

LIVING OUR MYTHS: THE MYTHIC FOUNDATION OF TRIBAL EDUCATION

CAJETE Gregory A., Espanola, New Mexico, U.S.A

Tribal myth contain tremendous psycho/spiritual energy that illuminates and contexts the acts of both individual and community when it is appropriately accessed. Every body of tribal myth contains a variety of stories which are culturally important to a tribe and reflect their uniqueness. Tribal myths are filled with tribally significant metaphors, symbols, images, and creative linguistic/visual forms which are emotionally affective for members of a tribe. They are essentially interpreted accounts of the world experienced through the lives of the people of the tribe. As a whole, they are reflections of the role of people and spirits which affect a tribe's world. They are a body of explanation which form the Story of the People as they metaphorically perceive and relate that story. [1]

Every tribe created vehicles for skillfully and creatively accessing the inherent energy contained in their body of myth. Through the telling, performance and artistic expression of myth, tribal teachers actively brought their tribal bodies of myth alive and made it's lessons relevant to their audience's time and place. While keeping true to the core meanings of their myths, tribal teachers continually improvised, reorganized, and recreated the particular elements of a myth to fit their audience, the situation, and their own personal expression. In reality, every myth is "renewed" with each time *and* in each place it is told. Myths live through each teller and through each audience which hears and actively engages them. Myths and their enactment in every form was the way a tribe remembered to remember their shared experience as a people.

There are as many ways to tell a myth as there are myth tellers, and there are many ways to view myth as well. Western academic schools of "mythic" thought have ranged from evolutionist, to symbolic, to psychoanalytic, to functionalist, to structuralist, to folkloric orientations in their attempts to explain the human phenomena of myth. Yet, only recently have Western scholars turned to the "keepers of myth" for guidance. And, only recently, have some Western scholars of myth begun to cultivate an attitude of appreciation for these keepers and reverence for the *power* of myths in shaping human learning and experience. Indeed, humans are story telling animals. Story is a primary structure through which humans think, relate and communicate. We make stories, tell

stories and live stories because it is such an integral part of the way of being human. Myths, legends, and folk tales have been the cornerstone of teaching in every culture. These forms of "story" teach us about the nature of human life in all its dimensions and manifestations. They teach us how to live fully through reflection on, or participation in, the uniquely human cultural expressions of community, art, religion, *and* adaptation to a natural environment. The myths we live by actively shape and integrate our life experience. They inform us as well as form us through our interaction with their symbols and images.

Myths explain what it means to live in community with one another. They explain human dependence on the natural world and essential relationships which must be maintained therein. They explore the life-and-death matters of human existence and relate such matters to basic origins, causes or relationships. They reflect on the concerns which are basic *and* crucial to humans' understanding of themselves. Creation, survival, relationship, healing, wholeness, and death are the consistent themes of myth in every culture, place, and time. In short, myths are everything that the people and community which create them are.

The function of myth is as diverse and complex as human life and cultures. The myths that we live by glue our communities together through shared metaphors of identity and purpose. Myths help to balance individual psychologies and connect them to the greater wholes of the tribe, natural environment, and global community. Myths "resound" the spiritual essence of religion and ritual in life-related terms. Myth mirrors the paradoxes of life and reflects the truth behind every paradox.

Myth, in both its expressions through narrative and performance, is a communicative art form which integrates other art forms such as song, dance, and visual arts in its expression. Indeed, myth is a primary contextual field for artistic expression and may have led to the development of "art" in the early stages of human culture. Art is one of the languages of myth!

Finally, myths live or die through people. Myths, as human creations, are messages — as well as a way of conscious reflection — which live through the people who share them through the breath of their thoughts, words and actions.

Living through myth means learning how to use the primal images and processes which myth presents in a creative process of learning and teaching which connects our past, present and future. Living through myth also means learning to live a life of relationships to ourselves, other people and the world based on an appreciation, understanding, and guidance from our inner spirit and our wealth of ancestral/cultural traditions.

To "seek" such a life is a foundational metaphor of Indigenous Education which invites the empowerment and cultivation of a creative life of learning. And, it is the images and symbols brought to life through myth at the personal and group levels that provide impetus for such a creative life of learning.

"Mythic images...are pictures that involve us both physiologically in our bodily reactions to them and spiritually in our higher thoughts about them. When a person is aware of living mythically, he or she is experiencing life intensively and reflectively." [2]

Tracking A Myth: The Concentric Rings of Indigenous Education Process

The working of a metaphor is a creative way of exploring the teaching processes using myth in tribal societies. Such a process is a foundational dynamic of indigenous teaching and learning. This working evolves around the symbols and metaphors in myth and *is a way of asking for knowledge.*

The metaphor of tracking and the symbol of concentric rings are examples of tribal analogies which can be worked in such a way as to present a verbal and visual image as profound teaching. It is exactly this working in the context of myth which leads to profound and highly creative tribal expressions of teaching and learning.

Tracking involves good observation, common/natural sense, following an intuitive yet discernible direction, and developing intuition and visual thinking. Tracking in the literal sense simply involves observing the "rings" that are coming into you and quieting the rings that are going out from you. Tracks can be read at many different dimensions and from many perspectives. In reality, tracking strategy begins with scanning the "rings" of a landscape with a kind of "macro-vision." Such scanning eventually leads one through smaller concentric "rings" down to a micro-focus on a specific animal.

The "rings" which I refer to in this discussion are those which comprise observable inter-relationships in nature and social/psychological process. That is, every process in nature and society occurs in what can be called a "context" of concentric rings.

Concentric rings radiate from every "thing" and every process. The concentric ring provides a visual symbol of relationship; it is a way of visualizing how all processes radiate concentric rings, which in turn affect other rings of other processes. The symbol of concentric rings is useful in

seeing how one thing affects another, how one thing leads to another, and how one thing is connected to another.

The concentric ring is also a basic symbol of wholeness. It allows for representation of wholeness as the inter-connection of many concentric rings of relationship. The *mapping* of concentric rings of relationship is a major activity which occurs in "primal peoples" mythology, ritual, and adaptation to their respective natural environments. In all of these concentric rings of wholeness, there is always the awareness of a particular aspect of nature, reordering it and then representing it in some form. This process is one of the universals of the creative act and as such is a primary dimension of science and art.

Tracking from this perspective is intimately involved with learning how to *see* "connections" between concentric rings. The analogy of tracking then can be used in a variety of ways to illustrate an essential process in indigenous learning; that is, the process of seeing connections, being aware of concentric circles of inter-relationship and following the "tracks" of a parable or mythic process. The process of tracking is itself comprised of a group of concentric rings beginning with the physical, followed by the psychological, then the social and metaphysical. These rings of tracking represent inter-related dimensions of process and "field" thinking.

Field thinking within the context of tracking simply means becoming aware of a particular "field of relationships" and being able to pick out specific possibilities within this field which directly relate to what one wants to find or to do.

Tracking at the first level usually requires the ability to *see* connections of a physical nature. For example, an older Tewa hunter of wide experience in a particular environment can tell a fox is coming when a bluejay begins to scold in just a certain way. How does he know this? Well, in all likelihood some time in the past the old hunter *observed* and *heard* a bluejay scolding a fox in just this way. The old hunter fixed that image and that sound in his memory. He saw a specific connection within a field of possibilities. When that particular bluejay scold is heard again, the hunter remembers the sound and the image.

Tracking at the physical level requires the development of the ability to discern patterns using our visual acuity, to discern differences in sound, feeling, smell, and even taste. It involves the ability to *know*, using these basic human perceptual abilities, tracking of a particular problem or situation.

Tracking in the metaphysical sense is basically following the concentric rings of the physical, psychological, social, and spiritual to their various origins. Mythology presents the primary example of this process.

Try to visualize tracking of the trace of an animal through the eye of the hunter, then into the mouth of the hunter, then back through his hand, his body and his psyche in the forms of art, dance, song and ritual. Through myth and its associated rings of expression, the hunter celebrates the animal to make more animals, to dance more animals, to increase the fertility and vitality of certain animal species and in doing so, to keep the concentric rings rotating and inter-relating in a positive way. This is the essence of the hunting mythology of early man.

Primal mythologies abound with examples of tracing and "working" the tracks of "the ancestors" through time and through a geographical landscape of mythology whose concentric rings radiate to the present time and place. A key to understanding mythological tracking of concentric rings is developing the ability to think "upside down." In mythological contexts, things are reversed and inside out. For instance, the peyote hunt of the Huichol Indians of Mexico is characterized by tracing of the steps of the Huichol ancestors to the mythological land of Peyote, which is called "Wirikuta." This reverse tracking of the ancestor's steps occurs over a geographical and mythological landscape in which those Huichol seeking the peyote are led by a "Mara a kame" (Huichol Shaman) through five concentric rings of relationship. Each of these rings is symbolized by its own state of mind, its own ritual, its own natural energy and geographical landmark. The geographical landscape from the Sierra Madre, where the Huichols now live, to the desert flats just outside of San Luis Potessi, where the peyote cactus is to be found, represents the trail of the ancestors' tracks. Along the geographical landscape of this trail are natural landmarks which are representative of the concentric rings of important natural and life-sustaining "energies" of the earth. These are the archetypal energies of earth, wind, fire, water, plant and animal. Each of these energies are represented in Huichol traditional yarn painting by mythological animals, beings, and entities. They are symbolic of the natural shaping energies of the earth's landscape. [2]

Tracking the ancestors' mythological steps, then, takes the Huichol through different levels of knowing in reference to peyote, Huichol origins and myth, Huichol cultural philosophy, and the natural energies of the Huichol's natural habitat. This sort of metaphysical tracking through concentric rings of inter-relationship illustrates how landscape, natural energies, plants and animals affect each other. Noting these relationships and their mutual effects is the beginning of "primal" science and the wellspring of indigenous knowledge.

For instance, within the contexts of Native American mythologies, certain geographical features personify "ties" between natural processes. Generally, such features are looked upon as sacred places. These natural

features may be specific formations, springs, lakes, rivers, mountains or other natural places. All these features, physically, visually, and metaphysically represent concentric rings in nature. Many are symbols of life sustainers such as corn, deer, buffalo, fish, rain clouds, and forests. An understanding of the relationships inherent in these "ties" is essential to survival. Therefore, much attention is given to ways of knowing and learning about important natural phenomena.

Myths present a way of mapping a particular geographical landscape. Relating the stories associated with a particular geographic place is a way to begin to develop a cognitive map of that place and of its concentric rings of inter-relationship. Migration myths, for instance, are tracking stories through a geographical landscape. In many Native American migration myths, it is implied that the "ancestors" left representations of themselves in various natural forms or phenomena to remind people how to act and how to relate to the natural world.

Through the symbol of concentric rings, myth is able to give us a visual image of how one thing in reality is like something in myth and vice versa. Every myth has its concentric rings of meaning and is told and retold in this way. The telling of a myth begins with a simple version for children, then moves to a slightly more complicated version for adolescents, to a deeper version for initiates and to a still deeper version for the fully mature.

The symbol of concentric circles in its many manifestations throughout the cultures of the world universally seems to always connote a process event. That is, the concentric ring, when it is used in primal myth, ritual or art, denotes that something happened here or that something is happening here — it might be a waterhole, a ceremony, a distinct natural phenomena, or an important life activity.

For instance, the concentric ring represents a major process symbol in the mythology, ritual, and art of the Australian aborigine. As represented in aboriginal traditional art, the concentric ring is a place of an important event of sacred significance and great insight. The mandala and the medicine wheel are other symbolic exemplifications of significant process events. Since myth mirrors and analogizes natural process, it is no wonder that one of the simplest symbols represents one of the most complex processes of both nature and the human psyche — that of inter-relationships.

The symbol of concentric rings images the fact that everything is unique and leaves its own signature track. Yet it also shows that all things share likenesses which are to be found in the overlap of rings.

Knowledge grows and develops outward in concentric rings. Likewise, concentric rings can also form the basis of learning how to

track ideas and intuitions, how to observe fields of knowledge, and how to see patterns and connections in thought and natural reality.

Indigenous Education in "process" is basically following tracks in a particular field or level of natural, social, or spiritual reality. This tracking at any given dimension requires opening one's mind to the possibilities within each of the many concentric circles within that dimension. Learning how to blend the mythological, aesthetic, intuitive, and visual perspectives of nature with the scientific, rational, and verbal perspective is an integral part of Indigenous Education. Education, from this viewpoint, involves learning to see nature holistically. This requires a continual shifting and interplay between the two complementary perspectives mentioned. Facilitating the learning of how to orchestrate these two ways of viewing nature toward the greatest effect must become a major activity of contemporary Indian Education.

In this indigenously modeled approach, the first track begins with a symbol. It is these symbols which are the connection or keys which access the myth, the relationships of concentric circles and knowledge and perceptions of natural realities. For instance, in teaching and learning a process discipline such as science, beginning with a mythological track and following that track, through its concentric circles from its abstraction to its reality and then back again, presents one of the most natural and potentially creative approaches.

The Southwestern Indian symbol of the humpback flute player, sometimes called "Kokopeli" or antman, provides a case in point: The "Kokopeli" is a mythological symbol which represents the bringer of seeds, fertility, sexuality, abundance, the spreading of art and culture. The "Kokopeli" is a natural process symbol which is "pregnant" with meaning. As such, the symbol of "Kokopeli" is surrounded by many myths; these myths in turn abound with metaphors representing various dimensions of the procreative processes of nature. Each of these processes are encircled by a body of psychological, aesthetic and cultural expressions. These expressions in turn are tied to realities which are observable and which form a basis for Pueblo teaching through myth.

The "Kokopeli" is a mythically contexted visual metaphor which acts as a kind of "gatekeeper." That is, through "tracking" its meaning through its multiple levels of use and its various appearances in myths from Mexico to the Southwest U.S., one reaches one of the foundational roots of Pueblo Indian world view and mythic tradition. There are other Pueblo "gatekeepers" connected to other foundational mythic roots. Thinking Woman, The Corn Maidens, The Horned Serpent, the Sacred Clowns and Spider Woman are some of the others. Tribal-specific "gatekeepers" exist for the Navajo, Sioux, Iroquois, Ojibway, Pima, Huichal, Inuit and every other tribe from Alaska to the tip of South America. The

Diag

complex of Raven myths in the Northwest, the Coyote/Trickster myths of the West and Southwest, the Inapi (Old Man) myths of the Northern Plains, the Sedna myths of the Far North, the Medicine Wheel of the Central Plains, the Tree of Peace and Great Turtle of the Northern Woodlands are only a few of the American tribal mythic bodies, each of which contains numbers of "gatekeeper" symbols whose tracking leads to the roots of a tribal tradition and its mythic knowledge base.

Tracking selected tribal "gatekeepers" through key myths which illustrate the process and content of teaching/learning (in each of the orienting foundations of Indigenous Education) will be the primary vehicle of exploration throughout this text.

This methodology is a form of creative analysis in which the logic for myth and its validation is internally consistent with the perspective of a tribe's understanding an essential "message" reflected through the myth. Those gatekeeper symbols which are widely used in a particular region and which have a wide breadth of meaning will be explored within the context of myths from the same region. A major indigenous cultural or philosophical concept, they provide ideal vehicles for ways of seeing, understanding and relating considered important by a group of tribes in a region.

The myth of "Water Jar Boy" is a Tewa story whose roots begin in a mythic past which is ancient and reflective of the way the visual symbolic form of "Kokopeli" is employed in both the oral narrative and petroglyphic direction of a Pueblo teaching story.

On a petroglyph panel located near the ruin of La Cienega Pueblo, twelve miles south of Santa Fe, New Mexico, a series of "Kokopeli" figures herald the story of "Water Jar Boy." Water Jar boy is a story which I remember my grandmother and other Tewa grandmothers telling many times as I was growing up. It is a teaching story, a story about why things are and the importance of coming to know the spiritual sources from which human life proceeds (See Diagram).

Diagram of Water Jar Boy Myth Petroglyph at La Cienega, N.M.

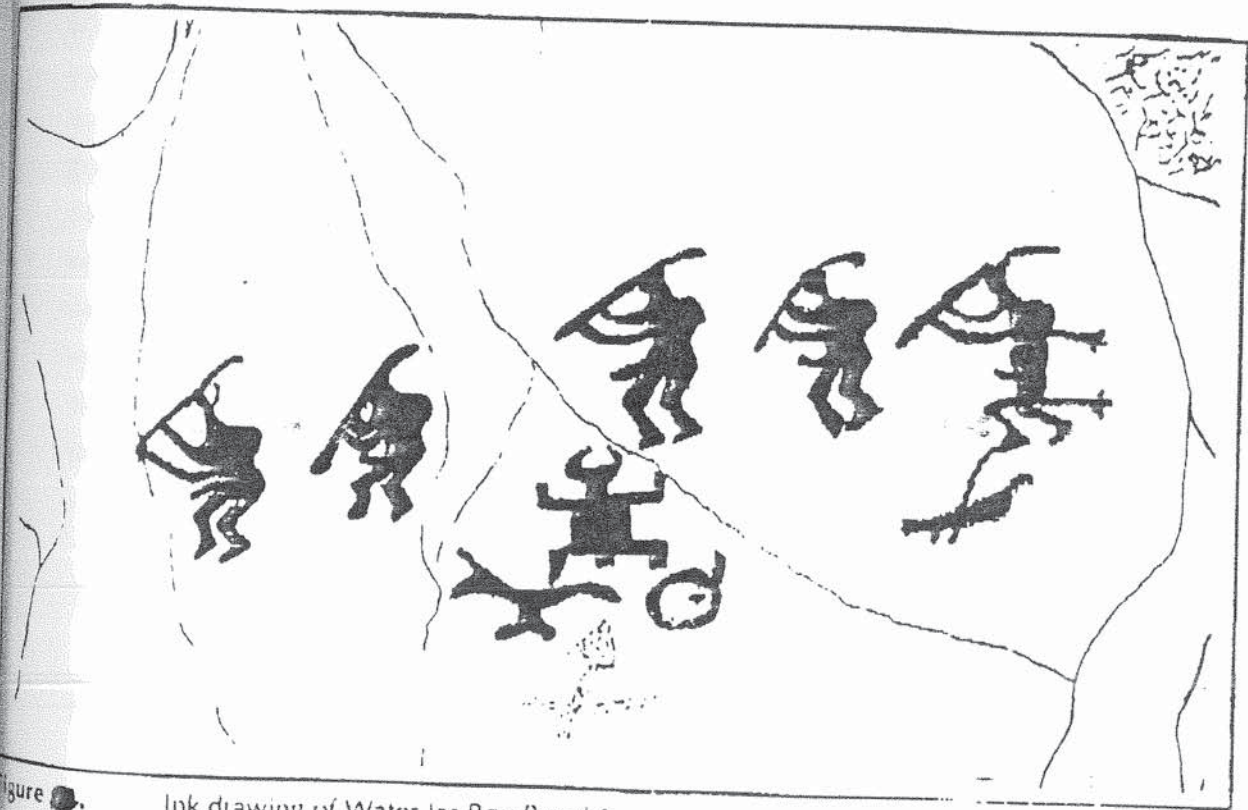


Figure 1. Ink drawing of Water Jar Boy Panel 1.

[4]

References

1. Vecsey, Christopher. Imagine Ourselves Richly. San Francisco: Haper Collins Publishers. 1991.
2. Goldberg, Naomi. Changing the Gods: Feminism and the End of Traditional Religions. Boston: Beacon, 1979. p. 47.
3. Myerhoff, Barbara G. Pevoite Hunt. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1974.
4. Rudolph, Carol. Petroglyphs and Pueblo Myths of the Rio Grande. Albuquerque: Avanyu Publishing Inc., 1990. (Diagram reprinted with permission of the author.)