THE IMPORTANCE OF PLANTS IN NATIVE AMERICAN ORAL TRADITION

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Abstract

This article aims to deepen the reader's understanding of the profound connection between Native Americans and the natural world. The animistic spirit, a concept attributed to them by Europeans, is reflected in their oral traditions, ceremonies, attire, and rituals. In this section, we will explore their extensive knowledge of grains, trees, and plants, along with their various applications on physical, mental, and spiritual levels, challenging the romanticized and idealistic perceptions that Europeans held of Native Americans.

Keywords: Native American, Oral Tradition, Three Sisters, Sacred Trees, Sacred Plants.

LA IMPORTANCIA DE LAS PLANTAS EN LA TRADICIÓN ORAL DE LOS INDÍGENAS AMERICANOS

Resumen

Este artículo pretende profundizar en la comprensión del lector sobre la profunda conexión entre los nativos americanos y el mundo natural. El espíritu animista, concepto que les atribuyeron los europeos, se refleja en sus tradiciones orales, ceremonias, atuendos y rituales. En esta sección exploraremos su amplio conocimiento de los cereales, los árboles y las plantas, junto con sus diversas aplicaciones a nivel físico, mental y espiritual, desafiando las percepciones románticas e idealistas que los europeos tenían de los nativos americanos.

Palabras clave: nativos americanos, tradición oral, tres hermanas, árboles sagrados, plantas sagradas.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Indigenous peoples maintained a profound connection with planet Earth, which cultivated their expertise in its resources. This is exemplified by the agricultural and fishing methods we continue to utilize today, which they originally introduced. However, from the 1500s onwards, Europeans dismissed this relationship as mere folly and romanticism. As an example, for the Lakota, who were nomad and lived in the Great Lakes region, natural features such as rivers, mountains, lakes, and forests embodied beauty, contrasting sharply with the European perspective that characterized them as harsh, primitive, wild, savage, and untamed.

As it will be argued, the concept of kinship is a fundamental tenet of Native American philosophy; wherein indigenous communities perceive the earth and other non- organic entities as integral components of the bios (life). For instance, they respect the spirit present in each element and seek permission before cutting, harvesting, or consuming resources. The purification and healing rituals will be conducted through the oral traditions of various North American tribes, alongside festivities centered on cereals, trees, and plants. Here we can see some indigenous perspectives around the concept of kinship:

> For hundreds of years, certainly for thousands, our Native elders have taught us "All My Relations" means all living things and the entire Universe, "All Our Relations," they have said time and time again. (...) Do you doubt still? A Rock Alive? You say it is hard! it doesn't move of its own accord! it has no eyes! it doesn't think! but rocks do move. Put one in a fire it will get hot, won't it? That means won't you agree? That its insides are moving ever more rapidly? (Forbes 2001, 287-288)

Hence, indigenous peoples have held a profound reverence for the Creator and the realm of nature, referred to as "Wemi Tali" or "All Where" in the Delaware-Lenápe language. Slow Buffalo, a revered teacher, is noted to have expressed around a millennium ago:

> Remember those upon whom you will rely. In the heavens resides the Mysterious One, your grandfather. Between the earth and the heavens lies your father. This earth is your grandmother, and the soil is also your grandmother. Everything that flourishes from the earth is your mother, akin to an infant nursing from its mother. Always bear in mind that your grandmother is beneath your feet, and you are perpetually upon her, while your father watches from above. (Forbes 2001, 285)

After having approached the philosophy and traditions of some North American tribes, in the following sections we will examine the understanding that Native Americans possessed regarding cereals, plants, and trees, as conveyed through their oral traditions and the ceremonies and rituals associated with them.

2. THE THREE SISTERS IN NATIVE AMERICAN ORAL TRADITION

According to Amanda L. Landon (2008), agriculture emerged in Mesoamerica –encompassing Southern Mexico, Guatemala, Belize, El Salvador, Western Honduras, Western Nicaragua, and Western Costa Rica– approximately 7,000 years ago. This development included the domestication of maize, beans, and squash, which significantly transformed the types of plants cultivated by the population. The figure of the Corn Mother, also known as the Corn Goddess (Iroquois) or Onatah, embodies this connection because she provided her children with essential sustenance, including squash, beans, and corn. However, Hah-gweh-da-et-gah captured Onatah in his darkness beneath the earth, where she suffered until she vowed to the Sun that she would "never leave her fields again" (Converse 1908, 64). Interestingly, this Goddess shares notable similarities with Persephone, the Greek Goddess associated with agriculture and vegetation, particularly cereals, who was also wed to Hades, the ruler of the underworld. Additionally, in narratives such as "The Strange Origin of Corn" by the Abenaki, the emergence of corn is explained, emphasizing the profound connections between humans and plants. In this tale, long before the creation of Native people, a solitary man lived far from others, subsisting solely on roots and nuts. One day, he awoke to find a figure nearby. Initially frightened, he soon beheld a beautiful woman with long hair. When he approached her, she requested that he let her be. Ultimately, she promised him, "if you do exactly what I tell you to do, I will always be with you. Now, "take two dry sticks and rub them quickly while you hold the grass" (Pérez 2018, 12). Suddenly, a spark flew away and the grass started burning like an arrow. The beautiful woman spoke again: "When the Sun sets, take me by the hair and drag me over the burnt field." The man replied, "I don't want to do that!" to which she said, "You have to do what I say." As she continued, "Wherever you drag me, something will sprout up like this, like grass and you will see something like hair coming out among the leaves. Soon, the seeds will be ready to use" (Pérez 2018, 12).

As it can be inferred, the matrilineal and matriarchal nature of the Iroquois can be reflected in considering these plants as special gifts from the Great Spirit. In ancient times, when these plants were cultivated together on a single hill, they served as a representation of protection and unity. This was also an example of sustainable agriculture because the corn provides the beans with needed help, the beans expel nitrogen from the air and bring it into the soil to benefit all three, as the beans grow through the squash vines and work their way through the corn cobs, they hold each other together (see Figure 1).

According to the story compiled by students at Centennial College and found in *Indian Legends of Eastern Canada* called "The Three Sisters," they "were quite different in their size and way of dressing" (Canadian 1969, 19). The little one, referring to the squash, "was so young that she could only crawl at first and was dressed in green" (19). The second sister wore a vibrant yellow dress and tended to wander off alone whenever the sun illuminated the day, and a gentle breeze caressed her face. The third sister, being the eldest, stood upright and tall, always vigilant in

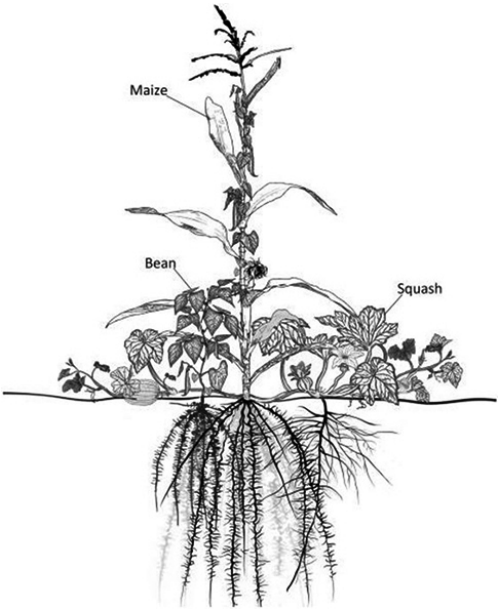

Figure 1. Plantation of the Three Sisters. Source: Lopez-Ridaura, S., Barba-Escoto, L., Reyna- Ramirez, C. A., Sum, C., Palacios-Rojas, N., & Gerard, B.

her efforts to safeguard her younger siblings. She was adorned with a light green shawl, and her long, golden hair danced around her head in the wind (19).

In the story entitled "The Corn Spirit" by The Tuscarora, since the people forgot to show respect for the corn and be grateful to the Creators for their good fortune, the grandfather, who personified corn, was crying, and his clothes were torn because people threw him to the dogs. He was also dirty because *Tuscarora* people had let their children trample him, so Dahoyagweida, who was the only person who cared for the fields, told him, "I will go back and remind my people how to treat you" (Canadian 1969, 21). It is relevant to note that, while the Tuscarora society is matrilineal, indicating that women played crucial roles in decisions concerning land and resources, the deity representing Corn is depicted as male in this tale. Hence, the community benefited from corn in various ways, including feeding ears of corn to their dogs and preserving it for consumption during the winter months. The pervasive significance of corn is illustrated in the Green Corn Festival, an annual renewal ceremony that spans a duration of 4 to 8 days. This event was celebrated upon the ripening of the first corn. During this time, men adhered to a rigorous fasting regimen, while women and children were permitted to partake under specific guidelines. The leaves of the corn plants were typically utilized to prepare a caffeinated drink, which formed an integral part of the purification ritual.

In another story, "The People of Maize" by the Lacandon (Maya) and adapted from the *Popul Vuh*, *Tepeu* and *Gucumatz* created the first people out of mud, but it was too soft and melted away. Indeed, "these people of mud spoke, but they had no minds" (Vidal Lorenzo & Rivera Dorado 2017, 71). The Creators realized they could not multiply, so they divined and saw they needed to carve people out of wood. This time, the people stood up, walked around, and spoke, but lacked souls, minds, and blood, so their cheeks were dry. Later, the Heart of Heaven sent a great flood, and the people made of wood were destroyed. Finally, Tepeu and Gucumatz held a council to decide how to make the flesh of the people. "The parrot, the jaguar, the coyote and the crow, told them of yellow ears of corn and the white ears of corn," (Vidal Lorenzo & Rivera Dorado 2017, 75) and brought them to the land where corn grew. "The Creator and the Maker ground the corn and made it into dough" (75), from which they created the flesh, arms, legs and bodies of the people. As a result, people made of maize were intelligent and they could see from afar which made the Creator and the Maker worried that they would become arrogant, so they made their eyes darker, and their sight was limited to the closest parts of Earth and Sky. Moreover, in the story "The Buffalo Bull and the Cedar Tree" by the Osage, the Buffalo Bull made the people from red, speckled and yellow corn, so they could be different from each other like animals (Bruchac 1995, 83).

As we can see, the stories provide answers to the emergence of corn, its proper preparation and its contribution to the creation of human beings as we know them today.

3. SACRED TREES IN NATIVE AMERICAN ORAL TRADITION

The shared element among these cosmogonic narratives is the descent of Sky Woman, who falls through a hollow in a tree from the patriarchal celestial realm to the terrestrial world. There, she is aided by animals that help her bring life from clay. Thus, in the "Huron Creation Myth" (First people), a legend of the Wyandot people, a female deity inadvertently descends through an opening in the sky, a realm that was previously inhabited solely by aquatic creatures. The narrative begins with the statement, "Then a woman fell through a hole in the sky."

Furthermore, in the "Iroquois Creation Myth" (Oneida), Sky Woman requests her husband to throw a tree at the center of the island, as she is about to give birth to twins. In a fit of anger, her husband complies and forcefully pushes her through the opening without her consent. "With curiosity, the woman peeked through the hole. (...) At that moment, the husband pushed her." Then, Sky Woman gave birth to twins, the entity referred to as Light One, also known as Good-minded, observed the absence of light and subsequently created the "tree of light." This tree featured a magnificent ball of light at its highest branch, predating the creation of the sun. Shortly after he "dug up the tree of light, and looking into the pool of water in which the trunk had grown, he saw the reflection of his face and thereupon conceived the idea of creating Ongwe and made them both a man and a woman" (Oneida). The tree, due to its impressive size, serves as a bridge between the terrestrial realm

and the celestial sphere, facilitating the passage of light in this context. In other narratives, the tree's hollow interior enables the creator goddess to descend onto the turtle's shell, thereby initiating the process of creation on Earth.

In one of those stories, "The Sky Tree" by the Huron, people lived on Earth, and in the middle, there was a great Sky Tree that provided all the food. An old chief lived with his wife Aataentsic "Ancient Woman," and he got weaker and weaker. He had a premonitory dream that he could be healed if he took the fruit that grows at the top of the Sky Tree. Aataentsic cuts the tree and splits it in half and falls through the hole left by the tree and says, "Without the tree, there can be no life. I must follow it" (Bonvillian 1989, 10). As it can be seen, trees possess extraordinary qualities as they serve as a bridge between Sky World and Mother Earth, while offering sustenance. Thus, in the narrative "The Thanks to the Trees," a traditional Seneca Thanksgiving Address, it is stated that the Creator determined, "Trees will be on Earth, growing here and there" (Mohawk 1972, 17). This decision holds significant importance, as these trees will be a source of medicinal resources. The Creator also declared, "Every tree shall possess a name," and "the trees will collaborate harmoniously to bring joy to families on Earth" (17). This declaration marked the origin of the maple tree. It is said that the Creator informed the people that as the weather warmed, the sap would begin to flow, and they would need to gather it to enjoy maple syrup once more, leading to the celebration of the Maple Festival or Maple Sugar Gathering. Indeed, the Haudenosaunee[1] expresses gratitude to the spirit of the maple trees, recognizing them as the first to awaken life in early spring[2] (Evans Tekaroniake). Charlie Patton practices and shares his people's traditional teachings, saying, "we call Wahta (maple) the leader of the trees because it is always the first tree to wake up in the spring, even when there is still two feet of snow on the ground" (Evans Tekaroniake). The sap harvested from these trees is believed to purify the body for the year ahead. Moreover, in the narrative "How the Ojibwe Got Maple Syrup"[3] (Ritzenthaler & Ritzenthaler 1983) Nokomis, Winneboozho's grandmother, contemplated a method to ensure that humans would need to exert effort to collect the sap, as it initially flowed freely like rain. Consequently, it was determined that individuals must host a feast, offer tobacco, and place birch bark trays before accessing the syrup. Nokomis then instructed him to insert a small piece of wood into each maple tree to facilitate the flow of sap. Upon attempting this, he discovered that the sap was "thick and sweet". The process of collecting syrup commenced with the suspension of birch bark buckets from the tree positioned beneath the desired sap collection area. To facilitate this, a

[1] The Confederacy, made up of the Mohawks, Oneidas, Onondagas, Cayugas, & Senecas was intended as a way to unite the nations and create a peaceful means of decision making. See https://www.haudenosauneeconfederacy.com/who-we-are/.

[2] Charlie Patton is a Faith keeper of the Haudenosaunee and practices and shares his people's traditional teachings of tribal traditions at the community longhouse.

[3] "How the Ojibway Got the Maple Syrup." Story adapted from the Great Lakes Inter-Tribal Snap-Ed Program and adapted from Robert E. Ritzenthaler & Pat Ritzenthaler (1983).

Figure 2. Traditionally, the process of making maple syrup begins with drilling a piece of wood into the tree to serve as a spile, or spout from which the clear sap can drip.

hole was drilled into the tree, a method referred to as 'tapping' (See Figure 2), after which a piece of wood was inserted into the hole to function as a spout.

In the narrative "Why Some Trees Are Always Green," the Cherokee people elucidate the color of trees. This tale originates when plants and animals were first created and were instructed to "watch and stay awake for seven nights" (Bird 1972, 37). Those who successfully met this requirement would be granted a unique ability. On the seventh night, only the panther and the owl remained vigilant, earning them the power to see in the darkness. Additionally, among the plants, the pine, spruce, hemlock, cedar, laurel, and holly also stayed awake, resulting in their perpetual greenness and the medicinal properties of their leaves.

It can be inferred from the narratives that trees play a crucial role in the creation process, connecting the celestial and terrestrial realms. Additionally, the necessity for humans to show respect and care to reap the desired benefits is evident. The animist beliefs of Indigenous people are illustrated when trees need to remain vigilant for seven days to receive a magical power.

4. SACRED PLANTS AND THEIR HEALING POWERS

The plants that will be present in the sacred and healing ceremonies will be grass, cedar, sage, and tobacco. Joseph Bruchac said that many American Indian women and men learned the secrets of healing through medicinal plants because they were told how to use them: "That knowledge came to them in a dream, or they heard it spoken by a breathless voice while they talked or sat in the forest" (2016, 164). The therapeutic properties of medicinal plants have been linked to the bear clan, as recounted in the narrative titled "The Gift of the Great Spirit". Iroquois elders share

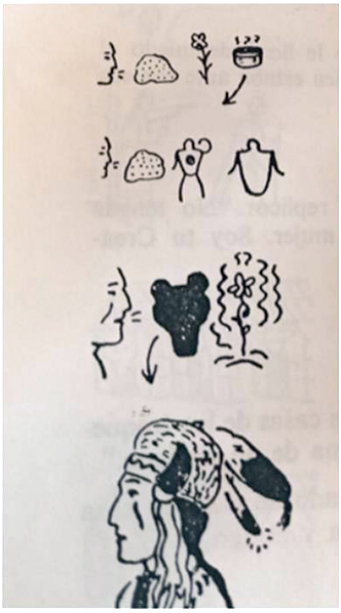

Figure 3. Pictograms of "The Great Spirit" Source: "Tehanetorens" Miraguano Editions.

this tale with younger generations to instill a sense of respect and compassion for their ancestors. As the story goes, long ago, an unfamiliar elder arrived in a small Iroquois village, clad in tattered garments and exhibiting signs of weariness and distress. In his quest for sustenance and shelter, he first approached the turtle clan, only to be denied assistance. He then sought help from the clans of the Duck, the Wolf, the Otter, the Deer, the Eel, the Heron, and the Eagle, but was met with refusal from each other. Ultimately, weary and disheartened, he reached the dwelling of the Bear clan, where an elderly woman, observing his state, extended an offer of rest and nourishment. The following day, the old man was afflicted with a severe fever and requested that the woman venture into the forest to find a particular plant. He instructed her on the preparation of the plant, which facilitated his recovery (93).

In the days that followed, she fell ill once more, suffering from various ailments, prompting him to persist in sending her to gather different herbs while supervising their preparation. One day, as the elderly woman toiled outside, she observed an extraordinary light emanating from her dwelling. Upon opening the door, she encountered a remarkably handsome young man, his visage radiating like the sun. In that instant, she understood that she was in the presence of the Great Creator.

Ultimately, the Creator entrusted the Bear Clan (Figure 3) with the enduring duty of serving as the Guardians of Medicine across generations, in appreciation for the shelter and sustenance they had provided. This account is conveyed through

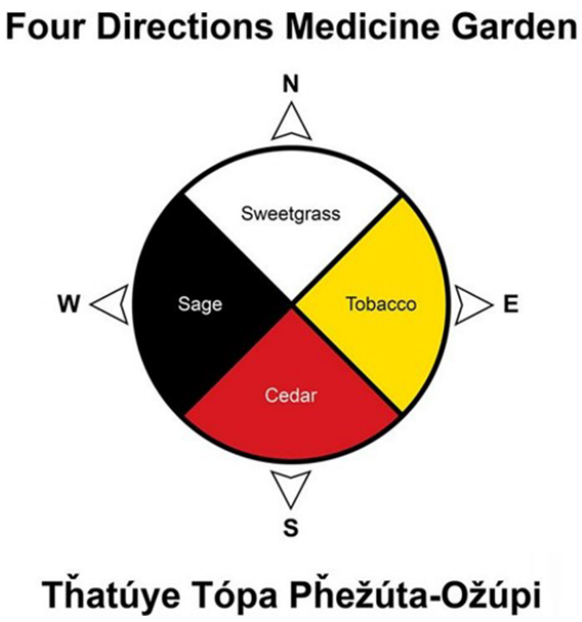

Figure 4. The Medicine Wheel. Source: University of Minnesota.

pictograms derived from ancient wampum belts by a researcher of the Mohawk tribe, drawing upon historically decorated barks or reproductions of ancient Iroquois rock art.

Medicinal plants are linked to the medicine wheel. Tobacco, associated with the eastern yellow section, is revered for honoring the creator and is considered the first plant given to humanity. Sweetgrass, linked to the western black quadrant, serves a purifying role before significant ceremonies. Cedar, associated with the northern white section, is utilized for purifying homes and sweat lodges, warding off malevolent forces. Lastly, sage, connected to the southern section, is known for cleansing the mind, dispelling negative energies, and preparing individuals for teachings and ceremonies (See Figure 4).

The initial revered plant is sweetgrass, often referred to as Mother Earth's hair. Once harvested, the grass is meticulously braided, symbolizing unity and strength. Each segment of the braid represents the mind, body, and spirit (Pérez 2020, 31).

The cedar is used in physical healing rituals and spiritual purification. The ritual consists of lighting the cedar inside a shell and shaking the smoke with a feather. You must direct the smoke towards you, first to the head, then to the heart, and finally to the rest of the body. Once you are purified, you will speak with your heart free of impure thoughts, and you will be in contact with the Great Spirit. In the story "The Buffalo Bull and the Cedar Tree" by the Osage, the great Bull Buffalo rolled on the ground, and there, healing plants grew. He told his people, "Use them

and you will see old age as you travel the path of life" (Liebert 1987, 84). As Osage people traveled, they saw the leaves falling from the trees and the days grew colder and the trees were bare of leaves, but there was a tree standing whose boughs were still green and its scent was fragrant; it was Cedar. Cedar addressed the people and said:

> "The Little Ones may make of me their medicine. Look at my roots. A sign of my old age. When the Little Ones make me their symbol, they will live to see their toes gnarled with age. Look at my branches and how they bend. With these as symbols, the People will live to see their own shoulders bent with age. Look at the feathery tips of my branches. When the Little Ones make these their symbols, they will live to see their own hair white with age as they travel the Path of Life." (Liebert 1987, 85)

This is how the Osage People named the Cedar the Tree of Life.

The widespread existence of this tree inspired various tales regarding its origin. For example, a warrior from the Micmac tribe sought immortality from Glooskap, who responded, "That is impossible; all must confront death"[4] (Public Library) Nevertheless, the creator promised him a lifespan longer than any other being on Mother Earth. The following day, at dawn, they journeyed to a desolate, rocky island. Glooskap embraced the warrior, lifted him, and positioned him face down, declaring, "Your wish has been granted" (Public Library). Then, the warrior understood he had transformed into a magnificent cedar. Glooskap continued, "I cannot specify the number of years you will endure, but I assure you that you will outlast any human. This island is isolated, ensuring you will not be felled for firewood, and you now possess the resilience to withstand any storm. Indeed, you will live for an extensive period" (Public Library).

It is widely held that the Spirit Tree possesses healing and mystical abilities. For centuries, this ancient tree has held sacred and spiritual importance for the Ojibwe people of Grand Portage, Minnesota (See Figure 5)

Furthermore, in the Potawatomi story, Skinner "The Men Who Visited the Sun," six men embarked on a journey to visit the Sun, hoping to fulfill their wishes. One of the men expressed, "I wish to avoid death. I desire to remain here to assist my people for as long as the earth endures." The Sun responded, "I shall grant you immortality. You will be known as Cedar Tree, and you will exist eternally among all nations and peoples. You will be the first to be honored in their feasts, and all will regard you as sacred." On their return, the man transformed into a cedar and instructed the others to use him as incense during their ceremonies. Another man, who also sought immortality, was transformed into a stone and advised the group that whenever they felt unwell, they should heat a stone and apply it to the affected area (Skinner 2011, 363). This narrative explains the origins of the sacred cedar and the stones used by the Potawatomi in their sweat lodges.

[4] Glooskap is considered to be the first human, a great powerful being who shapes landscapes and shrinks or grows the animals around him.

Figure 5. Almost 300 years ago, the Spirit Little Cedar Tree (or Witch Tree), growing out of the rock overlooking Lake Superior, was noticed by French explorer Sieur de la Verendrye, who wrote in 1731 that it was a mature tree.

Additionally, in the Northwestern Legend "When the Animals and Birds were Created" (Welker) when the world was so young that there were no people on earth, the two brothers of the Sun and the Moon came to earth ready to create a new race of Native Americans. They realized that Natives needed big trunks to make canoes, therefore, they created cedar trees to make many things from their bark and roots. Natives of the northwest coast exemplify the term "cedar people", as they navigated extensive distances in canoes constructed from this wood and primarily sought refuge during the lengthy winters in dwellings built from cedar poles, beams, and planks. Harris (2013) states that the construction involved hollowing out the center of a cedar log. Once the wood became sufficiently pliable, planking shaped and supported the sides. Subsequently, the elevated bow and stern were connected using twisted ropes and pegs made from cedar bark (99) (See Figure 6).

The multiple uses that could be given to the cedar tree will be explained in the story

> "The Origin of Red Cedar" by Coast Salish, where there was a good man always helping others, giving them food and clothing. When the Spirit saw this, he said, "That man has done his work; when he dies and where he is buried, a cedar tree will grow and be useful to the people with roots for baskets, the bark for clothing, the wood for shelter." (Stewart 1924, 26). Its bark was also used among Kwakiult

Figure 6. Bruce Larson uses forms that he acquired from the estate of the late Burt Libby for his new canoe construction projects. The ribs and planking are fashioned from white and red cedar. Photo by Roger Moody.

girls during puberty; a woman companion put over the girl's head a "shredded cedar bark, about 68.5 cm in diameter." (Stewart 1924, 180).

The third sacred plant is sage, which has the power to heal us spiritually because its fragrance penetrates the body, generating a feeling of height and strength. For Native Americans, sage plays a vital role during significant life events, including birth, life, and death. In Florence Stratton's "The Maiden Who Loved a Star" (2022), as compiled by Bessie M. Reid in 1936, the story follows a beautiful young Indian girl who embarks on a journey into the desert in search of the ripe, purple fruit of the prickly pear. One evening, she returns from the desert later than usual, just as the stars begin to twinkle in the night sky. One of the stars shone with exceptional brightness, appearing closer to the Earth than the others. The young Indian girl paused on the sand to admire it and wondered, "Is that star winking at me?" She envisioned its nighttime glow and found it present in her dreams. The following day, she returned to the desert in search of ripe prickly pears and once again spotted the star, repeating this ritual for seven consecutive days. In her dreams, a man communicated with her, yet she realized that as long as he remained in the heavens and she on earth, their union was impossible. The young woman was profoundly in love, but her heart was heavy with sorrow, knowing her beloved resided in the starry sky (Stratton 2022, 31).

Consequently, she decided to end her life. Seeking guidance from an elderly sorceress on how to die, she aspired to ascend to the heavens to be with her beloved star. The sorceress responded, "You must embrace the life bestowed upon you by the Great Spirit, but I can transform you into a being that will allow you to inhabit the desert beneath the gentle gaze of the young star" (31).

That very night, she departed with the elderly sorceress to the desert, where she crafted a powerful potion using local flora and urged the young woman to drink it. As she consumed the mixture, her feet began to merge with the arid, sandy ground.

Figure 7. Purple Sage. Source: Kristina Hicks-Hamblin. https://gardenerspath.com/author/kristinahickshamblin/.

Her arms morphed into branches, and her dark hair transformed into leaves. The young woman had turned into a bush unlike any that the indigenous people had ever encountered in the desert. When the wind rustled through, the bush appeared to murmur its gratitude to the old sorceress. Upon seeing the bush, a distant star emerged, its light fragmented by the vastness, causing some luminous shards to fall directly onto the bush. These star fragments settled as fine dust, blanketing the leaves in white. The shrub, adorned with white leaves and exquisite flowers, became known as cenisa. Today, it is referred to as purple sage (Figure 7), a fact that remains unknown to many white settlers regarding its origins in the desert.

Lastly is tobacco, which is used for spiritual healing and to establish a connection with the Great Spirit through the smoke that is released. In the *Anthology of Traditional Tobacco Stories* (1992), it is noted that among the Delaware people, when an herbalist collects leaves or roots from the forest, it is customary to sprinkle tobacco at the base of the tree or around the plant as a tribute to the spirit realm. This act serves multiple purposes, including calming destructive winds, attracting favorable outcomes during hunts, safeguarding travelers, and providing solace to those in distress. The Seneca people permitted the tobacco plant to grow to a length that was twice the span of their outstretched thumbs and forefingers, and it was only harvested when a storm was imminent; otherwise, the quality of the tobacco would be deemed inferior (5).

The Iroquois tale titled "A Great Gift, Tobacco" explores the origins of tobacco. According to the narrative, many winters ago, in a community along the Ohio River, the residents were startled by an unusual sound emanating from the river. They hurried to the source of the noise and listened intently to the "extraordinary sound, which at times resembled the roar of an unknown beast, evoking fear, and

then shifted into melodies that appeared to be performed by a choir"[5] (Tehanetorens 1984, 90). As they gazed upriver to identify the source of the peculiar voice, they spotted a canoe filled with strange beings who, "due to their distinctive attire, appeared to be witches" (1984, 90). This unique voice spoke to them once more, commanding them to return to their homes and secure their doors. Some chose to ignore this directive and were subsequently struck down. A relative of one of the deceased sought vengeance and initiated a military campaign. Upon discovering the canoe quietly resting on the shore, the voice reappeared, proclaiming that "if those unfamiliar beings were eliminated, the People of the Longhouse would be granted a significant reward" (1984, 92). A young warrior picked up a stone and hurled it at one of the beings, who awoke with a cry. In retaliation, the Iroquois warrior thrust a spear into him, silencing him permanently.

The peculiar beings leaped from the canoe and pursued the warrior, who led them to a nearby hut where a trap had been set. Other Iroquois warriors joined the fray, encircling the strange beings with their shouts and forcing them to the ground. They then "gathered a great pyre of bushes and dry wood" (Tehanetorens 1984, 94) and placed the lifeless bodies of the warriors upon it, igniting the fire. "From the ashes sprouted a rare plant. It was the Tobacco plant" (94). Ultimately, the mysterious voice instructed them on how to preserve and prepare the plant for its use, transforming it into a valuable gift.

The sacred pipe ceremony, as described by Calf Robe (1979), who documented the ritual for the Blackfoot community, indicates that on the eve of the ceremony, an offering consisting of willow wood, eagle feathers, sage, cloth, and calfskin is meticulously arranged and presented. This offering is placed within the tipi and is shared among participants on four separate occasions, during which they are required to speak truthfully and sing in reverence to the elements bestowed upon them, including hairstyles, necklaces, painted tipis, and medicinal pipes, among others (65).

5. CONCLUSION

The narratives previously presented illustrate the extensive understanding that Native Americans had regarding cereals, plants, and trees, which they occasionally attributed with the ability to shape the world as we recognize it today or to provide insights into the longevity of certain trees, such as the cedar. Additionally, the harvesting of cereals and the gathering of syrup serve as indicators of the transition to different seasons as well as transmission of non- invasive agricultural techniques.

Certain plants possess a power that goes beyond the physical realm, serving as a unique medium to connect with the Great Spirit, as exemplified by tobacco. Additionally, some of these plants are endowed with healing properties and play a

[5] Author's own translation.

significant role during the most profound moments in human existence: birth, life, and death.

The role of a storyteller has traditionally been a privilege granted to a select few, often due to their extensive experience or profound spiritual abilities. In summary, to safeguard the planet, it is crucial to keep sharing these narratives to maintain this valuable heritage and ensure its transmission to future generations. These stories also transmit us that we are relatives of the universe, and we need to connect with it and know it very well to survive. The importance relies on trusting our relatives and keeping a balance between what we receive and what we give so Mother Earth can be healed.

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