to be done, west represents life and how to carry out plans, and north an evaluation and reflection of how to continue of the path of life. (“Before me, behind me, below me, and above me, with balance I pray” is a common morning prayer of centering along with the focus on beauty: “All is beautiful, if everything around you is beautiful, beauty is the way you live.”)

Today, many hogans are constructed with modern materials and have windows. Sometimes, small hogans are built for sweat baths. The steam makes the body sweat and a cleansing occurs on both a physical and spiritual level. Additionally, some families build summer hogans and winter hogans near appropriate places where their sheep graze.

According to custom, it is considered rude to greet a person when visiting a hogan without waiting several minutes before entering. It is also considered rude to make eye contact or to shake hands with another with a firm grip. Religion is integrated into all other aspects of daily life for the Navajo. Life itself is considered sacred along with the earth and the idea of maintaining balance or harmony with all things. Life is cyclical, as well as time, and everything has a place and a season in Navajo religion and cosmology. In the Navajo culture there is no such thing as a coincidence; things happen because they were meant to. Religion ceremonies are elaborate and complex, lasting anywhere from 3 to 8 days or more. Religious gatherings include songs, chants, prayers, and sandpaintings. Ceremonies are called *Ways* and the religious leader is a *singer* who sings special songs and makes sandpaintings.

Ceremonies were given to the Navajo by the holy ones, who instructed them in how to recite the prayers and songs. Important lessons have been passed down along with history and universal wisdom. Ceremonies are used for healing the sick, for blessing a person, or for celebrating a happy moment, such as the birth of a child. Corn and corn pollen are considered sacred and play an important role in Diné ceremonies. The content of ceremonies includes much sacred knowledge with great power, and parts of ceremonies remain secret and are not discussed outside the ceremony.

Sandpaintings

Sandpaintings are “a place where the gods come and go” in the Navajo language and are used in healing ceremonies and to connect with nature. These elaborate creations are filled with symbolism and often contain representations of the first man and first woman from Navajo cosmology. After the ceremony, the pictures are swept up and the sand is taken away.

Ways

There are several Way ceremonies that serve a certain purpose in Diné culture. The Night Way is a 9-day healing ceremony where friends and relatives gather around the sick person and songs, and prayers, are offered and sandpaintings are created. The enemy Way is used when a Navajo returns from a non-Navajo society to cleanse that person of foreign influences. The Blessing Way is a ceremony that is used to be sung over someone. It is unique, because it is not used for healing; rather, it is used to foster good luck, good health, and blessings relevant to a person's life.

Navajo Code Talkers

During World War II, 3,600 Diné men and 12 women entered military service. The Japanese had been able to decipher all U.S. military codes until the Navajo marines created a code in the Navajo language that was an impenetrable means of secret communication. This made the contributions of these Diné soldiers indispensable to the U.S. military. In 1982, President Ronald Reagan declared August 14th Navajo Code Talkers Day, and in July 2001, 29 code talkers were given Congressional Gold Medals.

The Navajo Today

The Navajo Nation today is a mixture of traditional and modern. There are houses and hogans, sheep farmers and engineers, silversmiths and nurses. However, much is preserved due to the organization of tribal government and Navajo schools with cur-riculums relevant to Navajo culture and staffed by Navajos, including Diné College. The Diné nation continues to grow and flourish in the 21st century despite some major dark points in its history. The Navajos have proven to be highly adaptable and have overcome adversities. Their determination and philosophy of life allows them to continue and to “walk in beauty.”

See also

Pueblo, Sandpainting, Time, Cyclical

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