

## Logo LinX

### Turtle Archetypes

by Judi Harris

Ready for some associative thinking? What do you think of when I say "turtle?" Logo, of course...but what else?

Turtles are wonderful "objects to think with," as Dr. Papert says. But they also can be interesting objects to think *about* in cultural, metaphorical, and literary contexts. What patterns emerge when we view the turtle as a cross-cultural symbol? The search for answers to this question can inspire in-depth comparative historical, anthropological, and philosophical inquiry for your students.

#### The Orient: Turtle as Oracle

Ancient Chinese tradition depicted the tortoise as one of four sacred creatures, along with the dragon, the phoenix, and the ky-lin. Each creature represented one of four metaphoric elements from which physical form springs; the dragon symbolized fire, the phoenix, air, and the ky-lin, earth. The spiritually-endowed turtle embodied the water element; also the winter season, the yin principle, the northern region, and the color black, the primordial chaos out of which the earth was born. According to this tradition, the turtle symbolically supported the world, with its four feet placed at the four corners of the earth.

The dragon and tortoise were used as battle symbols, since the Chinese felt that they represented indestructibility; the dragon is unable to crush the turtle, and the turtle is unable to reach the dragon to do it any harm. Therefore, the tortoise was called the Black Warrior, and in that role, it represented strength, endurance, and longevity. Taoist tradition sees the turtle as symbolizing the Great Triad, or the universe, with its dome-shaped back as the sky, its bottom shell as the water, and the body in the middle as man, the mediator between heaven and earth.

Japanese folklore portrays the tortoise as support for the abode of the Immortals and the Cosmic Mountain. Kumpira, god of sailors, used the turtle as his symbol, as did the goddess Benten. Seen in ways similar to those of Chinese tradition, the Japanese turtle represented longevity, support and good luck.

#### Africa and India: Turtle as Female Creator

Many ancient cultures associate turtles with water. Some concentrate upon the fertility that this connection can suggest. Sumerian mythology considers the sacred tortoise to be Lord of the Great Deep. Ancient Egyptian texts portray the turtle as drought and an enemy of the sun god, Ra. Two tortoises symbolically measure the flood waters of the Nile river,

appearing in paintings with the sign of the Great Scales. Nigerian folklore depicts the turtle as procreative and decidedly feminine; according to this tradition, its shape suggests female reproductive and sexual organs, and is an emblem of lubricity.

According to Hindu teachings, the turtle was the first living creature, Kasyapa, or the North Star. This progenitor is an avatar of Vishnu the Preserver, and represents the power of Earth's waters. Paralleling Chinese tradition, Indians see a tortoise's lower shell representing the terrestrial world, and its upper shell as the celestial world. Yet unlike Oriental notions, Hindus see the earth symbolically resting on the back of an elephant, which is, in turn, supported by a tortoise. According to this tradition, the elephant is male and the tortoise female, together representing the two balanced creative powers (much like Chinese yin and yang) that bring about physical form.

Ogden Nash comments upon this attribute as a humorous paradox.

*The turtle lives 'twixt plated decks  
Which practically conceal its sex.  
I think it clever of the turtle  
In such a fix to be so fertile.*

-Ogden Nash, "The Turtle"

#### Western Notions

Greek and Roman mythology also portray turtles as representative of the feminine principle and water's fertility. Aphrodite and Venus, who were said to have risen from the sea, embodied this fertile principle in human form. The turtle is mentioned in the Old Testament as the voice of Spring.

*Rise up, my love, my fair one, and come away.  
For, lo, the winter is past, the rain is over and gone;  
The flowers appear on the earth;  
The time of the singing of birds is come,  
And the voice of the turtle is heard in our land.*

-Song of Solomon, 2:10

Early Christian symbolism showed the turtle as illustrative of modesty in marriage. Women were encouraged to live in the home as the turtle lives protected within its shell. Yet the turtle also appeared in early Christian art as a symbol of evil, contrasted with the vigilant cock.

#### American Turtles

In native American literature, the turtle is sometimes depicted as an earthly coward, braggart, or sensualist. Yet the great Cosmic Tree grows out of its back. The Iroquois, like the Chinese and the Hindus, see the earth as resting on the turtle's

shell. Delaware and Algonquian Indians also speak of the turtle as an earth-bearer; the Delaware specifically name the *cistudo carolina*, or box turtle, in this role. Therefore, turtles are also considered to be sacred, beneficent beings.

Yet turtles, according to native American custom, can be dangerous or foolish. Delaware and Shawnee Indians tell a tale about several men who climb aboard the back of a great sea turtle, and all except one are unable to get off before the turtle submerges itself in the ocean. Yet Gluskabe, protagonist for a series of northeastern Algonquian stories, plays practical jokes on the tortoise, who is similarly the butt of other pranks related through tales of other northeastern tribes. Still, many central Algonquian animal stories depict the turtle as racing other animals and winning.

This theme is carried through many modern Amazon mestizo and Guianan stories about the *jabuti*, a small, clever, mischievous land turtle that emerges safe and victorious from every contest with larger, stronger animal rivals. The turtle frequently matches wits with a ferocious but stupid jaguar, who, for example, is killed by the tortoise falling from a tree into a hole in the ground. When the jaguar reaches into the hole and gets hold of the turtle's arms, the clever turtle tells him that he has only grasped the roots of a tree. The jaguar, of course, believes him, and releases the devious creature.

Perhaps one of the most popular native American stories is one that will undoubtedly seem familiar. In it, the turtle challenges the deer to a race. The turtle wins because it has arranged with other turtles to deceive the faster animal.

#### Cross-Cultural Patterns

As J.E. Cirlot (1962) suggests, in all traditions, the turtle is a symbol for earthly existence. Its slowness suggests natural evolution; its round and square shape represents material substance, as opposed to transcendent forces. The turtle, it seems, embodies the *expression* of cosmic forces as physical form.

It should not surprise us, then, that the Logo turtle is a symbolically powerful, semi-concrete object-to-think-with in a microworld of mathematical ideas. It is easy to befriend a supportive earthly archetype, especially one that makes powerful (even cosmic) ideas manifest in patient physical terms.

#### References

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- Leach, M., ed. (1950). Funk & Wagnalls standard dictionary of folklore mythology and legend. New York: Funk & Wagnalls Company.

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#### Correction

In Michael Tempel's "Conversations with Logo" article in the January issue of *LX*, there lurks an error. On page 12, column 2, the second "Person" line should read **setxy 60 80**. We hope you didn't get a headache trying to figure out what was going on! Our thanks to Dorothy Fitch for pointing this out so promptly.