

# Navajo Ceremonials

Navajos possess a very complex system of ceremonials. Father Berard Haile, in his studies of these ceremonials, distinguished between *rites* (in which a rattle is not used) and *chants* (in which a rattle is used as an accompaniment to the singing). It seems that this is not an absolute criterion on which to make this separation, but the distinction between those he placed in each category is quite clear to the [Diné](#)

Based on this classification system, there are two major *rites*: the [Blessingway](#) [Hózhóǫ́jí] and the Enemyway ['Anaa'jí], which have a different focus than the chants. The [Blessingway](#) [Hózhóǫ́jí] is used frequently by the Navajo [Diné](#), often for no reason other than that they have not had one recently. It is, as the name implies, a blessing ceremony and is used to ensure good luck and prosperity. The Enemyway ['Anaa'jí] is used to exorcise the ghosts of aliens, violence and ugliness and is derived from old ceremonials used to protect warriors from the ghosts of those they had killed.

The chantways focus on curing and can be performed according to one of three rituals: Holyway, Evilway [Hóchǫ́'íjí] or Lifeway ['Ináájí]. The Holyway rituals act to restore health to the "one sung over" by attracting good. The Evilway [Hóchǫ́'íjí] chants exorcise evil and the Lifeway ['Ináájí] chants are used to treat injuries caused by accidents. Sandpainting ['iikááh] ceremonies are a part of all Holyway ceremonies and most Evilway [Hóchǫ́'íjí] ceremonies. They are not used in the Lifeway ['Ináájí] ceremonies. However, it must be noted that many of the songs used in the chantways occur in the [Blessingway](#) [Hózhóǫ́jí] ceremony and, in fact, originated there. The [Blessingway](#) [Hózhóǫ́jí] is the backbone of the songs in the entire Navajo ceremonial structure. Every chantway ends with the chanter setting down his rattle and singing at least one song from the [Blessingway](#) to "justify the chant, insure its effectiveness, correct inadvertant omission of essential song and prayer words, correct errors in [sandpaintings](#) ['iikááh] and in cutting and coloring prayer sticks or "just for safety's sake!" Some chants use many songs from the [Blessingway](#) [Hózhóǫ́jí] while others only close with [the twelve word Blessingway song](#).

It was estimated by Wyman that there were once 24 [naadiin dǫ́] chantway complexes, of which only 11 [h'a'ts'áadah] are performed now and only seven [tsosts'id] are frequently performed (Shootingway [Na'at'oliijí], Flintway [Béeshee], Mountainway [Dziłláhahí], Nightway [T'í'éé'jí], Navajo Windway [Diné biniłch'íjí], Chiricahua Windway [Níłch'ih'áłts'íísíjí], and Hand Tremblingway). These chants are groups based upon associations in the connected origin legends, symbolism, ritual equipment and procedural similarities. Each chant has its own origin legend that describes how the [Holy People](#) [dighin diné] gave the ceremonial to the Earth Surface People.

Each of these ceremonies is composed of multiple discrete units (or ceremonies) which can be kept or deleted as a function of the particular circumstances of the individual patient. Each of these units is isolated from the rest of the units of the chant by a pause in the activities, both at the beginning and at the end. There are some units that are required and which will appear in every performance of a given chant. The following table, taken from Griffin-Pierce, summarizes the combinations of individual ceremonies generally found in Holyway chants of different lengths.

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### Ceremonies of Holyway Chants

	Two- Night	Five- Night	Nine- night	Time of Day
Consecrating the hooghan	1	1	1	Sundown
Unraveling	1	1 2 3 4	1 2 3 4	Early evening
Short Singing	1	1 2 3 4	5 6 7 8	Evening
Setting out of prayer sticks	1	1 2 3 4	5 6 7 8	Before dawn
Sweat and emetic	-	1 2 3 4	1 2 3 4	Dawn
Offering	1	1 2 3 4	1 2 3 4	Early forenoon
Bath	1	4	8	Forenoon
Sandpainting	1	1 2 3 4	5 6 7 8	Afternoon
Figure painting and token tying	1	4	8	During the Sandpainting
All-night singing	2	5	9	Late evening onward
Dawn procedures	2	5	9	Dawn

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*Note:* The numerals indicate the days on which the ceremonies occur, with days reckoning from sundown to sundown. This is only a partial listing of the possible ceremonies.

The Holyway ceremonials are divided into two main sections: purification and the dispelling of evil (or ugliness) and the attraction of good. Both types of ceremonies are listed in the Table above. The consecration of the [hooghan](#) involves both blessing, through singing, praying, pollen sprinkling and purification, both to purify the [hooghan](#) and to attract good powers. Sandpaintings [‘iikááh] both attract good and dispel evil.

There are different numbers of [sandpaintings](#) ['iikááh] associated with each chant and the entire repertoire belonging to a given chant is never used in a single performance of the chant. The [sandpaintings](#) ['iikááh] to be used on a given occasion are those deemed to be particularly suitable for the "one sung over."

An analysis of the Nightway [Tʰéé'jí], a Holyway ceremonial, has been made by John Bierhorst by breaking down the entire nine night ceremony into those parts designed more to attract holiness (marked with a +, and those more designed to repulse evil (marked with a -). He sees the structure of the ceremonial as a balance in the groupings of these parts, as shown below, with the entire Nightway Ceremonial being, on the whole, an "attractive" ceremony.

## **+ The Night Chant**

### **- Part I / The Purification**

First Day / Day of the East

Consecration of the Lodge [\*]

- First rite of exorcism (the breath of life)
- + First morning prayer ritual
- First sweat bath
- + The sacred mountains

Second Day / Day of the South

- Second rite of exorcism (the evergreen dress)
- + Second morning prayer ritual
- Second sweat bath

(+) Preparation of the many kethawns (offerings)

Third Day / Day of the West

- Third rite of exorcism (the many kethawns)
- + Third morning prayer ritual
- Third sweat bath
- + Amole bath

Fourth Day / Day of the North

- Fourth rite of exorcism (the sapling and the mask)  
The vigil[\*] (an all night "sing" basically taken from the Blessingway)
- + Fourth morning prayer ritual
- Fourth sweat bath
- + The trembling place

## + Part II / The Healing

### Fifth Day

- Songs of exorcism, first session
- + First great sandpainting

### Sixth Day

- Songs of exorcism, second session
- + Second great sandpainting

### Seventh Day

- Songs of exorcism, third session
- + Third great sandpainting

### Eighth Day

- Songs of exorcism, fourth session
- + Fourth great sandpainting

## Part III / The Reprise

### Ninth Day

- Dance of the Atsálei (Thunderbirds)
- Dance of the Naakhaí

It is on the ninth night, in the dance of the Atsálei (Thunderbirds), that [the famous song, known as the House made of Dawn](#), occurs. This represents the culmination of the rite, the healing of the "one sung over." At the end of this ninth night, the "one sung over" inhales the "breath of dawn" and must certainly be cured!

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This page has its sources in *Earth is My Mother, Sky is my Father, Space, Time, and Astronomy in Navajo Sandpainting* by Trudy Griffin-Pierce, © 1992 [Trudy Griffin-Pierce](#), University of New Mexico Press, *Four Masterworks of American Indian Literature* edited by John Bierhorst © 1974 [John Bierhorst](#), University of Arizona Press, and *Blessingway* by Leland Wyman, © 1970 [Leland Wyman](#), University of Arizona Press.

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