

Myths, Legends, and Folktales of America: An Anthology

“Native American Myths” Part 1

When Hispanics from the south and Europeans from the east arrived in the what is now the United States, they found a large number of peoples who, for the most part, had discovered America several millennia earlier. It seems likely that most of these first Americans had come from Central Asia over the Bering Strait and that they had brought their traditions with them—complex creation myths, related shamanistic rituals, and an animistic sense of a living nature suffused with spiritual power. Gradually the old traditions were given new form based on the natural surroundings, the climate, the animals, and the long migration itself. Earth-diver creations, common in Central Asia, in which a being, directed by a creator or creatrix, dives to the depths of the primal waters to find the first materials for earth, are common in North America as well. But the settings of the American myths reflect the American landscape, and the animal characters are North American animals. As in Central Asia, creators are often assisted (or hindered) by tricksters. The creation myths most common to the Southwest, the Emergence myths, probably developed in part from the migrations themselves. In these myths, helped by deities, the people emerge from one early world into another, until they arrive in our world. Central Asian animism was translated by many American Indians into myths of a land inhabited by powerful spirits or, in many cases, made up of the bodies of deities themselves.

So it was that the gods of Central Asia became those of North America. The old creators became the Sioux Great Mystery or Great Spirit, the Athabascan Changing Woman, and the ubiquitous tricksters, Coyote, Raven, the Great Hare, and so many others. And the earth-diver creation stories became the shamanistic Cherokee Sun tale, the Iroquoian and Cherokee myths of the woman falling from the sky to assist in the animals in their search for earth, and countless other earth-diver myths adapted to the conditions of the tribes in question. And the animism of Asia was transformed into myths such as those of the Zuni Earth Mother and Sky Father, the Inuit Sedna, and the Cherokee Star Woman, whose bodies became earth's bounties.

Creation Myths

Creation myths are the most important myths for Native Americans, as they are for most peoples. A culture's creation myth is a statement of its relation to the greater powers of the cosmos. The Sky Father, the Earth Mother, and the trickster-helper of any given creation are concerned with the creation, preservation, and destiny of a particular culture. We are the Hebrews or the Egyptians or the Dineh or the Sioux because Yahweh or the Great Mystery made us so. The creation myth gives a culture significance in a universe that must otherwise be considered random and meaningless.

Zuni: The Separation of the First Parents

As in the case of so many creation myths involving a Sky Father and Earth Mother—the Egyptian and the Greek myths, for example—the world parents must be separated, or differentiated, in order that there might be room for creation to take place between earth and sky. In this story told by the Zuni Indians of the American Southwest is a classic example of this separation. The Zuni creation culminates in a story of emergence and migration. It begins, however as an animistic tale in which the originators of life—Earth Mother and Sky Father—are themselves the elements of creation, separated from each other like the Egyptian Earth and Sky (Geb and Nut) so as to provide room for the creation between them. The Mother actually is the earth and the Father is the sky. In addition, the Mother's breath is the warm wind, the Father's the cold; the Mother's breasts are the fields that give crops, and the Father's breath brings the rain that causes the germination of the seeds in the Mother. The universe, in short, is suffused by the power of the deities.

In the fourfold womb of the world, all terrestrial life was conceived from the lying-together of Earth Mother and Sky Father upon the world waters. Soon Earth Mother grew large with progeny, pushed Sky Father away from her, and began to sink into the waters. She feared that evil might befall her offspring, just as mothers always fear for their firstborn before they emerge.

Unnerved by her ominous, foreboding thoughts, she kept her offspring within her and discussed her fears with Sky Father. They wondered how these offspring would know one place from another, even in the light of the sun. They wondered how their progeny would survive.

They were surpassing beings, these two, and therefore changeable as the smoke in the breeze. And so they took the form of a man and a woman.

Then a great bowl filled with water appeared nearby, and Earth Mother realized that every place in the world would be surrounded by mountains like the rim of the bowl that was near her. She spat in the water and, as foam formed on its surface, she said, "Look! It's from my bosom that they will find sustenance."

She blew her warm breath over the foam and some of it lifted upward, shattering in the air, sending mist and spray down in great, shimmering abundance.

"Just so will clouds form at the rim of the world where the great waters are," she said, "and be borne on the breath of the surpassing beings until your cold breath makes them shed, falling downward—the waters of life falling into my lap, where our children will nestle and thrive, finding warmth in spite of your coldness."

"Wait," Sky Father said, and he spread his hand over the bowl, setting in its crevices what looked like yellow corn grains gleaming in the dark of the early dawn of the world. He took seven grains between his thumb and fingers and said, "When the Sun is gone and all is dark in the world, our

children will be guided by these lights, which will tell them the regions of space. And just as these grains shine up from the water to the sky, so will innumerable seedlings like them spring up from your bosom whenever my waters touch them, and our children will be fed.”

In this way, and in many others, Earth Mother and Sky Father talked and provided for their offspring and their offspring’s progeny, the people and the other creatures of the world.

A Cherokee Earth-diver Creation Myth

The creation myths of the Cherokee, who were forcibly moved from the Southeast to the Southwest, include a female sun as well as the earth-diver motif and the belief in animistic origins.

Everyone agrees that at one time almost beyond memory the world was covered with water. Whatever was alive lived in Galunlati, the vault of the sky beyond the rainbow, where it was so crowded the animals could barely move around. They sought a solution to this discomfort, and so they sent Water Beetle down to the watery world. He dove down into the waters and eventually returned to the surface with a gob of mud that began slowly to spread out. This became the earth-island, which the Great Spirit attached to the sky with four pieces of rawhide tied to the four sacred mountains that lie in the four sacred directions.

Still, the earth-island was muddy and too soft, so Buzzard was sent down to locate a dry spot. Finally he came to a place where the mud was drying out, and with great flappings of his wings he created mountains and valleys. When the land was ready, the other animals migrated down from beyond the rainbow and were dismayed to find that their new home was dark. So they decided to pull Sister Sun down from the vault of the sky and showed her the path she should follow each day.

They say that the Great Spirit, knowing things, sent the plants down to live among the animals and sustain them. He asked that the plants and the animals all stay awake for seven days. Most of the creatures fell asleep before the time was up, but Owl stayed awake and was given the power of night sight. Some of the plants also managed to stay awake the entire time, and these—pine, holly, laurel, and a few others—were permitted to keep their hair throughout the year. The other plants were told they would have to shed their leaves each year when the cold began and grow them again when the weather began to warm up.

The Great Spirit then thought to make a man and a woman. The man proceeded to press a fish against the woman, which made her grow large and eventually give birth to a child. Every seven days she gave birth to another child, until the Great Spirit rearranged things a little bit so that she could have a new child only once a year. That is how we Cherokee came to be.

A Tewa Emergence Creation Myth

The emergence origin motif is represented here by a version of a myth told by many of the Tewa-speaking people of the Rio Grande Valley in New Mexico.

In the beginning, the people lived underground in total darkness. Dissatisfied with this existence, they were glad to be visited one time by Mole, who came down from above. They asked Mole what it was like up there where he had come from, and he replied that he was blind and couldn't say exactly. But it felt different up there. Maybe they should come up and see for themselves. Mole proceeded to dig his way up, and the dirt got in the people's way, so they piled it up behind them as they went along. Therefore, they never were able to find their way back into the old world. Finally, they emerged into a world of blinding light. In a panic, they covered their eyes and tried to find their way back to the old world. But a voice told them to be patient. Slowly, as instructed, they took their hands away from their eyes, and there before them was the old, stooped grandmother of everything: Spider Woman.

With Spider Woman were her grandsons, the War Twins. She said, "I don't want you to become like these two foolish boys who waste their time fighting each other. If you want to be happy, you won't use weapons."

She pointed to some green stalks of growing corn and told the people how to do the work to keep the corn growing each year. Next, she said the proper place for the people to live was within sight of the great Turtle Mountain to the south, which nowadays some people call Sandia Mountain. Go forth, she told them, and when they found her and Mole again, they would know they had come upon exactly the right place. Having said that, she faded away into the night. The people were terrified, and again they panicked; the next day they ignored her advice, going to another mountain instead of Turtle Mountain.

There they were set upon by Comanches, and many were killed. This mountain came to be known as Los Sangres, which means "blood." Soon the people were quarreling and making weapons and killing one another; high up in the sky, the War Twins watched and laughed.

Finally the people straggled back to the place where they had emerged into this Middle World, hoping to find Spider Woman again, but she wasn't there. Soon, though, they spotted her high up in the night sky in her beautiful shining web. She was shaking her head in sadness over their foolishness, and weeping little star tears. The people started, one by one, to go up into the sky to be with Spider Woman, and before long there were only two people left. They went south through the hard and hostile desert, traveling a long time, until they saw green trees growing in a long row and came to the Rio Grande. In the sand along the river they found a turtle. It was the turtle of Turtle Mountain. Looking closely, the man and woman saw that it had Spider Woman's sign on its back and that it left tracks in the sand like Mole's tracks.

They were home.

A Hawaiian Creation Myth

The creation myth of the Polynesian natives of Hawaii, contained in a sacred poem called the Kumulipo, contains animistic elements as well as aspects of the emergence motif.

First, out of the very nothing, there was born Kumulipo, who was male and the essence of darkness, and Po'ele, who was female and the darkness itself. They gave birth to the children of darkness, shellfish, and the plants that grow from the dark earth. Soon many kinds of creatures of this kind existed and a bit of light appeared in the world. The god Kane-i-ka-wai-ola watered the plants.

Then deep darkness (male) and darkness with a little light (female) came into being and bore the fish of the sea, which multiplied. Still, there was little light to be seen in the world. Then Po'el'ele (who was dark night and male) was born along with Pohahha, who was female: night becoming dawn. Together they brought the insects into being, as well as an egg, from which came the bird, followed by many others. At this time in the world, it looked they way it does today a little before dawn.

In this very dim light, Popanopano and Polalowehi came about and gave rise to the animals like turtles that come to the land from the sea. Next, another male and female pair of beings was born and they gave rise to the pig, Kamapua'a, dark and beautiful. His people, the pigs, began to root around and cultivate the islands that were now flourishing in the dim light.

Yet another pair gave rise to Pilo'i the rat, and this was a mistake. For the rat people scratched and ate and began to damage the land. Next, a male and female pair arose whose names meant "night leaving" and "night pregnant." They gave birth to dawn, as well as the wind ... and the dog. It was Po-kini and Po'he'enalu who gave birth to the time when humans came into the world, and into this time La'ila'a, the woman, and Ki'i, the man, were born. It was daytime in our world.

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