



# THE NAVAJOS

## HOW THE MISS NAVAJO COMPETITION REFLECTS THE INGENUITY OF THE NAVAJO TRIBE AND ITS YOUNG WOMEN

### TEACHER BACKGROUND

The Miss Navajo Pageant, which began in 1952, demonstrates the ingenuity of the Navajo people. The Navajo Nation has adapted the Euro-American idea of a “pageant” into a competition that gives Navajo young women an opportunity to demonstrate traditional and contemporary skills and their understanding of Navajo language, culture, history, government, and contemporary issues. It is one important way the Navajo people are preserving their culture and transmitting it to new generations.

### OBJECTIVE

The student will be able to understand how the skills necessary to win the Miss Navajo competition reflect the ingenuity and culture of the Navajo people.

### TEACHER MATERIALS

*At a Glance:* The Miss Navajo Pageant and Navajo Culture

*We Shall Remain: The Navajo* (chapter 3, 14:17–chapter 4, 22:07; chapter 5, 25:00)

### STUDENT MATERIALS

Rosita Isaac’s Miss Navajo Experience

### TIME FRAME - VERSATILE

Two thirty-minute periods

One block period with homework

Three standard class periods

### ADDITIONAL MATERIALS NEEDED

“Crowning Miss Navajo,” *New York Times Magazine*, October 8, 2006, available online at <http://partners.nytimes.com/library/magazine/home/20001008mag-phenomenon.html>.

### PROCEDURE

Ask the students to think about what a pageant is. Have them write a paragraph or two about the qualities it might take to win a pageant and what winning a pageant represents.

Using the information provided in the teacher background, and/or if possible, video from the *Miss Navajo* documentary, introduce the students to the Miss Navajo pageant. Emphasize that the competition is based on knowledge and skills important in Navajo culture.

Give the students a copy of the “Crowning Miss Navajo” article and the Rosita Isaac Oral History. Using these materials, have the students write an essay, or create an oral presentation, about what positive contributions such a pageant might have for both the young women participating in it and for the Navajo people as a whole.



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## ASSESSMENT/PRODUCTS

Discussion contributions

Writing assignments

## VARIATIONS/EXTENSIONS

If possible, obtain a copy of the PBS Independent Lens Documentary *Miss Navajo*, and have the class view it. PBS Teaching Materials!

Have students research one of the traditional skills tested in the Miss Navajo competition. Have them write a report about why that skill is important to the history, culture, and heritage of the Navajo people.

Have the students draw, and/or describe, a pageant crown that reflects their own, or Utah's, culture and heritage the way the Miss Navajo crown reflects the Navajo culture, including appropriate historical and cultural symbolism.

## ADDITIONAL REFERENCES

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.

Jones, Lisa. "Crowning Miss Navajo." *New York Times Magazine*. October 8, 2000, <http://partners.nytimes.com/library/magazine/home/20001008mag-phenomenon.html>.

Maryboy, Nancy, and David Begay. "The Navajos of Utah." *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.

Miss Navajo Council, Inc., website, <http://www.missnavajocouncil.org/main.htm>.

*Miss Navajo*. DVD. Directed by Billy Luther. 2006. Re-released, New York: Cinema Guild, 2007.

## STANDARDS ADDRESSED

State Standards

Seventh Grade Social Studies – Utah Studies: 2/1/a,b&c; 5/5/c; 5/3/a

Accreditation Competencies

Social and Civic Responsibility/Understands the history, people, and traditions that have shaped local communities, nations, and the world/Analyzes diverse viewpoints of social and civic issues in local, regional, and global events

NCSS Standards

Middle Grades: 1/c; 4/c&e; 9/b&c



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## **AT A GLANCE: THE MISS NAVAJO PAGEANT AND NAVAJO CULTURE**

The Miss Navajo pageant has been held since 1952. Originally a contest based on audience applause, the pageant has evolved into a nearly week-long competition that judges young women on Navajo culture, language, history, government, and contemporary and traditional skills. In recent years, the pageant has added an interview portion, in which judges ask the competitors questions in Navajo and the young women must be able to answer in Navajo. This interview requires the competitors to discuss both the ancestral spiritual beliefs of the Navajo and the current issues the Navajo Nation faces.

In addition to this interview, the young women have to demonstrate a range of skills, both traditional and contemporary. The skills, some of which are determined by the judges and some of which are chosen by the contestant, can include time-honored methods of fire building, the complex process of Navajo weaving, traditional Navajo storytelling, preparing fry bread in the customary manner, and traditional sheep butchering. Contemporary skills vary, but a recent winner completed a project that examined methamphetamine use on the reservation and presented charcoal drawings.

Though Miss Navajo is a contemporary figure, the winner represents several important female figures in Navajo tradition. According to the website of the Miss Navajo Council, “The role of Miss Navajo Nation is to exemplify the essence and characters of First Woman, White Shell Woman and Changing Woman and to display leadership as the Goodwill Ambassador. Miss Navajo Nation represents womanhood and fulfills the role of ‘grandmother, mother, aunt, and sister’ to the Navajo people and therefore she can speak as a leader, teacher, counselor, advisor and friend.” In Navajo spiritual beliefs, the ancestral Navajo went through a process of emerging from four worlds. The Spirit Beings created First Woman, along with First Man, in the first of these four worlds, the Dark World. Navajo beliefs teach that corn, white shell, and turquoise came with First Woman. In some Navajo myths,

Changing Woman and White Shell Woman are the same, in others they are sisters. According to historians Nancy C. Maryboy and David Begay, Changing Woman/White Shell Woman is considered “the spiritual mother of all Navajos” Changing Woman eventually gave birth to twins who killed the monsters that existed at the time and made the world safe again for the Navajo people. Changing Woman also created the first four original clans of the Navajo.

Even the crown given to the winner of the Miss Navajo pageant symbolizes traditional and contemporary Navajo culture. For example, the crown is made of silver, representing the importance of silversmithing to the Navajo people. Though the ancestral Navajo did not practice this art form, Navajo silversmiths have adopted and mastered this skill and it has become an expression of Navajo culture and identity. Additionally, the crown contains 110 points of turquoise, which represent the 110 geographical chapters of the modern Navajo Nation. This large number of chapters reflects the decentralized political structure of the ancestral Navajo; yet the chapters are unified on the crown, just as they are unified today by the Navajo Nation. One of the strengths of the Navajo Nation is that, in spite of this locally based political system, the Navajo have a sense of national unity, which helps to make them one of the strongest tribes in the United States.

While most Anglo beauty pageants focus on appearance, the Miss Navajo Nation Pageant emphasizes the preservation of Navajo culture. The current Miss Navajo Nation Pageant is run by the Miss Navajo Nation Council, which is made up of past winners of Miss Navajo Nation. According to the council one of the main purposes of the pageant is, “To promote the preservation of Diné/Navajo language, culture, and tradition; more specifically to advocate for the enduring qualities, which identify Diné/Navajo woman as the foundation, strength, and keeper of cultural teachings as established by White Shell Woman.”

## ROSITA ISAAC'S MISS NAVAJO EXPERIENCE

I was one of the candidates for the title Miss Navajo at Tuba City [the regional pageant]. I competed against 13 girls and to my surprise I got the title of Miss Navajo. We competed for, I mean for the competition of Miss Navajo, we had two categories, tradition and modern. For my traditional I carded wool and spun-wove a rug. And did a demonstration and named the parts of the loom. And I told some jokes and sang some songs. And for the modern category I sewed and demonstrated some skills that I knew of. And they made some molds that I made. Brought some molds that I made back in my high school and demonstrated that. And told . . . I told how it was made and showed them and showed the people some of the dresses that I have made. . . . And at this show I had the experience of getting the title Miss Navajo . . . I competed against four other girls from four other different agencies and we all competed against each other at Window Rock [the tribal nation pageant] . . . I didn't feel real bad about it, even though I lost. But I still feel I can do better, because some of the experiences that I have had, places that I have traveled and toured. It was really something that I will never forget.

Rosita Isaac, interview by Gary Shumway, May 15, 1968, no. 476, Doris Duke Indian History Project, J. Willard Marriott Library, The University of Utah, Salt Lake City.