Agyaq Chukan Taylor

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Brett Lee Shelton, Carson Smith

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Indigenous Resilience and Adaptation in the Face of Colonial Pressures: A Comparative Analysis of Traditional Peacemaking on the Navajo Nation and in Kake, Alaska

Prior to European contact, the numerous Indigenous peoples and societies of Turtle Island thrived under their own worldviews, social organizations, spiritualities, and relational systems. Many of these included what we might now call “peacemaking”: community-based conflict resolution and balance-keeping practices embedded in unique cultural, spiritual, and kinship systems. Colonization violently disrupted these frameworks through land dispossession, legal suppression, christianization, and forced assimilation.

Despite this, many Indigenous communities are revitalizing their traditional peacemaking practices. These revitalization efforts reflect adaptation rather than replication. While grounded in traditional values and relationships, they are not static re-creations of pre-contact systems. Instead, they embody how each community has negotiated its specific historical, colonial, political, and spiritual contexts. Some have preserved ceremonial and spiritual foundations, while others have prioritized accessibility and relational repair.

The Navajo Nation and the Organized Village of Kake offer a compelling case study in how different Indigenous communities have reimagined peacemaking in response to their distinct contexts. The Navajo Nation’s peacemaking system is rooted in Diné spirituality and cosmology, yet integrated into a formal tribal government modeled after U.S. institutions. Peacemakers are formally trained and legally recognized, and the process is codified within the Navajo Nation

judicial branch. Kake's Circle Peacemaking process, by contrast, is led by community volunteers and grounded in cultural values like accountability and intergenerational care. It does not explicitly draw from spiritual or ceremonial frameworks, nor is it embedded within a formal legal structure.

These differences aren't signs of loss or degrees of authenticity. Rather, they represent distinct strategies for sustaining Indigenous justice under ongoing colonial conditions. Each reflects how communities have responded to their colonial disruption and should be recognized as demonstrations of strategic Indigenous resilience and cultural survival. What unites them is their grounding in Indigenous values, an ongoing negotiation with colonial powers, and their ability to carry tradition forward in ways through contemporary realities.

Colonial Context

Analyzing contemporary Indigenous peacemaking requires understanding the colonial contexts that each community has navigated. While the Navajo Nation and the Organized Village of Kake are both federally recognized tribes, their legal foundations and territorial authority differ dramatically. These differences are rooted in their distinct experiences with colonization, which continues to shape their jurisdiction, governance, land access, and self-determination.

The Navajo Nation, located in the southwest, is the nation's largest federally recognized tribe by both enrollment and reservation size. They have approximately 400,000 enrolled citizens, with ~170,000 living on reservation. The Navajo Nation and its reservation were established in 1868 via treaty with the US government. In 1923, a tribal council was created, though the first election was not until 1938, forming a tribal council led by a chairman. In 1989, the Navajo Nation government reorganized into a three branch system of government with an Executive, Legislative, and Judicial branch, mirroring the US governmental structure (Begay).

The Organized Village of Kake (OVK), by contrast, is one of the smaller federally recognized tribes, with about 600 enrolled members, roughly 500 of whom live in Kake. Kake is a small and remote village located in southeast Alaska, and is only accessible by boat or plane. The village is predominantly Tlingit, and the OVK tribal government was established in 1934 under the Indian Reorganization Act. Like almost all Alaska Native tribes, the OVK does not have a reservation.

This is due to Alaska's unique colonial history. The US ceased treaty-making with Native peoples in 1861, and Alaska was not purchased by the US until 1867, and became a state in 1959. Alaska Native land rights remained unaddressed until 1971, when the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act (ANCSA) extinguished Indigenous land claims over 360 million acres, and transferred 44 million acres to newly created Alaska Native Corporations. In the process, federally recognized tribes were left without land, departing from the typical reservation model.

In 1998, The U.S. Supreme Court ruled in *State of Alaska v. Native Village of Venetie* that Alaska Native corporate lands do not constitute "Indian Country" because they are privately owned, severely limiting Alaska Native tribal jurisdiction. Further, Alaska is subject to Public Law 280, which grants the state jurisdiction over most tribal matters. Consequently, tribes like OVK operate without territorial jurisdiction, navigating a legal system dominated by state courts, with little formal recognition or enforcement authority (Hyslop, "Circle Peacemaking").

Both the Navajo Nation and the OVK have had to contend with systems that are not designed for them. These colonial histories shaped the legal and cultural terrain each community had to navigate in reclaiming and adapting traditional peacemaking in ways that reflect both endurance, innovation, and care.

History of each peacemaking program

The development of each peacemaking program reflects how these communities have adapted their cultural frameworks to confront the legacies of colonization. The Navajo Nation integrated peacemaking into an existing western legal structure, while Kake's Circle Peacemaking emerged from community-led responses to crisis.

In 1937, the Navajo Nation Court of Indian Offenses was established by the Bureau of Indian Affairs, modeled after adversarial Anglo-American courts. In 1958, the system evolved into the Navajo Nation Judicial Branch, but retained its westernized model (Begay, 2025). Recognizing the disconnect between these systems and traditional Diné dispute resolution, Navajo judges created the Navajo Peacemaker Court in 1982. The goal was to provide an alternative to adversarial legalism and to legitimize hózhǫ́ji naat'aah (traditional Diné peacemaking).

Initially, however, the Navajo Peacemaker Court was shaped by the same formal legal norms it sought to resist. The process came to resemble mediator-assisted settlement, and its most essential values and practices, especially ceremonial and relational foundations, were compromised. The Navajo Nation Judiciary itself notes that "the judicial institutionalization of hózhǫ́ji naat'aah had the inadvertent consequence of changing its fundamental nature" (Navajo Nation Judicial Branch, 2024).

In the early 2000s, Navajo Nation peacemaking was reformed in order to address these issues. The first step was the formal recognition of Diné bi beenahaz'áanii (Diné fundamental law) by the judicial council, as it is an essential part of Diné peacemaking. The word "court" was removed from peacemaking, formal rules were replaced with culturally rooted guidelines, and the Peacemaking Division was created within the Navajo Nation Judicial Branch (Navajo Nation

Judicial Branch). Today, it is called the Navajo Nation Peacemaking Program, and it serves to develop and expand peacemaking throughout the Navajo Nation by providing services, education, training, and other resources. The program now fulfills its original purpose significantly better than its predecessor, as it has brought back some of the most essential aspects of hózhǫ́ji naat'aah. However, it is still embedded within the broader bureaucratic structure of the Navajo Nation.

In contrast, the Kake peacemaking program emerged as a grassroots response to a crisis. In the 1980's Kake was suffering from the devastating effects of intergenerational trauma, with extremely high rates of alcoholism, substance abuse, and suicide, particularly among youth. At one point, 21 community members passed away from suicide in a single year. Community leader Mike Jackson links these incidents to alcohol misuse: "I doubt if they would have done that to themselves if they were sober" (Hyslop, "Circle Peacemaking" 5).

In 1988, the Anchorage Daily News featured Kake in their series highlighting the crises of Alaska Native alcoholism and suicide. The article called out sober community members in Kake for not being supportive enough of the people suffering around them, and for being willing to turn a blind eye to people in need (Hyslop, "Circle Peacemaking" 5). This served as a wake up call for the community, who came together to reflect and act. From these conversations, an approach rooted in Tlingit knowledge and values emerged: circle peacemaking. Circle peacemaking is an ancient Tlingit tradition, called Guwakaan, that fell dormant during colonization. Guwakaan was reawakened in Kake in order to address the negative impacts of colonization on their community.

The Kake circle was developed in collaboration with Tlingit peacemakers in Canada's Yukon, but its specific design and implementation was entirely community-led. Unlike the

Navajo program, the Kake circle has no direct ties to formal legal systems. OVK is a small tribal government with limited bureaucratic capacity, and its circle peacemaking has always been a community-driven, relational process for healing and accountability (Jarret and Hyslop 240).

The first Kake peacemaking circle was held in the late 1990s, with a woman who had lost custody of her children due to alcoholism and failed numerous rehabilitation attempts. With the support and advice of the peacemakers, she planned a life without alcohol and agreed to attend an outside residential rehab facility. While she was gone, the peacemakers and other community members maintained her home, covered her bills, and took care of her family. After her return, she eventually regained custody of her children and remains sober to this day (Jackson).

These histories demonstrate that Indigenous peacemaking is not simply a matter of reclaiming the past, but of creatively adapting it to respond to the needs of the present. While the Navajo and Kake programs differ in scale, structure, and origin, both illustrate how Indigenous communities have reclaimed traditional justice practices in response to the harms of colonialism, and this reflects community resilience. Their histories show that Indigenous peacemaking is not a fixed tradition, but a living practice that adapts to meet contemporary realities while staying rooted in traditional cultural values.

Present Day function of each peacemaking program

The present-day operations of the Navajo Nation and Kake's peacemaking systems reflect their distinct cultural values, legal contexts, and governance structures. By examining how peacemaking functions in these two communities, we can see how traditional values have been retained, adapted, and rearticulated to meet current needs.

Today, the Navajo Nation Court System includes a supreme court and eleven trial courts, with one located in each of the nation's judicial districts. The Navajo Nation Peacemaking

Program operates within each of these districts and offers three core services: Hózhóji Naat'aah (Diné Traditional Peacemaking), Áłchíní BáNdazhnit'á (Diné Family Group Conferencing), and Nábináhaazláago Áłch'į' yáti' (Life Value Engagements). These processes all aim to restore hózǫ́ (harmony) when there is hóóchxo' or anáhóót'i (chaos or disorder), particularly in interpersonal conflicts. Services are accessed either by request or through referrals from appropriate courts or agencies (Judicial Branch of the Navajo Nation).

In Hózhóji Naat'aah, a naat'áánii (peacemaker) guides individuals or groups in confronting hóóchxo'/anáhóót'i through traditional stories and teachings, initiating transformative healing and a move toward hózǫ́. A key part of this process is encouraging a group to use k'é (clanship), which unites people through mutual respect but can be blocked by hóóchxo'/anáhóót'i. This process can take one or several sessions depending on the needs of those involved, but its resolution is conclusive. "When harmony, hózǫ́, is self-realized, sustaining it will have clarity and permanent hózǫ́ will be self-attainable" (Judicial Branch of the Navajo Nation).

Áłchíní BáNdazhnit'á (Diné family conferencing) emerged from the 2011 Álchíní Bi Beehaz' áannii Act (ABBA), which called for culturally appropriate methods for family preservation and harmony. The program facilitates family reunification and preservation using Diné peacemaking practices, again guiding the group towards hózǫ́, and providing other support resources. The program's services are typically utilized through referrals from courts and agencies, but can be requested. In the case of referrals, appropriate agencies such as Social Services monitor compliance with agreements made during conferencing, reinforcing its role within broader child welfare systems (Navajo Nation Judicial Branch, "Peacemaking").

Nábináhaazláago Ałch'į' yáti' (Life Value Engagements) is the most flexible of the services available. It depends on the needs of the participating individuals or groups, and does not require the presence of both parties in a conflict. Instead, individuals or groups meet with a naat'áánii (or another traditional teacher) to learn how to address problems through opening up to hózhó. These engagements have a variety of uses, and can even be used as a preparatory precursor to Hózhóji Naat'aah. Individual cases typically involve someone searching for hózhó or some other kind of positive personal growth. Group cases are typically for an individual experiencing a problem where the engagement of a broader group is necessary in order for this problem to be adequately addressed (Navajo Nation Judicial Branch, "Peacemaking").

The Kake peacemaking circle is an informal and volunteer driven process where concerned community members come together to guide an individual who has fallen stray back to a better path. They do this through teaching, stories, and experience, and offer support to the victims and wrongdoers. Anyone who is a member of the community and wishes to contribute to the community's well-being is invited to come to the circle as a Peacemaker. Peacemakers focus on addressing the root causes of conflict in order to repair relationships. The peacemakers also continue this responsibility outside of just the convening of the circle by being supportive and involved community members (Hyslop, "Circle Peacemaking").

The legal and bureaucratic functions behind the Kake Peacemaking circle shifted over time, but its main purpose and function have remained the same. At certain points in time the circle received various monetary or institutional forms of support, while at other times it has not, and this has not affected the functionality nor effectiveness of the process. Although it now operates under the Organized Village of Kake's tribal court codes, and receives case referrals from the Alaska State court, especially for juvenile misconduct, it is not dependent on these

formal systems. Circles are also held for situations outside formal legal structures, such as a celebration of a former wrongdoer's milestone (Jackson 10).

Understanding the Kake Peacemaking Circle also requires understanding the alternative: the state criminal justice system. In Alaska, rural offenders are charged and processed through corrections systems located far from their home villages. They are removed from their families and communities and placed in detention centers run by strangers who often do not share their values or understand their circumstances. High staff turnover adds further instability. Most youth probation officers do not live in the communities they serve and typically only interact with youth via phone. This process leaves many youth feeling unsupported and isolated. Upon returning home, they often struggle to reintegrate and may fall back into harmful behaviors or find community with other wrongdoers, simply because that is who they came to identify with in this turbulent time (Hyslop, "Circle Peacemaking" 8).

In contrast, the Kake Circle allows youth to address their wrongdoing while staying in their community, with their community's help. Rather than the impersonal nature of the state justice system, they enter the circle with community members who know them, love them, and care about their future. As one peacemaker put it: "we know the person and they are not judged. Instead of judging that person as bad, we pick them back up. You still live here. I'm still your relative" (Hyslop, "Circle Peacemaking" 82). Peacemakers often understand the root causes of behavior, such as intergenerational trauma, grief, or family instability, and are able to consider them with empathy and accountability. The process is embedded in community life allowing for meaningful follow-up and long-term support, creating sustained, relational accountability. Youth overwhelmingly prefer the circle: in 2001, 80 youth were referred to the circle and only two chose to return to the criminal justice system, and all 24 youth with underage drinking violations

completed their sentences successfully (Hyslop, “Restorative Justice” 20). The circle offers not just restoration, but dignity, treating youth as part of the community rather than pushing them farther out.

Together, these present-day programs reveal how both communities have carried forward their peacemaking traditions while responding to their unique contemporary needs. While structurally different, both models are grounded in cultural values, kinship and care. They show that tradition is not frozen in time, it adapts, and that adaptation itself is an act of cultural survival and sovereignty.

Broader Differences

Both the Navajo Nation and the Organized Village of Kake have revitalized their traditional Indigenous peacemaking practices, but what peacemaking looks like, how it unfolds, and who participates and how, differs between the two communities. These differences are rooted in not only their legal and historical contexts, but also in the distinct cultural values and social structures of the Diné and Tlingit people.

One important distinction is the roles of those involved in peacemaking. In both systems, participants sit in a circle to emphasize equality and relationality, and both involve community members working together towards peace. However, in Diné peacemaking, the naat'áánii (peacemaker) is one individual that guides those involved in Hóóchxo’/anáhóót’i’ (chaos) towards hózhó (harmony) through culturally and spiritually grounded stories and teachings. There can be ha’a sí dí, or observers, present, but these people may not speak or gesture so they do not actively participate in the peacemaking process. Thus, the primary exchange is between those in Hóóchxo’ and the naat'áánii (and of course those in Hóóchxo’ with each other).

In Kake, this exchange is almost inverse. Rather than a group of people in disharmony guided by one peacemaker, the Kake circle focuses on one wrongdoer (or multiple if their offenses are connected) guided by a large group of peacemakers who share their life experiences and wisdom. Everyone who choses to attend the circle becomes a peacemaker by contributing their lived experiences, teachings, wisdom, and support. While there is a designated keeper of the circle, this person serves as more of a facilitator rather than a central authority figure. In general, the role of peacemaker in Kake is far more fluid and informal than the naat'áánii for the Diné.

These contrasts illustrate that while both peacemaking systems share core values such as community care and relational balance, the specific forms they take are shaped by cultural differences between each group. Recognizing these distinctions helps us better understand how each system reflects the worldview and social fabric of the people who practice it.

Cultural and spiritual influences

Hózhǫ́ji naat'aah, or Diné peacemaking, is rooted in Diné Bi Beehaz'áanii Bitse Siléí, or Navajo Common Law, which draws from sacred stories and teachings found in the Dine´ Bahane' (Navajo creation story). The three foundational concepts are hozhó (harmony, balance), k'é (kinship, respect), and k'éi (identity, place). While these may appear to simply be cultural values, they are intertwined with the broader spiritual beliefs that are specific to the Diné. In fact, these terms are difficult to translate into English because their meanings are embedded in Navajo cosmology (Begay). Thus, Diné peacemaking is inseparable from Diné religion and spirituality.

This centrality is made clear in the Navajo Nation Peacemaking Handbook, which outlines key creation stories and spiritual beliefs before describing the process of peacemaking itself (Judicial Branch of the Navajo Nation 7). The handbook affirms that this spirituality is not background context, but the very legal and ethical foundation from which hózhǫ́ji naat'aah

emerges. This preservation of spirituality is likely due, at least in part, to the relative isolation inherent to reservation life, as well as the size and demographic strength of the Navajo Nation. This large, contiguous land base has allowed for the development of a Navajo-specific environment, one less interrupted by outsiders and does not have to cater to them if present because the space is not for them.

In contrast, the Kake peacemaking process, while deeply relational and rooted in Tlingit cultural values, is largely secular in practice. Across documents from OVK and other reports on the circle, there is a noticeable absence of explicit Tlingit spiritual frameworks or ceremonial practices. Instead, the focus is on shared cultural wisdom, storytelling, and accountability. While these undoubtedly stem from spiritual worldviews historically, they are now expressed through social and cultural relationships rather than explicit religious frameworks.

This does not reflect a lack of spirituality in Tlingit traditions, but rather the distinct historical, geographic, and political contexts in which revilitation has occured. Tlingit communities were already relatively isolated, and do not have the same centralized land based or unified tribal government as the Navajo Nation. Additionally, christianization–especially in Southeast Alaska–was particularly effective in displacing traditional spiritual beliefs. The region was one of the few areas Christianized by Russian Orthodox missionaries before Alaska became part of the United States, making this a deep rooted reality.

Language usage reflects similar patterns. Navajo peacemaking frequently utilizes the Diné language, often leaving terms in Diné rather than attempting to imperfectly translate them to English. Sometimes, peacemaking sessions are conducted entirely in Diné. In Kake, the Tlingit language is used to name certain key terms, such as guwakaan, but it is not integrated into the structure or conduct of the peacemaking process itself.

This difference again reflects certain contextual realities. The Navajo Nation's size and relative isolation have supported stronger language retention and revitalization. Kake is a small, mixed, community, where peacemaking may involve both Tlingit and non-Tlingit participants. In Alaska, cultural and language revitalization have been hindered by fragmented governance: tribal or corporate entities may represent only parts of an ethnic group, or include parts of multiple groups with entirely distinct languages and traditions. Moreover, Alaska Native corporations may not prioritize linguistic or cultural revitalization because as a corporation their goal is to maximize profit, and these initiatives are not profitable under capitalism.

These cultural and spiritual differences should not be viewed as markers of authenticity. Instead, they reflect each community's strategic and culturally specific responses to colonial disruption with meaningful continuations of Indigenous knowledge.

Structure, scale, and institutional integration

The institutional forms that peacemaking takes in the Navajo Nation and OVK differ just as meaningfully as their spiritual expressions, though in many ways these structural differences invert the dynamics of spiritual continuity. While the Navajo Nation has preserved spiritual and linguistic traditions in its peacemaking system, it has adopted bureaucratic governance structures that mirror western institutions. By contrast, the Kake circle has largely secularized its practice, but it continues to operate in a grassroots, community-based form that more closely resembles traditional relational systems.

The Navajo Nation's peacemaking system is integrated within a formal judicial branch and overall bureaucratic government system. Peacemaking in this system, though it is less institutionalized than it was previously, is still formalized through legal documentation and institutional protocols. Peacemaking can be court-ordered and peacemaking agreements may

become legally binding resolutions (Fenney 15). All practicing attorneys on the Navajo Nation must pass a bar exam that includes sections on Navajo Common Law, and peacemaking services are administered through trained peacemakers (Begay). In this way, the Navajo Nation has secured a degree of political legitimacy by conforming to the bureaucratic and legalistic frameworks–an act of strategic adaptation that has helped preserve other dimensions of tradition, including spirituality and language.

Kake Circle Peacemaking operates at a much smaller scale and is rooted in community volunteerism rather than institutional bureaucracy. The circle is technically part of the OVK tribal court code, but it remains the sole function of the court and has retained an informal structure. While at times OVK has received funding to hire a coordinator and formalize referrals from state agencies, the circle has consistently continued its flexible grassroots process when institutional support ended. Even today, cases may be referred through official channels or arise from community need, and some circles occur confidentially if requested (Hyslop, "Circle Peacemaking").

Importantly, this informality does not reflect a lack of legitimacy. Rather, it reflects a different model of legitimacy rooted in relational accountability. In Kake, peacemaking is described as not merely a system but as a "way of life," embedded in shared cultural practices and sustained by the values of "cooperation and collaboration, and looking out for one another" (Hyslop, "Circle Peacemaking" 43, 80). Rather than operating within a rigid institutional framework, Kake's circle thrives on the strength of its social fabric: clan systems, storytelling, and intergenerational mentorship. Its power lies not in its codification but in its community integration.

Together, these cases highlight a powerful contrast. The Navajo Nation had adopted institutional governance models that afford it broader legal authority and recognition, at the cost of greater bureaucratization. Kake, by contrast, has retained a community-centered model that reflects relational Indigenous justice in practice, even if it lacks formal infrastructure. Seen together, these systems reveal that adaptation to colonial legal structures takes many forms, and that Indigenous communities are not defined by how closely they match a singular "authentic" template or pre-contact form. Instead, they demonstrate a shared commitment to justice grounded in kinship, accountability, and survival.

Conclusion

The peacemaking systems of the Navajo Nation and the Organized Village of Kake demonstrate that Indigenous justice is not a single model, nor a static replica of pre-colonial practices, but a range of evolving practices rooted in cultural survival. Both systems emerged from ancestral values, endured profound colonial violence, and adapted to meet the demands of the present.

The Navajo Nation formalized and institutionalized peacemaking while retaining its religious and spiritual nature. Kake implemented a grassroots, volunteer-led system that is deeply relational outside of western bureaucratic processes, but is largely secular. Their differences, spiritual and secular, formal and informal, large and small, do not reflect a hierarchy of authenticity. Rather, they reveal how Indigenous communities strategically adapt, reclaim, and transform tradition to meet the realities of their respective landscapes and uphold shared values of balance, accountability, and relational repair. These systems are not relics of the past. They are living, breathing expressions of sovereignty, resilience, and future-building.

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