Navajo

The Navajo are a well known group of Native Americans who reside in the Southwest of the United States (Oswalt, 2006). While circumstances have extensively changed with respect to outside influence, the Navajo exhibit a clear determination to remain culturally linked to their past.

Geography: Location and Population

Location

The Navajo are traditionally located within the Southwestern United States, specifically in the area of the Colorado Plateau, which includes parts of New Mexico, Utah, Arizona, and Colorado (Downs 1984). However, Dutton (1983) claims that Navajo folklore places the early Navajo people in the “upper San Juan region.” Currently, most Navajo people live on an Indian Reservation (See Figure 1), a portion of land within the Colorado Plateau (Oswalt 2006). The Navajo live on an area of the Plateau which ranges from 3,000 to 10,000 feet above sea level (Oswalt 2006). According to Downs (1984), there is typically very little rainfall from year to year. A lack of rainfall may help to explain their traditional lifestyle as hunters and gatherers.

Figure 1. An overview of the area of the Navajo reservation (http://www.navajo.org)

Population

In 2000, the estimated population of the Navajo people was 300,000 (Oswalt 2006). Adams (1991) estimates that in 1864, the population was within the range of 16,000 and 20,000. Multiple sources confirm that although many Navajo people have moved to other parts of the United States, most of them still live on the reservation in the Colorado Plateau (Adams 1991, Oswalt 2006). Perhaps many of the Navajo prefer to remain close to their traditional roots.

Subsistence Strategy

Prior to Spanish Colonization

The main subsistence strategies of the Navajo (Apache de Nabajo) consisted of hunting and gathering (Brugge 1983). However, this is only a description of subsistence method adopted by natives in that general region, as Brugge fails to describe the Navajo’s way of subsistence specifically. Reference is made to subsistence in the accounts of initial contact with Navajo by the Antonia de Espejo expedition of 1582-1583, noting that Navajo also planted maize and other storable crops (Brugge 1983).

During and After Spanish Colonization

Navajo adopted sheep and goat ranching along with mixed breed dogs from Spanish, and it soon became their primary lifestyle (Black 1981). Nevertheless, their hunting and gathering lifestyle was not completely abandoned. Jett (1978:353) writes that while sheep herding became essential to the Navajo economy, they also continued “small scale subsistence farming,” “wild food collecting,” “dry and floodwater farming techniques” and trading with Puebloan neighbors. Raiding also contributed to the Navajo economy (Jett 1978:353).

Contemporary Navajo
Most Navajo today have adopted an Anglo-American lifestyle. Hunting and raiding are obsolete, and they are economically dependent on wage work and welfare. Jett (1978) also mentions that many Navajo still raise livestock and farm, based on wage work availability and environment. Although the traditional way of subsistence is not entirely lost, it is less self-sustainable, as raising livestock is only an accessory to wage work (Jett, 1978).

Modern Navajo Diet

Due to economic dependence on the United States, gradual changes have occurred in the Navajo diet. Lombard et. al. (2006) specifically illustrate that the active lifestyles of hunting, farming, and herding are being replaced by an Anglo-American diet of meaty and cheesy foods. They further note a rise in the consumption of nutrient-poor fast foods and low intakes of fruits and vegetables. The remoteness of the Navajo Reservation in combination with lack of electricity and low income prevents Navajo from obtaining fresh fruits and vegetables as part of their regular diet (Lombard et. al. 2006).

The Sugar Illness

The changes in modern Navajo diet have attributed significantly in rise of Type-2 diabetes among Navajo adults and children. Statistics show 40% of Navajo adults over 45 years are diabetic and the rate of increase is 4 times the rate found in the general US population. Diabetes was not traditionally prevalent amongst the Navajo, as historical data show that increase in Navajo diabetics correlated to the increased influence of western colonization (Lombard et. al. 2006).

Political Organization

Tribal or clan leaders were never originally instated within the Navajo Nation. However, it was possible for an individual in a given area to exert more authority than others. However, his influence would only be territorial, and not affiliated with any particular clan (Oswalt 2006: 356). It was not until 1868 that the U.S. federal government appointed “charismatic” representatives on federally established reservations. These leaders were appointed largely in part because they were not opposed to federal policies, which could then be implemented at the expense of the natives’ territory and resources (Oswalt 2006: 358). Today, the Navajo Tribal Council serves as the Navajo Nation system of government, representing these widespread local communities in order to pass independent legislation and negotiate with the federal government (21st Navajo Nation Council 2009).

Religion

The Navajo religion is very distinct and the ceremonies are the most well known among non-Navajo people when compared to other Native American religious practices. According to Oswalt (2006), most Navajo have maintained their religious beliefs and practices despite the influx of Christian missionaries. Their religion is focused on the Holy People (their gods), harmony, and the gods’ ability to maintain peace between the people and the universe (Oswalt, 2006).
Healing ceremonies are a large part of the Navajo religion. They include Nightway, Enemyway, Blessingway and Shootingway (McAllester 2009). These ceremonies are led by shamans or medicine men and often involve a great deal of music, dance and prayer (Dutton 1983). For example, Nightway is a series of ceremonies over the course of nine days that are meant to heal the person of his or her sickness by praying to the gods (Faris 1990). The ceremonies, such as Yeibiachi (See Figure 4), as witnessed by non-Navajo observers, are very complex and it appears that something new is taking place during the ceremony each time it is seen (Faris 1990). The ceremonies are a way to communicate with their gods in a form of prayer that is distinctive to them, by wearing regalia (See Figure 4) and competing against each other in song and dance throughout the night (McAllester 2009). The ceremony behavior seems to be highly tied to their artistic representation and competitive traditions.

Figure 4. An example of Yeibichai (a Nightway ceremony performance) dress (http://www.pem.org)

Culture

The Navajo actually refer to themselves as “the people” in their own language, or the Diné (Oswalt 2006). They are traditionally a matrilineal society and women maintain a high place in both society and the myths that make up their cultural heritage (Oswalt 2006). Many Navajo people, about 62% in 1998 had used a native Navajo healer at some point in their lives, and 39% of Navajos had used the native healers on a consistent basis (Kim & Kwok 1998). In Navajo education, there are now efforts and programs that focus on bilingual education for children, such as the Rough Rock English-Navajo Language Arts Program, that was extended from kindergarten to grade 3 in 1994 (Lipka & McCarty 1994: 270). However, as tied as they are to maintaining remnants of their past culture, they also are open to change. Many of their youth attend college, their dress styles have changed with the times, and they encourage commercial business on the reservation (McAllester 2009).

Similarly, their music has changed with increased exposure to outside influences. They still maintain old traditional music and dance performances, but now often record various performances for commercial profit (McAllester 2009). Also, the Navajo have been known to welcome people to parts of the reservation. As a result, tourism has made up nearly $100 million dollars to the Navajo economy (Oswalt 2006). Although it can be said that outside influence has led to the disintegration of Navajo culture, it can also be argued that their products, along with a willingness to open up to outsiders, has allowed their culture to thrive in a different respect.

Craft

Silversmithing
Silversmithing was introduced into Navajo culture in the mid 1880s during the incarceration of the Navajo at Fort Sumner in New Mexico by the U.S. federal government. Baxter (1998) writes: "The facility with which both the Navajo and Pueblo Indians took up the craft was nothing short of wondrous and they quickly made it their own" (Baxter 1998: 3). The silver jewelry of the first Navajo silversmiths was relatively intricate despite their utilization of crude tools. While crafted silver is currently dedicated to meeting popular demand, silver jewelry is fashioned specifically for the Navajo people, and represents unique styles such as repousse and repetitive patterns. Rings, buttons, bracelets, conchas for Navajo concha belts (See Figure 5), and pendants, are the most popular of Navajo items (Baxter 1998:5-6).

Figure 5. Navajo Concho Belt (http://www.turkey-mountain.com)

Textiles

Textiles are no longer an essential item in terms of clothing and protection, yet their production still serves to create cultural continuity. Navajo textiles are characterized by geometric shapes and stripes, woven in a variety of bright, bold, colors. They continue to grow in complexity and serve as mediums through which weavers can tell their story (Blomburg 1988). The styles and images depicted on these textiles may have changed, but they are still produced using original techniques (See Figure 6), implying that the process is what remains important. While the creation of textiles continues as a personal endeavor for weavers, they are now popularized products of marketable designs and commercialization for tourists (See Figure 7) of the Southwest (Smithsonian Institution 1994: 81-88).

Figure 6. Navajo rug (http://www.williambunchauctions.com)
Lifestyle

Navajo Youth

Dole and Csordas (2003) question what it means for a Navajo youth to "be Navajo" and if this term requires redefinition. Public education, employment, etc. makes movement between reservation and off-reservation environments necessary. It is therefore difficult for the Navajo to instill traditional cultural values within their children.

A considerable amount of literature and media attention is currently dedicated to the struggles of Navajo adolescents, in terms of poverty, depression, suicide rates, drug and alcohol abuse, teen pregnancy, gang violence, etc. Dole and Csocsas write that although these aspects of Navajo teenage living should be addressed, the overwhelming amount of attention paid to these issues "paints a problematic picture of what it means to be young today on the Navajo reservation" (Dole and Csocsas 2003: 362). Navajo life is by no means confined to these social problems. Dole and Csocsas refer to the ways in which Navajo youth conceptualize "tradition" as multifaceted. Tradition does not necessarily entail rigid historical cultural practices (Dole and Csocsas 2003: 365).

The elderly Navajo do however stress strong negative opinions towards the loss of traditional cultural practices and understanding among their youth. They fear the disintegration of basic Navajo concepts, as well as historical definitions for Navajo subsistence like sheep herding. For example, Dole and Csocsas conducted a study revealing that adolescents struggle to define simple concepts such as the Navajo term for person, "bilaa ashldia?" (Cole and Csocsas 2003: 365).

The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act funds such programs as the Ramah Navajo School Board Program, aiming at helping Navajo youth better identify with their culture (See Figure 8). Teens participate in community-oriented workshops that focus on particular tasks such as sheep sheering, weavng, butchering, and gardening (Francis 2009). Navajo storytelling is also being revived and implemented into current school curriculums as a way of establishing cultural continuity (Eder 2007).
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