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ABSTRACT

Historically, among American Indians, the respect for the power of language has been expressed through the oral tradition: stories, myths, folklore, poetry, and song. As life experience has changed for American Indians, they continue to value these stories, recording tribal oral tradition as well as personal biography and life history. The status and strength carried by women and girls in Navajo culture is related to the image and power embodied in this original female deity; and the indigenous stories by community authors will continue to reflect this orientation and influence. Among the many publications reflective of the Navajo woman's experience, there are the following: "Kaibah" by Kay Bennett, "Women in Navajo Culture" by Ruth Roessel, "Alice Yazzie's Year" by Ramona Maher, "Morning and Myself" by Nia Francisco, "Female Rain" and "Male Rain" by Agnes Tso, and "Sandpainting and Bridge Perspective" by Irene Nakai. The most pervasive pattern in these stories and poems is the inference to "Changing Woman," a Navajo female deity--a creator who shapes man from white corn and woman from yellow corn. In Bennett's autobiography, she treats "The Changing Woman Story." At Kaibah's request, her grandmother repeats the actual story of Changing Woman; she concludes by noting that the "God of the Sun" decided to give Changing Woman everything she could wish for and sent his helpers to build a hogan that would please her. Similarly, Roessel explains that while the Changing Woman goes through various changes and stages in her life each year, the Navajo women's lives are greatly influenced by the four seasons. In "Alice Yazzie's Year," a picturebook which is endorsed as a valuable resource by the Navajo Community College at Tsalie, the illustrations move the reader through the Navajo months and seasons--symbolically reinforcing the idea of youth, fertility, maturity, death, and rejuvenation. This historic and religious background of tribal women is of importance in understanding the self-image of the modern young Indian girls, and the source of the strengths that they draw upon to become the contemporary changing woman.

"Changing Woman: Aspects of Renewal in Navajo Tribal Literature"

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The impetus for this article has come from previous personal and cultural experience in various tribal communities including the Navajo, and my own evolving understanding of the role of oral tradition in American Indian "stories"--those preserved by word of mouth and more recently in print. During the late 1980's, I completed a comprehensive study of children's literature which indicated that the majority of positive images of girls and women emerged from the stories of the Navajo tribal community, and that more American Indian authors were becoming visible and published!

Although I have narrowed my focus to books, stories, and poems which provide an image of Navajo women and girls through both print and picture, I am most specifically concerned with the impact of oral tradition, and the original story of "Changing Woman", on the continuing literary tradition of written works by Navajo authors. My thesis is that the status and strength carried by the women and girls in Navajo culture is related to the image and power embodied in this original female deity; and that indigenous stories by community authors will continue to reflect this early orientation and influence.

Through my studies of American Indian literature, I have learned to appreciate the power of language to shape our human perception of reality and to contribute to a particular world view. Historically, in traditional tribal communities, this respect for the power of language has been expressed through oral tradition: stories, myths, folklore, poetry and song. As life experience has changed for American Indians, they continue to

value these stories, recording tribal oral tradition as well as personal biography and life history.

According to Fisher (1980),

> Writing became a means to perpetuate tradition in the face of cultural disintegration...By the end of the nineteenth century, a written tradition was beginning to emerge out of the oral traditions that would reach fruition in the 1960's and 1970's in the works of contemporary American Indians.
>
> The word continued to be equated with ways of knowing and of passing knowledge on. American Indian women have been part of the storytelling tradition--both oral and written--from its inception, passing on stories to their children and their children's children, and using the word to advance those concepts crucial to cultural survival. (Fisher, p. 7).

In the period of transition from the 1890's to 1930's, American Indians were forced to make major life changes and adjustments which included leaving home and attending BIA or mission boarding schools, learning Anglo customs and English language...and essentially giving up their tribal language as a major means of communication in mainstream experience. In an effort to preserve fast-fading cultural experiences and traditions, many American Indians told their own life stories, and these were written as ethnographic biographies or personal narratives.

Fisher (1980) notes:

> Organized to cover the major events in a woman's life --from early childhood through puberty ceremonies and education to marriage and childrearing--these autobiographies provide important records of the women's position in various tribal communities, reversing many of the stereotypes about Indian women (Fisher, pp 8-9).

In reviewing many publications reflective of Navajo women's experience, I have had the good fortune of discovering and reading the following selections: Kaibah by Kay Bennett, Women in Navajo Culture by Ruth Roessel, Alice Yazzie's Year by Ramona Maher, "Morning and Myself" by Nia Franciso, "Female Rain" and "Male Rain" by Agnes Tso, "Sandpainting" and "Bridge Perspective" by Irene Nakai.

The most pervasive pattern in these stories and poems is the reference to "Changing Woman," and the accompanying aspects of renewal and transformation of life energy. "Ásdzáá Nádleehi" or "Changing Woman" or "The Woman She Becomes Again and Again" is a Navajo female deity, found as a baby by First Man and First Woman. Her birth is controversial, and some say she was not born at all, but rather just appeared. As an adult, she became the wife and lover of the Sun, and later mother of Hero twins who cleared the land of monsters.

"Changing Woman" was depicted as a female creator, shaping human man from white corn and human women from yellow corn. Her world was visioned as a changing world and a beautiful world.

She was a female deity complete with spiritual status and powers. She also personified the beauty of change and transformation. Each day, after following the Sun across the sky, "Changing Woman" took time to renew her youth at the little pool and to give corn pollen to the gods who helped her.

According to many sources, the stories of "Changing Woman" are the heart of Hazhóójí, the Blessingway, which is believed to be the oldest and most sacred of Navajo ceremonies. Once expressed only through oral tradition, these concepts are now printed in stories, song and poetry. The following selections provide examples of this transformation of the word!

In Bennett's autobiography of Kaibah, she titles Chapter VIII as "The Changing Woman Story." At Kaibah's request, her grandmother, while weaving at the loom repeats the actual story of origin--adding that "Changing Woman" was also sometimes known as "Turquoise Woman" or "White Shell Woman." She concludes by noting that the "God of the Sun" decided to give "Changing Woman" everything she could wish for and had sent his helpers to build a hogan that would please her.

Reichard (1983) suggests:

> Changing Woman is woman with a sphinx-like quality. No matter how much we know about her, the total is a great question mark. She is the mystery of reproduction, of life springing from nothing, of the last hope of the world, a riddle perpetually solved and perennially springing up anew.

> Sun's decree concerning Whiteshell Woman, another name for Changing Woman...She will attend to her children and provide their food. Everywhere I go over the earth she will have charge of female rain. I myself will control male rain. She will be in control of vegetation everywhere for the benefit of Earth People. (Reichard, p. 406).

The story of "Changing Woman: has greatest symbolic significance for the cyclical aspects of woman's being, and provides the spiritual and traditional basis for the Kinaáalda, a Navajo girl's puberty ceremony. This ceremony is depicted most sensitively by Ruth Roessel in her publication entitled Women in Navajo Society (1981). Roessel provides narrative background and lengthy discussion on the importance of the ceremony in present-day Navajo experience.

One complete chapter is devoted to a pictorial essay on "A Kinaáalda Ceremony for Faith Roessel," the author's oldest daughter. She is assisted in this traditional ritual by her mother and grandmother as well as other women relatives. This is one of the most powerful sections of Roessel's book. Through the power of word and photograph, Roessel conveys the importance of the onset of menstruation and puberty in Navajo society. According to Reichard (1983),

> Changing Woman's adolescence ceremony was the first and most elaborate ever performed, and set a precedent for the future. Ceremonially dressed in whiteshell, the young girl was named--there was an argument about the

names Changing Woman and Whiteshell Woman; both were retained--and she was modeled by kneading and pressing; thus, she became the most beautiful maiden that ever existed. The entire effort was to make her pleasing for the Sun; a cake was baked for his benefit, and for him she ran several times to the east.

At the appearance of her second menses there was a ceremony at which she raced for Moon's benefit. A rainbow, undoubtedly Sun's messenger, indicating approval of the ceremony, spoke to her: 'This is truly Whiteshell Woman." (Reichard, p. 409).

Roessel also discusses in detail women's role during the four seasons. She explains that Navajo women have their lives greatly influenced by the four seasons of the year; this is paralleled by the story of "Changing Women," who goes through various changes and stages in her life each year.

First, she is young, radiant and beautiful (spring). Next, she is fertile, natural, fully developed and a mother (summer). Her third phase is one of added maturity, her children are grown up and she is becoming older (fall). The last stage is one of old age; she becomes feeble and tired (winter). Then, Changing Woman is reborn again in the spring into a young and beautiful girl...These four stages are the Four Seasons which are so important to the Navajos because of their relationship to the stages in Changing Woman's life. The stages also

> are those through which crops and all other plants must go. In the spring the seeds are planted, everything is fresh; in summer the plants grow and everything is beautiful; in the fall comes the harvest and a time of happiness; finally, winter is a time of apparent death and rest (Roessel, p. 61)

Another book, featuring the sepia illustrations of Stephen Gammel, is Alice Yazzie's Year by Ramona Maher. Published in 1977, this story is virtually built around the concept of seasons and months of the Navajo year, and depicts an eleven-year-old Navajo girl in a strong and capable role. This picturebook moves the reader through the Navajo months and seasons--symbolically reinforcing the idea of youth, fertility, maturity, death...and rejuvenation. The book is endorsed by Navajo Community College at Tsalie, and Carl Gorman provides a brief historical definition of each in the postscript.

Alice Yazzie is pictured as an important person in her family and community network, and on equal terms with men at home and at school. She is capable, trustworthy and resourceful. Both in text and illustration, the strength and stability of the feminine is expressed. Alice's grandparents have been important in her life, especially the memory of her grandmother. The influence of "Changing Woman" is alive and well!

Not only do many positive images and powerful stories of women and girls emerge from both oral and written tradition of the Navajo, but many carry the commonality of women's status, transformation, seasonal changes, and the continuous renewal of

the life cycle--from youth to old age, from birth to death, and rebirth. There is the underlying assumption in the older stories as well as the contemporary format that women are powerful beings...sacred beings and transformative beings!

These values are identified by Paula Gunn Allen in The Sacred Hoop (1986). Allen suggests:

> The water of life, menstrual or postpartum blood, was held sacred...The blood of woman was in and of itself infused with the power of Supreme Mind, and so women were held in awe and respect. The term 'sacred,' which is connected with power, is similar in meaning to the term 'sacrifice', which means 'to make sacred.' What is made sacred is empowered. Thus, in the old way, sacrificing meant empowerment.
>
> A strong attitude integrally connects the power of Original Thinking or Creation Thinking to the power of mothers. That power is not so much the power to give birth, as we have noted, but the power to make, to create, to transform (Allen, p. 21).

This transformative character of the feminine is the expression of the dynamic element of the psyche--that which drives toward motion, change, and transformation. This latter character drive toward development brings movement and unrest. Thus, the transformation mysteries of the woman, primarily the blood transformation mysteries of menstruation, pregnancy and lactation, actually lead her to the experience of her own creativity!

According to Rayna Green, most of the American Indian authors are poets. In the poems of several contemporary Navajo women--Nia Francisco, Agnes Tso and Irene Nakai--both the elemental and the transformational aspects of the feminine are present. For example, "Morning and Myself" by Nia Francisco is reminiscent of the daily rejuvenation of "Changing Woman", who started in the east each day and traveled to the west, washing herself in a pool of water to rebirth. She also gave corn pollen to the gods in thanksgiving. There is repeating emphasis on the morning 'within me' and the unity between women's physical being and the whole of life.

Agnes Tso speak of "Male Rain" and "Female Rain" in her poems, using visual metaphor beautifully to describe elemental differences in sexual character. These poems are obviously based on the origin story of "Changing Woman" who is assigned to be in charge of Female by the Sun, who remains in charge of Male Rain.

Irene Nakai, in "Bridge Perspective", is concerned with time and space connection and her people in transition. Her speech appears as a contemporary form of "Changing Woman." Again, in "Sandpainting," she points to the transformative character of the the sandpainting, which heals and then disappears with the dawn. This repeated emphasis on the transformational character of the morning is reminiscent of the original story.

In comparing the oral tradition of various tribes, the late Stan Steiner (1968) noted:

It was the Navajo Goddess of Creation who was, however,

who was the most vivid. The Changing Woman, said the Navajo religion, created the Dine'--the people--by molding them from the skin of the underneath of her breasts, the tenderest and most sensitive part of a woman's skin, it was said. Human beings were the only creatures created from the breasts of the Changing Woman, it was said.

Whichever way she created life, and whatever the form was the Earth Mother was not merely a holy woman. She was thought of as a living deity. She was an earthy goddess, indeed, for she was the biological, as well as the agricultural, as well as the spiritual giver of life.

The historic and religious background of tribal women is of importance in understanding the self-image of the modern young Indian girls, and the source of the strengths that they draw upon to become the contemporary Changing Woman.(Steiner, p. 219).

Rayna Green (1984) expresses a contemporary concern:

Indian women have continued in their traditional role as teachers, but as the old order has been inverted, they have begun to express their desire for change. Nia Francisco, a young Navajo woman, echoes the sentiments of many Indian women when she says...'It is time for women to become leaders again. The gods will grant them that honor very soon because man has abused the honor of taking care of the woman.' There is a myth building up of the woman regaining the power she had traditionally. (Green, p. 12).

Fisher (1980) concludes:

> The American Indian women writers...have inherited both the greatness of the remote past and the pain and conflict of the recent past. It remains to be seen what role they will ultimately take in tribal life, but their literature is testimony to their awareness that culture is dynamic and that change is not a negation of tradition.
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> Nostalgia and a sense of loss haunt their landscapes, yet the predominant note is hopeful because their literature is an extension of an oral tradition based on the power of the word that has managed to survive and to maintain the American Indian community (Fisher, p. 14).

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