

Chapter 28

The Primal Metaphor of Native America

Many waves of people migrated to the Americas from the Orient. These migrations began 30,000 years ago or more. These earliest peoples were tribal nomads who lived before the practice of agriculture or the dawn of hierarchical civilizations. When Europeans arrived in the Americas many Native American groups were still living as nomadic tribes. Others were living in agricultural but tribal federations. The mode of hierarchical civilization had also been imported to the Americas. We don't know exactly when or how, but we do know that highly developed hierarchical civilizations existed during the last 2000 years. We know some of their names: Olmec, Mayan, Toltec, Aztec, Inca.

We might ask if there was a single Primal Metaphor at the root of all these Native American societies. The differences between the nomadic tribes and the civilizations were great. Can we see a common metaphor beneath all this diversity? And if there is such a primal metaphor undergirding all of these Native American societies, is it unique or is it a variation on the Oriental metaphor? Or was a unique primal metaphor forced to leave Oriental geography and move to the Americas?

These questions have never been entirely answered for me. Native American societies do seem to lean more toward the qualities found in the Orient than toward any of the other primal metaphors. But the American societies are also different from China and Japan – more different than China and Japan are from each other. If the Native American primal metaphor is rooted in the same soil as the Oriental metaphor, it is a very old root with quite different leaves and branches.

Let us look first at an interesting myth that was prominent in mid-American civilizations. This will give us some impressions to work with toward answering these still unanswered questions. The story of Quetzalcoatl is the story of an fictitious animal that is both bird and snake. The Quetzal bird is a very beautiful bird with a long green tail. Coatl is the snake half of this mythic creature. The human society and its heroes are identified with this creature. One of the root meanings of this myth is that authentic life is a union of sky and Earth, of air and land, of flight and earthiness. We might view this as reflection of the sort of yin/yang "*Balance*" we encounter in the Orient.

Another interesting clue is the custom present in many of these societies of punctuating the calendar of their lives with wild celebrations. We have heard these celebrations called "fiestas" or "powwows." In these societies the calendar of living holds a balance between carefully designed social patterns that are punctuated by celebrations that touch the chaos out of which these designs have been built, the chaos to which designs return. The typical drum beat at a North American tribal powwow is another clue. Often we hear a heavy beat followed by lighter beats and this pattern is repeated monotonously. Two monotonous rhythms happen, the heavy beat rhythm and the lighter beat rhythm. This monotony eventually feels ecstatic. It reminds us of the monotony of the rise and fall of the sun, the flow of the seasons, the movement of the stars. Attention was paid in the early cultures of the Americas to all these flows of time. The social life was built upon a design of time. Here is my impression of the feel of these cultures: ric rac ric rac ric rac ric rac FIESTA ric rac ric rac ric rac ric rac FIESTA ric rac ric rac ric rac ric rac ric rac FIESTA ric rac ric rac ric rac ric rac ric rac FIESTA. The ric rac part of the calendar was where social order and its needful work got done, and then in FIESTA the entire social order was almost dismantled for an assigned time period. Classes, sexual order, various laws, were set aside for a time. This pattern interests me as a ritualization of the nature of human society – a creation that could be different, a useful order placed over the wildness of nature, an order not to be mistaken for the full Order

of existence.

Native American sand paintings also express this theme. Elaborate designs are built on the ground out of various colors of sand, then after a short period of participation in the healing intent of such a design, the sands are scattered – returned to an original chaos. When we look deeply at such details as these, we also see a strong emphasis on communal life. We see a precious insight into communal life: the design of society is to be a healing presence; it is made by human hands; it is vulnerable to return to the original wildness. And there is respect for this original, chaotic wildness; it needs to be designed into our communal life and participated in as part of the Grand Design that nurtures us at all times.

I am going to name the Primal Metaphor of these Native American cultures **Designing the Unstoppable Flow**.

Native America and the Orient

The Native American primal metaphor is probably a close relative of the Oriental metaphor **Balance within the Inclusive Community**, but the common ancestor of these two primal metaphors predates the mystical sophistication of Taoism, Confucian styles, and Buddhist enrichments. In Native America we are tasting something more ancient. And the Native American primal metaphor provides us with an unique opportunity to view the historical depths of a primal metaphor and watch it change from its pre-agricultural period, its pre-civilizational period, its early civilizational period, and its continuing dialogue with modern expressions of all the other primal metaphors. As we attend a Native American powwow and dance, sit in a sweat lodge with a Native American teacher, view Native American art, go on a vision quest, wander through the Mexican archeological museum, admire Inca stone work, or whatever we might do, we can amplify our wonder by meditating on the antiquity of this quest for profound realization. We can imagine its origins in ancient Asia and its existence among those first migrating peoples to the unfamiliar lushness of the Americas.

Native America and Europe

Since the arrival of European people to the Americas, a deep but tragic dialogue has been taking place between these two primal metaphors, **Ordering the Absolute Wonder** and **Designing the Unstoppable Flow**. The descendants of Europe have frequently been charmed by the natural connectedness and communal graciousness of Native American people. European descendants have also been surprised at the passion with which Native American cultures have fought to preserve their culture, their communal ways of living. Native Americans can be very strong individuals, but this strength is rooted in and dedicated to healing ways that are communally manifest. Europeans are individualistic by comparison, quite alien to this Native American communal richness. Early Europeans misunderstood how deep was their cultural shock, how challenged they were by Native American cultures. Not all, but most of them turned their opportunity to learn something about being human into an attitude of contempt and genocide.

Both “Ordering and “Designing” imply a use of the mind, but Native American designing is about designing communal life amidst the flow of time in order to access the healing depths of a mysterious nature within which humans are living members. The European primal preoccupation is more about giving to individual knowers ways of finding intelligibility in order to live life under the guidance of such truth. This can mean a humbling before the Mystery of Life that is continually teaching us new wisdom, but it can also mean imposing current doctrine upon nature and ourselves and

then developing defensive measures to protect our current state of “truth.” These more defensive forms of the European culture result in contempt for those who do not share these particular “certainties.” In the actual historical encounter with Native Americans we see some Europeans willing to learn from these people. But far more Europeans felt that they needed to teach Native Americans European wisdom. Europeans were surprised at the resiliency of Native American communal life, the confidence they had in the wholesomeness of their ways of life, the willingness they had to teach these strange Europeans who were obviously ignorant of the wisdom of the Americas. But few Europeans were able to see the limitations of their stubborn individualism and thereby open themselves fully to the communal treasures within Native American heritage. This was tragic, but perhaps predictable, for these primal metaphors are quite different and integrating the wisdom of these two approaches to living is still far from complete.

Native America and Arabia

The Arabian primal metaphor, **Intimacy with the Eternal Communicator**, has, like the Native American metaphor, a strong communal emphasis; seeing “We,” the people of God, in a vast dialogue through history with the God who rules history. But this communal emphasis is quite different from the Native American communal emphasis. The People of God are a vanguard experiment in realism and justice on behalf of all of humankind. Native American community is not a vanguard mission, but a stable place of residence on a piece of “sacred” Earth. This community includes all the animals and plants that comprise the wider community in which these humans reside. When Native Americans speak of “all my relations,” they mean more than grandmothers, uncles, and cousins. They include the animals, the plants, the mountains. And the Native American community is designed as a healing fabric for humans and their living companions of other species. The Arabian “People of God” type of community is more interested in history and in historical progress toward a destination of deeper union with the Final Reality.

Yet these two types of communal emphasis (at their best) do see a common enemy in individualism, egoism, crass nationalism, crass humanism, crass rationalism. In our times of intense ecological challenge, many of those who are committed to being the People of God understand that a true union with Final Reality includes a union with nature and a commitment to build societies that preserve and enrich the natural habitat. Indeed, such descendants of the Arabian primal metaphor can include in their vision of “Union with Reality” a union with geographical places that includes all the plants and animals and humans who dwell there. Such local, grounded, communal living can be embraced as an aspect of the “Kingdom of God” toward which humanity needs to move. This vision opens Western Christians, Jews, and Muslims to Native American wisdom as well as to some forgotten elements in the life of ancient Israel. The ancient scriptures of Israel are filled with deep connections with nature and a love of natural place.

Also, a significant number of Native American people have disentangled the essence of Christianity from the oppressive features that most Christian adherents foisted upon them. They are willing to integrate some elements of this historical realism with the Great Spirit within nature. So, some integration of the wisdom based on these two primal metaphors has taken place.

Native America and Sub-Asia

Native American history has had little dialogue with Sub-Asia. America’s original

peoples left Asia before the expansion of Buddhism reached the Orient. While there can be intense, solitary, mystic, feelings among Native American peoples, this is not the core emphasis of their primal metaphor. Native Americas have emphasized the communal rather than solitary singularity. Sub-Asia's **Unity with the Infinite Silence** is a solitary emphasis before it is a communal one. The communal life of Sub-Asia is patterned to enable solitary realization rather than the other way around. For Native America the communal is primary; the solitary enriches the communal. Though both communal and solitary are present in all cultures, the emphasis of these two primal metaphors is almost opposite.

Native America and Africa

Native American history has also had little dialogue with Sub-Saharan Africa. Their first encounters with the African primal metaphor began with the African slaves brought by the Europeans. **Attunement with the Final Rhythm** and **Designing the Unstoppable Flow** are primal metaphors that do not easily attract each other. Each manifests a certain wildness, but the wildness is different. The Native American drum develops a monotony punctuated by shouts and cries of liberation from this monotony. The African drum is complex, a thousand different heart beats, emotional feelings, all teaming together in rich textures that can hardly ever be described as monotonous. Native American wildness is part of a communal regularity and reserve and courage punctuated by explosive energies appropriately placed in the ongoing communal schedule. African wildness is an exploration of the always present vitalities of singular persons, communities, and natural surroundings. African community is rooted in joining the rhythms of these vitalities, rather than constructing a detailed, disciplined design.

Yet beneath these differences there is a common connection with nature, with sensations, with animal forms of consciousness, with the ongoing irrationality of Final Reality. Both Native American communal-nature designing and African natural vitalities can be seen as joined in a common challenge to any overemphasis on intelligibility, inflexible social order, or dogma that has lost contact with the Earth and our rich sensations, vitalities, and feelings that connect us to one another and to the Mysterious Overall that is beamed to us through the natural geography in which we are embedded.