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Between the Sacred Mountains: A Cultural History of the Dineh

by Lauren Del Carlo

(Anthropology 1100)

Roughly one thousand years ago, the Navajo tribe migrated from the Athapascan homeland in the northwestern subarctic to the southwest of the United States. Traditionally nomadic hunters and gatherers, the Navajo settled down on the sacred land they called Dinétah or Navajoland, located between the four sacred mountains representing the four walls of Hogan, the traditional home of the Navajo. The Navajo learned how to plant and harvest corn and set up a reliable food supply through herding and agriculture from their Pueblo neighbors (*Mythology of American Nations* 60-61). Today, the Navajo still occupy their sacred land that presently covers sixteen million acres of the four states, Arizona, New Mexico, Utah, and Colorado, at a place called Four Corners, making the Navajo Nation the largest reservation in the United States (Navajo Nation website).

According to the 2000 census, roughly 298 thousand Navajos live throughout the United States with the majority living within the hot, desert climate of the Navajo reservation and Arizona. The Navajo call themselves Dineh, identifying them as the 'The People' (*Symbols of Native America* 105). As one can imagine, religion is an encompassing aspect of the Navajo culture. People of all cultures define the world as they experience it, therefore their way of life must account for what they see (*Mythology of the American Nations* 10). The Navajo way of life focuses on the natural spirituality of the earth intertwined with its physical attributes (6). The Navajo believe the spiritual world is infused with the natural world, breathing life into every living thing of earth (*Native American Wisdom* 51). The supernatural spirits are called diyin dine'e' or holy people. Displaying human emotions and described in humanistic terms, religious practices and stories of diyin dine'e' instill moral code behavior and actions (*The Main Stalk* 25). Navajo legends, myths, rituals, and practices display a heavily matrilineal culture. Changing Woman or Estsanatlehi, the main Navajo deity or spirit, represents the female power of reproducing life. Changing Woman has the power to grow old and young each year, following the rhythm of the Earth's rotation. By dancing on the four directions, she creates rain clouds to the east, fabrics and jewels to the South, plant life to the West, and maize and animals to the North. All the resources needed to survive in the desert plains (*Mythology of the American Nations* 25). In the Navajo creation myth, when First Woman and First Man entered their present world from the underground, they lost the ability to reproduce. Discovering Changing Woman atop a mountain, First Woman and First Man performed the first puberty rite, Kinaalda, on her. After mating with the Sun, Changing Woman gave birth to the Navajo people (*Navajo Kinship Marriage* 15-16). In Changing Woman's image, women symbolize the earth as the life giving vitals and are honored and respected as such in the Navajo community. In her puberty rite, Kinaalda, a young girl embodies Changing Woman as she changes from a girl to a woman with her first menstrual cycle (19). Only a menstruating woman can ensure conception. Without a woman's ability to support and nurture life, the Navajo civilization would be lost.

Navajo myths determine men and women are complementary equals in the sense both male and female are needed to reproduce and raise a family. Neither sex can live without the other (23). Arguably, women carry the heavier burden in bringing a child to life, but human fertility is an important to both genders ritualistically as well as physically. Corn is a major symbol of fertility as well as a food source. It is spoken in legends that Talking God created First Woman and First Man from corncobs thus beginning the circle of life. In a Navajo wedding ceremony the couple eats white

corn (male) and yellow corn (female) mixed together with corn pollen sprinkled on top to ensure a fertile marriage (17). Fertility is so highly valued men are expected to give economic resources to women in exchange for reproducing power. This idea of bride wealth comes from the belief one cannot take something without giving something in return. Even in premarital and extramarital couplings some informal bride wealth needs to be given or else is it considered stealing and, therefore, immoral (24).

The clan is the largest kinship grouping in the Navajo community. Descent is bilateral in the sense children recognize and identify themselves by both their mother's and father's clan (*Code Talkers* 13). Although a child identifies with the descent lineage of his father, the child doesn't belong to the same descent category. Strictly matrilineal, children are born into their mother's clan and born for their Father's children's clan (*Navajo Kinship Marriage* 45). Since the mother is the primary tie to the children, all the women's children remain in the mother's clan. Traditionally, the clan raises the children together so the 'born for' category refers to all the children produced by the father's clan and they are therefore referred to as siblings (45). Exogamy is strictly followed for children to marry outside of the mother's clan and the 'born for' clan (39). Some Navajo favor their children to marry into their father's clan (31).

Within the family, women influence almost all aspects of the Navajo community. There is nothing stronger than the bond between a mother and her children (16). In most families, mothers create a uterine bond with her children. This uterine bond enforces the matrilineal way of life while connecting the supporting bonds among the siblings and between the father and children with the mother as the central focus (34-35). The father-child bond is considerably weaker than the mother-child bond but still important (42). Sibling bonds remain strong well into adulthood where siblings keep in contact (34-35). Women essentially own their households along with its animals (16). In recent time, a few households are patrilocal or neolocal, but residence is still preferably matrilineal where a newly married couple lives with either husband's or wife's mother (72). Currently there is a high divorce rate among the Navajo. It is not uncommon from a person to have several marriage partners in his or her lifetime (*Navajo Kinship Marriage* 30).

In modern times Native American tribes are banding together to regain lost rights, lands, and artifacts of their tribes (*Mythology of the American Nations* 13). To achieve that goal, in 1923 the Navajo established a political tribal government to manage the economy. To date, the Navajo have the largest tribal government in the U.S, with eighty-eight council delegates. Economic activities include traditional sheep and cattle herding along with making of traditional arts: sand painting, weaving, basket making, silversmithing, and turquoise jewelry. The Navajo lands naturally have vast mineral resources. Coal and uranium mining are newer industries. Within the reservation, roadside stands selling handmade crafts are major tourist attractions (Navajo Nation website).

Ethnically speaking, the greatest opportunity the Navajo received to prove their cultural value on a national and global scale was during WWII when 3,600 Navajo soldiers served as code talkers to transmit military messages by a secret code fashioned from the Navajo Language (*Code Talkers* 7). Navajo Marines helped the allied forces to win the war by using their native language to create an unbreakable code. The war effort involved the majority of adult Navajo in war-related industries (*A History of the Navajos* 3). Only in recent years are the Navajo being recognized for their heroic involvement in the Pacific War (*Code Talker* 219). The irony in the Navajo code talkers is the huge effort the U.S. made to completely acculturate the Navajo into the American way of life. When the U.S. went to war, America needed the language and culture it so desperately tried to destroy to defeat Japan. Today, the Navajos are given high honors and are free to live and practice their religion and culture on their sacred homelands.

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