

The Whirlwind is A Ghost Dancing*: The Mirror Point Site on Searles Lake, California - Musings on A Possible Interpretive Frame

by

**Alan P. Garfinkel
AGG Associates
Cultural Resource Management Consultants
Bakersfield, California
93306**

AGG Associates Research Paper Number One

May 21, 2014

Introduction

On the south base within the China Lake Naval Weapons Center in eastern California, there is an archaeological site consisting of a concentration of over one hundred rock cairns and rock alignments (the Mirror Point Site, CA-SBR-12134/H). Kish LaPierre did a wonderful MA thesis (LaPierre 2011) on this set of archaeological features and determined their age. Her research also uncovered that a number of these features contained offerings of aboriginal artifacts including obsidian bifaces, beads, projectile points and other cultural materials. Her research further discerned much of the spiritual and religious connotations embodied in these remarkable features.

It is difficult to know the precise reason that such a concentration of archaeological features exist in an area with little other cultural materials near the margins of Searles Dry Lake. I gave some thought to what could have prompted Native people to build so many of these rock features - cairns of fist size stones piled up together in such a restricted geographical context . I certainly don't know with great confidence what they were used for. I do have an interesting conjecture - a guess let's say. The following materials that I put together surround the story I was able to weave together pertaining to a possible cultural context for the rock cairn concentration of what has come to be known as the Mirror Point Site.



Figure 1: Dust Devils on Various Dry Lakes

Numic Cosmology

Great Basin (Paiute-Shoshone) Indians believed whirlwinds were ghosts (*inipi*) and/or the spirits/souls of the recently dead. Whirlwinds were portents of bad spirits. These “dust devils” were recognized by the Paiute-Shoshone as being physically inhabited by ghosts. Breath, wind, and dust were all the physical manifestations of this spirit. The latter personifications are in alignment with deeper Numic cosmology viewing the life force as breath and the belief that fog, clouds, smoke and other elements that move upwards towards the heavens have supernatural attributes.

Searles Lake is the location for the Mirror Point site and this is the same area exhibiting a markedly and distinct concentration of extremely frequent manifestations of whirlwinds (aka dust devils). The Trona Tornadoes (sports team located near Searles Lake) are named after the many dust devils (whirlwinds) spinning off dry Searles Lake. The Trona Tornadoes may be the only high school football team, outside Alaska, to have an all-dirt field.

The Mirror Point Site

The Mirror Point Site’s, the cluster of rock features (alignments, rock cairns, and offerings), may have owed its presence (perhaps in part) to an association with an unusual concentration of

whirlwinds. The rocks might be a means of placating the deceased ancestor supernaturals, ancient spirits and potentially malevolent ghosts represented by this concentration of whirlwinds that play across the salt playas of Searles Lake. So these offerings would then make some sense, no?

Background

Judith Vander (1997) indicates that Paiute Shoshones would leave *offerings* surrounding a special medicine rock and pray for good health. Shoshones also had a tradition to pick up a rock as they traveled and to deposit the rock along a trail where others had left similar rocks - these were called “medicine piles”. Kawaiisu elder, Andy Greene, told me about this habit of his people and he explained such a custom. Greene and Albert Knight worked together to reconstruct a number of these rock cairns that were physically associated with Indian trails.

Vander tells us that it was the intention of this Indian custom that the action of putting a rock there would facilitate a situation where illness, sickness and bad feelings would leave and be forgotten by the performance of such an act. This is not too different from the contemporary habit of leaving an offering when visiting a place of religious importance. This practice continues to this day. When we visited Creation Cave at Tomo Kahni with Native people (including a number of Kawaiisu) we always left an offering of tobacco, juniper berries and were smudged with Great Basin sage.

Whirlwinds are also depicted on the headdresses of *yahwera* (hypothesized animal master images) figures included within the Coso Representational rock art elements (the patterned bodied anthropomorphs) as spirals (aka whirlwinds) of feathers or *quail* top knots adorning the heads (crowns) of these figures in headdress fashion (see Figure 2). These were hypothesized as representing the Northern Uto-Aztec animal master figure (Garfinkel et al. 2009).

Quails

Quails are interesting animals and they have an odd behavior of shamming injury or even death when being preyed upon. When in a defensive posture, the mother quail pretends to be hurt and its chicks promptly play dead! Chicks look for cover and remain hidden, camouflaged under leaves, or flatten themselves out appearing comatose with stiffened legs. This unusual behavior may have presupposed a suggestive association of death and rebirth for the quail. Such an association would provide a platform for a regenerative role and metaphoric association for this bird. It is *Yahwera's* responsibility to bring the dead animal spirits back to life and recharge the world with renewed animals each spring (the latter is the Kawaiisu oral tradition for this supernatural).

On a possibly related note to, quail exhibit habits of shamming a death posture. Zigmond (1977) reported the legend that if *Yahwera* approaches closely, you become still and helpless! But if he is still some distance away, you can get rid of him by putting some tobacco on a rock and

throwing it in the direction of the sounds. He yells as he swallows it. You won't hear him again for several minutes. Then you hear him far away.

How many such whirlwind figures are there within the Coso *Yahwera* inventory? How many with feathered bird headdresses? Many (probably well over a hundred). There are at least 700 PBA figures in the Cosos (per Grant et al. 1968), see below for a very few examples (Figure 2).

Hopi Lore

The Hopi are a Utoaztecan people with ancient roots appearing to connect them to the ancestral Coso Region and the Northern Utoaztecan pre-Numic people.

The Hopi have shared with anthropologists that they have a symbol that came about when a huge whirlwind blew all of their crops and vegetation from the surface of the earth and took all of their water also. One day a complete stranger came to the Hopi people but could not communicate by mouth so he did it with signs. With a tool called a flint, he drew symbols on a rock and told the people he was the "Keeper of the Breath. The winds, the whirlwinds, and the air which men breathe that comes from the keeper's mouth."

He sat upon a mountain and blew strong winds, distributing to everyone a share of breath. He was sometimes evil: he twists and controls himself in the form of a whirlwind and he cries "Ho-bo-bo, Ho-bo-bo as he whirls about endeavoring to steal man's breath". (Ho-bo-bo stands for the spirit of the twister, the whirlwind, and the breath.) As we can see, some of these natural symbols do have a story behind them, such as the whirlwind (Patterson 1997).

The representations shown below are *Yahwera / Patterned Body Anthropomorph* figures from the Coso Range (part of the ethnographic territory of the Kawaiisu Indians). Note the quail top knot and/or feathered headdresses and concentric circle heads - perhaps representing the whirlwind forms for their heads and headdresses.

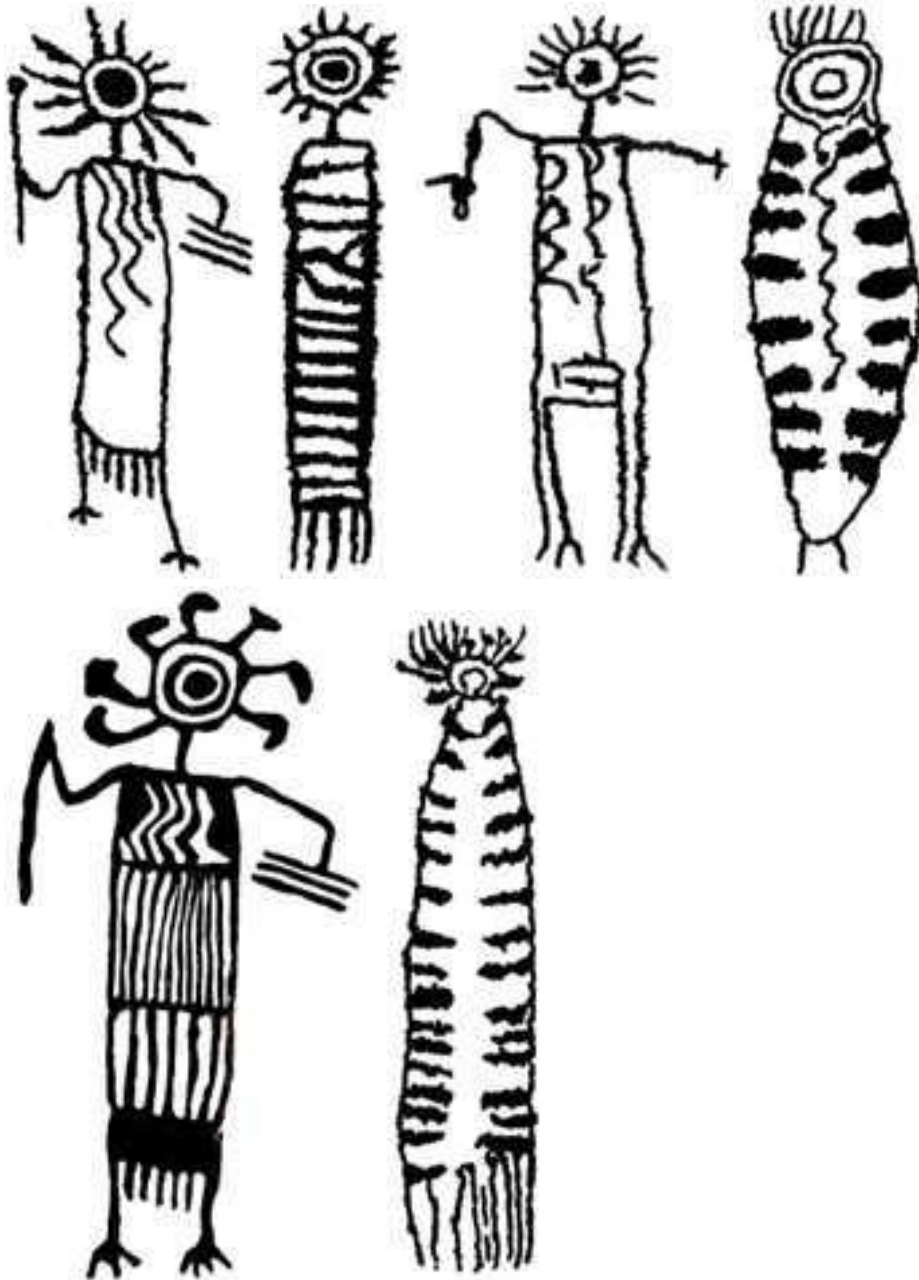


Figure 2: *Yahwera* Patterned Body Anthropomorphic Figures from the Coso Range, China Lake, California

Wind and Breath

The wind and breath are key concepts in Numic cosmology. Laird (1984) tells us that whirlwinds have the ability to steal away a person's senses or intelligence (*muguavi*) and this can be a fatal interaction. Ghosts (*inipi*) are to be feared and especially in places with many ghosts – a place with many such fearsome supernatural beings would be an extremely dangerous and supernaturally powerful place.

The whirlwind is said to be animated by *inipi* (ghosts). The Chemehuevi, in fact, beat it with sticks to break it up (Laird 1984:20)

Perhaps, as with the Mojave, when the Kawaiisu returned from their journeys through the Mojave Desert hiking back into the mountains they may have wanted to rid themselves of potentially malevolent spirits associated with the place and as such would leave a rock and an offering after moving through “dust devil place”. Whirlwind in Kawaiisu is the word *tooho-vi*. The word is similar in pronunciation of the native term for God *tugu-bayaa-va?a-di*; the latter is also a term designating the sky and upper cosmos. The term for dry land or dry lake is also of similar derivation and pronunciation and is a possibly related Kawaiisu term being *tiru-bi*

Figure 3: Representations of whirlwinds of the whirlwind pattern in a Hopi Basket.



Here is a whirlwind pattern in a Cahuilla basket. The latter is known as “Whirling Logs”, an ancient symbol from many cultures, the North American symbol is indicated by Native peoples as a depiction of the cyclic motion of life, the seasons and the four winds (Figure 4). Natives indicate that the depiction and imagery was taken from the pattern of a tree in a whirlwind, this image is also frequently found in Navajo sand paintings. It is considered a powerful medicine.

Figure 4. Whirling Logs on Cahuilla Basket.





Figure 5. Mimbres Bowl with Possible Whirlwind Pattern.

Mimbres

In the American Southwest a prehistoric culture identified as Mimbres is known for their fantastic elaborations of representative designs on pottery. This is a Mimbres bowl that has been interpreted to represent a whirlwind pattern (Figure 5). Notice it is formed by a series of concentric circles and a series of whirling circuitous interconnection along the roughly circular series of rings.

The indigenous Pueblo cultures of the American Southwest consider the centipede to be a potent symbol of power, as it regularly travels between the spirit world and the physical world. The Hopi also believed this and consider the centipede symbol to be taboo. The Mimbres apparently had similar prehistoric beliefs. An image on one Mimbres bowl shows a human who has been shot by an arrow. The bowl was looted sometime in the 1960s and has not been seen since. It likely resides in a private collection. A photograph of it, however, circulated in the 1980s, and scholars have been able to expand the knowledge of possible Mimbres metaphor and symbolic beliefs. The bowl depicts a man whose internal organs, life breath, and whirlwind are lying on the ground. In one hand he grasps a giant centipede. The arms and legs of the figure are turned upwards as if in a praying stance. The centipede likely symbolizes a single pole ladder, and indicates that the human is making a journey to the spirit world.

Native Consultants

Luther Girado, fluent speaker of the Kawaiisu language and spiritual leader of the Kern Valley Indian Council, tells us that the whirlwinds/dust devils exist as *inipi* in the mountains and in the deserts but the desert ones are bigger! He knows the word for these creatures. Janice Williams, Kawaiisu elder, tells us that when you see a whirlwind one you must lick your finger, point, and say *oos, oos* (means go in Kawaiisu) to dispel the bad medicine and break it apart so it will stay away.

Zigmond, Kawaiisu ethnographer, tells us that, “when you walk through the desert and feel a sudden gust of wind “like fire” this is the *inipi* passing by. The *inipi* have a path across the desert eastward to the other world. This is where the souls of the dead go on the journey.” (Zigmond 1977). The *inipi* can best be translated as “ghost, devil or spirit”. In order to counteract the bad of the *inipi* one scatters beads. In the home one hangs charms to keep the *inipi* away - one was two birds wings stretched on a stick another was a piece of spiraled wood both are suspended and moved freely to catch the wind.

A twisted hair is said to be a visible reminder of a person’s *unup*. Each of us have our own *unup*. This word roughly translates as soul or spirit from Kawaiisu to English. *The inipi wears a twisted hair around its neck.* The *inipi* can make you invisible (Zigmond 1977:64-69). When beginning a trip one scatters an offering. Beads are one type of offering (Zigmond 1977:78).

Bob Robinson knows of the *inipi* that inhabit the whirlwinds. He knows the word for these dust devils and it is *tooho-vi*. He said Judy Weldon, Native Kawaiisu who lives on an Indian allotment in the Kelso Valley, has a lengthy story regarding a whirlwind that came into her property and that her Dad had to battle.

Carobeth Laird states regarding Chemehuevi cosmology that *inipi* were disliked but not feared. They were demons that inhabited whirlwinds and were called *turunni?ari* by the eastern neighbors of the Kawaiisu, the Chemehuevi. When a whirlwind came by they would comment on it being the devil and the children would beat it with sticks until it subsided.

Summary and Conclusions

Given the location of the Mirror Point site what would we do to test the *inipi* (whirlwind) hypothesis in relationship to the Mirror Point archaeological site complex? Once central question - is there whirlwinds and dust devils in the vicinity of the site? Is this concentration of rock cairns near an area where whirlwinds predominate? If so, why are the whirlwinds concentrated at this particular location? Could this be a portal or transition point from those re-entering the mountains from the desert?

Many questions still remain.

References

*I borrowed the title for this piece from a wonderful book I discovered on-line. I hope Natalie Belting recognizes this as a compliment to her creativity and use of metaphor!

Belting, Natalie Maree 1974. *Whirlwind is a Ghost Dancing*. New York: Dutton.

Garfinkel, Alan P., Donald R. Austin, David Earle, and Harold Williams 2009. Myth, Ritual and Rock Art: Coso Decorated Animal-Humans and the Animal Master. *Rock Art Research* 26(2). [The Journal of the Australian Rock Art Research Association (AURA) and of the International Federation of Rock Art Organization (IFRAO)]

Laird, Carobeth 1984. *Mirror and pattern: George Laird's world of Chemehuevi mythology*. Malki Museum Press, Banning.

LaPierre, Kish 2011. Investigations at the Mirror Point Site, CA-SBR-12134/H. MA Thesis, Department of Anthropology, California State University, Bakersfield.

Patterson, Carol 1997. *On the Trail of Spider Woman: Petroglyphs and Pueblo Myths of the Southwest*, Ancient City Press, Santa Fe.

Vander, Judith 1997. *Shoshone Ghost Dance Religion: Poetry Songs and Great Basin Context*. University of Illinois Press, Urbana.

Zigmond, Maurice L. 1977 The Supernatural World of the Kawaiisu. In *Flowers of the Wind: Papers on Ritual, Myth, and Symbolism in California and the Southwest* edited by Thomas C. Blackburn, pp. 59-95. Socorro, New Mexico: Ballena Press Anthropological Papers No. 8.