



**Title:** Journey into my Polish Indigenous Mind

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**Published by:** Master's Thesis Submitted in Partial Satisfaction of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Liberal Arts in Creation Spirituality (Indigenous Mind Program) in the Graduate Division of Naropa University - Oakland.

**Publish date:** 13 December 2003

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**JOURNEY INTO MY POLISH INDIGENOUS MIND**

**By**

**Atava Garcia Swiecicki**

**Thesis**

**Submitted in Partial Satisfaction of the Requirements**

**For the Degree of**

**Master of Liberal Arts in Creation Spirituality**

**in the**

**Graduate Division**

**of**

**Naropa University**

**December 2003**

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**In memory of Barbara Kay Dean  
September 29, 1942- October 25, 2003**



*Dedicated to my family, to Polish ally Nancy Connor, and to the traditional farmers of Poland who fed us and loved us.*

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## **Introduction: Writing in alignment with my ancestors**

“Knowledge in the traditional world is not a dead collection of facts. It is alive, has spirit, and dwells in specific places. Traditional knowledge comes about through watching and listening, not in the passive way that schools demand, but through direct experience of songs and ceremonies, through the activities of hunting and daily life, from trees and animals, and in dreams and visions. Coming-to-knowing means entering into relationship with the spirits of knowledge, with plants and animals, with beings that animate dreams and visions, and with the spirit of the people.”<sup>1</sup>

This thesis is my own personal account of coming-to-knowing in a traditional way. I am telling the story about how I, a woman of Polish descent, came into relationship with the indigenous wisdom of my Polish ancestors. The path I walked in this process was the Master’s of Liberal Arts in Creation Spirituality with a concentration in Indigenous Mind. Creation Spirituality honors the original blessing, or sacred nature, of all of creation. Creation Spirituality weaves together the wisdom of western spirituality, indigenous wisdom and post-modern science.

The Indigenous Mind Concentration is a natural extension of the philosophy of Creation Spirituality. In the Indigenous Mind concentration, each student reconnects with their own ancestral culture or cultures. Guided by world-class indigenous elders, the students in Indigenous Mind gain an understanding of indigenous knowledge that is firmly rooted within their own cultural background.

Like many traditional people worldwide, my Polish ancestors have a rich tradition of stories, legends and folk tales. Many of these stories are encoded with cultural, historical and spiritual information. Rooted in this storytelling tradition, my thesis has emerged as a story that weaves together personal narrative, history, folk traditions, mythology, dreams, and indigenous wisdom. Two short videos from my ancestral

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<sup>1</sup> F. David Peat, *Lighting the Seventh Fire, The Spiritual Ways, Healing, and Science of the Native American* (New York, NY: Birch Lane Press, 1994), 64.

journey to Poland accompany my written thesis: “Thank You Mother Poland” is a video collage of scenes from the Polish countryside, set to the music of Polish composer Frederick Chopin. “Mary Magdalene’s Forgotten Chapel” documents my and Barbara Dean’s adventure in which we discovered Saint Mary Magdalene’s abandoned and looted chapel at Kalwaria, Poland.

Telling one’s personal story has power/relevance in the realm of traditional knowledge, the power of specificity. Kim Johnson, whose doctoral research explored the path of a European American woman recovering her traditional mind, writes:

“Elders and teachers from living traditional cultures have taught me that recovery of the good mind, the mind that is healthy and whole, begins in the specificity of each person’s story. Generalities only point in the direction of healing, while specificity is the place where healing occurs. I can speak in truth from my own experience.”<sup>2</sup>

As the stories from my thesis developed, I discovered they naturally grouped themselves into three chapters. The first chapter, “Origins and Maps” gives background information and introduces indigenous science and the ancestral remembrance process. In this chapter, I explore a map of the Polish Slavic remembrance process: the fairy tale story of the fearsome witch Baba Yaga. I explain how Baba Yaga’s trail led me to follow the path of my Slavic ancestors and make an ancestral journey to Poland.

The second chapter, “Stories from the Polish Land,” the heart of my thesis, arose from my ancestral journey to Poland. These stories reflect my direct experience with Polish people, Polish land and Polish spirits. I tell the story of my encounter with Smok, the Polish dragon in Krakow. In the section titled “The Divine Feminine in Poland,” I relate my encounters with three of the faces of the Divine Feminine in Poland: Matka

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<sup>2</sup> Kimmy Karen Johnson, “On the Path of the Ancestors: Kinship with Place as a Path of Recovery,” (Doctoral dissertation, The California Institute of Integral Studies, 2001)31.

Ziemia (Moist Mother Earth), Matka Boze (Mother of God), and Saint Mary Magdalene. The video “Mary Magdalene’s Forgotten Chapel” corresponds to the story I tell here about our pilgrimage<sup>4</sup> to Magdalene’s chapel. In “Teaching of the Forest” I tell the story about an encounter with a Polish elder and forest crone. In the final section of Chapter II, I relate the experience of meeting my own flesh and blood relatives in Poland.

The third and final chapter of my thesis, “Synthesis, Antithesis and Thesis”, includes the stories and reflections about my process of integration and coming-to-knowing. In this chapter I delve into the lessons taught to me by the historical shadow of my Polish ancestors /and discuss how this shadow continues to play out in my own life. “Reenactment” relates my encounter with my first Polish traditional ceremony. In “Dreamtime” I talk about the ways my dreams have supplied valuable information in the remembrance process. At the end of Chapter III, I give tribute to my dear Polish friend and companion, Barbara Dean, who joined the world of the ancestors on October 25, 2003.

Three is a sacred number to my Polish Slavic ancestors. The number three appears many times in Slavic fairy tales, mythology, folklore, and rituals. By structuring my thesis into three interconnected parts, I am symbolically aligning myself with the wisdom of my ancestors. As I do this, I am weaving together these three parts into one complete story. As Lakota scholar Vine Deloria Jr writes:

“Since, in the Indian system, all data must be considered, the task is to find the proper pattern of interpretation for the great variety of ordinary and extraordinary experiences we have. Ordinary and extraordinary must come together in one coherent comprehensive storyline.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Vine Deloria, Jr, “If You Think About It, You Will See That It Is True,” *Revision, A Journal of Consciousness and Transformation: Indigenous Science* (Washington D.C.: Heldref Publications, 1996), 39.

# Chapter I

## Origins and Maps

*They, our ancestors, are still with us.  
Undefeated by time  
In every breath  
They're still with us.*

*The world won't stop at your request.  
But you can count the days until we meet again.*

*They're still with us.  
Undefeated by time  
In every breath  
Through life's struggles they're with us.*

*Although, quite frankly,  
The sundials have stopped for them forever.  
Yet they're still with us  
To give us faith and strength in everything we do.*

Traditional Polish folk song<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> "Songs of the Earth," BBC Radio. A tape of this broadcast was shared with me by the Kobiela family in Poland.

## Opening Prayer

*The question is, who are you? This is the first step in entering the indigenous holistic mind. No elder or ceremony can continue until one is able to answer this question. Knowledge is considered a living entity. We ask permission to enter Her, and we must be able to specify our name, nation, clan, and have a clear question or reason for wanting to enter.*

*Apela Colorado*

*My name is Atava Garcia Swiecicka. I come from the Dine people of the Southwest United States, the Tometec people of central Mexico, the Magyar people of Hungary and the Western Slavic people from Poland. I am here because I wish to enter into a sacred relationship with the spiritual knowledge of my ancient Slavic ancestors.*

*First, I ask permission from the spirits of this land, the Nisenan people, the ancient ones who have lived in this Sacramento river valley for thousands of years, that I may be here in a good way. I thank you for being such good caretakers of the river, the hills, the valley, trees, meadows, and animals of this place. The beauty of this place helps to sustain my spirit. I ask permission to invite the spirits of the Polish land and my Polish ancestors to be here to help me with my work.*

*I pray to Matka Ziemia, Moist Mother Earth. You are a supreme being, revered for centuries by my ancestors. You have powers of healing which I call forth from you now. I ask that you help bring healing to your children: the Slavic people; the Polish and Polish American people; and to my family, the Swiecickis and Przybysz. For centuries, my people have trusted your powers of judgment and truth. I ask you today to preside over this ceremony of remembrance and healing for my Polish ancestors.*

*I call forth the Rod<sup>5</sup> spirits, my Polish ancestors: my Babcia Helen, my grandfathers Richard and Michael; my great-grandmothers Stefania and Katherine; my great-grandfathers Josef and Nicolas; and all my ancestors whose names I yet do not know. I also invoke the Rozanica, the spirits of the stars who preside over birth and fate. I ask all for your assistance and guidance in this prayer for healing. I pray to the stars in the night sky above me at this time of the wheel of the year, the time of yesen, the season of autumn and harvest.<sup>6</sup> I honor the beautiful Milky Way, called the Soul's Way or Bird's Way by my Slavic ancestors, and all the beautiful constellations, especially the great swan/Polish stork, Cygnus.*

*My Polish family has lost much of its earth-based indigenous and tribal mind. Once my people lived together in small tribes, deeply connected to the earth. We celebrated the seasonal cycles, and we honored our ancestors. We communicated with the spirits of nature, we sang together; we created beautiful music and art. We worshiped in groves of trees, alongside rivers, and on top of mountains. We possessed magical knowledge of healing and divination; we had a gift for farming the land and raising strong, healthy animals.*

*Over the past one thousand years, my Polish ancestors have suffered invasions, war, military occupation, and genocide. My great-grandparents were forced to leave their beloved land and endured the perils of immigration to a strange new country. In the United States, my family faced anti-Polish discrimination. Many of them chose to assimilate into the American culture and to leave behind their Polish ways. Many of them abandoned their ancient agricultural lifestyle for more lucrative factory jobs in the*

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<sup>5</sup> Maria Gimbutas, *The Slavs* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1976), 168. The word rod derives from the ancient Slavic word "roditi" "to give birth".

<sup>6</sup> Frank Kmietowicz, *Slavic Mythical Beliefs* (self published: Windsor, Ontario Canada, 1982), 25.

*cities. My Polish American family has been afflicted with addiction, abuse, betrayal, denial and disconnection.*

*I ask Matka Ziemia, with all your healing powers, to help restore what has been lost, the original medicine of the Polish people. I ask the ancestors, the Rod, to restore the ancient ways of my people that have been forgotten. I ask the Rodzanica to oversee this re-birth of the Polish Indigenous Mind.*

*All My Relations*

*Amen*



My Polish grandmother Helen Przybysz (left) and her family.

## **Discovering Creation Spirituality and Indigenous Mind**

My name is Atava Garcia Swiecicka. My mother, Julia Garcia Swiecicki is of Mexican, Navajo and Hungarian descent. My father, Michael Edmund Swiecicki, is primarily Polish with a touch of German and Russian. All of my paternal great-grandparents emigrated from Poland in the late 1800's, a time in Polish history when the country of Poland was completely partitioned between Germany, Russia and Austria. During the years of partitioning, the Russian and German colonizers attempted to eradicate both the Polish language and culture. Furthermore, during this time period the introduction of farming machinery left many Polish peasants out of work. Many of these peasants, including my own relatives, decided to emigrate from Poland in search of a better life.

My *Babcia* (grandmother) Helen spoke fluent Polish. She and my grandfather, Michael Swiecicki, lived in the Polish American community of Hamtramak, Michigan, until my grandfather's premature death of a brain aneurism at the age of 39. My father Michael Edmund Swiecicki grew up hearing the Polish language, but he never learned how to speak or understand it. I, Atava Garcia Swiecicka, was raised with absolutely no exposure to the Polish language and very little contact with Polish culture or the Polish American community. Therefore, to return to my Polish cultural ways, I needed to start from scratch.

For the past fifteen years I have studied and practiced holistic healing. I have worked primarily as an acupressure massage therapist and an herbalist. For many years I had been searching for a way to further my study of natural medicine. I considered

acupuncture school, but decided against it because I felt strongly that I wanted to study the healing traditions of my own ancestors. In the fall of 2000, I traveled to Mexico to study and work with two traditional Mexican healers, Estela Roman and Dona Enriqueta Contreras. At this time I proclaimed to the universe that I wanted to find an academic program that would allow me to pursue my passion for my ancestral medicine. As I prayed, I told my ancestors that I was open to travel any where in the world to find such a program.

A year later, in the midst of a personal and professional crisis, I received a brochure in the mail from the University of Creation Spirituality/ Naropa University Oakland. I immediately picked up the phone and called Aileen Donovan, the Admissions Officer at Naropa University Oakland. With her gentle wisdom, Aileen recommended that I enroll in the Indigenous Mind Concentration. The Indigenous Mind Concentration (“IMC”) was designed for students like myself, who wished to deeply explore their ancestral traditions. Miraculously, I had stumbled upon the answer to my prayer, and furthermore, Naropa University Oakland was less than one mile from my house! The school I had been searching for worldwide was practically in my back yard.

When I entered the Master’s program at UCS-Naropa, I hoped to learn more about my ancestral healing traditions. Perhaps I would learn the names and uses for medicinal plants; maybe I would memorize certain prayers and rituals for healing. I had been studying for the past four years with a traditional Choctaw herbalist as well as with the two Mexican curanderas, and I had a sense of what traditional medicine looked like. However, what came to me in the Indigenous Mind Concentration was a surprise. In the non-linear style of indigenous education I began to study the healing traditions of my

Polish ancestors not by directly studying the plants themselves, but by immersing myself in the world from which this healing knowledge grew, the world of my Polish Slavic ancestors.

## **Indigenous Science**

For thousands of years, indigenous people have had a strong relationship to the natural world. Indigenous people have their own way of coming to knowledge, their own science. Charles Finch III, researcher of African science, myth and religion, writes: “There are ways of knowing different from the scientific method that yield empirical information every bit as elaborate as that of science.”<sup>7</sup> Unlike western science, indigenous science takes a holistic approach. According to Pamela Colorado:

Native science, often understood through the tree, is holistic. Through spiritual processes, it synthesizes or gathers information from the mental, physical, social and cultural/historical realms.<sup>8</sup>

Physicist and author F. David Peat describes indigenous science this way:

It is a science of harmony and compassion, of dream and vision, of earth and cosmos, of hunting and growing, of technology and spirit, of song and dance, of color and number, of cycle and balance, of death and renewal.<sup>9</sup>

In the Indigenous Mind Concentration, I became a serious student of indigenous science. One of the key elements of indigenous science is relationship, relationship to what Native American people call “All My Relations”. As practitioner and teacher of European ancestral remembrance Kimmy Johnson writes: “Indigenous science arises

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<sup>7</sup> Charles S. Finch III, “New Perspectives on Ancient African Science,” *Revision, A Journal of Consciousness and Transformation: Indigenous Science* (Washington D.C.: Heldref Publications, 1996), 11.

<sup>8</sup> Pamela Colorado, “Native Science and Participatory Research,” Paper presented at the Participatory Research Conference, (University of Calgary, February, 1989), 4.

<sup>9</sup> F. David Peat, *Lighting the Seventh Fire, The Spiritual Ways, Healing, and Science of the Native American* (New York, NY: Birch Lane Press, 1994), 8.

from close observation of the natural world and deep respect for all beings of the world.”<sup>10</sup> In this process, I have been engaged with my mind as well as with my heart. I have deepened my own relationship to the universe around me, including the plants, the trees, the animals, the stones, the rivers, the winds, the planets, and the stars. Moreover, I have strengthened my relationship to my ancestors (including my living relatives); and I have explored my ancestor’s relationship to their natural surroundings.

How does one begin to interact with the world around them as an indigenous scientist? To begin with, the tools of Indigenous Science are radically different than those of western science. Johnson writes:

The tools of indigenous science are not a set of scientific instruments like a microscope or centrifuge, a linear accelerator or a radio telescope. ‘Coming to knowing’ is process by which I learn to listen deeply to what has been there all along, but was not visible to me through the lens of the dominant culture. This concept of knowing we call indigenous science points the way to directly lived experience. As it is in direct experience, specificity of place and being, is where learning and knowing flowers.<sup>11</sup>

In this way, as a practitioner of indigenous science, I have learned to carefully observe the happenings in my daily life. I have practiced being connected to the natural world around me, and to notice how nature speaks to me. I have also learned to listen to my dreams, my intuition, and the spirit messages that come to me through prayer and ritual.

How can one immerse themselves in the world of their distant ancestors? To do so, I studied history, folklore, fairy tales, folk art, mythology, and the religious traditions of my ancestors. I learned that I could not separate out the healing art of a people from its cultural, historical, geographical and spiritual context.

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<sup>10</sup> Johnson, 22.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 23.

As I began my studies in Indigenous Mind, I wondered: Could I, a mixed blood Polish, Hungarian, Navajo and Mexican woman recover my traditional ways? Would it be possible for me to remember the healing traditions of my ancestors who were healers and medicine people? Is it possible to recover what has been lost? Are things really lost?

## **Remembrance**

Apela Colorado Ph.D., Oneida and French elder and founder of the Indigenous Mind Concentration, has devoted her life's work to helping people remember their earth based tribal spiritual ways. According to Colorado, and to the international panel of traditional elders who teach in the IMC, it is possible to remember and recover one's sacred spiritual heritage. Hawaiian elder Mr. Hale Makua teaches that the ancestors intentionally hid their sacred information in a place nobody would ever think to look: in our hearts. Aleut storyteller Larry Mercurieff speaks about how the ancient ancestors parceled the sacred information between cultures all across the globe. Both Makua and Mercurieff agree that ancestral secrets are hidden in our native languages, and that by speaking these languages, we can activate ancestral memories.

In IM Concentration, we have worked with people who have recovered their traditional ways. One person is Keola Sequeria, Hawaiian kahuna and master wood carver. Sequeria recovered the knowledge of how to build a traditional Polynesian canoe, an item central to the cultural and spiritual life of the ancient Polynesians. At his home, Pakala, Sequeria talked to the IM students about his remembrance process, his process of uncovering his own "spiritual genealogy."<sup>12</sup> "When we make the same canoe

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<sup>12</sup> Keola Sequeria, "Indigenous Science Lecture," (Naropa University- Oakland: Maui, November 2002).

as our ancestors, we have remembered.”<sup>13</sup> He taught us that the information we seek is not in books, but that we must, instead learn to “let the spirit work through you.”<sup>14</sup> “Treat the spirits well, work for them, and they will reward you,” advised Sequeria.

### **A Map for Polish Slavic Remembrance: The Story of Baba Yaga**

*And before she could take another step, Baba Yaga in her cauldron descended on Vasalisa and shouted down at her, “What do you want?”*

*And the girl trembled. “Grandmother, I come for fire. My house is cold... my people will die... I need fire.”*

*Baba Yaga snapped, “O yessss, I know you, and your people. Well, you useless child... you let the fire go out. That’s an ill advised thing to do. And besides, what makes you think I should give you the flame?”*

*Vasalisa consulted her doll and quickly replied, “ Because I ask.”*

*Baba Yaga purred, “You’re lucky. That is the right answer.”*

*Vasalisa felt very lucky she had given the right answer.*

*Baba Yaga threatened, “I cannot possibly give you fire, until you’ve done work for me. If you perform these tasks for me, you shall have the fire. If not....” And here Vasalisa saw Baba Yaga’s eyes turn suddenly to red cinders. “If not, my child, you shall die.”<sup>15</sup>*

Although many indigenous elders told me that it was possible to remember my ancestral ways, I still was searching for evidence from within my own Polish culture. As I began the process of writing this thesis, I discovered a map for my Polish Slavic ancestral remembrance in the Slavic fairy tale of Baba Yaga.

In the Indigenous Mind Concentration, I have been taught the importance of examining my culture’s fairy tales and folklore. Our teachers explained that many remnants of an indigenous earth-based spirituality can be found in these stories. In the past year, I have plowed through dozens of Polish fairy tales. The stories that kept

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<sup>13</sup>Ibid.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Clarissa Pinkola Estes, Ph.D., *Women Who Run with the Wolves* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1992), 80.

drawing me in, time after time, were the stories about Baba Yaga. The ancient tales of Baba Yaga (*Jezi Baba* in the Polish language) are common throughout the Slavic world.<sup>16</sup> Baba Yaga is a fierce old crone who lives in the deepest, darkest part of the woods. She has long greasy hair and a big pointed nose. In older times she was described as a good witch, later she was personified more often as cruel and menacing.



*Baba Yaga*

Lacquer box design by artist Tatyann Alexeevna Soboleva of Kholuy.<sup>17</sup>

Baba Yaga lives in a magical hut, which is perched on chicken legs, and is known to spin in furious circles. Razor sharp teeth line the keyhole to her front door. A fence made of human bones surrounds her house. Baba Yaga flies through the air on a mortar and pestle, and she sweeps away all her tracks with a broom. Her allies are the cat, the goose, the owl, and the snake.<sup>18</sup> Her mysterious servants are a disembodied pair of gloved hands, who appear when she beckons them. Baba Yaga is the commander of three

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<sup>16</sup> Charles Phillips and Michael Kerrigan, *Forests of the Vampire: Slavic Myth* ( Amsterdam: Time-Life Books, Inc., 1999), 104.

<sup>17</sup> “Russian Sunbirds, Unique and Exquisite Russian Lacquer Art,” <http://www.sunbirds.com/laquer/box/771285>.

<sup>18</sup> Mike Dixon-Kennedy, *The Encyclopedia of Russian and Slavic Myth and Legend*, (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 1998), 25.

horseman: a white man on a white horse whom she calls “My Day”; a red man on a red horse whom she calls “My Rising Sun”; and a black man on a black horse whom she calls “My Night.”<sup>19</sup> Baba Yaga also has the power to control the moon, clouds, rain, fog, wind, fire and storms.<sup>20</sup>

Baba Yaga is clearly a spirit of ancient power and wisdom. She is an herbalist, a healer, and she has the power to both give and destroy life. She is the crone, the aspect of the goddess that presides over the realm of death and rebirth. Maria Gimbutas, feminist archeologist and scholar describes Baba Yaga as the “Killer-Regeneratrix” and the “Goddess of Death and Regeneration”.<sup>21</sup> The ancient Slavs revered Baba Yaga, who was central to their spiritual universe. However, with the onslaught of Christianity, Baba Yaga had been “degraded to a witch.”<sup>22</sup> Gimbutas writes: “(Baba Yaga) is but a loathsome caricature thanks to the enormous energies spent by the missionaries and inquisitors to fight this powerful Goddess”.<sup>23</sup>

In some Slavic stories, such as “The Maiden Tsar” there are three Baba Yaga sisters.<sup>24</sup> In others, like “The Dragon”, the Baba Yaga is the mother of a dragon or a snake.<sup>25</sup> One of my favorite renditions of a Baba Yaga story is told by Clarissa Pinkola Estes in her book *Women Who Run with the Wolves*. After countless readings of her story called “Vasalisa”, one day, while reading, my breath quickened and my skin tingled with a big “Aha!”. I discovered that within this ancient story exists a template for my Polish Slavic ancestral remembrance process.

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Marija Gimbutas, *The Language of the Goddess*, (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1989), 209.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 210

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Phillips and Kerrigan, 105.

<sup>25</sup> Joanne Asala, *Polish Folklore and Myth*, (Iowa City: Penfield Press, 2001), 54-59.

In Pinkola Estes' story, the young Vasalisa journeys through the forest in search of fire from Baba Yaga (I will refer to her with the Russian Slavic name Baba Yaga to stay true to Estes' text). She has been sent to the forest by her wicked stepmother, who secretly hopes that the terrible witch will destroy Vasalisa.<sup>26</sup>

On her journey, Vasalisa faces many impossible tasks. First, she must navigate her way through the forest to the enchanted hut of Baba Yaga. Next, she must survive her encounter with the carnivorous Baba Yaga, who is known to take those who displease her, throw them into her oven and eat them for supper. Finally, Baba Yaga orders Vasalisa to perform monumental tasks: "Wash my clothes, sweep the yard and clean my house, prepare my food and separate the mildewed corn from the good corn and see that all is in order."<sup>27</sup> If Vasalisa fails to complete these tasks, she too will be Baba Yaga's dinner.

However, Vasalisa possesses one thing that helps her complete the seemingly impossible tasks. Within her pocket she carries a small doll, a gift given to her by her dying mother.

*"Here are my last words, Beloved," said the mother. "Should you lose your way or be in need of help, ask the doll what to do. You will be assisted. Keep the doll with you always. Do not tell anyone about her. Feed her when she is hungry. This is my mother's promise to you, my blessing, my dear daughter."*<sup>28</sup>

Her mother's doll successfully guides Vasalisa back and forth through the forest to Baba Yaga's dwelling. The doll jumps up and down in her pocket to direct her to turn this way or that. The magical doll also helps her to finish all the work that Baba Yaga

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<sup>26</sup> Clarissa Pinkola Estes, Ph.D., *Women Who Run with the Wolves*, (Ballantine Books, New York, 1992), 76-120.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 80.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 77.

has demanded of her. Each night the doll assures Vasalisa not to worry. The doll promises that the work will be taken care of and that Vasalisa should go to sleep. Each morning Vasalisa and Baba Yaga awaken to find the tasks perfectly completed.

After Vasalisa successfully accomplishes Baba Yaga's tasks, Baba Yaga begrudgingly awards her with a flame from her hearth fire. Baba Yaga gives her the flame to carry home in a human skull perched on a stick. When Vasalisa returns home, her wicked stepmother and stepsisters are shocked to see her alive and well. As they inspect the eerie skull light Vasalisa has brought home, the skull gazes back and incinerates them into ash.<sup>29</sup>

How can I assert that the story of Vasalisa and Baba Yaga is a template for the remembrance process of the Slavic Indigenous Mind? How do I know my desperation for ancestral wisdom hasn't created in me what Indigenous Mind faculty member, Kimmy Johnson, calls "a new age hallucination"?<sup>30</sup> As a student of Indigenous Mind, I approach all my work, including the writing of this thesis following the principals of Indigenous Science.

One of the tenants of indigenous science is that it is holistic, and involves all the senses, including the spiritual and psychic.<sup>31</sup> To insure accuracy when working in the realms of the psychic and spiritual, Colorado teaches a research method, which Western scientists call triangulation. When doing research, the indigenous scientist looks for at least three ways to validate one's work.

Approaching the stories of Baba Yaga, I have strong gut feelings that draw me to her. Since Indigenous Science validates the information conveyed by feelings, I can

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 82.

<sup>30</sup> Kim Johnson, "Indigenous Science Lecture", (Naropa University-Oakland, September 2002).

<sup>31</sup> Colorado, "Indigenous Science and Western Science: A Healing Convergence," 2.

include my instinct as one aspect of my triangular research. Secondly, last spring I had a dream in which I talked to Clarissa Pinkola Estes about Baba Yaga. This dream guided me to look more closely at her story. In Indigenous Science, dreams are validated as important ways of receiving information from the ancestors. My dream therefore becomes a second leg of my triangular research. Finally, I have found evidence in books that Baba Yaga stories are linked to ancient initiation ceremonies.<sup>32</sup> In this way, historical information provides the final proof about the importance of Baba Yaga to Slavic spirituality.

The story of Vasalisa and Baba Yaga is a map from which I can navigate my indigenous Slavic remembrance process. Although this folk-tale has enough substance to be an entire thesis in itself, I will focus on certain teachings that have been foundational to my own process.

### ***Feeding the Doll: Making Offerings***

An essential instruction from Vasalisa's dying mother is to feed the doll. Vasalisa always remembers to give the doll a little bit of bread. In the Indigenous Mind Concentration, we have been taught again and again about the importance of making offerings. We make offerings to the elders, to the sacred stones, to trees, to the ocean, to plants. This part of the story supplies the evidence that offerings are also an essential part of Slavic culture. The story explicitly directs me to always remember to give a gift to the spirits that are helping me. The instructions are simple and familiar: *Give, and you shall receive.*

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<sup>32</sup> Phillips and Kerrigan, 104.

In fact, offerings were a central part of the spirituality of the ancient Slavs. All ceremonies began by feeding the spirits.<sup>33</sup> Slavs made offering to the spirits that protected their homes, farms, and forests, as well as to the elements such as earth, fire, wind and water. At certain times of the year, food was left on gravestones for the ancestors. Slavic people also have the custom of feeding the poor and the beggars, often with their best food, as a way to insure good luck for the family.<sup>34</sup>

Vasalisa specifically feeds her doll some bread. Bread, for Slavic tribal people, is “the most sacred food,” “a gift from God”, “a living being”, and “a form of deity itself.”<sup>35</sup> Bread is the quintessential offering for Slavic people, as it “symbolizes the relationship of exchange between the humans and God, between the living and their ancestors”.<sup>36</sup> Thus, this part of the story tells me that the offering of bread will link me directly to my ancestors. In addition, for Slavic people, bread is traditionally carried and used for protection while traveling. In this way, the story of Vasalisa and Baba Yaga also instructs me to carry protection while walking this path.

### ***Listening to the Doll: Intuition and Navigation***

In the Indigenous Mind process, I have learned that my most important teacher is my own inner guidance and intuition. Learning to acutely listen to and interpret one’s feelings is a key process in Indigenous Science. Apela Colorado writes: “Feelings tell

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<sup>33</sup>Kmietowicz, 231.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> *Slovenska mitologija: Enciklopedijski Recnik*, (Beograd: Zepter Book World, 2001), 562-564.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

us whether we are prepared for the task, whether the situation is right, whether location is correct and whether there is balance.”<sup>37</sup>

My feelings and intuition are like the small doll in Vasalisa’s pocket jumping up and down telling me to go this way or that. The process of recovering one’s traditional ways is often like walking through the dark woods to Baba Yaga’s hut. At times I have been lost in the woods of the historical suppression of the knowledge that I seek; other times I wander confusedly in a darkness of my own- my personal shadow, my mental confusion, or my emotional upheaval. Sometimes I simply dwell in the dark womb of the spiritual mystery.

Whatever dark woods I must traverse, I have learned the importance of tuning into my inner voice. During my journey to Poland, I “stumbled upon” many incredible places, including the dragon of Krakow, and Mary Magdalene’s chapel. Each time I simply followed my own intuition. I learned to listen to the doll jumping up and down in my pocket. More importantly, I learned to tune into my doll’s subtle signals. Was my body tingling as I walked down a particular path? Was a small voice inside of me telling me something important lay around the corner?

In my remembrance process, like Vasalisa I have also learned to navigate through uncharted territory by observing the signs given to me from the universe. Ancient Polynesians were master navigators who could journey for thousands of miles on open sea without instruments. They relied upon their “acute powers of observation and memory”<sup>38</sup> to guide them through uncharted waters. They studied the stars, the ocean swells, the clouds, the sea color, the landmarks and the patterns of birds.

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<sup>37</sup> Colorado, “Native Science and Participatory Research,” 12.

<sup>38</sup> Kawainui Kane, Herb, *Ancient Hawaii*, (Captain Cook, HI: The Kawainui Press, 1997), 22.

In a similar way, in my remembrance process, I have learned to observe the signals of nature. Like Vasalisa, I noticed the signals on my wooded path. During my trip to Poland, I learned to pay close attention to the language of nature: the wind that rushed through the trees at Mary Magdalene's chapel; the swans that appeared on the Vistula river; the lizard on the path to an elder's home. In each instance, nature helped me to navigate my ancestral journey.

### ***Cleaning the House: Feng Shui as an Initiatory Rite***

Tribal initiations are never easy. Facing the Baba Yaga to recover one's ancestral magic is not for the faint of heart. To prove herself worthy of receiving the flame, Vasalisa had to work hard. Specifically, Baba Yaga orders Vasalisa to wash her clothes, scour her house, sweep her yard, and "see that everything is in order."<sup>39</sup>

Essential to my own initiatory process has been a rigorous process of mental, emotional, psychic and physical cleansing. I began by literally cleaning my own house. In the spring of 2002, Apela sent each of us students a book on Feng Shui, the ancient Chinese art of space clearing. I began to clear out my own physical clutter: old papers and books, unused clothing, broken knickknacks, stale food, and many piles of worthless junk. As I did so, the stagnant energy in my life really began to move. Cleansing and clearing my home catalyzed a multidimensional purification process. A force beyond myself began to cleanse me of people, environments and situations that were toxic to me. Anything that interfered in my spiritual work was swept away with the power and wrath of Baba Yaga herself.

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<sup>39</sup>Pinkola Estes, 80.

### ***The Doll Works Magic at Night: Dreamwork and the IM Recovery Process***

In the story of Baba Yaga and Vasalisa, all of the seemingly impossible tasks are accomplished at night while Vasalisa is sleeping. And what does Vasalisa, or for that matter anyone else do while they are sleeping? They dream, of course! In this way the story points directly to the power and significance of dreams. Dreams possess a magic in which the impossible is possible.

Central to the process of remembering my own spiritual genealogy has been dreamwork. For the past two years I have faithfully recorded my dreams. I have examined them for patterns, symbols, and messages. I have worked intensively with a dream group as well as one-on-one with Karen Jaenke. Karen completed her doctoral research on the way dreams can help facilitate recovery of ancestral ways of knowing. In particular, her work focuses on how dreams can help activate this remembrance process in people long dissociated from their traditional cultures.<sup>40</sup> In this way, Karen has been both a mentor and guide to help me explore the interplay of my dream world with my Polish ancestral stories and traditions. My dreams have provided me with information that would be impossible to obtain in waking life, such as clues to ancestral lineages, stories of my ancestors, lost cultural and historical information, memories of ancient rites, and instructions for ceremonies. My dreams are my most cherished guides.

### ***Seeking the Sacred Fire: The Forgotten Medicine of the White Hoop***

*“And the white hoop has a medicine wheel and a sacred power to take care of, if they remember. And we need them to remember.”*  
*Apela Colorado*

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<sup>40</sup> Karen Ann Jaenke, “Personal Dreamscape as Ancestral Landscape,” (Doctoral dissertation, The California Institute of Integral Studies, 2001).

According to Native American tribal elders, the white hoop people (those of European ancestry) are caretakers of the sacred fire. In this Baba Yaga story, the sacred hearth fire has been extinguished. In a similar way, the white hoop people of Europe have lost connection to their medicine and to their responsibility for the sacred fire. Disconnected from their sacred power, the Europeans have wreaked havoc around the globe. Lost and destructive, they have left a bloody trail of conquest, colonization, genocide of indigenous people, and ecocide. The misuse of the power of fire, the forgotten medicine of the white hoop, has been unleashed upon the earth in the deadly form of the nuclear bomb.<sup>41</sup>

Thankfully, according to this story, the knowledge of the sacred fire has not been completely lost. The flame is protected by the Baba Yaga. She will not let anyone with false motives or an impure heart have access to the flame. She will bestow the flame of ancestral knowledge only to those who have successfully completed her initiation.

Baba Yaga rewards Vasalisa with the flame housed within a human skull.

According to Pinkola Estes the skull:

Is a symbol associated with what some old-style archeologists called ‘ancestral worship’. In the older religious rites which practiced ancestral kinship, bones were recognized as the agents for calling the spirits, the skulls being the most salient part. In ancestral kinship, it is believed that the special and timeless knowledge of the old ones of the community lives on in their very bones after death. The skull is thought to be the dome which houses a powerful remnant of the departed soul...one which, if asked, can call the entire spirit of the dead person back for a time in order to be consulted.<sup>42</sup>

Therefore, the reward for an initiate of Baba Yaga is twofold. Vasalisa receives both the sacred fire and the wisdom power of her ancestors. The path of this story, and

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<sup>41</sup>Nancy Red Star, *Star Ancestors: Indian Wisdomkeepers Share the Teaching of the Extraterrestrials*, (Rochester, Vermont: Destiny Books, 2000), 65.

<sup>42</sup> Pinkola Estes, 111.

the path of my indigenous mind recovery work leads directly to the bones of my ancestors. These bones carry the power, **the special and timeless knowledge of the old ones.**

*I call you forth, Jezi Baba, wild terrifying hag, enchantress, Mistress of Magic. Guardian of the forest, herbalist who walks with the medicine of the sacred mushroom. You who oversees spiritual initiations and protects the entrance to the Other World. You have the power to destroy and to heal. You aid those who are wise and pure of heart, and you destroy the wicked with your awesome and terrifying powers.*

*I humbly stand before you, begging for your assistance. I know that your eyes can penetrate into my soul, and that you can see my good intentions. I am crying for the soul of my people whose old ways have been devastated by wars, invasion, emigration and assimilation. I cry out for the children, the elders, the mothers and fathers, the plants, the animals, the waters, the air, the future of life on this beloved planet.*

*I ask you, Jezi Baba to open the doors to the Other World, the places where the magic and power of my Slavic ancestors has been hidden. I ask your permission to walk in your sacred realms, in the darkness, in the forest. Please guide me in my work. Please return your sacred flame to the Polish Slavic people.*

### **Following Jezi Baba's Trail: Heeding the Call of My Polish Ancestors**

*"Synchronicity is the breath of the ancestors moving thru the branches of our lives."*  
Apela Colorado

When I entered the Indigenous Mind Program, I had no idea that I would focus on my Polish ancestors. I had initially hoped to further my study with traditional Mexican healers, which was the logical direction to take my Master's work. I had familiarity with

Mexican culture, I had traveled to Mexico, had good connections with traditional people there, and I spoke some Spanish. Yet from my first day at UCS-Naropa, my Polish ancestors began to call for my attention. You might say that the small Polish doll was jumping around in my pocket, clamoring for my attention.

In the process of recovering our earth-based ways of knowing, Apela Colorado has taught us to “pay attention to what shows up.” On my first day of school at UCS-Naropa, I received a visit from the Patroness of Poland, Our Lady of Czestochowa. One of the Naropa staff handed me an envelope with a generous travel scholarship from the Our Lady of Czestochowa foundation. A Catholic prayer card of her was enclosed with my notification letter. I thought that the icon of Czestochowa had been chosen for me because I was of Polish descent. Yet that was not the case. Each student who had received this scholarship, regardless of their ancestry, had received their gift from the Our Lady of Czestochowa Foundation.

Later I discovered that the benefactor of the Indigenous Mind Concentration was a Polish American woman, who had grown up in the Polish ghetto of Chicago before making her millions in the computer industry. Her foundation had been named after Our Lady of Czestochowa, the patron saint of her Polish family.

The trail of Polish clues continued to appear on my path. Of the first four students to enter the Indigenous Mind Concentration, half of us (myself and Barbara Dean) were of Polish descent. Apela told us that she never had students of Polish descent show up before in her classes. What was the significance of all this Polish synchronicity?

I initially resisted the call of my Polish ancestors. I knew barely anything about Polish culture and could not even begin to pronounce the consonant ridden language. Furthermore, I was geographically and emotionally distant from the Polish side of my family. I had doubt about my ability to travel to Poland. Where on earth would I find the money to fund such a trip?

Yet my Polish ancestors were persistent in calling for my attention. Like the small doll in Vasalisa's pocket, they continued to guide me through the forest of my doubts and fears. In May of 2002, I received a generous scholarship from the Kosciuszko Foundation, a prominent Polish American organization. I had written my scholarship essay describing my work as researching traditional Polish folk medicine. Once again financial gifts poured to me from a Polish source. My ancestors were supporting me on every level to do my work.

By April of 2002, I finally heeded the call of my Polish ancestors and decided to travel to Poland. However, I was uncertain how I would structure my trip. Since I did not speak Polish, I did not want to travel alone, yet I was reluctant to join an organized tour of Poland. I knew I wanted to see much more of Poland than simply the popular tourist attractions, like castles and cathedrals. As an herbalist and a lover of the earth, I wanted to connect to the Polish land, and to the most traditional people I could find.

Miraculously, my Polish ancestors came to my aid once again. In mid April I was talking to a massage client of mine about my proposed trip to Poland. She exclaimed, "You won't believe it, but just last night I was at the Goldman awards, and I heard the most amazing Polish woman speak. Her name is Jadwiga Lopata, and she is the founder of the International Coalition to Protect the Polish Countryside (ICPPC). She won the

Goldman award (a prestigious environmentalist award) for her work supporting and organizing traditional Polish farmers.” Moreover, my client explained that Lopata’s organization sponsors eco-tours of Poland to educate people about the cultural and ecological wealth of the Polish countryside. In the ICPPC brochure, Lopata writes:

**THE RURAL VOICE MUST BE HEARD**

As never before, the future of the Polish countryside hangs in balance. On one hand, the thousands of small family farms that fan out across the length and breadth of the country hold the key to maintaining the wealth of biodiversity for which Poland is renowned. On the other hand, the forces of globalization and agribusiness are attempting to establish a factory-farming monoculture on this same land.... Poland stands as a bridge between the first and third world, offering a model of self-sufficient and sustainable farming skills to both.<sup>43</sup>

Eco-tours of Poland? I couldn’t believe my luck! For several weeks I had been searching the internet for ecologically friendly ways to travel in Poland. Over the next few months I corresponded by email with a woman from ICPPC, Danuta. When I wrote to Danuta I told her that I was interested in meeting very traditional farming people. She helped arrange our trip and made reservations for myself and Barbara Dean at four different farms in rural Poland. We would be living with traditional families in the heart of the Polish countryside.

On October 4, 2002 I made my ancestral pilgrimage to Poland, the homeland of my paternal great-grandparents. Over the next month I traveled throughout Poland and lived with three traditional farming families. I feasted on home cooked meals of cabbage, beets, sausage, pickles, homemade butter and cheese, bread, apple cake, potato pancakes and pierogi. I visited sacred sites, hiked through fields and forests, wrote down all my dreams, and documented my journey.

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<sup>43</sup> Jadwiga Lopata, and Julian Rose, *The International Coalition to Protect the Polish Countryside*, <http://www.icppc.sfo.pl>. (10 Dec. 2003)

Colorado writes, “The indigenous scientist is an integral part of the research process.”<sup>44</sup> Unlike western science which is objective, in indigenous science, “You put yourself in it.”<sup>45</sup> Indigenous science is a subjective, experiential process. In this way, during my journey to Poland my experiences, my feelings, and my dreams were all an integral part of my research.

Another of the basic tenants of Indigenous Science is: “All of nature is an active and equal research partner.”<sup>46</sup> While in Poland, I actively engaged with the spirits of the Polish land. The Polish animals, soil, plants, trees, rivers, forests and mountains were my companions as well as my ancestral research partners. The Polish land taught me about my Polish heritage by welcoming me into the landscape which had shaped the character and culture of the Polish people.

In a sense, my journey to Poland was like Vasalisa’s journey to Baba Yaga’s hut. The ancestral flame that I carry home is the gift of the stories that come from the Polish land. I pray that these stories have the power to ignite the flame of remembrance for the Polish indigenous mind.

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<sup>44</sup>Colorado, *Indigenous Science and Western Science, A Healing Convergence*”, 1.

<sup>45</sup> Apela Colorado, “Indigenous Science Lecture,” Naropa University Oakland: Maui, November 2001.

<sup>46</sup>Colorado, *Indigenous Science and Western Science, A Healing Convergence*”, 1.

## Chapter II

### Stories from the Polish Land



*The stories all come from the land.*

Larry Mercurieff, Aleut storyteller

*Like a tree, the roots of native science go deep into the history, body and blood of the land.*

Apela Colorado

## The Dragon and the Lizard

On October 6, 2002, Barbara and I first touched ground on our Polish motherland in the magical city of Krakow. Barbara and I spent several nights in Krakow as we oriented ourselves to Poland. We meandered down cobblestone streets drinking in the sites, smells and sounds of Poland. On the eve of our first full day in Krakow we were guided to the lair of Smok, the famous dragon of Krakow. The significance of discovering the Polish dragon must first be explained by telling the story of the Kiha Wahine, the sacred giant lizard of Maui.

Every semester, one of our Indigenous Mind intensives takes place in Lahaina on the Hawaiian island of Maui. We gather at Pakala, home of Hawaiian kahuna Keola Sequeira, who is a world-class wood carver and canoe maker. Pakala is situated on the border of “the spiritual and political power center of the Hawaiian Kingdom,”<sup>47</sup> *Moko’ula*. Moko’ula, which means “sacred island” was once home to generations of royal Hawaiian families.<sup>48</sup>

According to Hawaiian oral tradition, the princess Kala’aiheana was born at Moko’ula to the king of Maui, Kihapiilani. Their royal family “had for centuries been tied to the powerful Mo’o Akkua (large lizard like gods).”<sup>49</sup> When the princess Kala’aiheana died, she was buried under the sacred pond. Her spirit united with that of the guardian of her family, the *Mo’o*, the sacred lizard. She became the sacred goddess known as the *Kiha Wahine* and was revered by the Hawaiian people. The Kiha Wahine

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<sup>47</sup> *Moko’ula*, “History,” [http:// www.mokoula.com/history/history.shtml](http://www.mokoula.com/history/history.shtml) (10 Dec. 2003).

<sup>48</sup> Roy Nickerson, *Lahaina, Royal Capital of Hawaii*, Honolulu, HI: Hawaiian Service, P.O. Box 2835, Honolulu, Hawaii 96803, 5.

<sup>49</sup> *Moko’ula*, “History,” [http:// www.mokoula.com/history/history.shtml](http://www.mokoula.com/history/history.shtml) (10 Dec. 2003).

is the sacred keeper of genealogy and ancestral remembrance. She was “the one sacred being that unified all the bloodlines of all the inhabited Hawaiian islands.”<sup>50</sup>

Unfortunately, in the early 1900’s a sugar mill re-routed the water that fed the pond so that it could irrigate its cane fields. Soon the waters of Moko’ula dried up and the sacred pond disappeared. Today a baseball field and tennis courts stand in its place. However, Hawaiian people are working to restore Moko’ula:

### **Moku’ula, a royal and sacred sanctuary.**

Lying virtually undisturbed for almost a century, Moku’Ula, a political and spiritual center, and ancient home of Maui’s Chiefly lines, awaits its reawakening.<sup>51</sup>

The sacred Hawaiian lizard, the Kiha Wahine watches over our intensives in Hawaii. Her statue, carved by Sequeira, stands in the ceremonial room where we gather for classes and for Awa ceremonies. Her spirit guides the students. She activates our ability to remember our own spiritual genealogy.

### **Discovering the Polish Dragon**

When I arrived in Poland, although I was suffering from jet lag, I was thrilled and invigorated to be standing on Polish soil. I spent much of my first day in Poland walking around the streets of Krakow. Krakow, unlike many other major Polish cities, was not destroyed in WWII. The Nazis had occupied Krakow and made it their headquarters; consequently they did not bomb Krakow as they had the cities of Warsaw, Wilno and Lwow.

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<sup>50</sup> Nickerson, 11.

<sup>51</sup> *Moku’ula*, “History,” [http:// www.mokoula.com/history/history.shtml](http://www.mokoula.com/history/history.shtml) (10 Dec. 2003).

On the eve of our first full day in Krakow, as darkness quilted the city, Barbara and I dined by candlelight. We ate pierogi, Polish dumplings, filled with potatoes, farmer's cheese, and cabbage. As I glanced through our guidebook to Poland, I came across an interesting entry: "*Smok, the Dragon of Krakow.*"

According to legend, once there lived a fierce and terrible dragon named Smok. Smok lived in a cave next to the Vistula River and ravaged the surrounding countryside. Smok feasted on the villager's cows and sheep, and an occasional unlucky person. The ruling king promised his lovely princess daughter in marriage to whomever could destroy the dragon. Although many brave knights tried to kill the dragon, Smok was finally outwitted and defeated by a humble cobbler (or farmer or royal prince, depending on the version of the story) named Krakus. Krakus had stuffed a dead sheep with sulphur, and placed it as bait outside the dragon's cave. Smok discovered the sheep and devoured it hungrily. The dragon became extremely thirsty and ran to the river to drink. It drank and drank and drank so much water until it finally exploded into a spectacular display of fireworks. After Krakus saved his people from Smok, he married the princess, and later became the new monarch after the king's death. The people commemorated brave Krakus by naming their settlement, Krakow, after him.<sup>52</sup>

I glanced at our city map of Krakow. Surprisingly, we were only a short distance from Smok's cave. After finishing our delicious meal, we headed off toward the Vistula River and to the lair of the Polish dragon. Smok's cave is located at the base of another famous site called Wawel hill. According to our guidebook: "The very symbol of

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<sup>52</sup>I compiled my text about Smok from three primary sources:  
Krystof Dydzinski, *Poland*, (Victoria, Australia: Lonely Planet Publications, 2002), 199.  
Okana, *Singing Back the Sun: A Dictionary of Old Polish Customs and Beliefs*, (Edwards, NY: Okana's Web Publishing, 1999), 52.  
Joanne Asala, *Polish Folklore and Myth*, (Iowa City: Penfield Press, 2001), 85-86.

Poland, Wawel is saturated with Polish history as no other place in the country. It was the seat of the kings for over 500 years from the early days of the Polish state, and even after the center of power moved to Warsaw, it retained much of its symbolic and almost magical power.”<sup>53</sup> On top of Wawel hill stands both Wawel Castle and the Royal Cathedral, both important landmarks in Polish history. Many famous Polish heroes and kings are buried in the crypt underneath the Royal Cathedral. Wawel Castle is a popular tourist attraction and museum of Polish history and art.

The Hindu people also recognize Wawel hill as a sacred site. According to Hindu belief, the planet earth has seven sacred sites, or chakras, which are imbued with extraordinary spiritual energy. They believe that Wawel Hill is the site of the earth’s 4<sup>th</sup> chakra. Consequently, many Hindu people also pilgrimage to Wawel Hill to commune with the holy power that dwells there.

As we wound down the path to Wawel hill, we could see Wawel Castle looming in the distance. Although it was dark we passed many other people walking. We arrived at the base of Wawel Hill and the bank of the Vistula River. Like a huge black snake, the river greeted us. The Vistula River is Poland’s treasure and the last wild river in Europe.

A walking path lined the river’s edge. We passed lovers holding hands, old men sitting on benches drinking vodka, a circle of young people smoking and laughing, and a few men playing the guitar and singing. The night air was crisp, and I could detect the first scent of fall. Consulting our map once again, we directed ourselves toward Smok’s cave.

Hours had passed since closing time and steel bars barricaded the entrance to the cave. I peered inside, but only darkness greeted my eyes. A few yards from the cave’s

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<sup>53</sup> Dydynski, 196-198.

entrance, Barbara and I discovered a huge bronze statue of the dragon Smok. Speechless, Barbara and I rested at the base of this huge statue. Our ancestors had guided us directly



to the Polish dragon! My instinct told me that there was more to Smok than the popular legends. We both agreed that we had been led to a Polish counterpart of the sacred Kiha Wahine.

We took our offerings of salt and bread that we had saved from dinner. Together we prayed at the base of Smok's statue:

*Sacred Smok, great dragon of Krakow, we have come a long way, across sea and land, on a pilgrimage to the land of our Polish ancestors. I thank you for guiding us to your home on our very first day in Poland. I thank the spirit of the Kiha Wahine, the Mo'o of Hawaii, who has taught us about the importance of giant lizards and dragons. Many dragons like yourself have been demonized by the Catholic church. I know you are not evil but a symbol of the Goddess, of the divine feminine powers, or the power of the earth. I ask that you show your true self to me, who you are beneath the tales and legends.*

After paying homage to Smok, we walked to the edge of the Vistula River. Here we again made prayers and offerings. My heart swelled as we sat next to the water. Rivers have always beckoned me, seduced me with their fresh water curves and their continuous flow. I had a moment of understanding, of knowing deeply that my love for rivers comes from my Polish ancestors who settled at the edge of rivers. Right now, as I write this thesis, I am living in a river valley. Each day in Sacramento I visit the

American River to make my prayers and offerings. The river is my ally and my research partner, for it helps to activate my ancestral memories.

After we offered our bread and salt to the river, our bag holding our dessert slid down the river bank and into the Vistula. Apparently the river spirits wanted something sweet as well! Barbara and I laughed as we retrieved our cake that was floating in a styrofoam container down the river. Luckily, the styrofoam protected the cake from becoming soggy. (Imagine that, a positive aspect to Styrofoam!) We first offered a generous portion of homemade Polish apple cake to the river, and then shared the remaining piece between ourselves.

The next night, in that twilight space between waking and sleeping, I had a vision of Smok. She was enormous, her body almost as wide as the Vistula River. Her dark shape arched gracefully with the curve of the river bank. I was filled with a knowing that she still existed, dwelling in another dimension.

### **The Divine Feminine in Poland: Matka Ziemia, Matka Boze and Mary Magdalene**

#### ***Matka Ziemia: Moist Mother Earth***

After our first few days in Krakow and our visitation with Smok, Barbara and I started our “eco-tour” of Poland and traveled to the Polish countryside. Historically, Polish peasants have been farming the rich Polish land for hundreds of years. In fact, the etymology of the word *Poland* reflects the ancient connection between the people and their farms. In 5 AD, the dominant Slavic tribe who settled Poland was called the Polanie. *Polanie* translates as “people of the fields”, and *pole* means “field” or a “field

dweller.”<sup>54</sup> Therefore the tribal identity of the ancient Slavic Poles is intimately connected to their relationship with the fields and farms. In this way, our immersion into traditional Polish farming life was a great way to begin our research on Polish indigenous ways.

On a cold and rainy night, we arrived at the home of our first host family, the Masters, who lived in a small town named *Lekawica* (pronounced way-ka-veet-sa). The Masters have been farming the same small plot of land for generations. Like many other small Polish farmers, since they were unable to afford the expensive commercial pesticides and fertilizers, they have always been farming organically. That evening Marcin, Helena, Szczepan, Mateusz, and Kasia Master greeted us warmly with big smiles and strong handshakes. After we were shown to our room, we were invited down to the kitchen table for *obiad*, the Polish evening meal. The pretty red plaid tablecloth was covered with heaping platters of bread, cheese, cold cuts, and vegetables. Barbara and I savored this delicious offering from the Polish fields, barns and orchards.

Our first day in the Polish countryside was bitterly cold and wet, but I was itching to walk outside and see the Polish countryside. Even in the wind and cold, my eyes delighted in the landscape. I saw green, rolling hills dotted with farmhouses and distant mountains surrounded by forests. The soil of the newly plowed fields was rich, dark and fertile. I remembered that the Polish name for the Mother Earth is *Matka Ziemia*, which translates to “Moist Mother Earth.”<sup>55</sup>

Matka Ziemia had always played a central role in the lives of the early Slavs. She

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>55</sup> Okana, 34.

represented fertility, agriculture, healing, protection, divination, and justice.<sup>56</sup> Renowned scholar and Goddess archeologist, Marija Gimbutas writes: “For centuries, Slavic peasants settled legal disputes relating to landed property by calling on the Earth as a witness. If someone swore an oath after putting a clod of earth on his or her head or swallowing it, that oath was considered binding and incontestable.”<sup>57</sup>

In Poland, *Matka Ziemia* is honored throughout the year, but particularly during harvest time. Every August, She is celebrated during *Dozynki*, the Feast of the Assumption. This feast day honors both the Virgin Mary and the harvest. This festival represents the curious blend of pagan and Catholic rites in Poland and the connection between Mother Earth, *Matka Ziemia*, and Mary the Mother of God, *Matka Boze*. Slavic pagan scholar Ainsley Friedberg writes: “Earth worship was most adamantly clung to despite the Christianizing of the Slavic world. Earth worship was transferred to the cult of Mary and is why she is such a central part of Slavic Christianity.”<sup>58</sup>

Gimbutas also refers to this phenomenon. She describes the connection between the veneration of the dark, fertile Earth Mother and the popular worship of the Black Madonna. Although the color black was associated with death and evil in Christianity, to the ancient Slavs, black represented the goodness and fertility of the earth. Gimbutas writes:

The fact that black madonnas throughout the world are focal points for pilgrimages, are regarded as miracle workers, and are among the most highly venerated of all Christian religious symbols indicates that the blackness of these miraculous madonnas still evokes profound and meaningful images and associations for devotees. For instance, the shrine at Czestochowa in southern Poland, known as the Polish Lourdes, housing the black Madonna, is the holiest

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Gimbutas, *The Language of the Goddess*, 159.

<sup>58</sup> Ainsley Friedberg, “Slavic Pagan Beliefs,” *Slavic Paganism and Witchcraft*, <http://www.hometown.aol.com/hpsosnert/beli.html>, ( 10 Dec. 2003), 11.

and most visited religious shrine in Eastern Europe.<sup>59</sup>

Later in my journey, I traveled to Czestochowa to visit this legendary black Madonna. She is a fierce, somber Virgin. Her dark eyes look both watchful and sorrowful. Her right cheek is slashed with scars from a legendary invasion by the Swedes in 1655. She is attributed with many miracles, including the many times that she rescued the Polish people from brutal invaders.

### ***Marian Pilgrimage***

During our second week in the Polish countryside, the Master's family suggested that Barbara Dean and I visit the site of another famous Polish Madonna, Kalwaria Zebrzydowska. Included by UNESCO on their World Heritage List, Kalwaria is one of the most popular religious pilgrimage sites in Poland. Founded by Mikolaj Zebrzydowski, governor of Krakow in 1600, Kalwaria was constructed in the image of the holy city of Jerusalem.<sup>60</sup> Dozens of chapels were erected over six square kilometers to represent the Catholic stations of the cross. Pilgrims walk through fields and forest to recite the rosary and to reenact the Passion of Christ. Some devout pilgrims even make this journey on their knees.

Kalwaria is unique because it is a place dedicated to both Jesus Christ and his mother Mary. In fact, many pilgrims of "Marian devotion" come here to walk the "Marian stations," dedicated solely to the mystery of Mary. Pope John Paul II, who has made several visits to Kalwaria during his papacy, endorses the pilgrimage in this way:

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<sup>59</sup> Gimbutas, *The Language of the Goddess*, 144.

<sup>60</sup> Mikolaj Rudyk, OFM, *Kalwaria Zebrzydowska, A Passion-Marian Sanctuary, History and Guide* (Wroclaw: Wydawnictwo ZET 2002), 4.

“The thing that attracts a man here again is the mystery of uniting the Mother with the Son and the Son with the Mother.”<sup>61</sup>

The center of Marian devotion at Kalwaria is the image of Our Lady Kalwaria. Inside the cathedral, in a tiny chapel to the right of the main altar hangs a painting of holy mother and child, which was brought to the church in 1641. Many miracles have been attributed to Our Lady of Kalwaria, as to her Polish counterpart Our Lady of Czestochowa. Throngs of pilgrims pass through her chapel in a steady stream. Some stop to say the rosary; others stay for Mass and Holy Communion.

When I first visited the cathedral of Kalwaria, I was caught in a herd of people filing into the chapel. Suddenly, as I was squeezed into a pew between two sturdy Polish women, a priest stepped forward and began to say Mass. In the tiny chapel, I could not leave without creating a disruption. I took a deep breath and told my recovering Catholic self that I could survive the Mass. I gazed at the image of Mary above the altar in front of me. Her crowned head was nuzzled lovingly against that of her child's. The design on her robe caught my eye. A tree of flowers covered her midnight blue cloak. Large and ornately jeweled, these flowers clamored for my attention. I thought about my own love of flowers and my work with flower essences. I thought about the Polish people's love of flowers and the floral decorations on their clothing, their folk art, and in their homes. Could this flowery Mary of Kalwaria be an example of the way that the Slavic people's love for Mother Earth was transferred to the worship of Mary?

As I closed my eyes, I allowed myself to focus on the energy of Mary that was present there. I felt immediately enveloped in a warm, loving embrace. My heart melted open and I began to cry. Her energy reminded me of a time I encountered the spirit of

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 12.

Kwan Yin in the angelic chanting of Buddhist monks and nuns. Moreover, in this tiny chapel I could feel my grandmother Helen's presence so strongly that I could almost see her in the woman next to me.

When I opened my eyes again I saw the male priest saying Mass. I noticed the other priest and brothers who were caretakers of this space. Anger churned inside of me. What happened that such a holy feminine energy was under the exclusive care of men? I felt my familiar rage at the Catholic Church, its ingrained sexism, and its denial of female leadership and power. My thoughts swam with the contradictions. On one hand, the Poles are devoted to the Divine Feminine; and yet She is forever imprisoned within the patriarchal Catholic Church.

The paradox of Kalwaria is summed up in the words of Pope John Paul II, Polish patriarch of the Catholic Church: "I would like to offer this papal rose at the feet of Our Lady of Kalwaria as a sign of gratitude for what She was and has never stopped to be in my life".<sup>62</sup> Clearly the Pope has great love and devotion to Our Lady, yet his admiration does not extend to women in general. He is the head of a religious institution that blatantly denies women the right to the spiritual authority of priesthood. I continued to be haunted by these sorts of contradictions throughout my journey.

### ***Mary Magdalene's Forgotten Chapel***

I was very moved by Matka Boze Kalwaria. After leaving the cathedral, I decided to explore the trail of the stations of the cross. On my map I found one site labeled, "Chapel of Mary Magdalene and Hermitage of Five Polish Brothers." Being a

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 24.

student of Apela Colorado I have developed an interest in Mary Magdalene and decided to investigate the sacred site the Poles had constructed for her.

Mary Magdalene's Chapel, built by Zebrzydowski in 1616, was off the beaten path. All the other chapels on this pilgrimage were on a well-trodden loop. Clutching my map, I wandered around for a while in the woods before I found Magdalene's place.

I discovered Magdalene's chapel hidden in a forest of beech trees on the crest of a very steep hill. The crumbling building was fenced in and surrounded by heaps of debris. Several signs reading "*Uwaga!*" (Danger) were posted on the surrounding fence. The only remnant of Magdalene's chapel was a wooden sign posted on the front of the building that read: *Swta Magdalena* (St. Magdalene). Waves of shock and sadness rippled through me. None of the other sacred sites on this pilgrimage were in as terrible a condition as the chapel of Mary Magdalene. The other sites were structurally sound, well kept, and well visited.

Alone and unprepared to handle the spiritual task at hand, I decided to return to this site several days later with my traveling companion, Barbara Dean. As I began my journey home, questions buzzed in my mind. Why had this structure been constructed deep in the woods far from the other stations? What had happened that Magdalene's chapel had been forgotten and neglected? How could the Polish people bestow so much honor on Mary the Mother of God, but forget the other Mary who was the constant companion of Christ and leader in the early Christian Church? Obviously, in 1616, when the chapel was constructed, Magdalene was popular enough that the chapel was built in her name. What had happened that it had fallen into a state of disrepair?

A few days later, Barbara Dean and I returned to the forgotten chapel of Mary Magdalene to perform a ceremony in her honor. We brought our offerings of bread and salt, along with a beautiful red glass candle. We were visiting Magdalene's chapel during the season of *Zadzuki*, the time of honoring ancestors. In graveyards throughout Poland families were cleaning graves of loved ones, planting fresh flowers, and decorating them with colorful candles. Pilgrims at Kalwaria placed these same candles at sites along the stations of the cross. Many of these stations were well attended to and adorned with candles, flowers, seeds and branches.

Barbara had not yet been to Magdalene's chapel. Luckily, she had brought her video camera, and we had the chance to record our pilgrimage to the chapel. The day of our pilgrimage, we were blessed with beautiful weather. After many days of unseasonable cold, today the sun shone supportively in the sky above us. The beech trees surrounding us were shimmering gold in the sunlight. A gentle breeze moved through the woods as we slowly walked towards the chapel. We could hear the soft crunch of fall leaves beneath our feet. The trees were swaying in the wind, it was as if they were waving to us. The spirit in the forest seemed vibrant and welcoming.

Just as I had been, Barbara was stunned to witness the terrible condition of Magdalene's



chapel. Barbara bravely ignored the signs that warned “*Uwaga!*” (Danger), as she pried

open the door to the chapel. The conditions inside the chapel were worse. The walls were crumbling and tarnished with graffiti. We could not find any remnants of color, beauty, or holy images. The place had been badly looted, abandoned and forgotten.

We decided to do our ritual in an arched enclave outside of the building. As we videotaped ourselves, we first talked about the significance of Mary Magdalene to each of us. Next, we made our offerings to Mary Magdalene. We gave her bread and salt, the traditional Polish offerings. Finally we lit the red glass candle for her.

Two significant things occurred during our Magdalene ceremony. First, the videotape ran out exactly at the moment we stopped talking and began our ritual. Oftentimes in sacred ceremonies this happens; either the recording of a ceremony is prohibited, or often the attempt to do so is thwarted. For me this was a signal that our ceremony was powerful and authentic.

Secondly, as we prayed to Magdalene and lit the candle for her, we felt a huge presence of Spirit. This Spirit was so strong Barbara became dizzy. It was as if we had opened a doorway that had been shut for centuries, and a huge rush of energy and spirit poured in. Fortunately, from all my years in Native American ceremonies, I had the experience to understand what was happening. I asked Barbara to sit on the earth with me and drink some water.

Resting close to the earth helped ground the energy. As Barbara and I sat there on a soft mound of autumn leaves, we shared a piece of chocolate to help revive ourselves. We talked about what we each had experienced in our ceremony for Magdalene. Together we reached a true moment of indigenous mind, the state the Iroquois call “The Great Peace”. Colorado writes about this place: “The end point of an indigenous

scientific process is a known and recognized place. This point of balance, referred to by my own tribe as the Great Peace, is both peaceful and electrifyingly alive.”<sup>63</sup>

Months later, at the University of Creation Spirituality I attended another Magdalene ceremony. Apela Colorado had commissioned a stained glass window of Mary Magdalene in the library of UCS, and this day was the unveiling. Both Matthew Fox and Apela Colorado were presiding over the ceremony. Matthew Fox talked about the buried history of Mary Magdalene, and her role as a prominent leader in the early church. Marlene DeNardo, Barbara Dean and I read passages from the Gospel of Magdalene. Apela Colorado recounted her story of her visitation by Magdalene in the south of France. As Apela spoke a huge spirit once again entered the room. Touched by this spirit, many people at the ceremony began to cry. I recognized the spirit as the same energy I had encountered during our ritual at Magdalene’s chapel. It was in that moment that I clearly identified the energy as the spirit of Mary Magdalene herself.

### **The Teachings of the Forest**

*“When we traveled to the highlands, I was transported magically back into the world of forest spirits, where trees sang in the wind, expressing their gratitude that we came, and that we remembered to visit them, and where Polish elves laughed gleefully and also in thanksgiving.”*

Barbara Dean

The Masters family truly welcomed us into their hearts and home. During our next few weeks with the Masters, we were treated to three delicious home cooked organic meals per day. We learned to milk cows, churn butter, and make cheese. We rode on a horse and buggy, roasted kielbasa over open fire, and laughed heartily with our new Polish friends around the dinner table.

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<sup>63</sup> Colorado, “Indigenous Science and Western Science, A Healing Convergence,” 2.

During our third week in Poland, Barbara and I left the Master's family to travel to the mountain village Zawoja Barancowa. In Zawoja, we stayed with the Kobiela family, whose home was situated at the base of the beautiful Babia Gora mountain. Covered with a beech and pine forest, Babia Gora (translated as "woman mountain") towered majestically over the valley. Farmhouses dotted the rolling hills. Rivers and streams wound around trees and stones.

Barbara and I walked daily to the forest past the farmhouses, past the cows grazing in fields, the chickens pecking the moist earth, and the chattering turkeys. We passed fields of peasants picking the last crop of beets before the fields were to be plowed for the winter. Men, women, children, and elders stooped over to pull root vegetables from the dark fertile earth.

One day, as we were walking, we noticed a very tiny old lady ahead of us. She was hurling sticks and yelling at some chickens- goodness knows what the chickens had done- but I felt glad that I wasn't one of them. The little old woman was strong and feisty. She wore the traditional Polish peasant clothing, a cotton dress, a checkered apron, and a scarf around her head. We admired her from afar and both thought that she might be a person who knew something about the old ways. For the rest of the day, Barbara was fixated with this little old lady. She wondered how old she was, what her name was, and if we could meet her. I thought her hopes were too high.

Meanwhile, Barbara and I were having a hard time adjusting to life in the mountains. The climate was harsh and the people felt unwelcoming. The miserably cold and wet weather forced us to stay in our room for most of the day. I knew in my bones that this place had a lot of magic and teachings, but I didn't know how to access it.

One night I had a dream. In this dream I was with a group of people trapped in a small bedroom. As we planned our escape, a voice filled my head: “*If you feed the fairies, they will help you.*” I awoke knowing the message: I must make an offering to the spirits of the forest. We had forgotten to make offerings, and therefore the doorways to the spirit world were closed to us.

Later, after lunch Barbara and I walked to a stream in the forest. I remembered African elder Yacine Kouyate’s teachings about water: “When you are stuck, go to the water and make your prayer and offering.”<sup>64</sup> We needed to introduce ourselves in a proper way to this place, and to the spirits that lived in the forest.

I crouched beside the stream as I set down my salt and piece of bread. I talked to the *leszi*, the woodland elves who are guardians and protectors of the forest. The *leszi*, whose name is derived from “*leschia*”, the old Slavic word for forest, have bulging green eyes and bluish hued faces (from their blue blood).<sup>65</sup> Some say they are covered with black hair; others describe them as having long green beards.<sup>66</sup> Known as tricksters of the forest, the *leszi* wear their clothing backwards and their shoes on the wrong feet. Folk tradition says it is important to make the *leszi* an offering of bread, salt or candy before entering the forest, so not to be tricked by them.<sup>67</sup> For good measure, I rolled some tobacco and made my prayer in my Native American way as well.

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<sup>64</sup> Yacine Kouyate, “Indigenous Science Lecture, (Naropa University- Oakland, April 2002).

<sup>65</sup> Okana, 32.

<sup>66</sup> Larousse, *The New Larousse Encyclopedia of Mythology*. Translated by Richard Aldington and Delano Ames (New York: The Hamlyn Publishing Group, 1978), 290.

<sup>67</sup> Ainsley Friedberg, “Slavic Gods”, *Slavic Paganism and Witchcraft*  
<http://www.hometown.aol.com/hpsosnert/gods.html>, (10 Dec. 2003).

After making our prayers and offerings, our heavy mood lifted. We walked home, less concerned with the cold wet weather, paying more attention to the sounds, smells and sights of the forest.

The next day we hiked on a longer trail that meandered through the forest. We were a little unclear about the trail's destination, since neither of us could read Polish and interpret the map properly. At one point in our hike, we both became worried that we might be lost.

As we searched for familiar ground, we heard a rustling ahead of us. What could it be? A bear? A wolf? The leszi? My eyes beheld a site that couldn't be both more surprising and comforting. On the trail ahead of us walked the tiny old woman, dragging a huge armload of branches in each of her arms. The branches she carried were twice the height of her tiny frame. She looked up at Barbara and I, stopped walking, and began chattering away in Polish. We asked her with a mixture of English and lively gesticulations: "Can we help you carry these sticks?" I think she replied, "No thank you, I can do it myself." Running into this little old woman was a two-fold gift for us.

First, we knew we weren't lost, and couldn't be too far from our destination. Secondly, we had encountered for the second time this spirited crone of the forest.



Later that day when we returned home to our host family, Barbara asked Kasia, the young woman who was our translator, if she knew of this mysterious old woman whom we had met. Kasia, tickled by our interest in her neighbor, smiled as she replied, “Yes, of course! Her name is Bronislawa. She is very old, but very friendly.” Kasia then brought out an audio tape made by the BBC to play for us. Apparently, a journalist from the BBC had visited their village last year, and produced a radio show called “Songs from the Earth,” in which both Kasia’s family and Bronislawa were interviewed and sang songs. We asked Kasia many questions about Bronislawa. Barbara ventured, “Do you think she would be willing to talk to us?” Kasia said she thought so, and she would be willing to come with us as a translator.

Rain drizzled from the sky the day we went to talk to Bronislawa. We were bundled in jackets, hats and scarves and carrying our umbrellas as Kasia led us to her house. Our narrow muddy path meandered toward a small stream. As we crossed the stream, stepping carefully on large stones, I noticed a bright yellow color on the rock in front of me. Lying on a large, smooth stone was a small lizard. The lizard was black with yellow spots and its body glistened in the rain. I shouted out to Barbara, “Look! The Kiha Wahine!” Not only did our eyes behold a lizard, the symbol of the sacred Hawaiian Mo’o; but also this lizard was flecked with golden yellow, the color sacred to the Kiha Wahine herself. Barbara gazed at our reptilian friend and agreed that indeed this was a very good sign. We celebrated this fortuitous message from spirit. On the way to visit the Polish elder, we were gifted with a visitation from the lizard, the symbol of genealogy and ancestral wisdom. We could not have asked for a better sign.

Bronislawa greeted us with a big smile. She had not known that we were coming, but she warmly welcomed us into her home. We crowded into her tiny kitchen and stripped off our wet jackets. Her kitchen had a wood burning stove, a small table, a sink and a few cupboards. Paint chipped from the sky blue walls. Above her door hung a picture of Our Lady of Czestochowa, framed in dried flowers.

We asked Bronislawa about her life and her family. She was 89 years old, mother of two daughters and four sons. She has 17 grandchildren and 10 great-grandchildren. She has lived next to the mountain most of her life. She told us that life in the old days was very hard, a lot of hard work, everything had to be done by hand. She sang us songs.

Bronislawa taught us a few things that I will always remember: “Everyday I wake at dawn to sing and pray.” She described to us how she sings all the time; to the animals, the plants, the forest, and the mountain. When I asked her if she used medicinal herbs, she told us: “Everyday I gather herbs from the forest to make my tea.” The secret to her happiness, she said is: “Pray all the time and don’t quarrel!” Bronislawa is a true keeper of the old Polish ways. I cherish the time we spent with her, and hold her teachings close to my heart. Her wise words are keys to help unlock my own Polish indigenous mind: *Sing. Pray. Gather herbs. Live peacefully.*

### **Recovering What Has Been Lost: Finding My Polish Family**

Soon after our interview with Bronislawa, a miracle occurred: I received a phone call from my own Polish family!

I had traveled to Poland with two addresses scrawled in my journal. Before leaving, I had contacted my Aunt Judi who is the keeper of our Polish family’s

genealogy. I asked her if she had any information on our living relatives in Poland. I remember my grandmother telling me before she died that we had family in Poland. She herself had visited Poland with my step grandfather in the late 1970's. I still recall the gifts they gave me from their trip: Polish coins, including one with an image of Pope John Paul II, and a small carved wooden box.

My Aunt Judi located my deceased grandmother's address book and found two Polish addresses. She warned me that they could be over 30 years old. When I arrived in Poland, I carried around these addresses, not quite knowing what to do with them. Both were for Warsaw, which was a good train ride north of where I was staying. Besides, I didn't read, write or speak a word of Polish. Even if I successfully completed the impossible task of making it to these homes, what would I do when I arrived?

My traveling companion Barbara Dean was also looking for her Polish family. In her intensive search, she emailed the Polish Red Cross, and even arranged an interview with a local priest. Her perseverance inspired me to take action with the information I had. One day, while walking through the Polish countryside I had a revelation: I could ask the daughter of my host family, who spoke quite good English, to help me write a letter. This way, I could attempt to make contact with my family without having to travel all the way to Warsaw. If my relatives were still at these locations, I could give them a phone number to contact me at my host family's home.

This is the letter I wrote:

*Dear Family:  
My name is Merry Atava Swiecicka, and I am the granddaughter of Helen Przybysz and Michael Swiecicki of the United States. I am in Poland, and would like to meet my Polish family. If you are available to meet me, please call me.*

I mailed the letters ceremoniously with a prayer. About a week later, I was awakened early by a phone call. Believe it or not, my relatives had received the letter and called me back immediately. Luckily, my Polish cousin Kasia spoke fluent English. Kasia telephoned to say that her family (my family!) would love to meet me in Warsaw.

The following week I was on the express train from Krakow to Warsaw. Barbara had graciously volunteered to accompany me to meet my family. I recognized my family immediately at the train station. My cousin Kasia stood out with her bright reddish-pink hair. She introduced me to her mother Gryczyna and grandfather Bogdan. Our eyes welled with tears as we embraced.

The next three days visiting my Polish family flew by in a whirlwind. It was both exciting and surreal to meet blood relatives from a totally different culture. We shared the intimacy of DNA, but in many ways we were strangers. My family treated both Barbara and me like honored guests. We were guided around old Warsaw and escorted to museums and shopping centers. My family took us dancing, sang Polish anthems for us around the dinner table, and cooked heaps and heaps of food.

The shift from the countryside to the city was harsh. In a flash we were dropped into the modern, industrialized part of Poland. I learned that not every one in Poland lives the traditional life of Polish farmers. My family's life did not revolve around the cycle of the seasons, the land and the crops. Like citizens of other cultures affected by western civilization, they watched television, drank gallons of coke, and cursed in traffic jams.

My Polish family shared with me stories about the time when my grandparents visited back in the late 1970's. I learned new things about my Polish grandmother that I

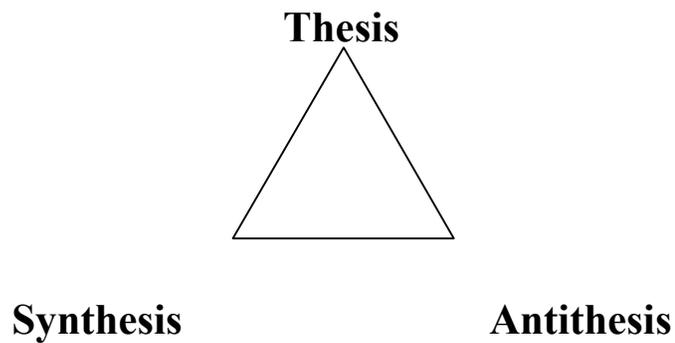
had never known. I learned that she had loved to sing and dance. I was able to view my Babcia with new eyes.

The first night we stayed with my family I had an unusual dream. In my dream state I was filled with deep, deep grief. My chest felt heavy, my breathing was labored and I began to weep. My dreamtime sobbing was so powerful that I awoke, still breathing heavily and feeling broken hearted. Somewhere deep inside of me, the Pandora's box of old family pain had been opened. Whose pain and grief did I feel? Was I feeling an ancient memory of loss and separation, of relationships that were severed by immigration? Did I feel my grandmother Helen, or was it her mother who had left her family in Poland to come to the United States?

I am thankful to have reconnected with my Polish family. Today, almost one year later, I am still processing the experience. What does it mean to reconnect with these relatives? How do I maintain these relationships? I have many cousins, aunts and uncles in the US with whom I have very little contact. I am painfully aware of the breaks in relationships with these American relatives. Can I form connections with my Polish family when I have not done so yet with my Polish American family? Why am I more drawn to my relatives in other countries? Can I make peace with all the contradictions? I continue to pray for guidance and healing for all of my family.

## **Chapter III**

### **Synthesis, Antithesis and Thesis**



*The three of us walk slowly into the darkness of the cave. The more we trust the more light appears to guide our steps. I can see a halo of light surrounding each being. Here in the darkness we are illuminated.*

Journal entry, Big Island lava tube, Maui Residency, November 2001.

*The battle is within ourselves... what is it that I want to release?*

Mr. Hale Makua, Maui Residency, April 2003

## Weaving

*“A woman’s task is to take all the different strands and to weave them together.”*  
Apela Colorado

*This process is alive. The Indigenous Mind is alive, the process is working me even as I write about it. I am in the center of my own sacred ceremony of remembrance.*

I have retreated to my parent’s house in Sacramento to work on my thesis. For thousands of years the Southern Maidu people lived here in thatched huts along side what is now called the American River. Each day I bike to the river to make my prayers and offerings to the spirits of this land. The river revives me, helps me with my flow of writing and emotions.

Last week during a scorching heat wave, I biked to the river to cool off. Before going into the water, I placed my towel in front of a strand of a spider web that stretched across from an oak to a willow tree. After my swim, I sat on my towel under the oak tree, feeling delightfully refreshed by the water. With my eyes I traced the line of the spider web strand to the fully formed web. In the center of the web sat an enormous black spider, with a smaller brown spider a few inches below her.

Suddenly Apela’s words echoed in my head: *“A woman’s task is to take all the strands and weave them together.”* I thought, “Aha! Spider medicine.” I looked up again at the spider, this time with more thought and appreciation of its medicine. Just then, my eye caught a glimpse of another spider web. Again a large black spider was poised close to center with her child or mate a few inches below. No wonder I was thinking of weaving, I thought to myself, I’m sitting below two huge grandmother spiders. At that moment my gaze drifted a few feet above in the oak tree. I shuddered as

I noticed one web, and then another, and another..... I counted more than 25 huge spiders! Normally, I am not afraid of spiders, but my skin was crawling as I realized I was sitting in a virtual den of spiders. I felt like I was in an episode of the Twilight Zone.<sup>68</sup>

I recognized this as an important moment of indigenous mind. Although I had sat at this very spot several times before, I had never noticed the spiders. I saw the spiders exactly when I was thinking about weaving the threads of my own story together. I took out some salt and made an offering to the spiders. I introduced myself and described to them what I am doing.

*Dear spiders, sacred spinners and weavers. To my Polish Slavic ancestors, you have the sacred power of creativity and weaving. I have experienced many wonderful blessings in these past two years. I have journeyed to Poland, the land of my ancestors. I have journeyed to Maui, and sat in circle with elders from around the world. I have learned about the stars. I have suffered the violation of my home being robbed twice, and then later my car being stolen. I have been uprooted and migrating. And yet I know somewhere there is a common strand that ties all of this together. Beloved spiders, with your infinite wisdom of weaving, please hear my prayer, please accept my offering. This salt comes from the salt mines in Poland. My Polish Slavic ancestors used this as an offering to the spirits of their land, I now humbly offer this salt to you.*

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<sup>68</sup> Twilight Zone is a television show that ran from 1959-1964. Hosted by Ron Sterling, the show was a series of strange, bizarre and tragic tales.

## Lessons of Antithesis

*“Healing of culturally inflicted wounds upon the land and people of the land are intrinsic to Native Mind. The wayfinder identifies and works to heal wounding that repeats throughout her familial and cultural lineage.”*

Kimmy Johnson

The focus of our Spring 2003 Indigenous Mind Maui Intensive was storytelling, learning how to tell our remembrance stories in a traditional way. This intensive was designed to help me and other senior students begin the process of writing our Master’s thesis. During this intensive, I asked elder Hale Makua about a dream I had. My dream was of three celestial bodies aligned in a triangle in the night sky. I knew this great heavenly triangle heralded something significant, but I awoke not remembering what. Mr. Makua responded to my question with a teaching about the triangle. “The triangle is the beginning of energy,” he said. “On the left synthesis, to the right is antithesis, and the point above is thesis.” Everyone in the room burst out laughing. This wise elder was gently reminding me of the phase of this process I was in: *thesis*. I have repeatedly reflected on Makua’s teaching as I engage in writing my thesis.

Thesis is linked to both synthesis and antithesis. I have more easily grasped the concept of synthesis. I understand that I must synthesize all that I have experienced in the past two years into my thesis. But antithesis? After much thought and prayer, this message came to me: *By experiencing antithesis what is true and essential is revealed.* Antithesis is also related to what Jungians call shadow.

To engage in the process of recovering tribal mind is to engage with shadow. We face our individual, familial, and ancestral shadows. According to Jungians, the shadow holds great power. Likewise, Apela Colorado teaches that shadow work helps to ground

our indigenous mind recovery process. Like a trail of crumbs in the forests, cultural shadows can be traced back from generation to generation. These cultural ancestral shadows leave their imprint in the stories of history. By experiencing my own personal antithesis, I have recognized how my ancestor's shadow stories continue to play out in my life.

### **The Historical Shadow**

*To let go of the pain of the past is to live a renewed life again and again.*  
Auntie Poe Poe, Maui, November 2001.

Last July I was beginning to prepare for my trip to Poland. I began to read about Polish history. Poland has a history of countless invasions, of being trampled from all directions. Poland has been brutally invaded from the south in 1241 by the Mongolian Tartars; from the west in the 1280's by the German Teutonic Knights; from the north in 1655 by the Swedes; and later by Russians from the east.

In 1795, an era of Polish history known as the Partitioning began. For 123 years, Poland was divided up and occupied by Russia, Germany and Austria. The state of Poland was completely erased from the map. Both Russian and German colonizers attempted to eradicate the Polish culture. Polish language was outlawed in education, commerce and administration.<sup>69</sup> Poles were forbidden to own land. In Prussia, the Germans invented racial theories of Slavic inferiority, and passed a law in 1898 making Poles second class citizens.<sup>70</sup> However, despite all the years of Partitioning, the strong spirited Polish people were able to retain their language, culture and Polish identity.

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<sup>69</sup> Dydynski, 26.

<sup>70</sup> Adam Zamoyski, *The Polish Way* (New York, NY: Hippocrene Books, Inc.), 302.

After the partitioning of Poland ended in 1914, Poland enjoyed a few brief years of freedom. On September 1 of 1939, the Germans marched into Poland. Soon after the Germans invaded from the west, the Russians marched in from the east. Poland was occupied and brutalized by the Nazis until the end of WW II in 1945. The Nazis chose Polish land as the location to set up their network of death camps. On Polish soil, over five million people, including Jews, gypsies, homosexuals and intellectuals were brutally murdered at these concentration camps. The entire Polish Jewish population was decimated. The impact of WW II on Poland was devastating. Polish historian Zamoyski writes:

The Poles are the nation who really lost the Second World War. They fought continuously from the first day to the bitter end and beyond. They put more effort into the struggle than any other society; they lost over half a million fighting men and women, and six million civilians; they were left with one million war-orphans and over half a million invalids. According to the Bureau of War Reparations, the country had lost 38% of its national assets, compared to the 1.5% and .8% of France and Britain respectively. They lost vast tracts of their country and their two great cultural centers of Wilno and Lwow. They also saw the greater part of their heritage destroyed.<sup>71</sup>

Unfortunately, Poland's misery did not end with WW II. The Russian occupation continued for decades longer, until the fall of communism in 1990. During this time many Polish people who fought for freedom in WW II were taken as political prisoners by the Russians and sent to the brutal slave camps in Siberia.<sup>72</sup>

Throughout history, when the embattled Poles needed a scapegoat, it was often the Jews. Jews have a long and complex history in Poland. As the Polish state was emerging in the 10<sup>th</sup> century, Jewish merchants and travelers were already crossing into

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 371.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

Polish territory.<sup>73</sup> Later, in the 11<sup>th</sup> century, many Jews came to Poland from German and Saxon lands. Many Jews fled to escape the brutal Pogroms in Western Europe; others came to Poland seeking new financial opportunities. In 1264, the “Statute of Jewish Liberties”, signed by Prince Boleslaw the Pious, guaranteed protection and freedom of religion to the Jewish settlers in Poland.<sup>74</sup> Policies such as these allowed Jewish populations to thrive in Poland. In fact, at the start of WW II, the largest population of European Jews lived in Poland.

However, as Catholicism in Poland intensified, so did anti-Semitism: “As elsewhere in Europe, the clergy was becoming the most ideologically anti-Semitic segment of Polish society, giving vent to its Judeophobia without restraint and producing some truly poisonous texts.”<sup>75</sup> Polish history has many sad examples of violent raids against the Jews. Zealous Polish patriots raided Polish shtetls, leaving destruction and carnage in their wake. During WW II, under Nazi occupation the anti-Semitism in Poland inflamed into full-scale genocide. Some Poles collaborated with the Nazis, others turned in Jews to save their own lives. Tragically, during WW II the entire population of Polish Jews, over 3 million people, was wiped out.

The historical relationship between Jewish and Catholic Poles has many grey areas. During WW II some Polish people aided or harbored Jews at great risk to their own lives. A personal acquaintance of mine, Marta Wohl, shared with me such a story. After Marta’s Polish Jewish parents survived the ghettos and countless other horrors of the Holocaust, they then hid for the last 18 months of WW II in the forests of Eastern

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<sup>73</sup> Eva Hoffman, *Shtetl, The Life and Death of a Small Town and the World of Polish Jews* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1998), 29.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

Poland (what is now the Ukraine). During this time they were aided by a Polish Ukrainian farmer named Antoni.<sup>76</sup> By helping Marta's parents survive, Antoni put himself and his entire family at risk. The Nazis punished by death not only those who harbored Jews, but their entire family as well. Moreover, those people who aided Jews lived daily with the risk of violence and retaliation from their own neighbors if they found out that they were helping Jews.

On the other hand, my Polish Jewish friend Maura Singer Williams shared with me a less favorable account of Polish-Jewish relations. Many years after surviving the Holocaust and fleeing to the United States, Maura's Aunt Mila and Uncle Mundig returned to their home village in Poland. A taxi drove them to the place which had been their home. When they arrived, the taxi driver got out and knocked on the door of their former home. The person who answered the door exclaimed vehemently to the taxi driver: "Don't ever bring Jews here again!"<sup>77</sup>

### **The Story Repeats Itself**

As I dug deeper into the troublesome history of Poland, my own life suddenly became a small reenactment of this history. Last June one of my long-time roommates moved out of my house in Oakland and a new woman moved in. With the arrival of Zoe, a woman of Polish Jewish descent, all three of us women living together were of Polish ancestry. On July 20, in the middle of the afternoon someone broke through a window, entered into our house and robbed us. A week later, on July 27 someone dislocated the bathroom window, entered our home, and robbed us again.

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<sup>76</sup> Marta Wohl, *Unpublished Speech for Yom Hashoa, Holocaust Remembrance*, (Synagogue, Queens, NY, April 1999).

<sup>77</sup> Maura Singer Williams, personal conversation, October, 2003.

I hesitate to compare my personal situation to the repeated invasions of Poland and to the atrocities committed against the Polish Christian and Jewish people. The horrors endured by the Polish Jews are greater than in my worse nightmare. However, I can say that these two small but significant invasions into my home space awakened my cellular empathy for the history of my Polish ancestors.

I had been living in this house, which we called Jasmine Way for four years, which was the longest I had lived anywhere in my life. I had cultivated a lush flower and herb garden. After the second robbery our landlord, in a feeble attempt to make us feel safer, installed barbed wire around the perimeter of our backyard fence. What once had been my peaceful sanctuary now felt like a prison or a concentration camp. Two of our windows were boarded up, constant reminders of the assault to our property.

Traumatized and filled with fear, my roommates and I decided to move out. None of us felt safe any longer in our own home. I could not tolerate being alone in the house, even in the day. My nerves were frayed, and small noises made me jump. I could barely sleep. At night I lay awake on constant vigilance until exhaustion swept me to sleep.

In a frenzy, we started the process of moving out. Like my ancestors who had decided to leave Poland during the years of partitioning, I was forced to flee my home. Like my ancestors, I feared for my life. Like my ancestors, I left the land that I had loved and cared for.

After weeks of not knowing where I and my two cats would move, a friend generously offered to take me into her home. In the past year, I have moved my home base three times. I have traveled once to Poland, once to New Mexico and twice to Hawaii. Like my ancestors, I have been on a path of migration. I have been searching

for my home. As I researched my family's roots, I literally searched for a place to put down my own root.

I wonder: Where is my home on earth? Is it on the land of my ancestors: the mountains of Taos, the glittering desert of Guanajuato Mexico, or the fields and farms of Poland? How can I live in a good way on someone else's land? Each morning as I pray I speak out loud the names my ancestors had for Mother Earth: *Matka Ziemia (Polish)*, *Nahasdan (Dine)* *Tonatsin (Mexica)*, *Guadalupe (Mexican Catholic)*, *Czestochowa (Polish Catholic)*. *Please guide me to my home, the piece of land that I can nurture and love, that I will not own, but for which I will be a caretaker.* My Polish ancestors had strong passionate ties to the land they lived on, and that longing still lives on in me. I feel homesick for Poland; I yearn for the fields, the forests, the pungent smell of horses, and the sound of the rooster crowing.

In my remembrance work, I am continually dancing with the shadow. I have observed the connection between the struggle of my ancestors and the challenges in my life today. Facing the shadow in me, in my family and my culture is like facing Jezi Baba. I stand quivering, facing my fear of homelessness, of annihilation, and of death. I hold the ancestral memory of both being oppressed, and of being the oppressor. As I traverse the sacred triangle, I use the power of synthesis to weave together these experiences of antithesis into thesis.

## Reenactment

*“To reenact is to remember.”*  
Apela Colorado

On Summer Solstice of 2003, I participated in a Polish ceremony that has its roots in ancient pre-Christian times. A few days before Solstice I had this dream:

“Picnic, Pickles and Polish People”

*I am at the Summer Solstice Polish picnic. I am lying on a picnic table with my sister. Polish people are surrounding us. They walk up and say, “Dzien Dobre” (Good Day).” Everyone is chattering in Polish. Many of them have brought jars of pickles. Polish people and pickles are piling up on the picnic table. (June 18 2003, Sun in Gemini, Moon in Pisces)*

This was the first time I heard Polish being spoken in my dream. It signified to me that there was a lot of Polish ancestral energy around this time of year. Summer Solstice, called *Kupala* in Polish, is one the four major fire festivals of the traditional Slavic year. The ancient Slavs saw this day of longest light as the day the sun “bathes in the river” and “dances and plays in the sky.”<sup>78</sup>

On this day, special fire and water rites are performed. The word *Kupala* comes from the ancient word *kupati*, meaning “to bathe.”<sup>79</sup> Water is believed to be infused with special healing power on this day, and people gathered to bathe at rivers, springs, and seas.<sup>80</sup> Women create wreaths of nine sacred herbs and flowers to offer to the water. These offerings to the water helped to strengthen the water as well as to bring protection to families from floods and thunderstorms.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>78</sup>Kmietowicz, 76.

<sup>79</sup>Okana, 30.

<sup>80</sup>Kmietowicz, 76.

<sup>81</sup>Sophia Hodorowicz Knab, *Polish Herbs, Flowers, and Folk Medicine* (New York, NY: Hippocrene Books, 1999), 134.

In the evening of Kupala (also called *Sobotki* or St. John's Eve) people gathered on hilltops, mountaintops or in clearings in the forest to light huge bonfires.<sup>82</sup> The sacred fire was believed to be connected to the sun itself and could only be started by rubbing two sticks together.<sup>83</sup> People would dance and sing around the fire. Later they would jump over the fire to receive its blessings of cleansing and protection. The smoke from this sacred fire would drift into nearby fields to help protect the crops.

Mugwort, or *blycia*, is the herb most honored by Poles at Solstice time. Polish herbalist Sophie Knab Hodorowicz writes: "No other plant played as important a role as mugwort, so much so that the midsummer bonfires were also called mugwort fires."<sup>84</sup> In pre-Christian times, the Slavs used *blycia* to protect themselves against evil spirits.<sup>85</sup> On Kupala, *blycia* is hung over doors, worn as belts, and offered to the fire for protection.<sup>86</sup> On Solstice morning, I gathered *blycia* and other herbs for our ceremony. I first made an offering of salt and tobacco to the Ohlone people, the ancestors of the land. I told them about our Kupala ceremony and asked permission to have this ceremony on their soil.

Later, in the afternoon, I met with other members of the Polish Arts and Culture Foundation at Lake Temescal in Oakland. We were gathered to reenact an ancient ceremony, in which we created beautiful wreaths of flowers and herbs. After we finished making our wreaths, we walked to the water's edge and tossed our wreaths to the water. As I sat with my Slavic friend David watching the wreaths, the water seemed to shimmer with our prayers and blessings. The lake looked like a beautiful woman

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<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 133.

<sup>83</sup> Kmiotowicz, 77.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 135.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 135.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

covered in flowers and jewels. The energy surrounding us felt peaceful and welcoming. I could almost hear the lake saying: *Thank you for your beautiful gifts.*

This day was an important landmark for me, for it was the first time I had participated with the Polish community in such a ceremony. Smelling the pungent aroma of the blycia, I was transported back in time. As my hands wove together strands of herbs and flowers, I could almost see the hands of my great-great grandmothers. As I gazed at the lake decorated with our wreaths ancient memories stirred within me.

### **Dreamtime: Excavating for What Has Been Lost**

*“It is time for you to live your dream.”*  
Mr. Hale Makua

My participation in the Kapula ceremony opened many doorways for communication with my ancestors. In the following month, my Polish ancestors visited me several more times in my dreams.

#### **“The Cauldron of Blood and Cauliflower”**

*I am in a home with a friend of mine. She is introducing me to her parents, who are both Polish. They are in a kitchen like area, chattering away in Polish. The man is stirring a big cauldron filled with soup, made of blood and cauliflower. He opens a barrel of stock- maybe something fermented like zurek- and scoops some out to add to the cauldron. As he stirs I look closely at him and his wife. Both are very small, short with dark hair and slightly slanted eyes. His wife has dark curly hair. She is able to speak English, but to me she only speaks Polish. Their child, a young man, escorts me through the house. He stops at the kitchen sink to throw up. I am in the living room, waiting to leave.  
(July 1<sup>st</sup> 2003, Sun in Cancer, Moon in Leo)*

I worked with this dream with my dream counselor Karen Jaenke. Karen has done her doctoral research on the ways the ancestors speak to us in dreams. She noticed the colors in the dream, the black cauldron, the white cauliflower and the red blood.

These three ancient colors are also associated with Jezi Baba (the colors of her three horseman) and ancient Slavic earth-based spirituality.

On the Capricorn full moon, I received a message from my ancestors: I needed to create some ritual to support my process of writing this thesis. I needed to acknowledge my work in a ceremonial setting and receive the support of my community. Intuitively, I knew that my ceremony had to have its roots in Polish culture, yet I had no idea in mind where to start. Suddenly, the feeling of “Aha!” bubbled from my belly. My instinct was guiding me to look at my dreams for the template of my ceremony.

After working with Karen, it became clear to both of us that my Polish Slavic remembrance ceremony was encoded within this dream. My dream held key ingredients: the fire, the cauldron, the blood, and the earth (cauliflower). The processes contained within the dream echoed the same environment I was stewing in (literally) while writing my thesis. This process involved the alchemy of fermentation, of cooking and of purging.

On September 1<sup>st</sup>, 2003 I gathered with a group of friends, teachers and mentors to reenact my dream in a ceremonial way. We circled around a fire at the home of Karen Jaenke and Kimmy Johnson. Kimmy stood as the European elder for the ceremony, and Karen held the space for the dream. All the elements of the dream were present: the fire, the cauldron, the fermented product (sauerkraut) and the cauliflower. To symbolize the blood, I used dark red beet broth. I had two Polish American friends and my sister play the part of the Polish dream characters.

The reenactment of my dream in a ritual setting catalyzed a very powerful experience for me. As we gathered around the fire, Kimmy Johnson, the elder of the

circle drummed as she invoked the four directions, the ancestors, and the spirits of the land. I followed by sharing the story of Jezi Baba and Vasalisa. Jezi Baba's arrival to the circle was signaled by a loud explosion from the fire. We could all feel Her fierce presence. Next, my dream was reenacted. My two Polish friends sat by the fire stirring the cauldron as my other friend escorted me into the "kitchen". As one woman poured the blood red beet juice into the cauldron, I felt a profound shift in my consciousness. I felt as if I had walked into my dream and the normal boundary between sleeping and waking was blurred.

Next, as Kimmy began drumming again, I recounted the history of the Polish people, of the invasions, massacres, partitioning, wars and genocide. As the story flowed from my lips, a strong energy, perhaps the spirit of Jezi Baba, pulled me deep into myself, deep into the pain of my people and of my family, and deep into the underworld. I felt in my heart the collective anguish of my Polish ancestors and of the Polish land itself. All separation between the past and the present, between "me" and "them", and between my body and the earth's body dissolved.

In this moment of suspended time I was able to release a strong prayer from my heart. I was held in a circle of loving supportive friends who witnessed my prayer and honored my work. Later, I realized that this ritual was the climax of my work on my thesis. I had birthed the essence of my thesis on a spiritual level.

An important piece of this ceremony was the discussion it inspired afterwards. After the ceremony, I talked at length with Kimmy and Karen about the parts of the ritual that worked, and what we would do differently next time. Later, I had the opportunity to talk at length with both Apela Colorado and Brian Bates about my writing on this ritual

as included in my thesis. Bates is an English psychologist, wizard, and best selling author who has written many books on Anglo-Saxon spirituality. The questions we tossed back and forth were: In what ways did this ceremony touch upon elements of ancient Polish Slavic spirituality? As we re-member, as we literally put back the pieces of our broken spiritual traditions, what is our method of quality control? How do we know when we have touched the root of our ancient traditions? How do we navigate these ceremonies when we have no elders from our own cultures?

I am left with more questions than answers. Wizard Bates described how he bases his tribal ceremonial work on the remnants of historical information from his Anglo-Saxon culture. Based on this approach, my dream ceremony did not have its roots in any historically known Slavic ritual. However, elements of ancient Slavic spirituality were present in the colors, the cauldron, the fire, and the blood.

Recently, I talked again with Kimmy Johnson about this ceremony and how I have written about it in my thesis. We talked about the ways in which people of European descent can struggle with the ceremonial aspect of the remembrance process. At the risk of being “new age”, how do we move forward and honor our ancestors in a ritual way when we have no maps? I never intended to or claimed to recreate an authentic Polish tribal ceremony. Yet at the same time, I felt called to honor my ancestors in a ceremonial and cultural way. Armed with only fragments of my tribal spiritual tradition and messages from my dreams, I created a ritual space to honor my Polish ancestors. And indeed, these ancestors did show up. Something powerful and healing occurred not only for me in the circle, but for my Polish friends present as well. I interpreted this as a sign that the Polish spirits were present.

I am profoundly grateful for the experience of this dream ceremony and I have been sparked by all the conversations that ensued. As I walk this path of ancestral remembrance, I welcome discussion about the interplay of ceremony within the remembrance process. I am interested in continuing to explore the ways people like me, who have been disconnected from their tribal culture, can remember, reclaim, and reconnect to ceremonies that honor their culture, their ancestors, and the earth.

### **In the Arms of Jezi Baba: In Honor of My Polish Sister Barbara Dean**

*“We are the ancestors of the future.”*  
Barbara Dean, Maui Residency

For the past two years I have walked this road of Polish ancestral remembrance with my Polish sister Barbara Dean at my side. Our lives were woven together in what the ancient Anglo-Saxon would call a very “wyrd” way.<sup>87</sup> On our very first day of school, we discovered that we both were of Polish descent. I remember the foggy Oakland autumn morning, sitting together on the couch at UCS/Naropa and sharing our stories about our Polish families. Barbara explained to me that her mother was the daughter of Polish immigrants. She spoke frequently of her Polish grandmother who had died before she was born, but with whom she had a very close connection. I shared with her my experiences with my Polish-American father and the Polish side of my family. Barbara and I immediately formed a very deep bond. As it became clearer to me that I was to journey into my Polish roots, I was comforted by knowing that she was walking beside me.

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<sup>87</sup> Brian Bates, *The Wisdom of Wyrd, Anglo-Saxon Spirituality* (Rider, UK: Random House, 1996), 5.

As fate had determined, Barbara Dean and I were roommates at every residency we attended in Maui. Together we were introduced to the powerful Hawaiian spirits. My experience of these spirits was amplified by the fact that Barbara had strong visionary power and the ability to see spirits. One such time was during our first residency in Maui. During this residency, Barbara and I had migrated between four different hotels. At the end of the residency, we finally settled into the right place, the lovely Napili Surf Resort. From our balcony we could see the crashing waves of the ocean and smell the breeze of sea salt. After a challenging week of migration, that night we shared our first home cooked meal. We fed ourselves and our Polish ancestors a hearty meal of potatoes and cabbage.

That night, for some reason, Barbara was in an emotionally difficult space. I suggested that she go out to the ocean. She did, and later returned refreshed. When I asked her about her time at the ocean, she replied offhandedly: “It was wonderful. I feel much better. I was praying to the water when I looked up and saw the Lizard.” I exclaimed, “The lizard? You saw the Kiha Wahine?” Barbara nodded, apparently unaware of the significance of her exceptional vision: “Yes I saw her dancing on the tops of the waves.” “That’s incredible. That’s a big deal Barbara! The Kiha Wahine doesn’t appear to just anyone!” I exclaimed. This is only one example of Barbara’s extraordinary sight.

On October 3, 2003 Barbara Dean and I traveled together to Poland. We were together almost constantly. We slept in the same rooms, shared meals, walked together, and studied together. We stayed up late drinking tea and eating Polish cakes, absorbed in long discussions about Poland. Barbara had a brilliant mind and her insights always

engaged me. We shared the excitement of discovering the treasures of Poland: the elves of the salt mines, the dragon of Krakow, Mary Magdalene's chapel, and Bronislawa, the forest crone. All of our shared journeys were illuminated by Barbara's lyrical speech. She elucidated her observations with words and images that seemed to be spilling from a volume of poetry. My journey to Poland would not have been the same without Barbara. I truly believe that it took three Polish women (three being a sacred number to the Polish Slavs): myself, Barbara and Nancy Connor to accomplish what we did.

On May 19, 2003 Barbara Dean, Audri Scott Williams, Kit Cooley and I attended our graduation ceremony. We were the first four members of the graduating class to receive a Master's degree in Creation Spirituality with a concentration in Indigenous Mind. We did it! I was so proud of all of us. In a photo from graduation night the four of us look happy and radiant.

A month later I got into a terrible fight with Barbara Dean over our videotape of Poland. I hung up the phone on her, shaking and crying. I felt as if Barbara had lashed out towards me in an angry and jealous way that I could not understand. I understood that we could fight like this because we were so close, like sisters. I grieved over our falling out, yet I felt that we needed time to cool things off.

About two months later, as I was deeply engaged in the writing of this thesis, I had a dream about Barbara. In the dream, I was hugging her. I woke up feeling how much I cared for her and how silly it would be to throw away our entire relationship over these videotapes. I mailed Barbara a card and told her how much I loved and appreciated her, and that I would like to let go of the anger and hurt between us. I also invited her to

come with me to the Sacramento Polish festival, which was coming up in early September.

Barbara and I never went to the Polish festival. The last week of August 2003 she was diagnosed with advanced liver cancer. When I found out, I immediately understood her odd, aggressive behavior of the past few months- it was the cancer. I called Barbara immediately. She didn't answer the phone, so I left a message. I continued to call her regularly in the next month, but could never get through to her. She was not returning her calls. I imagined that she was tired, sick and overwhelmed, but I was still frustrated at not being able to reach her.

As an essential part of Barbara's spiritual community, I felt called to support her through her illness. I imagined sitting at her bedside, holding her hand, reading her Polish folk tales, and playing Polish CD's. I envisioned our circle of Indigenous Mind students and teachers gathered with Barbara and praying for her healing. I wanted to talk with Barbara about our trip to Poland and to see her eyes and spirit light up with the happy memories.

Unfortunately, I never had the chance to see Barbara at all. When I went to visit Barbara, her family told me that I could not see her. The next day, in a phone conversation, her daughter told me "this was the time for family only." Waves of anger and sorrow rushed through me as I sat there, the phone dangling in my hand. I understood that Barbara's family needed to have a private space for their own grief, but at the same time I felt crushed to be shut out of Barbara's dying process. I have had to say thank you, goodbye and grieve without her.

In an eerie coincidence, Barbara's diagnosis came at the exact time I was writing about Jezi Baba. I was stunned to realize how real she had become to me. Here I was writing about the Polish spirit of death and rebirth when suddenly my dear Polish companion was dying. Jezi Baba was no longer simply a fairy tale character; she was now a palpable presence in my life. I could feel her in the shocking news of Barbara's illness. I could see her in the leaves turning color and falling from the trees. I could feel her embrace in these long chilly nights of autumn.

**THESE SPIRITS ARE REAL!** I remember Keola Sequeria saying that when he talked to us in Maui about the Hawaiian spirits. All along, I had thought that I had chosen to write about Jezi Baba. But as Apela corrected me: "No Atava. Jezi Baba chose you." In fact, Jezi Baba chose both Barbara and me. I am writing about Jezi Baba; Barbara is living/dying with her.

Last week, Barbara Dean received her diploma from Naropa University. She is the first one to graduate with a Master's degree in Creation Spirituality with a concentration in Indigenous Mind. Tragically, as she is graduating she is also dying. As Apela said, "Barbara is the first to graduate from Indigenous Mind, and she is taking her diploma straight to the ancestors."

*Dear Polish sister and companion Barbara Dean. I am sending you love as you pass your final days on this earthly plane. I give thanks for your life, for your brilliant mind, for your hard work, for your commitment to your healing path and for your dedication to your Polish ancestors. Thank you for accompanying me on our journey to Poland. Thank you for having the courage to break into Magdalene's chapel, and the persistence to arrange a meeting with Bronislawa. Without you I could not have made*

*that journey. Thank you for walking with me through this master's program we call Creation Spirituality and Indigenous Mind.*

*Barbara, I want to apologize for any hurt or harm I have caused you. I am sorry for the times we fought and for the times I was impatient with you. I am grateful that in our relationship, time and time again we each showed up to make amends to one another. I am sad we have not have the chance to do it this last time.*

*Barbara, I mourn for you as you suffer with cancer. I pray that your pain is eased and that your heart is filled with peace. I pray for your family, may they find comfort and healing in one another. I grieve that I cannot be there with you to support your dying. I pray that you are able to feel my prayers and love from a distance.*

*I pray that all your ancestors stand to greet you on the other side. I ask Jezi Baba to continue to watch over you as your spirit makes its journey through the stars on the Milky Way, The Soul's Way, to the land of the ancestors. May you be surrounded with love.*

### **Notes from the Road: The Un-conclusion**

How does one write a conclusion for a thesis on Indigenous Mind? It would be nice if I could wrap it up in a tiny compact package with a neat label. Yet this work of Indigenous Mind is alive and so is my writing: alive, pulsating, moving, and expanding much like our ever expanding universe.

My time in the Indigenous Mind Concentration and the Master's Program in Creation Spirituality has deeply transformed my life. My mind and consciousness have been expanded. I have been introduced to exciting new ideas: creation spirituality,

cosmology, and indigenous science. I have sat in many circles and shared conversations, laughter, tears and songs. I received teachings from indigenous elders from Hawaii, Africa, Europe, and North and South America. I was introduced to the sacred Polynesian plant awa and all to the spirits of Hawaii. I traveled to my ancestral land of Poland, communed with the Polish land, and made heart-felt connections with many Polish people.

This work has blessed me with a stronger sense of who I am and what my work is in the world. I have been given tools to navigate my journey like the four paths of Creation Spirituality and the tenants of Indigenous Science.

I am inspired to continue this work in the world. My dream is to continue my research and writing on Polish tribal ways. I hope to return to Poland in May 2004 to celebrate the springtime flowers and herbs. I hope to soon live in Poland for an extended period of study, so that I could learn the Polish language. I also would like to further explore the plant based healing traditions of ancient Poland.

I am currently collaborating with fellow UCS-Naropa Oakland student Maura Singer Williams to create healing ceremonies on Polish land for our Polish Jewish and Christian ancestors. I hope to expand my career as a teacher of this work and to ignite the fire within others. If I live a long life, I hope to be able to deeply explore the traditions of my other Mexican, Hungarian and Navajo ancestors.

In the many indigenous ceremonies I have attended, we end by giving thanks. In this way, I close the circle that has been my work as a student in the Indigenous Mind Concentration.

*Dear Creator, Beloved Ancestors, spirits of the Polish land, spirits of the land I walk on today. Thank you. Thank you for showing up and supporting me on this journey. Thank you to Matka Ziemia, Moist Mother Earth of Poland, who cared for me and loved me and shared with me your stories. Thank you Jezi Baba who fiercely initiated me into my Polish Indigenous Mind. Thank you for teaching me the sacredness of death. Please continue to watch over my sister Barbara Dean as she makes her journey to the ancestors.*

*Thank you to the spirits of the land in Sacramento and the Maidu people; the spirits of the land of the Bay Area and the Costal Miwok people; and the loving welcoming spirits and people of Hawaii. Thank you for allowing me to walk on the land of your ancestors.*

*Thank you to wonderful staff and faculty at Naropa Oakland who have supported me throughout the program. I honor Matthew Fox for his vision of Creation Spirituality and for allowing Indigenous Mind to have a home at his school. Thank you Aileen Donovan for your medicine of compassion and your tenacity to handle the logistical details of running a small university. Thank you Marlene De Nardo for being the bridge between Indigenous Mind and Creation Spirituality. You have helped us to navigate the uncharted waters. I am grateful for your Italian Mama Bear ferocity that has protected the IM program and the students.*

*Words could never describe my thanks for you, Apela Colorado. I honor your vision that gave birth many years ago to this Indigenous Mind Concentration. You have tirelessly dedicated yourself to helping people recover their indigenous minds. Thank you for your years and years of hard work and sacrifice. Thank you for having the courage*

*to embrace your French tribal ancestry. You have held us students with such love and integrity. Your belief in our ability to remember helps activate these powers within us. I pray that your work continues to grow through the hands and hearts of all your students. May you soon be blessed with the time for rest and reflection. I pray for your continued health and happiness. Thank you Apela.*

*Thank you Kimmy Johnson for your love and support. Thank you for helping me to ground this work in practice and in my writing. Thank you for opening your heart and your home to me. Thank you for being a role model of someone taking this work out into the world. I ask that your ancestors continue to bless you on your path.*

*Thank you to all the elders who have guided me- Auntie Poe Poe, Mr. Hale Makua, Yacine Kouyate, Keola Sequeria, Dorothy Ninham, Gwendale Cooper, Tata and Tashka, Sister Mary Minehan, Kathy Jones, Wizard Brian Bates, and Bill and Maria Weber.*

*I thank Karen Jaenke for helping to hold my dream space for this process. I thank Joanne Rossi for her Polish support. Thank you to Marta Wohl for generously sharing your stories and videos of your family and your trip to Poland, and for helping guide me to the right books. I thank all my companeras, the women who walked this path with me as students- Audri Scott Williams, Diana Stone, Kit Cooley, Barbara Dean, Jill Young, Marcella Sabin, Heather Seeley, Heidi Guttman, and Maura Singer Williams. And to all the new and future students- Wow! Your energy and spirit are inspiring.*

*Thank you to Polish sister Nancy Connor and to the Ringing Rocks Foundation,, whose love and generosity make this program possible. May you feel the special blessing*

*of your Polish ancestors. I pray that one day you are able to make your ancestral journey to Mother Poland. I am here to support you when you decide to go.*

*Thank you to my family, especially to my parents, Michael and Julie, who housed and fed me during my writing process. Thank you for always supporting me on my path. I feel blessed that we have had this time to share together. And to my sister Goose Jenny: Squack! I am grateful to be walking in this lifetime with you. Thank you to all my ancestors who dreamed and loved and toiled and suffered so that I may live. Thank you especially to my Babcia Helen: I feel you pulling strings for me up there in the spirit world! Thank you for leading me back to Poland.*

*Thank you to my partner Liz whose love and strength and good cooking have sustained me through this process. Thank you for your gentleness and tenderness with me. I pray for your good health and success in your work and studies. Thank you to all my friends who have supported my work with encouragement and stimulating conversations. Thank you to my beautiful family at Hummingbird Lodge, who help hold the sacred space of our Native American ancestors. I honor in particular Lynn Scott as a friend and elder of this community. I pray that Lynn receives all the help she needs to survive the challenges she has recently faced. I give thanks to my Lakota friends, Charlene O'Rourke and Ruth Kelly and to their family's Sundance which has been my spiritual home for the past twelve years. May you all be blessed with health, wellbeing, and all the resources you need to manifest your healing vision.*

*I give thanks for my cats, Maya Guadalupe, Freya, and Kali who give me endless joy and affection. I thank all the animals who have been my teachers and guides. I thank*

*the cows, horses, pigs, goats, chickens, ducks, geese, turkeys, cats and dogs who greeted us in Poland. I thank the plant beings who continue to amaze me, teach me and heal me. I honor especially the mushrooms, the fungi who are the most ancient plant beings on this planet.*

*All My Relations*

*Amen*



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