Anguish Of Snails

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I

Cultural Patterns in Native American Folklore

An Introduction

The only problem I’ve ever had with white people has been unrequited love.

—Vic Charlo, grandson of Flathead Chief Charlo

So the snail shell is our governing metaphor in the following chapters. We can see that the ongoing responses of the living snail have been recorded in the structure of the shell over time, forming patterns with which we want to become more fully acquainted. We believe that the markings before our eyes have meaning, and we want to explore the clues. We start here, not with the snail’s sensitive innards. As outsiders, we may not initially understand what the many-patterned expressions of Indians “mean,” either, but we can be certain that they mean something, and whatever it is must be important because it constitutes a substantive, outward-facing record of feelings and values Native people have shared with each other and with us over time.

Even if “all that is recorded” is only the anguish of snails, isn’t that more than enough to suggest the way a physical object can excite a mixture of ideas in the human mind? Like T. S. Eliot’s objective correlative, an external object or metaphor provides the touchstone for complex systems of abstract meaning within us and our cultures. In our model, it represents a whole class of abstracts having to do with snail-ness, let’s say, just as the Native expressions we will examine represent not simply the unique ideas of one talented artist but the ongoing concerns of many sharing artists within whole cultures.

The premise of this book is that we may use the “clues” provided by Native American tales, songs, dances, architecture, and other arts— provisionally, of course—as if they were snail shells, as objects that have meanings beyond their physical existence but nonetheless are readable through their details of style and substance. These objects will not be treated as mere cultural items but as fossil records of real responses to living contexts;
as physically crafted, culturally situated, and shared human articulations of irritation, injury, pain, growth, healing, nurturance, and even (sure, go ahead, reach for it) love, phrased in concrete metaphors that at once establish emotional and physical kinship with us and trigger our recognition of other systems of belief, custom, and worldview.

Like the articulations of all cultures, Native American expressions exist for a number of reasons, and few of them are secret or mysterious: They provide entertainment and dramatize ritual and social order; they record and maintain cultural values, providing moral examples, giving instruction, and imparting culturally important information; they express and embody artistic values; they preserve historical records with an eye for culturally significant detail. In our scrutiny of any culture, we easily run the risk of seeing mainly the shell and believing that it is only a shell; thus, we may hastily assume that a narrative is “just a story.” But if a snail’s shell is not just a shell, if it is an accumulated record of the “agonies” experienced by snails, then its full meaning cannot be captured merely by analyzing its calcium content but will be implied by the style and context of the record, and will lurk quietly in the field of implication, waiting to be brought into focus by an eye willing to read and “unpack” the suggestions of the patterns.

This does not imply that such a pattern is intentionally difficult to understand, or that we need to read meaning into the shell, however. Quite the opposite: it requires us to read out of the shell as text, and to accomplish this task, we need to be open to what the clues mean in the cultural contexts which shaped that shell. While our insights will be conditioned by what we bring with us into the effort, we must try as much as possible to include as much knowledge as we can of the Native contexts. In other words, we should not apply our own fantasies to this job of perception; neither should we take the lazy way out and say it’s just anybody’s guess. Nor will we start with the “hidden-meaning premise” usually expressed in the question, “What do you think this really means?” Instead, we will ask, “What’s being acted out, or dramatized, or made concrete here?”

Attend a Native powwow and you will see that no one is trying to hide anything; rather, something is being performed and projected to you and everyone else, even though it is not explicit. So what, then, is being performed, and how does it mean something to those who do it? You can see it happening, but its significance must be extrapolated from the way the event is actualized in its cultural context. The feathers and beadwork and dance steps and music can be treated as objective corollaries of a set of cultural assumptions, just as the events in a story, the shape of a dwelling, or the items of traditional food can be profitably viewed as icons of cultural
meaning. Their significance is seldom overt or explained in the text itself, but they come to life or are epitomized in the cultural performance.

Of course, on one level we sensibly hesitate to make a serious parallel between snails and cultures, partly because they are not really analogous and partly because we’re not altogether sure that a snail feels anything in our sense of the word, let alone that a snail produces its shell as a reflection of anguish for others to read. And we also know that in the cold light of denotation, it probably can’t be said that a culture has feelings or values that it records through the vernacular expressions of its members. Agreed, these propositions are good examples of pathetic fallacy—attributing feelings to something which doesn’t feel. But that’s what metaphors and figures of speech are for: they make connections that may not otherwise come to mind, just as the tortured markings on an abalone shell stressed by sponges and bored by clams, or the pearl in an oyster shell, or the twisted limbs of a tree constantly assailed by the wind can suggest some of the most delicate human experiences expressed in non-human terms. From an oyster’s perspective, if there is such a thing, a pearl results from an act of creation that emanates from a pain that won’t go away—in itself an apt description of what a good poem, or song, or story can do for us. From the human perspective, a pearl is an item on which to exercise judgments about beauty, shape, rarity, possibilities of human adornment, or monetary value. Are these judgments wrong because we’re not oysters and thus have no right to an opinion about them?

We do not have to think like an oyster (or dance with snails) to read their artistic output; neither do we have to limit our understanding of them by noting only their genus and species. And while we cannot presume to know what an oyster or a snail or a tree thinks, or even if they do, we have a sumptuous advantage in the case of our Native American neighbors: they do think, and they have produced several thousand years’ worth of accumulated feelings and values that are eloquently communicated in their intentional folk performances. And they have been creating their arts in our presence and in response to our appearance for more than five hundred years. There are plenty of these deliberate pearls and snail shells for us to examine.

In addition to establishing the idea of approaching our subject respectfully by reading—and experiencing—those clues obvious on the outside, there is another reason for using the snail-shell metaphor, and that is its circularity. If we can characterize the organization of European American cultures as lineal, we can as definitely describe the organization of Native American culture as circular. Circles abound in Native architecture, narrative, ritual, art, dance, and gesture; circular imagery pervades this book.
And while almost any circle would do to symbolize Native concepts of inclusion, balance, symmetry, and relationship, the snail shell—which spirals and builds upon itself in an interrelated, connected, self-referential, growing way—is a perfect metaphor for the ways the subjects of the chapters in this book depend and build upon, reflect, and interrelate with each other.

While most of this book focuses on everyday expressions of impressive beauty and deep meaning, many other levels of Native culture would admittedly be interesting to talk about. Indeed, those who have spent considerable time with Native American people have seen and probably taken part in esoteric events, and they may well have experienced things that seem almost unbelievable—or at least difficult to categorize using their own cultural logic. It is often this esoteric and exotic range of experiences that inquirers choose when they seek to use Native insights as a way of escaping the apparent confines of their own culture. But think for a moment: these kinds of odd and enlightening experiences are available among any group of people. Spend ten years in an immigrant community, or among the Chinese, the Germans, the Japanese, the East Indians, or the Balinese, and you will certainly have tales to tell of unique, dumbfounding—even traumatic—events. Why the American Indian should have become today's leading source of special enlightenment, inscrutable wisdom, and inexplicable wonder is an interesting and important question; perhaps some of the examples in this book will provide insight into that puzzle.

But extraordinary events and striking phenomena—while fascinating—are rarely the most representative elements of a living culture. Besides, it is often the naive outsider who finds such events striking because he or she does not understand the cultural logic which imbues the event with normalcy. For example, back in the 1950s, when non-Hopi visitors were still welcome to observe seasonal rituals like the Snake Dance, in which dancers hold live rattlesnakes in their mouths, I witnessed the anticipated concluding rainstorms on three different occasions. I found those events very striking and was moved to tears every time. My Hopi friends smiled confidently and acted the way you and I do when our car starts on a very cold morning: relieved, satisfied, but not teary and dumbfounded.

Part of the job of this book is to discuss some of the most interesting aspects of cultural logic and explore the many ways Native American societies have constructed their sense of logic and ritual in relation to the world around them. But according to our metaphorical plan, we are not going to focus on the surprising and awesome; rather, we will look at the expressions of everyday life and the customs that animate the generalized
values and worldview assumptions of Native Americans, for these common cultural goods most accurately illustrate the baseline of any culture. Folklore, the study of traditional, culturally situated expressions in their normal performative contexts, like anthropology and social history, is especially equipped to discuss these matters precisely because it is predicated on the importance of the ongoing, shared, vernacular voice.

Like snail shells with consciousness of kind and volition built in, the expressions of folklore are directed toward others, in the process engaging those others as cultural participants—either audiences or coperformers. Traditional foods require many hands to make them and many mouths to eat them, and seldom is nutrition alone the main reason for their creation. Similarly, jokes, dances, traditional housing (even the decoration of commercially built housing), and songs are ways of expressing, perpetuating, and making palpable—experiential—the complex abstractions of cultural values and assumptions. It’s difficult to explain what makes ethnic foods, for example, important to weddings or birthdays; but when you, as an insider, see and taste those foods, you experience a powerful sense of kinship quite independent from analytical commentary. Insofar as folklore is the performance of what closely related groups have felt and believed and assumed over the years, we may fairly use the term anguish—despite its initial melodramatic impact—to represent the depth and intensity of the accumulated emotional load articulated in traditional contexts. Moreover, since the performance of arts, crafts, foods, stories, songs, and dances requires not only intellectual competence but physical and emotional commitment in the form of body movement, breathing, use of vocal cords, tasting, and hearing, the resultant “texts” are redolent with ongoing human feeling. Indeed, folklore could not exist without it.

I have chosen the categories of folklore for this book with several considerations in mind; foremost is the fact that they are all available to non-Indians without the necessity for us to intrude. The first chapters focus on traditional forms, patterned formulations of complex, shared value systems: visual art and architecture, dance, oral narrative. Later chapters deal with cultural attitudes and worldviews expressed through humor and in stories and customs detailing the excitement of scientific and geographical discovery.

In our discussion of Native visual arts, we will look not only at decorative tours de force—which they certainly are—but also visible constellations of meaning. We will discuss the way color, pattern, imagery, medium, and context visually suggest important elements of Native life relating to gender, status, tribal affiliation, and worldview. Perhaps to the surprise of some, we
will discover how many Native artistic expressions have incorporated and coopted materials and designs from the encroaching Euro-American world—often producing a sensitive commentary on the relationship between Native and non-Native.

Traditional Native architecture varies widely from tribe to tribe, distinctly expressing a spatial model of human relationships within the natural world. The overall preference for round dwellings where a family or extended family live together in one space is not simply due to the lack of lumber or the absence of a decent regard for privacy but physically evokes a system which views the group—not the individual—as the basic unit and therefore shapes the immediate living space to reflect (and require) constant interaction among closely associated members. We will find that the patterns in architecture, visual arts, and narrative, along with the social assumptions that underlie eating and dancing, grow out of and reflect each other, providing rich networks of cultural experience for Native Americans who participate in these folk expressions.

Folk narratives are extremely valuable for understanding cultural assumptions because their ongoing existence is predicated on the ability—and the interest—of the audience not only to understand what is being dramatized but to pass it on to others who are interested in hearing it. Such narratives arise and are transmitted without the aid of print and are continually reshaped, polished, and reexamined by their tellers; the fact that they have survived indicates that they are considered memorable, they make cultural sense, and they are entertaining on one or more levels. A printed book or a written letter can exist long after its contents have immediate interest for anybody; when an orally transmitted story ceases to make sense or be interesting, however, people simply quit telling it, and it is no longer there. The survival of an orally transmitted story is in itself a testimony to its ongoing validity as an expression of cultural meaning in dramatic terms. A narrative is a sequence of related events, acted out by characters who experience an important complication and then witness its resolution. Of course, most narratives must be interesting and entertaining, or else why keep telling them? On the other hand, many stories, including some sacred narratives, impact us through wonder, awe, or fear, so we may say that mere entertainment is not always the principal reason a story is told, just as nutrition is not the main reason ethnic foods are eaten. But, just as food must offer real nourishment, a story has to be sensible, coherent, and somehow logical to the listeners, or its point is lost.

Beyond entertainment, we will see that the actions of the characters in Native stories usually reveal a broad range of cultural evaluations; whether an actor in a story is a person, animal, rock, or plant, if it does or
says something the tribe sees as foolish or dangerous, it will get its come-uppance. Thus, stories not only entertain but also embody Native behavioral and ethical values. Yet they almost never comment overtly on the values that shape the fortunes of the characters; instead, the characters act, and the results offer us insight into the value system through nuances of vicarious experience and empathy rather than open lecturing. We will look at Native narratives as tightly distilled dramatizations of cultural ideas and will not ask, “What does this story explain?” but rather, “What does this story dramatize?”—a quite different question altogether. Although Native narratives are dynamic arrangements of cultural meaning, not just simple entertainment, entertainment is itself culturally situated and must be considered.

In traditional dance, we will look at the way formulaic, culturally defined kinetic movement embodies (in the fullest sense) human concerns, ranging from connections with the earth and its living animals and plants to social and religious patterns that can only be experienced fully as a person goes through the steps. Our focus will not be on religious ritual dancing, much of which requires the kind of insider knowledge and years of personal involvement which we don’t pretend to possess. Most—certainly not all—ritual dancing can indeed be witnessed by respectful outsiders, and its patterns are very much like those we will discuss with powwows and other social dances. But we have agreed—I hope—to look primarily at the folk expressions most openly available to outsiders, so in the case of dance, we will follow our Native friends to social gatherings rather than church. Don’t be disappointed: there’s as much to learn at a powwow as a Sun Dance, and we’re not as likely to blunder in our approach or interpretation. And we won’t be so likely to delude ourselves into believing we have achieved fast-food spiritual enlightenment, either.

Each tale, each dance, each traditional food, each dwelling is full of cultural meaning because its articulation has been subjected to a cumulative process which changes, discards, or sloughs off the transitory, the trivial, and the inessential. Like the snail shell, the part which survives expresses the aggregate “feel” of the group because, in the long process of distillation, it has lost the marks of the original contributors and has compacted the talents and values of the many performers who have repeatedly contributed their expressions to the group’s ongoing and ever-developing aesthetics.

However, such expressions, even in their dynamic multiform and interactive richness, do not give us any final Truth about Native American cultures. They do verify that many tribal groups did not “vanish” but persevered and continue to function as cohesive, living cultures.
For those tribes that are still flourishing, for those whose cultures have been partly demolished, and even those whose worlds were devastated, the expressions of folklore provide us with the best and most articulate records of perspectives that we cannot do without precisely because they embody the relatively unmediated cultural voices of the peoples who have shaped the realities of life in the Western Hemisphere. In this book, they emerge as the hallmarks of accumulated values, attitudes, and worldviews—the living matrices from which cultural constructions like humor, art, exploration, and scientific discovery proceed.

Like all cultures, Native American tribes exhibit a wide spectrum of expressive customs at all levels of society—from the exceedingly formal and demanding systems of highly trained specialists (it can take a Navajo singer from five to twenty years to learn one ceremony—and a good singer usually knows several) to the informal gestures and anecdotes of everyday interaction, which everyone readily picks up from infancy. As with all cultures, the Native American languages are complex and varied, and answer the demands of their users fully; of the several hundred languages—not dialects—once extant in North America, an estimated 150 are still in daily use. Nobody knows how many of the languages in Central and South America have been eradicated by the European invasion and the ongoing “development” of agricultural lands by fire, but certainly hundreds remain today.

Native cultures are organized in ways that may seem startlingly different from those of the later invaders and immigrants, yet—as I’ve suggested—they possess the same kinds of human features: language, music, art, religion, shelter, and food acquisition and preparation. In other words, while they are different—and often even different from each other—we shouldn’t expect them to be odd, deficient, or opaque. They are functioning cultures that have developed in this hemisphere over a tenure estimated by some at more than thirty thousand years.

While Native Americans never developed the intense bureaucratic and aristocratic systems that have marked some European and Asian societies, they created extremely complex political and religious structures of their own, many of which seem quite advanced to us. Among the Iroquois, for example, men have primarily been elected as leaders, while the women chiefly have done the voting. While Native peoples did not evolve a machine-based technology—complete with marketing plans—they did of course develop techniques sufficient to fulfill their needs. Beyond that, most tribes encouraged an impressive range of visual arts among virtually all members of their society. Without laboratories, they discovered and consistently used medicines on which we still rely.
Without colleges of agriculture, they developed a kind of grass into a grain humanity depends upon—corn—that now feeds people and animals around the world. They articulated few—if any—engineering theories, but some tribes developed portable housing while others built huge complexes like Pueblo Bonito in Chaco Canyon, whose 500-plus-room edifice, deserted by 1400, is thought to have been the largest apartment building anywhere in the world until the late 1800s, when massive hotels were erected in Europe.

Surely, the cultures of North America are in their own ways as subtle as any in the world. These are not “backward” or “primitive” people—unless one equates primitive with the absence of bureaucracy or the technological inability to destroy vast numbers of fellow human beings. Moreover, the artistic and literary works of these cultures are as stunning as those found anywhere in the world—and may strike us as even more impressive because they were produced and perpetuated without royal patronage, university instruction, church encouragement, art studios, publication media, or a field of critical theory. But before we make a heroic case of the Native Americans—as if they had somehow triumphed over their unfortunate illiteracy and lack of proper schooling—let’s take a brief, and no doubt superficial, look at the main elements that constitute any culture so that we don’t make the mistake of believing there is any one “normal” set of criteria expected of one.

The term culture is itself a concrete reference to a set of related abstractions, and consequently the term is easier to describe than define. To begin with, the English word comes from the Latin cultus, “cultivation [of the earth],” and reflects the notion that plowing the soil improves the land. Leaving aside for now the more recent discovery that plowing is not the best thing to do to the land, which comes up again in our discussion of Native agriculture, let’s just note the implication, the connotation, that culture originally had something to do with making things better or more productive. And certainly, because of the difficulties of raising food in northern Europe in earlier days—especially in contrast to obtaining it by hunting and raiding—the image of plowing must have had a powerful effect on people: It envisions cooperation, it suggests the steady investment of labor in the production of food, it implies a relatively sedentary life—all of which no doubt were central in the establishment of stable communities. Hence, it is no accident that we talk about both the soil and ourselves being cultivated and that we define culture as that constellation of social operations which encompasses the traditions, beliefs, institutions, arts, and behaviors that bind us together to maintain that stable, identifiable, productive, ongoing, cooperative system which assures our survival.
But the trick is, of course, that the conditions that stabilize one group of people may destabilize another, so we must recognize—for one important example—that the idea of perfectability, or at least the urge toward making things better than they are, is itself a constructed assumption that rides along with the word culture and encourages us to look at other groups of people as if they are less or more cultivated than we are, depending on how far along they are in bettering themselves or exploiting the earth’s resources.

In other words, even in the presumably neutral terms we want to use may lurk a set of our own built-in cultural values. On the issue of cultivating the soil, for example, most tribes immediately rejected the idea of plowing, abhorring the notion of cutting open the earth because that was both symbolically and physically destructive. This, of course, was viewed as backward behavior by white settlers, who thought the Indians were lazy and uninterested in using the land. Believing that “rain follows the plow,” whites churned up as much land as they could get their machinery into and eventually created a dust bowl. This perfectly sensible cultural idea was so powerful and “right” that people practiced it wherever they went, overlooking local customs and environmental realities with the passion of the righteous. The millions of bison who once thundered across the plains never did nearly as much long-term ecological damage as a few thousand plows and could have supplied meat practically forever, but they were expunged.

It is easy to imagine, then, that Native terms for what we call culture are not rooted in metaphors of the way early farmers learned to survive on the cold, dark fields of northern Europe; nonetheless, Native peoples had—and still do—behaviors, institutions, beliefs, and expressions which characterize and maintain their identity, and we need a term to describe this system. We’re stuck with culture for now, but remember not to assume all cultures have the same construction.

A helpful and mercifully succinct description is given by folklorist David Hufford, who holds that culture exists to nurture and convey any shared system of values; and—only partly in jest—Elliott Oring adds that folklore is that part of culture that lives happily ever after. Well, what kinds of values are these? and where do they come from? and why are they so important that it takes the whole network of a human society to pass them on? And why do some of these values continue to be performed on the vernacular level in everyday life in the genres we call folklore?

Culture is an ongoing accumulation of interactive, interdependent human experiences and expressions that grow out of and articulate such factors as a) the general biological needs and inherited patterns of human life; b) the psychological patterns shared by humans; c) the psychological
patterns and peculiarities of particular individuals; d) the intersection of human populations with their environments; e) a “spiritual” longing that seeks to reconcile the palpable world with powers and processes that seem to lie beyond empirical observation; and f) the organization of these factors into the normal patterns of a particular community.

As these factors are construed, understood, and valued through shared assumptions and worldviews, they develop a kind of cultural normalcy in accord with the perceived realities of the group. It is important to note that these realities may be viewed as practical necessities and may therefore possess logical explanations, but most of them are nonetheless understandings about reality, not necessarily of it. The white settlers believed they had to plow to produce crops, and so they did. The Blackfeet believed they had to do the Buffalo Dance to assure the annual return of the buffalo, and so they did. There’s a sense of “Of course! What else would you do?” about these matters. People didn’t suspect that following the optimistic route of the plow would actually lead to destruction of the land. People didn’t expect that another group would come along and fracture forever the delicate ritual balance between humans and their animal relatives, the bison.

So it is well to remember, no matter whose culture we are discussing, that even though biological, psychological, and environmental factors seem like antiseptic functions of nature, they are almost always interpreted in the evaluative framework of culture, and the medium for this ongoing interpretation is folklore. Satisfying our biological needs may certainly assure the continuation of our species, but the subject is usually phrased in abstractions like courtship, marriage, sin, chastity, and sexual orientation. Inherited characteristics are described in the light of positive and negative family values (“You sure got your mother’s family’s nose,” or “You act just like your father”), in terms expressing societal expectations about beauty or size, or as ethnic and racial evaluations about hair, color, or build which may be positive within a group but seen as negative by outsiders. Long before they actually met Europeans, the Chinese and Japanese commonly depicted ghosts and demons as white skinned, blue eyed, and red haired because such characteristics were so unthinkable in their normal world. Even today, one common Chinese word for foreigner translates as “ghost.”

The generally shared psychological patterns studied by Carl Jung and his followers are often tagged with the unfortunate label “archetype” because of their alleged universal meanings, and for this reason, many scholars dismiss the idea of inherited images as too nebulous. But a total rejection of Jung’s concepts seems hasty and ill conceived, for there is a lot of evidence for the existence of imagery that reaches beyond the experience or recollection of single individuals. If we can inherit superficial
features like the family nose and hair color, why not more subtle qualities stored in the brain? If birds and turtles can inherit complex and accurate maps that are not the result of instruction or example and are far more precise and discerning than gross instincts, why can’t humans conceivably inherit patterns, perhaps even from ancient times? Joseph Campbell and other scholars offer rich examples of this possibility, and even if it is true—and it is—that Campbell and his followers in their zeal happen to focus on the examples that illustrate their premise, handily downplaying or ignoring examples that don’t match up, nonetheless the examples they cite are really provocative. But of course the notion of universal archetypes, like the theory of deep-structure language, cannot be proven so much as inferred.

Thus, while there may well be a universal archetype of Mother or Water or the Sun, and while all of us may certainly have both an anima (female side) and animus (male side) in our psychological makeup, the massive evidence about culture generated by years of anthropological and folkloristic fieldwork has pretty well established that these elements are differently organized and articulated—as they are even in everyday language—by the cultures where they appear. The sun is male in one culture, female in another; the hero goes out and conquers in one society, while in another, he stays home and attends to business; water is destructive in one culture, sacred in another, sensuous and seductive in yet another. In some cultures, there are two genders; in others, three; the Navajos distinguish seven or eight genders. The same themes and images are there all right, but rather than assuming they have a universal value, we usually expect them to be different every time we encounter them. But this doesn’t mean they do not exist as inherited symbols of deeply rooted meaning; on the contrary, their existence testifies to the ability of a culture to interpret and reconstruct something meaningful from inherited materials.

As Freud and others have demonstrated, the individual’s psychological state reflects not only the unique patterns formed in a particular psyche by upbringing, nurture, trauma, sickness, and disappointment but also parallels the psychological states of others closely enough to allow generalizations. These, in turn, become the bases for understanding, diagnosing, and treating psychological conditions. But even when these conditions seem unique to the person—a case of psychosis or manic-depressive behavior—we know that they also reflect a life shaped by a community of behaviors. A child reared in a middle-class home in the United States will likely be raised as an individual with rights and responsibilities, with his or her own room; one brought up in Japan will be given the sense that the group is more important than the individual and personal privacy is a form
of egotism. A Native American child reared traditionally is virtually never alone, and this provides a living sense of being part of a larger and more important group—a sense amplified by living in a one-room dwelling and having some kinds of competition suppressed.

Personal psychology in these contexts is naturally interpreted—and even experienced—in terms of the culture’s assumptions about normality. For example, many Hmong immigrants to America have died of shock in their sleep from a culturally constructed psychological condition our culture has only recently defined (“sudden unexpected nocturnal death syndrome,” or SUNDS). Hispanic people suffering from susto, a kind of shock, are easily diagnosed as psychotic by Anglo-American doctors who don’t recognize the culturally defined symptoms. Some Japanese individuals suffer from a depression caused by fear of embarrassing other people—an idea that hardly makes sense in Western culture but is a real Japanese phenomenon nonetheless. Hopis recognize several different kinds of individual depression, including petulance and broken heart. What is crucial in all these examples (and hundreds more like them) is our slow recognition that even in the most private recesses of an individual’s mind, processes are shaped and interpreted by the particular culture.

The same can be said, of course, about human interaction with the environment. While, on the one hand, we can look at environmental processes with relatively scientific objectivity, we normally have certain cultural agendas in mind. A culture that assumes it is superior to nature—whether by virtue of biblical decree or dint of advanced intelligence—makes an easy assumption that nature can—and ought to—be controlled if not dominated. From the taming of the frontier to the eager protection of threatened species, from the suppression of forest fires to the exploitation of natural resources, the technical and scientific talents of Euro-Americans are most often directed at controlling the outcome of the environmental equation, dominating the choices of survival rather than abiding by the outcome of natural processes as other cultures normally do.

Most Native Americans come from cultural backgrounds where people assume nature has a delicate balance which cannot be controlled but with which one must be in harmony; most often this is viewed as a ritual or spiritual harmony that does not relate logically to whether one litters or recycles. For many Anglo-Americans, deer are a harvestable natural resource; to many Native American cultures, deer are relatives who are willing under normal circumstances to do what relatives do: share food with their kin. I do not make this contrast to suggest that one system is more right or moral than the other but to point out that someone who considers the earth a relative or a sacred symbol of universal motherhood
and nurturance is going to make decisions and interpretations that are quite different from those of a person who thinks that the earth is a magnificent collection of resources assembled by geologic chance or a generous Father in heaven as a piggy bank for his children.

In *Forests: The Shadow of Civilization*, Robert Pogue Harrison demonstrates brilliantly that forests are not simply stands of trees but have become symbolic ways of expressing human relationships to nature and marking the outer edge of civilization. In the typical northern European folktale, the forest is the setting for danger, evil, and the unexpected. In the English and Scottish ballads, the forest is the scene for murders, seductions, attacks, and rapes. My own research on water folklore has convinced me that here, too, an apparently independent substance has been interpreted/translated into clashing cultural realities by Mormon ranchers, Hispanic farmers, and Native Americans in distinctive ways that have little to do with the objective nature of $\text{H}_2\text{O}$. How do all these cultural paradigms come about? I see no great evidence that they flow from the leading thinkers and scientists of any era; to the contrary, as Norwood Russell Hanson so well reveals, scientists are keyed by their cultures to look for certain things they already believe to be there. I think there is ample proof that in every culture the cultural constellation predates and shapes the field of discovery, a topic that will receive more attention later in this book.

Utilizing local attitudes about region and environment, biological need, psychological states, religion, occupation, gender, family, ethnicity, age and death, every ongoing group of people discovers and refines a dynamic system of reference to which individuals relate and by which they judge themselves and others. Insofar as this system becomes socialized into the everyday lives of its members and gets passed on, the group may be said to “have” a culture.

Because of the distinctive mix which characterizes each culture, however, even geographically neighboring groups may be vastly different. The neighboring Navajos and Hopis, for example, while they both have an essentially matriarchal family organization, nonetheless have entirely different worldviews about time, space, movement, and land tenure. And the contrasts are even greater when we compare European with Native American cultures: The heavy European use of nouns and straight lines is monumentally different from the Navajo preference for verbs and circles. In Navajo, which has 356,200 conjugations for the verb “to go,” movement is the central leitmotif; in the European languages, where nouns are central, the key subjects are things, place, ownership. We even refer to ideas as things: “Let’s get things straight.”
Although the roots of these cultural ideas are biological, psychological, situational, and ecological, the way each group assembles, understands, and codes these factors is markedly different. For this reason, the term *cultural construction* gives us a way to discuss cultures without expecting all of them to be alike. It is difficult to say whether people construct their culture or it constructs them; it’s probably both, in an interactive way. But the term calls our attention to the fact that, while the building materials may be similar, the edifices and their meanings diverge—even among groups that may seem at first to be similar. Folklore, in the aggregate, is made up of the vernacular performances that embody these cultural concepts.

We will look at the folk expressions of Native Americans in the West, then, not only because they are open to our scrutiny but also because they represent a relatively unfiltered articulation of everyday cultural codes, compared with the more highly trained and focused utterances and priestly traditions of specially educated orators, ritual leaders, and healer-doctors. We begin with Native visual arts because their construction, their meaningful arrangements of pattern and color, and their concrete articulation of culturally significant ideas make them one of the most readily accessible, intellectually congenial arenas for actually experiencing—albeit vicariously—the anguish of snails.

**Notes**

The Blackfoot Buffalo Dance was described by George Bird Grinnell in *Blackfoot Lodge Tales* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1917), 104–7, 220–24, 229–30. A summary of the Buffalo Dance story is given by Joseph Campbell in *The Masks of God: Primitive Mythology* (New York: Viking Press, 1959), 282–86. Its main feature is the marrying of a Blackfoot woman to a bison chief, thus establishing the reciprocal family logic by which the buffalo provide their flesh for food and the Blackfeet supply the restorative dance and prayer. Peter Nabokov presents fascinating historical testimony on the interactive relationship between Natives and bison in the Yellowstone area, which even extended to Natives coralling and protecting small groups of the animals when it became evident that the whites were bent on total destruction. When the government finally decided to preserve the species, many bison were bought from the Native people who had protected them (see Peter Nabokov, *A Forest of Time: American Indian Ways of History* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002], 60–63).

Comments from David Hufford and Elliott Oring come from, respectively, David Hufford, private correspondence December 2, 2000; Elliott Oring, private correspondence, June 15, 2001.

Robert Pogue Harrison’s *Forests: The Shadow of Civilization* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992) is a brilliant exposition of the culturally constructed notion of what a forest is. Norwood Russell Hanson shows how central cultural worldview is even to the supposedly objective processes of scientific discovery in his *Patterns of Discovery: An Inquiry into the Conceptual Foundations of Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1958). His observations (along with those of several others) are integral to my chapter, “Folklore and Cultural Worldview,” in *The Dynamics of Folklore* (Logan: Utah State University Press, 1996), 263–313. One of the best discussions of the relationship between cultural worldview and language is Gary Witherspoon’s *Language and Art in the Navajo Universe* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1977). To my knowledge, Witherspoon was the first person to use a computer to determine the number of conjugations for the Navajo verb “to go.”