
Chapter
3
The Navajo

The Navajo reservation is located across northwestern New Mexico and northeastern Arizona, with a small section extending up into southern Utah. It is high country—part of what geographers call the Colorado Plateau. The altitude varies from 3,500 feet to mountain peaks over 11,000 feet. On the higher ranges are large stands of piñon and juniper which above 6,500 feet merge into ponderosa pine.

The whole of the terrain has very little rainfall, ranging from twelve inches a year in the mountains to as little as five inches in the lower desert regions. During years of drought there is even less, which makes agriculture and sheep raising very precarious, especially for those at the lower altitudes. Most of the precipitation comes in July and August, when there are great cloudbursts which wash the top soil down the *arroyos*. Winter is marked by some snow—a good bit in the mountains—and severely cold nights of sub-zero temperature.

Until recently the Navajo have lived in hemispherical earth and log houses, called *hogans*, where much of the photography by the Navajos in our study took place. The hogan, a one-room,

windowless structure about eighteen feet in diameter with a central fireplace (today occupied by a stove) and smoke hole in the roof, provides adequate protection from the cold and the severe dust storms. Its persistence is also due to religious sanctions, since curing ceremonies known as *sings* must be held in such a dwelling. In the summer the people move into brush structures which shade them from the sun and take advantage of the breeze. The Navajo detest extreme hot weather—an important factor in the periodic return to the reservation of those who have gone to seek wage work in southern Arizona or California.

While it is a severe land, marked with recurrent droughts, dust storms, and blizzards, it is a land of great beauty. Vast panoramas of red rock and deep canyons with beautiful pine-studded parkland attract visitors from all over the United States. Tourists also come to see the Navajo in their picturesque dress—the women in long full sweeping skirts of calico and blouses of velveteen, useful garb for a people who make much of bodily modesty. Many of the men, especially on the northwestern edge of the reservation, still wear their hair long, put up in a double knot at the nape of the neck.

Compared to tribal peoples living in the interior of New Guinea, the upper Amazon River drainage, or the remote highlands of Southeast Asia, the Navajo are in no sense a primitive people. Most of them share, to some extent, twentieth-century technology, live in part in our economy and speak some English. The Navajo, however, do have some characteristics in common with other tribally organized peoples. They retain in good measure their own traditional social organization and religion which differ greatly from those of urban-living peoples with a Euro-American orientation such as ourselves, and from subcultures in our society such as Mexicans, Negroes, Puerto Ricans, and others, who share our religion, language, and variations of our social organization. They think of themselves as a coherent group. In their own language, they call themselves *Dine*, which means “the People.”

The very facts that the Navajo do share much of our technology, are involved in our wage economy, and speak our language as well as their own, make them representative of a very large segment of the "developing world." Those developing societies share with us features of twentieth-century life, but also share with tribal peoples many of the ideological and social principles of human organization that give them a very different approach to living and a very different system of understanding their total environment.

It should be noted that although the Navajo speak English in ever-increasing numbers (most of the population under thirty is bilingual), only a small percentage of those over sixty are fluent in spoken English and an even smaller number are literate. Navajo remains the language of the home and the community. It is the language in which the child first learns to think, and it remains the language that he reverts to when, as an adult, he meets a crisis.

It is also well to appreciate that the Navajo living on the edge of the reservation have been in contact with the white man, his values, his family, and his community organization for one hundred years.

In 1869 the Navajo were returned to their homeland from Fort Sumner in eastern New Mexico, where they had been interned for the previous five years as part of an all-out attempt on the part of the War Department to put an end to raids on Anglo- and Spanish-American settlements in the Southwest. Upon their return the present reservation was established by treaty.

The next fifty years was a period of forced assimilation. The white politicians, civil servants, and educators of that era thought that if the children of the Navajo (and of all other Indians) were isolated from their own people, placed in boarding schools distant from the reservation, and kept out of touch with their families and communities, they would automatically be "educated," assimilated into white culture, and thus become "civilized."

It is now apparent that this program was a failure; it produced

misfits unable to function in either their own or the dominant society. Nor did the attempts to Christianize the Navajo meet with great success. Except for a small number of converts, the Navajo have retained their own religion and its elaborate ceremonial life.

It was not until the reform administration of John Collier, Commissioner of Indian Affairs under the presidency of Franklin D. Roosevelt, that government officials began to entertain a more sympathetic and understanding view of Indian culture. Under Collier the trend in education was reversed, from distant boarding schools to high schools near the reservation and elementary schools in the local communities. Indian arts, religion, mythology, and tribal ways were officially sanctioned by the government officials in the Bureau of Indian Affairs on both the Washington and district levels. But the less educated, run-of-the-mill school teacher, doctor, or land management officer, who was working on the local tribal and community level on the reservation, did not necessarily go along with what they thought to be the impractical idealism of Collier and his staff.

At this time there was another very important development on the Navajo reservation—the beginnings of tribal government. Before 1920 the Navajo had no political unity as a tribe. The people had been organized into local bands, each with its own leaders, but there was no overall tribal identity. In the 1920s a tribal council was established and by the end of the thirties it began to have recognized authority, even though during those years many of the Navajo thought of the council as a rubber stamp for Washington. After the Second World War the council became an effective political and legislative body with a chairman and vice-chairman and seventy-four councilmen elected by secret ballot from as many voting districts spread across the reservation. While at first the tribal government was under the tutelage of some able federal civil servants at Window Rock, Arizona, today it is completely in the hands of Navajo leadership. Additionally the tribe has developed its own committee system re-

sponsible to the tribal council, for example, a committee on education, a committee on health and welfare, a committee on grazing. The Navajo have successfully assumed the responsibility for governing their own affairs after a period of over a hundred years of dependence on the federal government. That dependency had crushed Indian groups elsewhere, notably the Indians on the plains whose economy was drastically altered by the disappearance of the buffalo and the encroachment of white settlers.

Political growth has been matched by economic growth on the Navajo reservation. Uranium, natural gas, oil and timber became sources for the building of capital funds under federal guidance. The income from such wealth (held tribally, not individually) has been used to develop a tribal timber industry, to further arts and crafts production, to set up merchandising centers, to encourage small businesses, to improve roads, and to advance community development. Additionally, the tribe has a generous fund used for supporting higher education. Today the Navajo have their own civil service, employing over a thousand men and women; it conducts the administration of their affairs (including their own police force), all of which had been in the hands of federal administrators thirty years ago.

The growth of the Navajo during this period, as a unified people with a nationalized ideology of their own (they have constantly held out against pan-Indian political involvement), may be compared with the growth of national pride in the developing nation states of Africa and elsewhere.

The social organization of the Navajo is based on about sixty matrilineal clans and on an extended family system which traces kin to collateral lines far beyond the nuclear family. The clan's principal function is to regulate marriage; it is an exogamous unit with marriage rules which are still in effect—for example, to have sexual relations with a clanmate is to commit incest. Clan members also have economic obligations to one another—members of

the same clan join in putting on the expensive nine-night ceremonies.

Upon marriage, the husband joins the "camp" of his wife, where the couple set up their own hogan (house) adjacent to those of her grandmother, mother, and numerous sisters, all of whom live with their husbands in separate dwellings nearby. This is the classic residence pattern, but it is breaking down today among the members of the tribe who have been off to school; they tend to set up their homes apart from the wife's female relatives.

As mentioned, the economy of the Navajo has changed rapidly in the last thirty-five years. As late as 1934 most of the families and communities were largely self-sufficient, following a subsistence economy based largely on horticulture (corn, beans, squash, potatoes, and other garden crops) and sheep herding. The large herds of sheep were used for food and the wool and lamb crop were used for barter with the traders. The wool also was used for rug-weaving, in which Navajo women excel. Within a radius of fifty miles of Gallup, New Mexico, there grew up a concentration of silversmiths who made jewelry from silver and turquoise obtained from the white traders. In the late thirties and early forties the sheep economy was greatly altered, when the large flocks of sheep and horses had to be greatly reduced. For centuries the arid region had been overgrazed and enforcement of the soil erosion regulations set back Navajo-Federal relations, creating much misunderstanding, bitterness and recrimination. It was not until well after the Second World War that the wounds healed, when the Navajo undertook the enforcement of their own grazing regulations.

During the Second World War thousands of Navajo went to work in defense industries and on the tracks of the western railroads. Within ten years, the tribe became highly dependent on our cash economy. In 1937 there were only a few automobiles in and around Pine Springs. Today almost every family has either a passenger car or a pickup truck.

Many men and women on the reservation are dependent on

federally or tribally sponsored programs. In the last few years the various federal and state poverty programs have had a great effect on communities all over the reservation. It should be noted that while the tribe jointly has considerable wealth, most families which have five or more children fall under the federal law for direct aid.

Along with this rapid economic change has come a breakdown in the extended family, especially among those educated Navajos who live on the edge of the reservation or in the bordering small towns and cities. In such families the rights and obligations of the mother's brother—who traditionally played an important role in teaching the Navajo's moral code to his sister's children—have all but been forgotten by the generation now growing up. The use of alcohol also has greatly increased; today alcoholism is a major mental health problem for the tribe. Coupled with auto accidents, it is a scourge for the Navajo just as for the rest of the nation.

The religion of the Navajo is still central to their identity despite almost a hundred years of mission activity. Its central focus is curing, which in Navajo ideology is the means whereby the patient is restored to a proper harmony with his total environment—his fellow man, his natural surroundings, and the gods. These curing rites include short, one-night sings as well as complex nine-day ceremonies involving sand paintings and the singing of song cycles with sacred texts. The Night Chant, or *Yeibeichai* as it is popularly called, is one such rite. It is performed only during the winter season, after the first frost and before the first thunder of the spring. Hundreds of people come from a great distance to attend the final night, when teams of men from various communities vie with each other in the performance of a masked dance. It is an abstracted cardboard mock up of the mask of one of the Yei (gods), which appears in one of the films to be described later. During the previous days the medicine man

has been singing over the patient and directing assistants in making the elaborate sand paintings which depict the gods through complex geometric patterns created by sifting colored earth pigments through the thumb and forefinger onto a base of carefully smoothed desert sand. At the completion of each sand painting, the patient sits in the middle of the pattern, and the medicine man transfers its strength and beauty to various parts of the patient's body.

These ceremonials, attended by many relatives and neighbors all praying for the patient's recovery, have considerable psychotherapeutic value. Thousands of Navajo retain faith in the curing properties of these religious observances. They are an essential complement to the therapy given by medical doctors, which may rid the body of germs but fail to bring about the harmony required for health. Physicians from our culture who have worked as doctors or researchers on the reservation have only recently been learning the effectiveness of the curing ceremonies in the total health of their patients.

With the passing of each decade there are fewer medicine men with control of all the knowledge essential to the enactment of a nine-day chant, a knowledge which entails memorizing the original myth and the texts of long chants and songs, knowing the formulae for medicinal plant infusions, and having sure control of the design of the sand paintings. Such skill takes many years of training, starting in adolescence, as it is believed that the slightest error in any part of the ceremony may cause the death of the patient. This religious system was geared to a subsistence economy, and now that young apprentice medicine men must work off-reservation for wages, the essential time for learning, not only these most elaborate rites but the shorter ones too, has been sharply curtailed. The resulting loss of these and other aspects of traditional Navajo culture might provide some insight into the motivations of our Navajo students; almost all of them quickly chose subjects for their films depicting the "old ways."

But many of the shorter and less elaborate ceremonies, including the very sacred Blessing Way, which is used as a prophylaxis against evil and disease, are still performed in great number in every Navajo community. Kluckhohn and Leighton (1946) estimated that the Navajos spent approximately a quarter of their waking hours in religious participation. While participation is probably much less than that today on the reservation as a whole, traditional religious activity is still a dominant theme in the lives of most Navajo and a focus for community participation.

In recent years, starting in the 1930s, use of the hallucinogenic drug peyote, a sacrament in the Native American Church, diffused to the Navajo by way of the Ute Indians of southern Colorado. This religion, which is widespread among Indians all over the western United States, has provided the Navajo with an alternate religious system which is not so dependent on a long period of training and one which is a fusion of Christian and pagan elements. Today the peyote cult has many thousands of Navajo followers and continues to grow. For many years this religion and the use of peyote was outlawed by the tribe, but recently that law was revoked and the Native American Church now conducts its ritual openly.

There is some evidence of a revival of Navajo custom, not only of traditional religious practice and mythology, but of the older code of ethics, including kinship behavior. Today such a revival is to be found at the Rough Rock Demonstration School in the very heart of the reservation. There, eighty miles north of Pine Springs, this elementary school under the direction of Navajo educators has a level of community interest and support no longer enjoyed by the Government and mission schools. It includes in its curriculum the teaching of the Navajo language (both spoken and written) as well as English. Additionally, Navajo history, mythology, and tradition known to the grandparental and earlier generations is being taught to young children. Many Navajos who are now in their middle years, most of

whom have lived off-reservation for a considerable period, have faced what psychologists in our culture call an "identity crisis." In several of the films (see Appendix) this search for identity becomes a central theme. Other films show a deep concern for the general concept of the search for origins, whether of self or of their traditions. In the section on analysis of the films this concern for origins should particularly be noted.

In seeking an answer to the question of identity, the Navajo educators at Rough Rock have turned to their own cultural roots in the belief that if the Navajo is more secure as an Indian, he will be more secure living among white men. This is a far cry from the educational policy of fifty years ago, but it is one increasingly respected among those concerned with the education of Negroes, Mexicans, and other minority populations in the United States.

Pine Springs is about forty miles west of Gallup, New Mexico, and ten miles north of U.S. Interstate Highway 40, the main route between Chicago and Los Angeles that follows the Santa Fe railroad tracks from Albuquerque across northern Arizona to California.

Pine Springs is a small community of approximately six hundred people, bounded on the north by the road from Ganado to Window Rock. Ponderosa pine shades into piñon and juniper as one goes south.

Community activity centers in the trading post and the boarding school, which is limited to first and second grades. Both are located on a sort of central square, as is a Roman Catholic mission, which completes the roster of three institutions of the white man usually found in Navajo communities. Half-a-mile away is a large one-room chapter house built by the community for local meetings. There we met with the elders of the community at the outset of the film teaching project.

Political development of Pine Springs has been held back by

its division into two constituencies. The part east of the road from the highway is District 18 which votes at Oak Springs; residents on the west vote at Klagetoh.¹

Community leadership is in the hands of the local chapter, the smallest unit of tribal government. Such chapters were established in the early years of the century and were essentially based on the old band organization. Juan Tsosie was the chairman of the local chapter and Johnny Nelson was vice-chairman when we came to Pine Springs.

Pine Springs differs from most Navajo communities in only one respect—the high preponderance of craftsmen, both silversmiths and weavers, resident in the area. As early as the mid-thirties Pine Springs began to build a reputation for the quality of its vegetable dye rugs and silver jewelry. The latter was especially noted for its cast work without turquoise. Today many of these silversmiths work in Gallup but keep their homes at Pine Springs. The weavers all still live in the community, where they work in their hogans, assisted in carding and spinning by their daughters and by the older women with failing eyesight. The finely woven rugs bring premium prices and are widely sought by collectors. While these crafts provide considerable income to the community, the Navajos here as elsewhere are largely dependent on cash wages which they earn away from home or on government aid.

1. The reservation is divided into nineteen districts set up originally as land management administrative districts, which have since been adapted as the basis for 106 voting precincts for tribal councilmen.