

Article

Reaching Back to Traditional Teachings: Diné Knowledge and Gender Politics

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Abstract: As Diné, we must understand the traditional teachings that were once in place through oral traditions and teachings. There are many troubles Diné (Navajo) women and Nadleeh (Two-Spirit) people face from outside the community, but due to western influence, we endure the same effects from within our own Nation. Through this paper, I aim to propose resolutions to move our Nation in the right direction for social change and build a community of acceptance by reaching back to traditional teaching philosophies without the influence of cis-heteronormative patriarchal structures. I argue that adoptions of these western institutions have severe effects on Diné women and Nadleeh (Two-Spirit) livelihood and well-being. In this paper, I examine three areas of Diné philosophy and cosmology: (1) the central role of K'é (family) and the matrilineal clanship, (2) Diné women and Nadleeh voices in our creation stories, and (3) Hozhó, the beauty way, to understand the masculine and feminine energies of Diné cosmology in order to address the importance of women and Nadleeh on Dinétah.

Keywords: Diné; Nadleeh; Women; Navajo Nation; Two-Spirit; K'é; Hozhó; Cosmology; Diné philosophy



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1. Introduction

Shí éi Souksavanh Tom Keovorabouth yinishyé. Kinyaa'áanii nishli. Nááts'ózí Bashishchiin. 'Áshijhi Dashicheii. Nááts'ózí dashinalí. I am of Towering House Clan, born for the Slanted Eye People, my maternal grandfather is of Salt People, and my paternal grandfather is of the Slanted Eye People. Originally, I am from Chinle, Arizona, but grew up in Phoenix, Arizona. I am Diné and Laotian, Queer, and Nadleeh. I am writing this piece as a living descendant of survivors of the long walk, boarding schools, relocation, and the Indian placement program. I recognize the immense privilege that comes with living off-reservation and in an urban area, while writing to improve the conditions on the Navajo Nation, but I write this piece with the hopes of transformation and ultimately, to begin our generational healing as a nation and people for our futures, no matter our displacements.

Dinétah (Navajo Nation), is the largest land-based tribal nation in the United States (U.S.) and most recently, also the highest enrolment rate among the 573+ federally recognized tribes in the U.S. (Fonseca 2021). As Diné people, we have a rich history held within the four sacred mountains that expands throughout what is now referred to as Arizona, Utah, New Mexico, and Colorado. According to my grandparents, these sacred mountains hold our creation and traditions. As Diné, we understand that we travelled through three worlds (Black, Blue, and Yellow) to get to the fourth world, which is where we believe we are now. The Fourth World is known as the white world, or glittering world; my great grandma used to tell us it is because everything was “shimmering” or reflecting to create a bright light, such as when glitter glistens when light hits. Through these Worlds, there were many lessons that were learned by our people that are still shared today.

In contemporary times, Diné people face many issues as a result of colonialism. One of these issues that I argue involves the introduction of the western gender binary managed and confined by patriarchy. Diné scholars, thinkers, and Elders remind us that Dinétah

is a matrilineal and matriarchal society, but the introduction of colonization has had a significant impact on how our communities' function. Gender is one such issue. As Wiradjuri scholar Sandy O'Sullivan argues (O'Sullivan 2019), "the impact of the colonial project has cast First Nations Peoples as objects to be managed by the state and church. This external management has frequently denied us the subtle complexities of sexuality and gender" (p. 107).

Gender among Diné was not designed in the way that it is referred to or portrayed through the work of non-Indigenous researchers, anthropologists, historians, or in the whitestream media (Johnson 2011). Images of women doing domestic work such as cooking or cleaning and men hunting and gathering have been the way in which our lives have been communicated to the public, especially through media. Such portrayals do not reflect the reality of our experiences.

The introduction of colonization and christianization enforced gender roles and norms that were not part of our societies. Residential boarding schools was one strategy that was used to assimilate Diné into tightly confined gender roles (Adams 1995). The results of this influence can be seen in contemporary times. For example, there are beliefs held in parts of Dinétah that women are not permitted to take up leadership roles such as becoming the president of the Navajo Nation (Fonseca 2010). According to some "traditional" Diné people, it has been argued that this is because it is considered a "taboo" and we have never had a woman lead us before, which is a lie. Additionally, the introduction of the Diné Marriage Act of 2005 follows christian notions of marriage, between a man and a woman, and does not recognize same-sex marriage within the boundaries of the four sacred mountains (Diné Marriage Act 2005). The influence of colonization and christianization has arguably created some discriminatory behaviors within the community, especially impacting Diné women and Nadleeh (Two-Spirit). This adds to my argument that results in cisgendered men benefiting from patriarchy, while Diné women and Nadleeh have suffered further discrimination from within our own communities. As Cherokee scholar Qwo-Li Driskill (2004) argues, homophobia, transphobia, and sexism have become problems in our communities, "as a result of colonization [which] cannot accept women as leaders, or people with extra-ordinary gender and sexualities" (p. 52).

This paper will firstly discuss Diné cosmology and our traditional teachings of 'Sa'ah naaghai Bik'eh Hozho', which outlines Diné thinking as it relates to our understanding of the world we now live in and how our thinking and practices rely on a balance of spirit embodying masculinity and femininity. I will then discuss the way in which colonization has impacted Diné by focusing on what is known as the long walk and the imposition of christianity and colonial legislation. The next section will look at the ongoing impact of colonialism and how our traditional teachings have been impacted by christianity and the introduction of the gender binary. I will discuss leadership within Dinétah and the introduction of the Diné Marriage Act of 2005. To conclude, I draw on the work of Cree scholar Alex Wilson and discuss their theory of "coming in" to argue that Diné need to reach back to our traditional teachings to find a way forward for our futures.

2. Sa'ah Naaghai Bik'eh Hozho

In Diné cosmology, we are taught from our Elders that the four directions symbolize east, south, west, and north as well as various stones, seasons, colors, and most importantly, energies. These energies are broken down into masculine and feminine with each person embodying both. East and north represent masculinity, while west and south represent femininity (Lee 2015; Schwarz 1997). This is an important concept to grasp within Diné teachings because it helps us to understand the balance that each person is able and believed to achieve in their lifetime. It explains the relationships among each other and Nadleeh (Two-Spirit) identity within the community.

One widespread saying within Diné philosophy is "Sa'ah naaghai Bik'eh Hozho", which is a primary life path for Diné people to follow and stems from both male and female energies (Lee 2012). When breaking down the phrase, "Sa'ah naaghai" represents

masculinity and “Bik’eh Hozho” represents femininity, demonstrating the balance and importance of both and not one over the other. Sa’ah naaghai Bik’eh Hozho not only encompasses the pathway of life, but also highlights “the Diné body as having a female side (the right side) and a male side (the left side)” (Lamphere 2005). This does not mean Diné are viewed as being neither female nor male or categorized “berdache”, to use colonial language. Rather, I argue that there are two complimentary energies of masculine and feminine, that each Diné possess.

Our knowledges are passed down from generation to generation, often shared during the wintertime, while certain animals are asleep, which is often warned to us by Elders. Our knowledge is passed down via stories and provide us with a deep understanding of Diné society and our relationship with Dinétah. One such story tells of how Diné have built their knowledge around the topic of gender. This entails lessons we have learned that helps us to understand the way in which both masculine and feminine energy is valued. As my great grandma Fannie explained and passed down to our family, in the First World, there were four clouds: white, black, yellow, and blue, and when the black and white cloud crossed, First Man was formed, and on the opposite side, when blue and yellow cloud crossed, First Woman was formed. These clouds also represent the four directions, east and north representing masculinity, while west and south represented femininity (Lee 2015). During this time, it is said to be completely dark, reiterating black world, and everything existed in a space the size of a small island. First Man lit a fire, attracting First Woman’s attention and she picked up all her belongings to move to him. This story tells of the creation of not only First Man and First Woman, but also the authority of First Man. In this First World, authority was held through a patrilineal line. Second World things changed and Diné moved to being a matriarchal and matrilineal society. This is demonstrated in the way in which men now move to the woman’s family today, which is not exclusive to the binary (Carey 2011; Redhouse 2016).

However, when the Diné emerged into the Third World they saw the six sacred mountains and two rivers formed in this world. At this time, all the people were living in peace until the men brought to everyone’s attention that they could survive on their own. The women argued with them and similarly argued that they did not need the men to survive either. This is when the people became divided with one side moving across the river to build their own separate camp. As time went on, both camps were not prosperous, and the people were dying. Our Nadleeh within each camp came forward. It is said, in the men’s camp, Nadleeh were tending the crops, raising the children, and cooking; while in the women’s camp, Nadleeh were hunting, gathering, and protecting the camp, not necessarily pertaining to gender roles, rather social roles. Eventually, each camp was able to become stabilized and our Nadleeh people came forward, informing the others that in order to survive they need to embrace the masculine and feminine energies demonstrating that one cannot survive without the other. From then on, the people were able to come back together in harmony and Nadleeh became highly respected among the community because of that balance, but also their work to keep the people alive.

The Third World was destroyed by flooding, bringing the Diné to the Fourth World, which is the world that we are in now. However, the people were not able to reproduce and were being killed by monsters that existed in this world. In the Fourth World, as explained by white anthropologist Witherspoon (1975), who spent considerable time in their career living and working on Dinétah, “the people had lost the ability to reproduce, and monsters then inhabiting the world were killing the people; It was the plan of First Man, First Woman, and others to have Changing Woman [Diné deity] restore the power of generation and to give birth to the Twins, who would destroy the monsters” (p. 15). Changing Woman gave life to the warrior twins known as Monster Slayer and Born for Water, who were then guided to kill the monsters. The twins discovered that their father was the sun, and he gave them direction on how to slay these monsters: Born for Water planned how to slay the monsters and Monster Slayer would make sure the plan went through. They took the advice from their father and slayed all of the monsters that were in

the Fourth World, except four: poverty, hunger, cold, and death. These are the remaining four monsters that are believed to still be alive today.

Our warrior twins embody both masculine and feminine qualities as one. Changing Woman is known as Asdzaan Nadleeh and the direct translation would be woman or lady Two-Spirit. Notice her English name translates to “Changing” rather than Two-Spirit because Nadleeh is the balance or changing between masculine and feminine energies, which we see within previous examples of Nadleeh. Asdzaan Nadleeh is the life giver of the warrior twins and is an important ancestor to the Diné as articulated by white anthropologist Lamphere (2005),

“Changing Woman, one of the most important of the Navajo Holy People, is associated with the earth and was also the creator of Navajo clans and the Navajo as ‘earth surface people’. Thus, there are two models for relationships here: that of the mother-child bond centered in concepts of birth and that of male-female duality” (p. 35).

It is important to highlight the significance of Asdzaan Nadleeh or Changing Woman within our community because they were responsible for birthing the twins in a time of infertility. Asdzaan Nadleeh was able to create beings from her body; the four original clans and gave birth to the warrior twins.

Prior to the coming of invaders to Dinétah, Nadleeh were highly respected as spiritual beings because they were able to embody both masculine and feminine spirits. Within our Diné community, it was socially acceptable for unions (or marriage) of people regardless of their masculine or feminine status. The idea of same-sex marriage was common. Another related lesson that is taught in Dinétah is Naachid. This refers to the meetings between twelve war chiefs and the twelve peace chiefs. War was looked at as more masculine and peace was looked to be more feminine. As noted by Diné scholar Lloyd Lee, “prior to colonization, Diné men and women lived in an egalitarian way of life” by integrating their work roles, gender equity was critical aspect of social life; all economic contributions were equally valued (p. 223). Nadleeh were able to hold the title of chief and similarly, women were able to be war chiefs and men were able to be peace chiefs.

3. The Navajo Long Walk

Colonization brought much despair and much loss for Diné people. One event that took place in 1864 is particularly painful for us as Diné. This event is known as the Long Walk and refers to the forced relocation of Diné from our homelands to Fort Sumner, a 350+ mile trek on foot (Denetdale 2007; Bailey 1964). The Long Walk was a tactic of colonialism aimed at the erasure of Diné by physically removing us from Dinétah. On the walk, Diné people were heavily surveilled and forced to walk the whole 350+ miles on foot, while the government officials were on horseback (Denetdale 2008). Fort Sumner was not conducive to Diné practices such as planting crops as the land was barren. The people were provided with inadequate food supplies and led to many deaths by starvation (Deer 2015). Muscogee (Creek) scholar Sarah Deer reflects on the passage by Navajo Scholar Laura Tohe arguing,

“The Diné people call Fort Sumner, Hwéldi (the place of extreme hardship) because of their experience of starvation and rape at the hands of the U.S. government. Native people often arrived at their new home or place of captivity with little more than the clothes on their back; soldiers often took advantage of this state of affairs to coerce Native women into providing sexual services to receive food, clothing, and blankets” (Deer 2015, p. 69).

The Navajo Long Walk has a lasting trauma on the community who recall the horrors inflicted upon our people and especially on our women and Nadleeh. This trauma has been passed down from generation to generation and is still present within the community. Eventually, in 1868, with no choice left for us, the Navajo Nation Chiefs at the time: Manuelito and Barboncito, who were consulted by our Diné women and Nadleeh, signed

the Treaty of 1868; and the Treaty gave Diné people the ability to return back to our homeland between the four sacred mountains (Denetdale 2007).

In the 1930s, the Federal Bureau of Indian Affairs created the Indian Reorganization Act of 1934, making provision for Native Nations to return to some level of authority to govern themselves. This of course was not the same as before colonization, but was a move away from immediate colonial violence. Under this legislation the Navajo Nation government was formed including the appointment of a tribal president, vice president, and 88 council delegates that represent the 110 chapters of the tribe (History n.d.). Today, these roles are held primarily by men, and this is especially the case for the roles of president and vice president. Some continue to argue that women are not equipped to hold these leadership positions and argue that it goes against 'traditional' Navajo structures; such statements saying "I hope you lose" and "We want Ben Shelly. Women belong in the kitchen" when Lynda Lovejoy ran for Navajo Nation president in 2010 (Fonseca 2010).

Other efforts have been made by colonizers to disrupt Diné ways of knowing, being, and doing by moving our people from our traditional homelands. For example, the Relocation Act and Indian Placement program were ostensibly about the erasure of Diné people and culture. The purpose of these programs were to get Diné people off of the Nation in order to blend in within white society and hence cease to be Diné. The relocation program allocated funds for Native people to move into urban areas to seek employment opportunities and the Indian placement program had provisions for Diné children to be housed in Mormon households and for them to attend whitestream public schools in Utah; these are two intergenerational traumas that run through my family lineage (Fixico 2000; Garrett 2016). All of these strategies sought to undermine Diné cultural practices and beliefs and to instill western christian morals and beliefs. As argued by Witherspoon (1975), "for those who follow American and European cultural beliefs, according to which 'real' or 'true' kinship is limited to those human beings who are blood relatives, it must be pointed out that Navajo define kinship in terms of action or behavior, not in terms of substance" (p. 21). Kinship and clanship reiterate the matriarchal system of Diné people by showing the relations between family members to one another, not only based on blood relations.

This type of system creates community among the people and allows relationships among our people to be stronger. While exposure to western culture can have a serious impact on the way in which some people understand the deeper meaning and obligations of kinship. The exposure to the colonizer's culture has had an identifiable impact on Diné returning us to the conditions of the First World. In 2005, the Navajo Nation's tribal government created the Diné Marriage Act. In section two, it states "Marriage between persons of the same sex is void and prohibited, the purpose of marriage on the Navajo Nation are to promote strong families and to preserve the strengthen family values" (Diné Marriage Act 2005). The Diné Marriage Act is contradictory to the teaching and lessons of Diné people.

These teachings are embedded in the creation stories of Nadleeh who have played significant roles that have created our community prior to contact. Nadleeh are spiritual people who are highly appreciated in these stories and have been treated with respect. Such is the impact of colonization and christianization on Diné that in 2015, the United States Supreme Court had found the Defense Against Marriage Act unconstitutional throughout the U.S. extending recognition and benefits to same-sex marriages (Obergefell v. Hodges 2015). The ruling is mandated among all 50 states, but due to the Indian Reorganization Act and Tribal Sovereignty, Native Nations such as the Navajo Nation have full order of their government and lands. Therefore, the ruling of the Supreme Court does not apply on Tribal lands because Tribal laws are the law of the land. The legacy of colonial law making, and the indoctrination of christianity continues to negate Diné knowledge, which arguably is the intention.

4. Colonial Violence and Gender Politics

Colonial heteropatriarchy according to Mississauga Nishnaabeg writer Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (2020) “work[s] to destroy the fabric of Indigenous nationhoods by attempting to destroy our relationality, making it difficult to form sustainable relationships with each other” (p. 704). Diné face many issues that are born from colonialism such as poverty, alcoholism, and diabetes among others. Gendered violence is also a significant issue. Diné women and Nadleeh individuals are at the highest risks of all forms of violence including sexual assault (Malcoe and Duran 2004). Gender identity has become a controversial topic among Tribal communities and especially for those who survived residential schools and have been impacted by christianization. Younger Diné have had more opportunities to be openly and proudly Diné. Today, we are witnessing many who are embracing our own knowledge and calling into question colonial thinking, including the gender binary that has been introduced as part of the colonial project, such as myself. For example, while many still believe that only men can hold leadership roles, we can see that change is coming. In 2010, the Navajo Nation had their first woman, Lynda Lovejoy, run for Navajo Nation president (Fonseca 2010). Some older people and particularly cisgendered hetero men interpret our traditional ways of being such as Sa’ah naaghai Bik’eh Hozho to benefit their opportunities to remain in powerful positions. As Lee (2012) highlights, “the voters believed that versions and interpretations of a Navajo creation story that tells about the separation of men and women that led to disharmony means women should not be leaders because it will lead to disharmony, instability and confusion” (p. 277). At the same time, Dinétah was impacted by tornados and storms and many people believed that it was a sign from a higher power or creator that they should not elect Lovejoy to become Tribal president.

On the opposing side, there were many women, Nadleeh, and younger generation, who believed that she could make great change for the community. There were many people who spoke up about traditional ways such as Diné healer and Elder, Philmer Bluehouse, who argued that, “women have always been a vital part of cultural teachings and a woman President fits within the scope of the oral teachings” (Lee 2012, p. 285). While Bluehouse did acknowledge the gendered roles as being part of Diné traditions, they also stated that, “no story or song explicitly states a woman cannot be the primary leader” (Lee 2012, p. 279).

Similarly, Diné who identify as queer or Nadleeh face high levels of violence and discrimination. Across Turtle Island (U.S.), 4.5 percent of the total population identifies as being part of the LGBTQI+ community with 8.2% of millennials and 3.5% GenX (*LGBT Data & Demographics—The Williams Institute 2019; Young 2019*). According to the data collected from U.S. Census Bureau from the Navajo Nation Economic study, current statistics reveal that nearly 4 percent of Diné also identify as LGBTQI+. Navajo LGBTQI+ youth are at risk of suicide and are three times as likely to attempt suicide compared to non-Native youth. The statistics also reveal that 26 percent of LGBTQI+ youth are forced to leave their household because of conflicting views on their sexual orientation and gender and many become homeless. Over 40 percent of youth who identify as LGBTQI+ have experienced some physical harassment based on their sexual orientation.

One organization that is based outside of Window Rock, Arizona (the Capitol of the Navajo Nation), is called ‘Repeal the Diné Marriage Act’. This organization provides education to the community on the creation story that embodies Nadleeh in the Navajo society, and how important we are to Diné. Currently, there are 11 Tribal Nations in the U.S. that recognize same-sex marriage, while there are many more that do not recognize including the Navajo Nation along with 35 other federally recognized Tribes. Arguably, such discrimination among the Navajo Nation is not in line with our creation stories, or upbringing prior to colonization. The impact of residential boarding schools has been significant. These institutions were used to assimilate Native children. Those who were sent to these schools were denied their language, clothing, and were forced to adhere to christianity. The violence of these schools has been revealed in recent times with more than

1300 unmarked graves of Native children being found in Canada, which sadly, are still in counting (Mosby and Millions 2021).

The traumas that Diné endured during the boarding school era cannot be overlooked, completely operating in survival mode. The generation of people that work in the tribal government are people who survived residential schooling. It is understandable that many hold christian or are influenced by christian views given their experiences. As Cree scholar Alex Wilson (2015) argues,

“These experiences continue to affect our people, our communities, and nations. Today, some of our traditional Elders and spiritual teachers have adopted and introduced understandings and practices that were not part of their own cultures prior to colonization and the imposition of Christianity” (p. 2).

Wilson (2015) argues that “there is much work to be done, then, to undo the work that has been done upon us” (p. 2). They argue that we need to move toward the practice of “coming in”. By this, they mean, “coming in is an act of returning, fully present in ourselves, to resume to our place as a valued part of our families, culture, communities, and lands, in connection with all our relations” (p. 3).

There are various groups that are already doing the work of “coming in” on the Navajo Nation. Groups such as “Repeal the Diné Marriage Act” organization. Diné LGBTQI+ youth like Indigenous LGBTQI+ youth across the world, have some of the highest rates of suicide. The concept of “coming in and returning to our knowledges may very well provide a way to address these statistics (Wilson 2015; Rivas 2015). One small move in this direction would be to challenge legislation that does not fit with our traditional knowledges. Diné activist and organizer for the ‘Coalition for Navajo Equality’, Alray Nelson, said,

“There are three ways the Diné Marriage Act can be updated. One is to take it before the Navajo courts and challenge it as discriminatory. Another way is to have the Council repeal or amend the law to ensure it is inclusive to same-sex couples, and the third is to take it before the Navajo people for a vote” (Nelson cited in Silversmith 2015).

Wilson (2015) speaks to our sovereignty as people of the land, and in my case of Dinétah, arguing that, “Indigenous sovereignty over our lands is inseparable from sovereignty over our bodies, sexuality and gender self-expression (p. 4). Within the Diné Marriage Act of 2005, I am not arguing for the institution of marriage, which I recognize is a colonial form of monogamous partnership, but rather this recognition of same-sex marriage allows our LGBTQI+, Nadleeh, and Two-Spirit folx, especially our youth, to (re)exist within the boundaries of our four sacred mountains. “Coming in” and returning to ourselves entails reaching back to our traditional knowledges and recognizing Nadleeh and the teachings in Sa’ah naaghai Bik’eh Hozho connects us to our ancestors and to each other.

5. Conclusions

Today, there are Eders who have survived the boarding school system, which was in place to assimilate Native American children into christian worldviews and to disregard Native culture and knowledges. Many of these Elders would consider themselves “traditional”, but struggle with some aspects of our older knowledge and support elements of christian values such as not supporting same-sex marriage or some elements of patriarchy, believing that women are not capable of holding leadership positions.

There are, however, some resolutions that I propose on how the Navajo Nation could tackle the issues and impact of colonial violence such as assimilation among the community. One is to address the lack of understanding of K’é [family] and the clan system (Lee 2015). This is an important concept because K’é, directly translate to family, and family is based on the matrilineal system of women being in positions of decision making. Our clans are passed down from the women, and unlike the western family structure, Diné families are not only related based on blood, but also on a clan system; family extending beyond immediate family structures.

My second resolution would be including women into conversations and normalizing Nadleeh identity by sharing our knowledge told through our stories. Many topics within the community are not shared because they make people “uncomfortable”, but to eliminate mental and/or physical harm impacting Diné women and Nadleeh people, these are conversations that need to be had. For example, when sharing the creation stories, it is important to talk about gender politics that the stories relate to and how Nadleeh brought the people back together to live in harmony. This story highlights the balance of work and energy that Nadleeh people hold among the community, which led us to be highly respected on Dinétah in the past and should be in the present and continue for our futures.

Additionally, our knowledge can benefit the community by reaching back to traditional ways where the balance between masculine and feminine energy was common and held by everyone. The balance between holding the two energies goes back to becoming balanced with oneself and the environment around them; this was a concept that was seen as powerful. This would be part of what Wilson argues as “coming in” (Wilson 2015).

Overall, it is important for the Navajo Nation to understand the traditional teachings that were once in place through oral traditions. Diné women and Nadleeh face much discrimination and violence from non-Native people and sadly this discriminatory behavior and thinking has also found its way to the minds of some Diné. Reaching back to our traditional ways of life without cis-heteronormative patriarchal influence would be a move toward a more liberatory life for Diné as we return and allow our future generations to thrive for ourselves; sparking a new era of generational healing.

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