

Order of the White Moon Presents

# Grandmother Spider

By Lynda Aiman-Smith

A Level 1 Final Project for Dark Moon's Heart School

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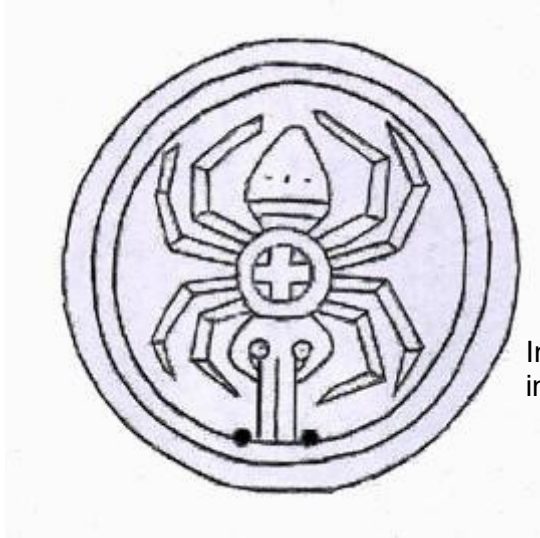
"Do you know Grandmother?" he asked naively, looking at her with his great, dark eyes. "Your grandmother?" "Well, yes—Grandmother—You know. Who makes the web. . . . Come with me this way now. Come into Grandmother's house." It was underground, but very large, dark and large, and the Grandmother was there at the center, at her loom. She was making a rug or blanket of the hills and the black rain and the white rain, weaving in the lightning. As they spoke she wove."  
From Ursula K. LeGuin *Buffalo Gals and Other Animal Presences*.

## **Background Information – Grandmother Spider**

Grandmother Spider, sometimes also called Old Woman or Spider Old Woman or simply Spider Woman, is a powerful figure in a number of North American Native American tribal stories. Among these people she is clearly an Earth Deity, and can change her form (and age) at will. Sometimes she is an old woman, sometimes she is a maiden. She can become a huge and frightening spider; or shrink to being so small she can sit in your ear and whisper instructions. Among most of the native peoples "Grandmother" is an honorific, to denote a woman of knowledge. So there are younger women, ones even without children, who are respectfully called "Grandmother."

Grandmother Spider is especially honored among the Hopi, Pueblo, Navajo, and Apache in the southwestern USA. The Hopi, Pueblo, and Navajo creation stories feature Her. For the Hopi, Spider Woman is the true creator of humans – she fashions them out of clay, and with her husband Tawa (the Sun) brings them to life. The Navajo have the story of how She taught the Navajo how to build looms and to weave. Both of these tribes have as part of the world creation stories how Grandmother Spider helped the Hero Twins (or Warrior Twins) vanquish the monsters who posed threats to humankind.

Other tribes also speak of Her. For example, the Obijwa - where Grandmother Spider is known as Asibikaashi – tell how She wove web to help retrieve the sun. Among the Obijwa She is credited with creating the magic of Dream Catchers. The southeastern Choctaw, Chickasaw, and Cherokee have a number of stories about Her. The ancient ancestors of many southeastern tribes left artifacts that show the importance of Grandmother Spider. There are beautiful gorgons and images of spiders that have been uncovered in Mississippian Mound builder excavations – probably the best known are a series of engraved shells and other artifacts from the ancient cultural center city of Cahokia, which was inhabited from about 600CE (Common Era) until 1250 CE, and likely had between 10,000-20,000 residents.



Drawing of shell gorgon found at Cahokia Mounds, an historical and UNESCO World Heritage site, located near St. Louis Missouri.

Image from the Illinois State Museum collection, image permitted as use as part of teaching curriculum.

As an aspect of the Goddess who weaves the web of the interconnection of life, she also appears in the ancient structures of the Mesoamerican region of Mexico, especially in the spectacular ruins of Teotihuacan (located about 25 miles from Mexico City); and among the historic and contemporary Mayan populations of the Yucatan peninsula of Mexico. There among the Maya she has many names. Ix Chel is the Weaver who sets the Universe in motion, her whirling drop-spindle at the very center of the Universe. Since the ancient Mayans were keen astronomers, this image makes me think of the swirling galaxies, turning like a spindle. She also has the aspect of Ix Kanleom meaning Lady Spider Web Catching the Morning Dew. She has the Crone aspect of Chak Chel, the Old Dark Moon Goddess. Since in the Mayan world old women were (and still are) healers and midwives, she is also seen as the Midwife of Creation who assists in birthing worlds and civilizations. For more information on the various Yucatan aspects of this Goddess, all of it fascinating see Taube (1992).

Other cultures in lands all over the world will ascribe this creative life-force of weaving to other aspects of the Divine Feminine. We might think of the Moirae, the three Fates who control destiny, where each of our fates is wound and unraveled by spinning the thread of life on the distaff. From ancient Greece there is Arachne, who became a spider when she bested Athena in a weaving. In the Odyssey, Penelope kept her freedom from unwelcome suitors by weaving. In the Hindu scriptures, the image of Maya is described as the play of creative and dynamic energy or force (Shakti). For Hindus, Maya is also a web of illusion being constantly woven by the universal spider (Brahman).

Coming back to my own land here in the southwestern USA, we know that the ones who came before us to this corner of New Mexico must have had stories about this universal weaving spider. The Mimbres people lived here a thousand years ago, on the very land where I live. The records we have are from the objects they made, and some of the most beautiful of those are the Mimbres pottery. A number of those have figures of spiders. Literally just five blocks from my house is the Western New Mexico University museum, which houses the largest collection of archaeologically excavated Mimbres artifacts in the world. There is a lovely seed pot there, with a spider image, cleverly made to seem like the spider is heading into the mouth of the jar. There is also a beautiful bowl with a spider image inside. Unfortunately, I have not been able to get photos of them.

### **Sacred to Grandmother Spider – Offerings, Stories, Songs, Ritual**

Since many Grandmother Spider stories have her assisting the Warrior Twins, and those stories often have the Twins bringing gifts that please Her, let me explain a bit about those Twins.

In the Navajo creation story, the Earth and Sky had a daughter, White-Shell Woman (later re-named Changing Woman). This miraculous being, White-Shell Woman, had strong powers of her own. She made herself a house right in the middle of the land bounded by the four sacred mountains. Her house was beautiful, and there was a running stream nearby. White-Shell Woman would go outside and sit by the stream, in the sunshine. Doing so she conceived twins, and when they were born the first-born was named Monster Slayer; the second was named Born for Water.

They were miraculous and powerful Twin beings, growing tall in strong in just a few days -- but it was via their Grandmother Spider that they were taught magic, and armed with magical weapons. When the Warrior Twins would go visit Grandmother Spider they would always bring Her gifts. In Navajo stories the Twins take Grandmother Spider beautiful arrows that they have made. In Hopi and Pueblo tales, the Twins would often bring Grandmother Spider pahos, or prayer sticks. These were pahos they made themselves. The Pueblo, Zuni, and Hopi people use prayer sticks, which can take a very long time to make, as offerings, as sacrifices, as ceremony, and as prayers of petition.

In the Hopi, Pueblo, and Navajo stories, humans periodically pray to Grandmother Spider with offerings of cornmeal, especially blue or yellow cornmeal. Sprinkling cornmeal on the ground is a way of blessing. It is even more sacred to use white corn pollen. Grandmother Spider is also pleased by tobacco offerings. Since she is a weaver, tufts of wool and thread are also appropriate offerings. It is also appropriate to offering songs, especially since She Herself likes to sing while She is weaving.

I also think that offerings of pieces of paper that have been carefully drawn and colored with a design that is often used in Navajo weaving called The Spider Woman's Cross are valid offerings for Grandmother Spider.



Even though each Navajo weaver creates her own design, there are repeating motifs in rugs. One of these is commonly known as Spider Woman's Cross. Usually the cross has equal arms, for balance.

Balance, or harmony, hózhó, is very important in the Navajo culture. So an offering for Grandmother Spider could be to start with this equal arm cross, and then while praying and with devotional focus, let other designs develop around the cross. Then add color as seems right. Then take the paper outside and tie it to a bush where a spider might be, or bury it in the ground. In this design you can see balance and beauty (Navajo concept is hózhó – pronounced whazho). The idea of the Four Sacred Directions, and the Four Sacred Mountains, is also part of the pattern.

Image from rug collection of H.E. used by permission.



Since I envision Grandmother spider as an aspect of the Crone, the time of year she could be most honored would be as the Wheel of the Year turns toward darkness. Here in southwestern New Mexico we celebrate El Dia de los Muertos, the Day of the Dead, for three days from October 31 through November 2. A number of community ofrendas get built at various places. This past Dia de los Muertos in 2018, I offered up on the ofrenda to Grandmother Spider. I placed a picture Grandmother Spider from Cahokia on the altar, and placed underneath it a drawing of the equal arm cross, with various designs, sigils, and prayers.

Original photo of community ofrenda. Grandmother Spider Image is at lower left quadrant. Under the image is the offering.

Another offering I have for Grandmother Spider is a meditation I wrote, as part of a workshop I developed on the Wheel of the Year, and have given in our community. During the workshop the participants were “walking” the wheel. As part of the exercises, I lead them in guided meditations. This is the meditation, *which I developed* and read to the group, for the celebration of Samhain.

### **Meeting Grandmother Spider -- This is my original work.**

“You hurry on the path, as it is getting quite dark, and you are feeling concerned about a place to stay before night. You hurry a bit too fast, and have to stop and catch your breath. You’re chilly, and you put on the jacket you have. As you do, something drops out of the jacket pocket. You think it might be your turquoise necklace you had put in the pocket. You bend to find it. You get on your hands and knees and look closely at the ground. You realize there is a light shining from a small hole, a hole about the size of the tip of your finger.

Unable to resist, you bend down and put your eye near the hole, and look in. Unbelievably, down the hole it looks like there is an old woman sitting and weaving on a loom. She turns and says “Grandchild, come on down, I’ve been waiting for you.” You say, somewhat timidly, “This hole is way too small.” “Grandchild, blow on it,” she responds. You blow gently on the hole. It widens. “Oh, give it a better puff than that!” the old woman calls up to you. You blow heartily. The hole widens, and it begins to look like there is a whole room down there. “Again” she commands. You blow harder. The hole is almost big enough for you to get your head and shoulders in. “One more time, the fourth blow” the old woman shouts. You blow as hard as you can, and then you are standing at the entrance to a large room.

The room is lit by a big crackling fire that smells of pinon. Rugs hang on the walls, their patterns flickering in the firelight. Soft sheepskins are on the floor. On the table is a big plate of sopapillas, and a jar of honey. The old woman is standing and smiling at you. Her face falls into a myriad of wrinkles. You notice she has lost many of her teeth. Her hair is snowy white, and is tied in a loose knot in the back of her neck with some black cloth. She is tiny; her head barely comes to your shoulder. She is old, but beautiful to you. You suddenly know her. She is the old one, the Grandmother. And you know she loves you.

You hold out your arms to her and exclaim “Grandmother Spider’ and she walks into your arms. You hug her frail but tough body. She pats you again and again on the arm, then motions you to sit on a chair, and moves to the fireplace for some cocoa. She pours two cups of cocoa, and you sit and sip cocoa and eat sopapillas, and tell her about your journey. Now and again she pointedly comments about something you might have missed. You listen carefully, because she is the Elder, and whatever she says is important.

Spider Grandmother tells you that you can nap, but you’ll have to continue your journey at night. You would much rather stay snug in her house and have her cook you eggs with green chile for breakfast, but you agree to do whatever she tells you. She tucks you in a pile of sheepskins near her loom and covers you with soft blankets she has woven. You lay and watch her weave. As she weaves you begin to see things in the loom, patterns being woven. You watch and watch, as you realize the patterns in the weaving are messages for you.

The visions fade into dreams, and then Grandmother is gently shaking you awake. You get up, groggy still. She ties some food into a packet for you, refills your water bottle, and kisses both your cheeks. Before you leave, she puts your turquoise necklace around your neck and shakes her finger at you for having dropped it. She walks with you upward through a tunnel in the earth. She points to a hole above you and reminds you that you must walk north. One last hug and you take a step, and suddenly you are outside. You set out into the dark and cold.”

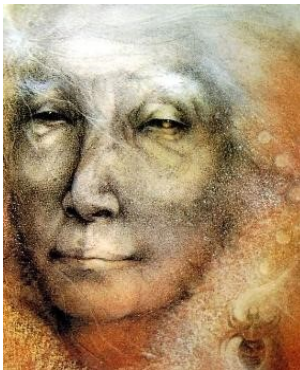


Image of Old Woman (Grandmother Spider) – by Susan Seddon Boulet

### **Rituals and Customs Related to Grandmother Spider**

Traditionally when a baby girl is born into a Navajo family, her hands and arms are rubbed with spider webs, so that she may receive Grandmother Spider’s blessing of learning to weave. There is also a tale that if you want to learn to weave, approach a spider web and touch it so carefully so as to not jiggle or break it. If you can, your hands will be blessed, and it will be easier to learn to weave.

My mother and grandmother taught me as a child to never ever kill a spider. If there is a spider in the house, and you are worried about it, capture it in a jar and take it outside. Killing a spider is not only a violation of the sacredness of Grandmother Spider, my grandmother firmly believed that killing a spider would result in delaying the rains that are so needed for our gardens in the southwest. Grandmother Spider is associated with the rains because of her association with snakes, from the Hopi and Pueblo stories of how Grandmother Spider kindly got some humans and snake people to intermarry, so that the snakes would be more inclined to go tell the rain spirits to bring the rain.



As part of this section, I want to briefly describe another ritual – of holding a sweat lodge, because some aspects of lodges I have done were dedicated to Grandmother Spider. My mother volunteered for years for a non-profit organization, Four Winds Recovery Center, outside of Farmington NM, where I grew up. Most of the people, who were serving, and being served, were Navajo. The treatment protocols integrated both western and Native American western medicines, including doing regular sweat lodges. My mother did a Women’s Sweat Lodge every week for about 15 years, both as a part of her volunteer work, and because she herself found them so healing. She also had a group of women friends, and relatives, who did regular sweat lodges together. I attended many a sweat lodge with her, often working with her to prepare the lodge, help with the fire, and do the myriad of tasks required. One of the songs that my mother, my cousins, and I always sang when we were all gathered in the lodge is a song to Grandmother Spider.

I actually think this is an original family song, since I have never heard it sung by anyone but members of my family. [“Oh Grandmother We Are Your Children”](#)

### Morning Ritual – Asking for Grandmother Spider’s Blessing

Material needed – cornmeal in a small bowl or basket

Step outside early in the morning, and face East.

Sprinkle some cornmeal toward the East and sing:

*Oh Grandmother, We are Your children*

*Bless us, and Guide us, and Show us Your Way,*

*Hey hey hey*

Speak softly and clearly, and ask Grandmother Spider for blessings of speaking today in a good way

Turn and face South.

Sprinkle some cornmeal toward the South and sing:

*Oh Grandmother, We are Your children*

*Bless us, and Guide us, and Show us Your Way,*

*Hey hey hey*

Speak softly and clearly, and ask Grandmother Spider for your emotions and creativity to be used in a good way

Turn and face West

Sprinkle some cornmeal toward the West and sing:

*Oh Grandmother, We are Your children*

*Bless us, and Guide us, and Show us Your Way,*

*Hey hey hey*

Speak softly and clearly, and ask Grandmother Spider for good guidance from your dreams

Turn and face North

Sprinkle some cornmeal toward the North and sing:

*Oh Grandmother, We are Your children*

*Bless us, and Guide us, and Show us Your Way,*

*Hey hey hey*

Speak softly and clearly, and ask Grandmother Spider for blessings on your body and your house

Toss a little cornmeal into the air above you and say "*Blessings come from the upper world*"  
Sprinkle some cornmeal on the ground directly at your feet and say "*Blessings come from the lower world*"

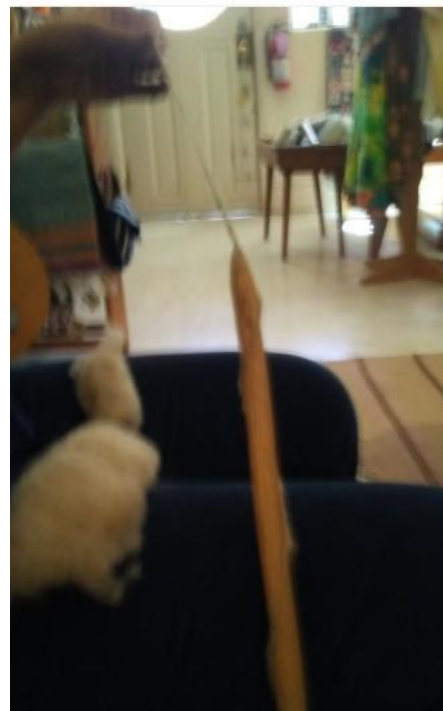
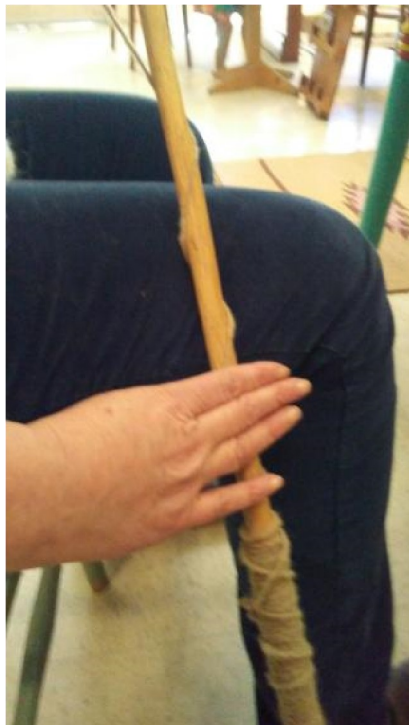
Meditate briefly on how Grandmother Spider is spinning the world into being. If there is some special blessing you are seeking, say this:

*Grandmother Spider is weaving at Her loom  
and the patterns She weaves, becomes so.  
She is of this world, and of the world above, and of the world below  
Grandmother Spider weaves and  
as She weaves the patterns become so.*

*She is sitting at her loom weaving for me now \_\_\_\_\_* (name what it is you are praying she weaves for and with you)

Be sure and thank Her for blessings she will be spinning for you

**Other Acts and Rituals** And since Grandmother Spider taught the first people how to spin and weave, it would seem to me that *engaging in those acts are her rituals*. In the past month I have been taking lessons from a local master weaver, H.E. Here is a picture, of me learning to spin on a traditional Navajo spindle, using wool from a churro sheep raised by a Navajo friend of my spinning teacher. Picture taken by H.E. used with permission.



## **Grandmother Spider Stories**

As I have been learning to spin with H.E., I've been telling Grandmother Spider stories. That has become part of the magic of the lessons. As a child growing up in northern New Mexico, in a small town where my grandmother's house was literally across the river from the Navajo reservation, I heard Grandmother Spider stories regularly, just from being around the people visiting with my family. And, since my family has some Choctaw heritage, I also heard the stories of Grandmother Spider that are part of the Choctaw, Chickasaw, and the Cherokee tradition. One I've heard, in many variations, is the Choctaw story of when Grandmother Spider brought fire to the people. There is no "official" version of this story, various tribal story tellers have it in

their repertoire, and my retelling reflects my own synthesis of hearing many versions.

["Grandmother Spider Brings Fire to the People"](#)

In January 2019 I went to a lecture "Creatures of the Maya" by Dr. Julian Lee, at our local university. His talk was on imagery of reptiles and amphibians as shown in ancient Mayan iconography, and he talked a lot about snakes. He briefly mentioned a story of Ix Chel demanding patterns from a snake, as an explanation of one of those images. Since I had already realized that the aspect of Ix Chel as Weaver (with her name Ix Kanleom meaning Lady Spider Web), is syncretic with Grandmother Spider, I was inspired by his brief explanation of that image. That inspiration led me to develop a story, that I call "Snake Patterns." The mp3 of the story "[Snake Patterns](#)" included as part of this final project is my own original work.

## **In Closing – Grandmother Spider Walks this Land**

Completing this project for Level 1 in the Dark Moon heart School, in the Order of the White Moon, has been personally wonderfully enriching. I've long felt a relationship with Grandmother Spider, but now more than ever. From this reading and writing, I am fully convinced that this Creator, Old Woman, Grandmother Spider, walks the land before me, behind me, and with me.



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IxCel and the Rattlesnake – the Weaver wants to use snake patterns, so gets Rattlesnake to come and give Her patterns. This was the explanation for an image shown as part of a lecture “Creatures of the Maya” by Dr. Julian Lee given 1-16-2019 at WNMU Western Institute of Life Long Learning

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