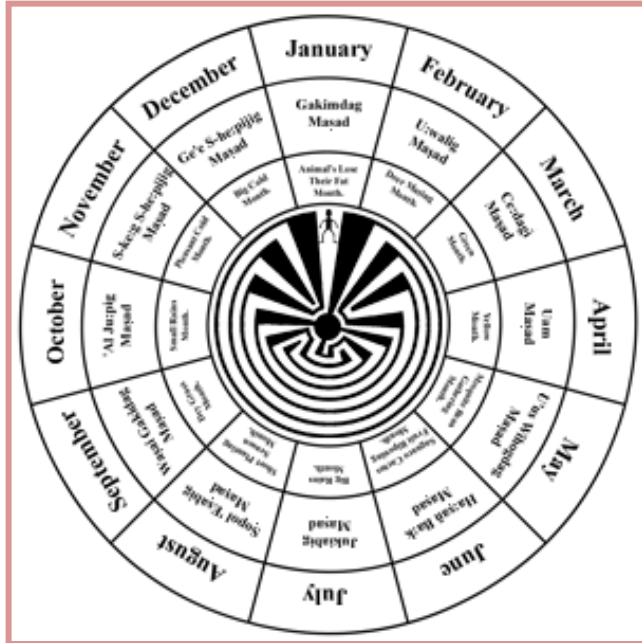


O'odham Winter stories 2012

By Roy Cook, edit

On cold winter nights, grandparents and other elders tell stories to pass on the values of our people. Traditionally, O'odham parents have always thought ahead to their children's futures, even when this meant speaking English at home so that children could succeed in school.



Traditional O'odham stories vary from village to village according to Grace Palacios who grew up in South Komelik, a village just north of the U.S.–Mexico border.

This version of the Milky Way story she remembers features Coyote, a trickster who doesn't listen well and always ends up in trouble.

.One day, Coyote was playing in someone's kitchen among the cooking utensils. He was trying to find some food to eat, but then he heard someone coming. He grabbed the first thing he saw, which was a bag of flour, and ran. He thought the best way to escape was by going into the sky. As he ran into the sky, the bag tore open. The flour flew everywhere, creating the Milky Way galaxy.

“The Milky Way galaxy is a trace of what Coyote shouldn't have been doing,” Palacios said. “Not to mention, it gives me insight of how my people made sense of their surroundings.”



Long ago, the elders in each O'odham family told traditional stories to their children and grandchildren. For the youngsters, it was considered story time, said

Lois Liston, a Tohono O'odham traditional arts teacher at Ha:san Preparatory and Leadership School in Tucson. Ha:san is a bicultural public high school designed for Native youths interested in attending college.

The stories were told during winter because of the long nights and for safety reasons. The O'odham believe they can talk about dangerous animals, such as bears and snakes, when they're hibernating and can't harm anyone, Liston said.

Keep stories alive

Today, however, most of the old stories are written and illustrated in books because the storytelling tradition has weakened. Not many elders know the stories from their family or area, Liston said. One of her jobs as a traditional arts teacher is to strengthen her students' cultural knowledge by telling them the old stories.

"I like telling traditional stories to students because there are so many different versions," Liston said. "When I share stories, I always tell them, 'This is how it was told to me.'"

Another version of the Milky Way story, for example, has Coyote spilling cornmeal to form the stars. In another variation, Coyote steals a bag of white tepary beans and scatters them while trying to escape, said Ron Geronimo, a Tohono O'odham language teacher at Tohono O'odham Community College in Sells.

Yet another story describes an old man and a young boy.

An old man was mean to his grandson, so the boy decided to leave and went up into the sky. The grandson lay in the sky and could see his grandfather down below. The grandfather could not find his grandson and began to feel badly about how he had treated him. The old man walked around crying as he looked for the boy. After time had passed, the grandson also began to feel badly and decided to come back down to give his grandfather a way to be with him. The boy told his grandfather that he had left because the old man was mean to him, and so he had made a new home in the sky. The boy gave his grandfather some seeds and told

him to plant them. In four years, the old man would have enough seeds so he would never go hungry. The grandson also told his grandfather the seeds were white tepary beans. The gray streak above in the sky was made of these beans, and this was his home. He told his grandfather that whenever the old man missed him, he could look up and see him across the sky.

Each traditional story carries a deeper meaning. “The importance of any story is what it is trying to teach you,” Geronimo said. “In this story it is trying to teach us about how we should treat people and each other.”

Stories and baskets have traditionally played a large part in the social and economic culture of the Tohono O’odham tribe. Aspects of traditional stories often are woven into the designs of the Tohono O’odham baskets. Mostly, baskets were very important in the everyday life of the tribe. It was the women's achievement and artistic expression in the tribe to weave the baskets. The baskets were used to haul grain and food. Many baskets were woven so tightly that they could hold water and liquor. Baskets were also very important in ceremonies, such as the Saguaro wine Rain Ceremony.



What makes the Tohono O’odham basket so uniquely beautiful is their style of weaving. The Tohono O’odham tribe has one of the most beautiful styles of basket weaving. The tight coiled basket and amazing designs make their baskets so appealing. Some of the baskets are woven so tight that they are used to hold water and other liquids. A few tribe members believe that the ancient baskets are of better quality than

those that are made today. Curators at the University of Arizona State Museum looking at ancient baskets retrieved during archaeological digs admire the workmanship and learn prehistoric designs and patterns. Many of the old baskets are made with splits of willow branches that are typically hard to work with. Most Tohono O’odham weavers today use primarily yucca, bear grass, and devils claw. The designs in the baskets are not made with any dyes. All of the baskets are made of natural colors. The white stitches in the baskets are yucca and the coil is shredded bear grass. The black is from devils claw, the rusty red is from the root of the yucca plant, and the green is from yucca leaves.

It has become harder for the Tohono O'odham tribe to gather the necessary materials for basket weaving. Today tribal members have to travel many miles to gather material for basket weaving, but it is important to the identity of the tribe, so the tradition, although more difficult has been maintained. In the ancient weaving of the Tohono O'odham the basic material for basketry weaving could be collected with little effort, even though many elements ripened or were unusable during different seasons. There is little open land to the public and so much development of land that it is getting more and more difficult to find the material needed to make baskets. Some Materials, such as, devil's claw are now being cultivated in a community garden in Sells, Arizona.



Basket weaving for the Tohono O'odham has gone from an essential part of life to a hobby. In ancient times, baskets were used every day for holding food, gathering food, holding water and for ceremonial use. As time went on and modern inventions came into tribal life, basket weaving became a hobby for many people and a way to keep the tradition alive. Baskets were sold for very little money and used by people for common things like trashcans. Then people began to

realize the art that went into basket weaving. Simple baskets took hours and hours of work, both for the weaving and the collection of the weaving materials. People from all over the United States still go to the Tohono O'odham reservation to buy baskets for very little money and then sell them for hundreds and sometimes thousands of dollars, to people all around the country.



When the O'odham tribe realized how much their baskets were selling for they decided to market the baskets themselves, cutting out the middleman. As a result, sales are the main reason for weaving nowadays, though some baskets still have traditional uses.



There is no one meaning to the Man in the Maze. Interpretations of the image vary from family to

family. A common interpretation is as follows: The human figure stands for the O'odham people. The maze represents the difficult journey toward finding deeper meaning in life. The twists and turns refer to struggles and lessons learned along the way. At the center of the maze is a circle, which stands for death, and for becoming one with Elder Brother I'ittoi, the Creator. Other O'odham see the image of a man as representative of an individual, or all of mankind, or I'ittoi himself.

Storytelling helps connect the O'odham people to their landscape. There are stories about the sky, the weather, the mountains, saguaros and desert animals. It is this landscape that makes them Desert People, Palacios said. Stories remind her of her



ancestors and make the connection with the past more tangible.

O'odham stories show that everything has a purpose. They also help establish values and boundaries that teach O'odham people how to live their life." Liston said, "The importance of the stories is to give directions and guidance to the younger generation on how to live as a Tohono O'odham, The stories also remind us of our heritage and culture and the responsibilities we have to one another."

Today, we as a Nation need to return to a view that puts learning at the center of childhood. Studying at school, learning through play and family life-this is the work of childhood.

In the same way that learning is central to childhood; traditional education is a key to our Tribal Nation's success. At this time when our economy is in a slump or the beginning stages of diversifying and maturing, our commitment to education is paramount.

Nationwide, studies have proven that western higher education brings higher income, lower unemployment, and better health for individuals, and higher tax revenues, lower crime rates, and improved civic life for the total American community.

Hoping for a Happy, Healthy, and Holiday for all our Families. Ho'ige idalig.

