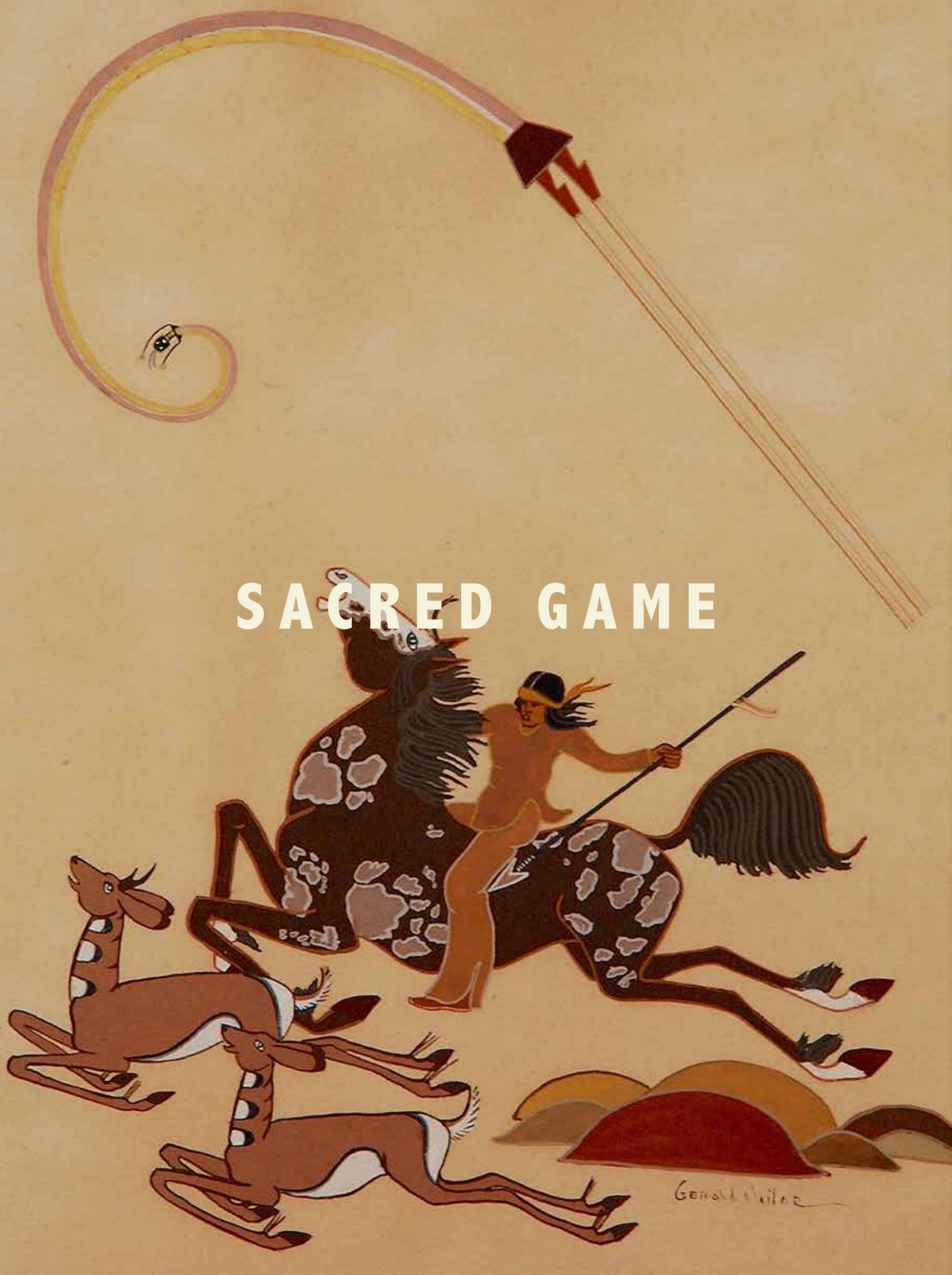


SACRED GAME



Look closely at your fingertips. In the whorls of soft skin you can see wind eddying. You can see corn and deer, individual futures, and the past of a people.

Rain God by José Disiderio Roybal (1922–1978), San Ildefonso Pueblo. The horned or plumed serpent symbolizes water, which, like deer, sustains life. Also like deer, it is associated with lightning. Courtesy of Adobe Gallery, Santa Fe, New Mexico.

Facing: A Navajo on horseback, painted by the 17-year-old Gerald Naylor at Mesa Verde in 1936. The Yei or Holy Being overhead is protecting or overseeing the rider. Courtesy of Adobe Gallery, Santa Fe, New Mexico.

As recounted in Diné Bahane', the Navajo Creation Story, at the beginning of time, in a place yet unnamed—long before there was a *bijh bito* "deer's spring" (the hamlet of Deer in present-day Navajo County) or a Deer Creek, or Buckskin Gulch—four Holy Beings convened in this fourth of four consecutive worlds. They brought with them two sacred buckskins and two ears of corn, one black and one white. Silent and carefully, they placed the two skins on top of each other, the head of one facing west, the other one east. In between they put the two corn ears and under each, an eagle-down feather. Then, from the east, White Wind slipped between the two skins as if between covers, stirring the protruding feathers ever so slightly. When the Holy Beings removed the upper buckskin, the corn ears had disappeared. In their stead lay a man and a woman, the ancestors of all Diné, sprung from deer, corn, and divine inspiration.

To the descendants of First Man and First Woman, and other dwellers in the Southwest, the deer remains a source of power, a sacrament as much as physical nourishment. It absorbs its life force directly from the earth, and from herbs, many of which have healing properties. Through the deer's flesh, women and men partake of these. Traditional Diné similarly regard soil as the earth's flesh. As the earth feeds the deer, so the deer—and by extension the earth—feeds the people. And people, in their turn, in death feed the earth. In this way the cycle continues.

As a reminder and for potent magic, First Man's medicine bundle thus contained soil from the sacred mountains; the bag was made from "unwounded buckskin," from a deer killed in an unconventional manner. In the old days, but long after places and time had been named, hunters sometimes ran down a deer

instead of shooting it, suffocating it with a bag full of blessed corn pollen when it lay down exhausted. This unbloody stilling prevented the animal's life force—*nítch'i* or Holy Wind—from escaping. In a way, the deer stayed alive, as all of us do, as long as *nítch'i* animates us. When it departs to lodge elsewhere like tumbleweed caught in a fence, we remain but empty husks. In a regular deer hunt, the ritualized butchering ended with splitting the windpipe—a symbolic severing of the animal's life force. This type of incision, as eloquent as a Zuni kiva mural of a deer with a “heartline” running from the animal's nostrils to its center, evokes the bond between spirit and respiration.

When the descendants of First Woman and First Man discovered agriculture, they fashioned hoes from deer shoulder blades for working the land. With the help of the four Holy Beings, they learned to make deer masks, to imitate the motions of deer. The gods taught people the mysteries of these delicate animals and in the process, grace. All this made them better providers, so they kept prospering. They learned to cure hides and

sew deerskin garments with deer sinew, no longer afraid of winter's steel bite. They strung and reinforced bows with sinew, giving their arrows the animal's speed. First Man in particular became very proficient and his wife therefore very round.

Before a deer hunt, traditional Diné hunters would take a sweat bath for purification and to implore Talking God and Black God, the two Holy Beings responsible for all animals. As told in the Navajo Creation Story, the gods had taught the Diné special songs and promised to grant them the means to support themselves and their families:

We will not hide the deer from you, for they are your livestock, your food. We will place them in front of you, but you must keep these songs sacred. From the time you leave the sweathouse until the time you come home, keep to the holy way.

Deer were tracked, shot from ambush, surrounded by fire, trapped in pitfalls, run down, or stalked while



wearing a costume made from the hide of an “unwounded deer.” (A hunter would even pull strings tied to the hide's ears, mimicking the nervously swiveling ones of a live animal.) There was also a way of killing a deer by bewitching it through singing over its tracks. It was improper to brag or speak disrespectfully, to joke, or even to have unclean thoughts, as the deer would sense these and avoid the hunters. Each night, before going to sleep, the men would put their bows and arrows down in front of them and sing: *In the east / In the midst of dawn / Among the beautiful flowers / The best of bucks are killed.*

While stalking, the hunters used animal voices to communicate. (Some linguists see this as the source of all human language.) They were careful not to contract “deer sickness” by inhaling the breath of a dying deer. They disposed of the animal's bones, antlers, and reproductive organs in a prescribed manner to please the Holy Beings and to ensure that more deer could be generated from the remains. The kidneys, they left—they were “Coyote's share.” Hunters sought to avoid urinating or defecating in a deer track or on deer hair, which they thought would cause serious

illness. As deer are mountain creatures in the desert Southwest (but migrate to sagebrush flats in the winter), the Diné believe that thunder and lightning protect them; deer antlers, which fork like lightning bolts, should never be taken home, because they will draw electrical storms.

During the hunt, the men ate the head, liver, and intestines by cooking them. Other meat they either broiled or roasted on hot coals.

Returning from a successful hunt, the men would make a final camp a few miles short of their hogans and in an improvised sweat lodge cleanse body and mind of shed blood. They also washed their clothes. In addition, they abstained from sexual activity for four days afterward. The spheres of life and death, of killing and procreating, human and other-than-human, male and female, wild and domestic were precarious and had to be marked continually and ceremoniously. The Navajo Creation Story relates how, after an argument with First Woman over which sex was really in charge, First Man and his male offspring for some time lived separate from the women. Lovelorn, a few men abused heated doe liver and slain does for intercourse, upon which Owl visited, warning them of the consequences. (The women likewise had strayed. Some used the bones of



Mule deer doe in southwestern pine forest. (Photo by Jane Richardson / Wikimedia Commons)

Facing: A Zuni vessel with “heartline deer.” Plate 86 from *Pueblo Indian Pottery*, with an introduction by Kenneth M. Chapman, published by C. Szwedzicki, Nice, France, in 1933.



Depicting Sacred Prey

Above: This 2,000-year-old charcoal pictograph from the western Grand Canyon portrays a deer. Bighorn sheep and deer were important food sources for prehistoric hunters and gatherers. Photo by Michael Engelhard.

Left, top and bottom: Two riders, possibly Navajo, pursuing a deer. Canyon de Chelly National Monument, Arizona. Petroglyphs like this one are created by incising, pecking, carving, or abrading a rock surface. Photo by Brian Minami. A hunting scene, possibly Ute, from Newspaper Rock, on a large patinated boulder near Canyonlands National Park, Utah. The rock bears images pecked by different people; the mounted archer may commemorate the deer drive in the La Sal Mountains. Photo by Randy Langstraat.

Facing: These 4,000-year-old split-twig figurines of deer and bighorn sheep were found in caves below the rim of Grand Canyon. They are thought to have represented some kind of imitative magic for the hunters who made them. NPS photo.

animals “as if they were their husbands” and gave birth to abominations.)

“Will the liver of a slain deer bear your children?” Owl mockingly asked the men.

The point, of course, is that black corn and white corn are in the buckskin together, each useless and lost without the other.

Agriculturalists valued deer as much as hunters and gatherers did. New Mexico’s Laguna Pueblos routinely covered a dead deer’s face before gutting it. A hunter then sprinkled cornmeal on its nose, to feed the deer’s spirit and show his appreciation. “Blinding” the deer in this way perhaps masked a fear of mistakes: if wildlife was killed or dressed improperly, the animal’s spirit would inform its fellow creatures, which would then shun or haunt the hunter. The idea of an animal’s self-sacrifice, of prey giving itself to the humble, and the practice of hunting taboos, all reach far back in time, to vast Beringian plains, to a mindset and landscape

in which transgressions could not be concealed. Any absence of game meant that taboos had been broken. Shamans or clan priests had to intercede on behalf of the guilty, to mollify and to restore harmony in the universe.

Subject to excessive poaching on one hand or to forest conservation on the other, the deer to this day brings forth darkness and light. It can serve as a moral compass, a bellwether for the land’s health. Subtract its four-legged predators—mountain lions, bears, wolves—and trees, streams, and people’s cornfields will suffer.

For guidance, the Diné could also turn to the stars. *Gah’ heet’e’ii*, or Rabbit Tracks, the tail of the constellation Scorpio, symbolized hunting. When it began tilting toward the east, the young deer no longer depended upon the does, and the hunting season began. This way, if a female was killed, her offspring could survive on its own. A big fall hunt yielded enough air-dried venison to feed families through the winter.





Deer Dancing

Deer Dancer by Joseph Tapia (1959–1991), Tesuque Pueblo. The dancer holds sticks that represent deer limbs, increasing his two legs to four. Ears and antler headgear complete the transformation. Courtesy of Adobe Gallery, Santa Fe, New Mexico. Right: Deer Dancers at Zuni Pueblo, New Mexico. Photo by Bruce Blankinship.



Cradling Infants

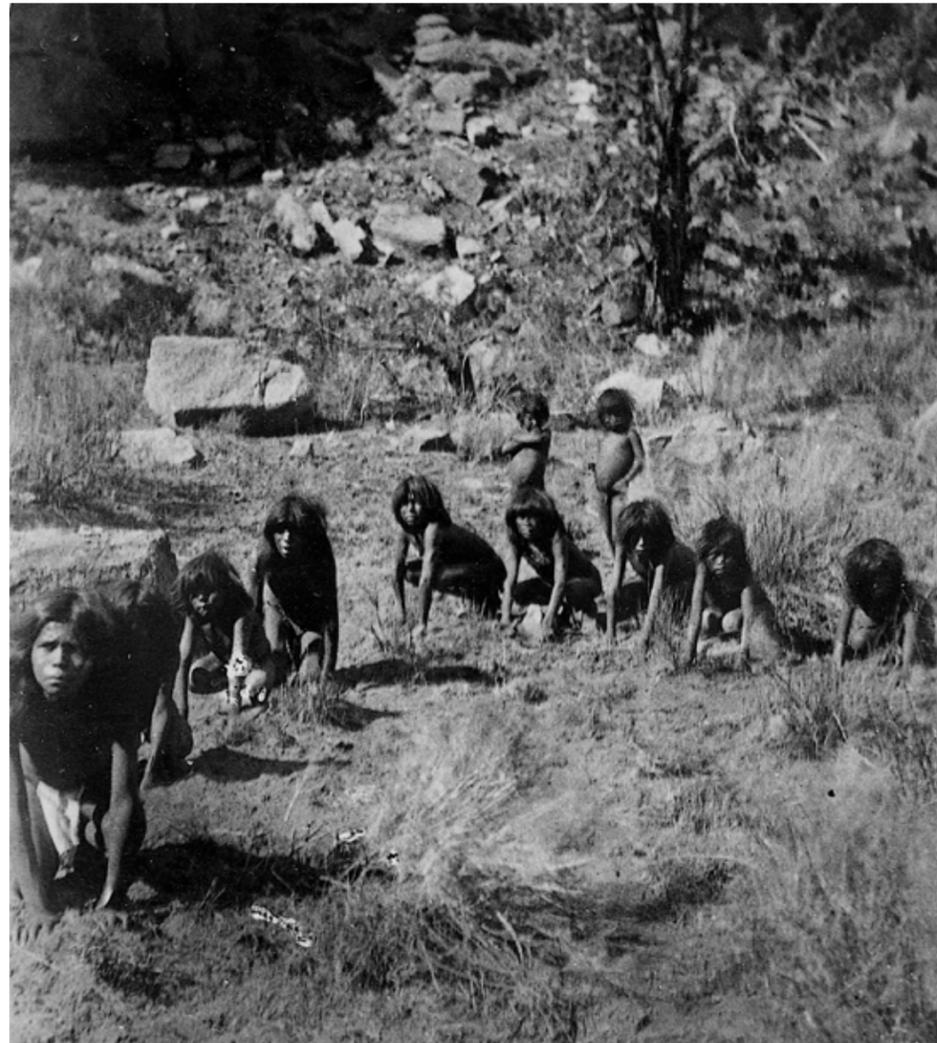
Utes traditionally made cradleboards from willow, but during the reservation period began to insert boards into buckskin sacks like the one in the photo at left, c. 1899. Photo by Rose and Hopkins, Denver, Colorado; Library of Congress. Above, a cradleboard from southern Colorado or Utah, late 1800s. Courtesy of Buffalo Bill Center of the West.

In her poem “The Deer-Star,” Mary Austin recast a Southern Paiute myth about a celestial body prominent low in the eastern sky around sunrise on summer mornings, the one we know as Sirius, the “dog star” in the constellation *Canis Major*. Long ago, a young Paiute man tried to run down a deer in the traditional manner. (This young runner seems to have been a lazybones—rising late, without having strung his bow or fletched his arrows he had no choice but to catch up on foot.) The pair was well matched. The whole village watched the youth, “in the bluish light of dawn” chasing the fleet-footed beast to “where the dawn mists lie uncurled; and over the purple barrows,” away over the world’s rim and into the sky, where they fused into a single hard light much to the surprise of even the rising sun. Ever since, the Paiute have believed that the best time to hunt deer is when this star is poised above the horizon.

Millennia before the Diné obtained sheep—through trade or cunning, from the newly arrived Spaniards—mule deer were a staple for Desert Archaic Indians, as caribou had been (and still are) for the Diné’s Athabaskan predecessors in central Canada and Alaska. Charcoal and hematite outlines drawn on alcove walls in the Grand Canyon and elsewhere on the Colorado Plateau speak of ancient preoccupations with the Cervidae. Split-willow figurines unearthed from the canyon’s limestone caves—some of them pierced with twig projectiles and dated from 2,000 to 4,000 years ago—represent deer, or possibly bighorn sheep. Perhaps, like Zuni prey animal fetishes, which were placed in other symbolic earth wombs (clay pots or leather pouches), they were meant to seed game numbers or, also like Zuni effigies, help in venatorial

Playing Wolf and Deer

Paiute children play a game called “wolf and deer” in this 1872 photo by John K. Hillers, taken in northern Arizona during the Powell Survey. Speed and agility were crucial where hunters pursued game on foot. U.S. Geological Survey.



pursuits. Generations later, proto-Puebloan farmers of the Colorado River’s corridor escaped summer heat to the North Rim, where they lapped up shade and cool breezes, gorging on protein: pine nuts, turkey, and venison. They, too, left behind deer images, petroglyphs pecked into black desert varnish.

Driven by famine and drought, before the Spanish arrived, these ancestral Puebloans dispersed to the Hopi Mesas and upper Rio Grande, carrying with them not only sun-dried jerky or pemmican but also the deep veneration of deer.

When deer meat was needed for a ritual at Isleta and none could be found, people implored the hunt chief, who then made a pollen circle, a symbolic enclosure, leaving a gap toward the east. Waving a feather in a

circular motion as he intoned, he finished by imitating the calls of mountain lion and wolf. He next told an attendant of the ceremony to open the door, and then started to sing. Soon, in came a big deer with sweeping antlers. While Wildcat Boy, as the Isleta hunt chief was called, kept on singing, the door was closed, and the deer stepped into the pollen circle. Then the chief closed the gap and gently tapped the deer on its forehead upon which it fell down stone dead.

The idea of an animal offering itself to the hunter is much older even than this Isleta custom, and in the Americas originated in the Arctic. Pueblo dwellers either remembered or else borrowed the concept from neighboring, more nomadic groups such as the Navajo, Comanche, or Apache. Conceivably, before

the acquisition of firearms or the invention of bow and arrow or even atlatl throwing boards and projectiles, residents of the Colorado Plateau cornered deer by driving them into box canyons or onto mesa tops where they dispatched them without much effort, similar to the technique of the Isleta ritual but also its reverse, as the deer were pushed rather than lured.

Though not common, mounted drives did take place. When, at the end of the 19th century, it became clear that southeastern Utah would be lost to white settlers, some Indians, possibly Utes, decided to hunt all the deer they could, for the hides, and drive the rest as far as possible toward their reservation. Old-timers estimated that in the summer of 1882 alone, they killed more than three thousand in the La Sal Mountains. A petroglyph of a hunter on horseback on Newspaper Rock near the Needles district of Canyonlands possibly chronicles this event.

In many ways comparable to Artemis or Diana—who is typically accompanied by a deer—a Pueblo deity or spirit is sometimes in charge of “releasing” the deer to worthy humans. In Hopi culture, this is the Long Horn kachina, Wupá’ala, one of numerous elemental spirits impersonated. The Shalako ceremony is held during the hunting season, and a deer hunt right before it. The Shalako kachinas themselves in part are deer impersonations, expressed in their running. (In Zuni, they are sacred messengers commuting between the deer’s mountain home and the pueblo, bringing rain.) Extra-tall and feather-coated, these Shalakos or “cloud maidens” bestow power upon deer hunters. At some point during the ceremony, a man strikes a Shalako exclaiming, “I have killed a deer,” and then puts it down with its head facing east—the direction of sunrise and regeneration. If one substitutes the Eucharist wafer for the flesh of this slain godhead, the sacramental nature of the Hopi ritual becomes obvious.

The incredibly elaborate Taos Deer Dance, tellingly performed around the winter solstice, also reenacts the hunt. In anthropologist Elsie Clews Parsons’s pre-World War II description, some of the dancers are impressively garbed: they wear real buck heads with many-branched racks and the hides cloaking their backs. They lean on two canes, which in effect make them four-legged. The performance even alludes to humans’ and mountain lions’ competition for deer; when a “lion” puts a “paw” on a “deer,” other dancers “kill” the deer with an arrow, snatch it from the lion, and carry it off. During one dance sequence, Deer Mothers enter, leading lines of other animals, apparently in charge, classic Keepers of Game, like the Long Horn kachina or Diné Holy Beings. In the evening, deer heads kept in a kiva are fed corn pollen and rubbed with feathers and cornmeal before each man takes one of the heads home, spreading the deer’s blessings.



Dolls carved of cottonwood to represent the katsinam (tihu-tui) were traditionally given to Pueblo children. Drawings from an 1894 anthropology book by Jesse Walter Fewkes (d. 1930).

In addition to the medicinal properties inherent in the deer's diet, venison is rich in iron and B vitamins, contains all ten essential amino acids, and compared to beef, is lower in saturated fat and cholesterol. It is no surprise that Native people associated deer with wholesomeness, fertility, and gestation. A Zuni story tells of a time when people were weak, because they only ate corn, rabbit, and seeds. The Zuni believe that a woman who eats of the wafer bread her husband brings back with him from a deer hunt will give birth to twins, because deer normally also do. Throughout the Pueblos, deer are considered bringers of water and rain. In Taos and elsewhere, a deer hair-stuffed football must be kicked about until it bursts like a big-bellied cloud, to fertilize crops. Mimicking the pitter-patter of a hard rain and hail, deer scapula rattles and deer bone rasps provide the soundtrack to various life-affirming rituals.

To the uninitiated, the belief that deer willingly deliver themselves—or that a benign deity delivers them to the butcher's blade—smacks of rationalization, the token offered to prey, of guilt or propitiation. To a degree, it perhaps is. But at least killing never is casual, let alone callous, in a cosmos ruled by reciprocity and interdependence, a world in which even clouds, mountains, and rocks are deemed animate. The act always involves risks for the hunter and his kin, risks that exceed the merely physical, such as getting hurt in pursuit. In the words of one Native elder, life's greatest danger lies in the fact that much food consists of souls, the souls of animals that in many ways resemble us. For the Diné, *níłch'i* animates all life forms and does so only temporarily, before it escapes and roots in another organism, human or other-than-human.

Yet another real danger is that of going feral, of reverting to wildness, which culture constantly seeks to tame and control. The risk of "regressing" was greater for men, who often roaming far hunted by dressing as deer and imitating deer behavior—they temporarily became deer, just as they did during ceremonies. There was a Tewa boy, born on a hunt, who is said to have later turned into a deer, and Little Dirt, a mythical Taoseño who married a doe. An ethnographic source from Jemez

mentions deer dancers who changed into deer and ran into the mountains and never returned. It can be disastrous for the hunter to identify too closely with his prey, and the danger of "becoming animal" seems greater in nomadic hunter-gatherer societies such as the pre-contact Diné compared to sedentary agriculturalists.

Perhaps this accounts for the multiple, complex treatment prescriptions encoded in Diné chantways—myth-based healing ceremonies—such as the Deerway. According to a Diné informant who worked with Karl Luckert, author of the seminal study *The Navajo Hunter Tradition*, in the underlying myth a large buck pronounces *ajilee* or "deer sickness" as the punishment for lack of respect for deer. "You will go crazy . . . You will have no mind of your own," Luckert's source said. The mind of the afflicted "wanders from one place to another," just like a deer. *Ajilee* has been described as a kind of general craziness that sometimes entails unrestrained sexual passions. It can also manifest as extreme shyness in people or in livestock that becomes hard to handle—in short, all things disruptive of home life.

It has been said that western industrial society as a whole suffers from *ajilee*—alienation and restlessness—with symptoms such as excessive mobility, high divorce rates, and the pandemic consumption of drugs. Nowadays, these also affect many younger Diné. Some would just call it the American or "modern" way of life.

Appropriately, the cure, at least for some Diné, comes from the Bringing Home ceremony during which the strayed wanderer is returned to the hogan, a symbolic center and replica of a balanced universe. Re-connecting the patient with tradition and immersing him or her in community both aid in the convalescence, as do medicines such as the Deer-plant or white umbellifer. It is a member of the carrot family that deer eat and that heals because "it carries the life-sustaining essence of the divine Deer-people of primordial times." It can make a child a fast runner and cures sick livestock.

The medical practitioner's paraphernalia by themselves can be links to deer. A Diné healer's *jish* is a deer hide pouch holding personal items of ceremonial significance, often his most-prized possession. Once, when an old *haatali* or "singer" pawned his *jish* at

Blanding's Blue Mountain Trading Post, he told the owner how as a young apprentice he had been told to ceremonially track down and kill a buck deer and fashion that *jish* from its hide. The trick was to follow the animal and never let it eat or rest, forcing it to keep running until it would surrender and offer itself. No small feat that, especially as the future *haatali* was physically handicapped. He then had skinned the deer, flawlessly, from the tip of its nose to its tail, leaving the hooves attached.

The strands that associate human wellbeing with deer run through our own culture's fabric also. The word "deer" stems from the Old English *deor*, an "animal" or "beast" as opposed to a human (still present in the German catch-all *Tier*); but sometimes it referred to wild animals only, excluding domesticated ones, such as dogs or livestock. Its Proto Indo-European root denotes a "creature that breathes" (as does "animal," from Latin *anima*—"soul" or "breath"), and pared down even more, "breath" or "cloud."

Old English, *wildeoren*, the "place of deer or wild animals," lingers as "wilderness" (German: *Wildnis*) and thereby the circle closes with "wildness"—the spark inside each of us that can trigger conflagrations or be harnessed for creative endeavors. Complementary, Gothic *gaman*, "participation, communion," from "people together," reverberates as "game"—not only "a contest played according to rules," but also "wild animals caught for sport."

Despite our society's ailments, some people remain keenly aware of the links between deer and wildness and wilderness, a certain kind of hunter, biologist, or poet most likely, who hungers for the wholeness that deer once implied.

In her essay "Deerskin," Utah writer and activist Terry Tempest Williams—a staunch non-hunter—describes the passion that flowed between her father and brothers when they spoke of deer. Williams interprets her relatives' excitement at the sight of fresh deer tracks in the snow in the context of the Diné deer hunting tradition, "a model for ecological thought expressed through mythological language." She recalls accompanying her father on a deer hunt at age sixteen, comparing his fastidious preparations to ritual. The

lines from the Deer Huntingway that Navajo elder Claus Chee Sonny recited for the ethnographer Karl Luckert can well serve as life philosophy and conservation manifesto for Natives and non-Natives alike:

*Walk lightly, walk slowly,
Look straight ahead
With the corners of your eyes open.
Stay alert, be swift.
Hunt wisely
In the manner of the deer.*

This elegant, golden creature grounds minds, bodies, and hearts in the land. As flavorful meat melts in the mouth, enhanced by the tang of juniper berries or sage smokiness, with synapses firing away, the subsistence hunter and the gourmet alike understand the entwining of senses and place. They know deer. They know venison as the true soul food of the American Southwest.

MICHAEL ENGELHARD is the author of the essay collection *American Wild* and of *Ice Bear, The Cultural History of an Arctic Icon*. Living in Fairbanks, Alaska, and working as a wilderness guide in the Arctic, he tries to maintain ties with the canyon country by writing about it and by visiting it at least once a year.

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