

The Navajo in Four Colors

My Navajo elders often describe colors as having symbolic meaning. There are many colors that have their own meaning in Navajo traditions. However, there are four colors that help define our Navajo history and beliefs. These four colors have been tied to the four natural elements by the Navajo Holy People that are black, white, yellow, and blue. The four colors are described in oral stories that have not been captured in any books and only have been passed down from past generations within my family. In order to begin my description of the four colors of my people, I will start with some background on some stories told to me by my elders.

My grandfather refers to the ancient Navajo (Diné) Holy People as those who originated from Hesperus Peak, Colorado. In his description, the Holy People told the Navajo to respect the natural elements (air, water, fire, and earth). If the Navajo respect the natural elements like how they respect their own mother, then they will live a prosperous life. The earth is referred to as the Navajo mother and she sustains life and brings balance to life if she is treated with respect. The sky symbolizes the heavens where the Holy People reside. The sky is referred to as the father of the Navajo. The sky and earth complete the balance in life. Water helps fill the Navajo spirit and supplements growth. Fire is a sacred element often referred to as the grandmother. I have been taught to respect the natural elements and not play with what is given from those elements.

The colors represent the four cardinal directions that outline my ancestor's homeland between the Navajo's four sacred mountains. The sacred mountains were created by the first Navajo man. Black is the direction North and Hesperus Peak in southwestern Colorado. White is the direction East and Blanca Peak in south central

Colorado. Blue is the direction South and Mount Taylor located northeast of Grants, New Mexico. Yellow is the direction West and San Francisco Peaks located near Flagstaff, Arizona.

The first Navajo man also created the first Hogan (the homes are still lived in today). He created the Hogan out of the stones that were placed in the four directions. The color black is the North wall, white is the East wall, blue is the South wall, and yellow is the West wall of the home. He blew on each of the stones four times for the four directions, the four colors, and the four elements to create the Navajo Hogan. The Hogan, as my grandmother described, symbolizes the world.

The color yellow was described by my great grandfather in the story of Pollen Boy. I often wondered why my grandmother would do prayers with pollen every time she prayed. I did not know who Pollen Boy was until my grandfather described him as a very crucial person that looks out for Navajo people during the day and that all prayers are done through him. Most Navajos use pollen to honor the four directions through Pollen Boy in their prayers.

The four colors that represent the four directions have meaning in ceremonies. The medicine men devise sand paintings for healing ceremonies using the four colors. Knowing the meaning behind the four colors in the creation of the Hogan makes sense to me now when entering a Hogan during ceremonies. When I enter the Hogan, I am supposed to go in a clockwise circle from the door (the door faces the east).

The four colors have different symbolizations in our everyday activities. My grandmother always tells us that we should not be out at night because black represents night and death. My elders stress that we get up early in the morning

because white represents the dawn of the day and birth. All our chores get done during the day because blue represents the middle of the day and youth. As our day comes to an end, we take on the form of an elder in the color yellow that represents the dusk and maturity.

I had no knowledge of the different stones that helped create the world we live in until my grandfather briefly explained the four stones. There are four stones that are described in Navajo stories. The four stones are named Jet (representation of black and North), White Shell (representation of white and East), Abalone (representation of yellow and West), and Turquoise (representation of blue and South).

The art that was created by my ancestors both past and present also have four colors that give meaning to them and portray a message. For example, the Great Seal of the Navajo Nation was created using these colors. The rainbow represents the sovereignty of the Navajo and never fully closes because of the sovereignty immunity of the Navajo people. The outside of the rainbow is red, the middle is yellow, and the inside is blue. In the middle of the seal are the four colored sacred mountains.

The colors are also very important when it comes to sharing stories through the art of weaving. The colors help share the spiritual beliefs that are related to the cycle of life. For example, Navajo wedding baskets that are woven are made of colors that carry meaning. The baskets are woven with a black stepping pattern that represents dark times; they have four points that represent the four sacred mountains; and the center is woven in the color white that represents birth. There is always a single gap that connects the middle to the edge of the basket and it is always facing the East.

I have learned and listened to many stories on how black, white, yellow, and blue symbolize the Diné (my elders have told me that Navajo is the name assigned to us, so I refer to us by our traditional name Diné) way of life. It was a big learning experience to learn about past generations of how my families were created. Being raised outside the four sacred mountains, I realized the four colors and mountains still call out to me. The stories have enriched my knowledge of why my fellow family includes these colors in art and everyday life. My elders taught me a lot through interviewing them and their storytelling. I see my world in a different way and have more knowledge regarding my history and language.

My views of where I come from have become very different and it makes me want to share these stories with generations to come. I did not have the chance to live life the way my elders did. I have been separated from my traditions by living in the city for most of my life. The stories should and can be preserved with my want to stay connected through the beliefs and knowledge of my Diné family. It explains why my elders have told me not to do certain things and they respect the four colors because of the plan of the Diné Holy People. We must not forget about the Holy People and their teachings of the beginning and future because that is like forgetting about the Diné People.

Work Cited

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- Most of my research came from my Grandparents through storytelling.