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The Role of Myth in Culture

Mother Earth Mythology

Sam Gill

Once the world was all water, and God lived alone; he was lonesome, he had no place to put his foot; so he scratched the sand up from the bottom and made the land, and he made rocks, and he made trees, and he made man, and the man was winged and could go anywhere. The man was lonesome, and God made a woman. They ate fish from the water, and God made the deer and other animals, and he sent the man to hunt, and told the woman to cook the meat and to dress the skins. Many more men and women grew up, and they lived on the banks of the great river whose waters were full of salmon. The mountains contained much game, and there were buffalo on the plains. There were so many people that the stronger ones sometimes oppressed the weak and drove them from the best fisheries, which they claimed as their own. They fought, and nearly all were killed, and their bones are to be seen in the sand hills yet. God was very angry and he took away their wings and commanded that the lands and fisheries should be common to all who lived upon them. That they were never to be marked off or divided, but that the people should enjoy the fruits that God planted in the land and the animals that lived upon it, and the fishes in the water. God said he was the father, and the earth was the mother of mankind; that nature was the law; that the animals and fish and plants obeyed nature, and that man only was sinful. This is the old law.

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Currents in Modern Thought

The Role of Myth in Culture

This story was told in the late nineteenth century by a Shoshone-speaking Native American named Smohalla, who lived in the state of Washington. He did not recognize the territory in which he lived by the name Washington. Neither did he recognize the rights to the land that Americans of European ancestry claimed—as they occupied his land, forcing him to live as an outlaw. Nor would he have recognized the word myth by which his story of the creation and history of his world would be called by them. The word myth has long been a problem for me in my study of Native American cultures. I dare not tell them the stories that I consider their stories to be myths, for they know that in standard English usage myth denotes the fictitious, the unscientific, the false. They live among us who believe in myth as being not of this age. Should a contemporary Westerner believe in such myths, he is charged with harboring a na""ve romanticism for the ancient past or indulging in a curious faithfulness to a nonexistent or holding outright fallacious beliefs.

Since those whose stories we call myths do not seem to care for the term, I am curious as to why Westerners persist in using it. Perhaps some study of myth might best be focused upon those who use it—American and European writers, who reflect and influence Western culture to a significant degree.

In this essay I will examine a lineage of Western writers who have considered the Mother Earth figure as a Native American goddess, from their writing a story of Mother Earth emerges, a story that has fascinated Europeans and actually created by the writers themselves.

Smohalla's Account of Mother Earth

The story of Mother Earth begins almost concurrently with the story told by Smohalla in 1895, and a remarkable connection exists between the two. According to Smohalla's sto-
Curiously, we contemporary Westerners have difficulty using the term myth in a positive sense when referring to anything in our own culture.

In his book *Primeval Chiefs*, published in London in 1973, Tyler proclaimed that the idea of the Earth as a mother is more simple and obvious, and no doubt for that reason more common in the world, than the idea of the Heaven as a Father. Among the native races of America the Earthmother is one of the great personages of mythology.

However, Tyler cited only three, insignificant examples of its use. These citations are therefore of little consequence in reporting major beliefs among Native Americans. Within a decade Robert Bancroft, undoubtedly influenced by Tyler, affirmed the view in his American publication *The Native Races* (1882). He wrote, "It seems long ago and often to have come into men's minds that the over-arching heaven or something there and the all-producing earth are, as it were, a father and mother to all living creatures."

Tyler's and Bancroft's views of the ancient motherhood of the earth received a fuller and more concrete expression in Smo-hallah's statement later in 1885. Shortly after he recited his story, two ethnologists, Albert Gatschet and James Mooney, who were working in the Washington-Oregon area, used Smo-hallah's statement to exemplify a Mother Earth theology they believed to be common to all Native Americans. These were the first of many such uses of Smo-hallah's statement.

In 1890, Gatschet, in an ethnography of the Klamath of southern Oregon, wrote poetically on the same belief in the earth as mother.

Among all nations of the world we find the idea, which is real as well as poetical, that the Earth is our common mother. She is dealing out her bountiful gifts to her children, the human beings, without envy or restraint, in the shape of men, fruits, and accident roots. Her eyes are the lakes and ponds disseminated over the green surface of the plains; her breasts are the hills and knolls; and the rivulets and brooks irrigating the valleys are the milk flowing from her breasts. (Gatschet did not indicate the source of this quotation.)

The Indians Rednails [Smo-hallah] at Priest Rapids, on the Middle Columbia River, and his numerous followers, called the "Drescuens," from the implicit faith these Shoshoni sectarians place in dreams, discarded their affiliation from their forebears, and the ground, as the white man does; and when he is about to sleep, and the Indian follows their example by opening her bosom and exalting such modifications by their medicine. (Gatschet did not indicate the source of this quotation.)

The Earth is regarded by these Indians as a mysterious, shadowy power of indescribable energies and influences, rather misleading and wicked than beneficial to mankind. The Indians answer eagerly and otherwise it is clearer outcomes than the methods used to explain the Earth.

Although Gatschet's comments on the Indian belief in Mother Earth have had little popular impact because they have remained hidden away in a little read book, they still certainly had an impact upon James Mooney, who in 1906, six years later, published a major study, "The Ghost Dance Religion and the Sioux Outbreak of 1890." His work became a widely read classic. In it Mooney not only quoted Smo-hallah's statement as a chapter epigraph, but he used the statement to exemplify the idea that the earth, as the mother of all created things, lies at the base, not only of the Smo-hallah religion, but of the theology of the Indian tribes generally and of primitive races all over the world... In the Indian mind the corn, fruits, and edible roots are the gifts with which the earth-mother gives freely to her children. Lakes and ponds are her eyes, hills are her breasts, and streams are the milk flowing from her breasts. Earthquakes and underground voices are signs of her displeasure or anger, or otherwise, held to be direct punishment for the crime of beating her bosom.

Mooney's quotation of Smo-hallah and his dramatically colorful description of the Mother Earth theology, which he declared to be common to "primitive races all over the world," stimulated the explosion of literature about Mother Earth that began at the turn of the century and has yet to subside. Such eminent scholars and well-known authors as Andrew Lang, Alfred Toynbee, Sir James George Frazer, George R. Gurney, and Herbert H. Harris have contributed to the view that Mother Earth is one of the chief deities of Native Americans. Yet only a few examples from tribal cultures in North America were cited as evidence for the statements made by these writers. None of these citations was as significant as nor had the impact of the statements attributed to Smo-hallah. By the middle of the 20th century, the statement had come to be a favorite used by the late eminent historian of religion Miracle Ellis in his discussion of Mother Earth. In his classic *Patterns of Comparative Religion* (1963), Ellis uses Smo-hallah's statement to exemplify Mother Earth.
Most remarkably, the Mother Earth story is not about Native American beliefs at all; it is not even about Native Americans.

In the most recent generation of this literary lineage, the latest citation of Smohalla’s statement comes from the noted Swedish authority on Native American religion, Ake Hultkrantz. His views of Mother Earth appear in his book The Religions of the American Indians (1979) and his essay “The Religion of the Goddess in North America” (1963). Hultkrantz understands Mother Earth to be a deity of great antiquity. He writes:

It is an indubitable fact that the concept of the earth goddess has grown strongest among the migrating peoples... Her origins may have been in the old hunting culture which lasted throughout America until about 3000 B.C. and was maintained by many tribes until the last decades of the nineteenth century. Far away from agricultural peoples lived, in the state of Washington, the Salish Indians whose chief in the 1800s was the dreamer Smohalla. Hultkrantz quotes the famed statement here. As elsewhere, the earth deity is here represented as anthropomorphic, at one with her substratum and yet an intimate experience of personal being. Many hunting tribes in North America manifested the same primitive belief in “her mother,” Mother Earth.

Even in this bare outline of writings on Mother Earth we find evidence of a highly interesting story. For even though Smohalla’s remarks clearly speak to a specific crisis experienced by native peoples in that region during the last half of the nineteenth century, they have been used again and again to document not only the religious beliefs of Smohalla, the theology of the Wanapum and other Salish-speaking peoples, and the peoples native to North America or all of the Americas, but all “primitive” peoples the world over. Moreover, the statement has been used to document beliefs not only during Smohalla’s lifetime but of hunting peoples some millennia ago. The resulting Mother Earth story is therefore a truly amazing story.

THE FUNCTION OF THE MYTH OF MOTHER EARTH

Although Taylor stated that “among the native races of America the Earth-mother is one of the great personages of mythology,” the Mother Earth story that seems most reliable is the one Europeans and Americans have created in their writings on the statement attributed to Smohalla. Let me briefly tell this Mother Earth story.

Long, long ago there were hunting peoples who ranged throughout the world. Some of these lived in the landscapes we now know as the Americas. Being peoples of so long ago, at such an early stage of development, they were very primitive. Their material cultures were underdeveloped as were their mental capacities. Because of the simplicity of their minds they could not yet comprehend the complex ideas of the heavens as a father, they could only conceive of the simpler idea of the earth as a mother. They could recognize parts of her body in the landscapes in which they walked. The hills and hillocks were her breasts, the rivulets and brooks were the milk flowing from her breasts. The pines and larches were her eyes. From her body she gave people their nourishment; roots, fruits, and plants. She took people back into her body upon their deaths.

As time went on some of these peoples developed, though they remained, compared to us, primitive, and eventually the idea dawned that the sky was a father and they came to realize that the sky, as father, and the earth, as a mother, came together as progenitors of all life.

Much, much later, though still long, long ago, as some of these peoples continued to develop, they finally discovered agriculture and began to cultivate crops. As a result the earth mother was replaced by fertility goddesses and mother goddesses who were separate from the earth itself.

Some of these ideas were known to our ancient ancestors who lived in Greece who wrote about them. These writings have been passed down to us. In this way our ancient ancestors provided us with an understanding of all of the forms that cultures and religious taken as they are developing. We are now in the latest and most advanced stage of development.

Since those ancient times many peoples and cultures developed as we have, but some did not. They retained primitive beliefs we became civilized. Even today there are primitive peoples who may speak to us of the beliefs of the ancient peoples of millennia ago. Just a century ago, shortly after Washington became a state in North America, a man there spoke of the belief in Mother Earth as it existed among ancient Indians. His name was Smohalla.

This story is remarkable in several ways.
respects. During the last one hundred years, it has gradually developed in the writings of some of our most eminent students of culture. Smohalla's single statement provides almost the only cited evidence on which to base the story. Most remarkably, the story is not about Native American beliefs at all; it is not even about Native Americans. If it were, a great many more examples from their culture would be present. Standard academic procedure used to document the presence of a trait in any culture or culture group requires the exhaustive analysis of the available data. In the case of the study of Mother Earth, as one of the great goddesses in the mythology of North America, this clarity was not done by any one of these writers in the lineage outlined above. The questions that come most immediately to mind are: Do these writers' views about Mother Earth accurately represent Native American beliefs? What were these scholars really writing about? A little reflection on these writings and especially on the use made of the statement attributed to Smohalla suggests that historic and ethnographic accuracy were largely irrelevant to the Mother Earth story and in fact would lead us away from what is important about the story. We must consider both the Mother Earth story as it emerged through European and American writings and the one told by Smohalla as myths, for curiously both are stories told about the "other." At the time Smohalla told his story, he was one of only a few hundred Native Americans in the Washington-Oregon area still holding out against American plans to confine Indians to reservations. Throughout his lifetime there had been pressures to radically transform the native way of life. Early in the nineteenth century trappers and missionaries came into the area. Their success encouraged settlers to seek land in the Northwest Territory. By midcentury the U.S. government procured treaties that effectively removed the Indians from desirable lands. Statehood for Washington and Oregon followed. Reservation lands were reduced so that gold mining and settlement could expand. Any hope held by the native peoples that they might retain their traditional way of life was destroyed when Chief Joseph was captured in 1877. Smohalla and his followers persisted in attempting to live according to these old ways. They dreamed of a time when the Americans would be destroyed and the old ways could be restored to the Indians. Smohalla and his followers practiced a ritual born of and shaped by this crisis. They met in a churchlike building and included obvious Christian ritual elements in their meetings. The story he told in 1886 must be viewed against this historical backdrop.

Smohalla's story tells of the creation of a world by a god who, in the act, created humans and furnished the world abundantly with plants, animals, and fish. He gave humans wings so they could travel wherever they liked. But many people came to kill the birds and the stronger ones oppressed the weaker ones. They drove the weaker ones from their lands and fisheries, killing most of them. This angered the god and "he took away their wings and wisdom, and commanded that the lands and fisheries should be common to all who lived upon them. That they were never again to have the fish off or divided."

Though this story is set in the time of creation, it is clearly a story about the oppression that Smohalla and the Indians suffered at the hands of American settlers and the U.S. government. It directly reflects the Indians' situation at the time of the storytelling. Not only does it make their oppression meaningful by incorporating it into the creation story, but it offers the hope that, as in the story, God will eventually punish the oppressor and command that the lands and fisheries be common to all.

THE MYTH OF ACADEMY

The European-American story of Mother Earth must also be seen in its historical and cultural context. Beginning as early as the 1492 voyage of Columbus, the European-Christian world faced constant challenges to its most basic beliefs concerning the shape and content of the world and the nature of humankind. Since the middle of the nineteenth century with the rise of anthropological and comparative studies of culture and religion, thinkers and writers have been challenged to comprehend the patterns, themes, and ideas that would enable them not only to understand the hundreds of newly emerging or discovered cultures but also to interpret them in Western terms.

Smohalla lived in a world collapsing from the unceasing presence of others. Europeans and Americans found their conceptions and knowledge of the world threatened by encounters with strange and exotic peoples whom they did not share. The story of Mother Earth is told by Europeans and Americans as a story of the development of human religiosity and culture. It is a story of the evolution of religious structures and forms, a story enriched by the patterns and categories derived from Western antiquity. It is a story of a society's growth from the simplicity of the primitive to the civilized, from the nonliterate to a literate culture. It is a story in which Native Americans, by virtue of the statement made by Smohalla in 1886, could be placed at a very early stage of cultural and religious development. The story of Mother Earth helps recognize the crisis of the Western worldview by providing it a base on which to incorporate the worldview of these "others."

Surprisingly, when the two stories are compared, they share more than might at first be expected. Both stories respond to a situation of encountering some "other." Both expand and develop an existing view of the world so that those others might be understood in such a way as to make the relationship with them meaningful, if not manageable. Both respond creatively to an encounter characterized by dominance and oppression. It is clear that both stories serve the most basic needs of the story creators and tellers. And it is clear that both articulate foundational values—unquestionable assumptions and perspectives that underlie all that is seen and done.

According to these observations I would suggest that myth should be thought of as the story on which truth is based, rather than thinking of myth as a true story. Myths are stories that articulate that which is itself not subject to verification or validation. This is a logical definition of myth, positing that in questions of truth there must be some base on which which truth-judgments are made. If one could isolate that base, it would necessarily not be subject to a demand for validation. For if it were, another unquestionable base would have to be postulated. If this base for truth is called myth, we could not ask whether myth was a true story. We should assume rather that myth is the foundation on which truth is based. Given this view of myth, we need not understand why myths are set in the

Though this story is set in the time of creation, it is clearly a story about the oppression that Smohalla and the Indians suffered at the hands of the American settlers and the U.S. government.
ancient past. This kind of story has nothing to do with the historical past. The temporal setting of "in the beginning" or "long, long ago" marks the mythic quality of the story—the quality of articulating that which is most fundamental.

It is commonly thought that myths provide for human beings a vehicle by which they may return to the primitively conditioned dimension of primordiality, to be refreshed in the pristine conditions of the newly created. Perhaps a complement to this view is the understanding that myths function as means by which human beings can articulate that which is most fundamental to them through the revision and re-creation of their stories, a kind of eternal renewal. Rather than returning to the primordial era of creation, the condition of primordiality may be carried along through history to give grounding to that which, in the present, is deemed by a culture to be most fundamental, to be beyond question. Myth thereby serves the creative capacity to effectively respond to crises and change while maintaining tradition and identity. The word "myth" suggests a connection between the primordial setting, which is essentially a mythic narrative, and history—a return to the beginning, a reversal or annihilation of history. I do not think history is severed or destroyed in myth; rather, the experience of history may be digested and recharged through the ongoing mythic process of producing newly vitalized articulations of that which is most fundamental to any people. It is because of mythic qualities that the validity of neither story we have considered is subject to question. Snookahla's story has obvious Christian influence and is clearly shaped, if not wholly formed, to meet the crisis situation being experienced. But it would be senseless to argue that the story could not possibly be correct in its assertion about the creation, because it can be historically documented that the story was formulated in the nineteenth century. From the point of view of Snookahla and his followers, this story articulates the grounds upon which they can in a crisis retain any meaning in life, which means that their very lives depend upon the story.

Likewise, in terms of the Mother Earth story that emerges from European and American writings, although our first question is whether or not they are historically and ethnographically accurate, it is in one sense an inappropriate question. Were these writings primarily scholarly in character, the question would be appropriate, but they are mythic. To even suggest that Mother Earth might not have existed in the religious experience of Native Americans or other tribal peoples throughout the world constitutes heresy. It is the very foundations of one of our important beliefs of the world. For Westerners, Mother Earth is not a hypothesis. She is a figure whose existence, structure, and character are the basis of many of the complex and diffuse cultures that may be meaningfully, if not absolutely, subject to questions of historical or ethnographic accuracy.

While many foundational myths have been digested and assimilated into the ongoing mythic process of producing newly vitalized articulations of that which is most fundamental to any people, in what can only be termed a logic of domination and conquest, Native Americans have been forced to participate in this same logic. This may seem harsh, but the fact cannot be ignored.

In the story told by Snookahla, the message of domination is clear. The story was told in the midst of a history of oppression and is about oppression. The Indians are oppressed, and the white Americans are the oppressors.

In the European-American story of Mother Earth, the logic of domination appears under the rubric of the dichotomy between primitive and civilized. Here it may be more subtle, but also more sinister.

Each taken in the context of its own historical background, both stories show the creativity not only of human beings, but of the genre and process I am identifying as myth. These stories not only share a common history, they have a common landscape and characters. The characters are not fictitious imaginings, but living human beings. In this light, the logic of domination, oppression, and conquest is not confined to the innocence of interesting stories idly told. Rather, these stories, especially the European-American Mother Earth story, articulate unquestionable principles and assumptions that have been fundamental to a long history of U.S. government policy toward Indians characterized at best as paternalistic, to a long history of misrepresentation (that denied the religious freedom of Native Americans), and to the military and legal enforcement of the removal of Native Americans from the lands they have occupied and exploited for millennia. This mythology has articulated the categories and theologies that have shaped, and in some cases have dominated, the academic study of Native Americans. It must be acknowledged that a logic of domination and conquest has motivated and shaped even this academic study.

This last point is conclusively demonstrated by Anne Donahoe in her article "Trickster: On Inhabiting the Space between Discourse and Story," published in Spiritus (Fall 1984). She focuses on a century of academic study of Native American stories in which the protagonist is a trickster, a fool, a buffoon. These stories include Coyote (popularized in the Coyote and Roadrunner cartoons), Raven, Racoon, Spider, and many others. For a century, Western scholarship has posited a common figure as appearing in all of these stories. They called this figure Trickster. The intellectual problems that have been raised by trickster can be both wise and foolish; a player of pranks and tricks as well as a hero, the epitome of wisdom, yet considered sacred. The following is Donahoe's startling conclusion to a review of twentieth-century scholarship on the Trickster:

The traditional discourse about Trickster is a discourse which reflects a cultural bias by imposing on Indian cultures its own framework of ideas. Western culture turns the discourse about Trickster into a discourse by Western culture about Western culture, with Trickster serving only as a nominal function so that the discussion may begin. This is a form of domination and repression of which any discourse about any "Other" must be guilty that discourse is self-questioning, that is, unless it involves a questioning of the very language it itself uses and a questioning of the discourse of which that language is a part. (p. 257)

Mother Earth and Trickster both owe their existence to a logic of con-
quest and dominance; they are characters in a mythology of dominance, in a discourse by Western culture about Western culture. In a sense, too, does the modern use of the word myth, for it is a principal use as a category by which to understand the "other" and in our tendency to characterize myth as archaic, it participates in the logic of domination. The advice of Dousseit is well put. In a modern pluralist world, a world obviously shaped by the logic of conquest and dominance, it is essential that the language used in discourse about every "other" be analyzed. The word myth has become increasingly important to this discourse, and, in many of its uses and implications, it has not escaped the logic of dominance. Western scholars and writers, in their study of myth and in their creation of such figures as Trisector and Mother Earth, have been creating their own mythology. Yet they have steadfastly refused to apply the category "myth" to their own work.

Perhaps the simplest way to avoid the logic of conquest and dominance is to apply the category usually reserved for dealing with "others" to the task of understanding ourselves. This is what I have attempted to do, in both the essay I have suggested the term myth be understood and in viewing myth as a linage of Western writings on the figure Mother Earth.

Now, throwing caution to the wind, risking emotional repressions and knowingly committing the act of heresy, I ask the question: Were the European and American writers correct in a historical and ethnographic sense? There are many rich and wonderful female figures known in Native American stories. Some are related to the earth, but most are not. Almost none are understood as the earth personified, and those who approach this do not have a developed story tradition or ritual presence. This should not be surprising, since there are hundreds of distinct tribal cultures in North America, each with a different language, religion, and culture. How could anyone expect to find a goddess common to all in such diversity?

While in terms of the story of Mother Earth this observation is significant, it is important to show conclusively that Mother Earth in North America is of the myth created by Westerners, not a historic and ethnographic reality native North Americans. But upon applying the term myth to the writings of our own mentors, some complex questions arise. These scholars have been authoritative because they were believed to have acquired their knowledge of the "other" through careful observation and to have based their conclusions on which their various tribal identities depended, the Mother Earth figure grew in importance among them. What seems to have happened is that the oppressed Native Americans have appropriated the mythology of their oppressors. Indians acquired what they knew to be the "other" at all, as their own views of human history. As a result, the general population, as well as scholars, now accepts without question Mother Earth as a historic and ethnographic fact in native North America and throughout the world. This raises the most fundamental questions about what constitutes responsible scholarship. What is the difference between scholarship and mythmaking, between fact and fiction? Is there a connection between some styles of scholarship and writing, some ways of seeing "others," and oppressive political and economic perspectives? Is it not the formulation of some expression in the guise of stating knowledge about some "other" a powerful means of dominating those others? Is this activity not somehow participating in the political, social, and economic oppression of the "others" while being understood as objective observations motivated only by a humanitarian interest?

A final issue is perhaps most remarkable. Among Native Americans today there is much evidence of a deep and abiding belief in a figure they identify by the name Mother Earth. She is often paired with Father Sky, the Great Spirit, or the Creator. Examination of the history of this figure shows that she arose in the process of the formation of the pan-Indian or pantribal alliances among Native Americans who, in this century, have increasingly forged a common experience of oppression and loss. As Indian people lost the land based on which their various tribal identities depended, the Mother Earth figure grew in importance among them.

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