



The Navajo

Haash dóone' é nilj?

Haash biniiyé ni' dilyé?

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The Navajo, the largest group of American Indians, live primarily in northern Arizona and northwestern New Mexico. They are famous silversmiths and rug weavers. Other important arts include sandpainting and pottery. The Navajo are Athabaskan-speakers whose early history is to be found in northwestern Canada. Scientists think that these people came into the Southwest between 1300 - 1500 A.D. and occupied the area once used by the prehistoric Anasazi. Traditional forms of subsistence such as sheep herding and agriculture having recently been somewhat replaced by wage earning jobs in mining, government and service industries.

Many books and museum exhibits have portrayed the Navajo. Our Navajo consultants felt that the non-Navajo's preoccupation with craft items, and the idea that things alone could be used to know a people, was inadequate. They suggested that presentation of the concepts, ideas, and symbols important to the Navajo would provide better insight into "Navajo-ness".

The exhibit is divided into two sections. The first part presents a Western View of the Navajo. It reviews arts and crafts and portrays Navajo history as a series of dates and events. The second area is a constellation of symbols, images and concepts or beliefs which represent important aspects of Navajo mental culture.

History and crafts are the external face of the Navajo. The question remains: what do we really know about the Navajo, or Diné as they call themselves? How do they conceptualize the world? What is it that Navajos carry in their minds that separates them from non-Navajos? It is their mental culture. To move into the world of the Diné one must leave behind a preoccupation with compartmentalizing and determining how things work. For the Navajo, things exist. Their workings are related to keeping a balance between opposites. Where the Westerner separates things into categories, the Navajo sees a single entity: a vast whole that cannot be broken up into units. This whole is for the Navajo a part of day-to-day living and the individual is constantly aware of those things considered important.

Some of the concepts important to a Navajo are place, direction, and relationship to one's surroundings. Home and relationships with other people are also a part of one's day-to-day existence and environment. Place is defined by the four Sacred Mountains: Blanca Peak on the East, Mount Taylor on the South, the San Francisco Peaks on the West, and Mount Hesperus on the North.

The directions are linked to colors: white (east), blue (south), yellow (west), and black (north). Duality is ever present in male-female, Mother Earth-Father Sky, First Thunder-First Frost, Monster Slayer-Born-of-Water, summerside-winterside. The responsibility of maintaining harmony or balance of the duality is the answer to the question: "Haash biniiyé ni' dilyé?" "What is your purpose in life?"

Interpersonal relationships, especially clan membership, are essential to the Navajo world. Children are born into the clan of the mother and for the clan of the father. Children learn that they can go to any member of their clan for help and that they, in turn, must help any member of their clan who seeks assistance. Hence, the first question asked of a stranger is: "Haash dóone' é nilj?" "Who are your people?" or "To what clan do you belong?" With this relationship established, the Navajo knows what behavior can be expected. These interpersonal relationships are symbolically seen by the Navajo in the hogan, or home. As the Four Peaks represent the Navajo place, the posts of the hogan represent the family. For the hogan to stand all the posts must interlock, or the frame will fall. The Navajo world is a continuum dependent upon all the components working together. Thus, clan or kinship, religious thinking, and the environment represent a single whole which must be kept in harmony for the well being of the people.

SUGGESTED READING

Kluckhohn, Clyde, and Dorothea Leighton

1962 *The Navajo*. Natural History Press, Garden City.

Ortiz, Alfonso (volume editor)

1983 *Handbook of North American Indians*, Vol. 10: The Southwest.
Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

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