

American Indian Male Maturation

By Lloyd L. Lee, Ph.D.

ABSTRACT

Less than one percent of baccalaureate-and-above degrees are awarded to American Indians and Alaskan Native students in the United States. In order for this to change, universities and colleges will need to do a better job of graduating American Indian men. While some universities and colleges have developed programs to recruit, retain, and graduate American Indian and Alaskan Native men, the goal of sustaining Native identity and working toward developing maturation has to be a part of any approach implemented. With identity and maturation, Native men and the idea of masculinities is grounded in the people's and community's thought and way of life. This grounding leads to maturation, the purpose of life. This article is an examination into American Indian male identity and maturation helping to succeed in higher education and life.

Keywords: American Indian, Male, Maturity, Identity, Higher education, Cultural knowledge, Relations, Language, Thought/philosophy, Space/place, Way of life

American Indian men continue to be underrepresented at all levels of higher education from associate to doctorate degrees. In 2010, American Indians and Alaskan Natives comprised 1.7% of the total U.S. national population, but received less than 1.0% of baccalaureate-and-above degrees awarded by several thousand schools in the United States (Bitsóí, Sharma, & Sibbett, 2013). The task of getting more American Indian students to graduate from college rests upon higher education institutions across the United States, particularly, colleges and universities in eleven states. More than sixty percent of American Indians and Alaska Natives live in Alaska, Arizona, California, Florida, Michigan, New Mexico, New York, North Carolina, Oklahoma, Texas, and Washington. College students tend to matriculate in the state of their original residence thus universities and colleges in these eleven states have a key role in helping to get more American Indians students to graduate from college (Bitsóí, Sharma, & Sibbett, 2013).

Colleges and universities will need to recruit, retain, and graduate American Indian men. While some institutions have implemented programs to achieve these aims, identity and maturation should be a part of any approach undertaken. Native American recruitment, retention, and graduation of men can be strong if the institution establishes programs and services whose goals and objectives are about helping to sustain Native male identity and working to help a young male mature as he pursues a higher education degree. For instance, several universities have established a young male of color or Native American male group. These support groups help young men of color learn about various topics

impacting young men such as racism, discrimination, life goals, and health. Identity and maturation have to be a part of any college approach. As a Navajo scholar, I discuss and analyze how a Navajo man's identity can help him mature and succeed in college and in life.

Identity Markers

Identity is distinct for each American Indian community and nation, however there are similar strands such as thought, language, cultural knowledge, relations, way of life, and space/place. These strands are different for each American Indian man as it demonstrates each man's experience and livelihood. The following paragraphs will discuss and analyze each strand.

S3'3h Naagh¹⁷ Bik'eh Hózh==n (SNBH) is a Navajo foundational principle of the universe. The phrase is heard in Navajo ceremonies as part of the prayers and songs. The phrase connotes a meaning of living a good everlasting beautiful life. SNBH exemplifies values, beliefs, and represents an animated and living journey. It is a static dimension, active dimension, thought, speech, male, and female. SNBH is the central animating powers of the universe, and as such, it produces a world described as hózh=, the ideal environment of beauty, harmony, and happiness (Witherspoon, 1977, p. 25).

SNBH also represents a four-part planning and learning process central to Navajo way of knowing. The process is comprehensive and includes the following: *nitsáhákees* (thinking), *nahat'á* (planning), *iiná* (living), and *siihasin* (reflecting). To contemplate SNBH, a person starts in the east

going in a circle proceeding sunwise through all four cardinal directions. SNBH also encompasses the four sacred mountains of the Diné people (Mount Blanca, Colorado—East; Mount Taylor, New Mexico—South; San Francisco Peaks, Arizona—West; and Mount Hesperus, Colorado—North), four sacred minerals associated with the four sacred mountains, four parts of the day (Dawn—White Shell, Day—Turquoise, Evening or Sunset—Abalone, Night—Black Jet), four seasons of the year (Spring, Summer, Fall, Winter), and the lifespan of an individual (Birth, Adolescence, Adulthood, and Old Age). Each part of the principle provides and expounds on the meanings within the four-part planning and learning process. To fully engage with and comprehend SNBH, the person must think and speak in the Diné language.

Language is pivotal because everything in an American Indian way of life such as thoughts, prayers, songs, ceremonies, and rituals are based on how a person thinks, interprets, analyzes, and synthesizes life through language. Studies by Deborah House, Evangeline Parsons-Yazzie, and Tiffany S. Lee confirm Diné language shift. Joshua A. Fishman's *Reversing Language Shift*, James Crawford's "Endangered Native American Languages: What is to be done, and why?," Teresa L. McCarty, Mary Eunice Romero-Little, and Ofelia Zepeda's "Native American Youth Discourses on Language Shift and Retention: Ideological Cross-currents and their Implications for Language Planning," and numerous other articles and books have documented a language shift in American Indian communities. Even with language shift, many American Indians such as

the Wampanoag, Cherokee, and numerous others see how critical language is to their identity and way of life.

Language is a core trait of past and current identity. Many American Indian communities and nations are attempting to revitalize and maintain their native languages. It is a challenge, but success stories are happening in Hawaii, among the Māori in New Zealand, the Wampanoag in Massachusetts, and in other Native communities and nations.

Language and thought are usually taught and learned through a storytelling approach. American Indian communities and nations have creation scriptures and journey narratives. These narratives on emergence, cultural heroes, and others exemplify for to the American Indian men how to live and understand their responsibilities to themselves, their families, and communities. The image of an ideal American Indian man originates from these stories, but actual life experiences have proven that not all men can achieve this image.

Creation scriptures and journey narratives illustrate for American Indian men several core values such as responsibility, reciprocity, love, compassion, courage, strength, and self-sufficiency. In many American Indian communities, men lived with their extended family. Family in American Indian communities consisted of the nuclear unit, extended family units, clans, the earth, and the universe. American Indian women also learn core values and principles from the narratives. Their extended family networks are the core and foundation of their way of life. In fact, both men

and women understand the interdependence between them through the narratives.

For many American Indians, identity is grounded in their relations with the land, their ancestors, and their people. They understand relationality in terms of an individual's connection to peoples and places. For instance, Shawn Wilson, in his *Research is Ceremony*, writes about Lewis Cardinal's friend's perspective on relational quality of existence:

That's right, I mean most Indigenous societies will always introduce themselves as, "I am Lewis Cardinal, my grandparents are these people, my father is this person, my mother was this person." They put themselves into an orientation. I think that is a real foundational thing, to say who I am. Who I am is where I'm from, and my relationships (Wilson, 2008, p. 80)

Relations are both individual and group-oriented. American Indian men are connected to their communities through their relations.

In Navajo communities, relations are known as *K'é* and *K'íí*. *K'íí* is the clan system. Each Navajo man and woman has four clans representing his/her mother, father, maternal grandfather, and paternal grandfather. It acknowledges the relationships between biological, related, and clan-related family members. Every Navajo person has a family and is never alone. *K'é* helps men and women understand their place on the earth and in the universe and how they are interrelated to all things. It provides needed support and protection against life's challenges.

Relations connect American Indians to the community and set parameters for marriage. For many American Indian communities, men and women cannot date or marry if they are of the same clan, family, society, or longhouse. In Diné communities, a Diné man who is related to a Diné woman in any of the four clans should not marry. While some Diné individuals make exceptions for the maternal and paternal grandfather's clans, many do not. Traditionally, marriage in some Native communities was arranged. Nowadays, very few Diné and American Indian families arrange marriages for their children. They allow their children to decide for themselves who they want to date and marry, although some families still discourage their children from dating and/or marrying someone who is clan-related, because this is the underlying principle of *k'é*.

K'é teaches Diné people they are family to each other even if they are not related biologically. For instance, a person who has a nephew/niece on his/her maternal side of the family is a mother/father to the nephew/niece. Even if a person lives or works over a thousand miles away from home, he/she sincerely takes responsibility for his/her nephew/niece. He/she strives to communicate with his/her nephew/niece and to be a part of his/her family.

In many American Indian communities and nations, including Navajo, men lived with their wife's family because of the rules their communities established in regarding tradition and way of life. While not all American Indian communities and nations practiced this custom, many did, and space/place was integral to a man's life experience and way of life. Space/place frames and

bounds a family's and community's thought, way of life, language, and relations. Thus, narratives, language, and thought are tied to the experiences and observations of a specific space/place. Entities, energies, and phenomena occurred for American Indian communities in the locations they lived, migrated, hunted, farmed, and prayed. These spaces/places help maintain a sense of connection to other human beings, strengthen identity, provide a sense of belonging, as well as increase political, social, and cultural power of the peoples.

Among Navajo communities, stories about Mount Blanca, Mount Taylor, San Francisco Peaks, and Mount Hesperus demonstrate to Diné people how their ceremonies and rituals were created and how they need to be conducted and maintained. Diné healers and medicine peoples go to these mountains to acquire the necessary materials such as herbs, plants, rocks, etc. to conduct healing ceremonies such as the *Hózhó=j7* (Blessing Way). These mountains and other natural landmarks represent space/place to the individual's and community's identity. As language and thought are being challenged, the sacred land of the Diné is also experiencing similar struggles. For instance, the San Francisco Peaks has been damaged. The Arizona Snow Bowl ski resort won legal battles against Native Nations including Navajo to ensure man-made snow from reclaimed wastewater is used to produce snow for their business. In addition, uranium extraction companies want to mine uranium in and around Mount Taylor. Currently, five Native Nations as well as environmental groups are in opposition to uranium mining.

Professor Renya Ramirez proposed a space/place concept known as *native hub*. A native hub offers Native peoples a mechanism to support their culture, community, identity, and sense of belonging. It is a geographical concept incorporating activities on and off the reservation and represents actual places. Gathering sites or hubs include cultural events, such as pow-wows and sweat lodge ceremonies, as well as social and political activities, such as meetings and family gatherings (Ramirez, 2007, p. 3). Space/place is interwoven with language, thought, way of life, relations, and native hub. Thus, a native hub is a cultural, social, and political concept with the potential to strengthen Native identity and provide a sense of belonging as well as increase the political power of Indigenous peoples (Ramirez, 2007, p. 3).

History

In a related vein to a native hub, the Diné stories of First Man, the Hero Twin warriors/protectors, and others exemplify for Diné men how to live, understand their responsibilities to their families and communities, and emphasize *k'éeí*. For instance, the story of the Hero twin warriors/protectors who searched for their father illustrates for Diné men several core values. The Hero Twins took responsibility for their actions and protected the people from monsters who roamed the earth at the time and even though they were afraid to confront these monsters, they were triumphant. The Hero Twins were independent, but with a strong connection to family, and continue to epitomize how a Diné man should live. A Diné man must be knowledgeable and smart, he cannot be afraid of responsibility and commitment, and he must protect his family and community.

Traditionally, Diné men lived with their extended family networks and made all possible efforts to sustain their families and communities. Most daily activities for a Diné man in the past included finding and fetching water, collecting firewood, finding and hunting game, maintaining crops, teaching and serving as a role model, while protecting his wife, children and extended family. In their marriages, Diné men and women lived an egalitarian and autonomous way of life. They integrated their work roles. Gender equity was the norm in social life, and both men's and women's contributions were equally valued.

Both Diné men and women were leaders. Many leaders were men, although a significant number were women, too. Men in leadership positions lived ethical and humble lives. They were role models for the rest of the community, and were relied upon to make good decisions for everyone. If a leader was immoral or unethical, the people let him know and if necessary, removed him. Male leaders were supposed to follow the examples set forth in the creation scripture and journey narratives.

Diné men understood their roles and responsibilities in life and in the extended/clan families. However, not all men supported their families, as some were selfish individuals who took advantage of people. Often, these selfish men lived alone. Overall, most men made sure their families and communities were prosperous and happy. They were responsible, respectful, hospitable, knowledgeable, and healthy. They advocated subsistence, self-sufficiency, respect, love, and humility.

From the seventeenth through the early twentieth centuries, there were significant European and American cultural impacts on material goods, languages, values, and livestock. Navajo families, Europeans, and Americans interacted consistently. Diné men added new roles and responsibilities such as a horse handler (*akáá[íi' sk[ee'i]*) and shepherd. While Diné men continued to live a subsistence way of life, warfare and livestock affected how men interacted with women, other Native communities, and with Europeans and Americans. Warfare increased dramatically and violence became a part of the way of life.

With the use of the horse, Diné men began to forage more frequently for extended periods of time. Diné men adapted very well in utilizing the horse for trading, protection, and travel (Clark, 2001). The horse raised men's economic capacity, social status, and ambition. Diné men with horses traveled to find food, trade, and interact with other peoples. Diné masculinities were connected to how men maintained and cared for their horses. Diné men showed responsibility in their caretaking of their horses, and in turn, it enhanced their status within their communities, while, as expected, those without a horse had low status in many cases. The overall effect was that Diné man was able to demonstrate to all, including his future wife and family, that he was dependable and capable of providing for a family.

In addition to the horse, raising sheep also shaped Diné communities. Sheep provided security, it was an integral part of one's identity as well as of the community, and influenced how Diné social groups were organized (Iverson, 2002, p. 23). Sheep ownership helped people cooperate and

become interdependent. Sheep herding became the main mechanism to teach the values of a Diné way of life—responsibility, respect, love, hospitality, knowledge, and wellness. Perhaps most importantly, raising sheep strengthened Diné male and female interdependency since both were capable of animal husbandry.

Diné men were hunters, farmers, teachers, storytellers, traders, protectors, and healers. Diné masculinities were tied to language, thought, cultural knowledge, way of life, relations, and space/place. Men lived the principles of *iiná*—to live well, to know the history of the people, to live an SNBH path, to use the four elements (water, air, fire, and land) to survive, to know and practice *K'é* and *K'ée*, and speak Diné. Diné men played a very important role in a boy's initiation ceremony by providing instruction, knowledge, and wisdom for their boys, much the same way other Native people do. Diné boys went through a puberty ceremony to learn what it meant to be a young man. They learned stories, prayers, songs, and cultural knowledge. The attributes of traditional Diné masculinities still exist, but it is not universal among all Diné men in the present.

Male Foundation

Each Diné man is expected to have a foundational image representing his responsibilities, expectations, and commitments. This image is made up of four distinct components: spiritual, common, social, and physical. Each component is interwoven with one another. To understand a more detailed description of each component, one must dialogue with a medicine person in the Diné language. In lieu of such a conversation, the following paragraphs provide a general description of each component.

The spiritual image is the first component. It is metaphorically located in the East and is represented by the entities of Talking God, Dawn Boy, and Dawn Girl. Spirituality explains a man's existential appearance and is born of this image. From this image, a person experiences the force of natural law. It helps a person experience positive energy, happiness, and laughter. This can be applied to all people to enjoy life and develops a good attitude and behavior to motivate oneself. A person's motivation gains the necessary energy to direct their needs and desires in life. Humans need to understand this energy in order to control it. This image can direct you toward the positive interests you have as a human being. As good emotions and thoughts are developed, a Diné man's outlook on life and the approach he takes derive from a positive spiritual image.

The second component is a common image. It is located in the South and is represented by Talking God, Blue Twilight Boy, and Blue Twilight Girl. It represents the "normal" way a person feels and acts. He/she can develop a good or bad common image. While the spiritual image relates to the abstract, the common focuses on how a person presents him/herself. It symbolizes the way a person is viewed by the world. It is tangible and visible. A person's childhood, belief system, and lifestyle create a common image, and different life experiences will shape and mold a person's common image and life pattern.

Social image is the third component. It is located in the West and is represented by Second Talking God, Yellow Evening Boy, and Yellow Evening Girl. The social image concerns a person's out-

look on life within a Diné cultural framework. A person's interactions with all the elements of the world, such as mountains, rivers, seasons, animals, plants, beliefs, and values, dictate a social image. Through this image, a person learns how to interact with other humans and non-humans. From this interaction, a Diné man comprehends his own personality. All of this understanding takes place within Diné thought. This image also allows for Diné people to learn from cultural teachings, stories, prayers, and songs. For example, *K'íí* represents the clanship system to help people know and understand their relations. It establishes a family network and instills in all Diné families support and protection. The social image is a process in progress, with each new interaction a man continuously developing his social image. At times, a man will have conflicts with his social image, so each man should take a careful and cautious approach in life. A balance must be achieved with the social image, if not, a man can suffer and venture into areas harmful for human beings. It is the most vulnerable of all the components, yet it establishes the values a man follows in life.

The fourth component of a man is the physical image. It is located in the North and is represented by Second Talking God, Folding Darkness Boy, and Folding Darkness Girl. In the creation narratives, the holy entities created human beings in this world and they created the physical image of a person in darkness. A person's physical image focuses on the outside appearance, the way a person looks, and the way human physical features are put together. Humans do not control the physical image. The other three components are considered more important than the physical

image, since physical features should not be a significant concern for a person if he/she understands the other three. If a Diné man accepts his physical appearance, he will understand his own foundation. A person's physicality represents the behaviors and attitudes each lives by daily.

To help a Diné man understand his personhood and the four components of his image, going through a rite of passage and a puberty ceremony is encouraged. However, many young Diné boys have never gone through a male initiation ceremony. The main lesson of the ceremony is to learn the necessary skills to live in this world and to ensure the person and community's well-being.

Male Initiation Ceremony

The male initiation ceremony is a two-part ceremony and can take place any time of the year. Boys train before the ceremony and, as the boy transitions from child to young adult, his family and relatives prepare him for the ceremony and general life. When a boy's voice changes, it is time for the boy to partake in the ceremony. The first part of the ceremony takes place over four days and the oldest maternal uncle guides the ceremony. His uncle will prepare the sweat lodge (*táchéii*) and collect herbs for the ceremony. The boy awakens before dawn every day during the four-day ceremony to run in each cardinal direction and is given herbs to make him vomit in order to purify himself. The young boy spends a significant amount of time in the *táchéii* and learns songs, prayers, stories, and lessons. He also learns confidential teachings for a man, he learns about life's complexities, and learns about being sincere, and having humor. Inside and outside of

the *táchéii*, the boy is massaged especially on the joints, to ensure he is physically strong. He also runs during the day around noon, despite the heat in the summer, and he is told to think about what he should do for the day and make plans on how to make sure he achieves his objectives during the morning hours of the day. Another important lesson is learning parenting skills (Begay, 2005).

The second ceremony takes place a month later and is similar to the first ceremony with the addition of a Blessing Way rite, *Hózhó=j7*. It is designed to bring happiness and protection to the young man. Mountain tobacco is used for this part of the ceremony and the purpose is to open and clear the mind of the young man. This aspect is derived from the Twin Heroes protection story. In the story, the Sun gave his twin sons tobacco to test whether or not they were indeed his sons. After the twins smoked the tobacco, their father massaged them with ashes. It is done the same way for a boy undergoing the puberty ceremony. Tobacco is used in the male ceremony even though it is not used in all *Hózhó=j7* ceremonies. After the ceremony is complete, a boy begins a new stage in his life as a young man (*dinééh*).

Upon completion of the ceremony, the young man receives an arrowhead, a sacred corn pollen bag, and a bow with arrows for hunting and protection (Begay, 2005). He will eventually learn how to hunt game, usually deer. All of this takes place when he is between the ages of eleven and fourteen. In a short amount of time, he will marry with the help of his family. In the past, only two questions were asked of a future marriage partner: what are your clans? and did the person go through a puberty ceremony? If the answer is yes

to the second question and the individuals are not related to each other, then on many occasions a marriage is arranged.

The question regarding the puberty ceremony allows for potential mates to make sure they are a good match for each other. A male initiation ceremony strengthens and guides a man's adult life and helps him live a prosperous life for himself, his family, and his community. Without the ceremony, a man does not begin to learn the necessary skills and knowledge to live a Diné way of life. Oscar Tso, in Maureen Trudelle Schwarz's *Molded in the Image of Changing Woman: Navajo Views on the Human Body and Personhood*, describes his puberty ceremony experience:

They built a sweat for me, and they talked to me about my responsibilities as a man. And then, what I need to do to take care of myself. They talked about how I should be when I get married. What should I know and how I should be towards a woman, because I have a mother, I have sisters. And I have to have respect for my mother, my sisters, and then have that same respect for a woman that I will marry. And then all the daughters that I will have, or granddaughters that I will have. So, those kinds of things are explained to you. And then about how you need to keep yourself real strong, try to stay with one woman for a long time, you know. Have one set of children. And they can really preach, you know, and talk to you about a lot of things. And those are some things that are explained to boys. And then, how you have to be strong, what kind of herbs you have to take from time to time

to purify and cleanse your body. To keep your mind and body strong, and have a sense of purpose as you go about living this life. So, I had the sweat done for me, as well as the Beauty Way, the Hoozhonee done for me (Schwarz, 1997, p. 159).

Conclusion

Diné identity establishes what it means to live a balanced, healthy, happy, mature, and successful life. It can guide boys toward becoming men who are mature, happy, and successful in life and in college. American Indians are fighting to maintain and revitalize their languages and their ways of life so it is imperative for communities to establish language revitalization and culture programs. This way, American Indian children can be bilingual and bicultural. It has been found that biculturalism (i.e., the ability to adapt to majority cultural norms while remaining grounded in one's own culture) serves to buffer American Indian youth against negative outcomes such as substance abuse. It is believed bicultural competence allows these youth to combine what is best from both cultures as a source of strength in the face of adversity (LaFromboise, Gerton, & Gerton, 1993).

What American Indian and Diné people went through in their history continues to impact and influence them. American Indian and Diné men continue to overcome the consequences of colonialism. Native identity helps American Indian men overcome their personal challenges. Not very many American Indian and Diné boys go through a rite of passage and fewer know about the foundational image of American Indian and Diné masculinities. American Indian and Diné

communities will need to revitalize and regenerate their rites of passage and cultural knowledge. While some communities are doing this now, every American Indian community needs to help boys going through a puberty ceremony learn the responsibilities and commitments they have to themselves, their families, communities, and native nations.

Thought, language, cultural knowledge, way of life, relations, and space/place are the foundational pillars of Diné and American Indian identity. A Diné and American Indian man builds and shapes his identity through his way of life. A Diné and American Indian man who is strong and knowledgeable of his identity will be confident,

happy, and successful in life. While some Diné and American Indian men are confident, happy, and successful they may choose not to attend and/or graduate from college. Happiness, maturation, and success are distinct in Diné and American Indian communities. It may mean men do not get a higher education degree although many Diné and American Indian men do want to be happy and prosperous in life and the acquisition of a college degree is an element to this pursuit. Colleges, universities, tribal colleges, and American Indian communities will need to work together to help men succeed in college. This collaborative effort will be different but Native identity will play a significant role for each community and native nation.

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