

**I address the importance of Indigenous sacred histories and how to read and understand them in Emergence Narratives, an article published in American Indian Religious Traditions: An Encyclopedia, volume one, pp. 258-265.**

## *Emergence Narratives*

Western spirituality often seeks to inspire its adherents to transcend their earthly state and desires (that is, the so-called natural or the fallen state), and to ascend to the heavens where a more divine state predominates. For Native Americans in general and Southwestern Natives in particular, their history, their spirituality, their art, their identity, and their sense of place all emerge out of the earth.

The idea of people emerging from the womb of Mother Earth onto the surface of the earth is unfamiliar to Western peoples and to Western theology. Rather than seeking to overcome their natural state or transcend their earthly natures, Natives of the Southwest seek to understand and celebrate their natural and earthly state. They see nothing lowly or carnal in their kinship with the Earth Mother. They seek to find their place on the earth and to attune their lives to the rhythm, melodies, and cycles of the earth and the sky.

Judeo-Christian followers sometimes build their temples and sacred structures on high places reaching toward the heavens, seeking to transcend their earthly states and places, orienting themselves to higher states and places of being. In

contrast, Pueblo Indians and their predecessors built their sacred places, the kivas, below the surface of the earth.

The Christian idea of hell as a bottomless pit in the earth and heaven as a paradise in the sky creates antagonism between the earth and the heavens, between the carnal state of the flesh and the higher state of the spirit. Native Americans see no such antagonism. The earth and the sky are kindred to the people—Mother and Father, existing in complementary asymmetry to each other, forming a dynamic and fertile union; they create, if you will, a cosmic concert. To Native Americans, the state of nature is not a war of all against all for self-aggrandizement; it is not a contest for the survival of the fittest, nor is it a struggle for power, wealth, or territory; it is a dynamic and diverse concert! The purpose of human life on earth is to harmonize with the grand concert of which it is a part. Therein do humans, children of the Earth and the Sky, find the fulfillment of their highest nature and purpose.

From the Native American perspective, life, sustenance, virtue, beauty, harmony, health, and well-being all emerge out of the earth. Despite vast differences in culture, language, subsistence, and physical type, a unifying thread that links all or nearly all of the diverse societies in the Southwest is the concept of emergence from a world or a womb below the earth's surface to the world above. The concept of emergence is ubiquitous in both time and place. It is found in song, in story, in agriculture, in

art, in architecture, in ceremony, in poetry, and in prayer.

Emergence is foremost an experience of birth, of origin, and of beginning. Emergence stories proclaim that all life—human, animal, and plant—is conceived in and born from the womb of Mother Earth. In many cases the three underworlds prior to this one are metaphorically linked to the trimesters of pregnancy and prenatal development. In the case of the Diné (Navajo), gender issues and identity are resolved in the third world, or the third trimester of the prenatal development of their ancestral peoples.

The emergence from the womb of Mother Earth makes all people—and indeed all life—children of Mother Earth. Because in most cases the other species also emerged with the ancestors of humans, birth from the womb of Mother Earth unites all living beings into a single kindred with the earth. Plants that grow from seeds that germinate in the womb of Mother Earth are also part of this same kindred.

Southwestern Native American accounts of their origin intertwine the literal and the metaphorical in ways that convey a different kind of truth than the truths found in solely literal attempts to render accounts of human origins. Metaphor and symbol can embody and express concepts, perspectives, and truths that are often lost in attempts to render an exact chronology of history.

The quest for a completely literal human history is presumptuous and illusory. No one has a full and complete

knowledge of the past—and especially not of origins. Every detail of “factual” evidence is sorted, sifted, and spun together from the subjective perspectives and purposes of those who recorded them, those who collect and interpret them, and those who write about them in the present.

Native Americans do not presume to possess a completely accurate literal human history and genesis. The importance of origin stories is not primarily in the literal details they recount but in the underlying truths and meanings they convey. Southwestern histories have literal truths embedded in metaphors and allegories, and they also have metaphors imbedded in literal constructions. Westerners have, therefore, been baffled by these histories and have usually treated them solely as myths.

Southwestern histories cannot be fully understood or appreciated if we view them as strictly literal representations. They also cannot be fully understood if we view them solely as metaphorical statements. They are not myths, though they are not solely a chronology of actual events. They are not fiction, though they are not to be taken as solely factual. They are a different kind of history, and they present a different kind of truth. We are going to have to learn to listen to these histories in a new and different way, if we are going to be able to understand them. The Southwestern accounts of emergence provide a good starting place. Emergence is both a statement of fact and a metaphorical statement.

Southwestern histories place and inform the people in their present state and circumstance, and link them to the past and to the future. The emergence accounts are literal enough to provide a recognizable framework that resonates with contemporary people, and they are metaphorical enough not to be mistaken as solely literal representations. The efficacy of the story called history is in its capacity to help people understand their place in the world. History provides people with a charter for their cultural values and perspectives and for their social institutions, resulting in a particular way of seeing the world and a particular way of being in the world.

All history is to one degree or another mythical in nature. Histories that extol the literal and ignore the metaphorical are more contingent, more subject to revision, and, most important, more subject to debate and dispute. The past before our lifetimes cannot be fully known by us; it can only be imagined.

Historical metaphors are analogical truths and meanings imbedded in literal and quasi-literal frameworks. These analogical truths and meanings are more potent, more pregnant, and more far-reaching in the information they convey and the implications they embody than are mere literal accounts. Metaphors enliven and enrich the power and impact of history. Attempts at literal history are mostly mere skeletons of monolithic dates and details—often without form, meaning, or contemporary familiarity.

Metaphor is based on analogy and points to underlying similarities in the past and the present that are otherwise often obscure. Metaphors reveal underlying principles, patterns, and dynamics that link the people to their past and contextualize their place and experience in the contemporary world. There is probably no greater example of the interweaving of the literal and the metaphorical than is found in the Native Southwestern histories of emergence. Emergence is a concept that informs nearly every southwestern culture and society from the Mayans and the Aztecs in the south to the Diné in the north.

In a daily renewal of the experience of emergence, ancient Natives of the Southwest from as long as 7,500 years ago arose with the sun, emerged from their subterranean homes, and ran to the east to greet the rising sun with song, prayer, and offerings. That tradition continues today, though observed less regularly than in the past. The Zuni Sunrise song comes from that tradition.

During the last 1,300 years, homes have been built above ground and ceremonial chambers called kivas below ground. The underground kivas were sacred places reserved for ritual performances and for the retelling and reenacting of sacred history, symbolically returning the people to their origin in the womb of Mother Earth. Descent into and emergence from the kiva linked one with the world below and the world above, with the Earth Mother and the Sun Father, with the dark and the light, with the

ancient and the contemporary, with the metaphysical and the physical, with the infinite and the finite.

The admonition *shabik'ehgo* is frequently heard among the Diné. It means: "Go according to the pathway of the light (generally referring to sunlight), or live in harmony with the patterns of Earth and Sky." Accordingly, the people follow the path of the sun. This pattern of following the path of the sun is several thousand years old. As the sun rose each day the ancient ones of the Southwest emerged from the darkness of night into the light of day, coming up out of their subterranean homes at dawn and experiencing a daily rebirth and renewal.

Today the people emerge from adobe and earthen-covered lodges and other types of homes, but those lodges are still metaphorically linked to the earth as their home and their place of origin and birth. When the Diné reenter their *hooghans* they must follow the sun's pathway, making a sunwise revolution. That is routinely done every day, but it is absolutely enforced at times of ceremonial performances.

The annual pathway of the sun also mirrors the pattern of emergence as the sun moves from its lowest point in the south at the time of the winter solstice to its northernmost position at the time of the summer solstice. The annual ceremonial calendars of the Anasazi of the past and the Pueblo Indians of the last 700 years were all organized around the solstices and the annual cycle of the sun and the earth.

The sun calendar on Fajada Butte near Chaco Canyon marks both the noon hour of the day and the semiannual solstices and equinoxes by guiding light onto serpentine spirals drawn on the interior rock surfaces behind three huge rock slabs. This calendar also marks the nineteen-year cycle of the moon. It is the only ancient site in the world to unite perfectly the interrelated cycles of the sun, the earth, and the moon.

The sun calendar and noon marker were created so that the ancient Chacoan Anasazi could perfectly harmonize their lives—physically and spiritually, agriculturally and ceremonially, daily and annually—with the terrestrial, solar, and lunar cycles that they observed and with which they felt themselves to be an integral part. The daily and annual cycles of Native life are attuned to the complementary asymmetry of Mother Earth and Father Sky.

When one sees the universe as a concert rather than a contest, the appropriate behavior is to ascertain the melody, rhythm, and structure of the concert and then to attune one's life and activities, as well as one's thoughts, to this grand concert. That is the premise and the orientation that led the Anasazi to align their villages and ceremonial structures to the dimensions of the cosmic concert of which they were a part and from which they would attain a fullness of being and purpose.

The concept of emergence further reveals that human life mirrors the life of the corn on which it depends. Corn is

planted in the womb of Mother Earth, germinates there, and, with nourishment from Father Sky, emerges from the womb of Mother Earth into a newness of life on the earth's surface. Above the surface of the earth, the corn grows until it reaches fruition. The stock then decays, but some of its seeds may be selected for planting, whereupon the cycle of the corn continues in a pattern of infinite regeneration.

The life cycle of the corn and the life cycle of humans are similar. The only difference is that the human cycle of regeneration is continued by women who become mothers, like unto Mother Earth. Elsewhere, I have argued that in at least the case of the Diné, the Earth Mother is the primary mother and primary referent of the term “-má” (Witherspoon 1977, 85–87, 91–94). Human mothers and the mothers in other species are like unto the Earth Mother. Therefore it is human mothers who represent a metaphorical extension of the concept “-má,” rather than the reverse.

The ancestors of the Diné (the Diyin Dine'é) emerged into this the Fourth World from three previous worlds below the surface of the earth. In the Fourth World, Changing Woman created the four original matrilineal clans of the people we call today “the Diné.” In their own language and history, the children of Changing Woman are called “The People of the Earth's Surface.” Changing Woman later became the inner form, or in-standing soul, of the earth. Earth Woman is another one of her names.

The earth's surface is the outer form of Changing Woman.

Changing Woman is named "changing" (*nádlééhé*) because of her power of infinite regeneration and rejuvenation. This power of infinite rejuvenation is manifest on the earth's surface, her outer form. As the earth goes through her cycle of the seasons, Changing Woman is a young girl in the spring; in the summer she becomes a young woman; in the fall she becomes a mature woman; in the winter she becomes elderly. But in the next spring, she rejuvenates and continues her infinite cycle of regeneration.

The ancestors of the Zuni climbed up through four earth wombs before emerging to the surface of this world, the Fifth World. These ancestors emerged onto the earth's surface at the bottom of the Grand Canyon, a place to which they refer as the vagina of Mother Earth. Then their ancestors migrated for many years in search of the Center of the Fifth World. They found that center near the Continental Divide and built seven villages there. This place they called *Halona Itiwana* or "middle place," and the Zuni became "the People of the Center" (or "the People of the Middle"). The Zuni say there are four worlds to come after this one, so they are in both the center of space and the meridian of time in the Fifth World on the earth's surface.

The cycle of human life, like the cycle of the corn and all living beings, mirrors the infinite cycle of life of the earth who is the mother of all. It is She who gave birth to life and sustains and nurtures that life

in patterns of infinite regeneration, making all living beings of one kindred.

It makes a moral and metaphysical difference, as well as an ecological one, when one views the Grand Canyon as the vagina of Mother Earth, as opposed to viewing it as the result of hundreds of thousands of years of erosion. These views affect the way one sees the world and the way one views one's place in it. For the Zuni and the other Natives of the Southwest, the emergence establishes a bond of kinship with the earth and all life forms nurtured by the earth. It also establishes a moral and theological imperative that requires them to assume responsibility to help sustain the cycle of life supported by the earth. The annual ceremonial cycle of all the Pueblos not only harmonizes the lives of humans with the larger solar, terrestrial, and lunar cycles of which they are a part, these rituals contribute to and enhance the healthy continuation of those cycles.

In the primary family, the Earth Mother is joined in beautiful and fertile union with the Sky Father, or in some cases more specifically with the Sun Father. Father Sky sends the rain down to earth to fertilize the Earth Mother and bring forth new life conceived in the womb of Mother Earth. The Sun Father also sends sunshine to the earth to lighten, warm, and energize life on the earth. The Sky Father and the Earth Mother form a dynamic and fertile union of complementary asymmetry. One is not without the other; together they form a whole.

Mother Earth and Father Sky are the foundation of what I call the cosmic concert. I think "cosmic concert" is the best gloss for the Diné word *hózhó*. *Hózhó* describes the normal state of the Fourth World, which is a state of beauty, harmony, health, happiness, and peace. This was the state of the world when Changing Woman created the People of the Earth's Surface. That state, however, is not necessarily permanent. It can be, and often is, disrupted. That is where the ceremonial system comes into play. The Holyway and Evilway ceremonies restore *hózhó* when it is disrupted. The Blessingway ceremonies are designed to celebrate, maintain, and enhance *hózhó*.

The complementary asymmetry of Earth and Sky, male and female, thought and speech, static and active, below and above, inner and outer, growth and decay, form the foundation of the dynamic and harmonious ebb and flow of the cosmic concert described by the Diné as *hózhó*. This holistic union sustains a pattern of cyclical and infinite regeneration. The constitution of this world is a complementary and holistic diversity bound together by a common kindred with the Earth and the Sky. The primary theme of this world is a dynamic and diverse harmony. The Natives of the Southwest do not view the state of nature as one of contest but rather as one of concert. These particular, important, and profound truths are embodied in and expressed by the concept of emergence.

The Southwest Native worldviews outlined here provide important premises and purposes for their way of being in the world, provide significant charters for social and ritual orders and institutions, and provide basic prescriptions for individual and collective behavior. Envisioning the world as a single kindred of complementary diversity and dynamic harmony does not presume, however, that these peoples have always lived and behaved in a harmonious manner. They are humans and are subject to human frailties and failures just like humans everywhere. Nevertheless, conceptualizing the world as a dynamic and diverse complementary concert founded on a common kindred with the Earth and the Sky provides a uniquely valuable way of seeing the world and a uniquely valuable way of being in the world.

According to Clifford Geertz, the essential vocation of ethnology is not to provide definitive answers to our deepest questions, but to provide answers that other people guarding other sheep in other valleys have given, and to include them in a consultable record of what people everywhere have said (Geertz 1973, 30). The views of Southwestern Native peoples are certainly worthy of inclusion in such a record; they are voices and views worthy of widespread reflection and thoughtful contemplation.

Emergence reveals truths that transcend all others in their moral, social, and ecological implications; in the way they contextualize human experience on

the earth; in the way they compel one to see the world; and in the way they bind one to the larger community of life.

It is not only the content of what Southwestern Natives have said that is worthy of serious contemplation but it is also the character of how it is said that is instructive. Native histories of genesis beautifully and powerfully intertwine metaphorical messages with literal constructions, suggesting that a strictly literal representation of history and origin is neither possible nor desirable.

In Native American stories of genesis, the literal and the metaphorical are interwoven, just as human perception and experience always occur in an elusive admixture of text and context, fact and figure, reality and representation, information and interpretation.

Gary Witherspoon

*See also* Architecture; Ceremony and Ritual, Diné; Ceremony and Ritual, Pueblo; First Foods and Food Symbolism; Kachina and Clown Societies; Oral Traditions, Northeast; Oral Traditions, Northwest Coast; Oral Traditions, Plateau; Oral Traditions, Pueblo; Oral Traditions, Southeast; Oral Traditions, Western Plains; Symbolism in Ritual and Ceremony

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## **Erdrich, Louise (1954–)**

(Novelist, Chippewa)

By reading the novels of Louise Erdrich, a reader is immersed into the world of traditional and contemporary Ojibwe (also known as Ojibwa, Ojibway, Anishinaabe, and Chippewa) history, cultural practices, stories, and religion. It is important to keep in mind that in this context, the term "religion" connotes more than belonging to a specific denomination or faith, going to a specific church or temple, or reading the holy books. According to Lawrence W. Gross, an enrolled member of the White Earth Chippewa Nation, "Religion should be understood as referring to the lifeway of the Anishinaabe" (2002, 30); in other words, religion for the Ojibwe encompasses all aspects of their lives.

Erdrich, an enrolled member of the Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa Indians, is one of the most popular and prolific of contemporary Native American writers. Building on and adding to the groundbreaking and award-winning works of N. Scott Momaday, Leslie Marmon Silko, and James Welch, Erdrich established herself as a major American writer with the 1984 publication of *Love Medicine* and eight subsequent related