Navajo

"Navajo" is a Tewa word meaning "planted fields." The Navajos call themselves Dine'é, "the People." Like the Apaches, they are of Athapaskan descent. Dinétah, the traditional Navajo homeland, is located on the lower Colorado Plateau, between the San Juan and Little Colorado Rivers, about 75 miles northwest of Santa Fe. Today's Navajo nation occupies a 28,800-square-mile reservation in northern Arizona and New Mexico and southern Utah. This land is mostly plateau (above 5,000 feet) and is marked by deep, sheer-walled canyons. The winters are cold, the summers are hot, and there is little water.

The Dine'é are the most numerous Indian tribe in the United States. In 1990, 144,000 Indians lived on the Navajo Reservation, plus 1,177 at Cañoncito and 191 at Ramah. Many thousands also live off-reservation. More than 200,000 Indians now qualify for membership in the Navajo nation (officially 219,198 in 1990). Perhaps 6,000 Navajos lived in the Dinétah in 1800. Navajo is an Athapaskan language.

Roughly 3,000 years ago, the Athapaskans, along with others (all called the Na-Dene), began a new wave of Asian migration into North America. Nomadic hunter-gatherers, the southern Athapaskans arrived in the Southwest in roughly 1400 and filled in the mountains around the Pueblo-held valleys. The northern Athapaskans remained in the subarctic.

Sa'ah Naaghei Bik'en Hozho, which may be characterized as being grounded to the earth, whole, and in harmony with life, is the Navajo Way. Everything is sacred and interrelated. For instance, religion equals identity equals clan equals place. The chief role of ceremonialism is to maintain or restore this harmony. Therefore, most ceremonies are for curing illness, broadly defined as being off balance for any number of reasons, such as contact with non-natives, ghosts, witches, or the dead.

According to legend, Navajos (and all other beings) came to this world 600 to 800 years ago through a progression of underworlds. They were assisted by powerful and mysterious spiritual beings such as coyote, changing woman, spider woman, spider man, and the hero twins. These beings exist in the natural and supernatural worlds and may be called upon for help with curing. Most ceremonies are held when needed, not according to the calendar.

Many important aspects of Navajo ceremonialism, such as the use of masked dancers, feathered prayer sticks, altars, dry (sand) painting, cornmeal, and pollen, were borrowed from the Hopi and other Pueblo people. Traditional Navajo religion excludes organized priesthhoods or religious societies. Instead, ceremonies are conducted by "singers" who have mastered one or more of 24 chantway systems. The systems are divided into six main groups: blessingway, warway, gameway (hunting), and the three curing ceremonials—holy-way, evilway (ghostway), and lifeway. Each group might be composed of 50 or more chants, which in turn might have hundreds of songs or prayers. Specific sandpaintings and social functions often accompany each chant.

As part of the ceremony, the singers use bundles containing items such as rattles, feathered wands and brushes, various stones, and herbal medicines. The most important is the mountain earth bundle, which contains pinches of soil from the tops of the four sacred (bordering) mountains. Around 1940, the Native American Church took its place...
Traditionally, the Navajos were organized in a number of bands, each led by a headman (appointed for life) and a clan leader, who were assisted by one or more war leaders. The leaders met formally only every few years. Decisions were made by consensus.

In general, the individual takes precedence over the group in Navajo culture. Property ownership is individual. The residence group, which was organized around a head mother, a sheep herd, and a customary land-use area, was the largest traditional Navajo organization. Clans were both matrilineal and matrilocal. Men were not allowed to see or talk with their mothers-in-law, so families lived near the wife's mother but in their own homes. The Navajos had a great fear of death. After the dead were buried, their belongings were destroyed.

The extended family was an important economic and social unit, as was the "outfit" in later times, a grouping that consisted of two or more extended families. Home, crops, pottery, and livestock belonged to women and were considered women's work; men made jewelry and represented the family in public and at ceremonies. A four-day girls' puberty ceremony ranked among the most important occasions.

Navajos lived in hogans. At first they were cone-shaped structures, framed with logs and poles and covered with earth and bark. Later the hogans had six or eight sides and were covered with stone and adobe. Doorways always faced east. The hogans were grouped in rancherias, or small settlements. Other structures included sweat lodges, brush corrals, and ramadas.

To the Athapaskans, Spanish influence (beginning in the early 17th century) meant primarily horses, guns, and places to raid. Consequently their interest in raiding grew, and they effectively established the northern Spanish frontier. Spanish missionaries had little success with the Navajos. Navajos also raided Pueblo Indians for food, women, slaves, and property. Between raids, Navajo and Pueblo people traded with each other. From this contact, the Navajos adopted some Pueblo habits, arts, and customs, especially farming, and settled down. They became farmers, then herders of sheep, goats, and horses.

Navajos helped the Pueblo people in their great revolt against the Spanish (1680), mainly by accepting, occasionally on a permanent basis, fugitives and refugees. Throughout much of the 18th century, the Navajos came in greater contact with Pueblo people and adopted more and more of their ways. Dine'é-Pueblo "pueblitas" became almost a distinct culture in parts of the Dinetah. What is now considered the traditional Navajo culture arose out of this cultural mix.

Animal husbandry, agriculture, hunting, gathering, and weaving wool made up the economic base of the Navajos as they began slowly to spread west and south. The early 19th century saw much reciprocal raiding with Mexicans, Spaniards, and early U.S. travelers on the Santa Fe Trail. Faced with the Mexicans' better firepower, Navajos, especially children, became targets of slave traders during the first half of the 19th century. At this time the Navajos possessed no tribal consciousness. They traveled with their livestock in clans (there were over 60) to summer and winter hogans.

In the 1840s, the Navajos held out against U.S. troops in their sacred stronghold, Canyon de Chelly. However, treaties signed then did not stop the conflict over grazing lands; white abuses of Indians, including the slave trade; and U.S. Army depredations. Following the Mexican Cession (1848), the Navajos were shocked to learn that the United States considered itself the "owner" of all traditional Navajo territory. In the face of Navajo resistance, the United States determined to take the land by force.
The great warrior and war chief Manuelito attacked and almost took Fort Defiance in 1860. Kit Carson defeated the Navajos in 1864 through a scorched-earth policy: He destroyed their fields, orchards, and livestock, and then he invaded Canyon de Chelly. Band by band the Navajos surrendered. Manuelito surrendered in 1866. The United States then forcibly relocated 8,000 Navajos to Bosque Redondo (Fort Sumner) in eastern New Mexico, with plans to transform them into farmers. Hundreds of Navajos died on the 400-mile walk, and 2,000 more died in a smallpox epidemic the following year. The Navajos who had not been captured hid in and around Navajo country.

In 1868, the Navajos were allowed to return and were granted 3.5 million acres of land for a reservation. Although the treaty called for a U.S. government-appointed tribal chief, local headmen retained their power. Manuelito returned home to serve as a Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA)-appointed subchief and then head chief of the Navajos. He also served as the head of the Navajo Cavalry, the local police dedicated to ending Navajo raiding. After their return, the Navajos turned successfully to horse and sheep herding. Navajo culture changed quickly at that time: Trading posts opened, rug weaving for tourists began to take the place of traditional blanket weaving, children were sent to U.S. boarding schools (although this was fiercely resisted at first), Navajos began working for the railroads, missionaries arrived in force, and non-native health care made inroads into traditional cultural practices.

By 1886, the reservation had grown from 3.5 to 11.5 million acres, although much of the best land was taken for railroad rights of way. Tremendous sheep and goat herds made the Navajos relatively prosperous and independent until the mid-1890s, when economic and natural disasters combined to reduce the herds by 75%. Following this period the Navajos switched from subsistence herding to raising stock for market.

The Navajos remained organized primarily by band into the 20th century and thus knew little or no true tribal consciousness until a business council began to meet in 1922. Local business councils, the first and most important community-level political entities, had been created in 1904 (well over a hundred chapters of the councils now exist). In 1915, the BIA divided the Navajo Reservation into six districts (which were in turn reorganized in 1955), each with a non-Indian superintendent. These communities retain their character as government towns. In 1923, the Secretary of the Interior appointed a tribal commissioner and a tribal council. In 1923, Henry Chee Dodge, who had assumed the position of head chief after Manuelito, became the first tribal chair. He provided the tribe with valuable leadership until his death in 1947.

Overgrazing was the key issue in the 1930s; a BIA-mandated stock reduction at that time led to dramatically lower standards of living. It also led to rejection by the tribe of the Indian Reorganization Act (IRA), of which the stock reduction plan was a part. World War II was a watershed for the tribe: Navajos traveled off the reservation in numbers for the first time, and those who returned came home not only with some money but also with a sense of honor gained from fighting as well as from using their language as a code the enemy was unable ever to break. Still, a crisis of unemployment and even starvation marked the immediate postwar years for the Navajos.

The 1950s brought large-scale energy development and with it jobs, money, and new social problems. Coal, oil, and uranium were the most important resources. The number of tribal programs increased dramatically, as did the power of the tribal council. The tribe adopted its own court system and legal code in 1959. The new programs culminated in 1965 with the Office of Navajo Economic Opportunity (ONEO), led by Peter MacDonald. The ONEO funneled tens of millions of dollars into social programs. MacDonald dominated Navajo politics for 20 years, both as head of the ONEO and as tribal chairman in 1970, 1974, 1978, and 1986.

However, the coal leases of the 1960s included provisions for massive strip mining. Soon the once pristine region was seriously polluted, and by the late 1970s there was strong sentiment against further development. MacDonald himself was convicted in 1990 and 1992 of several felony corruption-related crimes and later jailed. Peterson Zah served as tribal chairman in 1982, as president of the Navajo nation in 1990, and as chair of the nation in 1992. The
controversy over the degree and type of economic development continues today, the Navajos having achieved a large
degree of self-determination.

Further Reading

Hicks, John D. The Federal Union: A History of the United States to 1865. Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1937; Moquin,
Wayne. Great Documents in American Indian History. New York: Praeger, 1973; Pritzker, Barry M. Native America

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