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| RESEARCH ARTICLE

Place Attachment of the A'atsika Tribe in *People of the Whale*

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| ABSTRACT
This paper examines the A'atsika tribe's ecological and spiritual connection to the ocean as depicted in Linda Hogan's *People of the Whale*. Focusing on the tribe's mythopoetic narratives, rituals, and ceremonies, the research explores how these practices frame the ocean as both a living, sacred entity and a crucial partner in the tribe's survival. The study uses ecological place theory and indigenous epistemologies to analyze the tribe's holistic understanding of place. Key findings suggest that the A'atsika view their relationship with the ocean as one of mutual respect and reciprocity, where human actions are guided by spiritual and ethical obligations rather than exploitation. Rituals such as singing to the whales and offering gifts to the octopus underscore the deep interdependence between the A'atsika and the natural world, highlighting a worldview where the ocean is not a resource to be extracted but a partner in an ongoing dialogue. The paper argues that the A'atsika's "sense of place" goes beyond physical location, integrating spiritual, ethical, and ecological dimensions that foster a sustainable relationship with the environment. The A'atsika's approach challenges colonial-capitalist models of extraction, offering a radical alternative grounded in respect, balance, and the recognition of non-human agency. In the context of contemporary environmental crises, the A'atsika's practices provide valuable insights into decolonial ecological thinking and the urgent need for a redefined human-nature relationship.

| KEYWORDS

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1. Introduction

Linda Hogan is a renowned Native American author, known for her deep connection to nature and her exploration of Native American culture. Her literary works often reflect the intricate relationship between indigenous peoples and their ecological place. Her latest novel *People of the Whale* portrays the interconnectedness between the A'atsika people and their marine environment. In the worldview of the A'atsika tribe, the ocean is not only a foundation for material survival but also the core of their ecological identity. Unlike anthropocentric perspectives that prioritize human control over the place, the A'atsika worldview is rooted in kinship with the land, ocean, and all living beings. Their attachment to place is not merely physical but deeply spiritual, as it is interwoven with ancestral knowledge, traditional practices, and a sense of responsibility toward nature. Through mythological narratives, ritual practices, and ecological ethics, Hogan illustrates the tribe's profound connection with the ocean. This bond is manifested not only in whaling ceremonies but also in the oral transmission of stories and songs across generations. Endowed with sacred significance, the ocean becomes an integral component of tribal identity. In *People of the Whale*, ancestral stories and myths endow the ocean with a sacred meaning for the A'atsika people, thereby giving them a profound sense of place. Through fishing and other interactions with nature, the A'atsika maintain a close bond with the ocean, forming a deep attachment to it in their everyday lives.

2. Mythopoetic narrative of ocean being

In *People of the Whale*, Linda Hogan foregrounds the A'atsika people's mythopoetic narrative as the foundation of their ecological and cultural connections with the ocean. These narratives, deeply rooted in ancestral memory, spiritual reciprocity, and non-human

kinship, transform the ocean from a mere physical entity into a living and sacred cosmology. The novel opens with a declaration that frames the ocean as both a material and metaphysical force: "We live on the ocean. The ocean is a great being. The tribe has songs about the ocean, songs to the ocean" (Hogan, 2008:9). Here, Hogan establishes the ocean as a mythic protagonist, a "being" whose agency and vitality permeate A'atsika identity. It anthropomorphizes the ocean not to diminish its otherness but to affirm its personhood. Besides, this incitation encapsulates the A'atsika people's deep-rooted dependence to the ocean.

In A'atsika cosmology, the ocean creature—whale is their kin, teacher, and co-creator (Deaton, 2019). This ontological framing aligns with what indigenous scholar Zoe Todd (2016) calls "fish pluralities"—the recognition that aquatic beings possess agency, history, and relational value beyond human utility. The A'atsika's songs to the ocean exemplify this relationality. When they sing, "Oh whale, take pity on us. We are broken. We are weak. We are small. We are mere hungry humans" (Hogan, 2008:78). This passage reveals a fundamental aspect of A'atsika worldview, one that is deeply rooted in humility, reciprocity, and an awareness of human vulnerability in the face of the natural world. They articulate a humility that contrasts starkly with the anthropocentric arrogance of industrialized societies. Their plea is not a surrender to nature's power but an acknowledgment of mutual vulnerability, by positioning whales as subjects rather than objects, the A'atsika enact their belief in interspecies reciprocity. And the language of supplication evokes traditional indigenous hunting rituals, where animals are not simply hunted but honored, and their spirits are acknowledged as active participants in the cycle of life and death.

Furthermore, whale's mythic status blurs the boundaries between human and non-human. Whales as co-creators of culture who occupy a great space in A'atsika narratives: they are both physical creatures and mythic ancestors (Adamson, 2012). The A'atsika do not "hunt" whales in a transactional sense; they engage in ritualized communion. Before a hunt, women sing to the whales, their voices "pleading for understanding" (Hogan, 2008:10), rather than dominance. At the same time, Witka, the elder whaler, he would enter the water to communicate with whales, he does not "hunt" in the colonial sense of conquest; he engages in a sacred dialogue. His acknowledgment of the whales' sacrifice: "they offer themselves to the people" echoes the Potlatch traditions of Pacific Northwest tribes, where resource use is framed as a gift exchange requiring reciprocal offerings (Cote, 2016). This ritual transform predation into communion, destabilizing the human-nature binary that underpins capitalist extraction.

As Hogan (2008:10) wrote, "The whales have always been loved and watched, their spumes of breath blowing above water, their bodies turning, rising". It indicates that the whale gains much love and reverence from the A'atsika people. The whales' physicality, includes their breath, movement, and presence, all becomes a living myth, a reminder of their role as co-creators in the A'atsika's world. By incorporating the whales into their cosmology, the A'atsika don't merely respect these creatures; they weave them into their spiritual and ethical existence, reinforcing an ecological consciousness where every interaction with ocean life holds deeper significance. The whale hunt, thus, becomes a narrative act and a retelling of ancestral myths through embodied practice.

The porousness between human and oceanic realms is further embodied in the novel's mythic protagonist, Tomas. Thomas's birth, marked by an octopus traversing land to enter a sea cave, ruptures the binaries of nature-culture and land-ocean. This event, interpreted as both omen and sacred sign, reflects the A'atsika's narrative tradition where non-human beings actively shape human destinies. Tomas's grandfather—Witka's instruction to leave offerings "shining objects, beads, pearls" for the octopus reflects "an ecology of selves"(Kohn, 2013)—a recognition that non-human beings possess desires, preferences, and the capacity to communicate. Such instruction materializes the tribe's belief in mutual agency: just as humans depend on the ocean, the ocean's beings demand recognition and care. Through these interactions, Hogan dismantles Western epistemologies that separate humans from nature, instead she highlights an indigenous framework where interdependence defines existence.

Ruth's relationship with salmon further illustrates how mythopoetic narratives materialize in daily ecological practices. "It's salmon season. They are so beautiful. I hate to kill even one. But I only sell what we need to. I almost have to divine what the restaurants will use. Sometimes I throw a few back" (Hogan, 2008:32). That reveals a tension between survival and reverence. Ruth's practice of "divining" the salmon's needs and returning some to the water re-enacts ancestral myths of balance, where taking life necessitates and giving some back. Ruth refuses to commodify salmon and rejects the capitalist logic that converts living ecosystems into abstract profit. Her selective harvesting prioritizes long-term ecological health over short-term gain. Unlike industrialized fisheries that commodify marine life, Ruth's actions are narrative acts—rituals that reassert the salmon's sacred personhood. Her hesitation to kill reflects a broader indigenous worldview where the taking of life is never arbitrary, but always accompanied by gratitude and recognition of sacrifice. The salmon, like the whales, become integral to the A'atsika's survival. These ocean beings are not just as sustenance but as co-participants in an ongoing spiritual exchange.

It is evident that the ocean beings are full of sacredness in A'atsika worldview. And through these mythopoetic narratives, Hogan reimagines the ocean not as a resource frontier but as a web of relationships demanding ethical engagement. The A'atsika's stories don't romanticize nature, they just confront the messy realities of survival while always insisting on reciprocity. In an era of climate crisis, their beliefs offer a radical alternative to extractive capitalism: one where cultural memory and ecological responsibility are indivisible. By centering indigenous epistemologies, Hogan invites readers to re-examine their relationship with the natural world. As Hogan shows, the path to ecological healing begins not with technological fixes but with listening to the ocean's ancient songs, and recognizing ourselves as characters within its unfolding myth. When the A'atsika mourn their losses, they turn to the sea, singing songs that recall the voices of their ancestors and the wisdom embedded in ocean life. The ocean, in this sense, is both archive and oracle, and it holds the memories of the past while guiding the future.

In conclusion, mythopoetic narrative of ocean beings shows that the ocean beings are more than geographical feature, they are spiritual and narrative entities and sustain the A'atsika's cultural and ecological ethos. Hogan's portrayal resists Western frameworks that position nature as inert matter, instead advancing an indigenous ontology where land and ocean, human and non-human, exist in dynamic reciprocity. Through song, ritual, and myth, the A'atsika inscribe their presence upon the ocean's vast body, affirming that their survival is inextricably tied to the health and sanctity of ocean beings. This vision challenges contemporary environmental discourses by offering an alternative model, that is, one rooted in respect, mutuality, and the sacred continuity of life. On this level, *People of the Whale* doesn't merely tell a story about indigenous resilience and human's attachment to nature; it enacts a call for a deeper, more ethical relationship with the living world.

3. Learning from the place: rituals and ceremonies

Heise (2008) argues that the understanding of place constitutes a form of "situated knowledge", which is "a localized and intimate understanding of natural history, developed through sustained engagement with the surrounding environment". The A'atsika tribe's rituals and ceremonies are not merely cultural performances, they are also pedagogical practices through which ecological wisdom is transmitted and ethical relationships with the ocean are enacted. These embodied traditions, rooted in reciprocity, humility, and interspecies communication, challenge the Cartesian dualism that separates humans from nature and instead position the A'atsika as participants within a sentient, responsive ecosystem. The A'atsika tribe's deep bond with the ocean is reinforced and expressed through rituals and ceremonies that define their cultural and spiritual life. These acts are crucial for both ecological understanding and identity. In *People of the Whale*, Hogan highlights the A'atsika people's belief in reciprocity with nature. This belief is rooted in the idea that humans are not separate from nature, but rather an integral part of it. The A'atsika believe that the nature is not something completely different from people. Instead, the creatures of the ocean considered equal to the people of the tribe. In this worldview, the ocean provides not only material wealth but also spiritual nourishment, as the A'atsika see themselves as spiritually intertwined with the ocean.

A key aspect of their spiritual connection is the ritual of singing to the whales before hunting. "Before the indigenous people go out to hunt, they have to sing to the whales so that whales may come to them" (Hogan, 2008:21). This ritual is not one of control or exploitation but a plea for the whale's participation in the survival of the tribe, an invitation for the whale to offer itself as a gift, a sacrifice for the sustenance of the people. The women of the tribe sing to the whales, expressing love and humility, inviting the whales to offer themselves. These songs, laden with spiritual significance, reflect the A'atsika's understanding that nature, while providing for them, must also be respected and reciprocated with gratitude. "Mary sang to the whales, onio way no, loving them enough that one of them might listen and offer itself to her people" (Hogan, 2008:21). She sings, extending an offering of care and reverence, hoping that in return, the whale will willingly provide for her people. It is through this ritual that they maintain a harmonious relationship with the natural world, seeking not to dominate but to live in balance with it.

Hogan also highlights the ritual of the A'atsika men, particularly Witka, who enters the water before the hunt begins, symbolizing the deep respect the A'atsika have for the whales. Witka's role in the ritual is not just to lead the hunt but to honor the whales and ensure that the hunt is conducted in accordance with traditional practices. "When Witka went into the ocean, everyone and everything on land was still. The town stopped living. No one labored. No one bought or sold. No one laughed or kissed. It was the unspoken rule. All they did was wait, the women singing, eerily, at ocean's edge..." (Hogan, 2008:18). This ritual silence, akin to Māori tapu (sacred prohibition), suspends quotidian activities to honor the whale's spiritual significance (Mika, 2017). Witka's immersion is not symbolic but relational: his body becomes a medium through which human and whale agencies negotiate survival. In this ritual, the hunt is not merely a means of acquiring food but a spiritual practice that connects the A'atsika with the ocean. They hunt selectively and avoid causing harm to the place. Humans and whales coexist in a mutually supportive relationship, allowing them to live harmoniously by the ocean for generations.

After completing the hunt, they hold a ceremony for the deceased whale, honoring it with gratitude and remorse, much like they would for a dead family member. They would sew the whale's mouth closed to ensure it does not sink to the bottom of the ocean, a practice that reflects the tribe's respect for the life they have taken. "This sewing was important so that the lungs wouldn't fill with water and the whale sink to the bottom of the ocean" (Hogan, 2008:18). This tradition, passed down through generations, serves as a reminder of the interconnectedness of all life, where every action, no matter how small, has consequences for the larger ecological system. As for Gary Snyder (1995), the animals have the soul. And they have the blood relationship with human beings. Therefore, A'atsika tribe's hunting is not only to satisfy basic consumption, but also for cultural and spiritual significance. It is a group and an organized ritual.

Besides, A'atsika people believe that they can benefit from the harmonious relationship with the gods in the ocean, so they offer their best things to the Soul Guardian, the octopus, such as sparkling glass, gold nuggets, bead chains. If octopus leaves away with the gifts. And then people believe that the octopus would bless them and supply them enough food. That is a deal between people and ocean. For many years, the A'atsika tribe has always adhered to the ritual of gift-giving to the octopus. Moreover, Thomas was blessed by the octopus at birth and could hold his breath underwater, there is a spiritual gift that connects individuals to the natural world. These abilities, whether to communicate with the whales, hold breath for extended periods, or sense the world around them in heightened ways, represent the deeper knowledge and spiritual wisdom passed down through generations. The A'atsika believe that these talents are not random but are gifts from the ocean, which offer protection and guidance. For instance,

Thomas, much like his grandfather, had the ability to sense and communicate with nature, a trait that helped him avoid danger in war and navigate the world more intuitively. Similarly, Ruth, with her ability to hear through the water and sense the whales before they surfaced, exemplifies the tribe's spiritual sensitivity to the natural place. These gifts, passed down through both bloodlines and rituals, affirm the tribe's interconnectedness with nature and its creatures.

The A'atsika's rituals aren't merely symbolic, they represent material consequences yet. The A'atsika people's relationship with ocean also involves a moral and ecological responsibility. When the tribe violates ecological ethics, disregards the natural laws and engages in unethical hunting practices, for example, hunting whales just for profit, the ocean retaliates with drought. As seen in the novel, when the A'atsika hunt whales at the wrong time, driven by greed and a disregard for ecological balance, their place responds with a devastating drought that affects the tribe's livelihood. "The moon no longer pulls water back and forth with its love and will. The tide goes out and seems to stay out longer" (Hogan, 2008:99). This ecological retribution echoes indigenous narratives of "land sickness" (Whyte, 2018), where environmental degradation results from broken relational covenants. The drought symbolizes not only punishment but also a withdrawal of reciprocity. And it symbolizes a loss of spiritual connection and ecological balance, which reinforces the idea that the natural world is a living, responsive entity that can both give and take away based on how it is treated.

All in all, through their rituals and ceremonies, the A'atsika communicate with the natural world with reverence. Their talents, bestowed by the ocean, connect them to the deeper mysteries of the world. It indicates that humanity is not separate from nature, but a part of its greater ecological and spiritual continuum. These rituals serve as both a form of cultural expression and a moral guide, teaching the tribe to live in harmony with the natural world and to understand the consequences when that balance is disrupted. Through these rituals and ceremonies, Linda Hogan illustrates an indigenous ecological paradigm in which reciprocity, humility, and relationality form the bedrock of human-nature coexistence. These practices, whether singing to whales, immersing in sacred silence, or offering gifts to the octopus, transcend mere symbolism to enact a lived ethics of interdependence. By framing hunting as a dialogic exchange and ecological violation as a rupture in reciprocity, the A'atsika challenge the colonial-capitalist logic of extraction, positioning the ocean not as a resource but as a live whose agency demands reverence. Their rituals, deeply rooted in ancestral wisdom, serve as both ecological pedagogy and a form of decolonial resistance. These practices encode vital lessons of balance that manifest in tangible outcomes—prosperity through mutual care or drought resulting from greed. In an era marked by climate collapse, the A'atsika's ceremonies present a radical alternative: a vision of the world where traditional rituals and ecological responsibility are fundamentally intertwined.

4. A'atsika people's acquisition of sense of place

A sense of place can be understood as a sense of belonging or connection to one's location. "The real 'sense' of a place, therefore, is twofold. On the one hand, people feel it; on the other hand, they grasp its meaning" (Walter,1988:2). People cultivate a sense of community by residing in a particular location. Over time, the legends, beliefs, music, poetry, history, customs, and environment they share evolve into collective values, interests, pride, and goals. In other words, they share the same foundation. They genuinely care for the place where they live, showing concern for both their neighbors—humans and the natural world alike. Those who possess a strong sense of place form deep emotional and psychological bonds with the landscape they call home. Thus, the concept of "sense of place" has become a crucial term for exploring and understanding the relationship between humans and the environment.

In *People of the Whale*, Hogan demonstrates the A'atsika's belief that humans share an intimate relationship with the ocean, a worldview grounded in the understanding that humans are equal to and related to other beings. As mentioned earlier, A'atsika people see themselves as equivalent to all other living creatures, considering them as their kin. Wilkinson (1992) points out: "We need to develop place ethic. The foundation of this ethic is 'sense of place'—the recognition that the flourishing of our species depends on a delicate, subtle, and often imperceptible yet deeply soul-penetrating blend of landscapes, scents, sounds, history, neighbors, and friends that make up a place and a home. Place ethic respects equally the people, land, animals, plants, water, and air within a given region". From their birth, the A'atsika people are taught about the ocean and its creatures, and they learn from the ocean. Their understanding of the world is rooted in the ocean. Besides, the acquisition of their "sense of place" is deeply rooted in their relationship with the ocean, a relationship that has been nurtured through generations of myth, ritual, and practical knowledge. For the A'atsika, place is not just a physical location but a spiritual and emotional landscape that shapes their identities and their interactions with the world. The acquisition of this sense of place begins early in life, through both formal teachings and lived experiences.

In A'atsika tribe, they view the ocean and its creatures as family. "Oh brother, sister whale, grandmother whale, grandfather whale...We will let your soul become a child again. We will pray it back into a body. It will enter our bodies. You will be part human. We'll be part whale. We will treat you well. Then one day I will join you" (Hogan 2008;34). By addressing whales as family members, they acknowledge the interconnectedness of all life forms. This kinship isn't symbolic but literal within their cultural framework. The prayer acknowledges the cyclical nature of life and death, suggesting a profound respect for the spiritual journey of the whale. By praying for the whale's soul to "become a child again" and enter human bodies, the A'atsika people know the importance of the interdependence and shared destiny between them and whales. This belief in kinship fosters an ethical framework for their interactions with the natural place, guiding them to act with reverence and restraint. The cyclical perspective of life and death, as

seen in the prayer for the whale's soul to be reborn, underscores their understanding of balance and reciprocity in nature. By becoming "part whale" and allowing the whale to become "part human," the A'atsika demonstrate their belief in shared essence and unity, further solidifying their sense of place to the ocean.

Besides, by Tomas's experience, Hogan demonstrates readers a better understanding of the tribe's "sense of place". Thomas's natural sensitivity to the rhythms of nature shapes his interactions with the place. His heightened awareness firstly is a survival skill for him, which aids him during the war by allowing him to sense danger. Then it is a form of communion with the natural world: "His body had eyes. His back had eyes. His fingers had eyes. He could feel what was there. He could feel what was around" (Hogan, 2008:136). Tomas could feel the place and he know that everything is not isolated, what shapes his identity, an eco-man. As Thomas deepen his relationship with the place, "he begins to see the beauty of the water, the thickness of life" (Hogan, 2008:160). This realization, that the place he lives around is not merely a resource but a living, breathing being, is central to his sense of place. It is through this understanding that he come to recognize his own place in the world, not as separate from nature but as a part of the larger web of life.

Just like Thomas, the A'atsika people's acquisition of a sense of place is a profound process. Snyder (1990) once quoted an elderly Crow Indian as saying: "You know, I think that if people stay in one place long enough—even white people—the spirits will begin to speak to them. This is the power of the spirits from the place. The spirits and the ancient forces have not been lost; they just need people to live around them for a long time, and then the spirits will begin to influence them." The A'atsika people lived in the dark river from generations and through kinship-based beliefs, generations old traditions, and personal experiences, they forge deep-seated connection with the ocean, which forms the very core of their identity. All in all, the A'atsika people's "sense of place" is central to their harmonious relationship with the ocean, ensuring both their survival and the wellbeing of the place they attached. This harmonious relationship ensures that the ocean remains healthy, and the cycle of life continues. Their "sense of place" not only allows them to understand their position within the natural world but also guides their ethical interactions with it. It serves as a powerful reminder that humans are an integral part of nature, not separate entities. The A'atsika people maintain a harmonious co-existence with their place, this model holds great significance in a world increasingly grappling with the consequences of environmental degradation and the loss of traditional values. And their lifestyle showcases the importance of a holistic view of place, one that encompasses both the physical and the spiritual, and offers valuable lessons for broader discussions on environmental conservation and cultural preservation.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, Linda Hogan's People of the Whale offers a profound exploration of the A'atsika tribe's interconnectedness with the ocean, presenting a worldview that challenges conventional Western notions of nature as a mere resource. Through mythopoetic narratives, rituals, and a deep sense of place, the A'atsika demonstrate an ethical and spiritual framework where reciprocity and respect are central. Their practices embody a profound ecological wisdom that emphasizes the interdependence of all life forms, urging a shift from extractive, exploitative relationships to ones grounded in mutual care and responsibility. In an era of environmental degradation and cultural erosion, the A'atsika's worldview offers not only a critique of contemporary ecological practices but also a vital model for sustainable living. By embracing a more holistic approach to our relationship with nature, one that acknowledges the agency and sanctity of non-human beings, we can begin to imagine a more balanced and respectful coexistence with the world around us.

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