

Thunder Rides A Black Horse

Mescalero Apaches and the Mythic Present

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I feel that what Claire Farrer means by living in the "mythic present" is that although most Indian culture is perceived long to have been different, it is in fact very live and active today. I will give specific examples from her book, *Thunder Rides a Black Horse*, to support my arguments of what the "mythic present" actually means and list many examples of events that could be considered to be in the "mythic present."

First I will define the mythic present in the terms that Claire Farrer actually uses in

her book. She states, "For the Indians I know on several reservations in the American West and Southwest, life is lived in what I term the "mythic present." What mainstream Americans consider to have happened long ago, if it happened at all, is real and present during everyday life on reservations" (2).

Farrer obviously feels that there are many misconceptions among the mainstream Americans about the Indians, in particular the Mescalero Apache. I feel she uses her book primarily as actual proof that in many ways the Indians' culture is the same now in thought, song, narrative, everyday life, religion, and in rituals as many generations before the present.

The three major examples of life in the "mythic present" that I will primarily be discussing are the astronomical concept of the Mescalero Apache, the kin-system that the Apache implore, and lastly the Apache girl's puberty ceremony. Although I have only selected three examples, there are obviously many more such as the cultural heroine, White Painted Woman, the creation process in which Apache people are seen as the weakest link in the being-chain, and reciprocity, among others.

The first example of the "mythic present" I will discuss is the astronomical

concept that the Apache Indians have and how they apply it. This also includes their "Indian time". The Apache Indian Calendar is not nearly as artificially constructed as our Western version. Only after reading this book did I realize how artificial "our" calendar actually is. Although this calendar was designed like most others to be the time between which it takes for new moons to appear, it is actually not even close. It takes about 29 1/2 days between moons while for some reason about half of our months have 30 days, nearly half have 31 and another month has either 28 or 29.

The Apache calendar is in many ways much more structured. Farrer states, "Indian time . . . is governed by participants rather than a clock; it is when things and participants are all present and ready. That time may be ahead of or behind clock time" (1994:5). The Apache day, instead of starting at midnight as in our society, starts whenever the sun comes up, if at all. Generally, exact times are not set for any reason or are needed to be. I feel a lot of their time schedule has evolved instinctively. That is, Apache Indians generally eat, sleep, and wake up at approximately the same times day after day. There has never been a need for anything to happen, say, for example, at exactly 6 or 11 p.m. and I doubt that the Apache will ever completely adapt to a different calendar for this reason. The Apache have been using the same time structure and schedule for many generations. Their society has never become nearly as complex as our Western society and hopefully it never will be.

There are many examples from the book of their abilities to tell time without watches or clocks. One example is the morning of the first day of the ceremony in which Bernard awakens the author before sunrise to prepare for the many events that would occur during the day. Farrer states, "as usual, his watchless and clockless time sense was impeccable, for we would have just enough time to do all that must be done before he moved into the ceremonial arena for the start of this July's ceremonial" (41).

I feel. by saying "as usual", she means that this is a frequent occurrence of their amazing ability to "feel" what time it is or know the amount of time needed to accomplish a certain event. There is also the instance towards the end of the book in which Bernard tries to teach the author Apache astronomy. He explained how the Apache can look at the constellations and planets and determine what time it is, even though as the seasons change, so do the times. This was difficult for the author to understand or learn even though she spent a great deal of time at the reservation over many years. She says, "to be a competent star watcher at Mescalero requires years of watching until the sky becomes as familiar as the back of one's own hand" (99).

There are many other examples of the Apache ability to tell time using astronomical and instinctive methods. This process has been employed by the Apache for hundreds of years and is an example of the mythic present involved in thought and application.

The second example of the mythic present is the Apache kin-system. Their method of tracing ancestry is matrilineal, meaning only traced through their mothers. This method differs from that of the western world in which kinship is traced through both mother and father, called bi-laterally.

This system also applies to Apache customs. The Mescalero homes and their contents belong to women; only sisters and brothers in ascending generations are allowed to chastise or discipline children (30). Farrer also states, "since sisters and brothers are

always in the same family, it is the mother's brothers who are the disciplinarians, those with authority" (30). One's siblings and first cousins through their mothers are all

called "sister" and "brother" in equivalent English terms. A girl's matrilineal family is expected to help

with the cooking during the puberty ceremony.

While Apaches are aware of bi-lateral kinship and how it is dominant in most other societies, they still consider their "blood relatives" to be related through their mothers.

Relatives an individual may receive through the patrilineal, or father's side, are only

recognized as close, not blood relatives.

This is an example of the mythic present as part of the lived present in ritual life. It is, for example, ritual for one's sister or brother to chastise one another. This method for tracing ancestry has occurred for many generations and an example from the book would be how Stephanie could be considered to be related to Geronimo (31).

The third, and I feel, one of the more evident examples of mythic present the part of the puberty ceremony in which the girl's run around the baskets. Inside the girl's baskets are items which are considered to be symbolic of the four days of creation. This ceremony occurs after the girl is considered to have reached woman-hood.

During the ceremony at certain points, pollen is to be placed in the mouths of the girls to speak properly. Farrer states, "the pollen blessing sequence replicates not only life's living circle but also White Painted Woman's journey" (50). This is a reference to a cultural heroine upon which this ceremony can be considered to be based on. During the actual ceremony, each girl is considered to be a reincarnation of White Painted Woman. Each girl is painted so that they may appear as a reincarnation of White Painted Woman. The girls run a series of times around the baskets, each turn representing a different stage of life. After each run the basket is placed closer to the ceremonial tent. This is symbolically saying that although the girl is becoming a woman, her parents still want her closer to home. Farrer also states, "the four runs that the girl's make symbolize the four stages of life: infancy, childhood, adulthood, and old age" (51). At the end of the fourth run the girls are covered with food, candy, and money as a wish that the girls will never want anything. On the last night of the ceremony, there is a blessing of each girl. As during the first night of the ceremony, the girls run around the baskets four times but this time the baskets are placed further away from the ceremonial tent. This symbolizes the parents' realization that the girl's are now women. After running around the basket four times, the girls then run towards home taking off the paint on their faces. Farrer states, "when next they are seen, it is as Apache adults, no longer resembling White Painted Woman physically, but each about to embark on her role as the mother of a people" (88).

This actual ceremony is also very old and traditional. The book states that in the olden days, girls would immediately marry after the ceremony (89). This ceremony is so very symbolic that I cannot nearly include most of the examples. This event obviously is not known throughout most of the United States, which is another reason that this is an example of the mythic present. I feel most people would be shocked to watch the entire ceremony and their beliefs of Indian culture

would change as well.

As mentioned earlier, the "mythic present" is the idea that the Apache are in many ways living in the same manner as they did hundreds of years ago despite the many ways society has changed over those years. These examples as well as many more are evidence that the Apache indeed do live in the mythic present. "The mythic present does a lot of work in today's life" (25).

#### Bibliography

Farrer, Claire R.  
1994 Thunder Rides A Black Horse Waveland Press Inc., Prospect Heights, IL