THE TRADITION OF NAMING IN THE NATIVE AMERICAN CULTUREAS PERCEIVED BY LOUISE ERDRICH IN THE ANTELOPE WIFE

Oana-Andreea Ghiţă-Pîrnuţă
Lecturer, PhD., „Transilvania" University of Braşov

Abstract: Thepresent paper aims at highlighting the importance of naming in Louise Erdrich's novel entitled "The Antelope Wife". Giving a name to a person, an animal or even an object is of paramount importance within the framework of the Native American culture as it creates his/ her/ its own identity and history, thus naming is presented just like putting a mark or a stamp on somebody/ something. Erdrich's novel is rich in many interesting names which have deep significations. Thus, naming has a tradition that is enrooted in the Native American past and the process of naming is related to nature in the Ojibwa community having the ability to influence one's destiny.

Keywords: naming, Native American, culture, tradition, Ojibwa, past.

1. Introduction

Louise Erdrich's novel entitled *The Antelope Wife* presents the lives and destinies of the Native American people throughout several generations within the framework of the Ojibwa community or Chippewa Native American cultural group. The author herself has Ojibwa roots as she was the mixture of her father – who was a German American – and her mother - who was half Ojibwa/ Chippewa and half French. The same issue of blood mixture is presented in *The Antelope Wife* when Cally, an interesting strong female character, is talking about herself: *Some bloods they go together like water – the French Ojibwas: you mix those up and it is all one person. Like me. Others are a little less predictable. You make a person from a German and an Indian, for instance, and you're creating a two-souled warrior always fighting with themselves* (p.110). Thus, we can say that Louise Erdrich's origins have inspired her literary creations.

2. The Tradition of Naming

In the Native American culture, the tradition of naming, that is giving a name to a person, an animal or even an object, is of paramount importance as it gives identity to a person, it creates his/ her own history and it can influence the destiny. When the Ojibwa people feel that their names do not represent them anymore, they choose to change them with other names they feel are more appropriate for them. Thus, the Ojibwa people are known for changing their names throughout their lives as names should reflect their identity.

Louise Erdrich uses her gift to give very interesting names to the characters she creates, thus shaping their personality, identity and history. The name is a sign of life: if you have a name, you are alive. Names have religious connotations being related to the spiritual ritual of Christening. Louise Erdrich creates typical and atypical names for persons, animals and even objects and by giving them these names she defines them shaping their destiny. Erdrich creates personal names, such as: Blue Prairie Woman, this name being changed into Other Side of the Earth for her character to forget the sadness caused by the loss of her baby; Mary or Josephette, names which have religious connotations, related to the Virgin Mary or Joseph. She invents interesting family names, such as: Shawano, Roy or Whiteheart Beads. She creates names for dogs, such as: Sorrow, standing for Blue Prairie Woman's dog, or

BDD-A30495 © 2019 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 16:59:55 UTC)

Almost Soup, the dog saved by Cally from being eaten. She coins a name for a special cake made by Frank, the Blitzkuchen. Thus, the issue of naming is one of the most interesting aspects presented in Louise Erdrich's novel.

2.1 Blue Prairie Woman and her Name Changing

Blue Prairie Woman is one of the strongest female characters of the novel, if not the most powerful one. Her name was Ozhawashkwamashkodeykway in Ojibwa and she is presented at the beginning of the book as a woman who *was healthy as a buffalo cow* (p.12). Concerning her name, Erdrich says: *Blue Prairie Woman's name was covered with blood, burned with fire. Her name was old and exquisite and had belonged to many powerful mothers. (...) But the old ones did know, agreed between them, that the wrong name would kill what was in there and it had to go – like a husk dried off and scattered. Like a shell to a nut. Hair grown long and sacrificed to sorrow. They had to give her another name if they wanted her to return to the living* (p.13). She needed another name to get rid of her sadness, sickness and sorrow which was caused by the fact that she lost her baby. She had to take part in a very powerful ritual because not anyone could name the others: *The name they gave her had to be unused. New. Oshkay. They asked the strongest of the namers, the one who dreamed original names. This namer was nameless and was neither a man nor a woman, and so took power from in-between* (p.14). The ritual was a very powerful one: *The namer went away, starved an sang and dreamed, until it was clear that the only name that made any sense at all was the name of the place where the old Blue Prairie Woman had gone to fetch back her child* (p. 14). Her new name is Other Side of the Earth, which is the name that reflects her sacrifices to save the life of her daughter. Names have strong significances: *All that's in a name is a puff of sound, a lungful of wind, and yet it is an airy enclosure. How is it that the gist, the spirit, the complicated web of bone, hair, brain, gets stuffed into a syllable or two? How do you shrink the genie of human complexity? How the personality? Unless, that is, your mother gives you her name, Other Side of the Earth* (p. 18). Her life really changed after her changing of name and she gives birth to the twins Mary and Josephette Shawano.

2.2 Christianity and Naming

Names give protection, they keep the old ways and tradition guards people. Taking a new name, Other Side of the Earth starts to live a new life, she gives birth to the twins Mary and Josephette, but her soul remained wired to her first born daughter, Matilda. Thus, she starts to walk all around the world to find her. She left the twin babies in the care of her mother, Midass, the grandmother of the twins. Midass chose their names, old Christian names with strong religious connotations: *The twins, two girls, she left behind to the chances of baptism. They were named Mary, of course, for the good blue-robed woman, and Josephette, for the good husband. Only the Ojibwa tongue made Zosie of the latter name. Zosie. Mary. Their grandmother, Midass, who had survived the bluecoat massacre, would raise them as her own* (p. 15). Mary was named according to the name of Jesus's Mother, the Virgin Mary, She who helps all the Christian women, and Josephette was named according to Joseph, the protector of Mary and Jesus. Their daughters were twins, too, named according to their names: *Supposedly this Blue Prairie Woman, before she disappeared, had twins who had twins. Zosie. Mary. They were the first set of twins and the second too. The twins were named Zosie and Mary until me, Rozin, and my sister, Aurora, who died from diphtheria and was pried from my five-year-old arms. I named my girls Cally and Deanna. Bad choice. I broke more continuity, and they suffered for it, too. Should have kept the protection. Should have kept the old ways just as much as I could, and the tradition that guarded us* (p.35). After the first two pairs of twins, the next two pairs, Rozin and Aurora as well as Cally and Deanna, lost their protection from the Saints because they did not keep the tradition and the old ways anymore, thus turning into more vulnerable human beings.

BDD-A30495 © 2019 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 16:59:55 UTC)

2.3 The Significance of Family Names

In Louise Erdrich's novel, there are presented three main families: the Shawanos, the Roys and the Whiteheart Beads. Their names have special connotations and hidden meanings which should be deciphered.

Shawano is a representative name meaning "south" in Ojibwa, it refers to a town in Wisconsin. The name might also come from the old term "shaman", a wise man, a medicine man or a holy mean, curing the sick with magic potions performing a wide range of rituals. In the Shawano family, several characters are included: the twins Mary and Josephette Shawano I, who are the daughters of Blue Prairie Woman and Shawano, Mary and Zosie Shawano II, who are twins of Mary and Josephette Shawano I, but we do not know for sure whose are the twins, Mary's or Zosie's, and there are also Frank, Klaus, Cecille and Puffy, children of Shawano the Ogitchida with Regina. For instance, Klaus Shawano met his wife on the plains, his *sweetheart rose, Ninimoshe, kissing cousin, lover girl* (p. 22), the only one he will ever call his own. Klaus Shawano considers that all the members of his family are so mixed and he tells about himself: *I've got a Buffalo Soldier in my blood, I'm sure, and on the other side I am all Ojibwa. All Shawano, though my name is Klaus, a story in itself* (p. 23). The Ogitchida is Klaus's father: *when the ogitchida came home from the land of the frog people he was strange, but that is often how warriors are when they return. 1945. End of the war. So many spirits out, wandering. And, too, the ogitchida, that is my father Shawano, had lost his cousin who in the warrior's blood relation was more like another self and could not be adequately revenged* (p. 130). Klaus's mother is called Regina: *Shawano was exhausted and they got my Mama, Regina, to come in where the men were and put him to sleep. She was big with her child, that is, myself* (p. 131). The Shawanos are *Ojibwa men – the name has a warrior's meaning. We roast our enemies until they pucker!* (p. 138).

The Roy family has a name which refers to people endowed with high qualities. Scranton Roy adopted a little baby girl - found on the back of a dog - Matilda Roy, who is, in fact, Blue Prairie Woman's child. By adopting this baby girl she proves to have a good soul and noble feelings. Another member of the Roy family is Augustus Roy I, who is the son of Scranton Roy and Peace McKnight: *Augustus. She had already named her baby. Known that it would be a boy* (p. 17). We must mention Augustus Roy II, the boy of Augustus Roy I who married Zosie Shawano II and had two daughters, Aurora and Rozin Roy. Rozin says the following: *the women in my family are the kind to argue with the spirits. Short, tough-minded, sinuous of thought and bold, we daughters of the granddaughters of Blue Prairie Womna are wavy haired and lightened by the Roy blood. We're twins of twins, going back through the floating lines of time* (p. 34).

The Whiteheart Beads as a family includes Richard and Rozin who have two daughters, Deanna and Cally. The name has two terms: the first, "Whiteheart", is a compound consisting of "white" denoting innocence as well as purity and "heart" referring to the engine of the human body and the second term, "Beads", refers to accessories, but as a metaphor, the term refers to the intricate pattern consisting of several colored beads: *The word for beads in the old language is manidominenz, little spirit seed* (p. 91). It is interesting to lay emphasis upon the spirit name and concerning this issue Cally Roy says the following: *My name is Cally Roy. Ozhawashkwamashkodeykway is what the spirits call me. All my life so far I've wondered about the meaning of my spirit name but nobody's told it, seen it, got ahold of my history flying past* (p.102). The same Cally is wondering about the meaning of her name: *I was never in the city, since a little girl. Very sheltered. Not yet recovered from losing my sister. And my name. I think I want a new one, or at least I want to find my grandmas to ask them a few things about the one I've got* (p. 112).

The three names and families are connected, as Cally considers: *what we do with our names is one thing. Where we get them is another. I am a Roy, a Whiteheart Beads, a*

BDD-A30495 © 2019 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 16:59:55 UTC)

Shawano by way of the Roy and Shawano proximity – all in all, we make a huge old family (p. 110). In fact, this is the sophisticated pattern made out of so many colored beads which are interwoven.

2.4 Names of Animals: Sorrow and Almost Soup

Louise Erdrich succeeds in creating a novel, which consists of several stories told by different voices by combining traditional and realistic elements with unreal and comic ones, giving unique, funny and even strange names to certain animals, especially to dogs.

Sorrow is an interesting dog name. It refers to the dog fed by Blue Prairie Woman's breast and grown by her after the dog's mother left on its back with the little baby girl, found by Scranton Roy and named by him Matilda. Sorrow is described as follows: *the dog nursed on human milk grew up coyote gray and clever, a light-boned, loping bitch who followed Blue Prairie Woman everywhere. Became her second thought* (p. 15). Sorrow's name indicates a state of sadness and anxiety. Even if Sorrow remained without mother as she saved Blue Prairie Woman's child, the dog was adopted by a kind person, a loving one growing it as her own baby.

Sorrow is not a metaphor for the dog but for Blue Prairie Woman's sadness which disappeared only after she changed her name and found her daughter: *Close and quiet as her shadow, it lived within touch of her, although they never did touch after the dog drew from Blue Prairie Woman's Soaked and swollen nipples the heat, the night milk, the overpowering sorrow* (p. 15). The dog named Sorrow – who drank a human's milk - was Almost Soup's ancestor.

Almost Soup is the name of another dog, telling a funny story which is, in fact, the source of its name. "Almost Soup" is a compound name consisting of the word "soup", which is a kind of dish, a liquid one, with vegetables and meat, preceded by the term "almost", which means that the dish is not ready. The windigo dog says: *I'm not a full-blood Ojibwa reservation dog. I'm part Dakota, born out in Bwaaanakeeng, transported here. I still remember all that sky, all that pure space, all that blowing dirt of land where I got my name, which has since become legendary* (p.76). Almost Soup, just like Sorrow, is descended from the Original Dog.

It was a white and fat puppy taken from its mother and brought in the kitchen where grandma wanted to turn it into a tasty soup: *Sharpen up the knife. Grandma's voice. That's a nice fat white puppy. Someone else. He'll make a good soup, but do you think enough to go around? Should we kill another one?* (p. 77). Cally Whiteheart Beads, a little girl, was impressed by the beauty of the little dog and she saved the puppy when she found out that the dog would be transformed into a soup. The dog's voice can be heard again as follows: *'Aaay', my girl says, shy and laughing. 'Grandma wouldn't do that.' And she holds out her hands for me. Which is when I use my age-old Original Dog puppyness. I throw puppy love right at her in loopy yo-yos, puppy drool, joy, and big-pawed puppy clabber, ear perks, eye contact, most of all the potent weapon of all puppies, the head cock and puppy grin* (p. 78). The dog confesses *Cally was her name. The girl who saved my life. She loved me best of any other dog, put me up there with her human loves* (p. 81). After a disagreement between grandmother and Cally, the dog was saved, this being the moment when the puppy gets its name: *This is when my naming happens. As we go off I hear the grandpa calling from behind us in amusement, asking the name of the puppy. Me. And my girl calls back, without hesitation, the name I will bear from then on into my age, the name that has given so many of our breedless breed hope, the name that will live on in dogness down through the generations. You've heard it. You know it. Almost Soup* (p. 79).

2.5 Naming of Food: Blitzkuchen

BDD-A30495 © 2019 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 16:59:55 UTC)

The word "Blitzkuchen" is a German compound consisting of two nouns, the first, "Blitz" is translated into English as thunder, out of the blue, a noise is heard and a light is seen from the sky to the earth and the second, "Kuchen" is translated into English as cake, a desert eaten on a special occasion. Thus, we talk about a word which refers to a cake, for a special occasion, which can be made quickly.

The cake is prepared by Frank Shawano, the baker, according to a recipe invented by a German prisoner: *First, the prisoner pounded almonds to a fine paste between two lake rocks. Took the eggs, just the yellows in a little tin cup. There was, in my mother's house, a long piece of wire which he cleverly twisted into a beater of some sort. He began to work things over, the ingredients, grinding with the bottom of the iron skillet pods and beans and spices into the nuts and then adding the sugar grain by grain. When he was finished, he took the thick syrupy batter and poured it as though it contained, as it did for him. The very secret of life. He made dark pools in four round baking pans. He bore them ceremonially and with extreme care toward the oven, which yawned, perfectly stoked beneath with coals glowing in the firebox. Bending with maternal care, he placed the pan within the dark aperture, closed with a toweled hand the oven door* (p. 136). We can see how the soldier prepares the desert very quickly with ordinary ingredients, so this is what gives the name to the cake prepared by Frank almost all the time, even on the occasion of his wedding, being his favorite recipe.

3. The Process of Naming

The Ojibwa people believe that the power of naming comes from the spirits. That is why not anyone belonging to the community can name someone. There are certain persons who are chosen by the spirits as it is the case of Cally's grandmothers: Zosie Roy and Mary Shawano. They were born with this power: *Mrs. Zosie Roy. Mary Shawano. All they have seen, all the names they've named. Just a few people at one time are born to name. They have to dream certain dreams, hear them in the wind, get the instructions just so. I do know that my grandmas' dreams were big-time powerful. They got a lot of names you never heard, as well as some brought to them as spirit gifts. New names. Old ones. Zosie got my sister's name. Mary got names told to her by little frog woman. Names off the sun and weather. From the mouths of animals. Thin air. That day we were named. I ate until I stuffed myself and then I watched my sister walk in the hold of her new name given by the spirits* (p. 110). As we can see in the previous quote, the two women are told how to name a person by both gods and spirits. They hear names everywhere, in nature, in their dreams or the names simply come to their minds.

If a person gets an old name, that person carries the destiny of the one who had that name before, but if a person gets a new name, it means that person is free to forge his/ her own destiny.

When Cally keeps hearing in her mind the word '*Dashkikaa*', she decides to ask her grandma about its meaning. Her grandmother tells her that it is an old name which means "cracked apart". She is surprised by the fact that her granddaughter also has the gift of naming: *All of a sudden she shows great interest. 'Magizha it is you,' she says, 'who gets the names'* (p.213).

The story of how Klaus Shawano got his name is also interesting. His parents decided to name him according to the German soldier, a prisoner of war, who they kidnapped in order to kill him and revenge their people. The German asks them to let him cook the Blitzkuchen before killing him. They are amazed by the taste of the cake so they decide to let him live and his parents name him according to the German who showed him how to prepare a Blitzkuchen instead of giving him a traditional Ojibwa name.

BDD-A30495 © 2019 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 16:59:55 UTC)

The Ojibwa also give traditional names to cities. They call Minneapolis "Gakahbekong", Mary and Zosie refer to it as "Mishimin Odaynang" which in Ojibwa means Apple Town.

4. Conclusions

The tradition of naming in the Native American culture has a great significance in people's lives and it also has a very long history. Naming is a very important process, that of giving a name to a certain person, animal or object and only certain people have the gift to name others and there is a whole process that has to be followed. Names have the ability to protect people throughout their lives and choosing other names, different from the traditional ones means losing protection which causes suffering. Names also have the capacity to influence one's personality and destiny.

In the novel entitled *The Antelope Wife*, written by Louise Erdrich, there are three main families having their special names, such as: Shawano, Roy and Whiteheart Beads, with deep significances and specific symbolism. To change a name is a very important thing as this action is performed when for instance, a person is sick or suffers a lot and in order to be saved from death or get rid of all the sorrow, he/ she needs a new name and the best example is that of Blue Prairie Woman who turns into Other Side of the Earth. There are connections between names and religion. The names of animals can be amusing and the name of a special cake is given according to the way in which it is prepared.

Louise Erdrich's novel, *The Antelope Wife*, presents the life and traditions of the Native Americans in minute details, naming being a very important aspect of the novel as well as of the Ojibwa culture.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Louise, Erdrich: *The Antelope Wife*, London, 2002

BDD-A30495 © 2019 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 16:59:55 UTC)