



Why the World is on the Back of a Turtle

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whose population growth and territorial expansion in recent decades have been truly phenomenal and whose pattern of inter-group relations is particularly volatile.

Fissioning patterns themselves differ interestingly between these two societies. Whereas large Piaroa villages splinter into sibling sets (Kaplan 1973: 565), the smallest Yanomamo villages are generally composed of two blocs of kinsmen involved in affinal exchange (see Chagnon 1968: ch. 3).

This brings me to the general point with which I would like to conclude. In comparing these South American tropical forest societies, we might relate them to two 'ideal types', two basic approaches to social solidarity with which we are all familiar since they have served as the cornerstones of descent theory and alliance theory respectively. First, there are those societies in which notions about consanguineal kinship provide the central 'axiom of amity', to use Fortes's felicitous phrase. Both Piaroa and Kalapalo approximate this type, as revealed by the degree to which they seek to identify affines with consanguines or to transform the former into the latter. The Piaroa use of teknonyms for affines is, for example, described by Kaplan in just such terms when she says they form 'a sub-system of classification which transforms affinal terms into consanguineal ones' (1973: 564). Kaplan has described this system in greater detail elsewhere (Kaplan 1972). On the other side, we have those groups that find their social centre of gravity in the exchange relationship itself. Here we have groups like the Yanomamo—the Maussians or Lévi-Straussians, if you will—for whom the 'brother-in-law' tie carries more explicit moral weight than does the bond between siblings.

The Piaroa, as they emerge from Kaplan's analysis, in fact appear to make use of both models. The situation might be stated as follows: whereas affinal categories provide the mode for establishing new relationships, such relationships are then converted into the moral idiom of cognatic kinship. Perhaps one should see the Piaroa as occupying a position along a continuum on one side of which are those societies (the Kalapalo?) that place a more consistent emphasis on siblingship and kindred unity and, on the other, those (for example, the Yanomamo) who tend more towards recognising in affinal exchange itself an irreducible principle of social solidarity.

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Why the world is on the back of a turtle

SIR,

During his visit to the New World, between 1678 and 1680, Jaspas Danckaerts recorded the most quoted account of the Origin Myth of the Delaware Indians (Newcomb 1950: 72) of the Eastern United States. I will paraphrase it: First there was only water, then the Great Turtle gradually rose above water level and the Creator placed mud on his shell. The mud dried and the Great Tree grew in the middle of the earth. As the Tree grew towards the sky a sprout became a man, then the Great Tree bent down and in touching the earth caused a sprout to become a woman. From this man and woman all of humanity descended.

'The traditional Delaware belief that the earth rests on the back of a turtle' (Tantaquidgeon 1950: 25) is also shared by other tribes of the Northeastern Woodlands, most notably the Iroquois (Hewitt 1928). Originally, I viewed the turtle as a logical choice for this atlantean burden because its shape and appearance were appropriate to this role. But that was before I understood Delaware culture and the choice of natural symbols.

The turtle is more than it appears. Speck (1931: 44) noted that 'the turtle is the earth, its life.' Speck saw this assertion based on qualities of the turtle that the Delaware admired in life: perseverance, longevity, and steadfastness.' Also the Delawares viewed all life, time, and turtles as continuously moving from east to west.

My own conversations with Delaware indicate that life and the earth would have been impossible without the turtle supporting the world. In recognition of its importance for survival, turtles have come to symbolise life itself and the earth that nourishes life.

Among the Delaware, one quality of life has priority. This is the quality of consciousness.

The Delaware word for consciousness (pənayltndʌməswakʌn) also translates as thoughts of the mind. So important is this quality for life as a whole that anyone born with a mental defect is said to be mēciʌmgəl (now he is already dead). A strong consciousness can survive the death of its body and continue to affect the earth as a spirit. The significance of consciousness for my argument will emerge later.

The qualities of the Great Turtle are attributed to a particular genus, the Box turtle (Speck 1931: 46). Its shell was used for the rattle during the major Delaware ceremonial, the Big House. When I sought the position of the Box turtle within the Delaware ethnozoological taxonomy, an important point was noticed. The Delaware ethnozoology shows a pervasive distinction between land and water animals. For example, the Delaware language has two words for turtle: *taxkok* means land turtle or tortoise while the more obscure term *tulpe* may be used for water turtles or terrapins. The Box turtle is anomalous to this division for two reasons. First, it is more aquatic when young and more terrestrial when old and second, its feet, especially the hind feet, are partially webbed and thus intermediate between aquatic and terrestrial forms (Babcock 1971: 90, 91). As the Box turtle mediates between land and water forms in the taxonomy, so the Great Turtle mediates between land and water in the Origin Myth.

In Delaware society the turtle also figures prominently as the eponym of one of three matrilineal clans: turtle, fowl, and canine (Miller n.d.). The leader of the turtle clan was also the chief of all the Delawares and the protector of their traditions (Herman 1950: 60). Again the turtle figures as a mediator because the fowl are viewed as vegetarian and the canine as carnivorous. But 'the Box turtle subsists on a mixed diet, consisting of vegetable matter on the one hand, and animal matter . . . on the other' (Babcock 1971: 92).

Speck (1937: 24) also reported a general division of the Delaware into male and female categories. The Origin Myth also includes a man/woman opposition. Since the Turtle represents life and thereby consciousness, it also mediates between man and woman who also share consciousness between them.

The other opposition in the Origin Myth is that of Earth and Sky. The mediator for this pair is not the Turtle, but rather is the Great Tree. In the Big House Ceremony, the centre post represents this Great Tree, linking earth and sky. Since the Big House itself represents the Delaware universe (Speck 1931: 22), the turtle shell rattle and the centre post

refer to the Turtle and Tree of the Origin Myth. This opposition between Turtle and Tree is mediated by the mind. The Turtle has already been shown to symbolise consciousness. The Delaware also believe that trees have consciousness. They are the only plants considered to be animate and are called 'kins-people' in recognition of this consciousness they share with humanity. In the Origin Myth the mind itself is represented by the Creator, who places mud on the Turtle's back. The Creator is the embodiment of all consciousness. He is said to spend eternity sitting and thinking.

With intensive research, the above analysis should also apply for other societies who place the world on the back of a turtle. Parker (1912: 611) provides the tantalising report that members of the False Face Society among the Seneca Iroquois 'rub their turtle rattles on pine tree trunks, believing that thereby they become imbued with both the earth-power and the sky-power, . . . a recognition of the connection between the turtle and the world-tree that grows upon the primal turtle's back.'

It now remains to discuss these examples of natural symbols of mediation. I had originally believed that it was the appearance of the turtle that led to its use as a mediator. However, given the structure of Delaware culture, the behaviour of the turtle emerged as crucial. In fact, what is important about natural symbols is that they cannot be predicted before the culture is known. The turtle was important for the Delaware because it served to mediate the important land/water and vegetarian/carnivore oppositions. The Tree because it mediated between earth and sky. But most important of all was the conscious mind, which was attributed to both turtles and trees. The mind also mediated the man/woman opposition.

The three Delaware clans use natural symbols which express the three elements and these oppositions of the Delaware universe:—turtle: canine: fowl: water: land: air. Here the referents are the omnivorous Great Turtle floating in the water, the carnivorous canines on the land, and the vegetarian fowl roosting in trees.

While the Delaware cosmos can be viewed as structured by the land/water, earth/sky, and man/woman oppositions and the mediation of turtles and trees, all are subsumed by the ultimate natural symbol of mediation: the mind. More generally, I suggest that the more culturally inclusive a mediator is, the closer it will reflect the overarching importance of the mind.

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The Ethno-Archaeology of an unusual Tarahumara Burial Cave

SIR,

The Tarahumara are one of the least acculturated of extant Native American groups. They constitute a population of some 50,000 individuals, are members of the Uto-Aztecan linguistic family, and inhabit the exceptionally rugged and largely inaccessible Sierra Madre Occidental, a southern extension of the Rocky Mountains (Fried 1969). Their homeland, in the southeast portion of the Mexican state of Chihuahua, is a large elevated plateau with an average altitude of 2,270 m, and consists of underlying Mesozoic rocks with a thick volcanic cap of middle and late Tertiary rhyolite tuffs, welded tuffs and andesite (Schmidt 1973). The plateau is dissected by a series of narrow, deep, steep-sided gorges or *barrancas*, all of which contain innumerable water-eroded and wind-sculptured caves, as well as a number of fissures, and rock shelters of all shapes and sizes. The Tarahumara appear to have a series of ethno-categories into which they segregate the caves, including habitation caves, storage caves, cache caves and burial caves (cf. Clewlow & Pastron 1974).

In April of 1973 the authors were visiting Tarahumara country in order to observe *semana santa* or Holy Week festivities at the *pueblo* of Samachique, centre of the similarly named *ejido* of roughly 1,000 persons. In the

process of making some ethno-archaeological observations on local use of caves as habitation sites, we had occasion to inspect a number of cave types, including burial caves. One of these was located in a steep rock face about 600 m east of the centre of Samachique, about 100 m above the valley floor. It faces south, and is reached by a hard climb up a steep rock face. It is a crevice or fissure, roughly 3.5 m long, 1.7 m high at its mouth, and 2.1 m deep at its deepest point. At one time a wall of rocks and mud had sealed the natural crypt into which three adult bodies had been placed. This is a traditional Tarahumara burial practice, and serves to protect the bodies from the predations of coyotes, vultures, and other scavengers (cf. Lumholtz 1903: 383; Bennett & Zingg 1935: 237-8). At the west end of the crevice the rock and mud wall had been broken open and breached, and the bright sunlight afforded us the opportunity to inspect the contents of the chamber, which were scattered about on the rock floor in such a way as to allow us to take an inventory without disturbing the contents physically. It should be stressed that we did not tamper with the material in the crevice because we were not in possession of an official excavation permit, nor did we wish to defile the crypt and risk offending the Tarahumara who could observe us from the village below. The nearest dwelling, in fact, was a small cave inhabited by one family about 125 m south of, and about 40 m down the cliff from the burial cave.

The burial cave contained artefactual and human osteological material of the following description:

<i>Skeletal part</i>	<i>Quantity</i>
Radius	3
Ulna	5
Humerus	3
Femur	5 (2 articulated with tibia)
Tibia	5 (2 articulated; 1 with fibula)
Rib	40
Vertebra	22 (5 articulated)
Scapula	4
Pelvis	3 (2 male, 1 female)
Foot	1 (naturally mummified)
Phalanges	Various
Cranial fragments	10

Comments: The two articulated tibia-femurs were flexed, indicating that the individuals were laid to rest in a flexed burial position consistent with traditional Tarahumara custom (Lumholtz 1903: 383). Additionally, four of the extant femur sockets were pointing east, strongly suggesting that at least two (and probably all) of the adults were placed with their heads toward the east, also a typical