

# Tayo in *Ceremony*: The Gray Area for Preserving Native American Culture

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**Abstract**—This paper examines the themes of cultural preservation and integration in Leslie Marmon Silko's novel *Ceremony*, focusing on the character Tayo and his role in bridging the gap between Native American and modern American cultures. Historically, Native Americans have faced isolation, whether by choice or by force, leading to economic, social, and cultural challenges. Government policies such as the Dawes Act and efforts to assimilate Native Americans into modern American society through education and religious conversion have disrupted traditional ways of life and led to a legacy of mistrust and marginalization. *Ceremony* portrays a path forward, advocating for a balance between maintaining cultural integrity and embracing necessary changes for survival. The novel emphasizes the importance of cultural adaptation and integration, suggesting that Native Americans can thrive without losing their identities by engaging with the broader American society. Through Tayo's journey of healing and his interactions with the medicine man Betonie, Silko illustrates the potential for cultural hybridity to foster resilience and understanding. By presenting a nuanced vision of coexistence, *Ceremony* calls for mutual respect and collaboration between Native Americans and modern Americans. The novel encourages a reimagining of cultural identity that is inclusive and adaptable, ensuring that Native American traditions remain vibrant and relevant in a changing world. This paper argues that cultural survival depends not on isolation but on the ability to adapt and integrate, creating a future where multiple cultures can coexist and enrich each other.

**Index Terms**—the Pueblos, native Americans, modern Americans, Laguna Pueblo Reservation, The Pueblo of Laguna

## I. INTRODUCTION

For a long time, Native Americans either chose or were forced into isolation, separating them from the broader modern communities in the United States. Even though they shared the same lands with modern Americans and breathed the same air, Native Americans lived in reservations. In this paper, it can be argued that Leslie Marmon Silko, through the character Tayo in *Ceremony*, establishes a safe space for Native Americans to contribute to building the United States without losing their identity. Isolation is no longer a viable option for Native Americans; engaging with modern Americans and other cultures under the United States' umbrella is now the best choice. This paper will explore the historical and cultural contexts of this interaction, the economic and social pressures faced by Native American communities, and the role of Silko's *Ceremony* in portraying a path toward integration and mutual respect.

## II. HISTORICAL CONTEXT: ISOLATION AND ASSIMILATION POLICIES

Thomas J. Morgan, Commissioner of Indian Affairs from 1889 to 1893, articulated the government's stance on assimilation in his first annual report:

The Indians must conform to 'the white man's ways,' peaceably if they will, forcibly if they must. They must adjust themselves to their environment, and conform their mode of living substantially to our civilization. This civilization may not be the best possible, but it is the best the Indians can get. They cannot escape it, and must either conform to it or be crushed by it. (as cited in Anderson, 2008, p. 3)

Morgan's report reflects the era's prevalent belief in the superiority of modern American civilization and the inevitability of Native American assimilation. The government's assimilation policies aimed to eradicate Native American cultures by imposing Euro-American cultural norms. These policies were enforced through various means, including boarding schools where Native children were taught to abandon their languages, religions, and traditions. The underlying goal was to 'civilize' Native Americans by making them adopt the social, economic, and cultural practices of modern Americans.

The historical context of these assimilation efforts is critical to understanding the complexities of Native American identity in the modern era. The policy of forced assimilation was part of a broader colonial agenda that sought to erase indigenous cultures and replace them with the dominant cultural norms of the settlers. This approach not only undermined the rich cultural heritage of Native American tribes but also created a legacy of mistrust and trauma that continues to affect Native American communities today.

The Dawes Act of 1887 is a notable example of such policies. It aimed to assimilate Native Americans into mainstream American society by dividing communal tribal land into individual plots. This policy led to the loss of tribal land, as

surplus land was sold to non-Native settlers, resulting in significant land loss for Native Americans. The act disregarded the communal nature of Native American land ownership and instead imposed individual ownership, which was foreign to many tribes. This forced shift not only disrupted traditional lifestyles but also led to economic disempowerment, further marginalizing Native American communities.

Furthermore, the impact of these assimilation policies can be seen in the disruption of Native American social structures. The introduction of individual land ownership contrasted sharply with the communal values held by many Native tribes, where land was considered a shared resource integral to cultural and spiritual life. The shift to individual land ownership not only alienated Native Americans from their traditional ways of life but also created economic vulnerabilities, as many were unprepared for the demands of a cash economy. This dislocation was not merely economic but also deeply psychological, leading to a loss of cultural identity and a sense of belonging.

The Indian Reorganization Act of 1934 attempted to reverse some of the damages done by earlier policies, by promoting self-governance and restoring some land rights to Native tribes. However, the act was met with mixed responses from Native American communities. While some saw it as a step towards reclaiming their autonomy, others viewed it as another attempt by the federal government to control their affairs. This ambivalence highlights the complex relationship between Native Americans and the U.S. government—a relationship characterized by a struggle for autonomy and self-determination in the face of continuous external pressures.

Resisting mainstream culture could cost Native Americans more than they have already lost. Thus, there is little point in resisting other cultures and remaining isolated. The need for change became evident, especially in the new millennium, where Native Americans might struggle to meet economic and social requirements. The challenge lies in finding a balance between maintaining cultural integrity and embracing necessary changes for survival and progress.

### III. THE ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL CHALLENGES OF ISOLATION

The Pueblos, the tribe to which Tayo belongs, exemplify the challenges faced by isolated Native American communities. The Pueblos mainly relied on agriculture and livestock to survive, which proved insufficient in the twentieth century, particularly as their population grew. According to Dozier (1970), "By the beginning of the twentieth century, the Pueblos were no longer able to meet their own food needs without resort to a market and a cash nexus" (p. 9). To preserve their culture, the Pueblos needed to open up to modern Americans and find common ground.

Economic opportunities emerged with the expansion of railroads and roads, offering new avenues for employment and trade. Dozier (1970) notes, "Some wage work opportunities came for Pueblo Indians as railroads and roads were opened up toward the end of the nineteenth century and during the first and second decades of the twentieth" (p. 9). Despite these opportunities, the Pueblos were hesitant to embrace modern American culture: "The Pueblos cherish their isolation; hence they do not support efforts to establish businesses which will bring incomes. They value the traditional rewards of community life and object to moving too rapidly into the frantic life of modern America" (Dozier, 1970, p. 10).

This reluctance to engage with economic changes kept the Pueblos isolated and contributed to their economic hardships. The idea of living in reservations further isolated them. Perry (2008) notes, "The economics of marginalization are facilitated by the legacy of the reservation system. For one-third of Native Americans living on the reservations, the geographical boundaries have contributed to their economic isolation" (p. 66).

The economic isolation experienced by many Native American communities is not merely a result of geographic isolation but also stems from systemic barriers to economic participation. These barriers include limited access to education, high unemployment rates, and lack of infrastructure. The legacy of these economic challenges continues to impact Native American communities today, resulting in poverty and limited economic mobility. Addressing these issues requires a multifaceted approach that includes economic development initiatives, improved access to education, and support for cultural preservation.

Moreover, the economic hardships faced by Native American communities have broader social implications. High poverty rates often correlate with other social issues such as health disparities, substance abuse, and family instability. These issues are compounded by the historical trauma resulting from colonization and forced assimilation, which has led to a cycle of poverty and social problems that is difficult to break. The isolation of reservations, while offering some protection for cultural practices, also limits access to opportunities that could improve the quality of life for Native Americans. Thus, economic integration with modern American society, while maintaining cultural distinctiveness, is crucial for the future of Native American communities.

Social isolation also leads to psychological impacts. The sense of being cut off from the broader society can lead to feelings of alienation and disenfranchisement among Native Americans. This alienation is further exacerbated by experiences of discrimination and racism, which can negatively affect mental health and well-being. The struggle to maintain cultural identity in a predominantly modern American society can create internal conflicts, especially among younger generations who may feel caught between two worlds. These psychological challenges underscore the need for supportive environments that respect and validate Native American cultural identities while promoting engagement with the broader society.

### IV. CULTURAL AND RELIGIOUS PRESSURES

The Pueblos are cautious about engaging with modern Americans or the U.S. government, even when the government attempts to help improve their living conditions. For example, government efforts to educate Pueblo children met with resistance, although the Pueblos later supported such programs: "The Pueblos initially resisted the educational programs of the government; however, in subsequent years they enthusiastically supported such efforts" (Dozier, 1970, p. 14). Some Pueblos began to see that isolation was not a viable long-term strategy, feeling torn between a modern community and their traditional one.

Government efforts to assimilate Native Americans into modern American life influenced this shift. Dozier (1970) asserts that the Bureau of Indian Affairs significantly influenced the Pueblos, aiming to transform Indian communities into variants of the dominant American culture as quickly as possible, believing the solution lay in "Americanization" (p. 15). This pressure to conform included religious assimilation, where traditional religious practices were suppressed, and Christian practices were introduced.

Attempts to convert the Pueblos to Christianity represent another form of oppression faced by Native Americans. While some might view these efforts as attempts to civilize the Pueblos, they contradict the United States' commitment to religious freedom. Dozier (1970) describes the church's role beyond maintaining missions and churches, including efforts to convert the Pueblos: "This task consisted primarily of the attempt to eradicate Pueblo indigenous religious beliefs and practices and the endeavor to substitute Catholic counterparts" (p. 50).

These efforts increased the Pueblos' isolation, making them more cautious about engaging with American culture. Bridging the gap between Pueblo and American culture seemed increasingly difficult, as suppression of native beliefs fueled resentment. "Resentment swelled among the Pueblos. They did not give up their beliefs or even their sacred rites, but became more careful in concealment and secrecy. Their own religious beliefs and organizations, fitted, as it were, to their own folk culture, continued to have more meaning to them". (Dozier, 1970, p. 50)

The imposition of religious conformity not only disrupted spiritual practices but also undermined the social fabric of Native American communities. Religious ceremonies and practices are integral to the cultural identity of many Native tribes, and the forced adoption of Christianity often led to a loss of cultural continuity and community cohesion. This cultural disruption had long-lasting effects, leading to intergenerational trauma and a struggle to reclaim and preserve traditional spiritual practices.

Cultural pressures also manifest in the everyday interactions between Native Americans and modern Americans. Stereotypes and misconceptions about Native American cultures persist, often leading to discrimination and marginalization. The lack of understanding and respect for Native American traditions by modern Americans can create tensions and conflict, furthering the divide between these communities. Efforts to bridge this cultural gap require not only education and awareness but also a willingness to engage in meaningful dialogue and collaboration.

The cultural dissonance experienced by Native Americans extends to language as well. Many Native languages have faced decline due to the dominance of English and the historical suppression of indigenous languages in schools. Language is a key component of cultural identity, and the loss of language can lead to a loss of cultural knowledge and traditions. Revitalization efforts, such as language immersion programs, are crucial for preserving Native languages and, by extension, the cultural heritage they carry. These efforts not only help maintain cultural identity but also empower Native communities by reconnecting them with their linguistic roots.

#### V. SILKO'S *CEREMONY*: BRIDGING CULTURAL GAPS

These dynamics explain why Silko wrote *Ceremony*, a work seen as a neutral effort to bridge cultural gaps. Leslie Marmon Silko, who was born and raised on a Laguna Pueblo reservation, was deeply familiar with the life of Native Americans in reservations. *Ceremony* is set on the same Laguna Pueblo reservation where Silko grew up. The term "Pueblo Indians" refers to groups of Native Americans, including Laguna, from the Pueblo crescent running from central New Mexico to northeastern Arizona: "The pueblo of Laguna lies in the San Jose Valley, some fifteen miles northeast of Acoma" (Eggan, 1950, p. 253). Thus, much of Silko's work draws on her personal experience as a Native American.

In *Ceremony*, Tayo symbolizes the intersection between Native American and modern American cultures, emphasizing the necessity of fostering closer relationships. He embodies the common ground between these cultures. James Ruppert, in his 1995 *Mediation in Contemporary Native American Fiction*, views *Ceremony* as a novel of "mediation," suggesting it provides a space for both modern American and Native American readers to understand and reconcile cultural differences.

Silko's portrayal of Tayo's suffering and challenges—as a Native American soldier dealing with post-war trauma—illustrates that the barriers between Native Americans and modern Americans should dissolve. Cooperation in building and protecting their country, in both peace and war, can occur without sacrificing their identities. In *Ceremony*, Silko promotes a tone of unity, envisioning a world where Native Americans and modern Americans coexist and support each other.

The only fully realized language in *Ceremony* is that of Betonie. He provides a unified and unifying vision of the world which, far from being mediational, comes to dominate both Tayo's consciousness and the novel itself. The novel becomes, in other words, Silko's very conscious attempt to create a new mythology capable of subsuming older ones, both Laguna and mainstream Western" (Cutchins, 1999, p. 78).

Silko's work challenges the traditional dichotomies of us versus them, Native versus modern. Instead, she offers a vision of a shared space where cultural exchange can occur without domination. This approach not only humanizes the Native American experience but also provides a roadmap for healing the wounds caused by centuries of oppression and misunderstanding. Through the character of Tayo, Silko illustrates that embracing one's cultural heritage while being open to other influences can lead to a more inclusive and harmonious society.

*Ceremony* serves as a narrative bridge, connecting the past with the present and offering a vision for the future. It acknowledges the pain and trauma of historical injustices while also highlighting the resilience and adaptability of Native American cultures. Silko's narrative suggests that true healing and reconciliation can only occur when there is mutual respect and understanding between cultures. By presenting a story where characters navigate the complexities of cultural identity, *Ceremony* encourages readers to reflect on their own beliefs and attitudes towards cultural diversity.

In addition to bridging cultural gaps, *Ceremony* also reclaims the power of Native American storytelling. The novel's structure, which incorporates traditional Pueblo storytelling elements, serves as a reminder of the richness and depth of Native American oral traditions. Through storytelling, Silko reaffirms the importance of preserving cultural narratives and passing them down to future generations. These stories not only preserve history but also provide a framework for understanding the world and one's place in it. By weaving traditional storytelling with contemporary issues, Silko creates a narrative that is both timeless and relevant.

## VI. THE ROLE OF TAYO AND BETONIE: SYMBOLS OF CULTURAL INTEGRATION

In *Ceremony*, Native Americans are drawn to the prospects of modern American towns and the economic opportunities they offer, yet they still resist some cultural aspects. They are hesitant to fully engage with modern American culture, displaying a reluctance to entirely embrace it. What sets Tayo apart is his ability to navigate both his Native heritage and modern American culture, demonstrating the necessity of interaction with both.

As a multicultural country, the United States provides an ideal environment for Tayo and the Laguna people to interact with various cultures while retaining their identity. "Tayo is everything the ideal Indian is not: he represents the double other, who is discriminated against by both modern Americans and Natives. Still, he is the one to survive (the war as well as the crisis thereafter) because he can cope with many worlds" (Ganser, 2008, p. 154).

Tayo's recovery from war trauma is successful because Betonie integrates Native American healing traditions with those of modern American culture. "Betonie's healing rituals have also been influenced by modern American culture. They incorporate innovation and change as a result of the healer's knowledge of the complex world he observes from his hillside" (Cutchins, 1999, p. 83). Tayo's healing reflects a broader approach: Native Americans need to integrate aspects of modern American culture to thrive.

Ku'oosh, who sticks strictly to traditional ways, fails to help Tayo, whereas Betonie, who merges both cultural traditions, succeeds: "Ku'oosh and Betonie are both medicine men, but while Ku'oosh's power is limited to the traditions of the Laguna Pueblo and therefore offers only temporary relief, the half-Mexican Navajo Betonie transcends the old ceremonies of his tribe by integrating aspects of the colonizers' culture" (Ganser, 2008, p. 150). Silko uses these two medicine men to symbolize different perspectives on modern American culture, advocating for an integrated approach to preserve Native American culture.

"In *Ceremony*, Silko uses various characters of mixed ancestry and emphasizes their outstanding qualities as agents of cultural, social, and historical transition" (Ganser, 2008, p. 153). Tayo and Betonie, as individuals of mixed heritage, act as bridges between cultures, crafting a new identity that includes all surrounding cultures: "Tayo and Betonie, due to their being crossbloods, are placed at a certain distance from their respective communities, a fact that enables them to develop a more inclusive worldview which counteracts dichotomization—just as they themselves cannot be placed into dichotomous categories of ethnicity and of cultural belonging" (Ganser, 2008, p. 153).

The significance of Betonie's character lies in his ability to embrace change while remaining rooted in traditional practices. He recognizes that the world is constantly evolving, and Native American traditions must adapt to remain relevant. Betonie's approach to healing is symbolic of a larger cultural healing that Silko advocates for—one that involves a blending of traditions to create a more resilient and dynamic identity.

This blending of traditions is not without its challenges. It requires a willingness to question and reinterpret cultural norms, which can be uncomfortable for both Native Americans and modern Americans. However, it is through this process of questioning and adaptation that new cultural forms can emerge, allowing for a richer and more diverse society. Silko's vision is one where cultural exchange is seen not as a threat but as an opportunity for growth and understanding.

Tayo's journey also symbolizes the broader journey of Native American communities seeking to reclaim and redefine their identities in a modern context. His ability to heal and find balance through the integration of different cultural practices mirrors the efforts of many Native American communities to navigate the pressures of modernity while preserving their cultural heritage. This journey of integration and healing is a collective one, requiring the participation and understanding of both Native Americans and modern Americans. It calls for a recognition of the value of cultural diversity and the need for spaces where different cultural perspectives can coexist and enrich each other.

## VII. THE NEED FOR ADAPTATION AND CHANGE

Betonie understands the need to change and adapt to modern American culture, recognizing that traditional methods, while preserving identity, are no longer sufficient:

If Ku'oosh represents the idea that Pueblo culture should be preserved, then Betonie embodies the attempt, not to preserve, but to revitalize Native American culture. Betonie explains why Ku'oosh had been unable to help Tayo. He notes that 'at one time, the ceremonies as they had been performed were enough. After the modern Americans came, though, it became necessary to create new ceremonies.' Changing ceremonies or creating new ones was deeply troubling to traditionalists like Ku'oosh. (Cutchins, 1999, p. 85)

Betonie argues that unchanging ceremonies become obsolete, serving only their time. His new adaptation for the ceremony meets the evolving needs of all Native Americans, suggesting that changes in all aspects of life are essential to fit the modern world. By embracing change, Native Americans can protect their cultural heritage while navigating the complexities of contemporary society. The process of cultural adaptation does not mean the loss of identity but rather the evolution of traditions to remain relevant and meaningful.

Silko's message is clear: cultural survival does not depend on rigid adherence to the past but on the ability to adapt and integrate new elements while maintaining a sense of self. This concept is crucial for Native Americans who face the challenges of modern life, where globalization and cultural exchange are inevitable. The ability to adapt ensures that Native American cultures do not just survive but thrive, contributing to the broader tapestry of American society.

Adapting to modern realities does not mean abandoning one's cultural roots. Instead, it involves reinterpreting and reimagining cultural practices to fit the contemporary context. This adaptation can take many forms, from incorporating modern elements into traditional ceremonies to finding new ways to express cultural identity through art, music, and storytelling. By embracing change, Native Americans can ensure that their cultures remain vibrant and relevant, even as the world around them evolves.

Moreover, adaptation involves a proactive approach to preserving cultural heritage. This includes documenting and teaching cultural practices, languages, and stories to younger generations. Cultural preservation is an active process that requires engagement and commitment from community members. By taking ownership of their cultural narratives, Native Americans can ensure that their heritage is not only preserved but also celebrated and shared with the wider world.

Adaptation also means engaging with contemporary issues that affect Native American communities, such as environmental conservation, social justice, and political advocacy. By bringing traditional knowledge and perspectives to these modern challenges, Native Americans can contribute valuable insights and solutions that benefit not only their communities but also the broader society. This engagement fosters a sense of agency and empowerment, enabling Native Americans to shape their futures while honoring their pasts.

#### VIII. CONCLUSION: A VISION FOR COEXISTENCE AND CULTURAL PRESERVATION

*Ceremony* lays the groundwork for a new understanding between Native Americans and modern Americans, fostering a gray area where both can coexist while allowing Native culture to endure. "Ruppert comes closer to *Ceremony's* complex vision when he writes that the novel alters both Native and Western epistemologies toward the creation of a 'new reality'" (Arnold, 1999, p. 53). This vision aligns with the values of the United States, a nation that upholds minority rights and cultural freedoms.

As Morgan stated, the United States is the best option available to Native Americans, even if it is not ideal (as cited in Anderson, 2008, p. 3). Interaction with modern Americans is unavoidable, and a new understanding of this relationship is critical, particularly in the twentieth century.

Silko recognizes that Native Americans can no longer resist or be oppressed by other cultures. She understands their suffering and the necessity for change. Through Tayo in *Ceremony*, Silko illustrates that isolation is no longer beneficial and that embracing relations with modern Americans can help preserve Native American culture.

Silko rejects the simplistic ideal that a return to traditional beliefs is the only way Native American characters can survive. Denying both traditionalism and assimilationism, she proposes that the only way Native American characters, particularly those of mixed racial and cultural heritage, will be able to survive in the modern world is to adopt a nativistic paradigm and learn to adapt and alter ancient traditions to fit modern situations. This is the only realistic way, Silko might argue, and that the Nations may become genuine Indian. (Cutchins, 1999, p. 86)

In conclusion, *Ceremony* offers a way to preserve Native American culture in a world of change. Tayo exemplifies the merging of Native American and modern American cultures, leveraging his mixed heritage to navigate both worlds. This approach allows Native Americans to seize opportunities while maintaining their cultural identity. By fostering a space where multiple cultures can coexist, *Ceremony* provides a blueprint for a future in which Native Americans can thrive without sacrificing their traditions.

Silko's work calls for a reimagining of identity, one that is inclusive and adaptable. This vision not only honors the past but also looks forward to a future where Native American cultures contribute to the diversity and richness of modern American society. By embracing change and finding strength in cultural hybridity, Native Americans can create a future that respects their heritage while engaging fully with the modern world.

The novel serves as a reminder that cultural survival is a dynamic process, one that requires continuous negotiation and adaptation. By portraying characters who navigate the complexities of cultural identity with resilience and creativity,

Silko offers a hopeful vision for the future. In this vision, Native American cultures are not relics of the past but living, evolving traditions that contribute to the ongoing story of humanity.

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