

Annotated Bibliography: Indigenous American Culture and Its Relationship to Healing

Fiber Arts

Zoë N. Shulman

Department of Art Therapy & Counseling, Southwestern College

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Professor Jessi Cross

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Bruce Museum. (2011, April 6). *The navajo weaving tradition*. Traditional fine arts organization, inc. <https://www.tfaoi.org/aa/2aa/2aa332.htm>

Traditional Navajo weaving has threaded the Native American tribe's generations for hundreds of years. Beginning around the 1860s, the Transition Period of rug-making emerged after the Navajos had been subjected to the genocide perpetuated by Kit Carson and Gen. William Tecumseh Sherman during westward expansion. Once the Navajos had been starved, rounded up, and forced onto reservations, their children were sent to "boarding schools" that functioned like death camps, where their indigenous culture was systematically decimated through White colonial assimilation. Around this time, the surrounding trading posts that the Navajos depended on to sell their weavings began responding to new market demands for floor rugs. While this was an unprecedented departure from serapes and chief's blankets, it allowed Navajo weavers to express completely new functional designs. Over the course of several decades, these innovations took the form of the synthetic "eye-dazzler" Germantown weavings, in which red, orange, and blue chevrons zigzagged into vibrant, rhythmic patterns.

While not explicitly stated in this article, it is remarkable how weaving aided the Navajo people in surviving within a genocidal environment. Without any buffalo to hunt or established economies to support themselves, they utilized their sacred creative tradition of weaving to earn a living in the face of severe oppression and trauma. Similar to prior Navajo weavings that were originally worn, these rugs also have roots in the

mythical Navajo creation story, in which the “Dine” (Navajo people) were led to the Southwest by the “ye’ii” (Holy People) and taught to weave by Spider Man and Spider Woman. Feather and plant particles may be found in some of the rugs, which hints at their possible use in medicinal ceremonial practice. Individually, the symbolism of these rugs can only be defined by the Navajo artists who created them, however, there is a collective concept of “hozho”, in which each weaver preserves the combined elements of order, beauty, balance, and harmony. Ultimately, these rugs are testaments to the Navajo culture’s resilience and ability to bond the tribe throughout the generations.

Juma, S. (2019, August 25). *Weaving medicine*. Selvedge.

<https://www.selvedge.org/blogs/selvedge/weaving-medicine-the-healing-textiles-of-peru-s-shipibo-tribe>

The Shipibo tribe of Peru has utilized weaving as a therapeutic tool that allows them to commune with the natural world. Rich and colorful, their geometric textile patterns synthesize Shipibo herbalism, shamanic religion, and visionary arts. Within these traditions, the Shipibo first cleanse their bodies by fasting and then ingest indigenous medicinal plants harvested from their local Amazon rainforest. Then, shamans known as “curanderos” perform medicinal songs called “icaros” that are inspired by these plants. In response to the icaros, the Shipibo women weave tapestries, which may be worn as skirts, enjoyed as blankets, or used in ceremonial practice. Wisdom and protection are common themes that may be symbolized by serpents, plants, or crosses within the Shipibo tribe’s tapestries. Each unique design is considered to be able to heal a variety of mental, emotional, or spiritual ailments.

Altogether, this creative communion between the Shipibo people and their natural environment engenders a sense of spiritual and medicinal holism, which sustains their mental and physical wellness. Shipibo rituals celebrate the fundamental belief that medicinal plants can teach humankind valuable spiritual lessons, and the relationship between the audio and visual worlds shapes how the Shipibo conceive and express their visions of these plant teachings. For the Shipibo, these weavings both literally and metaphorically thread the sonic energy of the icaros into a language that can be seen, touched, and worn. This outward visual expression is what facilitates the communal sharing of their healing rituals both within and outside of their tribe. As cited in this article, an Irish graduate student visited the Shipibo and learned all about their rituals. Inspired, she then created her own geometric art based on the cymatics (the science of visualizing sound waves) of herbs harvested from the Burren in Ireland. With the Amazon rainforest being deforested, it is important that these Shipibo weavings continue to express the healing relationship between humankind and the natural environment.

Nunes, A. (2016, November 16). *Shamanistic crochets weave tales of indigenous brazilian culture*. Vice. <https://www.vice.com/en/article/78e5zd/shamanistic-crochets-indigenous-brazilian-culture>

Contemporary Brazilian artist Ernesto Neto visited the indigenous Huni Kuin tribe in Brazil's Amazon region and participated in several of their spiritual Ayahuasca ceremonies. Huni, which literally means "Ayahuasca", is a sacred drink that produces profound psychoactive effects. The Huni Kuin utilize this psychedelic as part of a singing ritual in order to celebrate their absolute connection with nature. Nestled in the

sounds of the rainforest, they sat in a circle around a candle and chanted traditional songs. As the Ayahuasca took effect, Neto described the sacred door of Earth opening up to him for the first time. This profound experience prompted him to express what he learned from the Huni Kuin lineage through the medium of crocheting.

Neto described his spiritual and artistic transformation as a transition from dialectical thinking to a more mythical and symbiotic worldview. As a result, his crocheted works evolved from singular objects to immersive and interactive installations. As viewers traverse Neto's works, they may feel a sense of the Huni Kuin's rhythmic singing via the energetic earth-tone patterns that move in and out of his otherworldly structures. Similar to the Shipibo symbolism, serpent and plant motifs inhabit Neto's structures and physically engage viewers in these elements of the Huni Kuin culture. For Neto, this transformation expressed the Huni Kuin's integrated somatic healing practices, wherein the human body becomes interwoven into the larger fabric of the natural world. Despite rampant colonization continuing to threaten the lives of all indigenous tribes, Neto was able to imagine a transcendent space where the healing nature-based wisdom of the Huni Kuin tribe could be preserved.

Wahl, D. (2018, February 18). *Deep weaving: indigenous earth wisdom, mythology, and cosmology*. Medium. <https://designforsustainability.medium.com/deep-weaving-indigenous-earth-wisdom-mythology-and-cosmology-dad5da368b0d>

Daniel Christian Wahl authors articles pertaining to sustainable design on an online publishing platform called Medium. In his article, "Deep Weaving: indigenous Earth wisdom, mythology, and cosmology", he reflects on the 2018 Ashoka "Global Change

Leaders” gathering to catalyze transformative innovation in education. Addressing educational ecosystems, he describes a systemic problem in which there is a lack of processes that enable youth to take conscious steps into more integrated community membership roles. More specifically, Wahl believes this problem (much like the violence that led to Native American “boarding schools”) lies in the way that the dominant colonial worldview separates humankind’s connections between nature and culture, self and world, and mind and matter. In other words, we live in a dichotomous world in which these crucial aspects of human life are existing in opposition to one another. For insight, he looks to Native American culture and connects their spiritual relationship with weaving to these needs inherent in modern educational systems.

For example, Wahl cites the Lakota tribe’s Medicine Wheel, which is composed of the Four Shields. Interestingly, these shields share themes of wisdom and protection with the Shipibo tribe’s serpent symbolism and the Navajo tribe’s “Na’ashjé’í Asdzáá” (Spider Woman). By invoking the archetype of the weaver, Wahl integrates each shield of the four sacred directions to form a map for a life well-lived for the greater good. Each directional shield weaves dichotomies of human and environmental elements into a complex philosophy that defines a holistic center of learning, self, balance, beauty, and harmony. Not surprisingly, these same elements are also shared by the Navajo weavers in their concept of “hozho”. Further, Wahl explains how modern society is capable of re-weaving connections to this ancient wisdom in a way that provides rites of passage rituals, ultimately offering us a better compass for navigating life as responsible participants and contributors. Wahl concludes by referencing pioneers of weaving

Native American wisdom, such as John P. Milton, Steven Foster, Meredith Little, Jon Young, and Gigi Coyle. While this article is not a literal examination of fiber arts, Wahl does address the overarching Native American philosophy that supports its creative expression and cultural significance. Indigenous American weaving is about more than the art product; it is a holistic and integrated life practice designed to sustain humankind through generational trauma. Altogether, this powerful medicine supports mental health through the systemic and existential repair of society at large.