

## **HISTORICAL BACKGROUND**

Sometime between A.D. 1000 and 1500, the people who became known as the Navajo left the northern woodlands, bringing with them the bow and arrow. They were accustomed to hunting and fishing, but they settled among the agriculturally oriented Pueblo peoples in northern New Mexico and northeastern Arizona.

The Navajo adapted the ideas of the peoples they met. When the Pueblo people fled from the Spanish invaders in the late 1500s, they took refuge among their Navajo neighbors. They introduced the Navajo to farming and weaving, and to their heritage of myths and religious ceremonies. With these new skills, the Navajo became known for their poetic, elaborate myths, their striking sand paintings, and their beautiful blankets.

After the first Spanish colonists brought sheep, goats, and horses into New Mexico in 1598, the Navajo became a nation of shepherds. They also began to use Spanish silver and United States coins to fashion beautiful jewelry.

The Navajo nation, the largest group of Native Americans in the United States, presently comprises between 110,000 and 150,000 people. Most Navajos live on or near the Navajo reservation, a 24,000-square-mile area in northeastern Arizona, northwestern New Mexico, and southeastern Utah. This reservation is the largest in the United States and is comparable in size to West Virginia.

The Navajos are organized into matrilineal clans and, both on and off the reservation, often live in groups of extended families that are related through the women in the family. Women have social, political, economic, and religious importance in their society.

Agriculture is the basis of the Navajo economy. It includes the dry farming of corn, beans, and squash and the herding of sheep. In addition, many Navajo men continue to be known for their beautiful work in silver jewelry, while Navajo women are recognized for their beautifully designed and woven wool rugs.

## **APPEAL AND VALUE**

Every nation of people has an explanation of how it came into existence. In the Navajo creation myth, the Navajo progress from world to world and become more

civilized as they move upward. Like other peoples, the first Navajo are created from a plentiful local material—in this case, two ears of corn. Like other peoples, the Navajo are the victims of a great flood—but the Navajo survive.

Four is a sacred number throughout the creation myth. There are four seasons, four directions, and four winds. The Navajo tradition also speaks of four sacred mountains (one in each of the four directions), four sacred colors (black, white, yellow, and blue), four sacred plants (corn, squash, beans, and tobacco), and a progression upward through four worlds. Moreover, four important human beings are created in the image of the gods (First Man, First Woman, First Boy, and First Girl).

One of the interesting aspects of this myth is the close relationship among insects, animals, and human beings. A distinctive feature of Native American mythology is the idea that all living creatures deserve respect, since they are all creations of the same Supreme Being.

The primary source for the following myth is Washington Matthews' *Navajo Legends*, published in 1897. Matthews continues to be respected for his pioneering research in Navajo religious ceremonies and texts during the last twenty years of the nineteenth century. He maintained the integrity of the material he transcribed by presenting it as it was believed and practiced and by preserving the inherent interrelationships that exist among the text, the songs, the prayers, and the sand paintings.