



## Re-reading Silko's Ceremonies and American History

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### Abstract

*This article retrieves the history of Native American ceremonies to highlight the aboriginal ways of being. Using Leslie Marmon Silko's Ceremony to retrieve the reality of the ceremonies, I argue how the myths inscribed in Native American contemporary writings are the social and cultural embedment of the ceremonies in which they were written and thus the knowledge of prehistoric times. I focus on Silko's modern techniques to revive the myths of oral tradition to understand and publicize the truths of Native American ceremonial world. She explains the ceremony of 1955 with reference to the ceremonies incorporated in Laguna myths, thereby juxtaposing two different time periods: the pre-Columbian timelessness and the post-second World War fragmented tribal community in Laguna in 1955. To understand the overlapping of poetic-prose stories I explain the function of ceremony in the prosperity of the Pueblo and assimilate the present in the past and the future.*

**Key Words:** Ceremony, History, Native Americans, Silko

### Introduction

A literary text cannot be considered apart from the society that produced it: a literary text is another form of social significance which is produced by the society and in return is active in reshaping the culture of that society” (Montrose qtd. in Doğan, 2005, p. 80). Native American literature followed by its oral tradition preserves cultural norms that define the tribal past. To survive or preserve their cultural norms Native American writers authoritatively control or extract their oral tradition in the present (Cook-Lynn, 1995, p. 46). Following the oral traditional norms, Native American writers prove that they are nationalists who “believe that it is time for Native people to exclude any European or Euroamerican influence from a developing Native aesthetics” (Lundquist, 2004, p. 291). This approach is significant due to the natives’ views of the world being more valid. On the other hand, they are tired of outsiders’ constant need to describe their experiences as often in the post-colonial phase but the ‘post’ phase cannot be seen in the Native American case as they still face imperialism. Thus, in the Native American case it can be called ‘anticolonial’ as they are still resisting imperial epistemologies. However, the impact of colonial tactics to undermine Native American culture was so strong that many Native American tribes were “willing to cast aside ceremonies that stood them in good stead for thousands of years and live in increasing and meaningless secularity” (Deloria, 2006, p. xvii). Thus, the majority of Native Americans today do not have much understanding of “the powers once possessed by the spiritual leaders of their communities” (Deloria, 2006, p. xvii) as “the teachers at Indian school taught [them] not to believe in that kind of nonsense” (Silko, 1977, p. 18). Hence, it became the communal tragedy of Native American communities that the people were confused about the reality of their cultural ceremonies and stories. Silko knowing the impact of colonial tactics of modern education has had to express different diachronic viewpoints through different stories. The poetic narratives of Laguna myths enlighten the ceremonies of the past whereas the prose narrative of Tayo’s journey explains the current scenario with reference to the ceremonies. The juxtaposition of past and present ceremonies retrieves the dialectic of this ritual as both narratives define the Native American ways of being at different times in the

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context of the Pueblo. The juxtaposition of main story and frame stories/myths strengthen the historic disposition of the ceremony as Laguna mythical drought and Laguna-drought of 1955 are thematically similar. Similarly, the poetic-prose narratives make the narration dialogic and the ceremonies valid.

## Literature Review

Native American writers claim to be 'native' for the construction of Native American oral tradition (especially ceremonies) in their stories and for that they are criticized: the invalidity of Native American literature is based on the incredibility of Native American ceremonies that are not being accepted as the cultural reflection of the Native American traditional world. The charges on Native American myths that stand for Native American cultural ceremonies, however, also explore the allegorical and historical dimensions of the mythical stories that make Native American mythical ceremonies and their oral tradition stories credible and intelligible. John D. Loftin claims that the mythical stories of these cultural ceremonies are perceived in two ways: rational and symbolic. He argues that Euro-American scholars only look for the rational side of these myths and ignore the symbolic side; this attitude blurs the sense of Native American ceremonies. He claims that Native Americans were sensible enough to distinguish the nature of history and myth as every girl and boy in Native American tribes like Powamuy or Katsina had had a critical sense of her/his surroundings.

Although some might wish to argue that prior to contact the [Native American tribes] had no critical thought that argument simply does not hold up under close scrutiny. For example, Malotki's extensive research clearly shows the Hopi language expresses an awareness that all human beings are oriented in time and space, and, thus, the Hopi have always possessed a capacity for historical and critical thought. (1995, p. 686)

Explaining the symbolic significance of Native American myths, Loftin explains *tuuwutsi*, a Hopi folklore term: 'Wutsi' means 'not real' as in 'make-believe' or 'false', whereas, *tuu* is used for indefinite, inanimate objects. 'Tuuwutsi', thus, is a Native American genre that explains the long descriptions of fictional happenings that never happened in real. Ekkehart Malotki, a German-American linguist, famous for his work on the Hopi language and culture, also points out the clarity of Native American storytellers about Native American myths and history. He argues that "when a Hopi storyteller relates an actual occurrence in Hopi history, such as a clan migration, 'I 'hapi pas qayaw'i, pas antsa (This is not hearsay; this is really true.)' will be his closing words" (Malotki, 1978, p. xiii). Hence, the Native American tribes were well aware of the difference between the fictitious and the historical side of myth. Therefore, all the Native American mythical stories are "either *wutsi* (make-believe) or *antsa* (true), although both are important religiously" (Loftin, 1995, p. 686). Edward S. Curtis, the American photographer, and ethnologist, also perceived that the Hopis define their cultural stories in two ways: either "my story" or as a "true story" (1922, p. 163). "My story" explains the subjective approach of the storyteller whereas "true story" explains the objectivity that is the salience of recording facts. For Curtis, the fictional stories themselves are not false; they have their symbolic sense and a moral lesson commonly practiced in North America where the religious convictions are taught through these tales. In order to develop the interest of the "children, these tall tales ... relate to the adventures of the trickster figure" (Eliade, 1963, p. 8) mostly about coyote, a well-known Native American trickster figure. These tales do not express historical events, but "symbolically the stories are true, for they teach children about the limitations and tensions of this world to which every child must resign himself in order to live as a human being" (Loftin, 1995, p. 687).

Kathryn W. Shanley of the University of Montana also points out the ignorance of modern scholarship about the true sense of the Native American stories. It often focuses on Native American texts without knowing contextual beliefs and, therefore, devalues Native American literature. In her article, "Writing Indian: American Indian Literature and the Future of Native American Studies," Shanley claims that every piece of Native American literature is a sort of ecosystem comprising of myths, songs, anecdotes, and recollections of its community. From this point of view, one must know Native American contextualization since it enhances the symbolic meanings of the mythical stories, to understand the meaning of Native American texts. Hence, the interpretation of Native American literature is possible through the Native American ways of understanding things. Shanley argues that the work on Native American mythical stories

Can thwart the comfort of an imperialist nostalgic perspective by disrupting expectations in several ways: by presenting the voices and perspectives of Indians to contradict or counter stereotypes; by adding validity and

emphasis to the points made by historical facts; and, most of all by rendering Indians as multidimensional and fully sentient human beings. (1998, p. 141)

Native American scholars like Greg Sarris, Paula Gunn Allen, Craig S. Womack, Gerald Vizenor, Lorelei Cederstrom, Louis Owens and Robert Allen Warrior also stress upon the “necessity of generating discursive modes originating primarily from the Native or indigenous cultural context, as it informs Native American literary texts, and suggests ways in which such discursive strategies can be articulated” (Pulitano, 2003, p. 60). They argue that the main difference between Native American and non-native scholars lies in their approach to analyzing Native American myths about ceremonies that are an integral part of Native American literary and non-literary texts. Non-Native scholars, for Cederstrom, never care about the context in which Native American texts are embedded whereas Native American scholars never forget the contextual relevance of old traditions. Therefore, according to Cederstrom, Native American writers resolve the issue of alienation as the native or mix-blood protagonists of their fiction “can be counteracted by the establishment of a connecting link between the modern world and the transcendent sacred centers of being purveyed by the old culture” (Cederstrom, 1982, p. 287). This ‘mythical method’ of presenting old culture in a new way is a method “of controlling or ordering ... immense panorama of futility and anarchy... [of] contemporary history” (Eliot, 1964, p. 123).

## Research Methodology

This qualitative descriptive and analytical research is based on the theorization of new historicism. “[N]ew historicists believe that it makes no sense to separate literary texts from the social context around them because such texts are the product of complex social ‘exchanges’ or ‘negotiations’” (Booker, 1996, p. 138). In his Introduction to “Representing the English Renaissance” Stephen Greenblatt, the founder of new historicism, argues that a literary text is written in cultural background, therefore, it is not an individual effort but a social practice with its ‘negotiations’ and contests’. According to him, different social structures are immediately interrelated and set apart, therefore, a predominant concept of “social inequality shapes artistic representations, those representations have at the same time the power to constrain, shape, alter, and even resist the conception of social inequality” (Greenblatt, 1988, p. viii). Therefore, a literary text not only defines the socially structured patterns but also reshapes those patterns in which it was produced.

## Ceremonies in Ceremony

In her inclination towards Native American mythology, Leslie Marmon Silko solidifies Native American oral tradition history: of social, political, religious, cultural and historical values. Her *Ceremony* (1977) is about the ceremony – a traditional practice of healing or finding a valuable lost entity or object – that heals the protagonist of the novel, the writer and the readers, in the process. The rite is related to the ‘homecoming’ of the young Tayo which, according to Williams Bevis, is a common plot in most Native American fiction where an Indian who has been away, comes home and finds his identity by staying (1987, p. 580). The novel (1977) has two narrative structures: the prose narrative (Tayo’s story) and the poetic narrative (the rest of the mythical stories): the prose portrays Tayo’s search for inner peace while exploring his relationship with the outer world in 1955 in which he exists and has his being, whereas the poetic myths solidify the diachrony of the rite since the oral tradition time. Silko fixes Native American oral tradition stories of timeless periods in the modern story of Tayo and knits a web of incidents in a poetic-prose style i.e. the salience of storytelling. The poetic-prose narratives of *homecoming* solidify the rite of ceremony as a cultural reality of the region. The prose narrative of Tayo’s ceremony unfolds with Tayo’s war traumas and the sufferings of the Laguna tribe where “[t]he drought years had returned again ... The dry air shrank the wooden staves of the barrels” (Silko, 1977, p. 9). The people of Laguna do not have the means to deal with the issue of drought that they have been facing for six years. Their lands become barren, their cattle begin to die and they have to work harder than ever for their livelihood. “And all this time they had watched the sky expectantly for the rainclouds to come” (Silko, 1977, p. 10). The situation describes the need for a ceremony as both Tayo and the Laguna are suffering the dryness of their souls. This prose narrative of the Laguna-drought is organized within the fragmented poetic myth of two sisters, Reed Woman, Iktoa’ak’o’ya, and Corn Woman thus intensifying the description of the ceremony itself. The myth is also about a long-time-ago-drought when Corn Woman had become angry with her sister Reed Woman for bathing instead of working. This had

made Reed Woman sad and she had driven away her rainclouds. "And there was no more rain then. / Everything dried up / ... / The people and the animals / were thirsty. / They were starving" (Silko, 1977, pp. 13-14). The chronological placement of the different narratives of the same story makes them dialogic thus validating both the mythical drought and 1955 drought.

Besides the story of Reed Woman, the mythical story of Pac'caya'nyi, Ck'o'yo medicine man builds up not only Tayo's narrative but also the narrative of Reed Woman. Coming from Reed Leaf Town, the Ck'o'yo medicine man plans to trap the Corn Mother Nau'ts'ity'i, the custodian of rainclouds. The native people leave their work to see his tricks and the twin brothers Ma'see'wi and Ou'yuy'e'wi also neglect the care of the Corn Mother's altar. This makes Corn Mother angry "[s]o she took / the plants and grass from them. / No baby animals were born. / She took the / rainclouds with her" (Silko, 1977, pp. 42, 44, 45). The myth explains that Corn Mother, like Reed Woman, has power over clouds and rain. Both drive away the rainclouds after feeling disgraced and disrespected. Similarly, the myth of the Gambler relates the story of the missing rainclouds. Ck'o'yo Kaup'ata, Gambler lived in the Zuni Mountains and "captured the stormclouds / [and] / was lock them up" (Silko, 1977, p. 160). These several ceremonies in *Ceremony* (1977) strengthen each other to persuade the reader about the cultural impact of ceremony in general, and the Laguna pueblo ceremonies, in particular. Different stories of a similar drought highlight the fact that the drought and the ceremony are chronic in Laguna Pueblo. The thematic similarity of all these myths and the 1955 drought influences readers' minds who are bound to believe them, given the evidence. Through causative incidents in the prose and myth Silko describes the same reality of dead drought to convince the readers about the validity of Native American myths and ceremonies as it depends on the readers to decide the nature of the happenings: magical or real (Todorov, 1975, p. 33).

The entire plot of *Ceremony* (1977) knits the web of diachronic Pueblo culture with the organized fragmentation of different ceremonies of past and present. The main story unfolds Tayo's condition that gradually alienates him from the white world. The end of the Second World War upsets him and western doctors cannot understand the symptoms of his disease. He is in a hospital feeling invisible and tongueless and this tonguelessness, for Allen, leads towards alienation (1986, p. 138). Tayo arrives in his native town where his family suggests "[t]hat boy needs a medicine man ... Otherwise, he will have to go away" (Silko, 1977, p. 30). Once this judgment is delivered, Tayo travels to the Navajo medicine man, Betonie, who tells "him to get on his way, telling him that ... there were the cattle to find, and the stars, the mountain, and the woman" (Silko, 1977, p. 155). And after retrieving all these patterns Tayo may retrieve not only his health but also the prosperity of the Laguna, Pueblo. Betonie does not tell Tayo the exact route map for his ceremony. He informs him of the four patterns and their sequence: a specific pattern of stars, the speckled lost cattle of Josiah, a mountain, and a woman. These patterns of the ceremony are real in nature but the elements and characters who meet Tayo during this journey, and the consequences of this ceremony are mythical. The second pattern of the ceremony – to find Josiah's cattle – mentions that the ceremony was settled a long time ago: when Tayo tells Betonie the story about his parentage and his affiliation with his uncle, Josiah, and his (Josiah's) mistress, Night Swan, who forces his uncle to buy the Mexican cattle, Betonie immediately understands the pre-settled journey. The connection between prewar and postwar happenings focuses on the fact that Tayo has already been chosen for the ceremony: his connection with the cantina dancer, Night Swan, in his boyhood, is also a part of his ceremony. To search for the specific pattern of the stars, Tayo travels to the north as he had seen them in the north in late September. After several days, when he is on his way to the north, he stays at the home of the Montano, Ts'eh. At night he thinks of the stars. "He got up from the table and walked back through the rooms. He pushed the porch screen door wide open and looked up at the sky: Old Betonie's stars were there" (Silko, 1977, p. 167). The first pattern of the ceremony i.e. the finding of stars discloses another magical woman, Ts'eh, who like Betonie, also helps Tayo in his ceremony by teaching him the harmony of natural elements and what his role in the natural harmony is. She guides him to the mountain to retrieve the speckled cattle. Following Ts'eh, Tayo searches for Josiah's lost cattle as the second pattern of his ceremony. In search of the cattle on the mountain he confronts a lion that disappears into the trees. "He rode the mare west again, in the direction the mountain lion had come from ... he saw the spotted cattle, grazing in a dry lake flat below the ridge" (Silko, 1977, p. 182). Here, Tayo's ceremony adds to the prosperity of his family as well: the safe drivers of the cattle home again would make his family prosperous as they can then raise a new breed according to Josiah's plans. Coming home back Tayo's relationship

with Ts'eh has completed his pattern that leads to the rainclouds that wet the whole land. Tayo is recovered and, according to his family, the credit goes to the old medicine man, Betonie. They believe that "old Betonie did some good after all, [as Tayo is] "all right now" (Silko, 1977, p. 200). The novel ends on another beginning as Tayo's experience will be helpful for the other people of Pueblo and for the future generations who may intend to undergo a ceremony for the retrieval of health or a valuable entity like rain.

Different fragments of Laguna myths in *Ceremony* (1977) solidify Tayo's ceremony. For instance, the myths of Corn Woman and Gambler gradually grow with Tayo's narrative in *Ceremony* (1977) that solidifies not only Tayo's ceremony but also the Laguna mythical ceremonies as well. These Laguna myths are similar in their structure and Tayo is the chosen one for the ceremony as his disease is related to his quest. He visits the Navajo medicine man Betonie for his treatment and not for the ceremony, itself. The medicine man tells him to follow the patterns of his ceremony for the cure which is not simple; to determine the pattern of stars, cattle, a woman, and a mountain involves time and effort. Similarly, the messengers, Hummingbird and Fly, and Sun Man, also describe a journey to figure out their given patterns to the retrieval of the rainclouds. For instance, Hummingbird and Fly follow the patterns of their ceremony which like Tayo's ceremony, involve traveling for the rainclouds. The people, immediately after the departure of Nau'ts'ity'i, the Corn Mother, are worried about their drylands: "She's angry with us,' / the people said. / 'Maybe because of that / Ck'o'yo magic / ... / we were better send someone / to ask our forgiveness" (Silko, 1977, p. 49). They, therefore, request Hummingbird who knows all about the mythical worlds down there. Hummingbird lets them call another messenger through a spiritual ceremony. The people on Hummingbird's directions bring a fine-looking pottery jar with paintings of beautiful flowers and parrots and sing a song. As a result a big green fly comes out of the jar. Fly and Hummingbird goes down to the fourth world and request Corn Mother to bring back "food and storm clouds" (Silko, 1977, p. 97). Both Fly and Hummingbird follow the patterns of their ceremony which are different from Tayo's ceremony in performance but similar in the retrieval of the prosperity of community. However, these patterns are unlike Tayo's pattern of ceremony where Betonie at once tells him about the nature and sequence of his ceremony patterns. They visit Corn Mother who asks them: "[Y]ou get old Buzzard to purify / your town first / and then, maybe, I will send you people / food and rain again" (Silko, 1977, p. 97). This is the first pattern of their ceremony. They come to the town again and get some sacred offerings for the old Buzzard: "They took more pollen / more beads, and more prayer sticks, / and they went to see old Buzzard" (Silko, 1977, p. 104, emphasis added) and requested him to purify their town. Old Buzzard does not accept their offerings and asks them about "the tobacco" (Silko, 1977, p. 104, emphasis added). Finding the tobacco for the old Buzzard is the second pattern of their ceremony. They come back again to the town but do not get any tobacco so they visit Corn Mother again, who tells them to ask caterpillar. Finding the caterpillar is the third pattern of their ceremony. When they find him, they ask for tobacco to take back for the safety of the community. "They took *the tobacco* to the old Buzzard / ... / Everything was set straight again / ... / The storm clouds returned / the grass and plants started growing again. / There was food / and the people were happy again" (Silko, 1977, pp. 140, 167, 237, emphasis added). The organized fragmented myth makes sense of Tayo's ceremony to the readers who, satisfied with the result of Tayo's ceremony, unconsciously, accept the ceremony of Hummingbird and Fly which has a similar result in the prosperity of the land.

To explain Tayo's ceremonial journey Silko relates the mythical tale of Sun Man who also takes a journey to retrieve storm clouds from the prison of Ck'o'yo Kaup'a'ta, the Gambler. This quest of Sun Man describes a similar ceremony of different patterns. He goes to all the directions – east, west, south, and north – but cannot locate his children: the clouds. He decides to ask Spiderwoman who knows all about the universe. Like Hummingbird and Fly he takes some sacred things like yellow pollen, blue pollen, coral beads, and tobacco to honor Spiderwoman who tells him the patterns of his ceremony i.e. the tricks of Gambler:

He will say  
 What do I have hanging in that leather bag  
 on the east wall?' ...  
 you will guess ...  
 'The Pleiades'. ...

Next, he will point to a woven cotton bag  
hanging on the south wall.  
He will say  
'What is it I have in there?' ...  
you say  
'maybe you have Orion in there'  
And then  
*everything*—  
his clothing, his beads, his heart  
and the rainclouds  
will be yours. (Silko, 1977, pp. 161,162)

Sun Man follows the guidance of Spiderwoman and retrieves the storm clouds. This ceremony of Sun Man also runs parallel to Tayo's ceremony, thus defining the continuity of the ritual. To explain this continuity Silko ends *Ceremony* (1977) with the hint of a future ceremony: "Remember that / next time / some ck'o'yo magician / comes to the town" (Silko, 1977, p. 238).

Mary Slowik argues that:

[A]s readers, we no longer follow the stories sequentially that is as the Indian tales interrupt the realist story. We now read contrapuntally; that is, as the weave of one story crosses the weave of another ... Such contrapuntal reading changes our sense of narrative as a self-contained form and our sense of what ontology is as well. (1989, p. 115)

All such mythical characters and the stories related to them carry the reader far back to the similar ceremonies and develop the connotation of different incidents. All the ceremonies follow a similar structure: (i) start with the separation of man and nature; (ii) the result is a drought; (iii) the situation needs a ceremony; (iv) hence, saving messenger(s) goes on a journey; (v) helped by a medicine man or woman for the patterns of the ceremony; (vi) and retrieves the lost relationship of man and nature (retrieves the raincloud); (vi) making the land and its people happy. On the other hand, similar objects in the ceremonies also define collaboration between past and present and the future world. For instance, on his way to his ceremony, Tayo confronts the spider, hummingbird, and flies when they relate the ceremony with the Laguna myths. Sacred objects like blue pollen, yellow pollen, coral beads and tobacco in all ceremonies draw a relational collaboration between Tayo's story and the Laguna myths. The connections make the real objects magical and magical appear real as the mystic figures of Reed Woman, Corn Woman, Sun Man, the Hunter and Ts'eh are parallel to Tayo's character and thus become believable.

## Conclusion

Native American cultural history is often overlooked for its similarity in tribal culture. The social and cultural harmony among the tribes ironically results in suspension of its cultural variety. In all tribal communities, cultural, economic, political, military and religious affairs are unified in a common empirical knot that reduces the controversy among the social factors of different tribes and explains the commonality of Native American identity. The stories in *Ceremony* (1977) are different regarding time and place but similar regarding their impact on Native American society. The poetic narratives of Laguna myths enlighten the ceremonies of the past whereas the prose narrative of Tayo's journey explains the status of ceremonies in 1955. The juxtaposition of past and present ceremonies retrieves the thematic similarity of this ritual as both narratives define efforts to retrieve the rainclouds for the fertility of the barren land and its people. These similar ways of living in past and present explain how a similar social order in all the disciplines of life have blurred the differences among tribes, and hence, the stories of the leading figures are, simply, followed without any question, objection or debate (Deloria, 1973, p. 102). The multicultural native society thus is essentialized as a singular phenomenon because of the resemblance that submerges the divergences of different cultures. On the other side, there are only a few written sources of documenting cultural history. Usually the stories are told to explain the cultural richness of the land before the arrival of Columbus. The modern world of science, questions the reality shaped by these stories as

they do not describe the world in positivistic ways. On the other hand, the non-natives living in a positivist world conceive the reality of Native American world as magic for their pre-understanding of traditional societies. But Native American contemporary tribes believe in the spiritual side of their world. Silko's *Ceremony* (1977) explains the native perception through the mode of storytelling to make up for the non-native perception of the Native American spiritual world.

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