

Navajo religion

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Curiously, the Navajo peoples have no word in their language that can be directly translated to "religion", in the way we perceive it (Woman 536). Rather, the term 'religion' refers to their world view. Anthropologists define religion as a set of attitudes, beliefs, and practices dealing with supernatural powers. The Navajo do not divide the secular from the holy; life and religion are one in the same. The Dine religion has a deep connection with the supernatural. Gods, spirits, monsters, and other supernatural beings play a large part of their everyday life.

Din Dinned, or the "Holy People", are viewed as gods by the Navajo. The term used for the deities does not imply that these are virtuous gods, but that they are powerful and dangerous. It is considered the duty of humans to preserve a harmonious connection with the Holy People (Woman 539). The Navajo are polytheistic; however the Changing Woman is possibly the most cherished deity. Her twin sons, Monster Slayer and Born For Water, their father the Sun, and her make up some sort of "Holy Family" which is often seen in myth and ritual (Woman 539).

There can be confusion about which Din Dinned appears in certain myths and rituals because different names are occasionally used to represent the same deity (Woman 539). The Navajo have a heavy sense of animism, which is the belief in spirits. Nearly everything in the universe contains a human-like inner form (Ones). This inner-form is very similar to the concept of a soul. Aside from natural phenomena, such as mountains and plants, material objects such as arrowheads can even contain this in-lying "soul" (Woman 539). However, death and ghosts are greatly feared in their society (Nonfood-Grimm 1801).

The dead are buried promptly without any accompaniment of a public ceremony. (Adams 253). To keep the deceased from returning, all of their possessions would be destroyed or rendered useless. This would be done so personal belongings would follow the deceased into the afterlife, therefore, keeping them happy and giving them no reason to return (Inform-Grimm 1801). The Holy People and spirits are central to Navajo life. Monsters plague their peripheral existence. Monsters may help explain a disastrous situation every now and then, such as The Monster Who Kicks People Down the Cliff, but it is not something one would come across every day.

Because of the Navajo everyday connection with the preternatural, myth plays an important role in day-to-day activities. Most myths discuss how things came to be, such as how humans came about. The creation myth of the Navajo describes the four worlds the Din Dinned passed through before creating the first earth surface people, known as First Man and First Woman, in the fifth world (Martinez 35). Myth also has a direct link to ceremonies and rituals the Navajo perform. The Changing Woman influences a very important rite of passage for girls who reach puberty. It is said the Changing Woman grew from infancy to maturity in four days.

To honor this myth, upon a girl's first menstruation cycle, she partakes in a ritual known as the Kendal. The Kendal is a four day ceremony which begins with a blessings chant, and finishes with the young woman blessing a number of small children by lifting them, and killing their heads. This is done so " their bodies grow There are few ceremonies, however, that mark a life-change. The Navajo see seven stages in life, however only three are recognized through ceremony. The first is at birth, where both the mother

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and child are washed, chanted over and sprinkled with pollen to protect them from evil.

The second applies only to girls, as it is the puberty ceremony discussed above. There is no puberty ceremony for boys. The third would be marriage. A brief blessings chant would take place, followed by a feast for family and friends (Inform-Grimm 1800). Most Navajo ceremonies and rituals focus on restoring "hą́łghzǫ́" or universal balance and harmony (Cones 337). This is most often done through ceremonials. Ceremonies are often held in a Hogan (a house, or building) in a group setting (Woman 537). Ceremonies can employ multiple types of ritual.

Offerings are sometimes made to the Din Dinned to attract attention and obligate their assistance. Another common practice is a sort of a sacred meal. Pollen is often consumed in addition to prayer. This is because pollen is personified as Corn Pollen Boy and his cohort Corn Beetle Girl, who together represent fertility, life, and happiness. Perhaps the most common form of ritual found in the Navajo religion is prayer. Prayer is often seen in the form of chants, and songs (Woman 541). All of these rituals can be combined to maximize the chance of contact with the supernatural.

The Navajo interesting view of the inner-form make the sacred aspect of religion interesting. Because nearly all things in the universe have this human-like inner form, whether it be one of the four cardinal directions or a Din dinned, there is no clear separation of sacred and profane (Woman 539). As mentioned earlier, the main duty of man is to preserve a harmonious relationship with the Holy People. A person may rely on this relationship for

healing, or for good fortune in the future. Ceremonies are rarely ever done in a private setting. Even in a girl's Kendal Rooney, the various segments are done with others.

During the Kendal, it is customary for the young woman to race, in honor of the run the Changing Woman took towards the dawn. The subject of the ceremony races with other girls her age (Inform-Grimm 1800). The beliefs of the Navajo also easily fulfill both the intellectual and psychological needs of the society. Because of their strong belief in the supernatural, natural phenomena can easily be explained. When one falls ill, it can often be blamed upon a ghost or possibly improper contact with a Din Dinned. This is a very simple explanation for why negative experiences may occur.

One can find relief from these tragedies by expecting a cure from a ceremony (Woman 537). The major religious practitioner in the Dine society is called a singer. Singers are full time specialists who dedicate themselves to learning one or two major chanteys (Woman 538). A chantey is essentially a ceremony. However, the ceremonies performed by the Navajo are often long and drawn out, lasting two, three, five, or even nine nights (Adams 252). Singers spend years studying a single chantey with an older expert, who receives gifts from their apprentices as payment.

Singers hold very high status and sometimes act as informal leaders in their communities (Woman 538). Because they are able to have full-time religious specialists, the Navajo religion religious practitioners, as well as group prayer, which is all present with the Dine. Religion plays a key role in the everyday life of the Navajo peoples. Their world view is evident through their

beliefs and actions. The Dine views provide the society with important values and ideas. The use of religion by the Navajo gives an example of how a society can be positively affected by a unique belief system.