

Navajo Ceremonial Basket Interpretations

Interpretation 1

The Navajo Ceremonial Basket also called Navajo Wedding basket is viewed as a map through which the Navajo chart their lives. The central spot in the basket represents the sipapu, where the Navajo people emerged from the prior world through a reed. The inner coils of the basket are white to represent birth. As you travel outward on the coils you begin to encounter more and more black. The black represents darkness, struggle and pain. As you make your way through the darkness you eventually reach the red bands, which represent marriage; the mixing of your blood with your spouse and creation of family. The red is pure. During this time there is no darkness. Traveling out of familial bands you encounter more darkness, however, the darkness is interspersed with white light. The light represents increasing enlightenment, which expands until you enter the all white banding of the outer rim. This banding represents the spirit world, where there is no darkness. The line from the center of the basket to the outer rim is there to remind you that no matter how much darkness you encounter in your world, there is always a pathway to the light. This pathway during ceremonies is always pointed east. The last coil on the basket rim is finished off at this pathway to allow the medicine man to easily locate it in darkness. Additionally the Navajo Ceremonial Basket serves another purpose. In none of the ancient Navajo rites is a regular drum or tom-tom employed. The inverted basket serves the purpose.



Interpretation 2



The step designs are clouds or mountains, the red ring in the can be described as a rainbow, and the center represents the beginning of life. The main feature of any wedding basket design is the pathway, adopted from the Navajo creation story.

Interpretation 3

The edge of the basket, a lighter color, represents the brightening skies as dawn approaches. The center design features four points to represent the Navajo's four sacred mountains, and the opening into the center (which Navajos believe should never be pointed downward) signifies an outlet for our thoughts. The bright red weave is the hallmark of sunshine, and is a blessing for Navajo health and spirituality. Black is for darkness, and a time to restore our bodies and minds. The lacing of the weave around the basket's edge represent our roots and human life. And the very center of the basket is representative of the emergence of he Diné, the opening for the First Holy One to come into the First World.



Interpretation 4



The Navajo wedding basket also reflects many values of traditional life and so often contains all six sacred mountains, including Huerfano and Gobernador Knob, though the size of the basket may determine the number of mountains in the design. The center spot in the basket represents the beginning of this world, where the Navajo people emerged from a reed. This is where the spirit of the basket

lives. The white part around the center is the earth, the black symbolizing the sacred mountains upon which are found water bowls. Above them are clouds of different colors. The white and black ones represent the making of rain. A red section next to the mountains stands for the sun's rays that make things grow. (Sacred Land Sacred View, Robert McPherson (1992)).

A word might be said regarding the symbolism attached to the design of Navajo wedding trays, for it is one of the few southwestern basketry decorations which probably has meaning. One very simple interpretation is that the inner black steps represent the underworld; the red band is the earth and life; and the outer black steps stand for the upper world. Fishler recites the following interpretation which he obtained from one of his Navajo

informants. The center spot (often a tiny opening) in the basket "represents the beginning of this earth as the Navajo merged from the cane"; the white around this is the earth. Stepped black designs represent the mountains, boundaries of Navajo lands; water bags and rainbows are draped on the mountains, clouds also rise from thm.



All the white in the basket represents dawn, all red the sun's rays, and all black the clouds, said the informant. Fishler adds much symbolism relative to numbers of coils; he then tells how Navajo legend relates that this wedding basket design was given to this tribe by White Shell Woman, and Thunder taught them to weave the water jar and carrying basket. The braided rim is explained by the Navajo in terms of this legend: A Navajo woman was weaving under a juniper tree, trying to think of finishing the rim in some manner different from that of the regular stitch. A god tore a small sprig from the tree and tossed it into her basket. Immediately she thought of the braided rim. (Indian Baskets of the Southwest Clara Lee Tanner (1983)).



The basket is viewed as a map, through which the Navajo people chart their lives. The central spot in the basket represents the sipapu, where the Navajo people emerged from the prior world through a reed. As the people emerged, all was white. The inner coils of the basket are white to represent this lightness, or birth. As you travel outward on the coils you begin to encounter more and more black. The

black represents darkness, struggle and pain; the darker side of life. As you make your way through the darkness you eventually reach the red bands, which represent marriage; the mixing of your blood with your spouse and the creation of family. The red is pure. During this time there is no darkness. Traveling out of the familial bands you encounter more darkness, however, the darkness is interspersed with white light. The light represents increasing enlightenment, which expands until you enter the all white banding of the outer rim. This banding represents the spirit world, where there is no darkness. The line from the center of the basket to the outer rim is there to remind you that no matter how much darkness you encounter in your world, there is always a pathway to the light. (As told to Steven P. Simpson by an informant, 1993).

Interpretation 5

The ancient design of the basket is full of imagery that deepens its beauty and holds within it the creation story of the People. The center coil symbolizes creation from which all things are birthed. The outward spiral of the design emulates our journey into wisdom. The starburst represents the union of generations past and present. Every basket has a Gate, which is called the "Sipapu," a path from the center for Spirit to come and go. Guardians are woven into the outer ring to stand in protection of the gate. In addition to being the vessel for the wedding cake, the marriage basket is a powerful healing tool used in the Navajo healing ceremonies known as "Sings."



The Marriage Basket also represents the womb from which all things are birthed. The birthing process refers to and includes for example; physical children, a wedding (the birthing of a relationship) as well as our spiritual children; our dreams and visions into actualization. It holds within its structure the balance of the feminine and masculine energy- both energies in proper alignment with which we create new life.

Interpretation 6

The design and sequence of the making of the basket -- spiralling outward from the center place, recounts the stories of creation and emergence into this fourth world, by the ancestors of the Navajo. It also visually reinforces the Navajo concept of the world as a place of beauty and harmony, when all things are balanced.



Hard to see in the image, the perimeter border is always carefully braided in an x-stitch which signifies all human life. The significance is further explained as humans are the recipients of all of the blessings of life and beauty, gifts from the Holy people.

Interpretation 7

The center spot in the basket represents the beginning of this earth as the Navajo emerged from the cane. The white portion surrounding the center spot is the earth. The black represents the six or ten sacred mountains to the Navajo and forms a boundary-line of the early Navajo people...Only six mountains are represented in some of the baskets, for that is the number of



mountains brought up from below during the flood...Above the represented earth are clouds which have many colors represented within them, as do real clouds above the earth...The white and black clouds are important. They represent the same thing – the making of rain. The rain represented in the basket is to bring comfort to the earth – to make plants and all things grow...Next to the mountains is a

red or brown section which represents the sun-rays. It also means the rainbow spectrum upon which the gods travel. The sun-ray is to make things on the earth grown and to make things go the right way. This sun-ray in the basket is to bring comfort to the earth, to make plants and all things grow and to keep the earth and the people warm. The number of the clouds has no significance. The finish point of the basket always goes to the east .

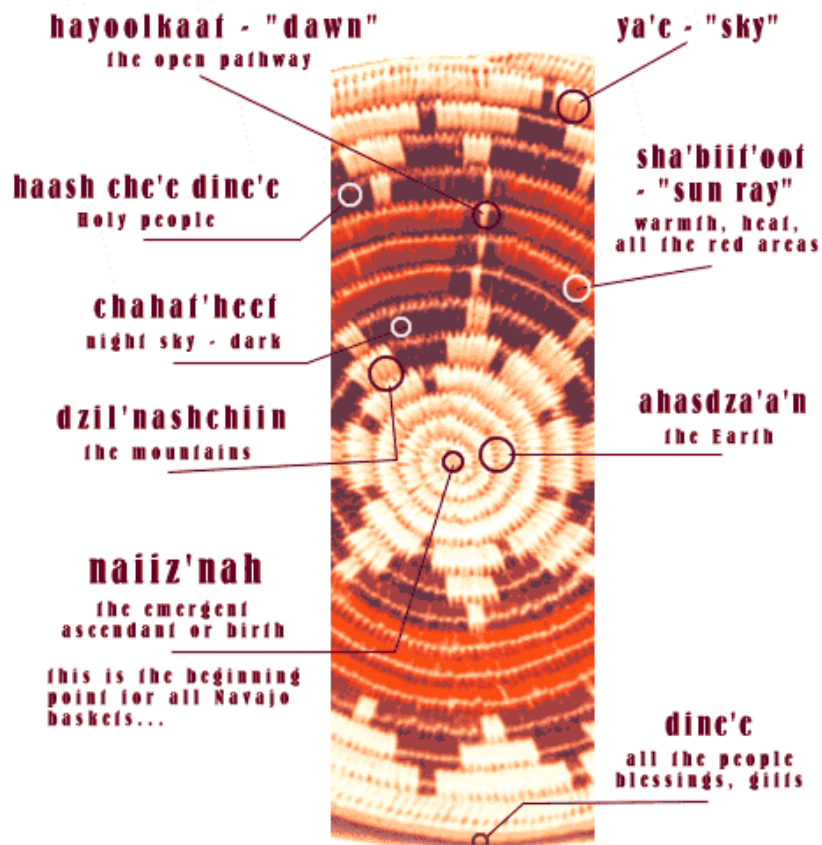
Interpretation 8

The designs on the basket are a visual record of Navajo history from the emergence through every phase of life in this world. They record the critical events in the construction of every aspect of the Navajo universe and in the Navajo history. As a visual record of the “natural order” of the Navajo cosmos, the designs on baskets serve as mnemonic devices by which life can be ordered.



Interpretation 9

It is a representation of your life. The beginning is like the whorl at the top of a baby's head. The beginning white portion is how you are as you are starting to grow. The first black designs represent your brothers and sisters. The red is a representation of you getting married. The black above that are your children and if there is red above that, your grandchildren. As it goes back to the white, it represents how you are growing old and how you are reaching full circle in your life.



Interpretation 10

A pathway leads from the center of the basket to the edge. This is "the way out," or the doorway of the basket, also called the "ceremonial break." It represents the emergence of the people and the birth canal of Changing Woman, a Navajo female deity. Many weavers believe in the importance of including a pathway in each basket. Some weavers believe, in accordance with Navajo tradition, that creating a pathway allows their creativity to continue beyond the basket and allows healing to occur when used in a ceremony. The pathway is aligned to the East during a ceremony. Weavers believe that if they do not include a pathway, their minds will be shut and they will no longer be able to create.



Interpretation 11

Concepts that anchor a Navajo person throughout the day and provide meaningful guidance.

A diagram illustrating four Navajo concepts that anchor a person throughout the day. At the center is a circular woven basket with a central pathway, labeled "Sodizim Sip". Surrounding the basket are four quadrants, each representing a concept with a quote and a small icon of a mountain range.

- Top Left:** Icon of black mountains. Quote: "With strong self-confidence I have hope for a better tomorrow." Concept: **Sih Hwiinzin**. Name: Dibé Nitsaa.
- Top Right:** Icon of white mountains. Quote: "My beautiful creative Thoughts give me direction." Concept: **Ntsáhákees**. Name: Sismaajini.
- Bottom Left:** Icon of yellow mountains. Quote: "Implementing my thoughts and planning allows me to live Hózhóogo Iiná." Concept: **Iiná**. Name: Dook'o'oosifid.
- Bottom Right:** Icon of blue mountains. Quote: "My beautiful Planning from beginning to the end makes my Dreams come true." Concept: **Nabat'á**. Name: Tsoodzil.

Clayton Long's handout.