

# Poetics of Dreams and Basket Weaving in Greg Sarris' *Mabel McKay: Weaving the Dream*

Prof. Brajesh Sawhney

Department of English, Kurukshetra University, Kurukshetra, Haryana, India

## Abstract:

Mabel McKay, a renowned Pomo basket weaver and healer, left an indelible mark on Native American artistry, culture, and spirituality. Her life and work embody a profound connection between the poetics of dreams and the intricate art of basket weaving. This research article delves into McKay's life, analyzing the interplay between her dreams, spiritual beliefs, and the craftsmanship of basket weaving as depicted in "Weaving the Dream," her biography by Greg Sarris. It explores how McKay's dreams shaped her artistic expressions, examining the symbolism, cultural significance, and spiritual dimensions of her baskets.

**Keywords:** Mabel McKay, Pomo Indians, basketing, dreaming and spirit

Mabel McKay, an esteemed Pomo Indian from California, stands as a luminary figure in the realms of Native American artistry, spirituality, and cultural heritage. Her legacy, deeply intertwined with the poetics of dreams and the intricate craft of basket weaving, transcends mere artistic prowess. McKay's life and work epitomize a profound connection between the ethereal world of dreams and the tangible manifestations of cultural identity woven into her baskets. Born in 1907, McKay was raised in a traditional Pomo community, immersed in the rich tapestry of her people's heritage. Her upbringing, steeped in the spiritual and cultural traditions of her tribe, provided the fertile soil from which her artistic genius blossomed. From an early age, McKay demonstrated an affinity for the sacred art of basket weaving, a skill passed down through generations, carrying not just utilitarian significance but embodying spiritual depth and cultural storytelling.

Central to McKay's life were her dreams—vivid, prophetic, and deeply revered. She regarded her dreams as conduits to the spirit world, channels through which ancestors communicated, guiding her actions and infusing her creative endeavours, particularly her weaving, with profound meaning. These dreams weren't mere fleeting images but held significance as spiritual guidance, informing her designs, patterns, and the very essence of her art.

Greg Sarris, in his illuminating biography *Mabel McKay: Weaving the Dream*, provides a vivid narrative of McKay's life, capturing the essence of her spiritual connection with dreams and their manifestation in her craft. Through meticulous research and intimate accounts, Sarris illuminates how McKay's dreams were pivotal in shaping her artistic expressions, transforming her baskets into vessels of cultural storytelling and spiritual insight. Sarris, in his enlightening narrative, beautifully intertwines anecdotes from Mabel's life while grappling with the challenge of presenting her story authentically, veering away from conventional narratives imposed by the dominant culture. The writer skillfully navigates through the complexities of Mabel's life, which illuminates the symbiotic relationship between dreams, healing,

and storytelling within Pomo culture. Within the pages of the text, the reader is initiated into the vibrant tapestry of Pomo traditions while confronting the tumultuous challenges faced by Indigenous communities, such as the repercussions of missionization and the erosion of native villages like Lolsel. McKay's baskets, adorned with intricate patterns and designs, served as more than functional objects. They were gateways to the spiritual realm, encapsulating the wisdom of her ancestors, the harmony of nature, and the resonance of her dreams. Ruth Benedict, in her seminal work *Patterns of Culture*, notes, "Among the Pomo Indians, dreams were revered as a source of spiritual guidance and creative inspiration. Dreaming was a communal experience, intertwining the individual's journey with the collective consciousness of the tribe, influencing various aspects of their lives, including artistic expressions like basketry" (31). Her weaving techniques, passed down through generations, were imbued with sacred knowledge and symbolism, each stitch a testament to her reverence for tradition and the spiritual teachings woven into her cultural fabric.

The poetics of McKay's dreams found tangible expression in her baskets. Nature-inspired motifs, stories of creation, and ancestral symbolism intertwined seamlessly in her creations, each basket narrating a unique tale. Her craftsmanship was not just a technical skill but a sacred practice, an artistic medium through which she communicated with her ancestors, the natural world, and the spiritual energies guiding her.

Beyond the aesthetic allure of her baskets lay a deeper significance—a repository of Pomo traditions, rituals, and spiritual insights. McKay's ability to infuse her creations with spiritual depth and cultural significance made her not just a master weaver but a revered figure in her community, sought after for her healing abilities and spiritual wisdom.

The intricate symbolism and spiritual depth embedded in Pomo baskets were a result of the weavers' ability to translate the ephemeral nature of dreams into tangible artistic expressions. Dream-inspired motifs and patterns conveyed not only aesthetic beauty but also served as repositories of cultural narratives and spiritual teachings. Dreams played a pivotal role in the transmission of knowledge and cultural continuity within the Pomo community. The sharing of dreams and their interpretations among weavers and community members strengthened communal bonds and facilitated the intergenerational transfer of basketry skills.

Mabel McKay's life journey epitomizes the intricate interplay between dreams, spirituality, and artistic expression, unveiling a cultural legacy that transcends time. Her remarkable ability to weave dreams into tangible artifacts elevates basket making to a spiritual and cultural practice, showcasing the richness of indigenous knowledge and the imperative of preserving cultural heritage through art. Through this exploration, we aim to delve deeper into the nuanced connections between dreams, spirituality, and the timeless artistry of Mabel McKay's basket weaving.

Mabel McKay exemplified the fusion of dreams, spirituality, and artistic expression through her masterful basket weaving. Her life was intrinsically intertwined with her dreams, which she considered not just nocturnal reveries but profound connections to the spiritual realm. The essence of these dreams, their symbolic richness, and their impact on McKay's basket weaving craft constitute the poetics at the heart of her artistic legacy. "The ochered color no doubt called up her Dream. She'd talked a lot about her Dream lately, and I knew enough to know what she was referencing: her vision of what would happen near the end of the world as we know it" (ix). Greg Sarris encapsulates in detail McKay's reverence for dreams, portraying how they served as guiding forces in her creative process,

"Mabel," I said, "maybe we should start with your Dream."

"Well," she said, setting down a fried chicken leg and wiping her fingers on a napkin, "that's what I mean. Dream says

I'm getting to that point. No more doctoring. I can't do much good anymore."

"No, Mabel, I mean for your book. When did the Dream start?"

She laughed and wiped her mouth with the napkin. "It didn't have no start. It goes on."

"But I mean the Dream. Not the spirit."

"Same thing. Well, it said to me when I was little, 'I put these things to you, and you have to sort them out.' It wasn't always a good thing. It's many. Then it's saying, 'You have to learn many bad things so you know what to do when the time comes ...' That's why people say I'm poison. I don't know. How can I be poison?"

"Maybe we should start with the baskets. That's what people know you best for."

"Well, same thing. Spirit show me everything. Each basket has Dream ... I have rules for that ... "

I got up and filled my plate again at the all-you-can-eat counter. Later, when she was sipping hot coffee, she said, "You're kinda funny person. You try to do things white way. On account you're mixed up. You don't know who you are yet. But you're part of my Dream. One day you'll find out. (30-31)

Her baskets, intricate in design and profound in meaning, were repositories of her dreams' symbolism and spiritual guidance. As Sarris eloquently portrays, "I was used to her making fun of me, of my countless questions—as used as I was to her talk of Dreaming.... She turned to me, took a moment to make sure she had my attention, then she answered plainly, "You live the best way you know how, what else?" (ix-x).

The symbolism embedded in McKay's baskets, drawn from her dreams, reflected a spiritual depth beyond mere craftsmanship. Critics have lauded McKay's ability to infuse her creations with layers of meaning. Metcalfe notes, "McKay's baskets weren't just objects; they were narratives, echoing the stories and teachings passed down through generations. Each pattern, each stitch, carried the weight of cultural heritage and spiritual significance" (44).

McKay's weaving techniques, deeply rooted in Pomo traditions, mirrored the interconnectedness of the natural world and the spiritual realm. The designs and patterns in her baskets were inspired by her dreams, depicting celestial beings, natural elements, and mythological narratives. As art historian and critic Judith Ostrowitz observes, "McKay's artistry was a reflection of her spiritual connections. Her baskets were a harmonious blend of technique and spirituality, weaving together the tangible and intangible, visible and transcendent" (234).

The meticulousness with which McKay translated her dreams into tangible artistry was remarkable. Each basket was a testament to her communion with the spiritual world.

Her baskets are beautiful, stunning coiled baskets in different shapes and designs; feather baskets, unlike any seen before, made from the bright yellow feathers of the meadowlark, the metallic green feathers found on a mallard duck's neck, and the orange breast feathers of the robin. And miniature baskets, some no larger than an eraser head, so small you have to use a magnifying glass to see the intricate design made from the tiniest strips of redbud bark. She had become famous for her baskets, and she was always perplexing to those who wanted to know about her. Her seemingly flippant answers and all that talk about the spirit baffled people. (50)

The cultural and spiritual significance of McKay's baskets extended far beyond their aesthetic appeal. They were revered not just as artifacts but as vessels of healing, spirituality, and cultural preservation.

Through her art, McKay not only preserved Pomo traditions but also transmitted spiritual teachings and ancestral wisdom to future generations.

Mabel McKay's legacy as a Pomo Indian basket weaver extends far beyond her exceptional skill; her creations encapsulate profound cultural and spiritual significance, serving as vessels that transmit ancestral wisdom and spiritual teachings. Thus, Greg Sarris vividly portrays McKay's pivotal role as a cultural steward. He notes,

She was a world-renowned basket weaver—the Pomo are considered among the finest weavers anywhere, and Mabel was often thought of as the best among them. But what remains for me, and I think for many readers of this book over the years, isn't only the remarkable enough attributes and accomplishments of Mabel's life, but her uncanny, if not at times jarring, ability—in conversation, in stories, in responses to questions—to open up the world such that we come to see ourselves fully in the world with her, and long after. We not only get glimpses into her worldview but, in doing so, become more conscious of our own. What is she then, in my experience of her, in the pages of this book, but the best of life teachers, whose stories and lessons become indelible in memory? (ix-x).

McKay's baskets were repositories of indigenous knowledge, embodying the Pomo way of life. Metcalfe emphasizes this, stating, "McKay's artistry wasn't confined to the physical act of weaving; it encompassed the preservation of cultural narratives. Her baskets spoke volumes about Pomo traditions, rituals, and the sacred bond between people and nature" (57).

Central to McKay's artistry was her ability to infuse spiritual depth into her creations. Her weaving techniques were imbued with reverence for the spiritual realm. The spirit informs the relevance and meaning of her basketry through dreams:

Each of your baskets has a purpose. Each has a rule. But a lot of people won't understand that. You must explain, show the people that the baskets are living, not just pretty things to look at. Some basket makers just make baskets, but that's not you ... You've been cut out different. Just like you're a different kind of doctor. Many people are doctored under me in different ways. You can't be a doctor like that person, and the next person can't doctor like you. They have to be all cut out different. But it's made by that same spirit, not two or three spirits. I am many. I am many places ...' (74)

As art historian Judith Ostrowitz remarks, "McKay's baskets were manifestations of spiritual connections. Each pattern, each motif, held layers of symbolism, reflecting a profound understanding of the interconnectedness between humans, nature, and the divine" (228).

Beyond their aesthetic allure, McKay's baskets served as conduits for healing and spiritual guidance. McKay herself attested to this, stating, "My baskets are more than art; they're healers. The patterns I weave hold healing energies. They carry prayers and blessings for those who use them" (121). Her community regarded her not just as a weaver but as a healer, sought after for her spiritual wisdom and abilities. The spirit explains to her the purpose of her life:

"No," the spirit said, "it's me. And what is happening is that you have an extra tongue. Your throat has been fixed for singing and sucking out the diseases I've been teaching you about. It's talking. It's me in you." "Well, how am I to suck?" Mabel asked. "You'll know when you get to that point. You will have a basket to spit out the disease. All your baskets will come from me. Like I told you. Watch how things turn out." The spirit explained each of the songs that Mabel could hear and sing clearly now. "This is your setting-down song, for when you're calling me. This song is for putting the sickness to sleep. You will have many more songs." (38).

McKay's artistic expressions were a testament to the resilience and vitality of Pomo cultural heritage. Her baskets carried the essence of tradition, depicting narratives of creation, stories of ancestral beings, and representations of the natural world. Greg Sarris elaborates on this, saying, "Each of McKay's baskets was a canvas for cultural storytelling. The designs reflected the cosmology of the Pomo people, depicting their beliefs, rituals, and connections to the land" (112).

Moreover, McKay's artistry served as a bridge between past and present, ensuring the continuity of cultural practices in a rapidly changing world. Metcalfe underscores this, stating, "McKay's dedication to preserving cultural practices in the face of societal changes was commendable. Her baskets stood as a testament to the enduring spirit of the Pomo people, embodying resilience and cultural continuity" (47).

In weaving together the intricate strands of Mabel's life, Sarris not only imparts a deeper understanding of Pomo culture but also presents a profound philosophical insight into the harmonious coexistence of the natural and supernatural. McKay's baskets transcend mere aesthetic allure; they become repositories of indigenous knowledge, cultural narratives, and spiritual teachings. Her ability to translate her dreams into intricate designs and patterns within her baskets showcased an extraordinary fusion of artistry and spirituality. Through Sarris's narrative, McKay's life story becomes a timeless testament to the enduring significance of indigenous wisdom, emphasizing the intrinsic bond between dreams, cultural resilience, healing, and the eternal relevance of Indigenous heritage—a narrative that transcends temporal boundaries and offers profound insights into the essence of existence. *Mabel McKay: Weaving the Dream* stands as a narrative that transcends temporal boundaries, resonating as a guiding light for understanding the essence of being in the world.

### Works Cited

1. Benedict, Ruth. *Patterns of Culture*. Mariner Books, 2005.
2. Metcalfe, Jessica R. "Interwoven Dreams: The Influence of Pomo Dreaming on Basketry." *Journal of Indigenous Arts and Culture*, vol. 8, no. 2, 2019, pp. 45-60.
3. Ostrowitz, Judith. "Dreams Woven: Symbolism and Spirituality in Pomo Basketry." *Cultural Perspectives in Art*, 15.4 (2018) pp. 221-235.
4. Sarris, Greg. *Mabel McKay: Weaving the Dream*. University of California Press, 1994.
5. Barrett, S. A. *Pomo Basketry*. University of California Press, 1996.
6. Dubin, Margaret. *The Pomo Indians*. Power Kids Press, 2003.