SPOTTED CATTLE AND DEER: SPIRIT GUIDES AND SYMBOLS OF ENDURANCE AND HEALING IN *CEREMONY*

Susan Blumenthal

SPOTTED CATTLE. RUNNING WITH THE GRACE and delicacy of deer, but tough, rugged, enduring, lost in a landscape of desert and mountains. Deer. Silent, spiritual sentinels whose being nourishes the soul as well as the body of its slayer when properly honored in Pueblo ceremonial traditions.

Spotted cattle and deer are strong but subtle thematic strands in the complex web of symbols, stories and images Leslie M. Silko weaves through *Ceremony*; they are the messengers of ancient wisdoms vital to Tayo's quest for healing and identity.

Critics have posited interpretations of spotted cattle but this thematic element has never been explored in sufficient depth because, as Kathleen M. Sands suggested in the Preface to the *Ceremony* Symposium issue of the *American Indian Quarterly*: "certain aspects of the novel reasserted themselves over and over . . ."[1] And indeed most critical analysis of *Ceremony* has focused on several primary areas, which Sands identifies as: "the natural world, the use of myth and ritual in the novel, and the formal design of the work."[2]

While the spotted cattle could be considered an aspect of the first category, "the natural world," there is perhaps a more appropriate designation—animal spirit guides.

Spotted cattle as spirit guides? Charles Larson in a collection of essays, *American Indian Fiction*, interpreted the cattle much differently, in the context of what Sands called "the natural world" theme:

> The cattle are a part of his [Tayo's] people's future. When they disappear after Josiah's death, Tayo feels he as not only neglected his responsibility to his people, but severed his relationship with the land.[3]

In contrast, Peter G. Beidler in a critical study "Animals and Human Development in the Contemporary American Indian Novel," offered a more psychological analysis, describing the cattle as a type of role model for Tayo. He states: "The animals Tayo comes most dramatically to imitate are the hardy Mexican cattle, those cattle which are closer to nature than are stupid white-man herefords."[4]

Susan Blumenthal is an Albuquerque-based writer and a graduate student in English at the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque.

Both conclusions are valid representative interpretations. Further study however, reveals the concentric nature of the symbol of spotted cattle; ordinary animals/quest object and spirit guides.

Animal spirit guides or helpers are a fundamental part of Native American spirituality and are a common element in the literature. If Tayo seeks wisdom, healing and self-identity, because of emotional traumas suffered during the war, then Paula Gunn Allen's discussion of the importance of spirit guides and self-empowerment in *The Sacred Hoop* seems particularly appropriate to his situation:

> The seeker hopes to gain a vision because through doing so he will also gain a secure adult identity and some "medicine", that is, some personally owned item will empower him in certain ways. He might get a song or a ritual. He might get a powerful crystal, a particularly charged stone, or a spirit guide who is some creature like an eagle, a wolf, a coyote, an ant, but who in any case counsels the seeker in certain crucial situations that have a bearing on the seeker's "path".[5]

James Welsh explores the notion of animal spirit guides in both a contemporary context in *The Death of Jim Loney* and a historical context in *Fools Crow*. The protagonist in *The Death of Jim Loney* is a deracinated alcoholic who has a reoccurring vision of a bird. Loney admits: "This must have some meaning. Sometimes I think it is a vision from my mother's people I must interpret it, but I don't know how."[6]

Fools Crow, set in the nineteenth century, contrasts the confusion of twentieth century Jim Loney. A young Pikuni Blackfeet, White Man's Dog, has no trouble identifying his animal spirit guide. Without hesitation he follows a raven who speaks to him, asking for assistance in freeing a wolverine caught in a trap. After White Man's Dog frees the wolverine [Skunk Bear], the raven tells him: "Dream of all that has happened here today. Of all the two-leggeds [humans], you alone will possess the magic of Skunk Bear."[7]

Jim Loney and White Man's Dog are at opposite ends of the spiritual spectrum. Loney has no understanding of the mystical wisdom of his people; White Man's Dog has not experienced the spiritual brainwashing of the dominant culture which insists it is impossible for ravens and other animals to communicate with humans. Tayo of *Ceremony* is a character whose innate spiritual insights are somewhere between these two extremes. Silko explains: "He [Tayo] never lost the feeling he had in his chest . . . he still felt it was true, despite all they had taught him in school—that long, long ago things *had* been different, and human beings could understand what the animals said . . ." (95).

Through the course of the novel, Tayo discovers the ancient path of wisdom in his own way, one which reflects the technological and cultural aspects of the twentieth century.

Consider the spotted cattle. These are not animals from traditional Pueblo mythology or storytelling tradition. However, by emulating Native American syncretic traditions, Silko created them to represent the hybridization of Indian culture. Indians in the southwest are not a dying race. They select certain desirable elements from the dominant white culture and incorporate these into their own culture to keep it alive and vigorous. Even though the Native American culture in the Southwest often appears in the midst of cultural crisis, it endures and survives. Betonie describes this attitude when he tells Tayo: "She taught me this above all else: things which don't shift and grow are dead things" (p.126).

As part of their dual symbolic role the spotted cattle are one of the metaphors for this syncretism. Silko describes how they "run like antelope" (p.80), how they "were tall and had long legs like deer..." (p.75).

In essence the spotted cattle are a cross between domesticated cattle and wild animals. The Indian people survived on wild game for thousands of years but contemporary white society restricted use of that food source. Native people turned to livestock as a means of maintaining self-sufficiency. Unfortunately ranch-bred livestock are poorly suited to the harsh environment of the reservation. Survivors, such as Tayo's uncle Josiah, must constantly seek ways to overcome even the seemingly insurmountable obstacle of cattle that die during drought. As a leitmotif for survival, the spotted cattle enter to echoes of Spider Woman's Story: "I'm thinking about those cattle Tayo. See things work out funny sometimes" (p.74).

In the poem which opens the book Silko tells us that stories are origins, beginnings; thoughts are the creative fountain of reality:

> Ts'its'tsi'nako, Thought Woman
> is sitting in her room
> and whatever she thinks about appears (p.1).

Josiah and Tayo think about the ideal breed of cattle and they appear:

> They would breed these cattle, special cattle, not the weak, soft herefords that grew thin and died from eating thistle and burned-off cactus during the drought. The cattle Ulibarri sold them were exactly what they were thinking about (p.74).

The metaphor of the spotted cattle, as related to Native American people who have not abandoned their traditional ways and knowledge, is quite pointed; "These cattle were descendants of generations of desert cattle, born in dry sand and scrubby mesquite, where they hunted water the way desert antelope did" (p.74).

In the same passage Josiah reinforces this image with one of the more profound insights in the book when he tells Tayo:

> Cattle are like any living thing. If you separate them from the land too long, keep them in barns and corrals, they lose something. The stomachs get to where they can only eat rolled oats and dry alfalfa. When you turn them loose again they go running all over. They are scared because the land is unfamiliar and they are lost. They don't stop being scared either, even when they look quiet and they quit running. Scared animals die off easily (p.74).

Beidler comes to a similar conclusion regarding the metaphor of the spotted cattle as Indians who survive, and offers this reflective analysis:

> And like the wild animals of nature, they are able to forage for themselves in the desert. Unlike the fat, white-faced Hereford (acculturated Indians?) they do not stand stupidly around artificial water tanks (bars?). Instead they find their own water in desert springs, their own food in desert grasslands. They trust their own instincts, drift to the south where they came from, and survive by their own native and natural abilities.[8]

While the symbol of the spotted cattle as a hybrid survivor representative of Native Americans who have retained tradition and adapted to white culture is easily identified as a thematic element, there is also a more subtle symbolism involved. The spotted cattle are not only physical hybrids they are also spiritual hybrids. They have the bodies of livestock but their spiritual essence is deer/antelope, the primary large game animal(s) of the Pueblo people for thousands of years.

Nearly all of the Silko's descriptions of the spotted cattle contain a deer/antelope simile. The cattle run "like antelope" (p.80). They hunt for water like "the desert antelope" (p.74). They "had little regard for fences" (p.79). "They were tall and had long, thin legs like deer . . ." (p.75). And, most specifically, they were "more like deer than cattle . . ." (p.197).

This emphasis on cattle as a spiritual hybrid of deer or antelope is particularly significant in terms of Pueblo philosophies concerning these animals. The reverence bestowed on deer by the Laguna people is illustrated in the novel when Silko describes the ceremony that will be performed on the deer slain by Rocky and Tayo:

> He knew when they took the deer home, it would be laid out on a Navajo blanket, and Old Grandma would put a string of turquoise around its neck and put silver and turquoise rings around the tips of the antler. Josiah would prepare a little bowl of cornmeal and place it by the deer's head so that anyone who went near could leave some on the nose (p.53).

The deer are honored, not exploited by the Laguna people. It is important that all the proper ceremonies be performed so the spirit of the deer will not be offended. In this way a balance is maintained: The deer spirits are honored and the deer return to give their lives as sustenance to the people. Silko portrays this relationship when Josiah and Tayo kneel beside the deer's body:

> They sprinkled cornmeal on the nose and fed the deer's spirit. They had to show their love and respect, their appreciation; otherwise the deer would be offended, and they would not come and die for them the following year (p.51).

Not only does the ceremonial feeding from the deer's spirit insure future hunting successes, it is a reaffirmation of the circular and interconnected life patterns fundamental to Native American spirituality. As Paula Gunn Allen states:

> At base, every story, every song, every ceremony tells the Indian that each creature is part of a living whole and that all parts of that whole are related to one another by virtue of their participation in the whole being.[9]

This point of view is not embraced by the majority of the white culture, and for a young man like Tayo who must straddle two cultures it renders the task of self-acceptance and self-understanding particularly difficult. It also challenges the reader's perceptions—Silko wants them to accept realities they may not understand or believe. Critics have remarked on this aspect of *Ceremony* before. Writing in the *South Dakota Review* about the concentric story aspects of *Ceremony* Dennis Hoilman notes: "An acceptance of the Laguna world view (as presented in *Ceremony*) involves a radically different perspective from the empirically derived perspective of the white culture."[10]

It is this "radically different" perspective that tints the analysis of many images. If viewed from the white perspective, elements such as the spotted cattle and deer are metaphors; from the traditional Indian point of view they are the magical aspects of reality. Or, as Robert Bell notes about this aspect of the novel: "she [Silko] intends for us to perceive in the duality of natural and super natural a fundamental equivalence.[11]

This philosophy of dual realities, visible and invisible is expressed with deer, not only in the ceremonial traditions accorded the slain deer, but also with Tayo himself.

Tayo appears to have a special relationship with deer. In the opening pages of the novel, he tries to hold the image of a deer in his mind in an effort to anchor himself in reality and find comfort in a familiar spiritual image rather than drugs: "And if he could hold that image of the deer in his mind long enough, his stomach might shiver less and let him sleep for awhile" (p. 7).

The symbol of this special relationship seems to be reinforced when Tayo remembers tenderly examining the deer he and Rocky have killed:

> When he was a little child he always wanted to pet a deer, and he daydreamed that a deer would let him come close and touch its nose. He knelt and touched the nose; it was softer than pussy willows, and cattails, and still warm as a breath. . . . he knew what they said about deer was true (p. 50).

This type of spiritual understanding of animals or a particular animal is not regarded as imaginary in Native American culture, and those who do have such a relationship with a particular species of animal are often regarded as healers or holy people. It is interesting to compare the preceding quoted passage describing Tayo's feeling toward deer with the recollections of Don Talayesva in *Sun Chief: Autobiography of a Hopi Indian* published in 1942 when Talayesva was in his fifties. *Sun Chief* recounts the experiences of a young man raised with traditional native customs who is not influenced by the dominant white culture and is therefore encouraged to explore and understand the other realities he perceives:

> As soon as I was old enough to wander about the village my grandfather suggested that I go out to the Antelope Shrine and look for my deer people who were invisible to ordinary human beings. Sometimes I thought I would see antelopes who changed into people. Whenever I dreamed of antelopes in the village my parents would say, "That is to be expected, for you are an antelope child."[12]

While there may be philosophical differences between Hopis and Lagunas regarding very specific spiritual matters and traditions unique to each pueblo, all Pueblo people share this reverence for the spirit world of animals, plants and nature, which they believe coexists, unseen, with the physical world. Therefore, Talayesva's visions could be compared to Tayo's instincts about deer. But where Talayesva's spiritual gifts were recognized and encouraged, Tayo's were ignored and even his traditional respect for the spirit of the deer is questioned by his cousin Rocky when Tayo covers the slain deer's head with his jacket: "Why did you do that?" (p. 50). But Tayo loves deer and knows they deserve respect even if it means derision from Rocky.

The subtle theme of Tayo as "antelope child", as Talayesva calls it, takes on special significance in the theme of healing. Tayo suffers emotional wounds from the war and feels guilt for the drought which has desiccated the land around Laguna. He feels responsible for the drought because he prayed away the jungle rain when he was in the war: "He damned the rain until the words were a chant . . . He wanted the words to make a cloudless blue sky . . ." (p. 12).

From the perspective of modern psychologists Tayo's concerns about damning the rain would be considered an abnormal guilt response. Silko illustrates that Tayo's awareness of the unity and connectedness of all things has not been diminished by his exposure to white culture. What has been diminished is his sense of personal power and knowledge that he can reverse the situation. This is what he must discover through his pursuit of the spotted cattle and his interaction with supernatural beings.

All of these experiences may appear purely metaphorical to the non-Indian reader. However, Silko is actually illustrating other realities of which most people have little or no understanding. Allen explains this dichotomy of perceptions in *The Sacred Hoop*:

> In English, one can divide the universe into two parts; the natural and supernatural. Humanity has no real part in either, being neither animal no spirit—that is, the supernatural is discussed as though it were apart from people, and the natural as though people were apart from it. This necessarily forces English-speaking people into a position of alienation from the world they live in. Such isolation is entirely foreign to American Indian thought.[13]

The self-discovery Tayo comes to realize in the course of the novel/ceremony is that, because he is an 'antelope child,' he is closely associated with rain-bearer spirits and therefore has the ability to affect the drought. As Hamilton A. Tyler writes in *Pueblo Animals and Myths*: "In Pueblo thinking there is a very close relationship between Kachina dancers and deer since both of them are rainmakers."[14]

This belief that deer spirits are rainmakers provides the basis for another interpretation of Tayo's quest for the spotted cattle which disappear after Josiah's death. When Tayo sets off to find the spotted cattle he in essence embarks on a vision quest to bring back the rain and heal his emotional wounds. The quest begins with old Betonie's prophecy at the end of the healing ceremony: ". . . the ceremony isn't finished yet . . . Remember these stars," he said. "I've seen them and I've seen the spotted cattle; I've seen a mountain and I've seen a woman" (p. 152).

Tayo realizes that he must find the spotted cattle, both to honor the commitment to his dead uncle and to continue the ceremony of healing.

In this respect he becomes the hunter and the healer, and the spotted cattle become his guide. They bound through his dreams and in essence lead him to his meetings with the mountain spirits Ts'eh and mountain lion man.

> He dreamed about the spotted cattle. They had seen him and were scattering between juniper trees through tall yellow grass, below the mesas near the dripping spring . . . He tried to run after them, but it was no use without a horse. They were gone . . . He wanted to leave that night to find the cattle; there would be no peace until he did" (p. 145).

In contemporary terms Tayo's quest for the spotted cattle can be juxtaposed to a traditional quest by Don Talayesva for the deer spirit people. When Talayesva returns to his village with yellow stains around his mouth, his family remarks that they know he had been eating sunflowers, which according to Hopi tradition are the food of deer spirits: "They knew I had been feasting with my relations [deer spirit people] and I would probably use my special power soon to heal some person who was sick and unable to urinate.[15]

Yellow represents spiritual food to the Hopis and the Lagunas (cornmeal and pollen) and, as Tayo begins his spiritual quest for the spotted cattle, Silko emphasizes this color in her imagery. As Tayo travels north in the early spring (yellow is the color for north in Laguna mythology), he encounters Ts'eh Montano, a mountain spirit woman who wears yellow and has "ochre eyes . . . slanted upward from her cheekbones like the face of an antelope dancer's mask" (p. 177).

It is likely Silko meant to represent "the Keresan game goddess Kochinako, or yellow woman,"[16] in the character of Ts'eh. She initiates the completion of the healing for Tayo and the return of the rain. There are numerous references to water when Tayo and Ts'eh are together. Ts'eh's moccasin buttons have "rainbirds carved on them" (p. 177). Her blanket has "patterns of storm clouds" (p. 177). Tayo could "feel the damp wide leaf pattern that had soaked into the blanket where she lay" (p. 177). "He squatted down by the pool and watched dawn spreading across the sky like yellow wings" (p. 177).

Tayo makes love to Ts'eh, an act which balances his male power with female power and increases his luck as a hunter: "Other powers such as sex may be especially directed into channels which will aid the hunt."[17]

Tayo dreams of the spotted cattle again and even in that vision there are images of water: "he saw them scatter over the crest of the round base hill, running away from him, scattering out around him like ripples in still water" (p. 181).

After encountering a huge mountain lion, an omen of good fortune and power, Tayo fills the lion's tracks with "yellow pollen"

(p. 196). He then discovers the cattle "grazing in a dry lake flat . . ." (p. 196).

When Tayo returns to Ts'eh he encounters Mountain Lion man, another mountain spirit portrayed as the brother or husband of Yellow Woman, carrying a recently killed deer. All of these visions combine to reinforce the spiritual nature of Tayo's quest and confirm that he is a special person, an 'antelope child'.

Tayo returns again in the summer to find Ts'eh and first sees her "walking through the sunflowers . . ." (p. 221), the food of the deer spirit people. It is during this second liaison with Yellow Woman that Tayo truly begins to heal as he realizes that love always endures, even if the object of that love (in his case Rocky and Josiah) dies:

> The damage that had been done had never reached this feeling. This feeling was their life, vitality locked deep in blood memory, and the people were strong, and the fifth world endured, and nothing was even lost as long as the love remained (p. 220).

In reality Tayo's soul, as a reflection of the spirit of the pueblo people, can be compared to the desert Spadefoot Toad. This remarkable animal can remain buried in a state of suspended animation, waiting. Waiting, buried in the sand up to ten feet deep; enduring for as long as a decade for the rain necessary for its mating and reproduction. Silko describes these "children of the rain" as Tayo watches them at the edge of the seeping spring.

> They were the rain's children. He had seen it happen many times after a rainstorm. In dried up ponds and in the dry arroyo sands, even as the rain was still falling they came popping up through the ground, with wet sand still on their backs. Josiah said they could stay buried in the dry sand for many years waiting for the rain to come again (p. 95).

Tayo has learned to endure, with love, dignity and no bitterness. Spiraling ever inward in the ceremony of his spiritual journey, Tayo resists the vortex of evil when he watches the murder of his friends Harley and Leroy. He knows his involvement would only lead to his own destruction too. Indeed, Tayo has recognized the futility of war and violence and how these forces upset the delicate balance of the cosmos. This too is a fundamental Pueblo philosophy which is associated with rain. Allen explains this concept: The rains come only to peaceful people, or so the Keres say. As a result of this belief, the Keres abhor violence or hostility."[18]

His spiritual odyssey complete, Tayo goes to the Kiva where he tells the elders he has seen Yellow Woman. They do not dispute or deny his encounter with a sacred mountain spirit, rather they want to know all the

details: "It took a long time to tell them the story; they stopped him frequently with questions about the location and time of day; they asked questions about the direction she had come from and the color of her eyes" (p. 257). Tayo is then accorded the respect due a spiritually gifted person when the elders chant:

> You have seen her
> We will be blessed
> again (p. 257).

As spirit guides, the spotted cattle led Tayo, the deer/antelope child on a journey of remembrance and healing. He learned to forgive himself and release the guilt burdens from the war. He chased the spotted cattle, with their infinity-symbol brand, through dreams and into the desert and mountains and learned that love is eternal. As a deer/antelope child he instinctively knew of the deer's love: "They said the deer gave itself to them because it loved them, and he could feel the love as the fading heat of the deer's body warmed his hands" (p. 54). But in the course of the novel/ceremony he learned of the eternal love of people as well. Perhaps it is Yellow Woman, perhaps his mother he thinks about when the healing is complete: "He thought of her then; she had always loved him, she had never left him; she had always been there. He crossed the river at sunrise" (p. 255).

NOTES

Silko, Leslie Marmon, *Ceremony*, New York: Viking Penguin Inc.
1977. All page references refer to this edition.

1. Sands, Kathleen, "Preface: A Symposium Issue." *American Indian Quarterly*, Vol. 5, No. 1, 1979, p. 2.
2. *Ibid.*
3. Larson, Charles, *American Indian Fiction*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1978, p. 154.
4. Beidler, Peter G., "Animals and Human Development in the Contemporary American Indian Novel." *Western American Literature*, Vol. 14, Summer 1979, p.147.
5. Allen, Paula Gunn, *The Sacred Hoop: Recovering the Feminine In American Indian Tradition*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1986, p.91.
6. Welch, James, *The Death of Jim Loney*. New York: Penguin Books, 1979, p. 105.
7. Welch, James, *Fools Crow*. New York: Penguin Books, 1979, p. 58.
8. Beidler, p. 147.
9. Allen, p. 60.
10. Hoilman, Dennis R., "A World Made of Stories: An Interpretation of Leslie Silko's *Ceremony*." *South Dakota Review*, Vol. 17, No. 1, p. 60.
11. Bell, Robert, "Circular Design in *Ceremony*." *American Indian Quarterly*, Vol. 5 No. 1, 1979, p. 51.
12. Simmons, Leo W. ed., *Sun Chief: Autobiography of a Hopi Indian*, Yale University Press, Publication for the Institute of Human Relations, New Haven, 1942, p. 66. Talyesva in his narrative of spiritual experiences often used deer and antelope interchangeably