

“Must fluently speak and understand Navajo and read and write English”: Navajo Leadership in a Language Shift World

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In 2014 and 2015, the Navajo (Diné) people discussed, debated, and decided on language fluency in their elected leadership. It has not necessarily been resolved but it does show how Navajo leadership has changed for the past two hundred plus years. The change shows the vitality of the Diné people and way of life in the twenty-first century. In this article, I discuss and examine Navajo leadership in a language shift world and what does this mean for the Diné people. I first do an overview of traditional Navajo leadership then examine the impact of western thoughts and ways on Navajo leadership followed by recent Navajo presidential elections and wrap up with a final discussion on leadership in a language-shift world.

Traditional Navajo Leadership

The Navajo (Diné) word *naat'áanii* identifies Navajo 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. Navajo people use *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.¹

Traditional *naat'áanii* had a heavy burden to carry and she/he always thought of the people first and not her/his own wants. These individuals had a lifelong commitment to the safety and welfare of the people. Their spouses were also committed. *Naat'áanii*s carried certain knowledge and experience; their lives were defined by their services. They negotiated, taught, and mediated for the people. In turn, the people trusted their leadership. Traditional *naat'áanii*s were never alone and they never disrespected nor dishonored the people and 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 Navajo history and traditions. Navajo 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.

Male and female traditional *naat'áanii* were entrusted with the knowledge and power of two ceremonies; *h0zh==j7* (healing) and *naay44'j7* (protection). They were to lead and govern following the ceremonies' protocols. In the *h0zh==j7*, the *naat'áanii* needs to know how to conduct the ceremony, the words to sing, how a patient and community must behave, 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 ceremonial participants. In the *naay44'j7*, the *naat'áanii* works to ensure the ceremony is done properly including restoring order and security to the patient and community.

The powers imbedded in the narratives, prayers, chants, and ceremonies aided the naat'áanii in bringing physical and spiritual sustenance and protecting the people against the many forms of danger on the earth. This knowledge allowed access to the energies, life forms, and natural phenomena. It allowed naat'áanii to interact with the Hashch'ée Dine'ée (Holy People) and to ask for their guidance and protection.

Navajo traditional leadership was concentrated in extended families. Navajo 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.² Naat'áanii led only the families comprising the natural community. Naat'áanii could not extend their authority over other natural communities. Navajo did not have a central naat'áanii. Navajo natural communities had a well-understood leadership organization. Besides naat'áanii, maternal heads, uncles, warriors, medicine people including a hataa[ii (medicine woman/man) and nideilnihii (diagnostician) lived in the natural community.

Traditional 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. Naabaahii (warrior) 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 hataa[ii and nideilnihii were instrumental in maintaining the community's wellness. A naat'áanii spoke on behalf of the community and planned for the people's prosperity.

The role of the naat'áanii is a sacred responsibility and obligation so they are chosen carefully. Sometimes, a naat'áanii was chosen at birth or the families prayed for a naat'áanii to be born. The families could also select 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 hataa[iis for guidance, advice, and support when choosing a naat'áanii. This trust between the naat'áanii and the people was acknowledged by the phrase "k'ad n7i11h bee nah1[ah." This phrase translates into English as, "now go minister with it."³ This phrase acknowledges the gravity and sanctity of the position. The person immediately has a tremendous amount of responsibility. She/he is always visible and available for the people. His/her thoughts and actions must be clear. Until Navajo people speak this phrase can only the person 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 K'ée and how to use K'ée in a proper and appropriate manner regarding conflicts, disagreements, arguments, and jealousy.

K'ée is a relations system designed to help Navajo people 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.

The Navajo Nation was and is made up of a diverse group of people. Over seventy different clans comprise the nation and this diversity was reflected in the traditional government structure naachid. The naachid was a regional gathering of twenty-four naat'áanii, twelve of whom were H00zh=j7 naat'áanii (peace leaders) and twelve were 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. H00zh=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 a H00zh=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."⁴ 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'áanii came together to discuss and determine an action affecting large sections of natural communities. Trained naat'áanii took part in the discussion and decision. The naachid always ended with the naayéé'ji bihózh=, Blessing Way of the fearing time.⁵

During discussion on a matter, a decision would be made and either the peace or war naat'áanii would attend to it. The other group would stay at the location until the group carrying out the matter returned. For instance, if the war leaders went out to hunt deer or other game, 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. One of the last know naachid took place around Christopher "Kit" Carson's scorched-earth campaign to "round up" Navajo people in 1863.⁶

Besides the naachid, other forms of collective gatherings took place. 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-Navajo neighbors, and many other issues.⁷ Male and female naat'áanii participated in these gatherings. Several women naat'áanii 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.⁸ Other Navajo 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/her leadership potential. Naat'áanii needed to have a spiritual base and stand on strong principles; they must be committed and willing to contribute completely to the people. The creation narratives show Navajo women must be included in the governing process as active participants.⁹ Navajo women were always present and provided integral perspectives on the planning and decision-making processes.¹⁰

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 Navajo and traditional naat'áanii were instrumental to a community's sustainability. Naat'áanii answered to both the people and the Hashch'éei Dine'ée and were instructed on how to conduct their behavior properly. The naat'áanii, naachid, and the concept of governance (nahatá) provided the people

with the means to live. Changes to Navajo thought and way of life came with the Long Walk in the 1860s, livestock reduction in the 1930s, and western education.

Western Leadership

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

From 1869 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, 1884.¹¹ 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 1908.¹² The Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) designed these regional councils to effectively govern the Navajo and Hopi reservation. These councils, while recognizing and acknowledging local officials and *naat’áanii*s, started the creation of a western governing body for Navajo people.

In 1923, the Department of Interior (DOI) established a “business council”, consisting of twelve delegates and twelve alternates representing the five Navajo agency towns.¹³ All twelve delegates and alternates were men. 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 lease contracts. The first tribal council, organized and controlled by the DOI, marks one of the first steps towards a centralized government system for the Navajo reservation.

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).¹⁴ 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 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 styles. 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.¹⁵ Presidents, vice-presidents, treasurers, and secretaries soon were recognized as *naat’áanii*.

Elected officials and council delegates replaced the traditional acknowledged *naat'áanii*. 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. Navajo women were not elected council delegates in the 1920s and 30s. Since the 1920s, not many Navajo 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). Navajo 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 Navajo life. Jacob C. Morgan was one individual who epitomized this change in the 1920s and 30s.

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 Navajo people to aspire to become middle-class Americans.¹⁶ He saw no contradiction between being Navajo and wanting to aspire to live as an American man. He was ambitious and wanted to be a leader.

In the 1920s and 30s, Navajo people 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 30s 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 shepherding 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. 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 she/he felt was best for her/his community.

Usually, older Navajo 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.¹⁷ Dodge and other older Navajo 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" Navajos. Morgan wanted more opportunities for the young and to materially improve reservation life.

While Morgan is not necessarily the first Navajo person to disregard cultural protocol regarding meeting conduct and behavior, his political career shows the transition in leadership as a function of the community. Navajo 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 *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. Morgan ushered in a western leadership style that continues.

Navajo Presidential Election of 2010

In November 2010, Lynda Lovejoy lost to Ben Shelly for Navajo President. Many Navajo and non-Navajo people thought Lovejoy would win because she won the primary election in August of that year and the assumption was she would win in November. She lost to Shelly by over three thousand votes. The *Navajo Times* asked people why they voted for Shelly or Lovejoy. Quite a few people in the paper said they voted for Shelly because of tradition.

All Navajo Chairmen and Presidents have been men. Women have been elected to council delegate positions as well as school board members, board of election supervisors, chapter house officials, and other tribal governmental positions. Women are seen as leaders in families and in the home. White Shell Woman is highly regarded among the people because she gave birth to the people and every Navajo woman reflects her and the life of the Navajo Nation. When Navajo girls receive their first menstruation, the family and community organizes a *kinaaldá* (puberty ceremony). The ceremony is four days with a *hózh=éjí* on the last day and it's supposed to be conducted twice within a two-month period. People want to attend the ceremony because the girl becomes the embodiment of White Shell Woman during her *kinaaldá*. She has the power to heal and create.

Even with the power to create and for some to be elected to the council or on a school board, some Navajo men do not respect Navajo women and the people have never voted for a woman to be their main leader. In 2010, people debated about Lovejoy and whether a woman should be President. Some people viewed politics as confrontational and adversary and a woman is not supposed to be criticized and put in an environment as such so therefore she should not be elected to the presidency. Others feel patriarchy and western logic dictate how Navajo people perceive women, politics, and leadership.

The Navajo creation scripture and journey narratives do not exclude women. Both women and men are needed for life however some men and women misinterpret the narratives and tradition. Tradition is part of the language shift world yet it has not thoroughly been analyzed to recognize the impact of American thought and colonialism on the Navajo people themselves although works by Jennifer Denetdale, Melanie K. Yazzie, Larry Emerson, and others are doing so now.

Navajo Presidential Election of 2014

On August 26, 2014, Christopher Deschene from LeChee, Arizona came in second in the Navajo Presidential primary election. He would face off against former President Joe Shirley, Jr. A little over a week later, two former Presidential candidates Dale E. Tsosie and Hank Whitethorne filed an election grievance against Deschene claiming he did not meet the Navajo language fluency requirement for President. Initially, the Office of Hearings and Appeals (OHA), which is in charge to hear any election

grievance, dismissed it because a ten-day limitation had passed but Tsosie and Whitethorne appealed to the Navajo Supreme Court.

The Navajo Supreme Court heard the case on September 26, 2014 and reversed the OHA decision. The Navajo Supreme Court agreed OHA had the authority to consider the grievance and also agreed Navajo language fluency is a legitimate qualification therefore Deschene needed to be determined if he is qualified to run for Navajo President. The Navajo Supreme Court remanded the case back to the OHA to determine Deschene's qualification. OHA tried to conduct a language fluency exam. Deschene refused to participate and answer the questions. The OHA disqualified his candidacy based on what they called a default judgment but he could appeal his case to the Navajo Supreme Court. The Navajo Supreme Court never received all required documentation from Deschene and dismissed his appeal on October 20, 2014. In the Navajo Supreme Court ruling, they stated the OHA ruling is final and enforceable.

On October 23, 2014, the Navajo Supreme Court ordered the Presidential General Election to be postponed and new ballots printed without Deschene listed and to place the third place finisher Russell Begaye from Shiprock, New Mexico on the ballot. Later that evening, the Navajo Nation Council's fall session started in Window Rock, Arizona. Resolution # 0298-14 titled "An Action Relating to an Emergency; to address a matter which directly threatens the Sovereignty of the Navajo Nation; amending language requirements of the Navajo Nation Election Code" was introduced by primary sponsor Council Delegate Danny Simpson along with a couple of other delegates. The council debated for several hours on the resolution. Amendments were introduced to the resolution but none approved. The resolution called for amending the language requirement for the Office of President and Vice-President, Navajo Nation Council delegates, Chapter officers, Land Board, Farm Board, District Grazing Committee, School Board, and the Navajo Nation Board of Education. The amending language qualification for the Office of President and Vice-President read as, "4. Must fluently speak and understand Navajo and read and write English, *which language proficiency shall be determined by the People voting in favor of the person upon the right and freedom of the Diné to choose their leaders.*" The italicized portion is the amended language to the qualification. The council voted 11-10 in favor of approving the resolution. Three delegates did not vote; two of whom resigned prior to the fall session. President Ben Shelly vetoed the legislation on October 28, 2014. He said, "The decision to amend the language requirements in Title 11, the Navajo Nation Election Code, must be brought before the Navajo people through a referendum vote. This decision is far too important and it is one the people need to decide on. We are a nation of laws. I took an oath to uphold the law."¹⁸

Three days later on October 31, 2014, a hearing was held in Chinle, Arizona on contempt charges against the Navajo Election Administration and the Navajo Board of Election Supervisors for not following the Navajo Supreme Court order; postponing the election and taking Deschene's name off the ballot. The Navajo Supreme Court found the Navajo Board of Election Supervisors in contempt but not the Navajo Election Administration after the Director Edison Wauneka declared he would postpone the Navajo Presidential Election but the election for council delegates, school board members, election supervisors, and other offices continued on November 4, 2014. In their written ruling, the Navajo Supreme Court wrote:

Nonetheless, at the hearing, the Respondents merely reiterated the arguments from their briefs and offered no additional information to show cause why they should not be found in contempt. The fact is there was absolutely no showing that the Respondents actually complied with the OHA and this Court's

order. This open defiance is maintained throughout the Respondent's response brief... Thus, we find the Respondents failed to obey a valid court order. A failure to obey a court order is a failure to obey Navajo law.¹⁹

The Navajo Supreme Court also discussed their procedural perspective on how and why the matter got to the point of contempt. In their explanation, they said Deschene was not disqualified for not meeting the language fluency requirement. He was disqualified by default judgment for filing a candidacy application with a false statement as to his qualifications. They stated a candidate may be removed in the event his or her application contains a false statement.

On November 12, 2014, the Naabik'iyáti' committee of the Navajo Nation Council voted 12-5 to override President Shelly's veto. The next day the Navajo Nation Council brought up the override legislation. It failed. The final vote total was 13 in favor and 5 against with 4 not voting. The override needed 16 votes to be successful. The council then passed resolution CD-80-14 on December 30, 2014 that set up a new run-off election for President, and allowed all candidates who ran in the previous primary election including Deschene to run. The primary run-off election was scheduled for June 2, 2015 and the run-off general election for August 4, 2015.

On January 12, 2015, Dale Tsosie and Hank Whitethorne filed a motion to hold eleven Council Delegates in contempt for the passing of the legislation on the run-off election schedule. The motion also called for the legislation to be declared invalid.

On February 20, 2015, the Navajo Supreme Court issued a written ruling on the motion. The court invalidated CD-80-14 resolution and ordered the Director of the Navajo Election Administration to hold the general election as soon as possible for the Office of the President with candidates Joe Shirley, Jr. and Russell Begaye. The Navajo Election Administration set the Special Presidential election for April 21, 2015. The council did not like the Navajo Supreme Court ruling. They passed a resolution authorizing funds for a referendum on the language question first and then later the special presidential election. President Ben Shelly signed the legislation on March 16, 2015.

A few days later Dale Tsosie and Hank Whitethorne filed a motion to enforce the court's election order on March 18, 2015 with Joe Shirley, Jr. filed an amicus curiae and support for the motion. The court on March 20, 2015 ordered the Navajo Election Administration (NEA) to use its available operating funds to implement the election and the Acting Controller to identify and transfer \$317,000 to the NEA for the election. The court also shielded the director of the NEA and the acting controller from retaliatory action. The Speaker of the Navajo Nation Council and the President released a joint statement declaring the Navajo Supreme Court is overstepping its authority and displays a lack of respect for the Legislative and Executive branches. They also state the Special Presidential election will take place after the people vote on the question of fluency in a referendum.

On March 24, 2015 council delegate Leonard Tsosie introduced legislation to remove the Chief Justice, alleging malfeasance and misfeasance. On April 13, 2015, the Supreme Court ordered the Attorney General to authorize the Acting Controller to issue funds out of the Contingency Management Fund to the Election Administration for the election. On the same day, four former Board of Election Supervisors file a petition for injunction against Edison Wauneka to stay the April 21 special presidential election. They alleged the Navajo Nation Council required the referendum on fluency to take place first before the presidential election. Window Rock District Court Judge Carol Perry issued a

permanent injunction, barring the presidential election from moving forward before the referendum on fluency was held on April 17, 2015. The Navajo Election Administration filed a petition against the injunction on Monday April 20, 2015. The Navajo Supreme Court ordered the special presidential election to proceed and declared the injunction null and void.

The special Navajo Presidential Election took place on April 21, 2015 and Russell Begaye won by more than ten thousand votes against Joe Shirley, Jr, 25,902 to 15,245. Begaye was inaugurated on May 12, 2015.

Leadership in a Language-Shift World

The Deschene case brings up the question of language fluency, identity, and leadership. Language shift has occurred on the Navajo Nation. Prior to 1980, the majority of Navajo children's first language was Navajo and English second.²⁰ In the twenty-first century, the first language is English and the second language, if the children learn a second language, is Navajo.²¹ While a large number of people speak Navajo, the question of language shift and its impact on Navajo identity and leadership is one where analysis is warranted.

Since the emergence into this world, Diné bizaad (Navajo language) has been a core element of Navajo identity and way of life. Diné bizaad created the physical and spiritual world. Curtis Yanito explained in Robert S. McPherson's *Dinéjí Na'nitin: Navajo Traditional Teachings and History*, "The Navajo language is unique because it is so connected to nature. Our words were given to us when everything was made...Only pure Navajo words are used in the ceremonies. Navajo words can heal you. Just learning Navajo can heal you. It is nature speaking."²² Diné bizaad has power. Anthropologist Gary Witherspoon in *Language and Art in the Navajo Universe* shows both creation and control of the world go through Diné bizaad. The Navajo Code Talkers in the Pacific Theater of World War II is an example of this understanding. They developed a code based on Diné bizaad, much of which was metaphorical such as tortoise for tank and iron fish for submarine. The Japanese could never break the code. The Navajo language helped win World War II.

Past Navajo leaders have primarily spoken Diné, however for nearly one hundred years, all Chairmen and Presidents have been bilingual in Navajo and English. For many Navajo people at chapter meetings, family gatherings, ceremonies, and/or storytelling sessions, the language spoken is predominantly Diné bizaad with English intermixed at different times. This way of communicating is common among the middle and elder generations. For the younger generations, English is the dominant language.

Navajo scholars and researchers such as Paul Platero, Tiffany S. Lee, Jenni DeGroat, Ruth Roessel, Mary Ann Willie, and several others documented this language shift. More and more young Navajo people learn to speak English first. While some schools on the reservation have established immersion schools or small language revitalization programs, the majority of Navajo children and students are not learning to speak Diné early in age.

In my doctoral and book research examining Navajo identity among college graduates/students and Navajo masculinities, many of the individuals I interviewed felt language is a core element of Navajo identity and masculinities. While many of the participants identified Diné bizaad as a core element of Navajo identity and masculinities, almost all of them agreed Navajo individuals who are not able to

speak Diné bizaad are no less Navajo and should not be criticized for not being able to speak the language. While this perspective is common among some Navajo people, the question and analysis remains on the impact language shift has on Navajo leadership.

While several Navajo Nation Council delegates, school board members, and officials do not speak Diné bizaad, the Navajo people have never chosen or elected a Chairman or President who did not speak the language. Language is a pillar of traditional Navajo leadership. Traditional Navajo leadership is tied to how eloquently you are able to communicate with the people. The word *naat'áanii* describes a person who is an orator. Other community leaders such as a *hataa[li]* also speak and sing in Diné bizaad. The language is ingrained in the healing powers of the songs and prayers. In order for the curing powers to work on the patient and ceremonial participants, it has to be spoken in Diné and in the proper order. Diné bizaad is viewed as a sacred language with a great deal of energy and power. Diné bizaad is the language of the *Diyin Dine'é*. The *Diyin Dine'é* are the entities responsible for the development of this world along with the stories, prayers, ceremonies, and cultural knowledge. Without this language, the distinctiveness of Navajo people is shaped differently.

What happens when English becomes the dominant language in regards to Navajo leadership specifically? Navajo people have discussed this in their own families and communities. Many people want the language to be respected but like the participants in my studies they do not necessarily want the person who is not able to speak Diné bizaad ridiculed. At the same time, some people do criticize those that are not able to speak the language and do want their leadership to speak the language. The Navajo Nation is in a complex situation. What should the people do? This question and many more related to identity and leadership need to be discussed and answered by the people.

The Navajo Nation was awarded \$554 million dollars in 2014 in their settlement against the U.S. federal government. Hearings were held in October and November 2014 to get public views on how the money should be spent. Some people suggested spending some of the money on language programs. The Navajo Nation Council has dedicated a portion of the settlement to improving infrastructure on the reservation. The major focus will be on large-scale water projects over a five-year period. No plans for immersion language programs or language revitalization programs at the moment but educators and community members want to see this happen.

If the Navajo government implements language revitalization programs throughout Diné Bikéyah, it may develop young Navajo children in a generation or two to speak Diné bizaad on a consistent basis. The people will probably need to make a commitment to speak the language consistently to ensure its vitality. What does the future hold for Navajo leadership in a language shift world? Numerous perspectives range from acceptance of leadership without the ability to speak Diné bizaad to speaking Diné bizaad is essential to Navajo leadership. Navajo leadership may change or may stay the same but the overall purpose and mission should not change and that is to serve, protect, and ensure the well-being of Navajo people and communities. Leadership is about the people, the security, and sustainability of communities and families.

A referendum on the language fluency question for the Office of President and Vice-President took place on July 21, 2015. The voters decided to change the criteria. For future Presidential elections, voters will decide if a candidate for President and Vice-President is proficient enough in Diné bizaad to hold the office. It will no longer be left up to the Navajo Election Administration. The outcome will probably not end the discussion of language proficiency and the impact on leadership in the twenty-first

century and beyond. The discussion will probably continue for some time. Mohawk scholar Taiaiake Alfred offers a perspective worth hearing, “Adapt, change, go forward, but always make sure you’re listening to the traditional knowledge at the same time. Commit yourself to uphold the first principles and values. We have to refer to both the past and the future in our decision-making.”²³ The overall goal of leadership has always been about service to the people and ensuring prosperity and sustenance for the whole.

Notes

1 AnCita Benally, *Diné Binahat’á*, Navajo Government (PhD diss., Arizona State University, 2006), xiv.

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