

Singing the path of the Spirits

The Navaho ways of healing and sorcery

Nicholas Breeze Wood



Above: Monument Valley, a sacred place in the Diné homelands

Inset - top: making a sandpainting

Inset - bottom: a Diné singer makes an offering of cornflour

The Diné are a Native American tribal group living where Arizona, Utah and New Mexico meet in the USA. They are often known as the Navajo or Navaho, but their real name is Diné which means 'The People.' The name Navajo is a Spanish adaptation of the Tewa Pueblo word *navahu'u*, which means 'farm fields in a valley,' and was given to the Diné by the Spanish because they lived in such a place.

THE DINÉ UNIVERSE

The Diné see the universe as made up of myriad interrelated living elements, from ants to mountains, and hot winds to hail and thunderstorms. In their cosmology, all beings have a natural place in creation, and when beings are in harmony and balance, the universe is in a place of *hozho* (beauty) - this is a Diné term for harmony and has nothing to do with attractiveness.

However, aspects of the universe have a tendency to fall into disharmony and this is

dangerous and needs to be guarded against by performing specific ceremonies to restore the harmony. Danger can come from any disturbance of the harmonious order, and the Diné believe that much in the universe has a tendency to go out of harmony when not controlled. This is especially true of the many things the Diné feel hold great power, and these are especially watched out for.

These 'loose cannons in creation' include the dead, and there is much fear in Diné culture of *chindi* (ghosts). A person, no matter how harmoniously 'good' they have been in life, has a disharmonious 'evil' aspect that may well become a dangerous ghost after death, and which is very likely to harm the living if not dealt with.

Other parts of creation considered to be especially prone to disharmony include certain animals such as snakes, bears, porcupines, weasels, deer, coyotes, eagles, ants,

moths and butterflies. Dangerous disharmony can occur either by coming directly into contact with them, or by touching things such as firewood or stones, which have had previous contact with them.

Cactus plants are also considered dangerous and must never be burnt, and natural phenomena such as lightning and whirlwinds are very dangerous indeed and anything touched by such a phenomena should never be used or approached.

Even dreaming about any of these things can be potentially life threatening. However, the threat from all these perils is reduced when the correct ceremonies are performed and strict taboos kept. All of this can make Diné culture appear very superstitious compared to Western culture, although to the Diné it all makes perfect sense to keep the universe in harmony.

Below: raw turquoise stones, which the Diné use as offering to the spirits





wish them well, mostly they are considered to be indifferent. But everything of power in the Diné's world view is potentially dangerous; there is the ever-present need to maintain harmony between oneself and the Holy People - or ideally avoid them - to prevent injury or illness because you came into contact with their power. Thus an attack from a Holy Person is not personal - unlike an attack from a ghost or a sorcerer

TABOO BREAKING

The breaking of accepted Diné cultural taboos is seen as a great cause of disharmony and danger, which can open flood gates for greater disharmony to come rushing in.

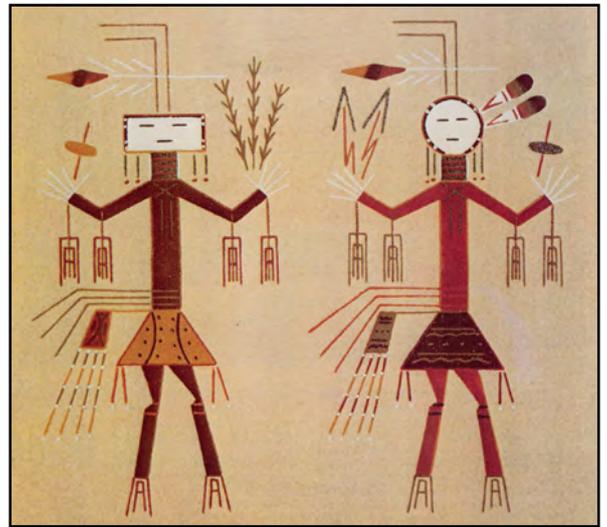
Taboos in Diné culture are many and varied; they include rules of social contact between family members, periods of gambling, improper sexual activity, breaking cultural laws about the dead, casually mentioning certain animals (such as owls), incorrectly maintaining the home, being untidy or dirty, not caring correctly for sacred objects, leaving a weaving unfinished with the weaving tools in the wrong place, or even weaving facing the wrong direction. A full list of taboos would be almost endless, and the breaking of any taboo could result in illness, accident or at best misfortune, and may ultimately end in your death.

However, breaking a taboo is not a 'sin' as we might consider it in the West - it is not bad because the 'crime' was bad - it is bad because it attracts external disharmony; for instance murder is bad not because of the deed itself, it is bad because it brings contact with the dead.

PUTTING THINGS RIGHT

The correct performance of ceremony brings the disharmony under control, banishes ghosts and restores harmony. Ceremonies also give protection from the disharmony, should it break out again. The Holy People are attracted to ceremonies, and the performance of a ceremony has to be exact, so that they are satisfied by it, and give their blessing in order to set things right.

This seeking of blessing forms a very major part of Diné ceremony - the restoring of



The Holy People do not necessarily care about humans or wish them well, mostly they are indifferent. But everything of power in the Diné's world view is potentially dangerous; and there is the ever present need to maintain harmony to prevent injury or illness

balance is seen as a blessing, and ceremonies and rituals are often referred to under the collective term 'blessingways.'

Blessingways bring good hope and luck, avert misfortune, invoke positive blessings for a long and happy life and for the protection and increase of possessions. They may be used to protect livestock, aid childbirth, bless a new dwelling, consecrate ritual objects, protect a departing or returning soldier, strengthen an apprentice medicine person, or consecrate a marriage.

Ceremonies are generally performed for an individual who requests and sponsors them. This is different to the other native peoples who live near to the Diné, and who have a set cycle of community ceremonies for the bringing of rain, crop fertility and to help smooth the natural procession of the year. Ceremonies for rain may be performed in times of drought by the Diné, but they will be individual affairs rather than large collective ceremonies.

There are many forms of blessingway, each with a different name such as 'hand-tremblingway,' 'shootingway,' 'eagleway,' 'red

Above: Yei spirit people in a sandpainting

Left inset - a Diné weaver



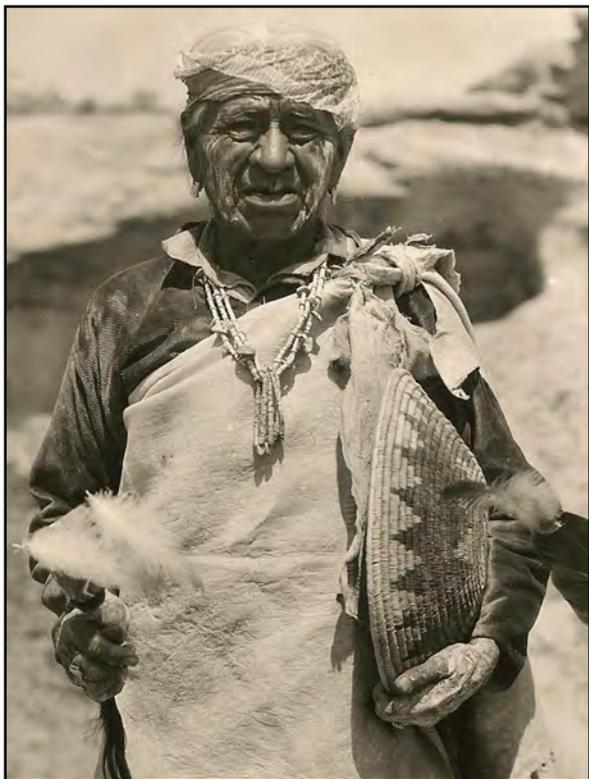
THE HOLY PEOPLE

To the Diné the universe is alive, and each aspect of it has spirit power and a soul. Then, in addition to these, there are the larger ancestral spirit beings, the cultural gods and goddesses. These include Changing Woman (Asdzáá Nádleehé), who is deeply connected to their sacred traditions, and is the Diné's most beloved spirit being. Changing Woman has twin children, Monster Slayer (Naaytt' Neizghlini) and Born for Water (Tóbáíjshchíní). Their father is the Sun, and the four of them form a holy family that is encountered in many Diné stories and ceremonies.

There are also many other spirit beings in Diné cosmology, collectively called *yei*. These include beings with such names as 'Growling God,' 'Black God,' and 'Water Sprinkler.' Each of the *yei* has a specific place in Diné ceremonial cosmology, and during ceremonies they are sometimes portrayed by masked dancers.

These 'Holy People' do not necessarily care about humans or





Above: a Diné 'singer' holding a medicine basket and a plume-feathered prayer stick

Above right: bright yellow pollen collected from corn pants used in Diné ceremonies

Below: a Diné healing ceremony

antway' and 'big starway.'

Each blessingway has a particular focus, for instance, 'mountainway' is a set of ceremonies used to deal with disharmony brought about by contact with animals that live in the mountains such as bears, porcupines, weasels, squirrels, chipmunks, badgers, skunks, and wild turkeys. People who have come in contact with an animal - even by unwittingly touching a tree which the animal had touched - exhibits a set of symptoms, and these are diagnosed. For instance, 'bear disease' is associated with arthritis and emotional disturbances, whereas 'porcupine disease' manifests as gastro-intestinal trouble



and kidney and bladder disturbances.

When a healing is being given and the illness is not easy to diagnose, excerpts of a blessingway, lasting only part of a day or a night may be performed as a diagnostic test, and if the sick person seems to improve, the whole ceremony may be then given for them.

Blessingway ceremonies can last a long time. They are measured in nights, from sundown to dawn, and some ceremonies can be as many as nine nights long, although sacred activities such as sandpainting and the holding of sweatlodges are also done in the days as well.

Diné medicine people are called *hataafji* (singers) because singing accompanies every blessingway and is considered essential to them. Ceremonies are taught to new *hataafji* by older experts, often over very long periods of time, and the apprentice pays his teacher to be taught them. It is essential that a *hataafji* performs a ceremony correctly in order for it to work, and so as to not create more disharmony - so the training of a *hataafji* is very exacting.

A *hataafji* will specialise in one

or two, or at most a handfull, of blessingways, because each ceremony is so vast and complex, and requires the accurate knowledge of hundreds of songs, long prescribed prayers, the use of sacred plants and ritual objects, the construction of sandpaintings, and many other rituals. Women rarely become *hataafji*, but there is no rule against them becoming one.

TURNING TO THE DARK SIDE

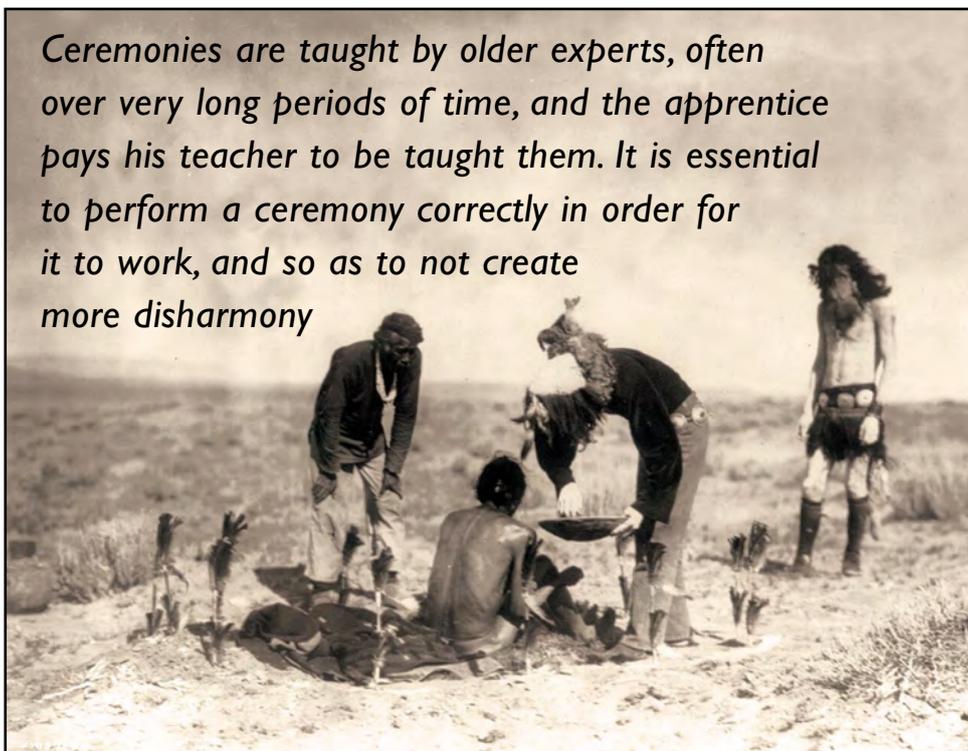
Sometimes *hataafji* or other people are accused, or suspected of becoming sorcerers (*ánt'ijhni*) and using dark practices for personal gain and to spread disharmony. Sorcerers - who are generally called witches when a Diné is speaking English - are said to be mostly male, and are traditionally believed to learn their practices from a parent or a grandparent. Initiation into the witchway traditions (*ánt ijhni*) generally involves murdering a close relative, often a sibling - but other crimes associated with them are necrophilia, grave-robbing, and incest. Any Diné suspected of any of those major taboo breakages is generally branded a sorcerer even if they are not one.

A major method of the witchway traditions is said to be the use of powdered corpses, known as *ánt i* (corpse poison). According to tradition the best *ánt i* comes from the corpses of children, and looks like corn pollen which is used in blessings, however *ánt i* is used to curse, not to bless.

Other people are the most typical targets of sorcerers, but animals, businesses, crops, cars, and other personal property are sometimes cursed in this way.

Other Diné cursing practices involve obtaining someones personal possession or something containing DNA (hair, fingernails, blood, excrement etc) and burying it with corpse flesh or *ánt i*, either in a grave, or under a tree that has been struck by lightning. Special songs are

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then sung or prayers said - often a blessingway prayer said backwards, or a special prayer called 'praying a person down into the ground.'

Harmful sandpaintings are also sometimes created, except curse paintings use ash, instead of coloured sand, cornflour and pollen and the sorcerers then urinate and defecate on the sandpainting to add anti-life power to it.

On a lesser level, sorcerers are said to apply a powder containing dust from the wings of a moth or a butterfly to the body of a victim to cause insanity. This 'moth sickness' is also associated with incest, which is considered a form of insanity sometimes associated with sorcery.

FEAR OF THE SKINWALKER

Probably the best known Diné sorcerers are the skinwalkers (*yee naaldlooshi*). The Diné name means 'with it he goes on all fours,' as skinwalkers are said to be shapeshifters, capable of turning themselves into animals to conceal themselves. Generally they are said to turn into foxes, coyotes, wolves, owls, or crows, but can turn into any other animal if they desire it.

Because skinwalkers are associated with animals, the owning of the pelt of a bear, coyote, wolf, cougar and other animals is taboo with the Diné.

They are akin to the vampire of European folklore, as they can steal the life essence, draining it out of their victims. They are also said to be able to enter your body and take you over if you look into their eyes. They are said to be the most powerful and most dangerous of all Diné sorcerers,

who have reached a level of expertise called *clizyati* (pure evil)

Skinwalkers are said to sometimes try to break into hogans and houses and attack the people inside, although on occasion their attacks are almost in the form of a macabre practical joke, as they are said to dig up a corpse, sever a finger and hide it inside a hogan. The Diné then say the ghost will rise in search of the finger and haunt the hogan where it is hidden.

Other times, skinwalkers are said to bang on the walls of houses, climb onto roofs and knock on windows, peering in with strange animal-like faces. As shape-shifters they are said to be cunning and deadly, using many tricks to get their victim, including mimicking the voice of a loved one or the cry of a child to lure people out of the safety of their homes.

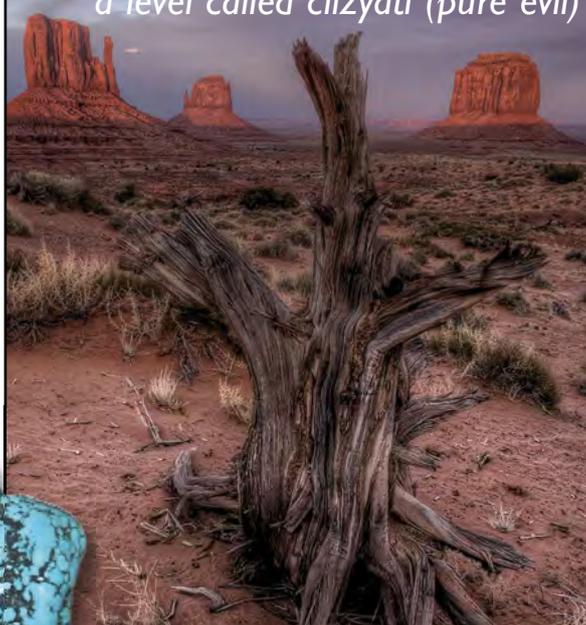
Because of this, sorcerers - even with mild powers - are deeply hated and feared in Diné culture, the fear persisting even among Diné who have no contact with other aspects of ceremonial life.

DEALING WITH THE DARKSIDE

When an act of sorcery is diagnosed, it is considered difficult to deal with by many *hataafiji*, and there are special traditions regarding the treatment of people effected by it, as well as some *hataafiji* who specialise in its treatment.

Whereas the blessingway is used for the restoring of harmony and the treatment of illness in

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peaceful ways, when dealing with ghosts and sorcerers, another set of ceremonies known as the 'evilway' or the 'enemyway' are used. The enemyway is also used to protect warriors from the *chindi* (ghosts) of enemies they have killed. Ghost sickness is seen as a result of contact with the spirits of the dead. It occurs in many Native American cultures under different names, but it is especially common amongst the Diné. Its symptoms include weakness, a loss of appetite, feelings of being suffocated,

Below left: a sacred mud ceremony in part of the 'evilway' for the healing of 'ghost sickness'

Below right: a Diné yei dancer wearing a mask





Above: a Diné yei dancer wearing a mask

Top inset: a carved stone Zuni horse fetish

Below: Diné sacred bundle, hide pouch holding nine prayer sticks of wood, twine, feathers, trade beads and turquoise. Height 42 cm, width 8.5 cm

Below - inset: 'Mirage Stone' Aragonite - an important part of Diné bundles

recurring nightmares, or other sleep problems. Sufferers generally report a constant feeling of terror, and often are obsessed with death, or with a deceased person - in which case it is generally believed that this person is the source of the illness.

In evilway ceremonies ghost offerings are made to attract the ghost so it can be dealt with. These can be prayer sticks of charcoal and often include blue glass beads and ashes. The patient maybe brushed with an eagle feather dipped in ashes, and other practices with ash are often involved such as having the sick person blow ashes toward the hogan's smoke hole to represent the expulsion and banishment of the ghost.

A ceremony called the 'big hoop ceremony' may be performed, where the sick person passes through a series of four or five big hoops made of flexible branches. The sick person wears a buckskin or cloth over their head and shoulders, which is pulled off gradually by the *hataafji* (singer) as they pass through each hoop in turn - often while following a sand painted path of mountains and bear tracks on the ground leading between each hoop. Once through the last hoop they undertake a sweat-lodge purification ceremony. Passing



through the hoops symbolises the restoration to normality.

TOOLS OF THE TRADE

Diné *hataafji* generally have a bundle of objects they use in healing and ceremony called a *jish*. They gather everything they need for ceremonies over many years, and the complete contents of a *jish* must be there even if they are not required in the ceremony currently being performed - showing up with only partial contents of a *jish* is like arriving with half an ambulance - the patient is short-changed by not having the full power of the complete *jish*.

As well as being a *hataafji*'s personal ceremonial kit, each *jish* also represents the bundle of a particular Diné ancestral figure, so for instance, there is a *jish* associated with Changing Woman, and another with her children, and others with other spirit beings.

A full list of objects a *jish* may contain is too long to list here, but to give an example of the complexity of a complete *jish*, I will describe a bundle found in a Changing Woman *jish* called a 'mountain earth bundle.'

This bundle contains earth collected from the four sacred mountains of the Diné homelands which represent the four directions. Pollen is mixed with each earth, and then each earth is wrapped separately in buckskin. A precious stone is then attached to each of these earth bundles to show which of the four directions it represents. Between these earth bundles are placed stick-like rods of 'mirage stone' (aragonite), agate, and quartz and carved stone animal fetishes (often bought from the near by Zuni people, who are famous for their stone fetishes). Then everything is covered with pollen and all of the individual pouches are wrapped in buckskin to form a larger bundle.

A complete *hataafji*'s *jish* will contain rattles, a bull-roarer, feathered prayer wands, ceremonial digging sticks, little bundles of fluffy eagle plumes to tie on patients so the spirits recognise them, eagle and turkey feathers, animal skins, claws and teeth associated with each blessingway the *hataafji* knows how to perform, an eagle bone whistle, a sacred fire making kit, medicine cups made from abalone or turtle shell, prehistoric



arrowheads and spearpoints - used in exorcisms, a small stone club, bits of turquoise,

abalone, white shell, and jet, oddly shaped stones or fossils, carved animal fetishes, quartz crystals, many small sacks of coloured earth for paint making, cornmeal, pollens, herbal medicines, and many, many other things as well, depending on what is required for the blessingways in the *hataafji*'s repertoire.

When a *hataafji* singer dies, his *jish* may be buried with him or it may be passed on to a relative who knows how to use it.

THE SACRED PERFORMANCE

When someone feels that they need sacred help, either because of illness, bad dreams, fear of witchcraft, or some other reason, a family conference is often held to choose a specific blessingway and the *hataafji* to perform it. If the sick person does not know what they need, a special diviner - usually not a *hataafji* and quite often a woman - is sought out, the ailment diagnosed, the remedy blessingway chosen and a *hataafji* contacted.

A blessingway is a very complex set of related smaller ceremonies that are enacted in specific order over a number of nights (and days). Because complete blessingways are so complex, it is impossible to describe a full sequence of events here, but below is a description of some of the main elements.

They are performed in a family hogan (traditional dwelling), which is emptied and swept clean, but sometimes a large hogan is built especially if large sandpaintings and many people are going to be present. Every blessingway begins with special hogan songs to bless and harmonise the space. Song accompanies almost every part of a ceremony, in Diné thought song is indispensable, and without it there can be no cure. Knowledge of several hundred songs is required for most blessingways.

The *hataafji*'s ritual objects are laid out in a fixed order upon a skin or calico altar cloth at the west of the hogan. Some objects, such as prayersticks, will be wiped over the body of the patient by the



hataafij while they sing.

The wiping of the body is done from the feet upwards to the top of the head, and everything applied to the patient - plant medicines, cornmeal, pollen, sand from sandpaintings - is applied in this order. All the movement of people and ritual objects in the ceremony is done 'sunwise' (clockwise).

A bull-roarer is whirled outside the hogan at each of the four directions, and everything and everyone is well smudged.

The actual ceremony starts at sundown, beginning with a hogan blessing. Following this, after sundown, and on the next three evenings there is an 'unraveling ceremony.' A number of wool strings (generally between four and fifteen) are made, with bundles of herbs and feathers tied on them in such a way as to fall off when the end is pulled. These are put over the patient's body and unraveled in ceremonial order. This symbolises a release from disharmony, danger, and harm.

Following this, medicine songs are sung for an hour or so, the singer either using a rattle or 'basket drumming' - using an upturned basket covered with a blanket as a drum with a drumstick of yucca leaves made for the occasion.

Just after dawn on each of the first four mornings a sweatlodge ceremony is performed, after which people rest and eat breakfast. After breakfast on the first four days an offering ceremony is performed to attract the Holy People. Offerings are made of bits of turquoise, shell and jet, short lengths of painted reeds stuffed with wild tobacco, and prayersticks.

The patient holds these and the *hataafij* says a long prayer, the patient repeating each sentence after the singer. When this is done a *hataafij's* assistant puts the offerings at special sites a long way from the hogan where the Holy People can find them.

A bath ceremony may take place in the morning, water and a



piece of yucca root (to act as soap) are placed in a watertight basket and whipped into a stiff mound of soap suds. Designs of pollen

and powdered herbs are sprinkled on the suds, and these are then used to wash the patient.

Following the bath an *iikhhh* (sandpainting) is begun. A sandpainting may be less than 30cm across, but the average painting is about 2 meters across. Sometimes very large ones around 7 meters across are made.

When the sandpainting is completed the ceremony begins. Prayersticks are brought in and set upright around the painting, and cornmeal is sprinkled on it by the *hataafij* and the patient.

Sometime during the singing the patient sits on a *yei* (spirit) figure in the painting, and the *hataafij* puts his moistened palms onto parts of the sandpainting making the sand stick to them. The *hataafij* then applies the sand to the patient's body.

When the sandpainting ceremony is completed the patient goes outside and the *hataafij* sweeps the painting away, collecting all the contaminated sand together which is then disposed of in a sacred manner outside the hogan.

Sometimes a 'shock ceremony' is done as a test to see if the treatment being used is the correct one. For these a special sandpainting is made outside surrounded by a low bank of earth, and a man covered with branches, impersonating a bear, leaps out to terrify the patient. If the patient faints or has a fit after four such appearances it shows that the correct blessingway has been chosen, and he is then resuscitated by a special restoration ritual.

On the last day the patient's body is painted from head to foot with symbolic designs with earth paints, which identify him with the Holy People. Small sacred prayer objects are tied in their hair, as well as a personal medicine gift (a shell bead for a woman or a turquoise



bead for a man), which the patient will keep as a protection from further danger.

On the final night there is an all-night sing, finishing with special dawn songs, after which the patient leaves the hogan, faces the east and breathes in the dawn four times. The ceremony ends with a final prayer and a song to remove any disharmony created by any errors in the ceremony.

During the ceremony and for four days afterwards, the patient must observe many restrictions on their behaviour in case they harm other people, this is because they are considered sacred and powerful like the Holy People themselves.

The family of a patient pay for the blessingway - a nine night ceremony can cost many thousands of dollars.

The component ceremonies of a blessingway will vary depending upon its purpose. Some ceremonies, such as consecration of the hogan and the suds bath appear only once in any blessingway, but other ceremonies maybe performed four times or more over the whole series of nights.



Top: Diné ritual 'marrage' basket

Above: a Diné sweatlodge hogan

Inset: Diné carved wooden bull-roarer

Left: carved stone Diné family protection bundle

Below: painting of a sandpainting, showing prayer sticks and a masked *yei* dancer (artist unknown)

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