

## Weaving the Basket

Our elders teach us important life lessons through the use of metaphors, symbols and stories. We wanted to honor this practice and we wondered:

**Are there metaphors to explain the concept of evaluation?**

A member of our advisory committee, Dr. Eric Jolly, gave his grandmother’s story about basket making and while weaving a basket, he told the story. With his permission, we use his **basket making story** as a metaphor for Indigenous evaluation:

Among the Cherokee, the making of a basket is a journey through which lessons are learned about life and spirit. The making of the basket begins by interweaving two pairs of thin honeysuckle vines into a square or cross; this forms the base of the basket. This squared cross symbolizes the four directions and the four elements of all Creation: the Great Spirit, mother earth and her gifts, animal life, and all humanity. On the journey of life, this represents the beginning of spiritual awareness.

Additional pairs of vines are woven, and together with the original crossed sets of vines, they begin to form interwoven triangles that give shape to the basket. This interconnectedness symbolizes a deeper awareness—the working together of the Great Spirit with all humanity, the earth and animals.

The basket maker continues, weaving in more vines to form a set of concentric circles. This represents an even higher level of spiritual awareness: the interconnection of all things with the Creator. We are all related and one with the Creator.

As the basket maker continues weaving, the basket forms an inner wall interlaced with an outer wall. It is the tension between these two walls that gives strength to the basket. For the basket maker, this strength from the tension between the two walls also gives the basket its integrity—for a strong basket is a useful basket.

*The interconnection within all life and the spirit world is a fundamental principle for the framing of Indigenous evaluation.*



Eric Jolly and Karen Kirkhart



Cherokee Basket

*The integration of program implementation with evaluation contributes to integrity, or truth making.*

Using this metaphor as a way to view evaluation, we see the program as a journey of learning. The inner wall of the basket is program implementation; the outer wall is the evaluation. Together these two combine to form a tension that enables the program to learn, improve, and strengthen.

**In basket making, it is important to have balance all around the basket. The basket maker must continually turn the basket as he or she works to inspect for balance and evenness.**

Similarly, by looking at our programs from multiple perspectives through evaluation, we also seek to create a more perfect product: one that balances our understanding of how goals connect to activities and results. In this sense, the evaluation focuses on learning throughout our work. We continually examine as we create and implement the program. We do not wait until the end of the program to conduct the evaluation. We must continue to look at our programs as they unfold so that we can render judgment and make decisions about how to ensure that the program is successful.

As we watched Eric making the basket, we saw that the honeysuckle vines had been soaking in a bucket of water and he worked them while they were still wet. This provided flexibility to the materials so that they could be easily woven.

Indigenous evaluation also must be flexible so as to ensure responsiveness to differences among tribal cultures and situations. Further, in an Indigenous framing, the tools or materials we use in evaluation must be thought through before the implementation. In this way, evaluation becomes part of the process of program implementation.

As Eric wove the basket and continued his grandmother's story, we realized that the journey of the basket does not begin with the weaving, or even the soaking of the vines. The journey began much earlier.

The basket maker must learn which types of materials to collect (in this instance, honeysuckle vines) and when to collect them (only at certain times during the year when the young vines are most pliable). Then, the materials must be prepared in a certain way. For example, they are soaked in water and dyed in certain natural colors that are tied to the materials available in that place and have special meaning. For some tribes, the colors represent the four sacred directions; for other tribes, they may have other associations.

In many tribal cultures, special songs are integrated into the work being accomplished. For the Cherokee, basket making has a long history, rooted in the culture of the people. When the Cherokee were in the Southeast, they sang certain songs in the collection and preparation of the materials. These songs were appropriate and relevant to the place, environment, and their relationship with that place. Those songs did not work anymore when the people were removed to a new place, Indian Territory, or what is now known as Oklahoma. New songs, or protocols, had to be developed that were appropriate for the new place and new relationship.

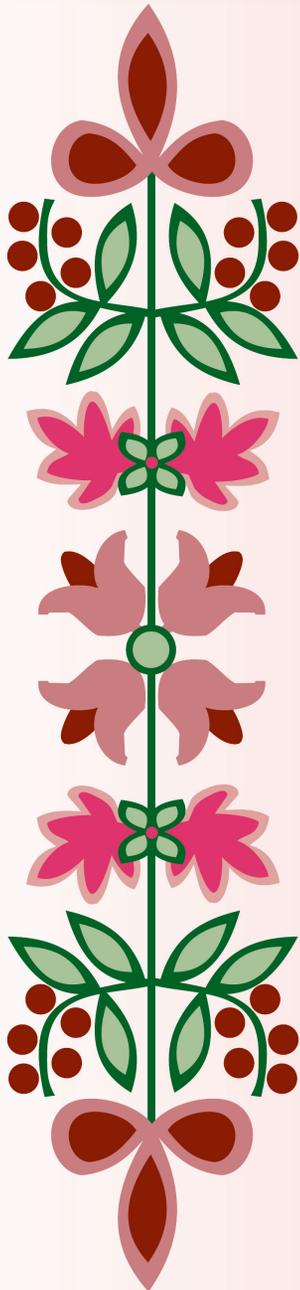
Indigenous evaluation, when conducted in a tribal community, is rooted in the culture of the people. The evaluation is responsive to the history, needs, and dreams of the people participating in and being affected by the program being evaluated. Culture and context are integral elements of Indigenous evaluation.



*Eric Jolly and Karen Kirkhart*



*Institute of American Indian Arts Students*



## The Power of Metaphor

The elders said, “We get scared when people bring us thick reports that are bound together and have tabs on them. We're frightened to open it because it's an evaluation of our tribe or our program. But somebody spent a lot of time doing this evaluation, so that's what we have to look at. Educated people are impressed by those thick reports. So their symbols must be that. You know, they must really like to write these thick reports. Some of us say that they write their reports in too small letters because we can't read them, and we get a headache by the time we get a little ways into it.”

The elders pose questions back to me. They ask: “We're giving you our traditional symbols and metaphors; what are some of the things that you use, that mean evaluation to you?”

Focus Group Participant, Seattle

In Indigenous communities, knowledge is seen in very practical terms. People ask: “How can it help us or help our community?” Thus, knowledge creation must be framed in practical terms. One way to do this is to use cultural metaphors. Often these metaphors take the form of artifact. Just as we have used the basket making metaphor to give the concept of Indigenous evaluation grounding in cultural values and protocols, as Indigenous evaluators, we can use metaphor to build a vision of how evaluation can assist our tribal communities.

An Ojibwe evaluator in Canada, evaluating a health care program in a Native community, framed the evaluation within the cultural

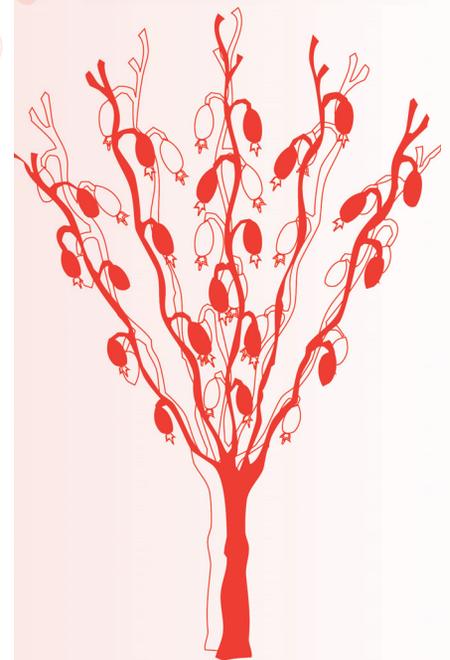
metaphor of the **tree of life**. This was a particularly relevant and culturally appropriate way of framing the program evaluation and it had strong resonance with her community stakeholders (project partners).

A focus group participant, who had been conducting research for her dissertation, noted that in her discussion of evaluation with elders in her community, she would use the analogy of traditional objects—such as a pipe or a drum—as indicators of standards. She noted that when elders look at traditional objects, they immediately recognize the quality of work that goes into the object’s creation. Certain standards tell the elders that the object is of good, solid quality, that the person who made it knew what she was doing, and that she had followed the proper protocols (for example, demonstrating respect for the materials and offering prayers for guidance).

In applying this discussion to evaluation, a focus group participant suggests asking:

*What if we apply this to how tribal members evaluate their life? They can really start understanding what we're looking for. It's a way of helping them make that leap of faith to say, "We're talking about the same thing" . . . I will tell a person that it is like looking at a beautifully made drum: "They took the time to put it together, and we don't have to worry. It's going to last us a long time." That's the kind of evaluation we're trying to get at, to capture in this process.*

The CIRCLE (Comprehensive Indian Resources for Community and Law Enforcement) Project article describes a critical juncture in the second year of a cross-agency’s justice program within a Lakota community in South Dakota. Guided by the evaluators, the project partners cast the project’s goals as nation-building and Indigenous knowledge recovery (to rebuild the Tribal Court and its associated institutions to reflect community needs and culture). In searching for



### *Reference*

See Readings, article on CIRCLE Project.

culturally resonant phrases to capture the nature of the project and its goal, several Oglala Lakota terms were considered. Project stakeholders settled on the term *tiyuwosla icupi* (raising the tipi).

Raising the tipi is particularly laden with symbolism and meaning, as it incorporates cultural teaching, family responsibility, and tribal duty. Raising the tipi—making a home—is accomplished with relatives. It is done with care and relevance, skill and teaching, and patience and knowledge. . . . the phrase additionally symbolizes the importance of education, boundaries, respect, family, living together peacefully, and love.<sup>1</sup>



Native American Week, Chief Dull Knife College

In a Tewa community in New Mexico, the evaluation of a Native language preservation program is being framed within the context of pottery making. Pottery making is a skill that goes back innumerable generations within the community:

Every single day the people . . . live with pottery, with clay—with the earth. Both consciously and unconsciously, we continue, on a daily basis, to reaffirm our connection—our dependency—on the *nung* (clay, earth, dirt). In the past, our dependency on the *nung* was intense because we farmed the earth for food, we formed the clay for cooking, storing and ceremonial vessels, we colored our bodies with clay for dances and ceremonies, and we built our houses out of the mud—the *nung*. Our lives were intimately intertwined with the earth. . . . Our present lives here are changing. We build different kinds of houses, our ceremonies are not as frequent, and our pottery is not used for cooking or storing food. . . . Are we a different people? In some ways we are—

<sup>1</sup> Robertson, P., Jorgenson, M., & Garrow, C.; (2004) Indigenizing Evaluation Research; *American Indian Quarterly*, vol. 28, nos. 3 & 4, p. 506-507.

but, our daily interaction with the clay reminds us of the pottery making tradition to which we belong and which stretches back almost 2,000 years.<sup>2</sup>

Dried clay is dug from the earth on the reservation and mixed with a temper of volcanic tuff (ashy sand). The tempering agent performs an important function in pottery making. By modifying the stickiness of the raw, wet clay, the temper makes the clay more pliable and easier to handle. It also controls the drying and shrinkage of the vessel, eliminating cracking and distortion of the unfired work, and during the process when the vessel is fired, it reduces further shrinkage and warping.

The evaluation work group for the language program is using the metaphor of the temper as a way of reinterpreting the role of evaluation as the program takes shape. It is shifting from viewing the evaluation as only a summary of a three-year federally funded project, to using the evaluation as a long-term planning process for language restoration. Evaluation is one of the tools ultimately used to strengthen the community's cultural foundation. By looking at lessons learned through the evaluation of the federal project, the work group realized that the federal program is only the initial step of what may be a 25-year journey to restore the language to its 1960s level.

In the beginning, a potter has no idea what the final work will look like. Some potters say that the clay has a mind of its own and that this is most noticeable when trying to make a very specific shape for a special order or commission. They say that the clay will not always be molded to the potter's wish. Likewise, the Tewa language project participants do not know what the end result of the journey will be, but the stakeholders view the evaluative process of learning as a journey worth taking to preserve their language.



Darlene James, Institute of American Indian Arts



Santa Clara Pottery

<sup>2</sup> Quote from the Forward by Rena Naranjo-Sentzell, *Pottery in Santa Clara: A Photographic History of Pottery in Our Community*, Cultural Preservation Program, Santa Clara Pueblo, May 1993.

# FRAMEWORK

Weaving the Basket

