



Honeeshgish

A Navajo Legend

Cultural Note

The Honeeshgish, or fire poker, is sacred to traditional Navajo. They believe that the Holy People blessed it and gave it to the Diné to use in their fireplaces, their homes, and their ceremonies.

Vocabulary

cautiously

charred

flickered

protection

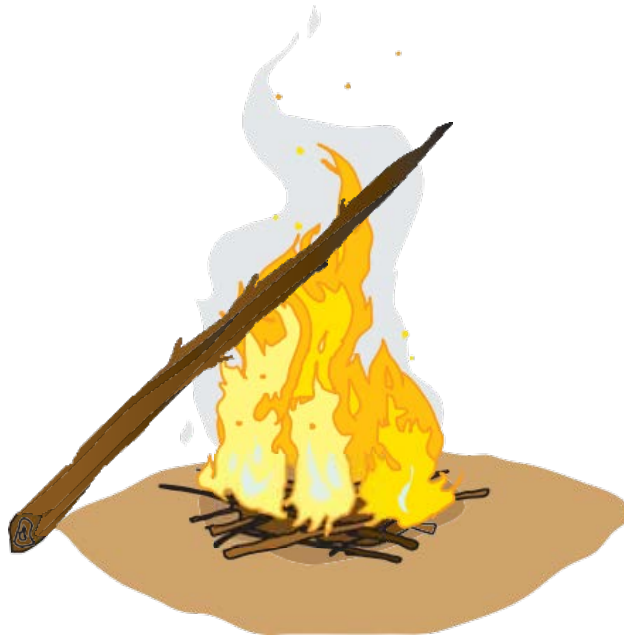
symbolic

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When the Holy People and the Diné first saw fire, they were amazed. They had never seen anything so bright. They approached the blaze cautiously, and as they got closer, they noticed that it gave off heat.

As the flames flickered, someone said, "Look at how red and yellow and blue it is. I wonder what it feels like!" He moved closer and reached out to touch the beautiful flames. Just as he was about to touch them, a log popped and made a loud noise. Sparks flew everywhere.

The Holy People and the Diné were frightened, and they turned and ran.

"Look out!" yelled one.

They stood at a distance and watched the beautiful but strange fire. And they talked.



"It's so beautiful, and the warmth that comes from it feels great."

"But it's noisy. It hisses and it pops, and the sparks keep shooting out, like it's angry. It could be useful, but how do we make it quit making all that loud noise?"

"We need to calm it down. Is there anyone here who knows how to make it quit being angry with us?"

The Thunder God spoke. "I have an idea. Why don't we get a branch from a pine tree? It has lots of long branches. Go get one of them. We can reach the fire with the long branch. We can stir it. Maybe that will calm it down."

One of the Diné cut a pine tree branch. He brought it back and began poking and stirring the fire. But as he poked and stirred with the pine branch, the fire hissed and popped, and sparks flew everywhere. He ran away in fear.





"Why don't we try a spruce tree branch?" suggested the Thunder God. "Go over there and get a spruce tree branch." So one of the earth people broke off a spruce tree branch and brought it back. He approached the fire cautiously and poked it with the spruce tree branch. It was worse than before. The fire popped and hissed, and sparks flew everywhere. He ran away in fright.

Thunder God spoke again, "That isn't working.

Maybe a juniper branch will work. Go get a juniper branch." So once again the Diné went after a branch. But it was the same as before. The fire just got hotter and wilder and spit sparks all over him. He too ran away.

Lightning God had seen enough, and he finally spoke. "Go into the valley and find a tree that stands by itself, a tree that has been struck by lightning. A pine tree or a cedar tree will do."

Another earth person volunteered to go. He journeyed until he found a lone cedar tree that had been struck by lightning. He brought back a branch as he had been told.



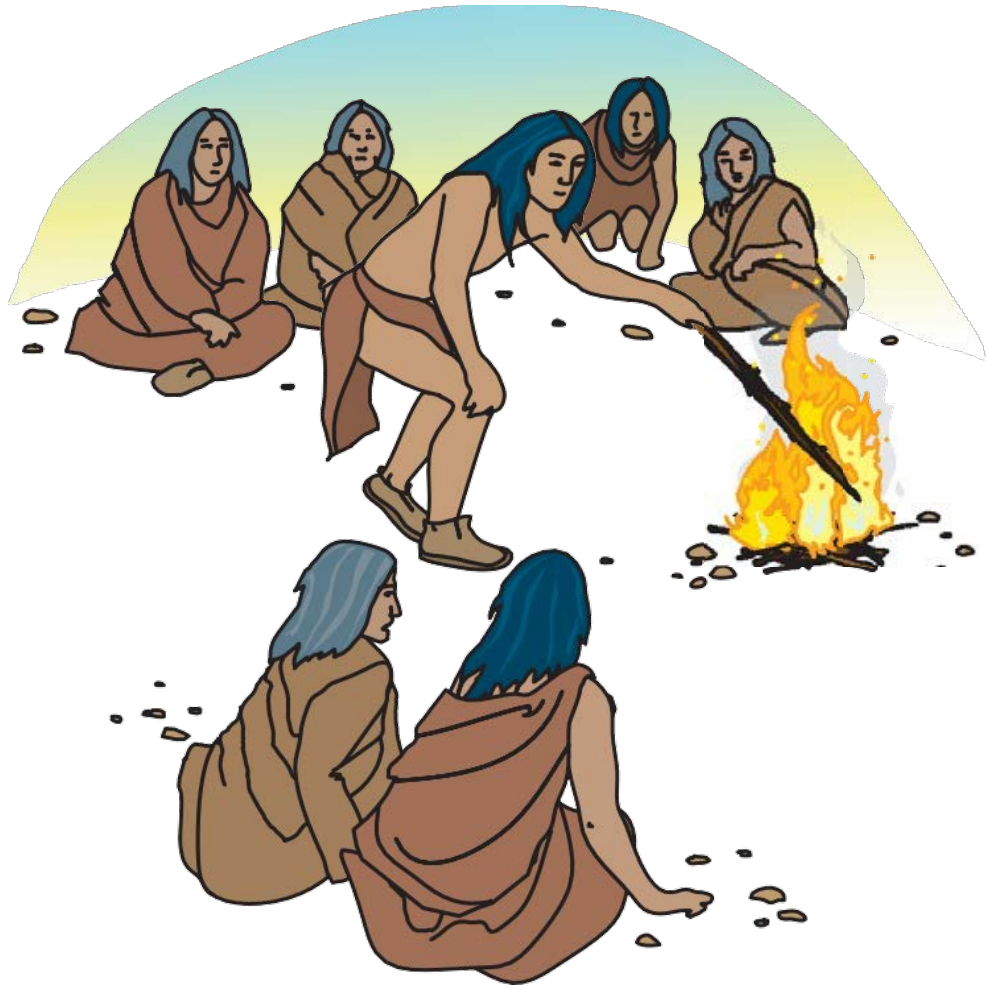
When he poked the lightning-struck branch into the blaze, the fire immediately calmed down. It didn't hiss or pop, and the sparks did not fly at him.

"That's what we needed. Look how the fire calmed down. With this fire poker, we can control fire. We can use it to keep our homes safe and warm, and we can cook with fire and use it for healing."

The Holy People and the Diné decided, "We'll call it honeeshgish. We'll make songs and prayers for it."

"Yes, we will call it the center of the home, the grandmother and grandfather of the fireplace," they said.





To the Diné, the honeeshgish is sacred. It is respected and used in almost every ceremony. Changing Woman recognized the importance of the honeeshgish for the Diné. When she left them and sent them back from the west, she gave each of the clans a sacred gish of turquoise, abalone, white shell, or jet. They were a guide and protection for the people as they traveled back to their homeland in the sacred mountains.



Today the honeeshgish is still important to the Diné. When they leave their homes, they place it by the doorway as a protection. They speak to the honeeshgish and say, "Grandfather and grandmother, protect our home while we are away." When a stranger approaches a Diné home and the honeeshgish is at the doorway, the poker warns the stranger and gives him the feeling that he should leave the home alone. The dark, charred end protects the home at night, and the lighter end protects the home during the day.

A honeeshgish can be used by a mother who needs to leave a baby alone in the hogan for a short time while she tends to her outdoor chores. She can place the honeeshgish in the dirt near the baby for protection.

As the honeeshgish gradually burns down, it becomes too short for poking in the fire, but many people save the portion that is left. They can place it on the west beam of the hogan or on the top of the doorway for protection. Some even carry it with them as they travel away from the home. This remaining part of the honeeshgish can be used by a medicine man for healing a person who is having nightmares.





There are some things a honeeshgish should not be used for. You should not shoo a dog away with the honeeshgish. You don't strike or poke a person or animal with it. It is not a toy and cannot be used for sword fighting, as children might.

The Holy People did simple things to help the Diné remember that the home is an important part of their lives. The honeeshgish is symbolic of the connection between the home and the Holy People. It can act as a guide and a reminder to people throughout their lives.

Glossary

acheii - grandfather (on the mother's side)

Asdzáán Nádleehé - Changing Woman

Diné - Navajo people

Diyin Dine'é - Navajo Holy People

gish - sacred cane

honeeshgish - fire poker

Reading Suggestions

- Make connections to real-life scenarios such as fire safety. Discuss the fire escape route from your home.
- Use comprehension strategies such as questioning and summarizing to better understand the story.
- Write your own stories about an object that is important to you.
- Go for a walk and find a juniper tree, a spruce tree, a cedar tree, and a pine tree.

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