

# Colonialism and Dinè Identities

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According to Joy Moncrieffe, labels put up boundaries and lay out categories in order to create our social world. With different categories, groups of people with similar characteristics could be placed into these confines, and easily could have lasting effects on society. Various authors have also touched on this idea through the exploration of colonialism, a movement that historically imposed heteronormative beliefs upon many indigenous communities across the globe. This resulted in genocide, gendercide, and an overall loss of culture with the bringing of these oppressive ideas. We can see colonial ideas pushed onto communities such as the Diné community that many know as the Navajo Indians. What originally was a matriarchal society that kept women at the center of the community, colonialism had changed gender roles and sexuality in a way that is almost irreversible. This essay attempts to explore the ideas put out by Joy Moncrieffe and other authors in exploring the lasting effects on gender roles, sexuality, and masculinities of the Diné people.

### *Labelling and Power*

In the opening chapter of the book titled *The Power of Labelling*, Moncrieffe makes the point that people such as policy makers, researchers, and others with authority over people will use labels in order to give leverage and support to their work and to “describe to others what they do.” Policy makers in the time of colonization and the creation of the United States certainly made way into categorizing Native Americans into categories that made them out to be “dangerous” or “savages.” Although in the years during and after westward expansion, Native Americans would then be forced off of their lands into assigned lands called reservations where they were expected to stay and continue whatever culture was not tampered with because of colonization.



## COLONIALISM AND DINÉ IDENTITIES

In that same section, Moncrieffe goes on to describe that this kind of labelling is important so that proper resources can be allocated to the number of people in a certain area. In a way, this could be seen as being helpful or even more efficient, however, there could be issues seen with this. The big question is figuring out the who that makes the decision on how many resources to relocate to, for example, reservations. Some may get a lot to live off of, but some may get the bare minimum, and those people will fall into poverty. Unintended consequences happen, and this could be the downside into the politics of labels and why we use them.

### *Relocation as a Result of Prejudice*

Other theories in labelling involve maintaining relations of power that “trigger social dislocation and prejudice efforts to achieve greater equity” (Moncrieffe 2011). This theory ties into the previous one, as Indigenous peoples were removed from their lands to make room for incoming immigrants into the United States. Whether these were because of prejudices or not are still argued over, but this fits well into the narrative of colonization. Upon arriving to the Americas, white settlers would describe the land they “discovered” as a “place of simplicity, innocence, harmony, love, and happiness, where the climate is balmy and the fruits of nature’s bounty are found on the trees year round” (Smith 2011). According to *Queer Indigenous Studies*, the first colonizers viewed this new land as an “paradise,” although this viewpoint is through the patriarchal and colonial lenses. In this sense, colonizers used indigenous peoples and the land without respect, and the effects were both damaging and long-lasting.

When it comes to the Diné community and the history of the land and people, one can see the many long-lasting effects of colonization. This comes in the form of western masculinities, invasion of lands, and the English language. Moncrieffe talks about labelling as a process that is undoubtedly influenced by different power relations (Moncrieffe 2007). She continues to talk



## COLONIALISM AND DINÉ IDENTITIES

about the differences in labelling and framing—of course both of which are used by authorities of power. The difference between the two is that framing helps put into perspective in how we see a problem, whereas labelling is categorizing people in order to reflect the frames we create. Although they are both pretty different, they function hand in hand, and pushed on to societies that are colonized with unexpected outcomes.

In the article titled, *Coming to Terms with Navajo Nádleehí: a Critique of the berdache, “gay,” and “Two-Spirit,”* Carolyn Epple touches on the Foucault theory that states the construct of sexuality comes from various modern power relations as a product. One of those power relations could be capitalism, as gender roles would begin to shift to being male-dominant, where different jobs would be reserved for men, while different jobs in the industrial ages would be reserved for women. A “sexual identity” (Epple 1998) would then be developed because of these roles and in the manner they were used.

### *Two-Spirit and the Nádleehí*

In the Diné society, the Nádleehí could be referred to in English as “gay” or “lesbian,” depending on how a person would define themselves. Because it is a rough translation, it is very difficult to express the term if one does not already speak Navajo. It is the Navajo term that could also be interchangeable with “Two-Spirit.” Two-Spirit is the overall term used to describe the Indigenous LGBTQ community, and most Natives may use this term among their communities instead of “gay” or “lesbian.” Brian Gilley would go on to say that “GLBTQ Natives who identify as Two-Spirit strategically draw on a well-documented historical tradition of multiple genders and flexile sexualities among pre-contact American Indian communities.” This Two-Spirit community is present in much of North America today and can be found in both remote towns and large cities such as New York (Gilley 2010).



## COLONIALISM AND DINÉ IDENTITIES

Other terms that are present in Navajo society include the “berdache” and “alternate gender.” Berdache comes from a French word that describes a man that will take the gender identity of the opposite sex; some would describe it as transvestism (Epple 1998). When talking about the alternate gender, there is a requirement that a change in attire into the opposite gender has to result in a change of social status in the community. So, if the social status does not change when an individual decides to change their attire outside of ceremonial purposes, they would not be considered into the alternate gender category.

### *The Pre-Colonial Diné Society*

At the time of European contact, many of the tribal groups that inhabited North America were very diverse, and had their own systems of subsistence, social organizations, languages, religions, and family organizations that allowed them to adapt to their environments and create sustainable communities (Roscoe 2005). The groups also relied more on knowledge than their technologies to interact with their land; Roscoe states that visions, trance states, and dreams became important forms of knowledge for many tribes.

The first Indigenous peoples that make up Navajo Nation today arrived to their lands around 12,000 years ago. These early inhabitants were mostly likely nomadic or semi-nomadic, unlike Pueblo Indians. Navajo Nation today is located at the Four Corners that make up Utah, Arizona, New Mexico, and some of Colorado. Many would say that the landscape that makes up “Navajoland” (Linford 2000) is primarily barren lands, however, this is not the case as barren lands only make up about 5 percent.

Diné society is primarily structured around the clan system. There are approximately 60 clans total, and all derive from the lineage of the mother. The father’s clan is less emphasized since the clans primarily are rooted from women. When introducing yourself in Navajo, the first



## COLONIALISM AND DINÉ IDENTITIES

clans go in the order of the mother's first clan, the father's first clan, the maternal grandfather's first clan, and then the paternal grandfather's first clan. As the lists go on, the clans will also state regions in which Navajos are from, and if they also come from other tribes. It is said that the purpose of the clans are to help establish relationships in the Diné community. For marriages, clans determine who can and cannot marry, and if two people are from the same first four clans (or any of the first four clans), it would be considered incest as they are then considered relatives (Linford 2000).

In the pre-colonial times, there was no social hierarchy, as men and women had different roles but each person had an important role; no responsibility carried more weight than the other. As far as gender goes, there were and are four genders which include female-bodied women, female-bodied nádleehí, male-bodied men, and male-bodied nádleehí (Epple 1998).

Prior to colonization, Diné men were taught to take responsibility, be intelligent, provide for and protect their families. They would also do smaller tasks such as getting water, wood for fires, and hunting; staying with their families was also emphasized in Diné society. Most of their teachings came from the Navajo creation story, and it provided the framework for how a Navajo man should live his life. Their relationships were also described by Lee as being "egalitarian and autonomous" (Anderson & Innes 2015). As far as politics went, there were equal responsibilities for both men and women, and overall, gender roles were equal in society as long as everyone had a part.

Religion and ceremonies are based off of reciprocity and the way in which an individual lives their life. The favors given to the Navajo people from the Holy People (also known as Diyin Dine'e) have to be returned in some way. This was the function of ceremonies, as they helped restore relations with the Holy People, spiritual beings looking over the Diné people. The



## COLONIALISM AND DINÉ IDENTITIES

entire system of ceremony has two parts that include the creation story and different legends of origins of ceremonials. In all there are 24 different ceremonies, although about half are still used today depending on the day and season, although some are used daily (Linford 2000). The categories all end in “way”, as there exists Lifeway, Evilway, and Holyway ceremonies that all have sub-categories of chants to use. Because place is imperative to Native American culture, it is important to note that ceremonies are used depending on the place for function.

### *A Brief History of Colonization*

The first foreign footsteps came in 1598 when Don Juan de Onate of Spain arrived in what is known as New Mexico today. In the 1500's the center of Navajoland was considered to be Farmington today, specifically. Navajo members did not take too kindly to the arrival of the Spaniards and eventually after harassments and raids, they left, and the Navajo nation moved to now Santa Fe. Raids and harassments went back and forth for another 20 years followed by a decade of peace in which the settlers would trade with the indigenous group. As expected, conflict would resume for hundreds of years. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the Spaniards tried to take over land by selling land grants to other groups of settlers, however, Navajos and Apaches banded together to drive them away. Conflicts between Navajo nation, foreign settlers, and other tribes in the area would have more and more disputes until the signing of the first Navajo-American peace treaty at Ojo del Oso on the 21<sup>st</sup> of the November, 1846. This treaty called for reparations of stolen property, a mutual trading system, and longer-lasting peace. Unfortunately, the treaty failed a few days after the signing, and more war ensued.

Despite their best efforts to be peaceful, the Navajos were forced back into the reservations in which they live today in the southwestern United States in the summer of 1868. Over time and through many treaties, the Diné people have increased the size of their reservation



## COLONIALISM AND DINÉ IDENTITIES

and have a tribal government as well as a Navajo police department. Through all the adversity that the Diné people have faced in their time on their land, they have persevered and are one of the most populous tribes in the United States.

### *Effects on the Diné community*

The Diné masculinity has been one of those unexpected outcomes of colonialism shaped by relationships of power. An essay by Lloyd Lee discusses the effects of Diné masculinities from colonization on relationships, as well as how Navajo Nation can reclaim their power and their culture through looking at masculinity.

After the arrival of Spaniard colonizers, the gender roles within the Navajo community would be greatly influenced by the western way of relationships and established, heteronormative ideas of gender roles and sexuality. European Masculinity was the source of power that essentially caused major changes in the Navajo community, and in some ways for the worst. In “Native Sexual Inequalities: American Indian Cultural Conservative Homophobia and the Problem of Tradition,” Gilley goes as far to state that “GLBTQ Natives believe that the separation of diverse sexualities and genders from Native American cultural practices began at European contact.” This citation is important to include, as this shows how powerful labels are as well as the weight that they can carry when they are used to oppress indigenous peoples; this also goes for how the indigenous masculinity also was attacked with Western ideas in what it means to “be a man.”

One of the biggest changes included the introduction of livestock, and more specifically, horses. Lee states in his essay that having a horse indicated how wealthy a man was, and without one, he had little to no place in society. Because this was imposed by white settlers (the authority figure), eventually Diné masculinity would be affected since men could now spend more time



## COLONIALISM AND DINÉ IDENTITIES

away from their family, gender roles would change as women took over different tasks that the husband would leave behind, leading women to do more of the housework than men. Over time, Lee says that this could have been a factor in contributing to the rise of domestic violence in the household. Nowadays, Diné men don't stay in the household, don't continue traditional dating, and are losing grasp on their culture, including the preference of using English rather than Navajo.

In a world mostly shaped by colonialism and imperialism, Navajo Nation was one of many victims of a nearly complete cultural change. Through labelling how a man should act and how wealth should be shown in the community, the changes in Navajo masculinities ultimately changed how relationships worked within the community. Through materialistic objects such as livestock and the introduction of the English language, the culture in which Diné people lived in began to change. It lead to the loss of respect for women, the central figure in the community, and eventually the rise of domestic violence in the home. Other shifts such as the prominence of habitual practice of ceremony can be seen today, as less and less of Navajo youth engage with the traditional teachings of their culture. The effects in the community are great, and clearly seen today as the result of positions of power imposing heteronormative and patriarchal beliefs onto an indigenous community that resided in North America for thousands of years.



## COLONIALISM AND DINÉ IDENTITIES

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