



THE NAVAJOS

HOW THE MEANINGS OF COLORS TRANSMIT NAVAJO CULTURE

TEACHER BACKGROUND

In many cultures, colors serve as symbols. The Navajos use colors artistically, but they also use them to symbolize important elements in the Navajo belief system. While many colors have significance, four in particular—black, white, blue, and yellow—are tied to the Navajo view of the world. These colors are associated with the four directions, certain times of day, the four mountains that serve as markers of the Navajo homeland, important spiritual beings and people, and many other aspects of Navajo culture and tradition. They appear throughout Navajo stories, and Navajo artists use them in sand paintings, weavings, and other forms of art.

OBJECTIVE

Students will be able to identify the four colors important to the Navajos and understand how these colors represent different elements of Navajo culture. They will also be able to understand how values and beliefs associated with color help transmit culture from one generation to the next.

TEACHER MATERIALS

At a Glance: Color in Navajo Life and Beliefs

Navajo Symbolic Associations Chart

We Shall Remain: The Navajo (chapter 1, 0:30-2:35)

STUDENT MATERIALS

Photo of Navajo Rug

Navajo Coloring Page

Photos of Navajo weavings, sand paintings, and other materials at www.UtahIndians.org

TIME FRAME - VERSATILE

Two standard class periods with homework

One block period with homework

Three standard class periods

ADDITIONAL MATERIALS NEEDED

American flag (or photo) for lesson introduction

PROCEDURE

Before starting the lesson, briefly remind the students what a symbol is, and explain that color works as a symbol in many cultures. Show them the American flag as an example. Explain that in the American flag, the white stars symbolize each of the states and the blue square represents “union,” or the way in which the individual states are tied together into one nation. Ask them to think about what colors mean in their cultures. (You could give suggestions, such as colors associated with holidays, weddings, funerals, signs, etc.)



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PROCEDURE (CONT.)

Next tell the students about the Navajos, a nation of Native Americans that have lived in what is now Utah, New Mexico, and Arizona for centuries and continue to be an important part of these states. Explain that the Navajos have special colors that act as symbols in their culture.

Based on the information in the teacher materials, explain how the four colors represent different spiritual beliefs, people, and places. Discuss how these colors and spiritual beliefs are also associated with the sacred mountains of the Navajo homeland, the four directions, and certain times of day. Explain that these colors are especially important because they tie the Navajo to their homeland.

Give the students the Navajo coloring sheet, and have them complete it either as homework or as an in-class project. When they have completed it, discuss what they have learned about the colors and the Navajos from the coloring sheet. Ask some of the students to share the color they chose for “family” and tell the class why they selected that color.

Tell the students that color is also an important way for Navajo parents to pass their culture on to their children, and that one way to do this is through art. Show them the clips from *We Shall Remain: The Navajo* or photos of Navajo artwork at www.UtahIndians.org. If time permits, you could also focus specifically on the importance of weaving in Navajo culture using the information from “The Art and Technology of Utah’s Five Unique Indian Cultures” lesson plan. Reinforce that this artwork is a beautiful and important part of Navajo life, and of Utah’s culture.

ASSESSMENT / PRODUCTS

Completion of coloring sheet
Discussion responses

VARIATIONS / EXTENSIONS

Include words from the lesson in vocabulary or spelling tests. Here are some suggestions: culture, education, nation, history, tribe, and symbol.

Students can use their knowledge of colors and their symbolic meanings to evaluate the flag of the Navajo Nation and other tribal flags.

Have the students do a brief report on Navajo weaving, basketry, or silversmithing. Have them focus on the use of colors in these art forms

From oral histories or other sources at www.UtahIndians.org, have students investigate what words or ideas the Navajo associate with colors and how certain facets of Navajo life link to colors.



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ADDITIONAL REFERENCES

A Capital Fourth. "History of the Fourth: Old Glory – the History and Etiquette of the American Flag."
<http://www.pbs.org/capitolfourth/flag.html>.

Benally, Clyde, with Andrew O. Wiget, John R. Alley, and Garry Blake. *Dinejí Nákéé' Nááhane': A Utah Navajo History*. Monticello, Utah: San Juan School District, 1982.

Iverson, Peter. *Diné: A History of the Navajo*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2002.

Maryboy, Nancy C., and David Begay. "The Navajoes of Utah," in *A History of Utah's American Indians*. Ed. Forrest S. Cuch,, Salt Lake City: Utah Division of Indian Affairs and the Utah Division of State History, 2000.

Yazzie, Ethelou, ed. *Navajo History*. Chinle, Ariz.: Navajo Curriculum Center, 1971.

STANDARDS ADDRESSED

State Standards

Fourth Grade Social Studies – Utah Studies: II/1/b,c&e

Accreditation Standards

Aesthetics/Understands how art helps to define culture/Identifies aesthetic elements in the environment and their relationships

NCSS Standards

Early Grades: I/a,b&c



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AT A GLANCE: COLOR IN NAVAJO LIFE AND BELIEFS

Color has many symbolic meanings in Navajo culture; in fact, a single color can mean several different things depending on the context in which it is used. Four colors in particular—black, white, blue, and yellow—have important connections to Navajo cultural and spiritual beliefs. These colors represent the four cardinal directions. The Navajos define their homeland as the area between four sacred mountains in each direction, so each color represents a sacred mountain as well. Thus, among their myriad other meanings, the colors black, white, blue, and yellow link the Navajos to their ancestral homeland and the story of its creation.

Black, which associated with north, also symbolizes Dibé Ntsaa (Hesperus Peak), in what is now southwestern Colorado. White, which represents east, is connected to Sisnaajini (Blanca Peak), in what is now south-central Colorado. Blue is connected with south and Tsoodzil (Mount Taylor), northeast of Grants, New Mexico. Yellow is associated with west and Dook’o’oosliid (the San Francisco Peaks), near Flagstaff, Arizona (for a map of these mountains, see the Navajo Interactive Map available at www.UtahIndians.org).

In the Emergence, the Navajo creation story, First Man took four stones—jet, which represents black; white shell, which symbolizes white; turquoise, which is tied to blue; and abalone, which represents yellow—and placed them at the four directions. He blew on the stones four times and they grew into a hogan. For the Navajos, the hogan is more than simply their traditional form of shelter; it has sacred meanings and still plays a vital role in Navajo spiritual and community life. In the story of the Emergence, First Man’s hogan became the world. First Man also created the four sacred mountains in this world.

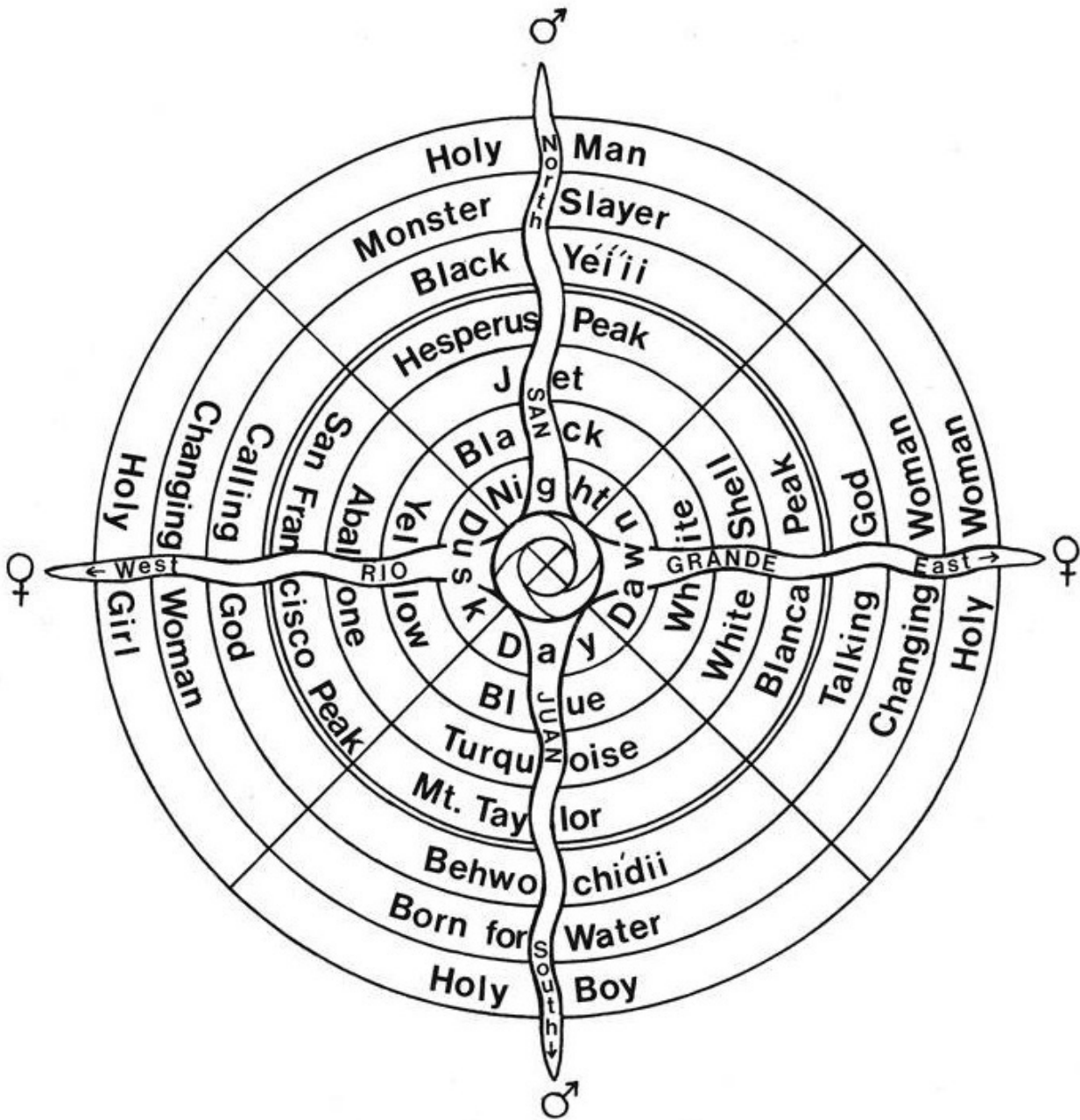
These are just two examples of the four colors in the Navajo creation story; myriad other references to color appear throughout this and other Navajo traditions.

Given their many connections to Navajo tradition, these four colors are an important part of the way culture and spirituality is passed from one generation to the next. One venue for the transmission of culture is art, and the four colors appear frequently in Navajo spiritual objects and works of art. Navajo silversmiths, for example, can use the four precious stones and shells to connect their work to Navajo beliefs. Navajo sand paintings are both an art form and a means of a spiritual communication that makes use of the sacred colors to transmit information about culture. For example, in sand paintings depicting the Place of Whirling Logs, the white guard watches over the corn, the blue guard watches over the beans, the yellow guard watches over the squash, and the black guard watches over the tobacco. Weaving is another important Navajo art form, and Navajo weavers choose colors based on both aesthetic appeal and cultural symbolism. (For information on the history of Navajo weaving, see “The Art and Technology of Utah’s Five Unique Indian Cultures” lesson plan.)

The Navajos use the four colors in ways too numerous to list, and their meanings are frequently subtle and complex. The colors’ symbolism connects the past, present, and the future of the Navajo people. It interweaves geography, spirituality, and art and encodes deep meanings into the material culture of the Navajo people. Using these colors and teaching their meanings to younger generations is one important way the Navajos are preserving their traditional culture.

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NAVAJO SYMBOLIC ASSOCIATIONS CHART



Clyde Benally, with Andrew O. Wiget, John R. Alley, and Garry Blake, *Dinejí Nákéé' Nááhane': A Utah Navajo History* (Monticello, Utah: San Juan School District, 1982).

NAVAJO COLORING EXERCISE

NAME: _____ DATE: _____



Navajo Rug

DIRECTIONS

Colors mean many things in many different cultures. For the Navajos, four colors have special meaning: black, white, blue, and yellow. These colors can symbolize many different things, including spiritual beings and important places in Navajo culture. These colors can also be symbols for the four directions—north, south, east, and west—and symbols for the four times of the day—night, dawn, daytime, and dusk.

COLOR	DIRECTION	TIME OF DAY
Black	North	Night
White	East	Dawn
Blue	South	Day
Yellow	West	Dusk

Use the list above to fill in each line of the coloring page. For example, on the top, where it says “North,” color the line next to it black, and on the bottom, where it says “Day,” color the line next to it blue. In the middle of the coloring sheet it says “Family.” Choose a color that you think could be a symbol for family, and use that color to fill in that section. Then write a paragraph (3-5 sentences) in the space below describing why that color represents family for you.

The color _____ symbolizes (means) family because _____

NORTH	
WEST	
NORTH	
SOUTH	
EAST	
WEST	
SOUTH	
WEST	
EAST	
FAMILY	
DAWN	
DUSK	
DAY	
DAWN	
DUSK	
DAY	
NIGHT	
DUSK	
NIGHT	

