

Philosophy, Literature, and the Moral Imagination

Women roles in Origin Stories and their influences on Tribal Government

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Diné Institute for Navajo Nation Educators (DINÉ)

2023

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Introduction

They are the children of Changing Woman.

They are called the Navajos. They call themselves Diné (Diné-A history of the Navajos).

Context

My unit will take place in Chinle, Arizona, it is not only where I teach but it is a place I call home. It is an area where my family has lived and cultivated for generations. The region of Chinle, is known for its historical significance to the Navajo people with sacred monuments within a canyon called, Canyon De Chelly. Chinle is in the middle of the Navajo Nation and Canyon de Chelly is filled with mysteries of the past, untold stories, and a reminder of the sacrifices the Diné tribe has made during the Long Walk. The Long Walk is a tragic event of displacement to the Navajos to Fort Sumner, it is a reminder to our people to be strong and encourage our future generations to thrive and carry on traditions. Canyon de Chelly, is an area that was once filled with vegetation and water, it sustained the livelihood for Navajos in the area for many years. Canyon De Chelly occupies cultural landmarks that influence who we are today.

These land formations are tied into the evolution of the Navajo people, our creation story encompasses a series of four worlds of survival from the Diné people, the word Diné means Navajo. The Diné culture derives from a domain of ethnic virtues, these morals and teachings take place in stories about the four worlds. We hear stories of deities and characters of morale that encourage a sacred way of living for the Diné, when we face problems in society today, we refer to those teachings.

Canyon de Chelly is filled with cultural monuments that have stories explaining the Diné origin stories. One monument that is very significant to Chinle is the Tseyi' overlook, it is the scenery at the base of the canyon, it shows where the water flows between the canyon walls and leaves the viewer a picturesque scene of how the Diné once lived before the Long Walk with a river and farming right below sheer cliffs. Another landmark is the White House overlook, it is a Puebloan style landmark within the canyon wall, it shows where the Anasazi once lived in a multilevel cliff side dwelling. The hike to the White House is an adventurous hike that is steep with various types of terrain. The Spider Woman monument is also very important to the Diné people because it implies a strong connection to the origins of weaving and the moral teachings of children that they should listen to their parents. Canyon De Chelly is a beautiful historic landmark to most tourists, but it has a great significance to the Diné people and generations before them.

The children that live within Chinle and the surrounding areas have suffered great losses while growing up in a remote area with limited resources in their homes and emotional or financial burdens. There are no libraries in the area or recreational centers available for students to keep themselves busy in a positive way, for most of the students, school is the best outlet for technology. Many Native American learners are hands on learners, as we think with a holistic point of view. Most students in my class are kinesthetic learners, I make my own power points to include visuals that they can relate to, mainly culturally related. I try to use up to date information so that they can apply it to real life situations. We use some videos made online from other tribes or other relatable content to keep the students informed of different cultural views.

This keeps the students up to date with outside knowledge and helps the students visualize the content.

Most of the students in the Chinle community come from low income households that can encompass many different family problems, some students live with multiple members in the household, and some live in rural areas with no access to internet. It is difficult for most students to learn at home without guidance and support from their families. The community of Chinle holds the largest high school on the Navajo reservation and in most reservations in the country. Despite being the largest high school with over 1,000 students enrolled we still have a community of families that like to help one another when they can. In some instances, our high school is like a family of Wildcats, most of the families in the community have graduated from Chinle High School and know one another. Our school district supported student learning during the covid era by giving the students laptops and internet services to keep up with their schoolwork. Since the pandemic our students have used those laptops in the classroom to complete their assignments.

Growing up on the Navajo reservation we see poverty, experience tragedy, and face hardship, caused by the rural area we live in, the lack of opportunities, and the oppression of our people. An important aspect of being part of the largest tribe in the country is the resiliency we carry. There is always one person to lead by example or be a model for others in the community. It gives other tribal members hope that they could be successful in a modern society.

I spent most of my life being raised in Chinle, Arizona, the heart of the Navajo nation. As a child, I was fortunate to have parents that went to college, I would go to the library with my mom while she attended college at Northern Arizona University, this is where curiosity got the best of me and my imagination would fall into the books I read. In my teen years, books were not appealing to me anymore. I could not find a book that interested me at that age, instead I felt like the mesas of the reservation secluded me from experiencing what I thought was a fulfilling life. I would watch shows on television and teens from the suburbs have libraries, swimming pools, amusement parks, or recreation centers, I wanted to be there. Most of the time when I looked outside, I would see dust, and despair, I wanted to go somewhere or do something, but all I could do was imagine an interesting place I would like to be, a place I wish to be. Eventually, I wanted to move off the reservation, I wanted to find what I was missing out on. I wanted to go off the reservation for my education with hopes to return and help my people. Eighteen years after I graduated Chinle High School, I returned as an educator, and was able to work with students from the community. I was hired as a Social Studies teacher and began teaching American History, however, the students in our school were not able to receive a Chief Manuelito scholarship because the school did not have a Navajo government class which is a requisite for the scholarship. I began working as a Navajo government teacher during the pandemic, I taught both subjects during that time and continued to teach the class after the pandemic.

There was no set curriculum when I began to develop the course. I was given a book called The Navajo Political Experience, for the students to follow and a final for them to take, the following year I was given the Navajo nation standards. I began to read the book and develop assignments that apply to the circumstances we face on Navajo reservation today. We also looked at different types of government from other tribes and compared it to our tribe. The students began to

analyze the variations of what it means to be sovereign from different tribes as a Native American. We noticed similar problems in our reservations; poverty, lack of education, and broken promises from the American government. I wanted the students in my community to examine how our government came to be and how they can change our legislation as a younger generation with influences of culture intertwining with education.

The Native American group of students enrolled in Navajo government are Navajo and are college bound seniors. This class is used as a requirement for students to apply for the Chief Manuelito scholarship. The students in this course have a background of research and writing skills they have accumulated over the course of 3 years in high school. Most of the students have taken Navajo language/culture as a prerequisite to this course therefore the rigor of this study is expected to challenge their minds and prepare them for post high school academics. The school is located at the center of the Navajo reservation, in Chinle, Arizona, with an average of 1,000 predominantly Navajo students enrolled and 138 teaching staff. Chinle High School is the largest Native American high school in the country with a high rate of poverty due to low employment opportunities and minimal housing units for families. However, with persistence and encouragement some students are able to excel in their classes and overcome these obstacles.

The time frame of this class will occur during the 2023-2024 school year, the course is a semester long course. The proposed unit will help my students understand origin stories from other tribes and how it led to the formation of their modern day government, it will help the students in my school understand the influence of our origin stories and the role of women in our society. The unit will also help students become more aware of other tribes in the country.

The tribes I selected were based off where they were located in the country, I wanted the students to acknowledge other tribes outside of Arizona and even across the country. I wanted the students to respect other ways of thinking in regards to other cultures and analyze that we are similar in regards to the governments ethnic cleansing but also similar by our origin stories.

Rationale

Why?

As Native American educators, we are curious about our surroundings and how our people came to be, how did our people survive as the first ancestors of this great nation, what stories can we learn, or why is our tribe different from other's? We already understand the diversity of our people from other nations because we see that we are not the same. As some religions perceive that they are human and have all evolved from a greater being, (they refer to it as God) we as a tribe evolved from a greater being that encompasses the earth, and even animals. Knowing this we then wonder what other native cultures believe? We accept that we are all different, there is no right or wrong way, these beliefs are handed down from generation to generation. There is a reason why we have traditions, taboos, and stories of ethics in our culture; it keeps humility in our society.

Our origin stories guide us how to be, how to act, and how to think, it builds our character in defining who we are. I learned from this seminar this type of thinking was also enforced by

Greek philosophers called stoics. They believed that actions, creates habits, and eventually leads to the character of an individual. This viewpoint is an example of how our system of storytelling leads to morals and ethics in our society, it also teaches members in the tribe positive customs.

I would like my students to analyze the concept of virtues, and what it means to be a good person in our tribe. According to our Diné elders there are nine virtues in the Navajo culture. The nine virtues are; self-reverence, courage, honesty, integrity, serenity, principals, standards, balance and harmony, and divine protection, each of these virtues support our cultural identity (Long, 2023). Some Diné practitioners believe that the Navajo culture is a way of life rather than a religion.

There are many tribes in the United States that have origin stories of how they derived on this continent. The nature of these stories incorporate characters from the environment such as animals or landscapes. We read them to understand the culture and significance of Native American societies and their belief systems. Most of these belief systems have influenced the leadership roles in their tribal governments as well. In the Native American culture women have been the background voice in what goes on in the homes and how a generation is raised. My students have a general background of the role of women in our tribe and how our clans are first identified from the mother's lineage. The next step for the seniors in my class is to graduate high school and continue college in a multi-cultural setting, I feel that this unit will prepare them to open their mindsets to what they might endure outside of the reservation and beyond. There are many questions of what happened to other tribes in the county, my goal is to help my students acknowledge the similarities other tribes have in establishing sovereignty and maintaining a tribal government.

Content objective

I plan on having my students study three origin stories from three different tribes and compare it to the Navajo origin story. The tribes I would like my students to study are the Navajo, Seminole, and Haudenosaunee. I picked these tribes because they were from various areas in the country and are active sovereign nations in the country today. I wanted my students to think about other Native Americans and realize that before settlers arrived and land became states there were people with cultures that occupied the land. Before cities, skyscrapers, and casinos, there were tribes that lived in long houses and lived off the land. After these activities, I want my students to be proud to be Native American and understand that we have come a long way.

The Diné origin story explains how our ceremonies and culture formed, it helps us carry on traditions. Our clans, songs, sacred instruments, and healing herbs all play a role in keeping a holistic way of life. We use our teachings to live in a hozho way, a way that is selfless, family oriented, traditional and ethically good. This traditional way will keep the Diné people on a path of spirituality and calmness from the creator.

Our Diné origin story starts with four worlds, each world was formed for a reason by the previous world, each world is supported by the other. The black world is the beginning of the Diné evolution and culture. It is where the spiritual world is held, within this world there was four columns each column represents the four sacred colors, white, blue, yellow, and black. The

columns also represented the times of the day. In the black world, there were four seas and an island with ants, beetles, and dragonflies living on the island. In the east, was a cloud where first man was formed, with him a white corn was formed. In the west, first woman was formed with yellow corn. The black world was dark and first man lit a crystal in the east to see and first woman lit turquoise in the west to see, first woman had seen a brighter light with first man and he asked her to live with him. The black world became over populated with insects and disagreements, that a blue world formed, in the blue world there were different animals such as different types of birds. First man brought the pillars from the black world, tobacco was used to light the pillars. First traveled with several animal cats in the second world (blue world), they fought off other animals and songs and prayers were formed. The coyote was an important animal he traveled in the four directions to explore different areas. Eventually, they were able to leave the second world and all the evils it carried.

The third world was known as the yellow world, first man, first woman, the coyote, an insect, and a bluebird, entered the third world, they discovered rivers, and directions with certain stones, and meanings. Turquoise boy lived in the east and white shell woman lived in the west. More animals were revealed in this world as well. The explorations of the animals led to the revelations of the fourth world. The fourth world is known as the glittering world, it is where the first humans were developed. There were also monsters and tests of courage for the humans to learn from. First man and woman also formed the sacred mountains with meanings and assigned animals. One morning, a baby cried in the dawn of light, it was a baby girl, she was formed from darkness and dawn was her father, they named her Changing woman. Over time, Changing woman became lonely and woke up the next morning pregnant with twin boys. The twin boys grew to be great warriors and learned that their father was the great father sky. The twin boys learned many things from Spider woman, she was a mentor to them, they conquered many obstacles and monsters with her help. They began to learn prayers and chants that the Diné people use in ceremonies today.

During my research I learned about origin stories from different tribes, the Haudenosaunee tribe had a distinct story because it incorporated the infamous storyline of turtle island. The story consisted of a greater being and a pregnant woman, this woman lived in the sky above a world filled with water. Skywoman became thirsty and asked her husband for some tea that was growing near a tree. As he was digging the tree collapsed and Skywoman fell into the hole down to the world of water, to break her fall a flock of birds shielded her from landing directly in the water. The birds laid her on a turtle floating nearby. When she landed she asked for land and the water animals dove down to bring her land. She began to plant the seeds that fell down with her from the sky and grow a tree. Eventually, Skywoman had her baby and gave birth to a baby girl. The young girl grew older and was told not to walk to the west, when she became a young adult she did not listen and she traveled to the west and met a man. She married the man and became pregnant with twins. The twins were very different and did not get along, one was left handed and one was right handed. The right handed twin was born naturally, the left handed twin was born through the underarm of the mother. When the left handed twin was born, it was difficult for the mother and she passed. When she was buried spiritual items were formed from her body, vegetables formed from her head, tobacco was grown from her heart and strawberries were produced from her feet. The twin boys were very powerful because the mother left them with

items to take care of themselves. When the grandmother passed away she went to the sky and became the moon for the night. This story is very much similar to the Diné story in reference to changing woman being the mother of the twins in the Navajo origin story. Both stories reflect on the mother's role in providing and protecting the family.

The origin story for the Seminole indicates that there was a creator that created a world of mountains and water. The creator really admired the strength of the panther and the medicine it carried, he wanted the panther to lead the animals when the time was right. The creator put certain spiritual animals in a shell, these animals were the otter, bear, snake, panther, bird, toad, and deer, the shell of animals leaned against a mountain. The creator advised the animals that when the time was right they could leave the shell and go to their rightful places on earth. However, the animals stayed in the shell longer than expected eventually a tree began to grow near the mountain and cracked the shell. The panther was patient in coming out of the shell, so the wind nudged him out so he could lead the animals and guide them. From these nine animals, clans were formed and people were designated to these clans. It was forbidden for these clans to intermarry and the clan system was based off the mother's lineage. There are various recollections about origin stories from the Seminole because they have evolved from different perspectives and evolutions of time.

Activities

My activities include timeline of events from each culture and applying it to other tribes in the country. I would like for them to make a triple venn diagram to compare the 3 nations. The last analysis I want my students to make is the differences between the tribes and how their virtues influence the roles of women in their government. I also want my students to see the distinctions of each tribe and how they differ by origin stories, culture, and location, yet they are similar in background by following the role of a woman in their culture. According to my research these tribes were not near one another yet have origin stories that follow along the same storyline. The clan system of each tribe is also based off a matrilineal lineage which says a great deal on how the Native people began their families with the mother's clan.

Resources:

<https://www.arizona-demographics.com/chinle-demographics>

Diné- A history of the Navajos, Peter Iverson.