Wisdom Sits in Places: Landscape and Language Among the Western Apache Study Guide

Wisdom Sits in Places: Landscape and Language Among the Western Apache by Keith H. Basso

Contents

Plot Summary

Wisdom Sits in Places analyzes the relationship between geographical location, cultural symbolism and place-names in the language and linguistic practices of the Western Apache tribe located in Cibecue, Arizona. The author, Keith Basso, is an anthropologist and ethnographer who argues that the field of anthropology does not study the relationship place, language and culture.

Basso first visited Cibecue in 1959 when he was a student. After writing about the Western Apache in a scholarly setting, Basso became bored and so decided to visit the White Mountain Apache Tribe directly in order to make maps the tied Apache place-names to their geographical referents and to records the stories and symbols located with those stories. In the process, Basso secured a grant from the NSF and spent eighteen months over five years (between 1979 and 1983) with the Western Apache, making maps and taking notes.

Wisdom Sits in Places is a short book, composed of four largely independent essays. All focus on the main topic of the book, but they emphasize different points. Each essay also uses a particular member of the Apache Tribe in order to connect a story with the thesis of the essay, but the person differs from chapter to chapter.

Chapter one, "Quoting the Ancestors", emphasizes that places are not merely geographical but social. The historical imagination of a people creates "place" and modifies it over time. Basso illustrates his point by appealing to his interactions with Charles Henry, a sixty-year-old herbalist who created place-words. Most of chapter one has Basso working with Charles and his cousin Morley, traveling around Cibecue, with Charles and Morley giving Basso the information he needs about the places they visit. It also introduces the idea of a "place-name": the proper name for a place that marks out some of its geographical or symbolic features.

Chapter two, "Stalking with Stories", focuses on how place-names are used in Western Apache society. Because place-names associate places with different types of symbols they can be used evocatively to tell stories and make points. It reviews the different types of narratives in Western Apache culture and classifies them. These points are illustrated through interaction with Nick Thompson, an elderly Apache.

Chapter three, "Speaking with Names", shows how place-names are used in action to evoke lessons. The chapter focuses on a conversation among several Apache where Lola Machuse, a sixty-year-old female and others use place-names to explain to a younger woman, Louise, why her brother was foolish. The conversation shows that place-names are often used as a mild form of moral reprimand.

Chapter four, "Wisdom Sits in Places", explores the Western Apache conception of wisdom, a virtue acquires by learning about the land and the history and symbolism associated with it. This practice of learning helps to produce a "smooth, steady and resilient" mind. Wisdom "sits in places" because wisdom is acquired by means of

knowing place. In this chapter, Basso makes his points through his interactions with Dudley Patterson, Sam Endfield and Charles Cromwell, three older Apache men with whom he travels.

Preface

Preface Summary and Analysis

The preface opens by asking what the attachment is between persons and place. We all understand that it matters in the abstract though we also take our real attachments for granted. It is when we lose our place that we feel adrift. Sense of place involves culture and "local knowledge". Many anthropologists have been hesitant to focus on place, but this has started in recent years. Fifteen years ago, the author, Keith Basso, had already been involved with research in Western Apache villages for two decades. He first visited the town of Cibecue in 1959 and was captivated. After graduate school, he wrote a wide range of articles and books on various aspects of Apache culture-their ceremonial symbolism, verb stems, social interaction and so on.

Basso, however, eventually became bored with anthropology, and so Ronnie Lupe, the chair of the White Mountain Apache Tribe, suggests that he make maps in the Apache language of Apache places. A year later, Basso had a grant from the NSF to begin. He would first travel with Apache consultants to hundred of localities, then speak to local consultants about places and place-names and the stories tied to them, listening to how place-names were used in conversation. The project lasted for eighteen months over five years. The maps are not published, as this was considered unwise by Chairman Lupe, but it is still about Apache places and place names.

Because the project includes so many aspects of Apache culture, the four main chapters are largely independent essays. Each chapter is also focused on a distinct Apache person in order to make concrete the areas Basso describes. Part of Basso's research involved looking to writers, poets, naturalists, philosophers and others with a strong sense of place.

Chapter 1, Quoting the Ancestors

Chapter 1, Quoting the Ancestors Summary and Analysis

Places include a social aspect; they are created by means of historical imagination, through many acts of remembering, imagining and their interaction. The locally imagined history must be lived as well; place-making also involves creating history around the place and revising and augmenting them. Place-making occurs easily even in cultures where there is no writing or record-making. Reinterpreting the past is easy even without a written history. What people make of places are often repositories of such knowledge. Place-making helps construct social traditions and even social and personal identities. Place-making is also a kind of cultural activity.

Basso will illustrate these points in the Apache Reservation of Cibecue in Arizona with the person of Charles Henry, sixty years old, an herbalist, uncle and created of place-words. The story begins in May of 1979. Basso stands with Charles and his cousin Morley Cromwell, just before dawn. Charles and Morley are taking Basso to make geographical maps. Charles is the guide, Morley the translator and Basso the food manager, Jeep driver and recorder. Basso's Apache is poor and his hurried need to learn it seems disrespectful to Charles.

However, Charles later downplays the tension by claiming that his missing teeth make pronunciation difficult. Their place is translated as Water Lies With Mud In An Open Container. It was named by Apache ancestors new to the land, looking for a safe place to settle. The place looked like water and mud in an open container, and so they named it this to make it easy to remember.

Over the next week, the three men travel to twelve more places; two are explained to Basso as "place-worlds", Bitter Agave Plain and Scattered Rocks Stand Erect. These place names indicate not only their appearance but of changes in the landscape, geographically and climatically. These lessons became clear to Basso when Charles and Morley took him to Snakes' Water, an inactive spring west of Cibecue.

Snakes' Water was once a watering hole highly valued by the local Apache, but one day snakes come and got between the people and the water. The Apaches think the snakes are claiming ownership. A man tells the people to wait until he speaks to the Snakes. He then speaks to the snakes and they move away, thanking them. While Snakes' Water no longer has water in it, the place-name sticks. Other place-names stick despite having lost their initial rationale. In fact, place-names in the area generally indicate that it had a wetter climate in early generations.

On a Saturday in late June, Basso was stung by hornets on his nose, broke his last pair of eyeglasses and was bitten on the hand by a centipede. He even ran out of gas. Morley and Charles had similar bad luck. The men get together to relax at Charles's; his

nephew, Jason, is visiting, and will probably join their expeditions. Three days later they are traveling.

On Cibecue's northern outskirts, they encounter Juniper Tree Stands Alone, a flat area that contains for Apache homes, two corrals and a dozen acres of farm land. The land no longer has a Juniper tree. This area was to be a place where the Apache would raise their children if they could survive and hide from the Navajo. They planted corn and prayed, doing all correctly. They stored food, which was abundant. It is not clear why the place-name refers to a Juniper tree, but the name originated and spread because it denotes an area where women had grown corn plentifully.

The leader of the local clan, Ellen Josay Tessay, comes out to meet Basso, Charles, Morley and Jason.

In mid-July, the maps of Cibecue are becoming more complex, covered with dots that make them looked littered with shotgun pellets. They chart 109 areas in only five weeks. Basso is impressed by the rich imagery of Western Apache place-names. But other place-names are impressive because they commemorate events and tie to traditional stories. One such place is Shades of Shit, an area where there was great corn but the owners refused to share it with their relatives. Their relatives forced them to stay at home even to defecate, so they did it at home and the feces piled up. The group then wonders if the story was true because it was so violently offensive to the sensibilities of Apaches.

Charles then expands on the story as his grandfather explained to him. The relatives who wanted aid became angry because they felt insulted by the refusal to share. The richer Apaches were worried that they could not start to share because they would then give into threats which would lead, in turn, to more requests. Ultimately the richer family shared and they decided to leave.

Over the next two weeks, Basso collected other commemorative names, recording the relevant information. Some were tragic, like Two Old Women Are Buried and Rotten Field. On the second day of August, Charles decides not to work with them anymore because he must make medicine and help Jason start school, but he will still teach them for a time. He explains the place-names were created first, then names of clans which were descriptive, then commemorative names after the land had been lived in. Place-names are always tied to ancestral speech.

In 1962, famous anthropologist Edward Spicer argues that despite a love of their history, Western Apaches would not become tribal historians. But this is to judge historical scholarship by Western standards. History for the Western Apaches was a craft. The Apaches see the past as a "trail," and much of it disappears, making it unavailable for study. Apaches are also concerned where events occurred, not when. The past is never more than a place-word away. It is very near; history is episodic, personal, subjective and variable.

The place-maker speaks the past into being and so history for the Western Apache is a narrative art, concise and rarely redundant. It focuses on the quest to survive, the value of community and family, and the good results of being moral, along with created empathy with and admiration for ancestors. They see Anglo-American history as distant and unfamiliar, inert. For the Western Apaches, knowledge of place is tied to knowledge of self and the relation of self to the world.

Chapter 2, Stalking with Stories

Chapter 2, Stalking with Stories Summary and Analysis

Basso advises paying close attention to the claims people make about themselves, as it helps to understand who the people of study are. This chapter focuses on sets of spoken texts that the Cibecue people say express themselves, their language and their places. They see the land as making people moral, looking after them. These claims are hard for Anglo-Americans to understand because one cannot understand their symbology and sense of themselves. For instance, the Western Apache see a deep connection between the land and the enforcement of morality. This enforcement of norms also occurs through language. An apparent simplicity of relationships to language and land will give way to deep concepts.

Chapter two illustrates its major themes through Nick Thompson, a man who claims to have been born in 1918. Basso has known him for twenty years and he has taught Basso much about Apache language and culture. Nick often likes to embarrass Basso in front of others just for fun. Otherwise he is generous, thoughtful and smart. The chapter starts in June 1980. At this time, Nick has been partially paralyzed and has a few grandchildren. He is happy to see Basso. He encourages Basso to learn the names of the places first before anything else. Nick maintains that the Western Apache keep maps in their minds; only white men need maps.

Few study American Indian place-name systems; it has almost ceased to exist in anthropology. Basso reviews some of the early history of his field. The work helped to reveal much about the cognitive categories of different peoples. The Cibecue settlement is found in a narrow valley at 4,900 feet in Mid-Eastern Arizona. The Apaches give place names partly because they enjoy it. They must often be interpreted in light of linguistic facts about the names. Nearly all place-names are complete sentences, made possible by the Western Apache language, which contains many prefixes that modify verb stems. Compact but semantically rich words arise, words that are satisfying to say. Faithful evocation is crucial for expression.

In 1981, Nick has just recovered from the flu. They speak little at first but Nick slowly regains his spirit. The two will discuss the stories behind place names and the symbolic importance of the geographical forms denoted. The Cibecue people have three major types of speech: ordinary talk, prayer and stories. Narratives have four major and two minor genres: 'myths' or holy tales, 'historical tales', 'sagas' that tell of pleasant things and 'gossip'. The minor genres are 'Coyote stories' and 'seduction tales'.

The major narrative genres are divided by time and purpose. Historical tales occur in periods long ago and are meant both to teach and to criticize delinquents. Sagas focus on modern times, within the past two generations. Sagas contain little that is serious or disturbing. Instead, they help listeners relax. Place-names are most important in

historical tales. The style is unremarkable but the content is very graphic on focuses on those who commit immoral actions and who suffer as a result. They are often humiliated, exiled or killed. Basso then illustrates his point with some texts of historical tales.

Historical tales are often "about" those to whom the story is directed because it is related to individuals who commit social offenses and the stories are remedial. They are often told to real social offenders. This produces a meta-communicative message. Basso then illustrates with a girl who adopted too many fashion habits from outside of the tribe and was then told a story; at a birthday party, the girl's grandmother told a story about an Apache policeman who acted like a white man. The tale had a psychological impact.

Stories are also used to "stalk", or to make impressions on individuals by working on their minds and causing them to consider their lives. Nick explains the point of these tales to Basso. Anyone can "hunt" a norm-breaking individual. It "hits" like an arrow. Only the history is told and it makes you feel sick. Nick's description is corroborated by other Apaches. The hunting metaphor is used, though not always interpreted in the same way. These tales, nonetheless, force individuals to admit social failings. After the stories are told, features of the landscape take over to perpetuate the message.

Basso hopes that with the foregoing explanation the reader can understand the early passages. The idea that the land makes people act correctly is because they are socially constructed to embody a moral reprimand, a reminder of social morality. Children who do not learn to tie places and names with historical tales become less moral and 'lose the land', something the Western Apaches feel. These geographical elements merge time, space and symbol, allowing something abstract to be directly contemplated.

The Western Apaches are probably increasingly emphasizing the importance of the land as modern American culture infiltrates their society. Younger Apaches find village life tedious. Basso transitions next into discussing the connection between historical tales and land in other tribes.

At the end of the summer of 1981, Basso must leave Cibecue and says goodbye to Nick. Nick comments that goodness is all around Cibecue. Basso then explains that anthropologists are often concerns with the connection between American Indian communities and their ecological settings. Materialist models cannot give a full explanation of the relation because symbolism is ignored. Ecological studies have made a difference, but they often focus on a 'systemic' level that cannot fully account for how individuals make and act on cultural meanings. Basso has used Apache conceptions of land to explain the effect of symbolism on individuals.

Cultural constructions can only be understand if anthropologists listen to the explanations of narrative consultants not only about landscapes but about *talking* about landscapes. This talk reveals cultural assumptions, like the hunting metaphor for community enforcement of morality. Basso ends by explaining how his theoretical

discoveries have helped him to make a legal case on behalf of Western Apache land rights.

Chapter 3, Speaking With Names

Chapter 3, Speaking With Names Summary and Analysis

Ethnographers immersed in a foreign culture with a foreign language must be cautious and understanding that the local conceptions of external realities are created from cultural concepts. Thus, when ethnographers become familiar with the local landscape, they must become familiar with local symbolism. Local peoples relate themselves to their geography in three ways: (i) through observing it, (ii) through using it, and (iii) by communicating about it. Understanding the landscape is partially a matter of understanding language and to glean from language the shared ideas of that culture. Often tacit messages are conveyed. The landscape is used to expand the imagination.

These shared meanings and geographies can only be studied through the study of property names and place-naming, in Basso's view. Place-names generate a wide range of cognitive associations, say with the mind, emotions, time, space, history, events, persons, social activities and periods of one's own life.

The residents of Cibecue are eager to talk about each other. Lola Machuse, a sixty-year-old woman, is more than happy to do so. She is a mother of eight who cares for her family, collects herbs, farms and engages in ceremonial activities. Lola is a center of community information. While visiting with a group of Western Apache and Lola, Basso overhears a woman, Louise, explaining that her younger brother became ill and had to go to the hospital. They then discuss where he got sick and decided, on the basis of this, they pleasantness and goodness will come, though the conversation is cryptic.

A difficulty with Western Apache is the inability of linguists to explain how utterances are sequentially related. In the conversation referenced, the speakers were using the evocative power of place-names to comment on Louise's brother's moral conduct. Basso claims that the Apache understand communication cooperatively, in that meanings must be constructed through a joint process. This process can serve many purposes, though in this case cooperation was used to construct a mild form of reprimand. The conversation that Basso observed was both cooperative and resulted in the presentation of a coherent, focused message.

But explaining the conversation requires some background, background Basso was lucky enough to have Lola provide him. Lola explained that the place-names were used to give Louise the ability to travel in her mind and hear her ancestors. This is "speaking with names", which in this case they used to help her think good thoughts despite the fact that her brother was stupid and failed to show respect. Other tribes people helped to elaborate Lola's description.

The conversation involved picturing one's self and depicting one's pictures for others, though the depictions are incomplete and must be completed by the hearers. Such

conversations are a form of voluntary cooperation. This is why Apache's cannot go into too much detail because it crowds out the hearer's ability to cooperate. Conversations of this sort must also employ place-names and geographical locations to allow the mind to travel to that place. There are no placeless events for the Apache. Place-names also identify ways of viewing these places in order to enable the mind to travel there.

Speaking with names is only appropriate in infrequent circumstances, such as in social situations where someone present is close to someone absent and speaking about them must be done tactfully. The narrative spoken is also a call to imagination to help those burdened by worry and despair. Often people feel better for having thought of distant places and ancestral events.

With the conceptual background in place, Basso explains that the conversation with Lola was uncomfortable for everyone. Louise was upset about her brother's sickness and his lack of common sense for coming in contact with a snakeskin and getting poisoned. Everyone felt the need to comment on his conduct. Since Louise was candid about her pain, Lola couldn't just say he did nothing wrong or openly censure him. They needed to speak the truth without making things more sensitive. Place-names solved the problem.

When they claimed that the incident happened at Line of White Rocks Extends Up And Out, they reminded Louise of a story of a girl who was bitten by a snake and survived but learned to act rightly as a result. The story helped to calm everyone. Emily, another party to the conversation, told a similar story at Whiteness Spreads Out Descending To Water to evoke a similar response. Lola then consolidated and affirmed the messages in the story. But she took a risk by claiming that the event happened at Trail Extends Across A Red Ride With Alder Trees because it was serious though it has a humorous aspect.

The story might have been misinterpreted. Robert then emphasized that 'pleasantness and goodness will be forthcoming' in order to again make explicit the message of the conversation. When Louise then made a comment about her brother, she indicated that the others had done enough and that nothing more need be said.

Human cultures all have their beliefs about how language works and what it is for. For the Western Apache, discourse is a product of interlocking utterances and actions. The "strength" of their language comes from the interlocking of many levels of abstract. "Speaking with names" illustrates this complexity because it produces a mental image, evokes prior texts, affirms traditional moral values, displays tact, conveys concern, offers advice, transforms distress thoughts and heals emotional pain all at the same time.

The richness of place-names comes from how individuals invest themselves in the landscape and take those meanings and integrate them into their experiences. It helps produce kindness and caring. A distinct characteristic of Western Apache is a preference for performing a maximum of social actions with the smallest number of words. These moments of communication are powerful.

Chapter 4, Wisdom Sits in Places, Epilogue

Chapter 4, Wisdom Sits in Places, Epilogue Summary and Analysis

Basso laments the progress of industrialism, which separates people from their lands and supports efforts by the Apaches to protect their native lands. One method of protecting the Apache involves understanding their deep attachment to their places but Basso realizes that few, even in his profession, are interested in his project. We must understand our relationships with places; when we attend to those relations we can have a sense of richly living and feeling them. And in doing so we can dwell on aspects of ourselves, some that are deep and some that are evolving.

Familiar places are inherently meaningful; their value comes from their observable characteristics, which merge the attentive subject with the object. Human constructions are generated in this interaction and can come to speak to those who experience them. Much of this experience can be made public, though some is inevitably private. Relationships to places are most often shared with others. The ethnographer must determine what acts of expression involve and explain how these acts are related to larger ideas about the world and those who live in it. Delicacy is required and one can be pleased and impression with what one learns.

In June 1982, Basso is riding with three Apache men, Dudley Patterson, Sam Endfield and Charles Cromwell. They're engaged in Apache shoptalk, when Talbert Paxton, another Apache horseman, joins them. Talbert has been upset over the past several weeks due to a break-up and has been drinking too much and sexually harassing women. Talbert tells the men he was been sober for three days and wants to return to work. The men respond but with what appear to be non-sequitors. The conversation starts and ends quickly.

Three days later, Basso began to uncover the meaning of the conversation. Dudley notes that Talbert needed to be reminded of some of his actions the days before he came to them. The conversation between Talbert and the other Apache's contained mention of Trail Goes Down Between Two Hills. There two girls harassed Old Man Owl by sexually enticing him and then moving away when he came near. When the two sisters returned a later night, Old Man Owl mistakes one of the girls for a tree and tries to set fire to her. She urinated on it to put it out, but Old Man Owl couldn't figure out what was going on.

Old Man Owl was used to criticize Talbert in a subtle way and that his recent behavior has been silly, offensive and disruptive. They wanted to let him know that he should do right without treating him like a child. The references to the Trail focused Talbert's attention on the two Apache sisters to explain to him both that his behavior was

inappropriate and to commend him for realizing this. The remarks from Charles and Sam backed up Dudley's initial message.

Basso realizes how little he knows about the Apache concept of wisdom, which they call "difficult". For the Apache, Dudley says, "wisdom sits in places". Dudley explains with a historical talent about his ancestors surviving off the land, then Ruth Patterson, Dudley's sister, recounts a story from her youth that emphasizes similar themes, about how the land kept the people alive. Ruth and Dudley explain to Basso that in their youths, people did not focus much on Cibecue village but spent weeks in the fields, farming and hunting. They lived a hard life on the land.

Then Dudley explains that having wisdom involves thinking about one's own mind and working on it, making the mind smooth, steady and resilient. Without a smooth mind, danger cannot be detected. Without a resilient mind, one will be easily startled and scared. Without steadiness, the mind will not block anger and upset. Smooth minds live long and the trail of this wisdom will take the wise Apache many places. Thus, wisdom sits in places in that wisdom is the ability to navigate the path of life. The explanation was delivered to Basso like a Western Apache prayer. Much of the symbolism was still unclear to Basso.

A few days later, June 15th, 1982, Dudley starts to take Basso to various areas in Cibecue on horseback when he falls off his horse. This leaves them stationary and so they talk about Dudley's statement on wisdom from the 16th to the 19th. The Apache conception of wisdom is grounded in an informal theory of mind which sees wisdom coming from special qualities of the mind.

Wisdom is a heightened mental capacity that allows the avoidance of harm when it is hard to detect. This capacity requires smoothness, resilience and steadiness. Knowledge of places illustrates the need for wisdom. The smooth mind has few obstacles to clear thinking. Mental resilience and steadiness ward off distractions, both external (barred by resilience) and internal (barred by steadiness). Every Apache, save the mentally impaired, can achieve wisdom if she likes; none is born with wisdom. Mental development is encourages and is based on the view that knowledge is useful, but this knowledge comes from observing difference places and learning their place names along with the associated narratives.

Dudley then tells two stories that illustrate these themes. They are cautionary narratives which include aesthetic merits, such as hard-edged terseness, steady forward motion and mounting suspense. These stories are traditional ways of exposing mental flaws and weakness, showing where one can improve. The trail of wisdom, while often encouraging, has many challenges and so wisdom is not always easy to achieve. Some persevere and achieve it. And the people often think in terms of place-centers stories, about ancestors who made them up and about how to apply the stories to their own lives.

On August 10th, 1982, Dudley shows Basso a number of important landmarks near his home until Sam Endfield and Charles Cromwell explain that someone left the cattle gate

open and that many had escaped. They spend seven hours rounding up the herd. They found themselves in Trail Goes Down Between Two Hills and the men decide to spend some time by the water.

Wisdom is a sensing of place, a cultural activity. It is not a biological necessity, a source of emotional stability nor is it meant primarily to keep the group bonds strong. Instead, it is a method of appropriating parts of the earth. It is a natural way of engaging the world, although it is tied to particular times and places and cannot function in the abstract. The key question concerning the sense of place concerns what the sense is made of—what geography, what history, what symbolism, what lesson, and so on. A sense of place can vary in its degree of mental and emotional strength.

The Western Apache theory of wisdom is intimately related to the notion of the self. They construct a sense of self by incorporating places and meanings into models of mental and social development. This power is most acute in moments of intuitive insight that indicate wisdom. Basso argues further that this Apache conception of wisdom indicates that we are most ourselves when embedded in our places; it is better for the soul to be somewhere, rather than nowhere.

In a note dated November 7th, 1992, Basso reports that Dudley Patterson died in the spring of 1983; hundreds of people attended from across Cibecue. Sam Endfield kept working as a horseman, though Charles Cromwell, tired of herding cattle, retired at sixty-six. Talbert settled down and stopped drinking and Ruth remained energetic and fully in charge.

In the brief epilogue, Basso notes that Cibecue has changed since he first visited in 1959. The land is still beautiful, but there are no more expert horsemen and little corn is planted. The highway nearby has been expanded and cars are common. Cibecue has a sawmill, a school, a supermarket, a fire station and a medical clinic. And there are many new houses with nice electronics. It is a town. The old housing complexes now have English place-names. The Western Apache still make place-names when things of moral significance occur.

Characters

Keith Basso

Keith Basso, the author of Wisdom Sits in Places, is a professor of cultural and linguistic anthropology at the University of New Mexico. Basso first visited Cibecue, Arizona in 1959 and devoted his career to studying the Western Apache people that lived there, their geography, language, culture and history. Basso's book won the Victor Turner Prize for Ethnographic Writing in 1997 because Basso's work was regarded as an exemplar of a human-oriented anthropology. Basso's work on the Western Apache ranged over four decades. He maps the "semiotic" space of place-making among the Western Apache and its link to moral imagination.

Basso's main role in the book is as an observer. He primarily tells stories about the characters he encounters, like Dudley Patterson and Nick Thompson, in order to illustrate his main arguments in each of his three essays. Basso's character comes through primarily through his admiration for Western Apache culture and his determination to extensively map the area. He also displays a self-deprecating sense of his grasp of the Western Apache language and culture.

Basso's primary aim in the book is to explain to the anthropology community that place-naming and the intersection between language and geography is a crucial factor involved in understanding a culture and a people. About that he is quite adamant. Basso also displays a high degree of familiarity with philosophers, poets and social scientists, all of whom he uses to make his point.

The White Mountain Apache Tribe

The White Mountain Apache Tribe is one of three Western Apache tribes living mostly in east central Arizona. The tribes are divided by dialect into the San Carlos, White Mountain and Tonto. Twenty thousand Western Apaches continue to speak their nation tongue. The White Mountain Apache Tries is located around 194 miles northeast of Phoenix.

The reservation in Cibecue was establish in 1891, and the community has lived in that area ever since. These peoples descend from the ancient tribes that inhabited the general area. While the tribe was once nomadic, they now are stationary, with permanent housing. They employ themselves through raising livestock and farming, along with tourism. Today the tribe houses around twelve thousand members.

The White Mountain Apaches are Basso's community of study. Their language is very different from English and Spanish and other European languages. It has the ability to conjunct a number of concepts into very short words and is spoken so as to maximize meaning and minimize word usage. Apaches practice the creation of place-names,

where they associate cultural symbolism and important events with particular geographical locales, most often within their reservation.

The people are always kind to Basso and always appear eager to help him learn about their culture. While their community has been somewhat affected by modern American culture, there are still efforts to maintain their culture and language. Many of the children find reservation life boring, but the community maintains itself nonetheless.

Charles Henry

A sixty-year-old Western Apache herbalist who is the focus of the first chapter. He explains place-naming to Basso.

Morley Cromwell

Charles's cousin who helps Charles and Basso make the place-name map of the reservation.

Nick Thompson

The elderly Western Apache who is the focus of the second chapter, a cantankerous and jovial man who teaches Basso about the various forms of Apache narratives.

Lola Machuse

A sixty-year-old Apache woman who is the focus of the third chapter. She helps Basso to understand how place-names are used as a method of enforcing social morality.

Dudley Patterson

The main character of the final chapter, Dudley is a horseman who, along with his friends, Sam and Charles, chastise a younger man, Paxton, using place-names. He also helps Basso to understand the Apache conception of wisdom.

Sam Endfield

A friend of Dudley's who aids him in chastising Talbert.

Charles Cromwell

The second friend of Dudley's who helps chastise Talbert.

Ruth Patterson

Dudley's sister, a vibrant older Apache woman.

Talbert Paxton

A younger man who drank too much after the end of a relationship. Dudley, Sam and Charles chastise him with place-names for getting out of control.

Anthropologists

Basso tries to convince his fellow anthropologists to think more about the intersection between language, culture and geography in Wisdom Sits in Places.

Ancestors

The Western Apache use place-names to evoke the memory and example of their ancestors.

Objects/Places

Cibecue, Arizona, The Reservation

The area in Arizona where the village of Cibecue is located in Navajo County.

Cibecue, Arizona, The Village

The village that Basso focuses on in the book (as of 2000, it contains 1,331 people).

Place-Names

Names of places that Western Apaches pack with symbolism and meaning and use for a number of important purposes, such as moral reprimand.

Maps

Basso begins the book by explaining his five year journey of making place-name maps of the Cibecue reservation.

Snakes' Water

A place-name for an area where snakes were said to have scared off Apache women from a watering hole but later permitted them to stay.

Apache History

Apache history is more tied to space than to time and is conceived of as best communicated in narrative form.

Apache Wisdom

The Apache conception of wisdom holds that wisdom can be acquired by acquiring a smooth, steady and resilient mind.

Line of White Rocks Extends Up And Out

A place-name used by Lola to explain to Louise that her brother did something foolish but that was also used to comfort her.

Trail Goes Down Between Two Hills

A place-name used to chastise Talbert for losing his self-control.

Apache Social Morality

The set of moral expectations shared by the tribal community and enforced by place-names.

Themes

The Relationship between Place, Language and Culture

Basso explains early on in the book that he thinks anthropologists have let the study of the relationship between language, place and culture fall into disrepair. Few ethnographers worked on those issues, and when Basso started his research it was a relatively dead field. Basso's efforts in the book are aimed at reviving the study of the intersection of these three elements. Towards this end, he argues that the Western Apache culture can only be understood in terms of this intersection.

The key element that Basso uses to demonstrate his point is the place-name. The place-name is a name for a particular geographical location combined with some social fact, like an imagined historical event, a real historical event, a description of what a particular location looks like to the viewer or a tie to a spiritual lesson. Place-names compact various sensory elements in order to invoke powerful memories, ideas and emotional states.

For instance, "Trail Goes Down Between Two Hills" describes a historical myth in which "Old Man Owl" is seduced and mocked by two Apache girls. The myth is tied to a place where a trial goes down between two hills, but the very mention of the place name evokes the memory of a man who is taken advantage of and thereby communicates to the listener the lesson to be learned from the story.

Place-names are also used as historical markers, as the Apache conception of history is rooted more in space than in time.

The Enforcement of Social Morality through Place-Names

While place-names have many functions, Basso focuses most on the place-names' function as enforcers of social morality. Social morality is that part of morality that concerns the interpersonal, how people should treat one another and maintain their status of honor in the community. In chapters three and four, Basso analyzes conversations that mention place-names but are otherwise cryptic. He shows how the conversations can be decoded by understanding the moral lesson associated with the story that is, in turn, associated with the particular place.

In chapter three, Lola mentions "Line of White Rocks Extends Up And Out" to a younger woman, Louise. Louise's brother was poisoned by a snake skin he was foolishly playing with and she was worried about him, as he had to go to the hospital. The point of Lola's using the place-name was to subtly explain to Louise that it was her brother's own fault but that, given the content of the story, everything would turn out fine. The place-name

was all that was mentioned save in conjunction with a few other place-names that referred to similar matters.

In fact, Western Apaches regularly explain to Basso that place-names are used to evoke emotions, memories and imagination that encourages the individual who hears them to "live right" and act in accord with the moral standards of the group. Place-names are not the only method by which social morality is enforced, though; it tends to be used when a mild and subtle form of reprimand is called for.

The Western Apache Conception of Wisdom

Chapter four focuses on the Western Apache conception of wisdom and it explains the title of the book. Wisdom, for the Apache, is not a set of known propositions about, say, ultimate matters. Instead, wisdom is a virtue of the mind. Specifically the Apache's describe being wise as having a "smooth" mind that is both "steady" and "resilient". Smooth minds think clearly with ease. Mental resilience bars external distractions and mental steadiness blocks internal distractions. A mind that is both steady and resilient is smooth and can walk the path of life effectively.

All Apaches can become wise, though most do not choose the path. No one is born wise. Mental development is promoted by the culture. It is rooted in the view that wisdom comes from a particular sort of knowledge, knowledge of place and the symbolism associated with it. Knowledge comes from familiarity with history, concrete spatial locations and the cultural heritage of the tribe.

Basso argues that the Western Apache conception of wisdom helps to understand the Western Apache conception of the self. A person is wise when she understands the environment in which she is embedded, the environment that defines who she is. Thus, by learning the facts needed for a smooth mind, an Apache can come to know herself. It also helps to solidify the self by incorporating within the self concrete social and historical events tied with familiar places.

Style

Perspective

Keith Basso is currently employed as a cultural anthropologist at the University of New Mexico, having worked at the University of Arizona before. Basso brings a thoroughgoing anthropological style to the text. However, he is critical of the emphases of his field. When Basso was doing his research on the Western Apache, issues concerning the intersection of language, culture and place had fallen into relative obscurity. Few were working on it and many didn't see much need to study it. Basso argues that the Western Apache culture cannot be fully understood without studying the connection between their language and their geography. Place names play a complex role in their society, ones that Basso reveals in some detail throughout the book.

Basso is fairly ecumenical in his perspective, not limiting himself to the perspective of anthropology. He brings the insights of sociologists, philosophers and others to bear on his work, often using concepts from outside of his field to defend his point of view. This perspective may be influenced by Basso's boredom with standard anthropological method and his change of emphasis to create place-name maps of the area surrounding Cibecue.

Basso is also interested in communicating in an informal way. He does his best to intertwine the abstract and the concrete, making his argument while illustrating it with real conversations he records and embodying these insights in the behavior of real individuals. He also clearly admires Western Apache culture.

Tone

The tone of Wisdom Sits in Places combines Basso's informal, concrete and actually lived experience with his perspective as a social scientist studying language and culture. First, since Basso, by his own account, had grown tired of standard anthropological methodology, he expresses a clear preference for writing in an informal style as an unusual way of making his argument. He interacts with his subjects rather than only observing them indirectly. He will sometimes describe his emotional states as well. These commitments give the text a less formal and more personal tone. When Basso makes his main argument, he often complains about the emphases of the field of anthropology generally, and in these moments the tone becomes less formal as well.

However, the point of Wisdom Sits in Places is to make a formal argument to the effect that the intersection of language, culture and place must be studied, as it is vital to grasping, at the very least, the nature of the Western Apache way of life. Thus, he describes himself as taking copious notes and then draws abstract arguments from these notes, often pointing to features of the Western Apache conception of time and history, their spirituality and even linguistic details like the variations of Western Apache

verb stems. In the parts of the book connected to these subjects, the tone becomes more formal and scholarly. Although, Basso's passion shines through even in these sections.

Structure

Wisdom Sits in Place has a preface and epilogue that are quite brief. The bulk of the book is four essays that cover related topics but are not written as one book. Some chapters will emphasize Western Apache conceptions of history and time, others the way in which place-names are used in conversations and still others on the Western Apache conception of wisdom. While the chapters cover different topics, reading them in sequence will reveal a complex relationship between them, wherein a network of concepts is laid out. The reader will have a much better feel for the concepts in each chapter if she reads the entire book.

Each chapter also combines the abstract and the concrete. While the point of the essays is to make particular arguments about the nature of elements of Western Apache culture, each essay illustrates its point with descriptions of a particular character. Basso introduces the character's profile, discusses their personalities and explains their interactions with Basso. The chapters also contain reference to a number of different sources, such as philosophical and sociological texts that bring the more abstract lessons out of the personal experiences without rendering the experiences flat or irrelevant.

Chapter one, "Quoting the Ancestors", focuses on an analysis of place-names through the person of Charles Henry. Chapter two, "Stalking with Stories", explains how the Western Apache employ place names generally; this chapter focuses on Nick Thompson. Chapter three, "Speaking with Names", shows how place-names are employed in the enforcement of tribe morality and it focuses on Lola Machuse. Chapter four, "Wisdom Sits in Places", analyzes the conception of wisdom in Western Apache culture; this chapter makes its argument through a profile of Dudley Patterson.

Quotes

"Why don't you make maps over there? Not white men's maps, we've got plenty of them, but Apache maps with Apache places and names. We could use them. Find out something about how we know our country. You should have done this before."
Preface, xv

"In this convulsive age of uprooted populations and extensive diasporas, holding onto places—and sensing fully the goodness contained therein—has become increasingly difficult, and in years to come, I expect, it may everywhere be regarded as a privilege and a gift. American Indians, who settled this continent first and were the first to be displaced, understand this already in very pervasive ways. May we all learn from them."
Preface, xvi-xvii

"Place is the first of all beings, since everything that exists is in a place and cannot exist without a place."
Chap. 1, p. 3

"Place-making is the universal tool of the historical imagination."
Chap. 1, p. 5

"For by now it should be clear that Apache standards for interpreting the past are not the same as our own, and that working Apache historians—Charles Henry among them—go about their business with different aims and procedures."
Chap. 1, p. 31

"American Indians hold their lands—places—as having the highest possible meaning, and all their statements are made with this reference point in mind."
Chap. 2, p. 37

"The land makes people live right. The land looks after us. The land looks after people."
Chap. 2, p. 38

"Historical tales have the power to change people's ideas about themselves: to force them to admit to social failings, to dwell seriously on the significance of these lapses, and to resolve, it is hoped once and for all, not to repeat them."
Chap. 2, p. 60

"What we call the landscape is generally considered to be something 'out there.' But, while some aspects of the landscape are clearly external to both our bodies and our minds, what each of us actually experiences is selected, shaped, and colored by what we know."
Chap. 3, p. 71

"The meanings of landscapes and acts of speech are personalized manifestations of a shared perspective on the human condition."
Chap. 3, p. 73

"The location of an event is an integral aspect of the event itself, and identifying the event's location is therefore essential to properly depicting—and effectively picturing—the event's occurrence."
Chap. 3, p. 87

"The expressive force of Apache discourse—what people from Cibecue call its 'strength'—may be viewed as a product of multiple interlocking at different levels of abstract."
Chap. 3, p. 100

"To know who you are, you have to have a place to come from."
Chap. 4, p. 105

"Wisdom. It's difficult!"
Chap. 4, p. 121

"Wisdom sits in places."
Chap. 4, p. 121

"The Apache theory holds that 'wisdom' ... consists in a heightened mental capacity that facilitates the avoidance of harmful events by detecting threatening circumstances when none are apparent."
Chap. 4, p. 130

"The village of Cibecue has changed in many ways since the day I saw it first in 1959.... The village of Cibecue, open to the world after decades of seclusion, is fast becoming a town."
Epilogue, p. 151

Topics for Discussion

Why does Basso think it is important to focus on "place: when doing anthropology?

What is a place-name? Explain three ways in which a name is related to a place for the Western Apache (such as by its geographical location).

What are two of the important social functions performed by place-names in Western Apache culture?

What is contained in a "place" beyond its mere geographical element?

How are place-names used to enforce social morality among the Western Apache?

What is the Western Apache conception of wisdom? What are its three components?

What does it mean to say that "wisdom sits in places"?