

# The apache: the struggle for tradition

[Parts of the World](#), [Asia](#)



The Apache Indians are one of the very few tribes that are left here in the United States. With a unique set of rituals, ceremonies, and many ways of living, the Apache tribe struggle to keep their traditions passing from one generation to the next. They carry out their day to day tasks in the southwest areas of the United States, such as Texas, Arizona, and New Mexico. Within this community, the women, children, and men each play a vital role in keeping the traditions around. Trying to live in small areas surrounded by modern ways of living is one of the biggest struggles they face. They have a small land area that secludes them from the rest of the American society but are heavily impacted by them. One of the main obstacles they face is continuing the power of the people throughout the tribe. They have special religious and healing leaders that are granted with supernatural powers, like today's pastors or doctors, except without the "supernatural powers." Through their diverse group of individuals, social and historical circumstances that have shaped their experiences, and specific cultural rituals, the Apache tribe are a tight knit group, but are continuously faced with a struggle from the rest of society.

Many years ago, Indians were the primitive people of the land that we now call Arizona, Texas, and northwest sections of Mexico. This was the space that they chose to make their "place." They assigned their own meanings to the area through their culture and ways of living. They created their surroundings with meanings and values of the geographic location and created their nationality. The tribes were nomads, meaning that they followed their food source throughout the year, moving place to place. Many

of the Apache men were hunters and were the ones that followed while the women stay home and lead the household.

A young girl lived her young life in camp of her mother, sisters, and cousins. A special ceremony is held to celebrate a girl becoming a woman because “ they believe that women become more powerful at the onset of puberty” (Dr. Meier, 1). The four days after the sunrise dance, the Apache believe that girls have significant power that promotes healing or rainfall. Once a girl hits puberty, she gets ready for adult life and motherhood. Once a woman, she begins to learn all forms of adulthood. The women are skillful providers and pass their talents to their young. The Mescalero tribe states that “ they could find water where others would die of thirst and prepared meat and skins brought home by the men” (1). Within the household, they make the clothes, acted as a shaman in council meetings.

Within the Apache social system, sex is based on the way you were born; the gender you were born as is the social construct that you live by. Therefore, they teach their children at a young age the exact roles a male and female play within their society. Each household is similar within this same social group. Each household raises their children to learn good manners, kindness, fortitude, and obedience. They each take the same paths toward birth, marriage, ceremonies, work, and social status. Although each household lives as the other, the family aspect is always different.

The men are the main fighters and hunters for the family. On grassy plains they hunted buffalo, their main food source, and only killed what they needed for their immediate use. At a young age, boys would get up before

sunrise and “harden their bodies through rigorous running and training” (Southwest Crossroads, 3). If a young boy was misbehaving, instead of cuffing or beating them, they would have to run up the mountain without stopping. They would continue to add on higher mountains as the boy got older. This was their way of constructive punishment. They were training the boys for war when they were old enough to fight. They would also direct the boys to bathe each morning in the stream, no matter the weather, to harden their bodies for combat. They followed their elders and fought in war, especially trying to fight the European colonists.

The Apache have always faced issues with European colonialism, dating back to the Mexican War. At the beginning of the war with Mexico, the Apache disliked them and agreed to provide safe passage for the US. Although they continued to keep peace for a while, “it ended after Apache leader Mangas Coloradas attacked by miners, breaking the treaty the military and Apaches had earlier signed” (Indans. org, 1). This was one of the main reasons that conflict began with the tribe and the Europeans. Imperialistic civilizations, like that of the Europeans, expanded their territory in the tribe’s society. Colonial policies privileged the Europeans and alienated the Apache, causing them to change their traditions and becoming part of the European culture. The author of First People, a first-person point of view of the war, writes “I have suffered much from unjust orders as those of General Crook. I think that his death was sent by the Almighty as punishment for the many evil deeds he committed” (5). The Apache believe heavily in tribe leaders and chiefs and find their power within the leaders.

Warriors and chiefs were chosen when bands began to join for war. They relied on this person to lead the clan and be sympathetic to his people. When choosing a chief, “ people chose a man known for his courage, wisdom, and personal generosity” (Southwest Crossroads, 1). The chief was a spokesman for the entire group and provided food and peace for those around him. If one disobeyed or disagreed with him, they would take their band and leave. Traditionally, the tribe had no laws, police, or jail systems. They lived by there code of honor. Michael E. Melody explains the code as “ good conduct is the result of obeying customs, and it is up to the person. But if a person doesn’t take hold of the customs, the others do not help him. He is alone” (Southwest Crossroads, 2). Customs and rituals played a huge role in their everyday lives, and if one did not follow, he left the tribe completely, taking his belongings and his family with him.

The Apache’s culture relies strongly on religion and ceremonial processes. The tribe had no definite idea of their surrounding after death but believed in Ussen and a life after this one. Geronimo explains that “ we held that this discharge of one’s duty would make is future life more pleasant, but whether that future life was worse than this life or better, we did not know, and no one was able to tell us” (Geronimo, 8). The tribe also believes that live among supernatural powers, according to Dr. Kelly S. Meier. They did not follow Van Gennup’s three-phrase rite passage or Karl Marx’s ‘ opiate of the masses.’ Instead, they believe their ancestors are the ones guiding them and living among them in nature. They treat nature with the upmost respect and have ceremonies based around natural occurrences. Most of their dances are used to communicate with the people that have passed on. In these dances,

they ask for healing, rain, and celebration of young girls obtaining puberty. Some of the tribe members are left with powers that they use to aid one another. Dr. Meier writes that these powers can either be bestowed on a tribal member or they can seek it on their own. The Apache are a tribe of optimism and pacifism. They use their powers only for good.

Some members are given healing powers, acting as the doctor of the clan. Through their dances, songs, and beats, they call on Ussen, their creator, for help in times of need. Ussen is like God, in that he made all parts of the Earth in a given period. Although, they believe that he created Earth in four days instead of seven. Three is a sacred number for Catholics, and four is the sacred number for the Apache. Within their homeland, there are the four sacred mountain, Sierra Blanca, Guadalupe Mountains, Three Sisters Mountain, and Oscura Mountain Peak. They trust in the mountains, moon, and sun for other spiritual beings. This directs their everyday life and they look at the White Mountain as the place that Ussen gave them life.

The Apache Indians are a force to be reckoned with. They begin to teach their young boys about war as soon as they can walk. Once old enough, they would fight in the war and carry out raids for their people. Their biggest enemy was the European colonists that invaded their homeland and worked to corrupt the children of their culture. They worked their hardest to fight off the enemy and protect their homeland. While the men were out fighting, the women oversaw the household, preparing the food, making the clothes, and acting as shaman. They began to teach their daughters about adult life and motherhood once they hit puberty, which was celebrated by the entire tribe.

The Apache also chose chiefs and warriors to lead their clan. Some of these warriors were granted supernatural powers that could heal and guide the way for others. They all looked toward Ussen, their creator, for help in any struggle and guidance for time to come. They believe that their ancestors are spirits within the nature, like that of plants, mountains, rocks, etc.

Although they are grouped as one clan, the Indians have individual families that they teach each ritual to. During European colonialism, they struggled to continue their beliefs but were able to continuously pass down cultural aspects throughout the household. The Apache Indians have lived a life full of struggle but have continued to hold close to their beliefs and ways of living for the children and the rest of the tribe.