

Contextualizing the Faith in Amerindian Culture

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Abstract: Amerindian accounts of creation vary in their detail. Yet, a survey of the accounts reveals interesting similarities and possible opportunities to bridge between tribal traditions and biblical accounts. This article will survey the traditional stories of several Amerindian tribes in regard to creation accounts in order to identify insights and possible opportunities to communicate the Gospel using these accounts as a starting point.

Similarities of Creation Accounts

The Hopi Indians¹ call him Tawa. In the beginning there was nothing but Tawa and endless space. Tawa gathered the elements from endless space and infused some of himself in order to create the first world.²

The Great Medicine of the Cheyenne³ created a place described like a Garden of Eden. In this place the Great Medicine placed animals, birds, and fish along with his other creatures and man. All were in harmony there, speaking one language. They lived on honey and wild fruits. Man and woman were naked.⁴

According to the Seminoles,⁵ it was the “Great Wind” that breathed life into creation.⁶

Kitchi-Manitou, the creator god, gave man his freedom according to the Ojibwe.⁷ This was an act of generosity and trust. The people could give nothing back to Kitchi-Manitou except to follow his example of selfless generosity. The Ojibwe claim that mankind, began from one family, which included four brothers. One of the brothers would cause the death of another brother and would find himself shunned.⁸

The Seminoles have a story of brothers who taught their families under the guidance of the Great Spirit. Some found favor in the Great Spirit’s eyes. The brothers split up going to their own villages with their families. When it came time for a man to choose a wife, he was required to leave his village to select a woman from one of the other villages.⁹

The Sioux¹⁰ believe that it was a trickster who convinced man that he should leave his home. Old man and old woman scheme with the trickster, Ite, to improve

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the status of their daughter.¹¹ These samplings communicate distinct parallels with the biblical account.

The Bible describes how God created the heavens and the earth (Gn 1:1).¹² The earth was without form and void, and so God begins to shape and fill it. God makes the earth and places all creatures on it (Gn 1:20–2:7). In the midst of the land, He puts a garden (Gn 2:8). God creates Adam and Eve and gives them dominion (Gn 1:28) over the earth. In the union of Adam and Eve, God establishes that a “man should leave his mother and father and be joined to his wife and they shall become one flesh” (Gn 2:24). They were to tend and keep the garden. All lived in harmony and spoke one language. There was no death in the garden.

However, a snake tempted the woman, tricking Eve, who gives the forbidden fruit to Adam. The consequence of their disobedience is that sin and death enter the world, and Adam and Eve are forced to leave the garden (Gn 3:24).

A review of the tribal and biblical accounts shows us many similarities. The Creator is in the void. He creates a garden in which all God’s creatures live in harmony. One language is spoken. All creatures live on what the garden produces and so there is no violence or death. The Creator breathes life into creation. God gives man freedom and people are to follow his example of trust and generosity. A trickster causes man to have to leave his home. Mankind begins with one family. One of the original sons is the cause of death of his brother.

We might marvel at the similarities; yet if we truly believe the Genesis account of Creation, then all mankind would have started with the same truth from the same original source. Therefore, we should expect similarities.

Divergences from the Biblical Account

In the Ojibwe account, it is spider woman who breathes the first breath of life into the world. By doing this, she gives the earth the attributes of motherhood.¹³

Yet, even in this divergence, there is a parallel to natural religion which will be noted later. Spider woman was to point others to Kitchi-Manitou, god of creation. She was to do this by showing the timing and order of the seasons and to show that every creature has a place and purpose.¹⁴

The Hopi account tells of four different worlds, all created by Tawa. The first was inhabited by insects.¹⁵ These insects made their way to the second world to be transformed into mammals. The second world is inhabited by dogs, coyotes, and bears; however, they do not understand the meaning of life, and so Tawa created a third world. The third world is inhabited by people who live in harmony.¹⁶ However, sorcerers enter the third world with the people and create conflict.¹⁷ In this account, it is the medicine men who are taught to form birds to carry out missions.¹⁸

The medicine men first form a sparrow out of clay. The mission of the sparrow

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given by the chief is to fly into the fourth world created by Tawa and determine who lives there. However, the sparrows wings are too weak. Next the medicine men send a dove followed by a hawk. Both enter the fourth world but see no one. Finally, the Catbird finds Masauwau, the Spirit of Death in the fourth world. Masauwau tells the people they can enter the fourth world to escape evil.¹⁹

The Seminoles have men emerging from a cave after an earthquake. They are propelled forward into the new world like a child from the birth canal. There is harmony among the people until they choose a leader, who falls in love with the movements of the sky. The consequence of the leader's love is an imbalance in worship that slowly leads his people in the direction of pain and misery.²⁰

Distributed Powers

In surveying the origin accounts of the Amerindians, we find that the powers are distributed among all the species, not centralized in a few or one. Human beings are held up as being particularly gifted, but still have a lot to learn from nature. In order to obtain the gifts of other creatures, the human being either must receive the gift from the animal or build a relationship with the animal. Other creatures are seen as part of a community, just as human beings are, and therefore those communities deserve the same type of respect.²¹

An important aspect of the theme of the distributed power, in other words is that various entities of the natural universe, among which the powers of the universe have been distributed, have the prerogative to demand care and respectful treatment from the humans if they are to reciprocate with service to humans.²²

Animals in stories can take on the role of transformers, tricksters, or cultural heroes.²³ Often they appear in stories not unlike Aesop's fables and should not be confused with a religious belief.

With these stories in mind, human beings learn from non-human creatures how to live. In some of the stories, the intermarriage with non-human beings appears to demonstrate one's interdependence upon another. Other cases tell of transformations during which the animal becomes human and lives among the tribe or the human being becomes an animal.²⁴ This concept will be revisited as we consider an Amerindian worldview and the bridges and barriers to sharing the Gospel.

In communicating the Gospel, we must exercise caution not too quickly to identify the one true God with a character from Amerindian folklore or beliefs. A primary example of mistakenly drawing such a connection can be found in the efforts to bring faith to the Tlingit.²⁵ In 1904, a Tlingit storyteller named Katishon, declared that Raven was one and the same with the Christian God and Jesus Christ. "Listen to the stories. Christ was born here. Christ was what we called Raven and

Raven was God, because the stories tell us that God is a Holy Trinity.”²⁶

Though Katishon had the best of intentions, in comparing the Triune God of the Bible and Raven, few similarities can be found; in fact, the divergences are noteworthy. Raven creates very little. He is a transformer in some sense that redistributes things that are already in existence, things that are being hoarded: the sun, the moon, the stars, and salmon. Raven is a trickster often motivated by greed, ego, and hunger. He has sexual exploits. Though his redistributions of these objects benefit man, the effects always provide some benefit to Raven himself as well. Raven is seen by some as a demonic character, as encounters with him are rarely good for man. He tends to be an example of man’s worst traits and an example of how not to behave.²⁷

Clearly, Raven is not the loving gracious Creator God who gives all things to rescue His wayward children from sin, death, and Satan, even paying the price for our freedom with the life of His own dear only-begotten Son.

There may be times when it will be appropriate to make a direct connection without being syncretistic. We may have an example of this in the meeting between Abraham and Melchizedek (Gn 14:18–20). The biblical account does not tell us how Melchizedek came to know the one true God. We only know of Abraham’s specific revelations and yet Christ is a high priest in the order of Melchizedek (Heb 7:1–17) who is not of the seed of Abraham nor of the Levitical priesthood.

The Amerindian worldview is that the Amerindian was not created to “Lord” over creation, but to work and live in harmony with the rest of creation. According to this view, the connection between man and other creatures and the earth is a sacred relationship. This relationship demands respect from man of the created world around him. This worldview may appear to be in conflict with God’s decree to have “dominion” over the earth. How that “dominion” is perceived and explained may become the crux of the matter on whether it becomes a bridge or a barrier.

In the Amerindian worldview, man’s entitlement to his fellow creatures is not unlimited.²⁸ There is an “appropriateness” to one’s behavior in interacting with our fellow creatures. This concept of what is appropriate is more than just not harming nature because we are part of it.²⁹ There is a moral obligation that acts as the entrance to religious ideas.³⁰ Those religious ideas point us to God as He has revealed Himself in nature that all men should know Him.

There are no biblical doctrines that would directly challenge the core values of the Amerindian worldview. As with people of all cultures, Scripture challenges us to adopt a worldview founded and formed from Scripture itself. The general manifestation of God in nature and knowledge of Him can be derived from nature and will dovetail nicely with many of the traditions of the Amerindians.

Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions assert that there is a natural knowledge of God. In the book of Acts, Paul declares, “Nevertheless He did not leave Himself

without witness, in that He did good, gave us rain from heaven and fruitful seasons, filling our hearts with food and gladness” (Acts 14:17). In another instance, the crew of the ship that Jonah attempts to take to Nineveh do not know his God. Yet God reveals Himself to them in the storm and shows them that Jonah’s disobedience is the reason for the storm (Jon 1:5–10).

The Formula of Concord also attests, in the second article on Free will, of man’s having a basic knowledge of God; “man’s reason or natural intellect still has a dim spark of knowledge that there is a God, as well as the teaching of the law (Rom. 1:19–21, 28, 32).”³¹ This is a remnant of the image of God that was almost completely lost when man fell into sin.

Luther states “the forms of worship and the religion that have been and remained among all nations are abundant evidence that at some time all men had a general knowledge of God.”³² Since the Fall into sin, mankind has lost the specific knowledge of who God is and whether or not God is willing to help.

Christ as Creator

The importance of establishing Jesus as co-Creator with the Father and Holy Spirit should not be underestimated. If Christ is to be seen as the God of the Amerindian peoples, He must be seen as part of their story of who they are. As we see in the words of Alphonso Ortiz: “A Tewa is interested in our own story of our own origin for it holds all that we need to know about our people and how we should live as a human.”³³

How does one identify Jesus as Creator God? In the Gospel of John, the Apostle writes, “All things were made through Him, and without Him was nothing made that was made” (Jn 1:3).

The Gospels record many instances when Christ commands nature. One familiar instance is the account of Jesus’ calming of the wind and the waves on the Sea of Galilee (Mk 4:35–41). Others include the story of the fish who brings a coin for tax money (Mt 17:24–27). There are the fish that fill the nets of the disciples after they have fished all night and caught nothing (Jn 21:3–6). Jesus curses a fig tree, which then withers (Mk 11:12–13; 20–21). The star of Bethlehem is placed in the heavens to guide Wise Men to the place where the infant Jesus is to be found (Mt 2:1–2). An earthquake occurs at Jesus’ death (Mt 27:51). These are only several examples of Jesus’ command over nature.

Jesus also utilizes examples in nature to teach faith lessons about life in His kingdom. There are parables with seeds (Mt 13:1–18; 31–32), weeds and wheat (Mt 13:24–29), the lilies of the field (Mt 6:28–29), and the sheep and goats (Mt 25:31–46). Parallels to the flood accounts are seen in the Mark 1 account of Christ’s baptism.

Ultimate Allegiance

The ultimate allegiance of the Amerindian is based upon his/her relationship to the earth. There are conflicting aspects of this relationship that become manifest as the worldview impacts beliefs, values, feeling behaviors, and artifacts. Each individual's identity is integrated with a corporate identity that sees all of life as intertwined with the community.

In this worldview, the relationship between mother earth and creator becomes very complex. Individuals in the twenty-first century assume a right to use modern conveniences, such as the automobile. In recent years, however, we have effectively taught people that to drive a car is to pollute the air. Similarly, when an Amerindian drives a car that consumes fossil fuels, his behavior acts contrary to his ultimate allegiance.³⁴

With the Amerindian's ultimate allegiance being to the earth, there is a relationship that views the earth as semi-divine,³⁵ and at other times as a victim to be saved,³⁶ and sometimes as a disowned family member.

In the Amerindian worldview,³⁷ the earth may also be seen in a motherly role,³⁷ and so the Amerindian sees the current imbalance of nature as one from which they need to rescue the earth if the earth is to heal herself.³⁸ Many of them believe that the imbalance that exists in the world today is due to the lack of power rituals being performed.³⁹

One of the more prominent power rituals is the sun dance practiced by nineteen tribes.⁴⁰ The ceremony includes fasting, dancing, prayer, singing, and, for some tribes, self-torture. The ritual is performed as a thank offering to the creator for his blessings, for protection of the tribe and healing of the sick.⁴¹ This power ritual embodies a belief that focuses on day-to-day life, a present and active god in the lives of the tribe and in creation. It is the one true God creator and still intimately active personal God that we must make known to the tribes who seek to worship the creator in a way that is pleasing to Him.

The Lord Jesus Christ will not take his place fully at the center of the native worldview until he is perceived as the only free source of power, able to save completely, not just some time in the future but now—meaningful, powerful, and effective for the living of life moment to moment and not merely saved from sin to escape hell after this life.⁴²

Christianity's greatest challenge may be the perception of differences between cultures. If the Amerindians believe their purpose is to help mankind restore nature's balance, it may be difficult to convince them that anything associated with another culture should be retained and accepted if balance is to be found.

Many missionaries have arrived with the perception that to allow native expressions of faith is to be syncretistic. They believed that "conversion" had to

manifest itself not only by confession of faith in Christ, but also by accepting the cultural practices of the missionaries' home country. If an Amerindian was to be Christian, his or her dress, hair style, music and dance had to conform to the missionaries' concept of "Christian" [i.e., often Western] cultural norms.⁴³

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Avoiding Syncretism

Confessional Lutheran Christians abhor syncretism. Our Lutheran Confessions and Church fathers all warn against syncretistic practices and beliefs. These warnings were necessary because syncretistic practices can be very alluring and so easily fallen into in the name of Gospel proclamation.

Walther defined syncretism as "every kind of mixing of religion."⁴⁴ It is necessary to distinguish syncretism as a mixing of religion, not a mixing of cultural expression. To allow Amerindian culture, dress, and music to form a uniquely tribal expression of the Amerindian's love for Christ is not syncretism.

Examples of syncretism, as opposed to contextualizing, include the following:

Alfonso Ortiz, a member of the Tewa tribe, notes that the Tewa name given to a child, which invokes nature, contains power. He relates how he was baptized and then brought by his mother and grandmother to be dedicated to the sun. He also speaks of a fellow member of his tribe who would pray to the sun and return some of the energy the sun had given to him. At funerals the priest would conduct the funeral. After the Christian rites were completed and the priest left, the Tewa people would conduct their own tribal rituals.⁴⁵ Other tribes would conduct Black Magic alongside Roman Catholic rituals. This is illustrated in one instance when a simple substitution was made claiming the Volcano god as the Holy Spirit and the sun god as the Father. The hallucinogen, Peyote, was used to bring one closer to god as animal sacrifices and fetishes were combined with Catholic sacraments.⁴⁶

It is also important to note that conversion is not the end goal of the mission effort. By focusing merely on conversion as the end, we neglect the necessity of fully contextualizing the message in a process of continuing discipleship.⁴⁷ Conversion without discipleship allows for that mixing of religions about which Walther warns. Christ becomes "a" power source rather than "the" source.

To force a tribe to divest itself of its cultural identity, worrying only about the initial conversion, while not attending to the discipleship that needs to follow causes syncretistic accommodations in religious practice. The most effective way of reducing such temptation is to allow Amerindian tribes to establish a worship style that is consistent with their cultural heritage along with being faithful to the Christian

Gospel.

This is not a new concern. In Acts the first church council grappled with the question of whether or not to require circumcision of the Greek converts. The church determined that circumcision would not be required for non-Jewish converts. Circumcision was a unique sign of Israel's calling as God's chosen people. It was deemed enough for the Greeks to follow minimal Jewish dietary laws and to abstain from sexual immorality (Acts 15:23–29). “For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit, and to us, to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things; that you abstain from things offered to idols, from blood, from things strangled, and from sexual immorality. If you keep yourselves from these you will do well” (Acts 15:28–29).

Franciscan Friars who entered the mission field of Southern Texas worked to create a self-sufficient community governed by the native population while they communicated the faith.⁴⁸ As churches were built they reflected the European style, but these churches were contextualized, by being painted in the startling bold colors chosen by the native inhabitants who built the churches and worshiped there. At the same time, however, the language of the church, which the Indians learned, was Latin. Using a foreign language allowed the faith to be compartmentalized. The message was never fully contextualized. The result was that sometimes the Amerindians would participate in dances that the Friars thought superstitious and demonic.⁴⁹ These dances became syncretistic in the sense that Christ became a power source rather than *the only* source from which blessings flowed.

Lutheran missionaries in New Sweden (modern day southern New Jersey, east-southern Pennsylvania and Delaware) would translate the catechism and the Bible into the native language of the tribes in their area, demonstrating an understanding of the need to communicate the Gospel to people in ways that they can understand

The Amerindian communities need to have the opportunity to find expression to God using their own instruments, musical style, and other culturally significant expressions. In this way Christ will not seem a distant and foreign God.⁵⁰

If we don't allow Amerindians to be who they are, we establish the foundation for a compartmentalized faith.⁵¹ Church members may become outcasts perceived as having rejected the native culture, forcing newborn Christians to make a decision on acting one way in church and another way outside of church and compartmentalizing their faith. Foreign styles of dress and behavior may create a defensive atmosphere in which the native culture feels threatened and finds the need to defend its traditions against the intrusion.⁵²

Parallels between the biblical and Amerindian creation accounts can be a means of connecting us with the common Truth that all people received from the ancestors whom we share, as well as with the Savior, who, by His perfect life, death, resurrection, and ascension has paid the price and fulfilled all righteousness for us

all, the One for whom we wait in expectation.

The Hopi tradition of burying their departed brings such a parallel into focus. When buried a Hopi body is to face to the east. "It is said that in some distant time a certain Bahana⁵³ will arrive among us from the direction of the rising sun, bringing friendship, harmony, and good fortune to our people. When the time comes he will appear. Let us watch for him. Let the dead be buried with their faces to the east so that we will meet him when he approaches."⁵⁴

Just as Paul shared the name of the unknown God with the Athenians (Acts:17:22–17), now it is time to share the name of that unknown Bahana with those who await the knowledge of the specific revelations of Christ that we have to share. On that occasion, Paul showed a knowledge, not only of the Athenian's history but also of their poetry (Acts 17:28). In like manner, we need to study the stories, traditions, and poetry of the Amerindian tribes so that through those studies we may bring to them, by the power of the Holy Spirit, Jesus Christ, our brother through the miracle of the incarnation.

Endnotes

¹ The Hopi Tribe resides on a reservation in eastern Arizona.

² Harold Courlander, *The Fourth World of the Hopis: The Epic Story of the Hopi Indians as Preserved in Their Legends and Traditions* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico, 1987), 17.

³ The Northern Cheyenne tribe resides on a reservation in southeastern Montana. The Southern Cheyenne nation is located in Oklahoma and with the Arapaho.

⁴ Richard Erdoes and Alfonso Ortiz, *American Indian Myths and Legends* (New York: Pantheon, 1984), 112.

⁵ The Seminole Tribe is located in the state of Florida.

⁶ Adonaset, "Hitchi-Mikasuki Creation Story as Told by Family Elder Jayabutu McClellan," *Indigenous People's Literature*, compiled by Glenn Welker, last updated June 8, 2004, accessed April 10, 2013, www.indigenousepeople.net/hitchiti.htm.

⁷ The Ojibwe tribe is located in Michigan, Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Canada.

⁸ Basil Johnston, *The Manitous: The Spiritual World of the Ojibway* (New York: HarperCollins, 1995), 87.

⁹ Adonaset, "Hitchi-Mikasuki Creation Story."

¹⁰ The Sioux tribe is located in the states of Montana, North and South Dakota, Nebraska, and Wyoming.

¹¹ "Lakota Sioux Creation Myth." *Webpanda.com*. N.p., n.d. accessed April 10, 2013. www.webpanda.com/There/uot_lakota_sioux_creation_myth.htm.

¹² The Scripture references in this article are from the New King James Version.

¹³ Johnston, *The Manitous*, xv.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 14.

¹⁵ Courlander, *The Fourth World of the Hopis*, 17.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 18.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 19.

¹⁸ Ibid., 21.

¹⁹ Ibid., 21–23.

²⁰ Adonaset, “Hitchi-Mikasuki Creation Story.”

²¹ Marsha Bol, *Stars Above, Earth Below: American Indians and Nature* (Niwot, CO: Roberts Rinehart for Carnegie Museum of Natural History, 1998), 16.

²² Ibid., 26.

²³ Ibid., 16, 18.

²⁴ Ibid., 22.

²⁵ A tribe of approximately 26,000 members located in Alaska.

²⁶ Bol, *Stars Above, Earth Below*, 32.

²⁷ Ibid., 40.

²⁸ Ibid., 26.

²⁹ Ibid., 10.

³⁰ Ibid., 5.

³¹ Theodore G. Tappert, “FC SD 2.9,” *The Book of Concord*, 17th ed. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988), 521.

³² Martin Luther, “Galatians 4:8–9,” *Luther’s Works, Vol. 26: Lectures on Galatians 1535: Chapters 1–4*, ed. J. J. Pelikan and Daniel E. Poellot (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1963), 399.

³³ Bol, *Stars Above, Earth Below*, 256.

³⁴ Mary Magoulick, “Native American Worldview Emerges,” *Native American Worldview Emerges* (Georgia College & State University, n.d.), 6–7, accessed April 12, 2013.

www.faculty.de.gcsu.edu/~mmagouli/worldview.htm.

³⁵ Ibid., 4.

³⁶ Ibid., 11.

³⁷ Johnston, *The Manitous*, xv.

³⁸ Magoulick, “Native American Worldview Emerges,” 11.

³⁹ Richard Twiss, *One Church, Many Tribes* (Ventura, CA: Regal, 2000), 102.

⁴⁰ The nineteen tribes known to practice this ritual are Lakota, Arapaho, Arikara, Asbinboine, Cheyenne, Crow, Gros, Ventre, Hidutsa, Sioux, Plains Cree, Plains Ojibway, Sarasi, Omaha, Ponca, Ute, Shoshone, Kiowa and Blackfoot tribes. (Amy, “Sun Dance Ceremony,” *Native American Encyclopedia*, Dec. 6, 2011, accessed March 8, 2014, <http://nativeamericanencyclopedia.com/sun-dance-ceremony/>.)

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Twiss, *One Church, Many Tribes*, 103.

⁴³ Luther writes in his commentary on Psalm 117 in “St. Paul himself affirms in Eph. 3:5 that it came as a revelation even to the apostles that the heathen could be God’s people without the law of Moses, yes, without and beyond the law. Thus we read that St. Peter himself did not know until it was revealed to him in a vision from heaven when he was to go to Cornelius, the heathen. . . . So difficult it is for our reason and nature to comprehend that the secular and the ecclesiastical estate are nothing when compared with the Christian Estate! Our reason wants to mix the two, making out of the Christian estate a worldly or ecclesiastical structure, framed and governed by laws and works. In the process it forgets and no longer knows what truly belongs to Christ and the Christian calling, as, unfortunately, we have seen demonstrated under the papacy” (Martin Luther, *Luther’s Works, Vol. 14*, ed. J.J. Pelikan and Daniel E. Poellot [St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1958], 23).

⁴⁴ Gerhard Bode, “Historical Background and Interpretation of Article VI.2 of the Constitution of The Lutheran—Church (sic) Missouri Synod.” Draft, 36. Lutheran Church Missouri Synod, January 2012, accessed January 2014, <http://www.lcms.org/Document.fdoc?src=lcm&id=1710>.

⁴⁵ Bol, *Stars Above, Earth Below*, 255–261.

⁴⁶ Twiss, *One Church, Many Tribes*, 127.

⁴⁷ Rick Brown, “Contextualization without Syncretism,” *International Journal of Frontier Missions* Fall 23.3 (2006): 128.

⁴⁸ *Gente De Razon*, directed by John Gralsowska (1997), DVD. This film, which won the George Sidney Independent Film Competition, is shown by the National Park Service at the San Antonio Missions National Historic Park in San Antonio, Texas.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Twiss, *One Church, Many Tribes*, 72.

⁵¹ Brown, “Contextualization without Syncretism,” 129.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Bahana means Brother whose name is not known (Courlander, *The Fourth World of the Hopis*, 31).

⁵⁴ Courlander, *The Fourth World of the Hopis*, 31.