Naat’áanii: What does it mean for Navajo Leadership in the 21st century?

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Naat’áanii in an Era of Colonialism

The Navajo (Diné) word naat’áanii is used to signify Diné men and women who are planners, orators, and community leaders. If you translate the word into the English language, it roughly means orator, speaking to and for the people. The word also refers to leader yet the depth of this word and context is more specific and honored. Diné peoples use the word naat’áanii when referring to chairmen, presidents, council delegates, and chapter officials. While the word itself does not designate an individual a naat’áanii, the word is acknowledged as a distinct title (Benally 2006, xiv). In the creation narratives, certain entities held this recognition such as ![ts4 Hastiin (First Man), ![ts4 Asdz33 (First Woman), and the Hashch’47 Dine’4 (Holy People). Later, mountain lion, bear, and coyote were bestowed as naat’áanii (Benally 2006, 6). They were chosen because they demonstrated certain characteristics and abilities. However, none of them were dependable. Mountain lion was too lazy, bear got angry too easily and quickly, and coyote was too mischievous and dishonest. Later, humans were recognized as naat’áanis.

A naat’áanii has a heavy burden to carry and he or she must always think of the people first and not his/her own wants. These individuals have a lifelong commitment to the safety and welfare of the people. Their spouses are also committed. Naat’áanis carry certain knowledge and experience; their lives are defined by their services. They negotiate, teach, and mediate for the people. In turn, the people trust their leadership. Naat’áanis are never alone and they never disrespect nor dishonor the people and Diné way of life.

In contemporary times, quite a few Navajo men and some women are called naat’áanii even though their recognition came from a different process; by electoral means foreign to Diné history and traditions. Diné leadership, specifically the word naat’áanii, has a deep and honored significance for the people. The deep and honored understanding has become standardized when in fact it is not conventional. The word is supposed to be rarely used in everyday conversation and only in formal settings do the people acknowledge the distinct title. In the creation narratives, stories on how First Man, First Woman, and the Hashch’éi Dine’é governed and their experiences dealing with challenges helped develop the leadership institutions needed to maintain security and wellness.

In the first known realm of life, {a’7 Naaghai, the first entity, known by several other names organized other entities and assigned them roles. ![ts4 Hastiin, ![ts4 Asdz33, Dzi[ Asdz11n, T0 Asdz11n, Chaha[hee[, Hayoolk11], Haashch’44[t7, Haashch’44’owaan, Naad3’1[gaai Ashkii, Naad3’1[gaai At’44d, T1d7d77n Ashkii, Anilt’1n77 At’44d, S1’2h Naagh47 Ashkii, and Bik’eh H0zh00n At’44d
became naat’áanii. In the first world, First Man and First Woman were created along with white, yellow, blue, and black light. These lights represent order to the universe. The white light is representative of the process of thought and planning, blue the implementation and actualization of planning, yellow is life and the learning experience of planning and implementation, and black symbolizes re-evaluation of the planning, implementation and experience with the hope for achievement (Benally 2006, 9).

This order/organization in turn became the foundation for !tsé Hastiin, !tsé Asdz33, Hashch’47 Dine’4, and all human leadership. This foundation for human leadership is led by women and implemented by men. Diné women and men work together as a complementary partnership. This partnership is in all aspects of life. For instance, the male is embodied in Y1di[hi], darkness of the sky, and the female is Ni’hasdz11n, the earth (Benally 2006, 5). This order resulted in the development of h0zh==j7 and naay44’j7, established systems of wellness and protection ceremonies. They became the tools through which happy and prosperous life experiences are maintained and through which naat’áanii governed and maintained social and political order (Benally 2006, 11).

White Shell Woman and her twin sons inaugurated h0zh==j7 and naay44’j7. These two healing and protection ceremonies are key mechanisms by which the naat’áanii lead, protect, plan and maintain and restore life (Benally 2006, 11). White Shell Woman experienced the h0zh==j7 ceremony upon her entrance into womanhood. This ceremony emphasizes peace, life, balance, happiness, and family. This ceremony is the backbone to wellness. The twin sons did not know who their father was but eventually White Shell Woman revealed to them their father was the Sun. The twins insisted they visit him. Several people including their mother warned them against this; yet they persisted to see him. They overcome many dangers and challenges along the way with the help from others. They asked for their father’s assistance in destroying the evil monsters on the earth. At the time, several monsters roamed the earth terrorizing the people. The Sun with great reluctance gave the twins weapons, special prayers, and songs to help his sons destroy the monsters. The twins destroyed most of the monsters except for hunger, thirst, sleep, lice, indolent poverty, old age, and death. The twins exploits introduced Naay44’j7 Nahagh1, dangerous way, to the earth and humans. While White Shell Woman inspired peace and wellness, her twin sons mirrored a means of protection and a system to manage dangers and evil in the world. These two ceremonies help the naat’áanii lead. They also provide the people a way to mediate between good and bad in the world and help maintain a way of life. Male and female naat’áanii are entrusted with the knowledge, wisdom, and power of both ceremonies. They are to lead and govern following the instructions within the healing and curing systems. In the h0zh==j7, the naat’áanii needs to know precisely the protocol for the conduction of the ceremony, the words to sing, how a patient and community must behavior, what earth elements to use in the ceremony, what lessons are to be taught from the stories, prayers, and songs, and to ensure wellness and happiness for the patient and all participants. In the naay44’j7, the naat’1anii works to ensure all objectives are meant, similar to a hózh==j7, including restoring order and security to the patient and community.
Lee. Naat’áani

White Shell Woman created four Diné clans, or peoples. She told the peoples they had relatives to the east so the peoples set out to find them. The peoples took with them corn pollen, tobacco, canes, pipes, guardian pets, and other items. The peoples along their journey interacted with other peoples. This interaction increased the population. The adoptions of new peoples required leaders to guide, provide, and protect. The knowledge of the hozh= and naayja helped the naat’áanii carry out their tasks. The powers imbedded in the narratives, prayers, chants, and ceremonies aided the naat’áanii in bringing physical and spiritual sustenance and protecting the peoples against the many forms of danger on the earth. This knowledge allowed access to the energies, forces, controlling life forms, and natural phenomena. It allowed naat’áanii to interact with the Hashch’éí Dine’é and to ask for their guidance and protection.

Historical Diné leadership was concentrated in extended families. Diné extended families were independent from each other mostly due to difference in clans and location. The fundamental political entity was called a “natural community” comprised of ten to forty families (Wilkins 2003, 35). Naat’áaniis led only the families comprising the natural community. Naat’áanii could not extend their authority over other natural communities. Diné society did not have a central naat’áanii. Diné natural communities had a well-understood leadership organization. Besides naat’áanii, maternal heads, uncles, warriors, medicine people including a hataajii (medicine woman/man) and nideiniihi (diagnostician) lived in the natural community.

Naat’áanii were recognized as leading the natural community. However, the eldest grandmother on the maternal side of the family was well-respected and sought for advice and perspective when critical issues arose. The uncle on the maternal side of the family also was important particularly when it came to the discipline of the young men in the families. Warriors protected the community although they were not leaders. They were young men and women who did not have the cultural knowledge or experience to fulfill the role of a naat’áanii. The hataajii and nideiniihi were key to maintaining the community’s spiritual wellness. These individuals all represent a part of the leadership organization within the natural community. A naat’áanii spoke on behalf of the community and proposed a plan for the people’s prosperity.

The role of the naat’áanii is a most sacred responsibility and obligation so they are chosen carefully. Sometimes, a naat’áanii was chosen at birth or before or the families prayed for a naat’áanii to be born. The families could also choose a Naat’áanii. The choosing of a naat’áanii was done very carefully and not without detail considerations.

Families relied upon the hastóí (elder men) and hataajiiis for guidance, advice, and support when choosing a naat’áanii. This trust between the naat’áanii and the people was recognized by the phrase “k’ad n7il1h bee nah[ah.” This phrase translates into English as, “now go minister with it” (Benally 2006, 26). This phrase acknowledges the gravity and sanctity of the position. The person immediately has a tremendous amount of responsibility and obligation. She or he is always constant and visible among the people. A naat’áanii is always available and his or her thoughts and actions must be clear. Until Diné peoples speak this phrase can the individual be addressed as a naat’áanii.

Naat’áanii learned their duties, responsibilities, and obligations through training and elders. The training included the ability to settle discord. Naat’áanii spoke with a good heart so people could listen
and respect them. They needed to know Ké and how to use Ké in a proper and appropriate manner regarding conflicts, disagreements, arguments, and jealousy.

Ké is a relationship system designed to help Diné peoples understand how they are related to each other, to nature, to the earth, and to the universe. This system teaches humans how to be respectful and thoughtful to others, to animals, to insects, to the earth, to the moon and sun, and to all living entities. Women and men naat’áanii had to live by the principles of love, commitment, patience, fortitude, compassion, intelligence, courage, honesty, physical ability, and strong ethics. These attributes revealed a woman or man’s potential to work for the security and happiness of the community. Without these attributes, an individual would fail resulting in abuse and negligence among the peoples.

The Navajo Nation was and is made up of a diverse group of peoples. Over seventy different clans comprise the nation and this diversity is reflected in the historical government structure: the naachid. The naachid was a regional gathering of twenty-four naat’áanii, twelve of whom are Hoozh=j7 naat’áanii (peace leaders) and the other twelve are Naay44=j7 naat’áanii (war leaders). The naachid usually began after harvest and went until the springtime. At the naachid, internal matters for the region were discussed. During years of peace, the twelve peace leaders presided over the meetings and in times of war, the war leaders led. Hoozh=j7 naat’áanii and Naay44=j7 naat’áanii were separate. No individual could hold both positions. The character and knowledge of the individual determined if the person became Hoozh=j7 naat’áanii or Naay44=j7 naat’áanii. These individuals held the positions for life, relatives or offspring did not inherit them.

Naachid literally means in the English language, “to gesture” (Wilkins 2003, 40) Naachid is a ritual designed to address a particular concern, crisis of an urgent need, or to take action for the purpose of survival. Naat’áaniiis came together to discuss, debate, and determine an action affecting large sections of natural communities. Trained naat’áanii took part in the discussion, debate, and decision. The naachid always ended with the naayéé’ji bihózh=, Blessing Way of the fearing time (Benally 2006, 28).

During discussion on a matter, a decision would be made and either the peace or war naat’áanii would attend to the mission. The other group would stay at the location until the group carrying out the mission returned. The group carrying out the mission would return, report and reveal the results. For instance, if the war leaders went out to hunt deer or other game animals, the hunters would bring back the meat and distribute it to all. The naachid was held at various intervals depending on the need of the communities and how critical the situation was for them. The last known naachid took place right before Christopher “Kit” Carson’s scorched-earth campaign to “round up” Diné peoples in 1863 (Iverson 2002, 163).

Besides the naachid, other forms of collective gatherings took place, bringing naat’áaniiis together. They came together to discuss numerous domestic matters including drought, farming, building homes, trading, gathering salt and other necessary items, puberty ceremonies for girls and boys, negotiations with non-Diné neighbors, and many other issues (Benally 2006, 34). Male and female naat’áaniiis participated in these gatherings. Several women naat’áaniiis rose to important positions or were highly influential. For example, a woman known as !sdz33 Naat’11h spoke eloquently and had a tremendous
amount of influence (Benally 2006, 35). Other Diné women also had prominent positions within their communities.

Leadership requirements were not based on gender. A person’s intellectual competence and oratorical abilities indicated his or her leadership potential. Naat’áaniis needed to have a spiritual base and stand on strong principles; they must be committed and willing to contribute completely to the people. Gender had nothing to do with determining a naat’áanii. In fact, the creation narratives show Diné women must be included in the governing process as active participants (Benally 2006, 35). Diné women were always present and provided integral perspectives on the planning, debates, and decision-making processes (Benally 2006, 35).

The primary features of a naat’áanii were permanent availability, lifetime commitment, and a commitment to open oratorical leadership. The Holy People left gifts, knowledge, and wisdom with the Diné and the naat’áanii was instrumental to a community’s sustainability. Naat’áanii answered to both the peoples and the Hashch’éí Dine’é and were instructed on how to conduct their behavior properly. The naat’áanii, naachid, and the concept of governance (nahatá) provided the peoples with the means to live in this world. Changes to Diné thought and way of life particularly the Long Walk in the 1860s, livestock reduction in the 1930s, and western education altered how the peoples understood leadership and governance.

**Era of Colonialism**

From 1863 to 1868, thousands of Diné peoples were “rounded up” and imprisoned at Bosque Redondo in southeastern New Mexico. Over a thousand Diné peoples died from starvation, disease, heartache, and warfare during this time. After spending over four years at the prison camp, the government negotiated a treaty with the peoples. In the Treaty of 1868, a federal reservation was established and the peoples were allowed to return home.

From 1868 to the 1930s, federal agents had autocratic control of the reservation. Agents recognized and appointed “chiefs” up until the 1890s; the Secretary of Interior confirmed the selections. For example, agent D. M. Riordan designated Henry Chee Dodge “Head Chief of Navajo Tribe” on April 19, 1884 (Young 1978, 28). Prior to Chee’s designation, Manuelito and Ganado Mucho were recognized as the main leaders. Agents also established regional councils in the early 1900s: Moqui in 1899 (renamed Hopi agency in 1923), Tuba City in 1901 (renamed to Western Navajo Agency in 1923), Fort Defiance in 1903 (renamed Southern Navajo Agency in 1927), Shiprock in 1903 (renamed San Juan Agency in 1923), Pueblo Bonito in 1907 (renamed Eastern Navajo Agency in 1927), and Leupp in 1908 (Young 1978, 30). These regional councils were designed for the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) to effectively govern the Navajo reservation. These councils, while recognizing and acknowledging local officials and naat’áaniis, were the beginning of the creation of a western governing body for Diné peoples.

In 1923, the Department of Interior (DOI) established a “business council”, consisting of twelve delegates and twelve alternates representing the five Navajo agency towns (Iverson 2002, 134). Herbert J. Hagerman, special DOI commissioner to the Navajo reservation, presided over the “business council.” The council’s primary duty was to approve oil and other mineral leases. The first tribal
council, organized and controlled by the DOI, marks one of the first steps towards a centralize government system for the Navajo reservation. All twelve delegates and alternates were men. Along with a western centralized government, the BIA implemented a chapter house system. Superintendent of Leupp Agency John G. Hunter created the chapter house system in the 1920s. The chapter house system was fed into pre-existing, local socio-political structures (core extended family units functioned as the basic unit) (Wilkins 1987, 35). The chapter house system acknowledged local leaders in the communities but the electoral process changed how the community chose its leadership. The majority-rules concept and the democratically elected system became the new way to choose leaders.

The chapter house was designed to create an efficient and unified government utilizing cultural mechanisms of recognizing leaders in the communities. While chapter houses were established in areas where trading posts were stationed or in areas where families brought their livestock to dip or to sell to traders, the chapter house focused on western leadership systems. Chapter houses elected a president, vice-president, treasurer, and secretary. These positions were new to the people. How they governed was not necessarily new and how they were elected relied heavily on persuasive abilities and oratory skills in order to fulfill their roles (Severance-King 1996, 40). Presidents, vice-presidents, treasurers, and secretaries soon were recognized as naat’áanii. They were endorsed as naat’áanii because they possessed skills, knowledge, and had a political position. They were elected to help the community. Democratically elected officials, council delegates, replaced the historical acknowledged naat’áanii. The council delegates were young and inexperienced. They were part of a new polity and had very little knowledge or understanding of the new government system when it was first implemented in 1923. It was also male dominated. Diné women were not elected council delegates in the 1920s and 1930s. Since the 1920s, not many Diné women have been elected to the council and no woman has been elected to the top government position (Chair of the tribal council or President of the Navajo Nation). Diné leadership shifted from a perspective where the naat’áanii was a distinct title and few attain to individuals in contemporary politics being called naat’áanii. This shift reflected many changes happening in Diné life. Jacob C. Morgan was one individual who epitomized this change in Diné leadership and way of life.

Morgan was born in 1879 near present-day Crownpoint, New Mexico. He received a boarding school education. In fact, he spent many years of his life involved in the boarding school institution. He converted to the Christian Reform religion. His Christian zeal, belief in the boarding school education, hard work, and his willingness to succeed in the American world represented his worldview and way of life. He wanted Diné peoples to aspire to become middle-class white Americans (Gjeltema 2004, 4). He saw no contradiction between being Diné and wanting to aspire to live as a white American man. He was ambitious and wanted to be a leader. In the 1920s and 1930s, Diné peoples responded to and respected Morgan. He became a council delegate representing the Shiprock, New Mexico area. In 1938, he was elected to the tribal chairmanship position and served for four years. Morgan understood the people’s needs. He spent time visiting numerous communities throughout the reservation trying to convert people to the Christian Reform religion prior to becoming a delegate. He talked, listened, and for the most part respected
peoples’ perspectives. He also understood and promoted Navajo regionalism and wanted the people to self-determine their way of life mirroring an American lifestyle.

The 1920s and 1930s began an era of a unified nation and ushered in western leadership styles. Morgan, with his boarding school education and Christian Reform missionary work, believed in “educated Navajos” leading a new path for a new Navajo Nation while old ways such as sheepherding was no longer applicable to the people. Morgan argued and debated in the council sessions particularly with his elder Henry Chee Dodge, the BIA, and Commissioner of Indian Affairs John Collier. Morgan’s leadership style of argument and debate was contrary to the past. In the past, people did not argue or debate naat’áanii or an elder during discussions. According to cultural protocol, discussions on matters took place in the hogan and respect to all participants, particularly elders, was followed. A public argument was rare in the hogan although it possibly took place. If a disagreement did occur, discussion would continue until a consensus was reached. If a consensus could not be reached, then the individual naat’áanii had a right to follow what he/she felt was best for his community.

Usually, older Diné adults held the naat’áanii positions and protocol established how interaction took place with them. Morgan learned how to argue and debate in school and he believed his leadership style reflected the changes taking place in the world at the time (Gjeltema 2004, 5). Dodge and other older Diné disliked the fact Morgan openly disagreed and debated them. With a western leadership style, Morgan emerged as a recognized spokesman for the Shiprock area and an outsider to the BIA and the tribal council. Dodge often clashed with Morgan on federal government funds and mineral lease royalties. Dodge wanted to use federal funds and lease royalties to purchase land in New Mexico while Morgan wanted to spend the monies for water development projects and assisting young “educated” Diné. Morgan wanted more opportunities for the young and to materially improve reservation life.

While Morgan is not necessarily the first Diné person to disregard cultural protocol regarding meeting conduct and behavior, his political career shows the transition away from leadership as a function of the community. Diné leadership changes to where men, predominantly educated in western and American ways who argue and debate the issues for their own community’s sake, are seen as solely the naat’áanii. Naat’áanii starts to be equated to politicians. The comprehension of naat’áanii also starts to be defined within western political language. Naat’áanii as a distinct title for a selected few is no longer the case by the middle of the twentieth century and the generalization of the word manifests itself in everyday language.

The subsequent leadership style in tribal government followed the approach Morgan initiated. Soon, naat’áanii equated to political leaders, chapter house officials, and individuals, viewed by the Diné public, with authority and power. While many Diné peoples use the word naat’áanii for political leaders, other positions in the religious, education, and family sectors of life are still recognized as leaders too. Singers, diagnosticians, roadmen, preachers, principals, head teachers, eldest female and male of the extended families are leaders but they are not called naat’áanii; although, these men and women share a strong responsibility to help the community. This responsibility is similar to what was expected of past naat’áanii. The person speaks out for the sake of the peoples, acts to help the community, and helps a fellow community member.
Conclusion

Diné peoples see men and women in the educational field, the spiritual realm, and the professional ranks as leaders. Many people do not call them naat’áanii but use terminologies created to designate the positions. In Diné, teacher is b1’olta’7, singer is hataa[ii, warrior is naabaahii, diagnostician is nideilniihi, preacher is diiyin bizaad yaahalne’i, roadman is ‘azee’ yee naha[1h7, and principal is ‘0lta’ binanit’a’7. These terms describe the actions of the individuals. The actions of these positions come with expectations and responsibilities. While the men and women who occupy these positions are not technically naat’áanii, they are part of the communities’ leadership and work for the welfare of the people.

Naat’áanii has a deep and honored understanding for Diné peoples. Few Diné men and women in the past were called by this term unless the community and/or Hashch’éí Dine’é bestowed this title on them. Presently, Diné peoples use the term naat’áanii in a secular way when in fact the word is sacred and supposed to be used rarely. The meaning of the term and the usage embodies the era people lived however the people maintain a connection to their history and the resiliency of their way of life.

In the twenty-first century, naat’áanii is a combination of Diné history and contemporary ways. Naat’áanii can be understood in the present by recognizing Diné way of life is fluid. The word no longer represents a distinct title but rather a word that still garners respect however the cultural protocol on when, where, and to who has been altered for most of the people. The word can equate to how the Navajo Nation is rebuilding and the priorities of the Diné peoples. The term meaning and usage can represent these priorities with a connection always to the creation narratives and to past history.

The Navajo Nation might want to consider developing or contracting with Diné College or some other regional college or university to create a distinctive leadership development program reflecting what naat’áanii meant and what is means now. The Navajo Nation and all Indigenous communities in the United States are rebuilding their nation. Leadership is key to this re-building. Without developing individuals, whose primary goal is the wellness and prosperity of the people, will hinder this rebuilding process.

The core of a Diné leadership program might incorporate some of the following strands: philosophy, way of life, education, roles, ethics, and history. Diné leadership should be taught using these strands and others. The concept of a warrior does not mean leader nor does leader mean warrior. Diné peoples are specific and detailed communities when it comes to language, history, and culture. This explicit approach can help create a curriculum model whose objective is to develop male and female Diné leaders.

At the University of New Mexico (UNM), the Native American Studies (NAS) department is working on a Master of Arts program in Indigenous leadership for the twenty-first century. Some of the objectives of the program include creating competent leaders; reinforcing, supporting, and strengthening leadership skills and character; and facilitating relevance of learning to individuals and communities (Cajete). An epistemological foundation the program can be grounded on include: (1) ways of coming to know, a tribe’s view of the nature of knowledge and learning; (2) guiding stories, guiding thoughts and core values; and (3) western concepts, indigenous leadership, embedded
knowledge, symbols, metaphors, and orientations (Cajete). The guiding virtues of a naat’áanii can fit into a leadership program whose epistemological foundation and goals are similar to what UNM-NAS is hoping to establish.

The word naat’áanii is special to Diné peoples. While the peoples’ way of life has changed, the peoples still maintain their cultural knowledge. This knowledge is detailed, deep, meaningful, and significant. Several aspects of Diné cultural knowledge continue. This continuation shows the resiliency of the people. It is with high hopes the detailed aspects and depth of the word naat’áanii will persist well into the future reflecting life’s fluidity.

References


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