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We hope you enjoy reading the article. Nicholas Breeze Wood (editor)

# SITTING WITHIN A PLACE OF BEAUTY

Sand Paintings and the Diné Night Way Ceremony

Nicholas Breeze Wood



The tradition of *dry* or *sand* painting amongst the Diné (Navaho) people shares its origin with other tribal people of the area, although the Diné have taken it to a greater depth than others and can be said to have made it their own.

The paintings use many things besides sand to create the colourful images. Dried larkspur blossoms give a blue, ground cornmeal give white, corn pollen gives yellow and black is made from charcoal ground from a lightning struck tree.

Although permanent sand paintings, with the sand stuck onto wooden boards with glue, have become fashionable art objects in recent years, the traditional impermanent paintings, which can measure many feet across, are created as part of *Chant Ways*, or ceremonies.

These Chant Ways can take up to nine days to complete, but a sand painting is always begun at first light, completed by the afternoon and dispersed by night time. Some ceremonies call for more than one sand paintings to be made during their enactment.

#### HEALING AND BEAUTY

The Night Way, *Yeibchai* or *Tleeji* is an elaborate healing ceremony which lasts for nine days and nights and takes a large amount of preparation, a lot of helpers and great expense to undertake. The ceremony makes the cosmology of the Diné people visible and tangible

during it's course, as it is acted out by masked dancers who take on the role of the Spirit Powers or *Yei* during it's nine day course.

Before the ceremony is performed a shaman type figure will be consulted to find out the exact nature of the illness, as this will determine the specific Chant Way ceremony to be undertaken. Illness is seen as a disharmony, a separation from the natural beauty of creation. This separation causes an *anti-beauty* to gather around the sick person which needs to be removed before the correct relationship with beauty can be restored.

A major part of the ceremony focuses on the *Yei*, who are not only represented by dancers, but also portrayed in the sand paintings prepared as part of the ceremony.

Before the ceremony can begin, a *hogan*, the traditional Diné house, together with a cook house for the ceremony participants and helpers and a dance ground must be prepared or even built.

The Hogan is prepared for the ceremony by the *Chanter* (the main ceremonial leader) coming into it, and going around it in a sunwise direction, rubbing cornmeal on the four supporting timbers. While he does this a crier stands at the open door and calls to the *Yei* to 'Come on a trail of Song'.

#### THE DAY OF THE EAST

At dawn the ceremony starts by the sick

*I have prepared  
a smoke for you.*

*Restore my feet for me.*

*Restore my legs for me.*

*Restore my body for me.*

*Restore my voice for me.*

*Happily I recover.*

*Happily my body  
becomes cool.*

*Happily I go into Life.*

*My Body feeling cold,*

*May I walk.*

*No longer sore,*

*May I walk.*

*Impervious to pain,*

*May I walk.*

*With lively feelings,*

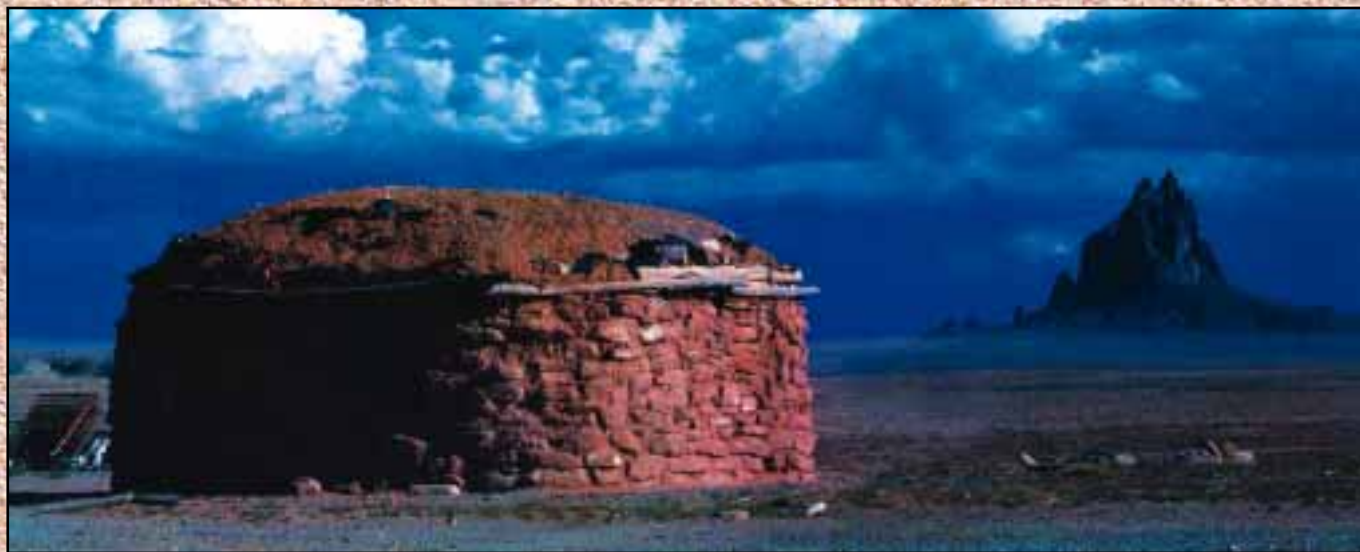
*May I walk.*

*No Longer sore,*

*may I walk.*

*As it used to be*

*long ago, May I walk.*



person being brought into the hogan and seated in a place of honour to the west of the central fire. Yei dancers come into the hogan and perform the 'Breath of Life' ceremony, an exorcism to prepare the sick person for the healing by unraveling the anti-beauty, the cosmic disorder that has made the person sick.

This ceremony involves ceremonially touching and blessing the patient with 12 rings of bent sumac bound with thread known as *woltraad*. The thread is eventually unbound from the rings and they are dragged outside behind the dancers as they leave the hogan, dragging the anti-beauty with them. All the while this is happening singers sing specific songs.

Tobacco is now offered to the Yei by putting it inside four painted hollow reeds which are lit and given to the patient to hold while pollen is applied to their body.

After more songs have been sung to the powers, the reeds are taken outside the hogan and left in a special place. At mid morning a sweatlodge is prepared to the East of the hogan, and the patient walks to it on a path of pollen scattered before them to the lodge where they sweat, after which the patient returns to the hogan and the lodge is dismantled.

Traditional Diné sweatlodges are made of dried mud over a wooden frame. The dome of the lodge has a sand painting painted on its roof to empower it.

Upon returning to the hogan, a small sand painting is now prepared showing the Four Sacred Mountains of the (Diné) World, together with a sacred path into their centre. The patient then follows this path and sits down in the centre of the painting surrounded by the mountains. Sand is then taken from each of the Four

Mountains and placed on the patients body, while a mix of resin and feathers are sprinkled over the fire coals which are then extinguished. The sand painting is then dispersed and the singers leave the hogan.

#### THE DAY OF THE SOUTH

This is the second of the four days of purification which remove the anti-beauty from the patient. It begins at dawn with the patient entering the hogan wearing knotted garlands of

after which another sweatlodge is undertaken by the patient in a newly built sweatlodge to the South of the hogan. In the afternoon 52 offering bundles are prepared for use the next day.

#### THE DAY OF THE WEST

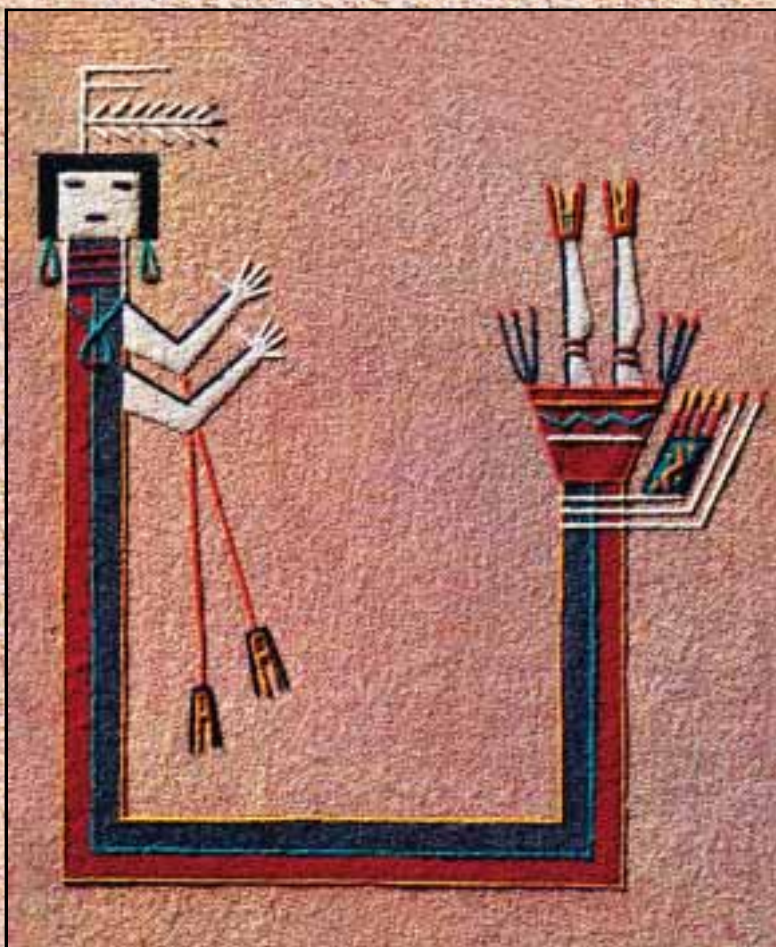
This day begins at nightfall of the second day. The singers and helpers all gather and the 52 offerings made in the afternoon are burnt in the hogan fire while singers sing. At dawn the patient is given more offerings to hold while songs are sung to the Yei asking them to help in the healing. A third sweatlodge is undertaken by the patient, which is freshly built to the West of the hogan. In the afternoon the patient is ritually washed and rubbed with commel.

#### THE DAY OF THE NORTH

The day begins at the dusk of the third (West) day with Yei dancers planting a sapling in the earth floor of the hogan, and bending it towards the patient. They tie it to a mask the patient is wearing on their face, and as the dancers let go of the sapling, it flies back, pulling the mask from their face. This mask represents the anti-beauty.

Other masks of power are placed on the floor at the patient's feet and they scatter pollen from small bags upon them to bless them. The bags of pollen are then passed around the people gathered so that they can eat a small amount of the sacred pollen and be blessed too. Women then enter the hogan with dishes of ritual food with which the masks are fed.

At midnight the Chanter picks up each mask in turn and shakes it awake while singing a waking song. The rest of the night is devoted to singing healing songs.



spruce which symbolise the bonds of their dis-ease. Dancers representing the twin war Yei come into the hogan and move sunwise around the patient cutting loose the spruce while singers sing specific songs once again. After this is done the Chanter takes a grass broom and sweeps the anti-beauty through the smoke hole in the hogan's roof. The spruce is then burnt on the fire

The Chanter now prepares bundles which act as shrines to two more Yei,

This continues until a crier sitting outside the hogan announces the first light of dawn. A last sweatlodge is built to the North of the hogan and thunder songs are sung while the patient sweats.

#### THE FIFTH DAY

Shortly after nightfall, a basket is turned upside down on the floor of the hogan and beaten like a drum to accompany songs. Masked dancers then enter accompanied by children. The children are covered with cornmeal and beaten (if a boy) with a blade of the yucca plant or massaged (if a girl) with an ear of corn. The masked dancers now take off their masks and the children put them on symbolising the continuance of tradition.

The basket is now turned the right way up and coloured pigments are brought in to prepare the first great sand painting 'The Picture of the Whirling logs.'

When the picture is completed, the Yei in the picture are fed and awakened by sprinkling a little cornmeal on them and putting a cup of water between the hands of the main Yei in the picture.

Now a dancer steps into the painting, picks up the cup, offers it to each of the Yei in the painting and then gives it to the patient to drink. Sand taken from various places

on the bodies of the Yei in the painting is taken to the patient and applied to their body at the corresponding place on their body. All the while this is happening songs are sung. Once this is completed the sand painting is dispersed.

#### THE SIXTH DAY

The basket used the day before is again turned upside down and beaten like a drum, while songs are sung to capture any anti-beauty in the hogan. This is

pinned under the basket and once the songs have been sung it is swept out of the hogan by the Chanter.

The painting of the second great sand painting, 'The Ribbon-like Rainbow' is now undertaken and once it has been completed, sand is taken from it and applied to the patient's body like before.

#### THE SEVENTH DAY

This day is very much like the preceding two; beginning with the

forbidden by the Yei, so other ceremonies are performed instead.

During the four days of healing the patient is empowered with beauty. This power is able to maintain a healthy relationship with the patient as the destructive power of the anti-beauty has been removed in the four days of purification.

The return to normal life occurs during the ninth evening when a great masked event unfolds in which human and dancers acting as the masked Yei join together.

People gather outside where bonfires are lit to keep them warm. The patient, the dancers and the Chanter come out of the hogan and the Yei begin a grand dance. This assembly of Spirit Powers bestow their blessing and beauty onto the patient and to all those who watch. As dawn breaks the dance ends. The patient then takes a further four days to gradually return to the everyday world, often greatly improved or completely cured of their illness.



PHOTOS:  
Page 24 : The Emergence Sand Painting.  
Page 25 : A Hogan in the landscape of the Diné reservation.  
Page 26 : Detail of Yei in a sand painting.  
Page 27 : a boy sits within a sandpainting during a Night Way Chant receiving healing while the Chanter sings and shakes a rattle.

basket being upturned and leading onto the construction of a large sand painting; the patient again being led to the painting and blessed with the sand.

#### THE EIGHTH DAY

There are several Chant Ways which last nine evenings (eight days) in the Diné traditions. In some Chants the last day has it's a fourth painting, but in others the last painting is said to be