

FASCINATING NATIVE AMERICAN RITUALS IN A LITERARY REVOLVING WHEEL PATTERN

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Abstract: The present study analyzes rituals and traditional practices in Louise Erdrich’s novel entitled “The Antelope Wife”. Rituals play a very important part in the Native Americans’ life. In this novel the most fascinating rituals are those dealing with the beading technique. The beads are like an enchanted totem and beading is a web interweaving the characters in the novel. Other rituals refer to dog magic, to practices connected with the act of eating and traditional food, to specific customs related to death and the process of grieving. The circular narrative pattern resembles a revolving wheel, full of odd spokes, interesting Native American rituals, traditional practices and customs which are part of the everyday life of the Ojibwa Native Americans.

Key words: ritual, tradition, practices, beading, eating, grieving.

The Native American traditional practices are fascinating. Rituals play a very important part in the Native Americans’ life. In Louise Erdrich’s *The Antelope Wife* rituals include beading, rituals needed in the creation of totems, animals which have a pivotal presence in the Native American culture, the dog and the rituals in which this animal takes part, rituals connected with the act of eating and the process of grieving. This novel offers both magical rituals and practices which belong to the everyday lives of the Native Americans who “constitute the indigenous population of the United States and profoundly affected colonial American culture, society and literature (Bona & Maini, 2006:79).

Erdrich’s novel has a circular narrative pattern, a very intricate one, which looks like a “revolving wheel [...] a wheel as often broken as not, full of odd spokes, shards, lives caught out by circumstance (Lee, 2003: 107).

The Native American spiritual universe is very rich. According to Vine Deloria Jr. “every Indian tribe has a spiritual heritage that distinguishes them from all other people. Indeed, in the past, recognizing their unique relationship to the world and its creatures, most tribes described themselves as ‘the people’ or ‘the original people’. Regarding themselves as unique, they rigorously followed the commands of the spirits as they had experienced them over uncounted generations and recognized that other peoples had the same rights and status as themselves” (Deloria, 2006:XXIII).

The lines which make up this book are beaded in the same complex and intricate manner that the author beaded the lives of her characters in this immersive and thrilling book. Probably the most interesting rituals are those around the beading technique. “A necklace of blue beads hung from the brow guard of the cradleboard. It swayed, clattered lightly. The child’s hands were bound in the wrappings. She could not reach for the beads but stared at them as though mesmerized” (Erdrich, 2002:5).

At the beginning this ritual can be regarded as a simple magical one because her being mesmerized can be considered a kind of hypnosis. The beads are like an enchanted totem and beading stands as a web that keeps the characters supported and interconnected and it also serves as a reflection of the narrative technique.

Even though it takes a while to place together all the pieces of this puzzle, in the end the author made it so that she tied every knot in the story at a later time, so as to the end in a full circle, encompassing the complete story of the characters. To mention an object which is even more alike a totem than this process, "My mother sewed my birth cord, with dry sage and sweet grass, into a turtle holder of soft white buckskin. She beaded that little turtle using precious old cobalts and yellows and Cheyenne pinks and greens in a careful design. I remember every detail of it, me, because the turtle hung near my crib, then off my belt, and was my very first play toy. I was supposed to have it on me all my life, bury it with me on reservation land, but one day I came in from playing and my indis was gone" (Erdrich, 2002:101). This is one of Cally's descriptions of her room and of the most memorable and loved objects, talismans rather, that she owns. This can be considered a ritual due to the fact that the Native Americans traditionally put together odd pieces with pieces that come from nature or with personal objects so that they can create a talisman of protection. They often have such objects or elements, the dog, too, should never leave a woman's side and such is the case with talismans. This can be translated in our minds as a birth cord, continuous connection to the mother, even after birth, dry sage for purification. Sweet grass is considered to be sacred by the indigenous people and it is used in their rituals, it is purifying as well, though it does not smoke, unlike the sage.

But, to come back to beading, it is important to note that it was not other individuals, not humans that understood the depth of it. Of course, the women who beaded were human, but they were more than ordinary human beings, they had special senses that other Natives did not, and so did their dogs. "We dogs know what the women are really doing when they are beading. They are sewing us all into a pattern, into life beneath their hands. We are the beads on the waxed string, pricked up by their sharp needles. We are the tiny pieces of the huge design that they are making – the soul of the world" (Erdrich, 2002:83).

Thus, it is confirmed by the dog of this story himself that he is aware of his place in the string of beads which only he and his like are capable of observing. It takes so much of humans to be able to pierce into the spiritual realm, starvation, isolation, and the list goes on; but the dogs are living their lives continuously bridging the two dimensions.

"We have lain next to our personal human shrouded in red calico. We have let our picked-clean ceremonial dog bones be reverently buried in bark houses. We have warned off bad spirits from their babies, and talked to the irritating ghosts of their suicide uncles and aunts. We have always given of ourselves. We have always thought of humans first" (Erdrich, 2002:81).

The structure of the fragment is yet again a repetition, "we have [...] we have [...]", which also alludes to us of ritualistic chants. It translates as rituals because Almost Soup

illustrates that this is a tradition and reveals some of the ways in which dogs dwell in the Natives' spiritual realms. Moreover, burying objects in this manner is doing magic, so is warning off spirits and their babies as well as ghosts. Interesting how suicide ghosts are deemed irritating by the dog.

"One foul night in a blizzard far off in the bush, she got sick with a fever and a cough and it worsened, worsened, until the truth is, I sensed the presence of the black dog. We all know the great black dog. That is, death. He smells like iron cold. Sparks fly from his fur. He is the one who drags the creaking cart made of sticks. We have all heard the wheels groan as they turned, and hoped they kept on past our house. But on that cold late winter night, up, north, he stopped. I heard his hound breath, felt the heat of his lungs of steam and fire (Erdrich, 2002:82).

The black dog, or the canine grim reaper here can be considered another ritual because it is again a tradition, a recurrent presence that is well known by Soup. The peculiarities related to the dog of death are also contributing to the ritualistic aspect of the persona, especially the "creaking cart made of sticks", creepy audio-visual image, but definitely an object of ritual.

"You will end up puppy soup if you're born a pure white dog on the reservation, unless you're one who is extra clever, like me. I survived into my old age through dog magic" (Erdrich, 2002:75). The ritual of eating white puppies, making soup out of them is now painted as a ritual and explained as such by Almost Soup. We come across this when the Blue Prairie Woman feeds the dog to her daughter and she eats it holding her dying mother's hand. Also, the "dog magic" is mentioned which also pertains to magic rituals. Dogs are part of the Natives' lives so much as they take part in their human life as well as in their spiritual life, through various rituals.

"Tough old thing now. Blue Prairie Woman holds the dog close underneath one arm and then, knife in hand, draws her clever blade across the beating throat. Slices its stiff moan in half and collects in the berryfield makuk its gurgle of dark blood. Blue Prairie Woman then stretches the dog out, skins and guts her, cuts off her head, and lowers the chopped carcass into a deep birch-bark container. Suspended over flames, just right, she knows how to heat water the old way in that makuk. Tending the fire carefully, weakening, she boils the dog. When it is done, the meat softened, shredding off the bones, she tips the gray meat, brown meat, onto a birch tray. Steam rises, the fragrance of the meat is faintly sweet. Quietly, she gestures to her daughter. Prods the cracked oval pads off the cooked paws. Offers them to her" (Erdrich, 2002:18-19).

Then Blue Prairie Woman dies and her daughter eats the dog while holding the hand of her dead mother. Even the description of her death alluded to ritualistic behavior, such as dancing and singing, being seductive. The same loyal canine companion that was always watching over Blue Prairie Woman, and the same dog that drained Blue Prairie Woman's breasts of the milk she could not feed to the baby she lost, now accomplishes his final act of care-giving through his sacrifice. The dog feeds the hungry child and one knot is tied in the process of beading, a moment that came full circle. The Blue Prairie Woman is a special character in this novel, thus it is granted that are mentioned some of the rituals she took part in.

“She ate white clay, scratched herself with bull thorns for relief, cut her hair, grew it long, cut it short again, scored her arms to the bone, tied the skull of a buffalo around her neck, and for six moons ate nothing but dirt and leaves” (Erdrich, 2002:12). These actions seem to be part of a ritual as well. Even though we may find a logical explanation for why she may be doing this, like the white clay could indeed be used for detoxification, the way they are enumerated, as if some sort of magic chant, translates them as a concocted ritual. Skulling a buffalo around her neck definitely leans more on the magic side of the spectrum, far away from logical explanation. Even the act of changing her name alludes to a ritual. The wiser ladies, the grandmothers also helped Blue Prairie Woman.

“In weak sunlight they chewed spring-risen mud-turtle meat, roasted coot, gopher, the remaining sweet grains of manomim, acorns, puckoons from a squirrel’s cache, and the fresh spears of dandelion. Blue Prairie Woman’s name was covered with blood, burned with fire” (Erdrich, 2002:13). This is also very ritualistic. The steps are laid out and named one after the other. In this case, the wise women performed a ritual in order to help Blue Prairie Woman “shed her skin”. According to Franco, “the older women have a long cultural memory of tribal customs and experience with the vast territory of North America” (Franco, 2006:1). These wise and elusive ladies, the grandmothers also have a special place in this novel, despite the fact that, in some cases, they can remind us of witches.

Like in this case, “She’s cooking out there. Wonder what she’s making? Wonder if a little child disappeared, we would find it in the cooking pot?” (Erdrich, 2002”56). This could make us think of the image of the ritual the typical witch has, brewing elements, or kids, in his cauldron.

Mary also advised Cally once to “Eat the head of a skunk,”[...] “In the old days, that was the way to make sure the baby’s head would be a little head, easy to push: (Erdrich, 2002:202). In this case, because Mary is talking about “the old days” there is revealed yet another ritual that has survived for generations. Native women’s experience with birth giving demonstrated that eating skunk heads aids in children that are easier to push out due to their perfectly-sized heads and who are we to contest that.

Since we are focusing on the topic of food, there is an entire quote that captures the serving of Frank’s beloved cake, the so-called Blitzkuchen: “Let’s cut the cake!’ There was a shuffle, weak smiles, shrugs and halfhearted inquiries around among the women, who, questioning one another, determined that there were still no plates. ‘Hold out your hands then!’ Frank brandished the shining knife and then, with Rozin’s hand grasped firmly in his hand, cut a wedge firmly into the lowest layer. He then proceeded with the practiced alacrity of his trade to slice up the entire cake and lay out the pieces before the increasingly restless crowd of guests, all of whom he then, gesturing grandly, with an expansiveness unlike himself, urged to pick up a piece in their hand. He did, smiling now at Rozin. Holding the fragrant wedge aloft, first, he then lowered it like a sacrament and took a huge bite. At his reaction to the taste, the crowd stopped dead. His face, his expression, registered a stark, huge feeling. Amazement covered him. He opened his mouth wide and bit again. Even before he broke off a corner of his piece and placed it in

Rozin's mouth he was already shouting. The crowd began to taste the cake, exclaiming as they did, nervously, in trepidation, but unable to resist the next bite after the first, the next and next delicate yet dense bite of blitzkuchen. And so it was, so the secret was discovered. The final and the missing ingredient – fear. And they all ate together, and they all saw their loved ones moving [...] The old people sacrificed a corner of the cake, with tobacco, for the spirits. The ones who had gone on before, the dead, even they came back for a little taste” (Erdrich, 2002:178-179).

This is one of the most beautiful quotes taken from the novel. It represents another knot tied and another moment that came full circle. Yet again, the Blitzkuchen has been served directly in people's palms, as it was back then when it was, literally, a lifesaving cake. People could not resist the next bite and their pleasure along with another completion of this ritual and an added layer of fear united the living with the spirits. The fact that Frank followed a recipe that belonged to his ancestors and their history and managed to also acquire the missing ingredient grandmother would not share, fear, completed the ritual and delivered the perfect cake. Eating was not always such a cheerful subject in the book, though, especially when it was brought up in a metaphorical sense.

“Rozin. She swam in the grief, she cooked with it, she bagged it up and froze it. She made a stew, burned it out in the backyard, dug a hole and threw it in, sacked it for garbage, put it up on a shelf, brought it to the trees she loved, and set it free out in the leaves. She worshiped it, curled around it like a sweet dog, smoothed the hair of her remaining daughter underneath her hand, and decided to have nothing to do with men. Rozin left her husband and her lover both behind. Took her daughter Cally and came north to live with Zosie, Mary, and me, Almost Soup, once again” (Erdrich, 2002:84).

A ritual of dealing with grief, human to go through stages, but ritualistic because it is specific to the Native American traditions, the cooking, the stew, digging and burying and so forth. In the end, women often seem to end up back to where they started, or back to their roots, with their dogs.

The chapter entitled *Food of the Dead* is an incredibly moving and chilling representation of Native American rituals surrounding death where food and eating or the lack thereof play important roles. Even though the focus is Rozin's story, the meaning precedes the book and connects to the large body of Native American traditions.

To speak about one story is to bring up all the stories, the sacred rituals that manifest themselves over and over through other people, nonetheless they are connected. The spirit world is as important to the Natives as their human world, so keeping in mind the traditional aspect of the ritual theme, the Native American tradition educates every member of their own tribe how to deal or how not to deal with spirits. When Rozin was weak and grieving again, a spirit showed itself to her but she knew what consequences she would suffer were she to interact with the spirit.

“Mama?’ Deanna asks. ‘Are you coming too?’ [...] If she lets her daughter keep talking, Deanna will never stop. She'll go on talking. She'll talk to her mother morning and night and at last they'll put Rozin away. Still, she wants to hear so badly. Just a few

words. Just get close to her, she thinks absurdly, don't talk to her but just get near her" (Erdrich, 2002:186). She was not clueless, Rozin, despite her state was nothing like we are used to when witnessing just about anyone being visited by a spirit, the all-too common "Hello? Is anybody there?" And going exactly where one should not go, clueless and curious like a cat with one life left. The tradition highlighting how Rozin knew that if she opened the door to this spirit which was set on taking Rozin with it into its world, she would go mad, for opening that door would mean being gravely weakened by that spiritual force, mentally and in any other way imaginable. Nevertheless, Rozin could not help herself and she goes on to perform other rituals, like setting out the food and hoping that the spirits would visit, the starvation and the isolation are also pillars of the voyage a human must take in order to be able to connect to the spirit world and that is exactly what Rozin did.

As it is mentioned in the *Canadian Encyclopedia*, "According to most Algonquian oral traditions, a windigo is a cannibalistic monster that preys on the weak and socially disconnected. In most versions of the legend, a human becomes a windigo after his or her spirit is corrupted by greed or weakened by extreme conditions, such as hunger and cold. In other legends, humans become windigos when possessed by a prowling spirit during a moment of weakness" (Pitt, 2012).

The windigo has a ritualistic presence in the Native American culture and these descriptions fit perfectly with Rozin's case, but thankfully, she made it out still human and that is possible with Frank's help. Windigo legends are stories about isolation, selfishness and the importance of community, hence, why Frank could be called Rozin's salvation in this case because if it were up to her, she would have been left to her own devices until she would have been put away.

These instances are intriguing and magical, but very far off from what the rest of the world is used to. Still, this book is a complete package because it also offered means of connecting with readers like us, who are white and believe in the Christian- Orthodox religion.

"Who knows whose blood sins we are paying for? What murder committed in another country, another time? The black-robe priests believe that Christ allowed himself to be nailed high on the cross in order to pay. Shawanos think different. Why should an innocent god, a manitou spirit, have to settle for our bad drunks, our rage, our heart-sown angers and mistakes? Those things should come down on us" (Erdrich, 2002:237-238).

Whenever reading about other cultures we should make sure to keep our culture and religion in our minds and this quote is such a beautifully related parallel between Christianity and the Native American tradition. Despite it being a beautiful culture, it is also a culture beaded with pain and tragedy, but despite all that the Natives carry it broodingly and with strength on their broad shoulders. To acknowledge and to face punishment for sins head on with bravery is part of the beautiful Native identity, especially in some cases presented in this book.

"My branch of the Ojibwa sticks to its anokee. That word, which means work, is in our days of the week. Monday is First Work Day, Tuesday is Second Work Day, and so on

to Ishkwaa Anokii Wug. No day for lazy. Even our Saturday is Clean the Floor Day” (Erdrich, 2002:104). This quote contains a ritual in the functional sense, it has implications in the rituals of everyday life and how they repeat themselves, harmonizing in a circling continuum. We find out how the Ojibwa organize their days and their tasks as Romanian Christians/ Orthodox people (even if just respecting the model and not the religion) we have such rituals/ traditions as well, Sunday being an example. Thus, the anokee we discover means work but also much more. And, unlike us, the Natives’ Sundays are not meant only for relaxing.

In a perfect world, in a “fantasy anthology”, as Jay Fliegelman says (1993:337), cultivated people should “enhance Native American pieces with attention to individual tribal customs, sensibilities, traditions and religions – the pluralism of Native America” (Bona & Maini, 2006:78).

Erdrich’s novel takes us on an unforeseen adventure of varied colors that belong to the traditions of the Native American culture where rituals accompany all the activities of the Native American people, be it magical or mundane.

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