

**Meeting Agenda**  
**Institutional Review Board, Dinè College**

Wed., May 11, 2022, 2:00 pm

[ZOOM MEETING LINK](#) Passcode: DCIRB Meeting ID: 988 2585 9912 Dial-in: 1 346 248 7799

1. Check-in
2. Updates
  - a. Form updates: Suzanne will work on these over the summer for your approval
  - b. Data repository and policy clarification: To be completed during summer
  - c. Time for IRB meeting 2022-23: Fridays at 9:00 am?
  - d. CITI training certificates needed from Roger Benally, Thomas Bennett, Frank Morgan, James Tutt  
*If you need to update your certification, it can be done for free through the website linked below. Click on "Register" in the upper right corner, and enter "Northern Arizona University" in the first text field under "Select your organization affiliation."*  
[LINK TO CITI TRAINING](#)
3. New Business:
  - a. Protocol 220209 – K Honani: Review and accept the updated report
  - b. Celebrate! Watch the video for K Honani's presentation
4. Other

“Keep Me Alive, Keep My Children Alive.”

“Keep Me Alive, Keep My Children Alive”:

Resilience of Diné Ceremonial Practices Amid Covid-19<sup>1</sup>

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Diné College

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<sup>1</sup> This article is not intended for public distribution at this time. It is intended to be demonstrated to the Diné College IRB upon the successful completion of Protocol #DCIRB 220209. This article's next stage will be a manuscript draft and sent to publishing. At that time, acknowledgement of the Diné College IRB process will be clearly stated and a final copy will be delivered to the Diné College IRB committee for public dissemination and repository storage.

### Abstract

This mix method Indigenous research investigates how the COVID-19 pandemic impacted Diné (Navajo) ceremonial practices and wholistic well being. The methodology stems from the Diné Paradigm of *Sa'ah Naghai Bik'eh Hozhoon* which is associated with Diné ceremonies, prayers, songs and ways of life. Following this framework, qualitative and quantitative stories were collected through surveys and talking circles from Diné College students, staff, and faculty to understand (1) impact on attendance to group ceremonial activities; (2) impact of change of attendance to ceremonial settings on wholistic well-being as defined by Calvin White (Diné); and (3) self-accountability to continue to practice prayers, songs, and ceremony in isolation despite the pandemic. Survey results showed a deficit in ceremonial attendance and various areas of their wholistic wellbeing (physical, emotional, mental, spiritual). The Talking circle stories exhibited a profound setting to analyze the impacts the pandemic had on ceremonial practices and reveal themes of lament, impact on individual, family, and community well-being, and resilience of individuals who practiced their ways of knowing in isolation.

Keywords: Navajo Nation, COVID-19, Wholistic Well-being, Ceremonial Practices

### **Resilience of Diné Ceremonial Practices Amid Covid-19**

It was the Friday before the start of the 2020 Spring Break and I was frantically finishing up my last midterm. I was running on a tight schedule. After my exam, I had to pack up my dorm room in Tsaille, head west to Teesto to drop off my belongings at my house and then head back east in time for the start of a peyote ceremony in Navajo, New Mexico. Once in Teesto, I put on my moccasins and hurried out the door as my companion was waiting for me in the car. He drove and I napped, exhausted from midterm week. We arrived to *shima yazhi*'s homestead and made our way into the teepee, situating ourselves on the ground that we would keep warm for the rest of the night. Little did we know what the next couple of weeks would hold for us, the Navajo Nation, and the rest of the world. The COVID-19 pandemic was knocking on our hogan door that night and we prayed for ourselves and everyone else. During that meeting, I would have never thought how much *Dikos Ntsaaígíí-19* would affect my people; how such a sickness would limit my ability to be around my relatives; how it would cease my attendance to ceremonies; and how the lack of ceremonial gathering would affect me on mental, emotional, physical, and spiritual levels.

At the time of the onset of COVID-19, I was enrolled in Diné College's NAS13: Indigenous Research Methods and I took that opportunity to build a project that could help me study the impact of COVID-19 on our Navajo community, reflect upon the sacrifices of community ceremonial gatherings, and study the incentives of taking personal accountability in our own ceremonial practices in isolation. My questions in that mock project lingered over the next year until finally, in Spring 2022, two years after the onset of COVID-19, I decided to take that class project and put it into action as part of the NAS498: Undergraduate Indigenous Research course. I worked with Dr. Christine Ami in an independent study class to help start to

make sense of what I felt - isolation and loss. Was I alone? Was there a resilient lesson to be learned from all this?

The following stories gathered through participant observation, surveys, and talking circles reveal how the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted Diné ceremonial practices and Diné wholistic well-being through Indigenous and Diné research methodologies and methods. Focusing on traditional and peyote ceremonies, I collaborated with Diné College community members to understand (1) if and why their attendance at ceremonial practices were shifted as a result of COVID-19 and (2) how the pandemic may have negatively and/or positively impacted their emotional, mental, physical, and spiritual well-being as it relates to their attendance to ceremonies during the pandemic. As studies are just now beginning to emerge on the long-term impacts of COVID-19 within the Navajo Nation, one area that necessitates attention is how this illness has affected our ceremonial being. This pandemic has resulted in much trauma to our Diné people as we lost hundreds of our relatives, including traditional knowledge holders.

More poignantly, as this work moves beyond deficit research to reveal stories of those who persevered with ceremonial practices, even in isolation, practicing what they could, when they could to maintain their wholistic well-being and to keep their children, community, and culture alive. Through this process, I learned that our community is much more resilient than I had previously thought; that I am resilient too, reaffirming faith in *Diyin Diné'é* (holy people), *nihimá azee* (our mother medicine), and *sodizin* (prayers) grew stronger. Here are these stories.

### **Previous Research**

Through the methodology, data collection and findings of these articles it has become transparent that the COVID-19 pandemic has had a huge impact on many people's lives throughout the

world. Various factors that were due to the pandemic contributed to the decline in mental health, wellbeing, and over all lifestyles. However, it also became known that to know the importance of our mental health, wellbeing, how we can take care of ourselves, manage our stress, and coping strategies during a pandemic. Although most of the articles could not relate to my research topic in regard to how the pandemic impacted Diné ceremonial practices and wholistic wellbeing, it gives my research that much more reason to be conducted, as our situation as a Diné community who still engage in ceremonial practices and how COVID-19 impacted those practices and our wholistic wellbeing is unique.

In previous research, there were several articles that had the commonality of investigating and understanding how the COVID-19 pandemic may have impacted people's stress, anxiety, depression and other impacts on their mental health. The research by Ivbijaro et. al (2020) focused on the psychological impacts and consequences of the pandemic, in other studies by Orgiles et al.(2020) and Khademian et al.(2021), also had similar focuses as both researches investigated the anxiety and depressive symptoms caused by the pandemic and isolation. In another study by Park et al. (2021), the scope shifted a little as it shined light on how the COVID restrictions had an impact on lifestyle changes. Each of these studies had used quantitative surveys to collect their data. These researchers supported my hypothesis as the research purpose as they aim to investigate how COVID-19 impacted parts of their wellbeing.

In other research highlighted the importance of healing an coping strategies during the pandemic were those of Wichmann, S. (2011), who focuses on the importance of wellbeing and Garbozy et, al.(2021), studies coping strategies for stress and anxiety as related to COVID-19. Other investigations along the same line but were more resilient focused were researches of Tuason, T, Guss, D., and Boyd,L. (2021), their research highlighted how resourcefulness and

adaptiveness can help in coping strategies and psychological wellbeing during uncertain times. Kim et. al.'s (2021) research highlighted how the pandemic may have changed lives for the better depending on how they spent their time in isolation of the pandemic. These studies brought upon the idea of despite the negative impacts of the pandemic, resilience factors are also an important focus to highlight so that we can do something to counteract the negative impacts which is what my research includes as well.

Lastly, a study done by Butler, S and Cohen, A., (2010) had conducted an ethnographic method approach to their research, which brought qualitative data. This research was about how living in rural areas were beneficial to aging adults. While research by Lucana, S., and Elfers, J. (2020), had brought upon the concept of indigenous healing and therapeutic practices. This research aimed to find relevancy between indigenous and western practices. Both of these articles brought perspective as to how life may have been for those residing on the reservation during the pandemic, and how we as indigenous people perceive our traditional ways of knowing and have our own source of healing.

## **Methodology and Methods**

### **Methodology**

Indigenous Research Methodologies, and more specifically the Diné paradigm of *Sa'ah Naghai Bik'eh Hozhoon*, framed my research. Indigenous research highlights and embraces our own Indigenous ways of knowing, methods and methodology that have been previously subverted by Western academic research (Kovach, 2010, Wilson, 2008). As an Indigenous (Diné/Hopi) researcher, in addition to using this way of understanding the world from Diné specific research lenses, I placed reciprocal relationship building with my collaborators who engaged with my

surveys and talking circle at the forefront, even above collecting data. In the process, I also built a relationship with the sickness at hand, learning from the experiences *Dikos Ntsaaígíí-19* presented in the best way possible. This allowed me to reconnect to *Sa’ah Naghai Bik’eh Hozhoon* through research, despite the looming isolation and death that surrounded us.

The concept and philosophy of *Sa’ah Naghai Bik’eh Hozhoon* is associated with Diné prayers, songs, and ways of life and this extends to my learning of this way of life taught and practiced in the teepee during Native American Church meetings and in the hogan during ceremonies. Both ways of life are what instilled in me *Sa’ah Naghai Bik’eh hozhoon* as a guide to wholistically walk in balance and in harmony on the corn pollen path. Building from this, I was mentored by Dr. Christine Ami (Diné), NAS498: Undergraduate Indigenous Research Associate Professor at Diné College, to create a project adhering to four interconnected phase associated with *Sa’ah Naghai Bik’eh hozhoon: Nitsahakees (thinking), Nahat’á (planning), Iiná (Living), dóó Siih Hasin (Reflection)*.

In the *Nitsahakees* phase of my research, I submitted a proposal to the Diné College IRB board and conducted a literature review on studies that may help to inform this project. In the phase of *Nahat’á*, I commenced data collection by distributing my surveys to Diné College students, staff, and faculty over the course of a month. This was followed by a talking circle with three collaborators.<sup>2</sup> During this phase, it was also significant to provide offerings to my community, presenting them with opportunities to join my journey and, more importantly, to learn how to care for themselves during the pandemic. Therefore, I worked with the Diné

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<sup>2</sup> I refer to them as collaborators rather than participants because they willingly shared their experiences about how COVID-19 impacted their ceremonial practices and how they exhibited resilience by continuing to practice prayers, songs, and ceremony despite the pandemic. The telling, and hearing of these stories were so important as they contributed to my data for me to code and highlight.



College Navajo Language and Culture Resource Specialist, Mr. Johnnie Bia and created a workshop about *honeeshgish* (fire poker). We shared knowledge of the traditional stories of the *honeeshgish*, its significance, how to make one for your home, and why it is important to have during this pandemic. For the talking circle collaborators, I created beadwork along with sweetgrass offerings in gratitude for the non-material knowledge they provided to this project.

In the *liná* phase I began data analysis. From the surveys, I looked for trends and outliers in responses as a way to situate a general snapshot of community experiences. From the talking circle, I studied codes to bring individualized stories to light in order to explore specific scenarios of COVID-19’s impact on Diné ceremonial practices. Lastly, in the *Siihasin* phase, I reported back to the community that contributed to my research. In this phase, I shared my initial report to collaborators, community members, and Dr. Ami’s NAS413: Indigenous Research Methods course for feedback. I also presented to our Diné College community in virtual format.

### **Participants and Collaborators**

Survey participants consisted of students, staff, and faculty of Diné College whom were 18 years or older. Recruitment for the survey took place via the Diné College email server, Diné College social media platforms, and workshops held with Diné College’s Navajo Language and Culture Resource Program. A total of 72 participants completed the survey: 57 were female and 15 were male. The mean age of the participants was 32.4.

The collaborators from the talking circle included one male and two females. Collaborator 1 (C1) was Adrian Lerma, who is a Diné College staff member and mother of Kinaadlá during COVID-19. Collaborator 2 (C2) was Nonahbah Sam, who is also a Diné College Staff member and cultural preservationist. Collaborator 3 (C3) who has requested

anonymous participation is a male traditional practitioner in his late forties and a current Diné College student.

### **Materials and Procedure**

Online surveys were distributed through the Diné College email server, Facebook, and personal outreach to Diné College students, staff and faculty throughout the course of a month from February 22 through March 28th, 2022 and consisted of 36 questions. Nine demographic questions gauged the following information on participants: age, Diné College site affiliation, gender, Navajo Nation chapter affiliation, primary residency during COVID-19 pandemic, Religious/ spiritual Way of life affiliation, frequency of ceremonial attendance pre-pandemic, frequency of ceremonial attendance since the onset of the pandemic, and reasons identify their decrease of ceremonial attendance. The demographic section was followed by twenty-three 4-point Likert scale measures. These questions asked participants to reflect upon how COVID-19 restrictions have impacted their ceremonial practices from a wholistic sense (physical, emotional, mental and spiritual.) The last section engaged interest in future participation with this project, including attendance of virtual workshops to help learn about ceremonial practices during COVID-19 pandemic, participation in the Talking Circle, and access to research findings.

The Talking Circle took place April 5, 2022 and included three collaborators. Due to the increase of COVID cases (Omicron variant), the Talking Circle was held online via zoom. Collaborators were sent the talking circle discussion prompts to engage personal self-reflection time about their experiences. On the day of the talking circle, I opened our space with a prayer and a traditional story about healing. We discussed the meaning of talking circles, which is grounded in respect and time to share our stories. The Talking Circle consisted of 5 questions. The prompts were linked through the Diné paradigm of *Nitsahakees*, *Nahat'á*, *Iná*, and *Siihasin*

and focused on their experiences with ceremonial practices during the pandemic. Each question allowed for two rounds of feedback, one to tell each collaborator's uninterrupted stories and the other to respond to the stories they had been gifted with. Collaborators made their closing remarks before we closed the talking circle session.

### **Snapshot and Stories**

Following the data collection period of *Nitsahakees*, I commenced transcriptions, coding, comparing of quantitative and qualitative responses, and began the writing phase of *Iiná*. Among all of the codes that were found, three were quite significant: the feeling of lament, negative impacts on wholistic well-being, and the actions of resiliency.

#### **Lament**

Within the code of Lament, my collaborators talked about how they missed coming together with their family and relatives during ceremony. Collaborator number three explains how there is a spiritual absence that took place as many families couldn't come together due to the pandemic restrictions.

When I think of ceremonies I think of family, people getting together. My family or the patient's family and there's always a lot of good humor and, and a lot of people coming together from long distances. And not having that, and seeing people not being able to have that in ceremonies um as of lately in the last couple of years, it really kind of uh, it's an odd feeling sometimes. It's quiet, and there's no, you don't hear kids playing outside, you don't hear cars pulling up, you don't hear people say “you're supposed to be over there, helping butcher!”. You know all these things and there uh, uh a little bit of a spirit that is missing. Uh and um, it's a spirit of family, spirit of k'e that kind of seems to be uh missing. (C3)

This collaborator's perspective reflected the quantitative survey results. The survey results showed that there was a drastic decrease (61.8%) in seeing or visiting with their ceremonial family. These two relations show that ceremonial family coming together is one of the essential

parts to ceremony. Not having that may have had some people feel different or yearning for their presence during these times.

Another code that came up was the missing of participating in ceremony. C2 discusses how her and her family were not able to have or participate in ceremonies that they were used to doing.

We're very big on kinaalda season or not season but, kinaalda time. Um I know it really impacted us because a couple of our girls weren't able to um, have their kinaalda done because of, you know we weren't able to come together, especially in the height of the pandemic. And I think that you know, uh it's, it's been difficult, it's been really hard to um, you know just...coming together as a family and, and being able to do what you're so used to doing, and what seems to come so naturally. (C2)

This collaborator's experience coincides with the survey result of question fourteen, to which showed a drastic decrease (73.6%) in sitting up all night to pray and sing due to the onset of the pandemic. Some Diné ceremonies involve sitting up, praying, and singing on behalf of the patient. Collaborator number two shared how some of their younger girls in the family did not get to participate in their coming-of-age ceremonies due to pandemic restrictions. The last day of the Kinaalda ceremony involves the young woman sitting up all night, praying and listening to traditional songs being sung by those attending. Both of these results show that the onset of COVID prevented participation from happening as it may have been a risk to the patient and those attending. Many people sacrificed their participation so the spread of COVID could decrease throughout the reservation.

Many people learn ceremonial songs, teachings, and stories while attending ceremonies. Collaborator number three shares how the pandemic may be just another barrier that the next generation has to face while learning their traditional way of life. He shares,

All the other ceremonies that I take my son to, to reinforce these concepts and ideas like walking on the *tadidiin attin*, and *sa'ah naghai bikeh hozhoon niliidoo*... all those kind of

things like you can really do that at blessing ways, or peyote meetings. We just lost out on a lot of opportunity I think, time for the next generation to learn. I think they already have it tough enough for like language barriers and um the decline in ceremonies and this happened. And I think it's really stunted...uh our, our younger generations um learning curve. It's really stunted their ability to, to learn and pick up things because there's, there was always a ceremony going on somewhere. (C3)

This experience was represented in the survey in three separate questions which asked how the onset of COVID impacted their opportunity to learn prayers, songs, and stories. The question about opportunity to learn prayers results showed a drastic decrease (25%), and slight decrease (18.1%). The question about the opportunity to learn songs showed results of a drastic decrease (26.4%) and a slight decrease (18.1%). The question about opportunity to learn stories results showed a drastic decrease (33.3%), and a slight decrease (19.7%). These results are important as they highlight the population that felt that they loss of opportunity to learn ceremonial concepts. And this relates to what Collaborator number three was talking about, as many of us learning a lot of ceremonial concepts while attending ceremony. It may not just be the younger generation either, but various ages who learn something that they may have not known before.

## **Wellbeing**

In a personal conversation with Dr. Calvin White, he defines Wholistic well-being as acknowledging not only the physical, mental, and emotional parts of an individual, but also their connection to nature and their spirit. He talks about this concept and refers to it as the warrior spirit, which is what an individual needs physical, mental, psychological, and spiritual preparation one must engage in for battle. Battle against any evil, hardship, and situations that may be thrown at us in life throughout our journey so that we protect ourselves, our family, community, land, and traditional ways of life. From my collaborators, I am able to reflect how

the pandemic impacted these parts of their warrior spirit, or how they observed it impacted our Diné people.

One of my collaborators vented how she felt the loss of our people which hurt her emotionally. C1 shares,

And everyday I'm grateful and I'm thankful that I'm still here. You know what I mean? And I know that it's... in any moment I could be taken... because I saw so many people being taken, and it hurts my spirit too because I can feel their absence. When I was seeing those numbers sticking upward during the OPVP report, I would cry every time, because it stopped being just two, or three, or four... it, it was tens, and twenties, and hundreds and thousands and I was... it was too much it was too much. And I can still feel that now. Even though I walk through life, I try to be happy, and I walk through life trying to be all hozho, in balance, like I walk around with that pain too, you know. I walk around with that loss... and I don't talk about it. (C1)

This experience sheds light on how so many of us felt as COVID-19 took many of our people week after week. It was emotionally draining. The survey results showed a decrease in happiness and hopefulness since the onset of COVID, hopefulness drastically decreasing at 20.8%, slightly decreasing at 19.4%; happiness drastically decreased at 25%, slightly decreasing at 36.1%. However, for some it remained that same, happiness at 43.1%, and hopefulness at 33.3%. The survey results may have not shown an exact reflection, as it wasn't so much of a significant decrease, but this may also be due to traditional teachings, as we are told not to mourn so much for those who have gone back to the holy people. It may also be because in times like these, personal ceremonies or prayer may have helped those who felt those losses.

This same loss impacted a lot of individuals spiritually, as many of our people did not get to grieve properly as COVID restrictions didn't allow large gatherings which our people are used to doing when a loved one has passed. Collaborator number three shares how the pandemic impacted our people's grieving process.

I think before the pandemic we took for granted... you really see how it impacted us overall. Um there seems to be like uhh... a sadness hanging over the whole rez. Uh I think you know another part of it is... we lost so many people and even grieving was a part of the ceremony. We get together for four days in a hogan. We would cry together and talk to one another, and reencourage one another, and remind each other of these... of our teachings and how you know death is not the end and People lost that ability to grieve with one another. And um so I think that's really impacted people's health as well and from a traditional diagnostic standpoint that's called hooji'. You know so I think kinda. We've been gaining a lot of stresses and we haven't had a lot spiritual outlet, places to deal with those things for uh a lot of people. (C3)

An observation made by my collaborators was the rise in substance use during the pandemic. My collaborators shared that the increase traffic to the local bootlegger, they felt, reflected a lack of access to ceremony may have pushed people to substances. C2 shares her insight on the topic:

How people are being impacted by COVID. And that idea of not being able to deal with some of the pressures or some of the things that are going on. Through ceremony I think caused a lot of people to turn to substances. In terms of dealing with stress. Um becoming introverted... And I think that's something that you know a lot of times, we don't think about the impacts of those who depend on ceremony mentally. And when something like this... you know and I know, it wasn't planned or anything like that. But something of this magnitude happens, you know that part of how people deal with things... mentally.. um especially spiritually. I think it really impacted them. And they really didn't know what to do. They didn't know where to turn for help. They didn't know how you know how continue to be who they needed to be. And I think that, you know, for them I think that turning to substance was probably a better thing and. You know, I can't.. I can't imagine how that has affected other families out there. (C2)

Another collaborator shares how ceremony may have been a coping outlet for those at high risk of relapsing to substances, and not having that impacted their form of therapy or coping. C3 shares,

Growing up on a reservation it's already um a high-risk group for a lot of different social ails here. Uhh so I think you know that's one of the ways it impacts us was not being able to give us that access to tacheeh. Cause I know like um. For a lot of men, they like to sweat. And that's where they kind of talk about what happened during the week. What's going on with their families. Kind of really let it out. It's a positive place for them to talk about their stress. And for the men to reaffirm within themselves, to to reencourage one another. And then...They go back out to their community. Within their community. Back to their homes a little bit better. And I think their families lost that. (C3)

Both of these insights are reflected within my survey results. One of my questions addresses how their change of attendance in ceremony may have impacted their feelings of sadness. Survey results showed 41.7% remained the same, 26.4% increased slightly, and 6.9% increased drastically. These feelings of isolation are discussed amongst my collaborators when talking about how that feeling of isolation may have pushed some individuals back to substances. Other survey results which coincide with this perspective are the mental impacts, which highlight how their change in attendance may have impacted their ability to make healthy decisions and their ability to adjust to unexpected challenges. Survey results showed 19.4% of individuals felt like their ability to make healthy decisions decreased slightly, while 51.4% remained the same. The survey results of adjustment to unexpected challenges showed 18.1% decreased slightly, and 12.5 % decreased drastically, and 45.8% remained the same.

Although these results reflect that the majority feelings remained the same, it is still important to highlight that there is a population who felt like their change in ceremonial attendance had impacted their feelings of sadness, loneliness, and their abilities to make healthy decisions and adjust to unexpected challenges. It is important because those percentages may represent those who the collaborators talk about being high risk, the population of those who felt lost and had no other way of coping with the isolation, the mass loss of our people, or anything personal issues they may have been dealing with prior to COVID.



## Resilience

While doing this research, I believe that one of the most powerful discoveries was the resilience that beamed through despite the darkness and heartache that COVID-19 brought to our people. The stories of resilience showed how even though there were COVID-19 restrictions, my collaborators found ways to practice ceremonial prayers, songs, and practices, whether it was within their home in isolation, or with very minimal people outside of their household. Other stories highlight learning, practicing, and teaching ceremonial prayers and songs to their children and next generation.

One of the difficulties my collaborators faced was having a ceremony in a pandemic but doing so in a safe way. One of my collaborators insisted on having one of our larger winter ceremonies, but doing so with very minimal people. He, his family, and those who participated made their adjustments. He shares his experience,

So I asked my dad. I told him, your nali wants a *azaa'al neel*. And so he came over, and we talked about it. And he said there's several ways we can do it. And um, He said we can do real straightforward and simple. And then another one is where it involves uh it's a small *yei bi chei*, it's not the full *yei bi cheii* but the *jish* comes out, everything comes out. And so I told him, I would rather have that one because somebody's *jish* has to be open this winter. We can't just, we can't skip it. We can't skip *yei bi chei* season. We have to have one. And so I asked my dad, so can we do this shorter version but just keep it to ourselves, don't tell nobody... You know just have it just, just the essential personnel who needs to be there. And so we did that and um, his two main helpers he told them, I want you guys to self-isolate. Either get vaccinated or self-isolate for the next ten days, we're going to have a ceremony coming up. (C3)

Another meaningful experience of resilience was that of C1, and the manhood ceremony they held for their son which hadn't been done for any male in her family in a hundred years. She was persistent for this ceremony to take place no matter what would be asked of them as a family. She states,

The most meaningful ceremonial experiences that I've had since the start of COVID were my children's coming of age ceremonies. Um, I have a son who's 14 and last spring his voice started changing...It finally got to the point where I was like can you conduct this ceremony you know for my son. And they agreed to do it with very strict protocols, you know everybody had to be vaccinated. Very limited participants. And it was very... A lot of trust was put into my family to carry this out. But we did it you know. We did it. And it was one of the first manhood ceremonies that had been conducted in my family in about a hundred years. So we were bringing this back into my family, into my bloodline. And it was powerful, and it was one of the most amazing experiences that I have ever had because the depth of what we were doing. (C1)

These two experiences had shown that our people would do what they had to despite the risk in order to restore and rejuvenate the prayers and songs that were needed for their family.

These two experiences reflect survey results that measure an individual's spiritual connection to ceremonial songs, prayers, and stories, also their level of spiritual connection to the holy people.

Connection to songs, prayers and stories showed results on an almost evenly weighted out spread between all five measures: decreased drastically 23.9% , decreased slightly 19.7%, remained the same 26.8%, increased slightly 11.3%, and increased drastically 18.3%. The level of spiritual connection to the holy people also showed a spread of results between the five measures:

decreased drastically 16.7%, decreased slightly 18.1%, remained the same 31.9%, increased slightly 13.9%, and increased drastically 19.4%. The results that show an increase in connection coincide with these two experiences, as they show that even through unforeseen times like the pandemic, these individuals believed that these ceremonies needed to take place. These ceremonies may have made their connections to the ceremony and the holy people stronger because of the risk that was taken to hold these ceremonies.

Another form of resilience that was discussed amongst my collaborators was sharing how the pandemic pushed them to practice what they were taught by traditional mentors before the pandemic. C1 one reflects on how the pandemic may have strengthened her and her family's

connection and practice as they were doing what they were taught as they believed their survival depended on it. C1 shares,

I think, I think my family, my little family were one of those that really elevated our ceremonial activity since the pandemic started. Um we... for many years we were invited to ceremony you know, to learn how to sing, to get acquainted, to um help out, to cook. And then when the pandemic started, you know we had been taking this singing class here at Diné College. And we were given...Songs like, protection songs, and songs to ward away evil you know what I mean? Songs to strengthen our minds, songs to console us during times of amidst stress, stress and hardship and then traveling songs. And all of those songs came in handy when the pandemic hit and the hataali we know were like “you know those songs now, you use them.” And so we would sit with our children around the fire and we would sing, and when we were traveling... and then bringing that ceremony into our home where, I think we held more ceremonies within the past few years than we have our entire lives and it’s really brought our family together. And I feel like it’s given us this armor that we wouldn’t have otherwise because we got to put these teachings into practice, and I think that’s what carries us through everything we do. And we’re always doing our best to help other people. And you know when arrows come shooting our way, we have shields now. We’re like “bam! Bam! Bam!” you know, you missed! And thankfully we have those songs, and prayers and you know these people that prayed for us because you know they want us, we want to survive. (C1)

Another perspective shared by the culture preservationist of the group of collaborators discusses how there is responsibility of not only learning and practicing ourselves, but also teaching our next generation so that the knowledge and practices continue. C2 says,

I feel like I have a big responsibility to the younger generation to at least share with them what I know and how I understand things. And I think that you know, in all of this with the isolation and everything it really is learning to sing those songs, and understand those songs and what they mean. And, even at that, singing those songs to my grandbaby now, so he knows what they sound like. You know and hoping with hopes that when he grows up he can interpret that in his own way and use it to his own advantage. I feel like, you know again I think, as a generation of speakers where some of us still speak, where some of us have learned these, some of these teachings, traditional teachings I feel like you know we have to be the ones to make it work. We have to be the ones to pass on what we know you know to our children and they can pass it on to their children. (C2)

These two perspectives bring such important insight as to how we can carry forward. A question within the survey has asked if the individual made extra effort to learn songs, prayers, and stories

that they would've learned at ceremonial settings, but made the effort to learn in isolation to avoid loss of cultural ways of knowing. The results showed 31.9% remained the same, 20.8% increased slightly, and 20.8% increased drastically. The positive results show that there is a population that was willing to make that extra effort while in the pandemic. The pandemic gave us time to slow down and come back to learn and re-establish these spiritual efforts as it felt like they were essential during this unprecedented time.

### **General Discussion**

Kalvin White defines wholistic well-being as acknowledging not only the physical, mental, and emotional parts of an individual, but also their connection to nature and their spirit. He explains about this concept and refers to it as the warrior spirit, which is what an individual needs physical, mental, psychological, and spiritual preparation one must engage in for battle. Battle against any evil, hardship, and situations that may be thrown at us in life throughout our journey so that we protect ourselves, our family, community, land, and traditional ways of life. Battles like this pandemic and all the harshness and loss within that, we had to prepare and reignite our ceremonial ways of life to fight for our survival.

My research reflects on ways that my Diné people struggled as so much of the pandemic took from us. My survey and talking circle showed deficit results in ceremonial attendance and impacts to how we practiced the physical components to ceremony. Impacts to the different emotional components of how we felt because of the change in attendance to ceremony. Impacts to the different level of mental components that fluctuated because of the change in attendance to ceremony. And the spiritual impact as the pandemic impacted the opportunity to learn, practice and connect with the different parts of ceremony. However, in some areas of the survey, it also

showed results of remaining the same or an increase in measure. The results displayed more than just deficit factors, but also showed resilience factors.

At the beginning of my research, I had hypothesized that the COVID-19 pandemic would have had a negative impact to Diné people’s wholistic wellbeing due to the change in attendance of traditional or peyote ceremonies. I believe that my results were supported as survey results showed deficit measures within different areas of the survey. These deficit results exemplify that ceremony is essential to many Diné individuals, it heals and strengthens their wholistic self in many ways. Talking circle discussions show how they missed various parts of ceremony and for some, felt a spiritual absence, or an emotional distress, or even observed how the mental impacts impact people’s way of coping.

However, along the way of my research it became apparent to me that I must not only look for deficit results, but I must bring out results of resiliency. By doing this, my survey results also highlighted positive measures in the questions that measured individual effort or other areas of emotional, mental, and spiritual impacts. The talking circle discussions shed light on how it is possible that some individuals or families may have increased their ceremonial learning, practice, and connection while in isolation. This would show that despite the negative impacts, there were positive impacts as well as some individuals chose to take the time in isolation to elevate themselves spiritually. The results showed me that during the pandemic, our people found ways to practice, and found ways to conduct ceremony with minimal people and resources.

In many of our teachings, we are taught to remain strong minded in tough times. We are taught to find ways to help ourselves and protect ourselves physically, emotionally, mentally, and spiritually. There is a reason why the holy people created and gave us these ceremonies, prayers, and songs. They are our forms of protection, survival, and healing. We depend on them to

revitalize parts of our wholistic wellbeing, in order to face any battle, monsters, or challenges that are amongst us.

It is like the story of the twin warriors *nayee nezghani* and *to bajishchini* and how they traveled across Diné Bikeyah to fight off or kill different monsters that were taking our people. When it came time to defeat one of the biggest monsters, *yei tsoh*, they were directed to seek help from their father *jo'honaaei*. Their father gave them weapons, prayers and songs as they journeyed to their attack. These weapons of songs and prayer shielded them and gave them the power to defeat him. It is stories like these that give an example as to how we must go about protecting ourselves in our life journey. Many of the traditional songs we have are stories being told of the journeys and battles that our holy people made. They explain the very essence of who we are as *Noohooka diyin Diné'e bila' ashdlai* (The earth's holy five fingered beings).

Within my research, another unexpected but important discussion became apparent, which was the loss of medicine people. My collaborators mentioned several times in our talking circle about the concern of losing medicine people throughout the pandemic. These conversations reflected on how losing medicine people also meant losing the opportunity to learn and teach a lot of traditional ceremonies, prayers, and songs. We are already in a deficit of sustaining a lot of our language and culture as it is, and the pandemic impacted that even more so. It is unfortunate and alarming as the amount of ceremonies we as Diné people have is becoming that much more scarce, so it is important that we find a way to sustain what we have left as these ceremonies are vital to Diné people's healing.

This research aimed to meet the concepts of a healing research agenda to which I believe it has succeeded. It met this by making it a priority to also bring out the stories of resilience during the pandemic. Despite the losses and the hurt, the research suggests ways that we can help

ourselves by learning and practicing in isolation is possible and can continue to be done. My research displayed stories of doing ceremony no matter what but doing so with proper adjustments and flexibility to protect ourselves and others from this virus. It shows how we can also make it a priority to teach one another so the knowledge continues.

In my research, some limitations came to my attention. The first being, doing a lot of the gathering of the data online. It was difficult for me to travel to the different Diné College sites to get more surveys completed as the COVID numbers fluctuate on the Navajo Nation. I did not want to put myself or others at risk. Other limitations included concerns about a survey question, which addressed the topic of suicide. Two survey participants brought to my attention that they felt uncomfortable answering the question as traditional teachings teach us that we are not to think that way about our life. In the survey 4 survey participants of the 72 did not answer this question.

However, it was important for me to address this topic despite those teachings because it is important to shed light on issues like this so that we can find solutions to deal with them, if need be. When we work together to treat the impact of COVID-19, death is an unavoidable topic. The stories and lived realities of our people also include suicide as either a direct result of COVID-19 infection or from the long-term impacts of dealing with the realities that COVID-19 has exacerbated, including that on our wholistic well-being. However, survey participants were encouraged to skip that measure.

Overall, for us to move forward collectively I believe it is important to address and teach each other the importance of spiritual connection. By that I mean, teaching not only our children but those who want to learn the basics of traditional songs, prayers, and teachings. And they must not be only within ceremonial setting, although that would be nice but we must understand

that we must find a way to make it work. We found ways to make it work when wanting to hold a ceremony during the pandemic, so we can find a way to teach those who are wanting to learn. One of the ways that I thought became helpful during the pandemic was presentations through zoom.

Different departments of the Navajo Nation used the time of isolation to also broaden their outreach to people by using zoom to hold presentations about traditional stories, songs, discussions, teaching of string games and other interesting traditional information. This way was so resourceful and accessible to many of our people. Even my collaborators discussed how technology is such a resourceful tool for us to use now to document and share. The next step for us I believe is not being afraid to share, teach and learn because traditional knowledge is vital to our stability and healing as we move forward. We still currently do not know how much further this pandemic is going to change and take from us.

So, it is important that we do not depend on ceremonial settings being the only place for us to learn, teach and heal. It should all start within our own home, our sanctuary. It starts with our everyday practice, and how we implement these songs, prayers, and teachings in our routine. From there, we display that for others to observe and follow. It is going to take a collective effort, but also self-accountability and responsibility to carry on our knowledge ourselves. Although this has been the goal since before the pandemic, it is even more so now because the pandemic showed us what it was like to be without our ceremony, and the impacts of that. We must appreciate what we have now while we have it, along with passing it on to future generations to enjoy.

## **Conclusion**



This project has changed me in many ways. Cree scholar Shawn Wilson (2008) explains that bringing the Indigenous researcher closer to our ways of knowing, to understanding our relationships with the cosmos, are direct results of Indigenous research. When I first started this project, I felt a loss as ceremony has a huge influence on my life. When I would go to ceremonies, I would have teachings, songs, prayers, feeling of *k'é* (relationships), and “medicine words” reinforced to me and my spirit. But as I conducted these surveys and listened to my collaborators about their experiences, it was as if they were making offerings for me.

Despite the many unfortunate ways the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted our community through drop in ceremony, loss of medicine people and knowledge holders, the ability to be around relatives, and passing relatives and loved ones, there were those that chose to take this time in the pandemic to also strengthen their connections to ceremony. Whether we wanted it or not, we have developed a relationship with this monster, COVID-19. This relationship has exacerbated physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual weaknesses but it also inspired us to take self-accountability for our wholistic well-being.

We were/are living in such a fast-paced world that the pause that many of us had to take in isolation gave us the chance to reignite our connections to our teachings, songs and prayers. Bringing ceremony within our home, gave us the opportunity to re-root ourselves into the foundation of what makes us Diné. The stories of resilience show us that we can move forward and have our own solutions to our hardships by adjusting, being flexible, and determined to carry out the intentions of the ceremony, no matter what that may look like. My father shared with me that from a Hopi perspective and what he was taught: there are going to be times when tough decisions or sacrifices will have to be made. For Navajo people, this is the explained through

*awóli bee ánitj*. Having faith and trust in our deities and those that have gone on before us will correct and make things right in whatever may have lacked in a ceremony, prayer, or song.

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