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Author(s): Carol Mitchell

Source: *American Indian Quarterly*, Vol. 5, No. 1, A Special Symposium Issue on Leslie Marmon Silko's "Ceremony" (Feb., 1979), pp. 27-35

Published by: University of Nebraska Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1184722>

Accessed: 06-03-2020 11:47 UTC

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Ceremony as Ritual

CAROL MITCHELL
Colorado State University

Leslie Marmon Silko's novel, *Ceremony*, can be viewed as three simultaneous planes which interweave throughout. There is the human plane on which we see one man's despair and his regeneration; there is the socio/cultural plane on which we see the cultural conflicts caused by the partial acculturation of the Pueblo Indians; and there is the myth/ritual plane on which we see the traditional myths, values, and beliefs of the Laguna and their relationship to the contemporary Laguna Indian. The reader's understanding of the traditional materials found in the myth/ritual plane is crucial for understanding the whole novel, for among Indians the spiritual world is one with the secular world; disharmony on the spiritual plane causes disharmony in the whole world and vice versa. Thus, these three planes of the novel should not be separated, but must be seen together, as parts of a whole. The novel itself can and should be viewed as a part of the changing rituals in which the novelist has become the healer or shaman and the readers are the participants in the new ceremony.

All of the American Indians have faced the problems of the small, less technologically oriented society confronted by a much larger and materially wealthy technological society, and to a greater or lesser degree each tribal culture has changed as a result of this confrontation. One typical result of this culture change has been that some members of the Indian societies have lost the spiritual values of their own societies without being able to replace those values with new spiritual values from Anglo-American society. In the case of the Laguna Pueblo this acculturative process began even earlier than in most of the other Pueblo societies. According to Elsie Clews Parsons, around 1880 the religious conservatives of Laguna moved to Isleta, "carrying with them their altars and other sacred things, and leaving the progressive, Americanized townspeople to a state of irreligion from which they have never fully recovered."¹ During that time much of the richness of the Pueblo ceremonial was lost to Laguna, although some parts of the

ceremonial survived or have been revived. This drastic and traumatic splitting of the Laguna Pueblo helps in our understanding of some of the details of *Ceremony*: for instance, the fact that Tayo needs to go to a medicine man who is more powerful than Ku'oosh, the Laguna medicine man of the Scalp Ceremony, and is thus sent to Betonie, who is a Navajo and not a Laguna, and the emphasis that we find in *Ceremony* on the need for changing, growing ceremonies rather than the static, unchanging traditional ceremonies. We can assume from Laguna's history that many individual Lagunas have felt a lack in their lives deriving from the loss of ceremonial and tradition.

While one novel alone cannot revive or replace the traditions and ceremonies of a people, Silko's novel is itself a curing ceremony. It weaves the old stories and traditions into the contemporary story of Tayo in a way that helps to make the old ways understandable and relevant to the contemporary situation. Not only is Tayo cured by the old stories and changing ceremonies, but the form of the novel may bring a new storytelling tradition into the Indian tradition that will help to cure some of the hopelessness and despair of the contemporary Indian who is caught between two ways of life.

The novel begins ceremonially with the Laguna myth of the creation.² Among the Pueblos and the Navajos, as among many peoples, the creation myth recreates the power of the time of creation, and "the patient is projected out of profane time into the plenitude of primordial time."³ "It is through the actualization of the cosmic Creation, exemplary model of all life, that it is hoped to restore the physical health and spiritual integrity of the patient."⁴ It seems uniquely appropriate that the novel begins in this way, since not only is the novel the story of Tayo's extended curing ceremony, but it is also a curing ceremony for the Laguna and other Indian peoples in which the power of creation will enhance the recreation and rebirth of the Indian nations. And finally, one can see the use of the creation myth at the beginning of the novel as a spiritual means by which the novelist is inspired in her creative work by the original creation which is parallel to the invocation to the muses in Western literature.

After the story of the Creation comes the ceremonial explanation of the connection between stories and ceremony. The stories are not just entertainment, they are the heritage of a people, they validate the traditions of the culture, they make the past come alive in the present, and they reassure that the past will continue into the future.

And in the belly of this story
the rituals and the ceremony
are still growing. (p. 2)

Thus Silko attests that the novel itself is a ceremony, that the traditions

are alive while growing and changing, and further, that the ceremony is for healing.

The only cure
I know
is a good ceremony,
that's what she said. (p. 3)

Since "she," Thinking Woman the Creator, said this, the story is validated as a cure by the highest deity. The poetic opening also becomes a "prayer," which concludes with "Sunrise" (p. 4), a reference to traditional Pueblo sunrise prayers, but, of course, also symbolic of hope for the future.

The novel begins in May, continues through a full year and on through the autumnal equinox in September; thus, the ritualistic calendar has been completed during the course of Tayo's cure. Mircea Eliade has pointed out that the whole series of periodic seasonal ceremonies can really be placed under "two main headings: (1) annual expulsion of demons, diseases and sins; (2) rituals of the days preceeding and following the New Year."⁵ These two main times occur at the beginning and end of *Ceremony* with the May purification and curing at the beginning and the end of the old year, and the beginning of the new at the autumnal equinox at the end of the novel. Although September is not the end of the old year in the Western calendar, as Eliade also points out, the new year for traditional peoples often comes at the equinoxes or winter solstice, and clearly Tayo sees the equinox as the end of the old year. "A transition was about to be completed: the sun was crossing the zenith to a winter place in the sky, a place where prayers of long winter nights would call out the long summer days of new growth. Tonight the old priests would be praying for the force to continue the relentless motion of the stars" (p. 247). Appropriately, the novel begins in the spring when the general purification ceremonies are held along with special curing ceremonies.⁶ And it is Tayo's cure that is central to the novel.

Interspersed through the story of Tayo are the traditional and contemporary myths, legends, and chants. The curing of the world sickness which involves drought on the earth parallels the curing of Tayo's despair. Basically we see three causes of the sickness of the Pueblo world. First, a misunderstanding between Corn Woman and Reed Woman led to drought.⁷ Second, the omission of proper rituals by the War Twins,⁸ *Ma'see'wi* and *Ou'yu'ye'we* angers *Nau'ts'ity'i*, the Corn mother, and leads to drought. Third, the witches, who are evil and who continually cause sickness and death, have a contest to show off their magical powers, and the white race is created. This story seems to be almost entirely a creation of Silko rather than a traditional story, although according to Laguna tradition *I'tcts'ity'i* is the mother of the white people while *Nau'ts'ity'i* is the mother of the

Indian people, and *I'tcts'ity'i* is half witch.¹⁰ So there does seem to be a traditional connection between a witch and the creation of white people.

The causes of sickness in the Pueblo world in the traditional stories parallel the causes of sickness in the contemporary world. First, Tayo's sickness is primarily because of his misunderstanding of his Indian traditions and heritage: "He had believed in the stories for a long time, until the teachers at Indian school taught him not to believe in that kind of 'nonsense'" (p. 19). And one realizes that this is the primary cause of the sickness of the whole tribe. Furthermore, Silko places this description of Tayo's lack of understanding almost immediately after telling the story of Reed Woman and Corn Woman. Second, there has been a loss of the old rituals. Too many Indians are like Rocky who was embarrassed by the performance of the deer hunting rituals. And with the loss of the rituals the people have turned to the white man's "magic" just as the War brothers were blinded by the magic of the Ck'o'yo medicine man. Again Silko describes a contemporary scene that is parallel to the traditional story almost immediately after the traditional story. Third, there is the evil of both white and Indian witches who actively cause harm to others—the white man's wars, the corrupt Indians living in the gully at Gallop, the active hate of Emo for both white and Indians.

Finally, the cures in the contemporary world are parallel to the cures in the traditional stories. The Scalp Ceremony that Ku'oosh, the Laguna medicine man, performs for Tayo does not cure him because he no longer understands the old rituals. Gradually, as he thinks of Josiah's teachings and then with Betonie's help and finally Ts'eh's help, Tayo begins to understand again the old ways so that he can be cured. As he begins to understand the old ways, he begins himself to perform the old rituals—sprinkling pollen, saying a prayer at sunrise, participating in the Kiva ceremony with Ku'oosh. And finally he is able to watch the witches' ritual without being drawn into it and destroyed, but without his new understanding of tradition he would have been drawn into the destruction just as he had been drawn into the fight with Emo in the bar.

Not only does Silko ritualistically repeat the parallel causes of sickness and the curing of that sickness, but she also shows the stories and ceremonies building and growing to form a new ritual that can be understood and used to cure the despair of loss of belief and cross-cultural conflict. The ritualistic stories and chants are given in poetic form, but descriptions of traditional rituals are not set off from the story, for they are the actions that accompany the ritual of the story.

In the larger ritual scheme of the novel, the first act of the ritual is the telling of the story of The Creation and the validation of the story

as a ceremony. Then comes the story of Reed Woman's and Corn Woman's misunderstanding and the ensuing drought with the story left unfinished and no cure for the drought mentioned. The Scalp Ceremonies for the returned veterans follow, and again there is no cure. Then comes the beginning of the story of the Ck'o'yo medicine man and the ensuing drought. At this point the story is left unfinished with no cure, but as bits and pieces of the story are interwoven through the novel, the anticipated cure comes closer and closer until finally almost at the end of the novelistic ceremony, the curing ceremony for the drought is completed.

The first witchery ceremony comes with Emo's story of getting White Pussy during the war, and this witchery ritual almost draws Tayo to destruction. Following this are short sections of the Ck'o'yo medicine man story in which Hummingbird and Fly, the traditional messengers,¹¹ gather up the items to use for a ritual of propitiation and purification. These short excerpts give hope for a final cure. Before that cure comes, though, there is the story of the boy who lived with the bears and could have lost his life if the medicine man had not understood the need for a step-by-step ceremony. This story, told by Betonie, ends with the boy's reintroduction into society and thus validates the fact that the medicine ceremonies can return people to society. Then Betonie tells the long story of the Creation of the White People through witchery, which is to help Tayo understand the evil in the world and the need for ceremonies to cure it. Shortly after this story Betonie tells another curing story of the boy stolen by Coyote which involves a fairly complete description of the ritual used, again validating the use of curing ceremonies and including the ceremonial sand painting.¹² The sand painting ceremony for Tayo immediately follows its validation story along with ritual chants involving repetitions of lines four times, four being the magical and ritual number for the Indians, as three is for the White world.¹³ The story of the evil Kaup'a'ta, another Ck'o'yo magician who captures the storm clouds, is then told as another myth that validates the belief that even witchery can be cured. Thus, we see that the three curing stories also follow the pattern discussed earlier: of understanding, use of ritual, and destruction of witches and witchery. This is the last ritualistic story given in poetic form that is told except for the conclusion of the cure for the drought caused by loss of ritual.

After the Kaup'a'ta validation story comes the sunrise chant, the winter chant, and the ritual at the Elk Shrine. The sunrise chant and the ritual at the Elk Shrine are both done by Tayo, who is finally almost cured of his despair. The ritual at the Elk Shrine takes place in late September just before the autumnal equinox during the traditional season for the

hunting ceremonies¹⁴ and returns the novel to the traditional seasonal calendar ceremonies that began with the opening of the novel in May and the purification and curing ceremonies. The ritual performed at the shrine, while incomplete, is traditional in nature with the rebuilding of the altar and the offering of willow sticks.

Shortly after this ceremony, on the night of the autumnal equinox, Tayo witnesses Leroy, Emo, and Pinkie in a drunken debauch that he recognizes as a witchery ritual. Although the equinoxes are usual times for ceremonials, this is not a part of the regular Pueblo seasonal rituals since it is done by witches in order to hurt the society. And as is usual with witches, they do the reverse of what is good and appropriate in a society. Thus, instead of purifying themselves the participants have become drunk. Tayo, on the other hand, has been purified before seeing this ritual by unintentional fasting and vomiting, which are both part of Pueblo purification ceremonies.¹⁵ Pinkie does beat on the car as if it were a drum, but the drumming is metallic and unnatural, "the sound of witchery: smashing through the night, shrill and cold as black metal" (p. 250). Finally they make a human sacrifice of Harley, rather than the usual Pueblo sacrifices of pollen, cornmeal, willow sticks, and tobacco, and the ritual becomes a bleak parody of the peaceful Pueblo ceremonial. Because of the curing ceremonies and rituals that Tayo has been participating in with Betonie and Ts'eh, and because of his physical purification, he is able to escape the destruction of the witchery which overcomes Leroy, Pinkie, Emo, and Harley.

The final part of the novel includes the "You have seen her" chant (p. 257), the evil unraveled chant (p. 258), the witchery is dead chant (pp. 261-261), and finally the sunrise chant (p. 262) which concludes the novel and gives it as an offering to the rising sun. It is only appropriate that these chants which are, of course, rituals, should come after the understanding of traditional ritual has been gained by Tayo and the readers of the novel who have become participants in the new ritual. To add to the ritualistic quality of *Ceremony*, Silko has made the novel almost a chant at times by repeating formulaic sentences, phrases and words. "In the old days," "It has never been easy," and "This has been going on for a long time" are some of the formulaic phrases that are used throughout the novel along with the images of entanglement and unraveling.

Another important ritualistic element of the novel is the distortion of time. Not only do Tayo's nightmares, hallucinations, and flashbacks distort time, but also the interwoven ancient tales with their parallels in the modern tale add to the distortion. The most important distortion of time occurs in the episodes with Tayo and Ts'eh for Ts'eh seems to be a rein-

carnation from one of the ancient legends, the living proof that the legends never die, that all time is one time. Ts'eh, then, is Yellow Woman, Ko'chinako. In the traditional legends of the Pueblo, Yellow Woman is the leader of the Corn Maidens and thus associated with fertility, growth, and summer. One story about her is that she and her husband Winter, Shakak, lived in the North. One time she met Summer, Miochin, who lived in the South, and invited him home with her while her husband was gone deer hunting. That evening her husband returned home in a snow storm. Summer returned home to the South to rally his forces; later Winter and Summer fought for Yellow Woman, after which it was decided that she would live with Winter for half the year and Summer for half the year.¹⁶

Clearly, the story of Tayo and Ts'eh is the contemporary reenactment of the old myth. When Tayo meets Ts'eh, she is living on the slope of North Top with her husband. When Tayo arrives, her husband is away deer hunting and she invites Tayo to stay. Her husband returns in a snow storm and Tayo goes south again to his home. In the spring Ts'eh comes to Tayo, as he knew she would, although she had not told him so, and lives with him for the summer, leaving him in the fall to return to her husband for the winter. Furthermore, it is clear that Ts'eh is not an ordinary woman, for the morning after Tayo spends his first night with her she performs a ritual with yellow and blue pebbles and dark yellow tobacco and blue-gray mountain sage.¹⁷ Also, when Tayo first meets her, he notices her blanket with the storm cloud pattern that she is wearing. When he is at her house during the snow storm, we learn that she has used the blanket to call up the storm, and when she folds it up the storm stops. Later, when she lives with Tayo for the summer, she teaches him about the plants, including their magical properties: "This one contains the color of the sky after a summer rain storm. I'll take it from here and plant it in another place, a canyon where it hasn't rained for a while'" (p. 224). Thus, with sympathetic magic, like causes like. And finally, like traditional Pueblo medicine men,¹⁸ "she could see reflections in sandrock, pools of rainwater" (p. 232), from which she could prophesy the future. At last Tayo realizes that she is of the past as well as the present: "He thought of her then; she had always loved him, she had never left him; she had always been there" (p. 255).

In a short story entitled "Yellow Woman," Silko mentions an old legend which includes the information that Yellow Woman has "light hair and eyes."¹⁹ Ts'eh, too, is light with light brown skin and ocher eyes. The use of the light eyes motif ties Ts'eh not only with the traditional myth, but also to other characters in the novel who have special powers in the cere-

mony. This ritualistic repetition of the eyes motif occurs with Josiah's Mexican Woman, Betonie and his grandmother who was another Mexican woman, and with Tayo himself. At the end of the novel Ku'oosh and the other medicine men seem to recognize Ts'eh when "they asked about the direction she had come from and the color of her eyes" (p. 257).

At the beginning of this paper the recreation of the time of creation was discussed as being a part of curing ceremonies. In making the novel itself a curing ceremony, Silko has made the old rituals grow into a new ritual that still hearkens back to the ancient times and rituals. At Betonie's, Tayo begins to recognize the timelessness of rituals, for "he wanted to dismiss all of it as an old man's rubbish, debris that had fallen out of the years, but the boxes and trunks, the bundles and stacks were plainly part of the pattern" (p. 120). Betonie, understanding Tayo's feelings says, "Take it easy . . . don't try to see everything at once . . . We've been gathering these things for a long time—hundreds of years. She was doing it before I was born, and he was working before she came. And on and on back down in time'" (p. 120). Later, on the mountain looking for cattle, Tayo gets a real sense of the timelessness of time: "The ck'o'yo Kaup'a'ta somewhere is stacking his gambling sticks and waiting for a visitor; Rocky and I are walking across the ridge in the moonlight; Josiah and Robert are waiting for us. This night is a single night; and there has never been any other" (p. 192). Thus, the contemporary story/ceremony of Tayo is so interwoven with the traditional myths, curing stories, and chants that it becomes a part of an ever-continuing and ancient tradition—as Tayo's grandmother says, "It seems like I already heard these stories before . . . only thing is, the names sound different'" (p. 260).

NOTES

1. Elsie Clews Parsons, *Pueblo Indian Religion* (Chicago, 1939), p. 15.
2. Hamilton A. Tyler, *Pueblo Gods and Myths* (Norman, 1964), p. 116.
3. Mircea Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return or Cosmos and History*, trans. Willard R. Trask, Bollingen Series XLVI (Princeton, 1954), p. 84.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 82.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 53.
6. Parsons, p. 860, Table 3.
7. Tyler, pp. 118-119.
8. Parsons, p. 247.
9. *Ibid.*, pp. 243-245, and Tyler, pp. 118-119.
10. Parsons, pp. 244-245. It is easy to become confused by the various spellings of the names of these deities and by the fact that the Indian and Alien sisters are reversed at Laguna and by the fact that these two sisters are often confused or equated by the Indians with another female corn deity or another pair of sisters.

Hence, Nau'ts'ity'i (Silko), Naotsete (Parsons), Nau'tsity (Tyler) and I'tc'ts'ity'i (Silko), Uretsets (Parsons), I'tc'ts'ity (Tyler) are sisters. At all the Pueblos except Laguna Nau'ts'ity'i is the Alien or White Sister, but at Laguna the Alien or White Sister is I'tc'ts'ity'i. Parsons says that Iarriko and Utshtsiti are sisters (p. 244), but it is not clear whether these are different spellings for the previously named sisters or whether they are a different pair of sisters. I believe that Utshtsiti is a variant spelling of Uretsete and Iarriko is a variant spelling of Iyatiku (Parsons), Iatiku (Tyler), E-yet-e-co (Tyler), but definitely Iyatiku replaces I'tc'ts'ity'i in some pueblos and both deities are sometimes called Corn Woman or Corn Mother (Tyler, pp. 117-118).

11. Parsons, p. 186 and p. 86.

12. See Robert Bell's "Coyote Transformation Prototype Ceremony" from "The Myth of Red Antway, Male Evilway" in this issue.

13. Parsons, pp. 100-101.

14. Ibid., p. 860, Table 3.

15. Ibid., p. 455.

16. Tyler, pp. 165-168.

17. Yellow Woman is also known as Katchina Girl and in that role which associates her with Katchina Boy, blue and yellow are their colors (Parsons, p. 101). Also Ts'eh is wearing a yellow shirt when Tayo meets her in the North, and yellow is also traditionally the color associated with the North (Parsons, p. 99).

18. Parsons, pp. 719-720.

19. Kenneth Rosen, ed., *The Man to Send Rain Clouds* (New York, 1974), p. 35.