



Tibetan Kalachakra Sandpainting

**The Sacred Circle East and West:
Sandpainting in Tibetan and Navajo Cultures**

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“God is a circle whose center is everywhere
and circumference nowhere.”

Hermes Trismegistus

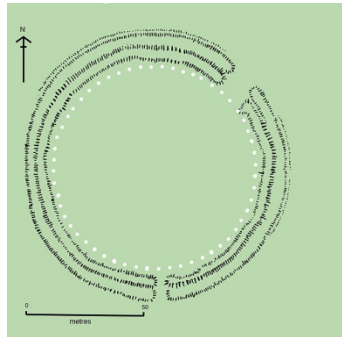
The Sacred Circle

Throughout history the circle has been consistently regarded both as an important metaphysical concept and symbol, as well as a practical object of aesthetic creation and shamanic, ritualistic, magical usage, often used to define an area that is special, that is sacred, that is protected. Accordingly numerous rituals using circles have evolved in the past throughout the world. Knowledge of these rituals is important for the shaman, for they offer a way to tap into the cumulated energy of all of these rituals carried out with focused consciousness in the past, through the performance of rituals in the present that have a multidimensional resonance, that is, which set up harmonically sympathetic vibrations bridging states of non-ordinary reality with ordinary reality to reveal states of extra-ordinary reality.

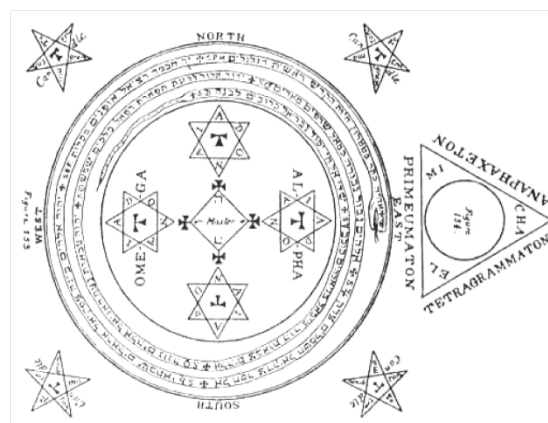
This paper will focus on the use of the sacred circle in shamanic practices within two different cultures, the Amerindian Navajo culture and the Tibetan Buddhist culture, both of which have for many centuries and continue into the present day to create ritually efficacious magic circles using a technique known as sandpainting. The Navajo and Tibetans have both preserved their systems of psychophysical transformation, ritual, art and natural philosophy up to the present day. This paper will explore the creation and use of magic circles within these two cultures, literally on opposite sides of the world.

Ubiquity of the Sacred Circle

An ancient pattern of postholes dated around 8000 B.C. has been found in southwest England defining a circle around what is now Stonehenge, even now visibly consisting of enormous stones establishing an inner circle to that of the postholes.



In medieval Europe, creating a magic circle was known as ‘Casting a Circle’, one of which, shown below is described as a Solomonic magic circle with a triangle of evocation in the east (similarly Navajo sandpaintings “open” to the east. This circle would be drawn on the ground using sand and pollen colored with minerals and clays, while the operator would stand within the protection of the circle while a spirit was evoked into the triangle.



In a global, postmodern world we find similar use of the magic circle ubiquitous, and often as far removed from European culture as Australia, among the aboriginal peoples, or, for example the magic circle used by shamans for séance in Malaysia, as described by Eliade: “The séance proper takes place inside a round hut or a magic circle, and the object of most séances is cure, the discovery of lost or stolen objects, or knowledge of the future.” (p. 345). However this paper will limit itself in scope to an introduction to the sacred circle in two specific cultures within Asia and North America: the Tibetan and Navajo cultures.

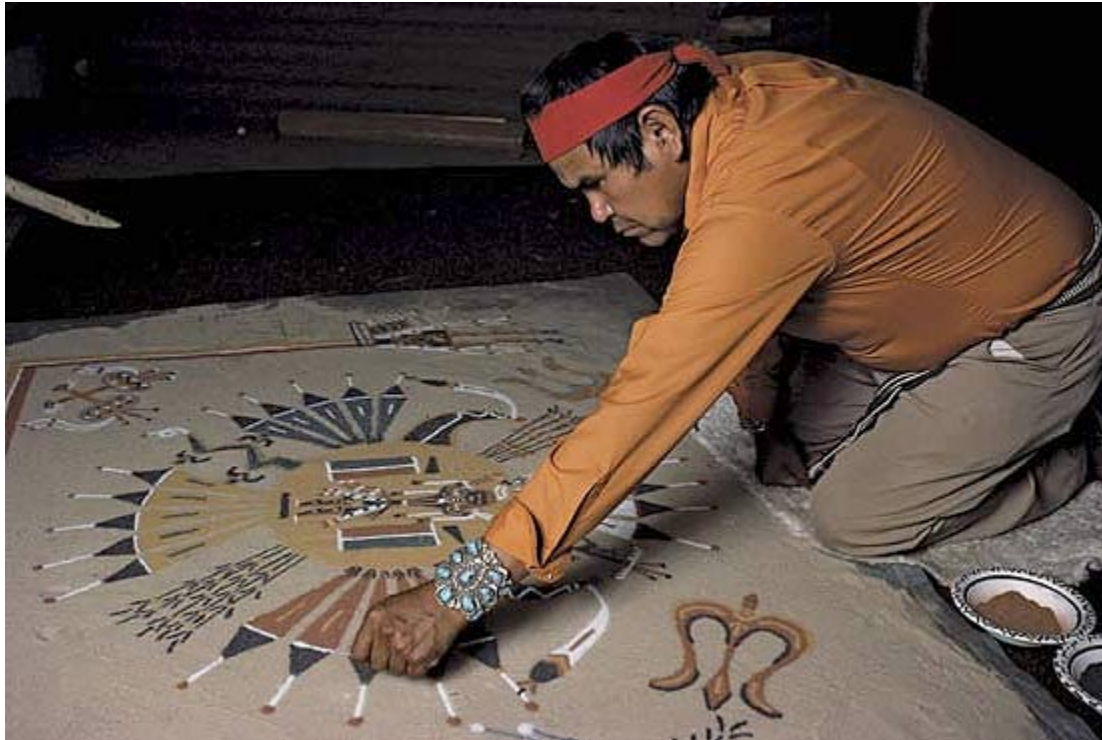
Navajo Sandpainting

The native American people known as the Navajo (“the People”) now number close to 300,000 and first settled the southwest on land now consisting of Arizona, New Mexico, Colorado, and Utah.

Though called “sandpainting”, the technique used other materials, including cornmeal, flower pollen, and powdered roots and barks. A Navajo sand painting could measure from three to fifteen feet or more, and would usually be prepared by one shaman with two or three assistants. (Villaseñor, p. 8).



The People used sandpainting for multiple purposes, including divination, praise and supplication; but the most common use of sandpainting rituals were to call the spirits to enter into and be captured by the painting and to be then used as powerful energy allies to carry out tasks in non-ordinary reality.



Gladys Reichard, a trained anthropologist who spent more than thirty years living among the Navajo, says of the Navajo ceremony the following:

“A Navajo ceremony is a combination of many elements – ritualistic items such as the medicine bundle with its sacred contents; prayer sticks, made of carefully selected wood and feathers, precious stones, tobacco, water collected from sacred places, a tiny piece of cotton string; song, with its lyrical and musical complexities; sandpaintings, with intricate color, directional, and impressionistic symbols; prayer, with stress on order and rhythmic unity; plants, with supernatural qualities defined and personified; body and figure

painting; sweating and emetic, with purificatory functions; vigil, with emphasis on concentration. But it is the selection of these and other elements and their orderly combination into a unit that makes the 'chant' or ceremony effective".
(Reichard, p. xxxiv).

The ritual of sandpainting is ordinarily done in a fixed sequence which is termed a "chant," lasting from five to nine days, but never less than three days long. Long prayers, intoned like a litany consisting of a series of invocations, suggest the term "chant". And if done properly, the spirits will come: "... if the rituals are performed correctly, the prayer sticks placed properly, the chants sung beautifully, and the sandpainting done masterfully, the spirits are 'compelled' to attend their ceremony held in their honor". (Villaseñor, p. 6).

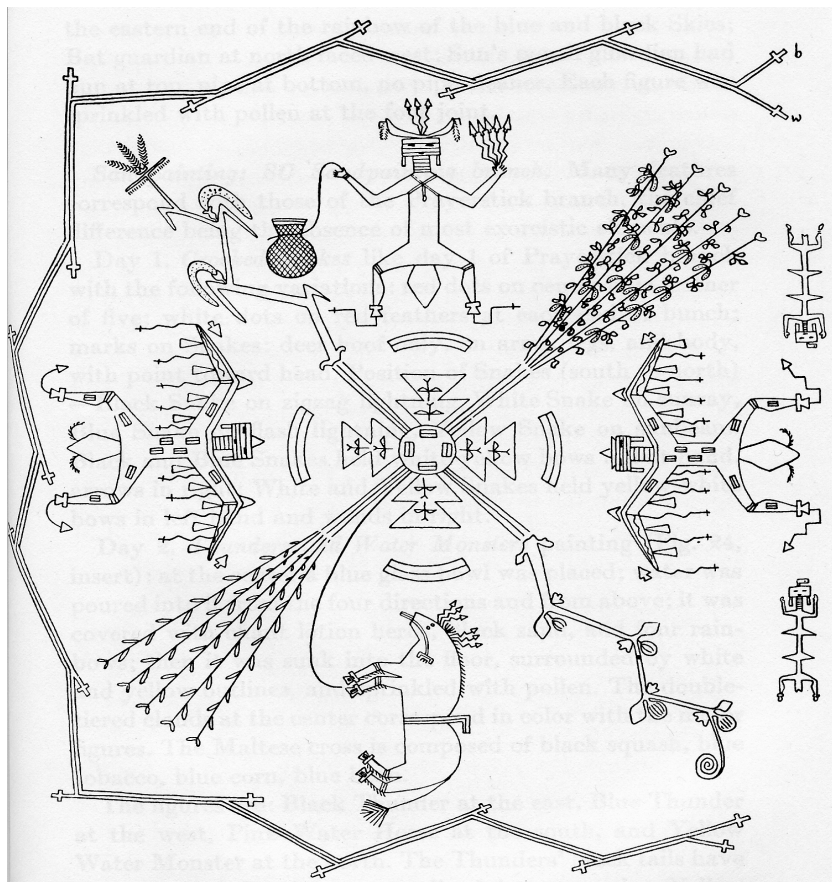
Once the spirits had arrived and were occupying their receptacles in the painting/diagram, they would be directed through chanting and drumming and often used for healing, in which case the patient would sit in the center of the painting and be 'sung over'. The Navajo say that sandpainting is "...good for a sick mind and a sad heart.". (Villaseñor, p. 7).

There are periods during the ritual of the sand painting during which silence is entered into for extended periods. This is the space in which the shaman will go on a Spirit Journey. A contemporary Navajo sandpainter has described that experience as follows:

"When the Twin-Self (soul) goes on a Spirit-Journey, it enters into what has been called the fourth-dimensional plane, an awareness where one can feel, see and know or have rapport (spiritual connection) with plants, animals and people at once. Your soul is of that single element in unity with the spirit (reality) of all things. The spirit can be everywhere at any given time at once, and the mind open to that mirroring reality, can go away through rocks and mountains or into the roots, branches and flowers of the plant. What or who

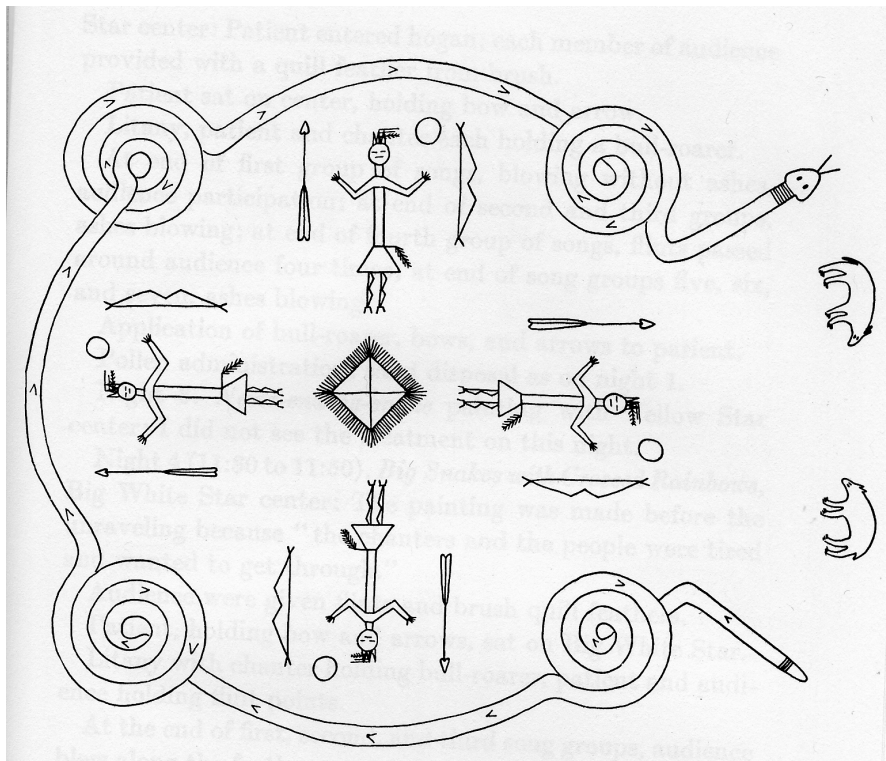
one 'sees' in this spirit vision may as well be encased in pure crystal, for there is nothing hidden in body, mind or thought. There is oneness everywhere, no separation or division by time or space. This is what some American Indians call 'Orinda' – affinity, universal rapport, oneness, all words being limited in comparison to the comprehensive interpretation of their meanings. These spiritual qualities of the silence, augmented by prayer, meditation and fasting, are truly a part of the silent 'Path of Beauty'." (Villaseñor, p. 64)

There are two types of Navajo sandpainting, the night sandpaintings, begun at sunset, are always destroyed at sunrise. Day sandpaintings however are always begun at sunrise and destroyed at sunset. While an entire ceremony, a typical "chant" would often span multiple days, several different sandpaintings might be created and destroyed during that time, some by day and some by night.



Thunders and Water Monsters: Shooting Chant
Day ritual
(Navajo Sandpainting)

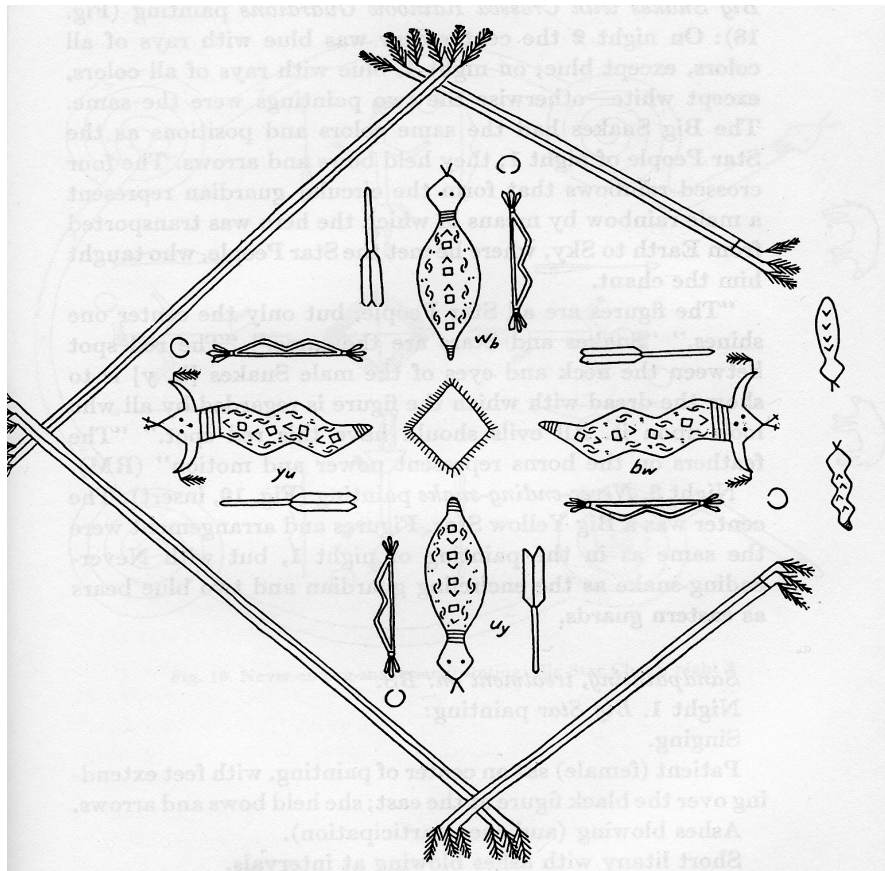
There is usually an opening in the circle, and it almost always is oriented toward the entrance of the shelter in which the sandpainting is constructed. Since the Navajo dwelling or ceremonial enclosures almost always are oriented so that the entrance faces east, the opening of the sandpainting also is to the east.



Never-ending Snake: Big Star Chant
Night ritual
(Navajo Sandpainting)

According to Peter Gold, the Navajos, like the Tibetans whom we will explore later in this paper, have come to the same basic understanding of the real link between the psychic

and the physical, the *noumenon* and the *phenomenon*. By imagining idealized deity personas from their respective concepts of the infinite, Tibetans and Navajos are aided in forming mental and experiential connections between these two levels of reality. (p. 61).



Big Snakes with Crossed Rainbow Guardians: Big Star Chant
Night ritual
(Navajo Sandpainting)

Tibetan Sandpainting

Tibetan sandpaintings are created by monks. Each monk holds a chak-pur (see image below) in one hand, while running a metal rod on its grated surface; the vibration causes the sands to flow like liquid.



Chak-pur and other Tibetan sandpainting implements.

The practice of creating a mandala circle image with colored powders is called *dul-tson-kyil-khor* in Tibetan. Millions of grains of sand are painstakingly laid into place on a flat platform over a period of days or weeks.



Tibetan monk vibrating Chak-pur to “paint” with flowing sand.

According to the Dalai Lama, there are **three** major contexts for Tantric Buddhist mandalas: “..those which represent the outer universe, those which refer to a meditative view of the human body, and those visualized in the practice of deity yoga.” (Forward by H.H. the XIV Dalai Lama, 27 November 1991 to *The Mandala*, p.7).

According to Brauen, Tibetan sources mention four types of mandala (p.11):

1. Mandalas made from powdered colors.
2. Mandalas hand painted on textiles.
3. Mandalas created through meditation.
4. Mandalas within the human body.

Of the many Tibetan mandalas, this paper will focus on the most recent and most complex, called the ***Kalachakra*** mandala, which is created and utilized in conjunction with a meditative deity yoga practice which has its roots in South Indian Tantric practices which were later brought to Tibet.

Kala is the deity who appears at the time of death, and the Kalachakra tantric practice therefore focuses on the transition between death and rebirth, not with the intermediate states (bar do) that are frequently explored in Tibetan tantric teachings and practices. Thus the Kalachakra practice is most suitable for our age, the Kali Yuga, in which everything is changing and being transformed (death and rebirth) at an ever accelerating rate. The structure and symbolism of the Kalachakra mandala differs from those of other mandalas in that the rings encircling the palace in the Kalachakra mandala are

"..composed of the cosmos: five great discs bearing the universe, namely: space, air, water, fire and earth. In many other mandalas such reference to the universe is not immediately evident." (Brauen, p. 10).

The term 'mandala' is a multivalent term that only on the most basic level of many is applied to the painted diagram itself. The term 'mandala' must also be understood and visualized as the whole cosmos surrounding the practitioner and the painted mandala, the exterior out to the entire cosmos itself, in order to resonate with, activate and access the multi-dimensional powers described in the mandala. The term then extends interiorly, further into the very physical, molecular and energy universe that is the living body of the practitioner, which is also united with the mandala. The practice here becomes one of sensing and then tuning into the chakras within the human body and psychosphere until a resonance is felt between and among these three:

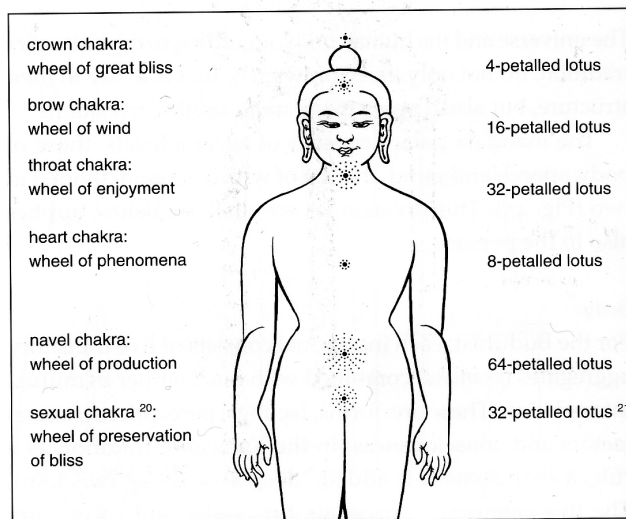
1. Exterior (cosmic) mandala (exterior galactic universe extending outwardly in a sphere beyond the practitioner)
2. Ritually visualized (painted) mandala (as viewed/visualized by practitioner)

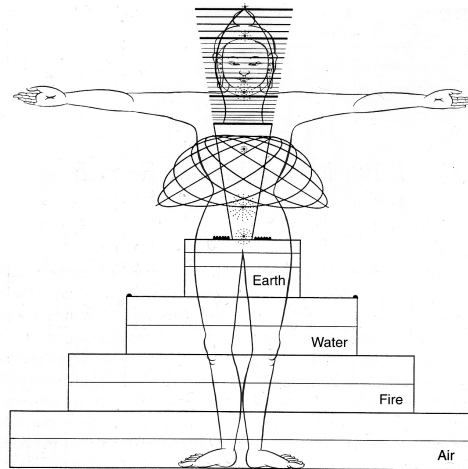
3. Interior (bodily) mandala (chakra energy centers along the spinal column and within cranial cavity)

It is interesting to note how similar this practice is to that of Navajo shamans, who during their multiple day “chant” rituals also attune themselves not only to the visualization of the painted image, but also to the universe (cosmos) beyond (east/south/west/north/above/below) and the universe within. Not only did the Navajo shamans identify their own interior bodies with the energies of the painting and the surrounding cosmos, but during a healing chant, the patient being cured would sit within the sacred sandpainting circle to better resonate their inner organs and living systems with those of the sandpainting and the surrounding cosmos.

In both types of sandpainting, once the practitioner begins to sense the inner chakras and distinguish them more clearly, natural harmonic resonances promote healing and the accumulation of energy while the practice progresses.

According to the Kalachakra tradition, a person possesses six distinct mind components or ‘six sense powers’ as can be seen in the diagram below:





The image above is another way of visualizing the Kalachakra as it resonates with the human body of the contemplative practitioner.



Human figure with six chakras and major nadi (channels) through which flow the energy-laden prana (winds).

Summary and Conclusions

Creation and use of the sacred circle in both Navajo and Tibetan cultures is strikingly similar in approach and practice, considering they inhabit small, almost diametrically opposite areas of the planet.

For both cultures, the practices surrounding the creation and destruction of circle-enclosed sacred images of colored sands and powders became a central focus of their liturgical and healing rituals. Even the duration of the full rituals are similar, up to nine days for the longest rituals.

Most importantly, both cultures discovered the reality, the power and the efficacy of establishing a sacred resonance and communion among the human bodily interior, the cosmic galactic exterior and the sacred circle itself, as represented in Navajo sandpainting and Tibetan Tantric mandalas. These practices hold great promise for the development and evolution of ways for modern cultures to develop and refine metaphysical tools and maps in the use of the sacred circle motif for contemplative practice.



Dalai Lama in Kalachakra Mandala ceremony

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