

AMERICAN INDIAN BULLETIN

SPOTLIGHT: NAVAJO

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Navajo offices, seal, and location

The Navajo, or Diné, represent the largest Native American tribe within the United States, residing primarily in the expansive landscapes of Diné Bikéyah, encompassing portions of Arizona, New Mexico, and Utah. Their cultural identity is deeply rooted in rich traditions, including intricate weaving, silversmithing, and complex ceremonial practices, all underpinned by the vital Diné Bizaad language. Historically, they navigated migrations and adapted to the Southwestern environment, though their past is also marked by the tragic "Long Walk" of 1864, a forced relocation by the U.S. government. Today, the sovereign Navajo Nation continues to preserve its heritage, demonstrating resilience and cultural strength while engaging with contemporary society, notably evidenced by the crucial role of Navajo code talkers in World War II.

CULTURAL STORY

(Changing Woman) is a deity with tremendous powers of creation. The life-giving qualities of the earth are associated with and derived from her. One part of her story illustrates the balance between opposites that results in harmony in the Diné (Navajo) universe. After her children, the Hero Twins, had slain the monsters terrorizing the Diné, the Twins' father Jóhonaa'éí, (Sun Carrier) asked Changing Woman to move to his home in the east. When Changing Woman refused and asked for a special house in the west, Sun Carrier asked why he should build it. "I will tell you why," she said to him. "You are male and I am female. You are of sky and I am of earth. You are constant in your brightness, but I must change with the seasons. You move constantly at the edge of heaven, while I must be fixed in one place . . . Remember, as different as we are, you and I, we are of one spirit. As dissimilar as we are, you and I, we are of equal worth . . . Unlike each other as you and I are, there can be no harmony in the universe as long as there is no harmony between us."



Navajo Basket Art



TRIBAL HISTORY

The Navajo, or Diné, people have a history marked by migration, adaptation, and resilience. Their origins trace back to Athabaskan-speaking groups who migrated from present-day Canada and Alaska, arriving in the Southwestern United States between the 1300s and 1500s. Over time, they developed a distinct culture, incorporating agricultural practices from neighboring Pueblo peoples and later adopting livestock from the Spanish. This adaptability allowed them to thrive in the challenging desert environment.

However, the 19th century brought immense hardship. The expansion of the United States led to increasing conflict, culminating in the "Long Walk" of 1864. The U.S. government forcibly relocated thousands of Navajo to Fort Sumner, New Mexico, where they endured harsh conditions. After four years, they were allowed to return to their homeland, establishing the Navajo Nation, which has since grown into the largest Native American tribe in the United States. Despite past injustices, the Navajo people have preserved their language, traditions, and cultural identity, remaining a vibrant and significant part of the American Southwest.



Navajo Hoop Dancer



Navajo regalia

LANGUAGE LEARNING

The Navajo language, Diné Bizaad, is a vital part of Navajo culture and identity. Here's a quick overview:

Athabaskan Family:

It belongs to the Athabaskan language family, which also includes languages spoken in Alaska, Canada, and other parts of the United States.

Tonal Language:

Navajo is a tonal language, meaning that the pitch of a spoken syllable can change the meaning of a word.

Yá'át'ééh:

This is the most common greeting, like "hello" or "good."

Ahéhee':

This means "thank you."

Diné:

This is what Navajo people call themselves, meaning "the people."

Tó:

This word means "water."

Shimá:

This word means "my mother".

Resources

Tribal Website

<https://www.navajo-nsn.gov/>

Language Resource

<https://libraryguides.nau.edu/Navajo>

History

<https://utahindians.org/archives/navajo/history.html>

Native Land Explorer

<https://native-land.ca/>

Treaties

<https://www.archives.gov/research/native-americans/treaties>