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Native American philosophy

from [Dictionary of World Philosophy](#)

Widely understood, this term denotes the philosophical reflection and philosophies of the *Native Americans* (also called *Amerindians* and *American Indians*), i.e. the descendants of groups from Asia (and, some argue, other areas) who, beginning more (some say much earlier) than 40,000 years ago, migrated first into present-day Alaska and then into areas of what are now Canada, the United States and, eventually, other areas of North, Central, and South America.

Among these groups, some – e.g. the Incas of what is now Peru, Bolivia, northern Chile and northwestern Argentina, the Mayas of Mexico and Guatemala, and the Nahuas of Mexico – developed outstanding settlements, cultivating corn, building large cities with plazas, parks, and public buildings, as well as pyramids, and roads used for extensive trade. In addition, a good many other groups engaged in analogous activities to a somewhat smaller scale and developed their own forms of art, oral and, in some cases (e.g. that of the Nahuas), written literature that described their myths, and formulated their cosmological ideas and, indeed, conceptions of truth, personal value, and life's significance. An example of these is discussed elsewhere in this dictionary (see [NAHUA philosophy](#)).

Besides those already mentioned, many groups in what is now the United States and Canada – e.g. the Navajo, the Hopi, and the Lakota – have shown significant resilience and, today, are widely recognized for the philosophical value of their ideas, especially those concerning the interconnection between human settlements and their natural environment.

This interconnection is reflected even in the manner in which these groups conceived of knowledge. For example, in Navajo philosophy, *aha'áná'oo'níil* or “the gathering of family,” is one of the four categories of [knowledge](#). It focuses on family ties and emotive connections, and is associated with the yellow evening twilight. A second category is *bik'ehgo da'iinánii* or “that which gives direction to life.” It focuses on character development and moral deliberation, and is associated with the dawn. A third category is *Háá'ayí,í,h, sihasin dóo hodilzin* or “rest, contentment, and respect for creation.” It focuses on the interconnected character of all life and *k'e*, i.e. love or reverence for nature, and is associated with darkness. A fourth is *nihigáál* or “sustenance.” It focuses on self-reliance and becoming a contributing member of one's community, and is associated with the blue twilight. As for the significance of all these categories and the types of interconnections they reflect, Navajo philosophy holds that the ultimate aim of knowing and living is *hózhó* or the beauty way of life.

The Navajo knowledge system, like that of many Native American peoples, is based on metaphysical principles. For the Hopi, *navoti*, i.e. abstract knowledge, has – like Navajo speech – causal effectiveness in engaging supernatural factors that involve conscious and animate force. Among Navajo metaphysical views, the central notion is that of *níłch'í*, a term sometimes translated as wind, though it denotes the air or atmosphere in its entirety. *Níłch'í* is thought to be holy; to suffuse all nature; to give life, thought, speech, and the ability to move to all living things; and to serve as means of communication between all components of the living world.







In Navajo thought, the world existing on the earth's surface is the result of *níłch'í*'s emerging from the underworlds it had created. This type of emergence, together, with the various characteristics attributed to *níłch'í*, makes this conception quite unlike much, if not all, of Western thought. Perhaps the only likely affinity is with the notion of the One found in emanationism (see [Neoplatonism](#)).

At any rate, the Navajos' use of the category *k'e*, i.e. love or reverence for nature, has influenced various contemporary authors who discuss ecological problems and propose solutions involving a change in the manner in which humans conceive of their relation with the land, the environment, or, in general, the biota.

As indicated, though the philosophies of Native American peoples display many differences; they share some similarities, certainly in the United States and Canada. For example, among the Lakota, *Mitakuye Oyasin*, meaning “we are all related,” is an expression used in greetings and ceremonies to point out that all life forms are interconnected. Also, the Navajo concept of the holy wind is analogous to the Dakota concept of *Skán*, the Great Spirit. Indeed, scholars have suggested that this concept may be quite widespread among other native North Americans. The animating force of the universe is called *wakan* among the Siouan, *orenda* among the Iroquoian, *manitou* among the Algonquian, and *nawalak* among the Kwakiutl.

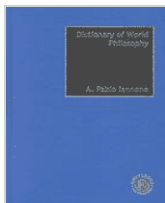
See also: [myth](#); [Nahua philosophy](#)

Further reading

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