

STONE SPIDERS

by

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Figure 1. ROCHESTER CREEK GREAT MOTHER PANEL, UTAH

In our rock art field trips we have encountered many images that seem to represent Spiders. When I began checking in my backlog of drawings I found about 50. Some were "definitely" others "probably" and a few "iffy" arachnid images. They come from Utah, Wyoming, Idaho and Nevada.

Spiders have fascinated many cultures from ancient times to present day. Showing multiple arms and legs is a symbolic representation of more than human power in some Asian and Africa religious traditions. "Spider Man" of comic book fame is Superman's friend and

part of the Super Hero Task Force. He can climb anywhere and throw a web around villainous characters in his pursuit of "truth and justice." Arachna-mania has long been a part of the film industry's science fiction.

I began doing research on the role spiders have played in traditional history of Native Americans. It was easy to find dozens of stories about Spider Woman or the Grandmother Spider among the legends of the Southwest, especially the Pueblo and Navajo. We also found Spider Woman stories among the Lakota, Ogalala and the Cherokee. We are just beginning to scratch the surface, of course, but we selected a few of the most interesting.

The first is a creation story¹ from a combination of Hopi and Zuni legends:

In the Beginning the world was not what we know today. There were only two beings: Tawa, the Sun God, and The great Earth Mother, also called Spider Woman. (Her Hopi name is Kokyanwuhti.) All the mysterious in the "Above" were controlled by the power of Sun God. In the "Below" all the magic belonged to Spider Woman.

Sun God and Spider Woman had plans to create the Earth and they needed more gods to help them with their labors so they divided themselves. Tawa divided himself to create Muiyinwah, the God of all Life Germs. Spider Woman divided herself to create Huzruiwuhti, the Woman of Hard Substances. She was the goddess of all the ornaments of wealth such as coral, turquoise, silver and shell. Huzruiwuhti became the bride of Tawa and they became the parents of the Hero Twins.

Tawa and Spider Woman next set about their one big thought to create the Earth between the Above and Below. They sat side by side swaying and made the First Magic Song. It was a song of rushing winds and a song of light and sound and life.

"I am Tawa. I am the Father of all that shall come." sang the Sun God.

"I am Kokyanwuhti. I receive light and nourish life. I am the Mother of all that shall come."

When the Earth was made Tawa and Spider Woman talked of the birds that could be in the air and the animals that could move on the land and fish that could swim in the water. They thought it was a good plan so Spider woman set about forming all the creatures. She used her long slender fingers to carefully form each figure out of clay, but the figures did not move or breathe yet.

¹ Mullet, G.M., "Spider Woman Stories; Legends of the Hopi Indians" University of Arizona Press, Tucson 1989.

SPIDER WOMEN PETROGYLPHS

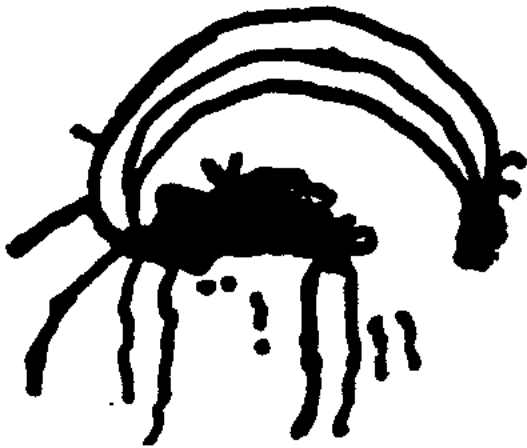


Figure 2. GREEN RIVER, UTAH



Figure 3. SID AND CHARLEY, UTAH

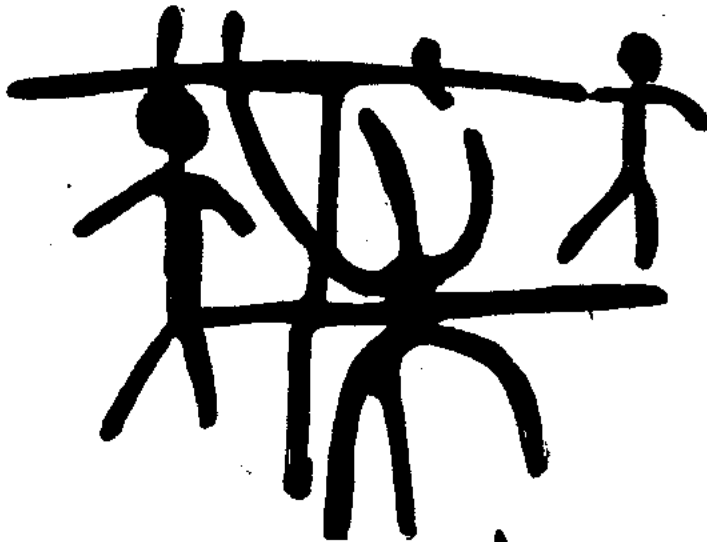


Figure 4. FLAMING GORGE,
SUGAR LOAF MARSH, WYOMING

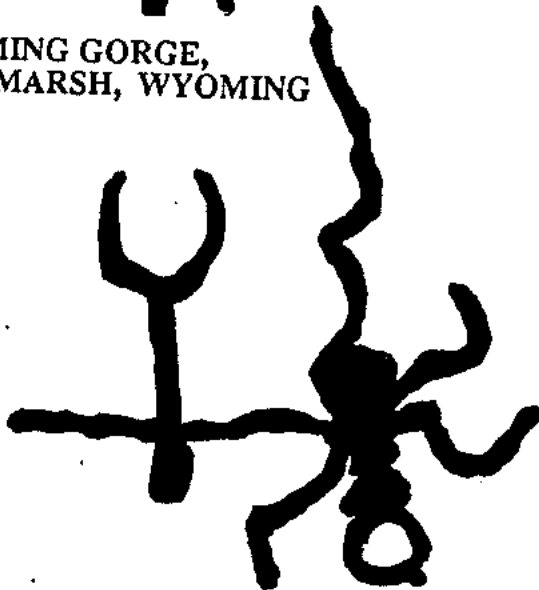


Figure 5. BUCKHORN, UTAH

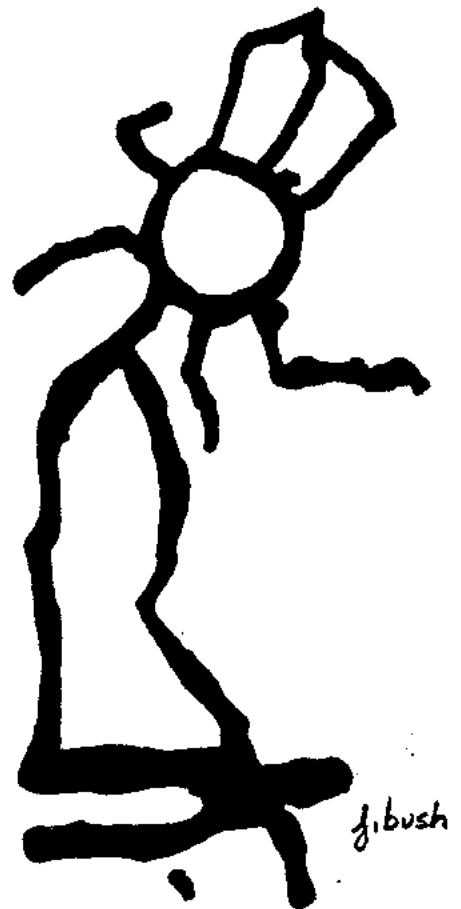


Figure 6. STANSBURY ISLAND, UTAH

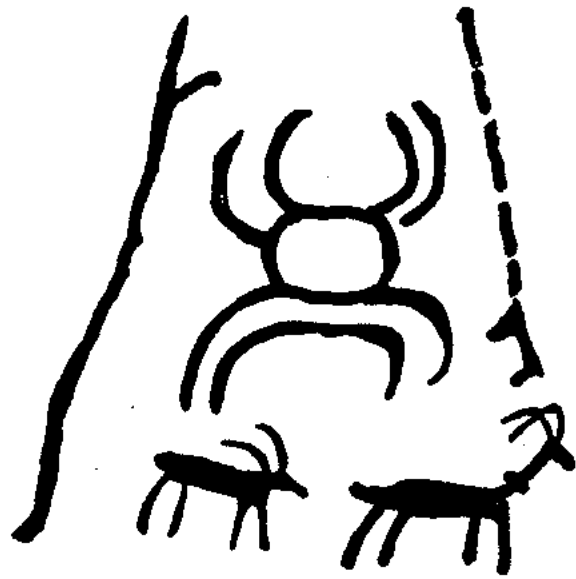


Figure 7. MINERAL MOUNTAINS,

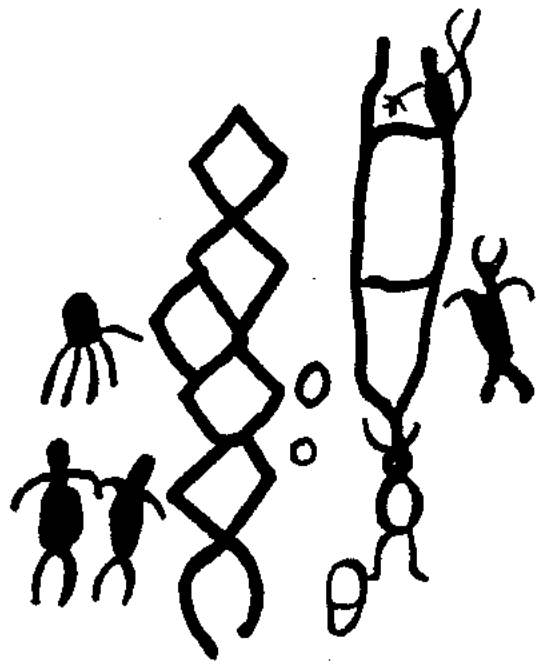


Figure 8. POTASH ROAD, UTAH

Figure 9. TRAIL LAKE, WYOMING

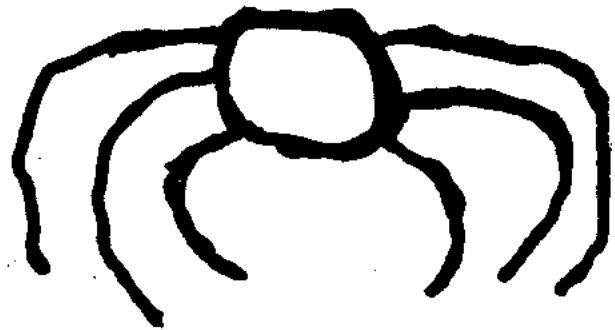
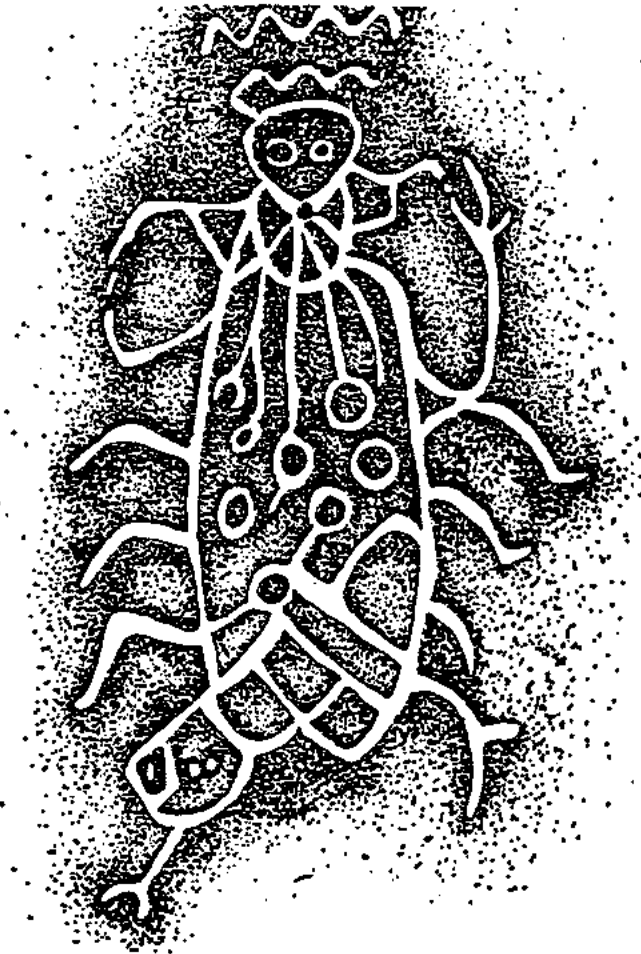


Figure 10. GUNNISON, UTAH

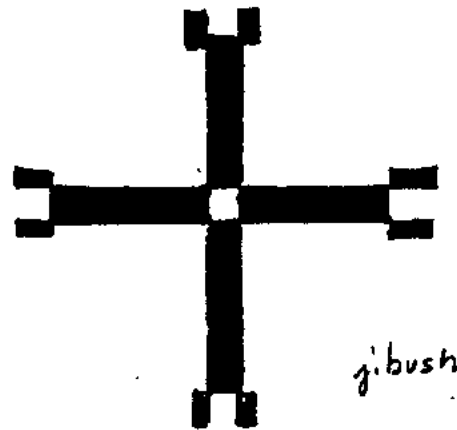


Figure 11. SPIDER WOMAN'S
NAVAJO WEAVING PATTERN

Tawa and Spider Woman then made a plan to give each form a spirit. They covered all the figures with a fleecy white blanket. The blanket was carefully woven by Spider Woman. Then they sang an incantation over the blanket and the creatures began to move and breathe.

Next Tawa and Spider Woman decided to make man and woman figures. When the clay figures were finished Spider Woman gathered them up and wrapped her long arms around them and rocked back and forth. Tawa sent rays from his glowing eyes to warm them and at last the men and women began to breathe. Tawa said. That is enough. We have done a good thing. Now all the creatures will multiply, each one after his own kind. I will make a journey across the Above every day and return every night to Huzruwuhti. I will turn my blazing shield upon the Endless Waters, so that Dry Land may appear; and this shall be the first day on Earth."

Spider Woman said she would lead the people to the land. So she placed the Magic Twins beside her and called all the people and animals to follow her. She led them through the caverns of the Underworld until they finally came to the Sipapu, opening which led above. This is thought to be the lowest spot on the Colorado River where people were to come to gather salt.

Besides the large Rochester Creek panel (Figure 1) showing Spider Woman and the Magic Blanket we located other petroglyphs the Magic blanket at Green River (Figure 2), Sid and Charley (Figure 3), Nine Mile. and Melba, Idaho.

This drawing (Figure 4) from Sugar Loaf, Wyoming shows a spider with two anthropomorphic figures, possibly the twins. It may be the part of the story, however, where Spider Woman leads the people and animals to the Sipapu. We found other images where spiders are leading animals or people at the Buckhorn (Figure 5), Stansbury Island (Figure 6), Mineral Mountains, South of Great Stone Face (Figure 7), Potash Road(Figure 8), and Meadow Wash, Nevada.

We also found several lonely spiders, spider webs, and other spiders panels; among them were: Wah Wah Mountains, Blue Table Mesa, Great Stone Face, Spider Web Clear Creek, Nine Mile, Antelope Springs, Idaho, Ferron, Argyle, Fremont State Park, Clear Creek, Wyoming Wind River (Figure 9) and Gunnison, Utah (Figure 10).

The faithful may call upon Spider Woman for all kinds of supernatural aid. She often gives help in the form of medicine or guidance. She can become invisible as well as what ever size it required. This allows her to hide in the ear of the recipient to give messages.

In most all of the legends spiders are good and powerful individuals. The only exception I found came from an Ogalala legend, where in the first world the spider begins as a spirit of knowledge. When it become to clever it was labeled a trickster and banished. In the second world it redeemed itself by bringing fire as a gift to the Ogalala people. The story tells of a volcano that grew on an island. The People could see the fire and feel it's warmth, and thought it would a good thing to have, but no one knew how they could capture

it. Spider Woman said she would get it for them. First she swam across the water and then found a small glowing coal from the volcano. She quickly spun a soft web around it to protect it, and then attached a line. This allowed her to swim back across the water pulling the package behind her. She then presented the Ogalala people with the fire.

The Cherokee story is similar, but instead of a coal from a volcano spider woman brings the People a piece of the Sun. In order to carry the piece of the Sun she wrapped it carefully in clay. By the time the Spider Woman returned to the Cherokee People the clay around the piece of sun was baked into a jar. They could open the jar and the piece of the sun spilled out. Spider Woman not only brought light and fire, she gave them the knowledge of pottery as well.

Spider woman is responsible for the crafts of many different tribes. This is especially true for the Navajo. They believe Spider Woman's home is at Spider Rock in Canyon de Chelly.

Spider Woman instructed the Navajo women how to weave on a loom which Spider Man told them how to make. The crosspieces were made of sky and earth cords, the warp sticks of sun rays, the heddles of rock crystal and sheet lightning. The batten was a sun halo, white shell made the comb. There were four spirals: one stick of zigzag lightning with a whorl of channel coal, one a stick of flash lightning with a whorl of turquoise, a third had a stick of sheet lightning with a whorl of abalone; a rain streamer formed the stick of the fourth, and its whorl was white shell. ²

There are some weaving patterns that have spider symbolism. The flagged cross is called Spider Woman's cross, and shown here. (Figure 11) The Spider Woman's Hole is a small hole in the center of diamond designs. This is hole that allows the spirit of the weaver to escape, much the same as the spirit trails in some Navaho weaving.

Spider Woman certainly played an interesting role in many stories of Native Americans. I'll be watching for her to be crawling around the panels as we keep studying rock art.

² Reichard, Gladys A. "Spider Woman; A Story of Navajo Weavers and Chanters." MacMillan Company. New York. 1934.

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