Wisdom Sits in Places: Landscape and Language among the Western Apache

Cheleen Mahar
Pacific University

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Recommended Citation
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Posted on March 1, 2003 by Editor

By Cheleen Mahar <mahrca@pacificu.edu>

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The old Apache man, Nick Thompson, pointed with his lips to a low ridge that runs behind his home in an easterly direction away from Cibecue Creek. “That is a good place,” he says. “These are all good places. Goodness is all around.” (pg. 65).

Wisdom Sits in Places investigates how the Western Apache think and imagine their geography. The study grew out of a suggestion to the anthropologist from the chairman of the White Mountain Apache tribe: “Why don’t you make maps over there… not whitemen’s maps… but Apache maps with Apache places and names.” Thus, with the help of the tribe and the National Science Foundation, Keith Basso began his work over the next five years. Basso is an ethnographer-linguist which means that he studies the language and culture of a particular group.

The book begins with the question: What do people make of places? In asking this question Basso tells us that he means to interrogate human attachments to place; the connection between place, identity and origins; and the relationship between place to collective sensibilities and dispositions. Basso reveals to us how certain places are identified with ancestors, and stories of Apache sacred history. These stories are used as examples or templates for proper behavior. In fact in this view just telling someone a story will encourage them correct bad or dangerous behavior. Telling stories to correct behavior is thought of as ‘shooting someone with an arrow’, as when a grandmother tells her granddaughter a story about a person who was so forgetful that he behaved too much like a whiteman. The granddaughter ‘understood’ the story and promptly changed her style. Stories can also ‘stalk’ people, never letting them forget the right path to walk. This is a self-reflexive activity in which stories work on a person’s mind. However, away
from the landscape of their ancestors, individuals can become forgetful and bring their lives to ruin. Consider the situation of one Apache man who had moved to Los Angeles only to descend to a life on the street as an alcoholic. When he returned to Cibicue he understood his self-destructive behavior as being the result of having moved away from the landscape which held wisdom stories. Not being around his ancestral land allowed him to forget the wisdom of his people.

Landscape embraces sacred names, the stories of ancestors and connects to everyday life. Sometimes locals will carry on a conversation by ‘speaking with names’ because place-names are strong. ‘Speaking with names’ does not entail telling stories but is used as a kind of shorthand, using only names which remind a person about a place, and therefore the story involved. For instance, Lola relating a conversation of this sort, explained: “We didn’t speak too much to her... that way she could travel in her mind... we gave her clear pictures with place-names. So her mind went to those places, standing in front of them as our ancestors did long ago. That way she could see what happened there long ago... perhaps (she could) hear our ancestors speaking.’ (pg. 83).

Landscape, then, for the Western Apache, is firmly embedded in the moral imagination. It is part of a reciprocal relationship between people and their land by which individuals and community are connected to, and positively affected by, the voices of their ancestors. Place-names produce mental images of a geographical location, which then evoke prior stories and sagas, and which go on to affirm the value and validity of traditional moral precepts (ancestral knowledge). This process of affirmation can heal disturbing thoughts and wounded spirits.

At the end of the book Basso asks “What is wisdom?”. Dudley, his Apache informant says “Wisdom sits in places”, and then launches into an ancestor story of struggle along the trail of wisdom. The wisdom trail is one of self-reflection and leads to the creation of a steady and resilient mind; a smooth mind that will be alert to danger. Only through reflection can one walk the trail of wisdom. Finally, Dudley says, “Wisdom sits in places. It’s like water that never dries up. You need to drink water to stay alive, don’t you? Well, you also need to drink from places.” (pg. 127).

While the book focuses upon the experience of a particular group of people, it is a wonderful book to ‘think with’ when each of us contemplates our own sense of place and how places help to construct our experiences and color our imagined pasts and futures. After all, human existence is deeply embedded in time and space, and our social lives are situated within an exchange of symbolic forms wherever we live. As Basso says, places have profound meaning and are often metaphors for living and understanding our social worlds and practices.
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