

# Medicinemen unite to protect their heritage

Over thirty years ago at White Cone, a Navajo boy named Miller Nez was witnessing and assisting in the Navajo ceremonies being performed by his father.

During the following years, the boy grew to learn the prayers, songs, herbs, and the ritual procedures of a traditional ceremony. Later, as a young man, he became a medicineman and earned the right to perform a Navajo ceremony himself.

Several years later, the Army's review board in Denver, Colorado, held hearings to learn why many Navajo soldiers were taking longer leaves than they had been authorized to take.

Miller Nez, man who is now the community liaison officer for DNA in Window Rock in addition to being a medicineman, testified before several review boards to help Navajo soldiers explain the value of Navajo ceremonies and the importance of these ceremonies to Navajo culture.

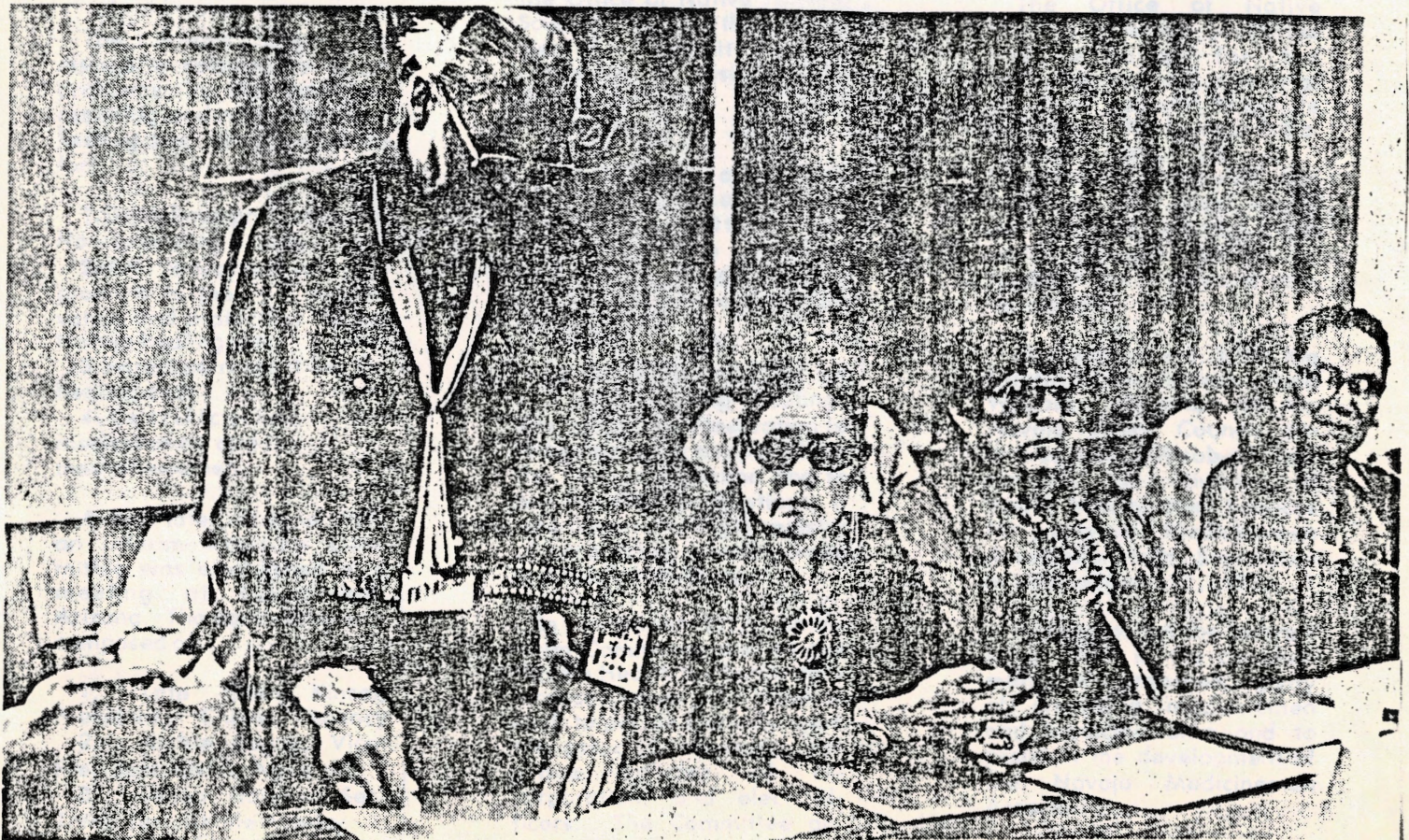
During 1975, Navajos reported several incidents of medicinemen's Jish (medicine bags) being destroyed and buried. There were also reports that Navajo ceremonies were being abused in various ways.

Reflecting on his experience with the Army review board and on the disrespect some people were

showing Navajo religion, Miller Nez wondered if an association could be formed to represent the medicinemen and to protect sacred paraphernalia and rituals.

He wondered, "How do we organize such an association, so that cultural significance of Navajo religion may be understood and recognized by Navajo individuals and groups, as well as by non-Navajos."

Although somewhat reluctant, he began to talk with a few medicinemen and medicine women within the White Cone Community about the need for a recognized Association. He thought that



**MEDICINEMEN ORGANIZE**--Members of the Navajo Medicinemen Association discuss ways to preserve Navajo culture at a recent meeting. From left are Ashee Begay of Tolani Lake, Faye Tso of Tuba City, and Roger Hatat'li of Mexican Hat.



medicine men could be certified and licensed like western medical doctors.

These discussions with individuals soon grew into group discussions. Chapter meetings were held across the reservation. Nearly everyone agreed Nez's idea was a good one. A number of names for the proposed association were advanced, including "Board of Practitioners," "Native Healing Committee," and "Navajo Practitioners."

On August, 1976, at a meeting in Chinle Arizona, the medicinemen and other participants were reminded of the problems facing the Navajo healing arts. The following concerns were discussed at the meetings.

- 1.Reduced numbers of Navajo medicinemen and medicinewomen.
- 2.Decline of Navajo healing arts.
- 3.Loss of respect for Navajo healing arts.
- 4.Abuse of Navajo Healing Arts paraphernalia.

The groups began to discuss a solution to these problems in the hope of restoring and renewing their healing arts. They saw needs for:

- 1.Guidelines protecting the Navajo healing arts.
- 2.An organization to promote to the preservation and protection of the Navajo healing arts;
- 3.Increased respect for the healing arts;
- 4.Certification of medicinemen and medicinewomen.

A year later, in June 1977, an Interim Advisory Committee was established at a meeting at Lukachukai, Arizona. The committee was composed of:

1. Late Henry Kinsel, President, Chinle Agency
2. Archie Begay, Vice-President, Chinle Agency
3. Allen Harvey, Sec-Treasurer, Chinle Agency.
4. Morris Chee, Ft. Defiance Agency

5. Clyde Chee, Ft. Defiance Agency
6. Jack Stanley, Tuba City Agency
7. Ashee Begay, Tuba City Agency
8. John Bee, Shiprock Agency
9. Frank Bluehorse, Shiprock Agency
10. Baheshone Begay, Tuba City Agency
11. Francis D. Tsosie, Chinle Agency
12. Edward Harvey, Chinle Agency
13. Jim Charley, Crownpoint Agency
14. Raymond Arviso, Crownpoint Agency.
15. William Dennison, Crownpoint Agency

In August, 1977, the Interim Advisory Committee met at Navajo Community College and passed a resolution requesting the establishment of a formal organization to be known as the "Navajo Native Healing Practitioners."

Mr. Jack C. Jackson and Mr. Lloyd F. Thompson from the Office of Native Healing Sciences, within the Navajo Health Authority, were requested to assist in the development of this Association.

The Office of Native Healing Sciences began meeting with the Association. The committee immediately began drafting the Articles of Incorporation and By-Laws.

At the same time, the office began having meetings throughout the reservation to tell community people about the new organization and to ask for their suggestions. It also began making a registry of practicing medicinemen and medicinewomen.

In November, 1977, the Interim Committee met in the Navajo Health Authority conference room at Window Rock to decide formally upon the association's name, approve articles of incorporation, and elect officers. The Committee approved the name, "Dine Be'Azee lil'iini Yee Ahota." Elected as officers were:

1. Miller Nez, President, Ft. Defiance Agency
2. Hoskie Tom Becenti, Vice-President, Crownpoint Agency
3. Fred Stevens, Jr., Secretary, Chinle Agency
4. Mike Mitchell, Treasurer, Chinle Agency

Elected as agency representatives were:

5. Ashee Begay, Tuba City Agency
6. Faye Tso, Tuba City Agency
7. Don Atene, Tuba City Agency
8. Francis D. Tsosie, Chinle Agency
9. Tom Watson, Sr., Ft. Defiance Agency
10. Frank Bluehorse, Shiprock Agency
11. John Bee, Shiprock Agency
12. Roger Hatathli, Shiprock Agency
13. Jim Charley, Crownpoint Agency
14. Tony Trijillo, Crownpoint Agency

The Office of Native Healing Sciences presented the resolution for the establishment and charter of the Dine Be'Azee lil'iini Yee Ahota, to the Navajo Tribal Council in April, 1978. The council reviewed the resolution and asked that it be tabled, believing that some changes should be made in the articles of confederation.

On September 5, 1978, the Health, Alcoholism, and Welfare Committee of the Navajo Tribal Council approved a \$49,889 sub-contract through the Division of Health Improvement Services for Navajo Medicinemen Association from September 5, 1978 to March 31, 1979.

The purpose of the contract is to assist in the development of the proposed registry of practicing medicinemen and medicinewome and to assist in the development of the Navajo Medicinemen Association.



The Association plans to review and develop the mechanism for the improvement of the health care delivery system to the Navajo people through use of Native Healing Sciences.

Several years have passed since those first discussions initiated by Miller Nez, and the Navajo Nation Medicinemen Association has begun to increase its role in the community. The association is dedicated to the belief that Navajo healing ceremonies and practices are at the foundation of Navajo culture and should be preserved.

These ceremonies and practices also constitute an important health care system for approximately 75 percent of the Navajo people. Many Navajo people, young and old, rely on traditional healing ceremonies and practices for their health needs.

The Navajo Tribal Council established the Navajo Health Authority in 1972 and directed it to--among other duties--develop and promote the full utilization, preservation, education and practice of the Navajo healing sciences. In accordance with this direction from the Navajo Tribal Council, the Dine Be'Azee lil'iini' Yee'Ahota' (Navajo Medicinemen Association) has been developed.

The Dine Be'Azee lil'iini'Yee'ahota', sometimes called "the corporation", will work to preserve Navajo culture and meet the health needs of Navajo people.

A summary of the Association's accomplishments follows:

- a. Elected officers
- b. Elected Board of Directors
- c. Adopted By-Laws
- d. Adopted Articles of Incorporation
- e. Met with community people to acquaint them with the purpose of the Association
- f. Developed Association Seals and Certificates
- g. Developed and refined evaluation procedure for certification of members

h. Continue Registry of medicinemen and medicinewomen. A portion of Ft. Defiance Agency has been completed; and the Tuba City Agency will be started soon.

The surveys of Crownpoint, Shiprock, Chinle Agencies, and Ft. Defiance list a total of 1,001 Navajo medicinemen and medicinewomen.

**RECLAIMED JISH:** On October 28, 1978, the Navajo Medicinemen Association met with the Navajo Community College Board of Regents to request assistance in the protection of the Navajo Traditional Healing Paraphernalia.

The Board of Regents agreed to serve as a clearing house for reclaimed, unwanted or lost paraphernalia. They also agreed to supply the personnel to assist in the protection of reclaimed Jish, and to assist in the development of procedures for the collection and distribution of reclaimed Jish as requested by qualified practitioners.

Letters have been sent by the Association to museums throughout the United States requesting that they return all of the paraphernalia in their collections to the Navajo people.

**SAN FRANCISCO PEAKS:** The Navajo Medicinemen Association, along with other Tribal groups have submitted a Notice of Appeal through the Tuba City DNA Legal Services Office to the National Park Service.

The appellants are individual Native Americans, the Navajo Medicinemen Association, the Pueblo of Zuni, and the representatives of the Sacred Mountain Defense Fund, (a group that regards the entire San Francisco Peaks as being of special religious and cultural significance.)

Issues Include:

- a. First amendment of the constitution of the United States

b. American Indian Religious Freedom Act, PL 95-341

c. Federal Indian Trust responsibility

d. Endangered Species Act of 1973

e. National Environmental Policy Act

f. Multiple Use - Sustained Yield Act of 1960

A hearing on the appeal was scheduled for May 15, 1979 in Albuquerque, but a request by DNA Legal Services was made to hold the hearing on or near the Navajo Reservation. With this request, the meeting schedule for May 15, 1979, was postponed until further notice.

**PL 95-341- NATIVE AMERICAN RELIGIOUS FREEDOM ACT** The Navajo Medicinemen Association is represented on the National Advisory Committee on the implementation of the Public Law 95-341, the Native American Religious Freedom Act. Some of their concerns are:

1. Private land which contains native sacred sites and religious products;
2. Native religious objects presently used by American Indians;
3. Public lands, such as National Parks, U.S. Forestry, Bureau of Land Management, Fish and Wild Life, etc., which encompasses sacred sites or burial grounds sacred to American Indians;
4. Individuals who have been denied access to sacred sites;
5. Important native religious items currently held by museums.

**EX-OFFENDER PROGRAM:** The Navajo Medicinemen Association works in coordination with the National Indian Youth Council's Ex-Offender Program of Albuquerque;

The Gallup Inter-Agency Alcoholism Coordination Committee and the Office of Native Healing Sciences agreed to implement a "Pilot Project." The project was initiated in February, 1979. Monthly visits are being made to the penitentiary by members of the Association.



This project was initiated because throughout the United States, inmates of other nationalities have access to their religious practices while in the penitentiary.

The Indian people throughout the country have become concerned that the Indian inmates who still believe in their traditional native healing arts, do not have access to this spiritual guidance.

Under the Native American Religious Freedom Act, the Indian inmates have requested access to their Traditional Native Healing Practitioner for Council.

Several visits have been made to the New Mexico State Penitentiary by members of the Association, and by the staff of the Navajo Health Authority's Office of Native Healing Sciences. Some of what they discovered is as follows:

1. Currently, there are seventeen Navajo inmates who said they needed moral support from outside the walls.

2. The inmates asked for parole support from tribal officials, the Indian Health Service, Bureau of Indian Affairs, and other organizations. Parole includes assistance and commitment in providing half-way houses, psychological treatment, and job placement upon release.

3. They said legal and financial support is needed. Individual inmates and their families don't have the income to hire attorneys to either research or appeal their cases; and the inmates and their families are not experienced in dealing with an attorney. At one point or another, the attempts usually end with frustration and defeat.

4. They also requested:  
a. Copies of the Navajo Times  
b. Navajo and Native American History Books  
OTHER ACTIVITIES

The following organizations are coordinating their programs with the Navajo Medicinemen Association. The Association acts as an advisory committee and provides recommendations to these organizations. In three instances, members of the Association have been selected to be Board Members of other organizations:

1. The Office of Native Healing Sciences  
Navajo Health Authority  
P.O. Box 643  
Window Rock, Arizona  
86515

2. Ethnobotany Project  
Navajo Health Authority  
P.O. Box 643  
Window Rock, Arizona  
86515

3. Navajo Ethno-Medical Encyclopedia Project  
P.O. Box 1524  
Kayenta, Arizona 86033

4. Toyei Opportunity Ctr and Sheltered Industry The Navajo Nation  
Ganado, Arizona 86505

5. Navajo Area Indian Health Board  
Crownpoint Agency  
Crownpoint, New Mexico  
87313

#### PROPOSED NAVAJO TRADITIONAL INSURANCE PLAN:

The association has met with Bill Gold and Associates on several occasions to discuss the possibility of developing a Navajo Traditional Insurance Plan. Gold and Associates is attempting to provide such a plan.

#### A VOICE OF THE FUTURE:

In the course of the Association development, chapter people, young and old, expressed much concern for the need of such an Association.

Their concerns and recommendations are expressed in the articles of incorporation and by-laws. Many Navajo people feel that the time is now for cultural awareness is now. The Navajo Medicinemen Association

will be a significant step towards cultural awareness and maintenance.

Today, like thirty years ago, somewhere on the Navajo Reservation a young

Navajo child is now witnessing and assisting his father in a Navajo ceremony that has been handed down for generations.

His generation may see the reality of the intergration of Western and Traditional medicine; the importance of traditional ceremonies in bilingual education, the importance of herbs in today's medicine, the importance of traditional ceremonies for curing illnesses, and the importance of traditional ceremonies in ensuring that a culture has a future.

In summary, the Blessing Way Ceremony is the backbone of all Navajo Traditional Ceremonies. The voice of the Navajo medicineme is the foundation of our Navajo culture."