

## SHAMAN'S CIRCLE: CIRCULARITY IN NATIVE AMERICAN CULTURE

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**Abstract.** *The aim of this paper is to provide an outline of Nancy Wood's book of poems entitled *Shaman's Circle*. The poems provide an illustration of some of the key points of Native American culture, with an emphasis on how the beliefs and rituals of Native Americans follow the circular path of nature..*

When it came out in 1996, Nancy Wood's *Shaman's Circle* was one of a set of three very insightful books of poetry inspired by the ways of the Native Americans. Although she herself is not bound by blood relations to any of the Native American tribes of North America, award-winning author Nancy Wood has devoted her career as an author to understanding and putting into practice the lessons passed down in Native American culture. It took one remarkable and memorable visit to a Taos Pueblo community in 1961 where she met a legendary shaman for her to see how beneficial being privy to their insightful view of the world could be to a person's life.

And so her numerous books, both fiction and nonfiction, and her photographs came to life as an illumination of truths and secrets she found in their culture. Although her writing primarily deals with her experiences with the Pueblo Indians and what she has learnt from them, the significance of the traits and idiosyncrasies of the culture that she outlined are the shared cultural ground of all Native American tribes.

In order to be a practitioner of the ways of a culture centering on circularity, one has to tune his way of thinking in order to pick up on these rotations. This requires perception, a desire to understand first and foremost the natural processes and a will to learn them. It is not enough to merely witness these processes, to be aware of the physical laws that set them in motion. Reverence is the ingredient needed to give these cycles, and the Native American rituals that are based on them, a genuine and beneficial meaning. As Nancy Wood says in the preface to her book: "*Most of us non-Indians are out of touch with the magic of the seasons, the subtle rhythms of the earth, and the daily blessings of*

*the natural world. We hardly notice birds building nests, green leaves budding, or the way a river swells with life in the spring. We are too busy to care. But care we must, for we are inextricably tied to nature, and to one another. We have to rediscover ritual and, in so doing, rediscover ourselves. We need to strengthen our bonds with nature, every day of the year. Few of us greet the rising sun or bid it farewell at sunset; not many of us howl at the moon, nor do we sing to rainclouds, growing corn, or the death spirit. We have drifted away from our roots, and melancholy prevails. Now we must reestablish contact with our sacred center and invent rituals that have personal meaning."*<sup>1</sup>

It is, therefore, no coincidence that the book, as an attempt to introduce the Native American ways into popular culture, is entitled *Shaman's Circle*. Circles, or cycles are the foundation of Native American culture. To quote the cover review: "*Life is a series of circles. From seed, to blossom, to ripe fruit, and finally to decay, we yearly watch nature trace the cycle that encompasses all living things, including ourselves.*"<sup>2</sup> It is not difficult to fathom that by mere observation of the natural rhythms around them, the Native tribes of America noted without difficulty a reoccurring pattern, a story told over and over again with us as the unknowing participants. Once you have picked up on the form, it is easy enough to find an abundance of its manifestations, both outside your world and within it. It is reminiscent of "*the ripples caused by tossing a handful of pebbles into a pond.*"<sup>3</sup> Our lives and what happens to us and in the world around us are just the smaller parts of a larger set of concentric circles, the largest of which encompass the events pertaining to the entire cosmos. That the Native American tribes felt themselves part of something greater can be seen in their cosmology where creation myths usually portray two spirit deities merging, or together creating the earth.

It was the changing of the seasons in an orderly and unvarying fashion which led the Native Americans to create and enact rituals reminiscent of the seasonal changes, even rituals that were only meant for certain seasons. For example, one of the poems in the book, *Spring: Bringing the Buds to Life*, is a song which refers to the rituals of both spring and harvest season, meticulously carried out in order to ensure a good yield. Our attention is drawn to these particular events as a reminder that what happens around us should not go unnoticed, so that these perceptions could be used to enrich our lives.

Of no less importance were the solar and lunar cycles, the way the stars would disappear and then reappear in the same parts of the sky, the same path that the sun took every day traversing the sky, and the gradual wasting away of the moon until it was reborn, all of which led to a profound study of astronomy on the part of the Native Americans, and to the establishing of the Sun god deity. In her poem *When the Morning Stars Sang Together*, Nancy Wood describes the creation of the universe, of life itself, as stemming from the stars, stating that one of the oldest hungers known to man, the one for procreation came from above as well as below, from the earth.

Other significant dates to be observed were the winter and summer solstice, the shortest and the longest day. In her poem by the same name (*The Shortest Day/The Longest Day*) the author explains the significance of these days. They were in themselves small recreations of the cycle of life, the unity of opposites. Although the longest day is the best

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<sup>1</sup> Nancy Wood, *Shaman's Circle*, (New York: Delacore Press, Bantam Doubleday Dell Publishing Group, Inc., 1996), p. 11

<sup>2</sup> *ibid*, cover

<sup>3</sup> *ibid*, p. 8

day of the summer and provides us with the opportunity to enjoy the blessings of summer for an even longer period, as she clearly points out "*Even the longest day contains the seeds of winter*"<sup>4</sup>. At the height of our enjoyment we are told of the change that is to come, one which is perhaps not that pleasant but which is equally important for us. The same applies for the shortest day in winter, the "*long gasp of icy silence*"<sup>5</sup> after which we can release our breath in the expectation of spring. There is another good example for this. Nancy Wood was able to summon up this view of life as an unending circle in her poem *Winter: Leaning toward Warmth*:

*Silence is renewal. As earth sleeps under a  
blanket of peaceful snow,  
in our village we dream of life's endless  
circle. Leaning  
toward warmth in front of the fire, we  
remember how the seeds  
Are sleeping, but in their hearts, full ears  
of summer corn begin to grow.*<sup>6</sup>

Of no less importance were those cycles observed in our inner, personal lives. The birth of every child marked the onset of a new life-cycle. But every new beginning, as we have seen, already holds within itself its ending. Every birth implies the onset of a movement that will inevitably lead to death, as with every death there is the promise of a new life. The Native Americans knew not to separate the two, to understand that one inevitably leads to the other for perpetuation of all creation, and for that purpose developed birth and death rituals, songs and dance. Unlike the white settlers who brought their own views of the continuity of life in the form of a linear progression, the native settlers of the American continent were far more satisfied with making sure that their life-lines were in tune with those of nature: their truth was that life progressed in a circular manner. There is much comfort to be found in such a belief. Speaking in the broadest and most general of terms, there exists a fear of the passing of time and the inevitability of death in white culture. A person is always aware of his own demise, the point when a stop will finally be put to his life-line. The same fear is not so frequent in Native American culture. Death is a change, a simple transition, the other half of the cycle of life. There is an acceptance of what life brings in that culture, of what is offered, natural and which brings a peace of mind and a continuity which is hard to come by in white man's culture.

If we accept the idea of the circle of life, then our attitudes need to be adjusted. Unlike the white settlers who saw life as a linear progression where every bump in the road meant that they were being steered off course, the native tribes understood that they were supposed to take the good with the bad. In the poems *The Ritual of Forgetting* and *Changing* as a people they are portrayed as someone who understands the "*necessity to start again*"<sup>7</sup>, that when something goes wrong, it is understood that it had to happen but that it opened the doorway for a new opportunity. They believed in dealing with these situations 'the proper way' so that there would be no misunderstanding in the cycle of life

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<sup>4</sup> *ibid*, p. 51

<sup>5</sup> *ibid*, p. 51

<sup>6</sup> *ibid*, p. 72

<sup>7</sup> *ibid*, p. 55

where everything requires our participation, requires that we give a part of ourselves to it, not that we are being cheated out of some form of happiness. That change is a force which dominates the world, they could tell from mere observation. But it was not something to be dreaded, but something to be looked forward to in anticipation, as a part of life.

That life is never just a straight line, but goes round and round, does not refer only to the lives of individuals, but to mankind as well. Most Native American tribes have in their mythology a similar deity now known as Kokopelli, a hunchbacked, flute-playing figure often found on petroglyphs. He is said to be the deity of fertility, one who brings fecundity and food to people, but he is also connected to mass migrations and processions, and is believed to summon people from one form of existence into another when playing his flute. Some Native American tribes believe that in a past existence they were animals, and while they are now human, Kokopelli would return with his song to call them into another plane of existence. Having taken so many forms in the past, it makes it easier for the tribes to understand and respect other life forms, calling them their brothers and calling on them for protection and guidance.

Yet of all the circles that can be found, there is one which provides the key to understanding and following all others: the shaman's circle. In the Native American tradition, the shaman's circle is a sacred circle and is most closely related to preserving and passing on knowledge. The shaman, or medicine man always had the reverence of the tribe and was an important factor in assisting youths in finding their ways and their roles in life. But the role of the shaman should not be connected solely with physical healing of the wounded or the sick. They also had the role of spiritual guides, or spiritual medicine men, those who were able to connect our presence here on earth with the supernatural. The spiritual has always played a very important, even dominant role in the lives of Native American tribes. In this sense, the lessons or instructions given by the shaman were mostly for the benefit of the soul. They were attempts to help people establish a sense of natural order and rhythm in their lives, to create a harmonious feeling between an individual and his past and present giving him a sense of continuity and purpose. There seems little doubt that in choosing the title for her book, Ms. Wood wished to tell us that she too had some knowledge she would like to pass on, that there were secrets to be learnt in this mysterious circle and that she was making them available to us.

The shaman was usually, but not exclusively, one of the elders. Elders played vital roles in the life of the community. It was from among them that tribal chiefs, political and religious leaders and of course medicine men were chosen. Old age among the Native Americans was a sign of being favored by the spirits, and therefore one who was rich in years, was also rich in wisdom and knowledge. These people, both men and women, were the protectors and teachers of the young, the keepers of the lore telling of the world and its creatures, stories that taught moral lessons. It was they who established continuity between what had come before and what was yet to pass. The fact that they had much experience is what made the elders best equipped to deal with the follies of youth and their feeling of being invincible. In the poem *On Catching Time*, Nancy Wood discusses the way the Native Americans looked upon growing up and growing old, how time inevitably passes but always leaves something behind, that which we call experience. This is why, during the course of their initiation, youths were often assisted by the shamans.

In the poem that carries the collection's title, *Shaman's Circle*, Nancy Wood talks about the circle in very simple terms: it holds a kind of knowledge that provides us with a

way of looking at life, a way of organizing our thoughts and our actions. There is a strong sense of a bond in the poem, one that originated in the past with our ancestors and whose other end is held by our unborn children. *The Sacred Song of our Ancestors* is another illustration of this point. It stresses the importance of what the elders who lived before our time had learnt and were now willing to pass onto us: do not be blind to the world around you; we are all made of the same raw essence. It is almost as if we were being told that it is not only a circle but chain of life of which we partake, and that we are only one of the links. Here is what they told us: *In those days we spoke with life and thus knew beauty all around.*<sup>8</sup> It is not just a sense of continuity that we are taught; it is also a lesson of appreciation of all that life has on offer. Take the good with the bad, the songs with the tears, the springtime with winter, as the shift or transformation from one opposite to the other is what propels the circle to continue on its route. The circle itself is the unity of the two, and of all of us who are affected by it.

The same idea is continued in the poem *The Meaning of Daylight*- we listen to the daylight because it teaches us how to survive in the nighttime. But this particular poem answers yet another pertinent question, especially one which would be asked by the more skeptical among us: why would we be in need of such knowledge? Seemingly, our lives are organized, we are content, and we hunger for nothing. But what we may take as obvious may not actually be true. As Nancy Wood puts it, these lessons are "*offered for the satisfaction of more than ordinary hunger*"<sup>9</sup>, the hunger of the spirit to rejoin its kindred.

Native Americans had various sacred places or locations at which they prayed or where they held their rituals and ceremonies. Such a location can be found in Mesa Verde, a gathering of cliff dwellings of the Anasazi located on the rim of the Grand Canyon. Each group of dwellings has a special ritual and rite chamber, a kiva, where the tribe members could reenact their birth into this world. The kiva always had an underground chamber and a small opening, a tiny crack representing the opening through which the earth mother gave birth to them, and through which they came to this world. This is yet another example of prominent symbols in Native American culture. Along with the circle, animals are also important symbols for the tribesmen. Once something has been established as having symbolic value, once we see more in it than just its outward shape, it becomes a connection between the physical and spiritual world, and can be used to heal the gap between them.

Dreams were also used as a doorway into the spiritual world, mostly for the purpose of foretelling events that were to come. Rituals as reenactments of birth or as mimicry of certain animal behavior were supposed to reestablish a bond with the spirits. They were essential to harmony, to continuity; they were the reenacting, the repetition, and the affirmation of what had been before. These rituals were always accompanied by dance which was performed in the hope of the continuation of the ancient ways. They were usually performed at important life-cycle or seasonal events. The dance would usually be accompanied by music; a drum would have been inevitable as its pounding was reminiscent of the heartbeat of the entire world and all of life around it. The rhythm was so important that only favored individuals were allowed to beat the drum and it was a skill to be acquired. The movements the dancers carried out were never performed at random, but were in accord with the beliefs and prominent symbols of the beliefs of the particular

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<sup>8</sup> *ibid.*, p. 19

<sup>9</sup> *ibid.*, p. 27

tribe in question. As tradition is an important part of the life-cycle, these rules are adhered to even in the powwows of today.

It is beyond question that much was put into the performance of such ritual dances, and picking up on that, Nancy Wood even entitled one of her poems *Sacred Love: A Ritual*. The title not only refers to the act of marriage as a culmination of two people's love for each other, but gives birth to an understanding that a ritual performance is in itself a form of sacred love for the object, person or any other reason for which it is being performed. Sometimes the words 'dance' or 'story' do not necessarily have their literal meaning. Just as the tribes themselves had rituals as a reaffirmation of life, so did the animals and plants around them. Each year the corn performed its well-rehearsed dance of sprouting and growth, the birds repeated their migratory dance, the bear its ritual of hibernation. As the author says in her poem about the seasons *Summer: The Corn Finds Its Own Life*, what happens every time a ritual is performed is the "...saving of the world through repetition of stories and dances we have known forever"<sup>10</sup>, both we and our fellow creatures. It is the way of life.

The book itself is divided into several sections all of which lead us through the different stages of our traverse along the path taught us by the shaman's circle. The first part is appropriately named *Becoming*, as in beginning, being born, being initiated, and is followed by *Connecting*, or becoming attuned to the progression of the cycle of life. Then comes the *Transformation*, which can be associated with death, as one of the great changes in life, or for women could mean giving birth, becoming a mother, or may signal the merging of one's spirit with the natural order of things. Finally there is *Honoring*, and that is the step to which our journey along the circle should ultimately lead us. The author seeks not honor for herself but for the truths about life that once we embrace, can be used to better our quality of life. As Nancy Wood says in her preface to the book: "...heaven and hell are here and now..., and they are of one's own making."<sup>11</sup>

After being initiated into the secrets of the shaman's circle, you could easily say that you have been offered the tools for living. But gaining this knowledge does not mean that you have inherited an obligation as to how to live your life. As she so eloquently puts in her poem *The Path*, being instructed is like being blessed before your journey, but you still travel along it alone. *Nothing is owed to you, but everything is available to you.*<sup>12</sup> The biggest choices in life you will still have to make on your own, and most importantly, incorporate your new feeling for the world around you into your life on your own terms.

Women had a special role in Native American society. It was not only elderly men that were involved in important decision making processes; many elderly women were often entreated for their opinion and advice. When the time came to make decisions about going to war against another tribe, the answer to the question as to whether they were able to go was sought from the women, as they were the ones who would be left behind to tend to the tribe, the children, the food, the wounded. Older women played a special part in the ritual of child bearing, where they would gather in the mother's teepee and help with the labor and delivery. As birth has always been such an important event, the onset of a young girl's menstrual cycle was considered quite an event, her initiation into womanhood, where her body too would adhere to the cycles of nature. In her poem *Pu-*

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<sup>10</sup> *ibid*, p. 36

<sup>11</sup> *ibid*, p. 10

<sup>12</sup> *ibid*, p. 21

*berly* Nancy Wood addresses the issue as it is dealt with in the native tradition. Woman, as natural counterpart to man, as a divinity, held half the sky. After all, her cycle is connected to the fecundity and procreation of the entire world. It was, after all, the mother earth from whom they sprung. Her menstrual cycle will lead to a new cycle, the cycle of life, and the reoccurring pattern of concentric circles will be continued.

The natural continuation of the idea begun in the poem *Puberty* is the poem *Birth Ritual*. There are many beautiful lines in this poem and certain thoughts chime beautifully what has already been said: birth is the renewal of life, of hope, birth is the "*new repetition of old ideas that people thought had died long ago*."<sup>13</sup> Here is someone addressing a newborn child: "*Your recent journey affirms our faith in ancient circles. ... You are the continuity of seasons and migrations, the best or worst of all that has gone before*".<sup>14</sup> In the poem *The Children of the Sun* the newborn is told: "*In you is the continuation of the world, both made and unmade*".<sup>15</sup> Much awaits a new life in this world, there is a tradition to uphold, understand and ultimately pass on in the way it has been passed down to you, but also in the way that it has affected your life, it should include the significance it has had for you. Now that this has been said, and an understanding of what has happened has been achieved, it is only right to clearly state the goals that await this new being in life: "*to be at home in the world*"<sup>16</sup> and "*to recognize your song*".<sup>17</sup>

Once one has gone through the book in its entirety and taken to heart what the author has tried to tell, it becomes clear that one of the most important lessons to be learnt inside the shaman's circle is the lesson of love. In her poem *Partners* the author says that it was in a "*...shrine of holy love, where the Creator placed everything of value for us to discover*"<sup>18</sup>. From love stems understanding, a feeling of kinship and respect. This could refer to the love of the natural world, but the love between a woman and a man should also not be overlooked or undermined. The author offers several poems that deal with this love, some of which have titles that clearly state what the intention was, such as *Commitment* or *Partners*, while others bear more unorthodox titles but still stress the beauty of such a relationship, like *Why the Great Spirit Made Hands*. The key to realizing the lessons offered us in our own lives is repetition: the repetition of love, the repetition of birth, of all the worldly cycles in our everyday activities.

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<sup>13</sup> *ibid*, p. 25

<sup>14</sup> *ibid*, p. 25

<sup>15</sup> *ibid*, p. 49

<sup>16</sup> *ibid*, p. 25

<sup>17</sup> *ibid*, p. 25

<sup>18</sup> *ibid*, p. 42

**ŠAMANOV KRUG:  
KRUŽNI TOKOVI KULTURE AMERIČKIH INDIJANACA**

**Marta Dimitrijević**

*Ovaj rad je napisan sa namerom da se predstavi knjiga pesama autorke Nensi Vud pod naslovom Šamanov krug. Pesme iz ove knjige ilustruju neke od najupečatljivijih obeležja kulture američkih Indijanaca, sa naročitim osvrtom na činjenicu da njihova verovanja i rituali prate kružne tokove u prirodi.*