



# THE NAVAJOS

## 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.”