

# Leslie Marmon Silko's Ceremony and the Effects of White Contact on Pueblo Myth and Ritual

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## Ceremony

I will tell you something about stories,  
[he said]

They aren't just for entertainment.

Don't be fooled

They are all we have, you see,  
all we have to fight off illness and death.

You don't have anything  
if you don't have the stories.

Their evil is mighty

but it can't stand up to our stories.

So they try to destroy the stories  
let the stories be confused or forgotten

They would like that

They would be happy

Because we would be defenseless then.[1]

The above passage from Leslie Marmon Silko's novel *Ceremony* emphasizes the important role that storytelling plays within the Pueblo culture. It also accurately summarizes the repeated attempts of white groups to decimate the Pueblo culture by destroying its ceremonies. Despite these attempts, which began in 1540 and continued until the 1930s, the basic elements of Pueblo myth and ritual managed to survive. As Silko reveals in *Ceremony*, however, the years from World War II to the present have presented new threats to the Pueblos, which, although more subtle than the early Spanish conquests, are even more dangerous, and must be fought if the Pueblo

culture is to continue. In order to explain fully the threats the modern world poses to the ceremonial life of the Pueblos, it is first necessary to present a background of the Pueblo geography, basic mythology, and its corresponding ritual.[2]

## **Traditional Myth and Ritual**

*Pueblo Indians* is a collective term used to refer to the many native peoples of the Pueblo crescent located in the Southwestern United States. This area stretches from Taos in north central New Mexico westward to the Hopi mesas of northeastern Arizona. The Laguna Reservation, which is the setting for Silko's novel, is located approximately thirty-five miles from Albuquerque, and about seventy miles from Los Alamos, where the first atomic bomb was developed.

The three most important figures in Pueblo mythology are Thought Woman, Corn Mother, and Sun Father. While all three beings are extremely powerful, they are also interdependent. Thought Woman is attributed with the creation of the universe, and one version of the creation myth is as follows:

Ts' its' tsi' nako, Thought-Woman,  
is sitting in her room  
and what ever she thinks about  
appears.  
She thought of her sisters,  
Nau' ts' ity' i and l' tcs' i,  
and together they created the Universe  
this world  
and the four worlds below.  
Thought-Woman, the spider,  
named things and  
as she named them  
they appeared.  
She is sitting in her room  
thinking of a story now

## I'm telling you the story she is thinking.[3]

This myth is important in two respects. First, it explains the Pueblo belief that the universe consists of our world, which is the earth, and the "four worlds below," where the spirits of the dead go. Second, it reveals the crucial function that storytelling serves in the Pueblo culture. Storytelling is more than entertainment or even the passing on of history and religious beliefs to the next generation; it is also a ceremony that acts as a link between the mythical deities and the people themselves, whose ritual life is based on the myths.

Corn Mother, also called Corn Woman, is perhaps the most important deity in Pueblo mythology, judging from the large number of ceremonies devoted to her. She is synonymous with Mother Earth, and represents growth, life, and the feminine aspects of this world.[4] Her role in Pueblo mythology reflects the importance of corn as a staple crop of the Pueblo diet.[5] Because corn and Corn Mother are multivocalic symbols for the Pueblos, the ritual corn dance is performed for one or more of the following reasons: to bring rain, to increase fertility, or to assure an abundance of crops. It is a seasonal ceremony that occurs in the spring or summer, and as a result of the influence of Spanish missionaries, it is usually held on the feast day of the village's patron saint. The dance is understood to be humans' appearance before Corn Mother. It has many variations, reflecting the differences among the many Pueblo groups themselves, but it usually involves lines of dancers moving in a constantly changing zigzag pattern. A drummer and a chorus of chanting old men provide the music. The dancers make gestures to indicate the requests they are offering to the Corn Mother: lowering the arms signifies the lowering clouds, moving the arms in a zigzag motion indicates lightning, lowering the palms symbolizes rain, and lifting the hands signifies the growing stalks of corn. In smaller corn dances, all of the participants are men, but in larger dances, both men and women participate. When women are involved, they often wear headdresses called *tablitas*. [6] This marking likely symbolizes the special connection that women have with Corn Mother because of their shared femininity.

Prayer sticks representing individual petitions are also offered to Corn Mother,[7] and in *Ceremony*, Silko mentions the regular offering of blue and yellow pollen, which can be viewed as symbolizing fertility, to Corn Mother's altar.[8] Silko expresses the necessity of making these sacrifices in the following traditional myth: An evil Ck' o' yo magician appeared to the people and seduced them with his magic. They were extremely impressed, and believing his magic would give life to the plants and animals as Corn Mother did, they neglected the corn altar. Corn Mother became very angry with her people, for she knew the magic was just a trick, and took away the plants and rain clouds, and didn't allow any baby animals to be born.[9] The myth's message is loud and clear: if the proper ceremonial offerings to Corn Mother are not made, the earth's life processes will not operate as they should.

Sun Father stands opposite to Corn Mother, and is the most powerful creative force in the universe. He represents masculinity and light, and therefore white, the color of pure light, is the most sacred color.[10] Cornmeal is offered to Sun Father, which demonstrates the interdependent relationship he has with Corn Mother. He also is connected with Thought Woman, as can be seen in another myth told by Silko in *Ceremony*. In this myth, a Ck' 'o' yo magician tricked not only the people with his magic, but the storm clouds as well, and took both the people and the clouds prisoners. Sun father went to wake the storm clouds up one morning and could not find them. Because they could not release their rain over the earth, the land began drying up, and the people and animals starved. Sun Father took blue and yellow pollen, tobacco, and coral beads to Thought Woman, asking for her help. She gave Sun Father a magic medicine that allowed him to trick the magician and free the clouds.[11]

The relationships between the Pueblo people and their deities are reciprocal: if the ceremonial offerings are done properly, then their needs are met.[12] If they are not properly carried out, then the people are not fully cared for, as the myth about neglecting the corn altar suggests. Reciprocity can also be seen in the relationship between the Pueblos and the spirits of the animals they hunt. Silko describes the tradition of sprinkling a killed deer with cornmeal in order to free its spirit. This is a sign of

appreciation to the deer for giving up its life for the people, and if it is not done, deer will not return the next year to provide for them.[13]

Throughout history, however, the Pueblos have been faced with certain evils that the concept of reciprocity cannot explain. For example, sometimes the ceremonial offerings had been properly carried out, yet there was still a drought, a serious illness, or an unexplainable death. The Pueblos solved this problem by attributing unexplainable evils to witchery.[14] The responsibility for challenging the power of witchery falls upon the shoulders of the medicine man, so when the arrival of the whites to the Pueblo region brought a host of previously unknown diseases, as well as an exploitation of power that was inconceivable to the natives, the medicine man was challenged as never before. [15]

## **History of White Contact**

The Pueblos experienced three basic phases of contact with the white world: the Spanish, Mexican, and Anglo-American. The first, the Spanish, began in 1540 when Coronado encountered the Southwest Indians while searching for the legendary Seven Golden Cities of Cibola.[16] By the late 1500s, Spanish attempts to establish a "New Spain" had expanded, and they sought to civilize the Indians through the establishment of Catholic missions under the authority of the king of Spain.[17] The missionary idea of civilization included the speaking of the Spanish language, the use of rectangular houses built from stone or adobe, the adoption of men's trousers, the establishment of a political organization that emphasized loyalty and obedience to the king of Spain, and conversion to Roman Catholicism. The missionaries tried to replace the corresponding native customs with these and other features of the Spanish culture.[18]

During the early 1600s, the Spanish missionaries appeared to be fairly successful. Churches had been built, and colorful ceremonies had been introduced to the Pueblos. The missions were providing care for the sick, and introducing the natives to new agricultural crop and techniques. But by the 1630s, the Spanish began to realize that they had a real problem on their hands:

They had baptized, they claimed, all the Pueblo Indians and had become more or less regular participants in the ritual of the Church. It was apparent, however, that the Indians had not given up their own ceremonies.... there were still ceremonies in the kivas of the villages; prayer sticks were still offered; cornmeal was still strewn ritually.[19]

While the Indians had adopted certain elements of Christianity, they had simply added them on to their own belief system. Their religion "gained more occasion for ceremony and more supernatural beings, but lost nothing-Christian ideas were modified and accepted, but kept peripheral to religious ideology." [20] This peripheral incorporation explains the strange juxtaposition of native and Christian ideas in Pueblo religion, such as the holding of corn dances on the feast day of a patron saint, and the worship of both the Christian God and the native deities.

The second phase of white contact was the Mexican. It began in the early 1800s, and continued to emphasize the speaking of the Spanish language and the building of rectangular houses as marks of civilization. The Mexican authorities introduced some new ideas to the Pueblos as well, including individual land holdings, representative government, and mandatory elementary schooling. Because the Mexicans were less strict than the Spanish about enforcing Catholicism, the native Pueblo religion continued to thrive.[21]

The third and final phase of white contact was the Anglo-American. It began in 1848 when the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo ended the Mexican-American War, and gave the United States control of the Southwest. The United States government introduced the natives to the English language and current United States agricultural technology, and continued to push for individual land holdings, elementary schools, and Christianity, this time allowing the Pueblos to choose between Catholicism and several Protestant denominations. The native religion continued to be suppressed until the 1930s. The greatest change that the United States government introduced to the Pueblos was the reservation system. Although its initial purpose was to set the Indians apart from the whites, the rapid westward expansion of

settlers meant that the reservations were soon encircled by settlers.[22] As Silko demonstrates in *Ceremony*, although the Pueblos managed to survive the disease and acculturation that decimated half of the original Southwest Indian tribes, the reservation system ushered in a new era that threatened to destroy the Pueblo religion completely.

The Pueblo reservations were surrounded by white society-at-large, which viewed the Indians as inferiors. Subjected to the whites' prejudicial treatment, yet taught in the reservation schools that the white world was better than their own backwards one, the new generations of Pueblos raised on the reservations became increasingly ashamed of their native traditions. The dissatisfaction they felt with reservation life was also a direct result of the poverty the reservation system brought, for it reduced the amount of suitable land available for agriculture and hunting, and forced the Indians into a cash economy.[23]

### **The Creative Forces of Myth and Ritual: Potential for Change**

In *Ceremony*, Silko portrays the endangered state of the Laguna reservation following World War II. The land has been damaged by runoff from the uranium mine on the nearby Cebolleta land grant,[24] and a generation of young Pueblo men has been destroyed by the war. These young men originally enlisted in the army because they sought an escape from their feelings of inferiority and the poverty of reservation life, and because the army promised them the opportunity to see the world and to be accepted into mainstream America. The characters of Tayo, Rocky, and Emo, three typical young Pueblo, believe they have finally found access to the white world when the army recruiter tells them, "Anyone can fight for America, even you boys." [25]

Rather than giving the men a new life, World War II destroys them. Rocky is killed fighting the Japanese, Emo becomes an alcoholic, and Tayo returns with a severe case of post-traumatic stress disorder that white medicine has been unable to cure. In his search for healing, Tayo first turns to drinking with Emo and the other Indian veterans. But becoming part of a pattern of drinking and violence never before witnessed among Indiana veterans [26]

only makes Tayo sicker. Rather than telling traditional stories about the people's relationship with the earth and the deities, the Indian veterans tell stories about the witchery of the modern world, which has tricked them into believing it is good, just as the Ck' o' yo magician tricked the Pueblos into believing his magic was enough to sustain life. The distortion the witchery has produced in ritual storytelling can be seen in the following myth which Emo tells:

We went into this bar on 4th Ave., see,  
me and O'Shay, this crazy Irishman.  
We had a few drinks, then I saw  
these two white women  
sitting all alone.  
One was kind of fat  
She had dark hair.  
But this other one, man,  
she had big tits and  
real blond hair.  
I said to him  
"Hey buddy, that's the one I want.  
Over there."  
He said, "Go get'em, Chief."  
He was my best drinking buddy, that guy  
He'd watch me  
see how good I'd score with each one.[27]

Tayo next seeks a cure from Ku'oosh, the old medicine man, who tries to heal him with the old ceremony. He chants in the native language, and explains to Tayo that his curing is important not only for his own sake, but the entire world that is under the spell of witchery.[28] But Tayo vomits before Ku'oosh gets very far in the ceremony, and Ku'oosh realizes that he cannot heal him because, "Some things we can't cure like we used to . . . not since the white people came." [29]

But if neither entering the white world like the other veterans nor returning to the old ways can heal Tayo and the Pueblo people he represents, then



what can? Silko's answer to this question is revealed by the two people who manage to save Tayo from the witchery of the world. The first of these is Montano, a woman whom Tayo discovers living on the rim rock. She lives in close contact with nature, and teaches Tayo the traditional ceremonies of ritual offering and the healing power of many plants and other natural objects. A symbol of the Corn Mother herself, Montano not only loves Tayo as he has never been loved, but gives him a power "emanating from the mesas and arroyos. . . [replacing] the rhythm that had been interrupted long ago." [30]

While the return to the old ways helps Tayo, something else is needed to complete his healing ceremony. This is where Betonie, a new kind of medicine man, comes in. Betonie still wears the traditional clothes of a medicine man, creates the curative sand paintings, and uses the old medicine man's paraphernalia, such as prayer sticks, gourd rattles, leather pouches, and herbs and roots. But Betonie also counts modern items among his healing devices. These include coke bottles, phone books, and calendars with pictures of Indians on them, all common objects on the reservation. When Tayo questions the use of such non-traditional items for his ceremonies, Betonie responds, "In the old days it was simple. A medicine person could get by without all these things. But nowadays. . . ." [31] Betonie is also a new kind of healer because he is half-Mexican like Tayo, which was previously unheard of in a medicine man.

The Indians are suspicious of Betonie and the ceremonial changes he represents. But as he explains to Tayo, although the new ceremonies are different from the old ones, they are not any less complete. [32] The effects white contact have had upon the Pueblos cannot be ignored if the witchery of the modern world is to be combated successfully. Betonie, who integrates the current realities of Indian life into traditional ritual, demonstrates ritual's potential for reflexivity. Betonie's new ceremonies not only reflect changes in the Pueblo culture, but are a means for endorsing these changes.

Silko argues for the necessity of cultural change in another way: the transfer of traditional oral myths into written form. Although it has been argued that

the introduction of written form causes myths to stagnate, Silko demonstrates how literacy can help ceremonial life to grow. From the ancient myths she has recorded, new myths, like the novel itself, and new rituals, such as Tayo's healing ceremony, can and should be developed. Silko's belief in the importance of allowing myth and ritual to evolve to meet the needs of present circumstances can best be understood in the words of Betonie:

At one time, the ceremonies as they had been performed were enough for the way the world was then. But after the white people came, elements in this world began to shift; and it became necessary to create new ceremonies. I have made changes in the rituals. The people mistrust this greatly, but only the growth keeps the ceremonies strong.[33]

Although the Pueblo Indians managed to survive the repeated attempts of early white conquerors to destroy their ceremonial lifestyle, in the twentieth century they have faced circumstances that threaten their culture as never before. While the Pueblos cannot ignore the impact that white contact has had upon their culture, neither can they completely abandon their old rituals and still survive ethnically. The key to survival, as Silko demonstrates in *Ceremony*, is found in allowing native Pueblo ceremonies to change to meet the present-day realities of reservation life. It is in this fusion of old and new that the Pueblos can find the healing they so badly need after suffering more than four hundred years of white conquest. As Frank Waters so adequately expresses, "For here as nowhere else has the conflict been fought so bitterly, and have the opposing principles approached so closely a fusion. At that fusion there will arise the new faith for which we are crying so desperately." [34]

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## Endnotes

1. Leslie Marmon Silko, *Ceremony* (New York: Viking, 1977), 2.
2. Alfonso Ortiz, Introduction to *New Perspectives on the Pueblos*, Ed., Alfonso Ortiz (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico, 1980),

xv.

3. Silko, 1.

4. Byron Harvey III, "An Overview of Pueblo Religion." *New Perspectives on the Pueblos*, Ed. Alfonso Ortiz (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico, 1980), 206.

5. Ibid.

6. Frank Waters, *Masked Gods: Navaho Pueblo Ceremonialism* (Chicago: Swallow Press, 1973), 261-62.

7. Harvey III, 208.

8. Silko, 47-49.

9. Ibid.

10. Waters, 198.

11. Silko, 176.

12. Harvey III, 203.

13. Silko, 208.

14. Harvey III, 208.

15. Ibid., 209.

16. Edward Holland Spicer, *Cycles of Conquest: The Impact of Spain, Mexico, and the United States on the Indians of the Southwest, 1533-1960* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1962), 8.

17. Ibid., 150.

18. Ibid., 5.

19. Ibid., 160.

20. Ibid., 507.

21. Ibid., 5.

22. Ibid., 5-6.

23. Waters, 141.

24. Silko, 242.

25. Ibid., 64.

26. Ibid., 53.

27. Ibid., 57-58.

28. Ibid., 86.

29. Ibid., 38.

30. Ibid., 227.

31. Ibid., 121.

32. Ibid., 233-234.
33. Ibid., 126.
34. Frank Waters, 425-426l.