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Mythic Themes

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Mythic Themes

Myths, Tales, and Legend. No standard exists for the use of the term myth to distinguish a segment or type of Native American oral tradition. Anthropologists and folklorists have not often discriminated between myth and the related term tale, using both simply to refer to narratives or stories. When a distinction is made several criteria are commonly used. Myths are sacred while tales are not. Myths are true while tales are not. The characters of myths are deities and primordial figures; humans and animals are the usual characters of tales. Myths deal with creation at the dawn of time or with cosmic transformations occurring in a prehuman era. Tales tell of fantastical and nonsensical events. Sometimes a subclass of tale or a wholly separate class of narrative is distinguished as legend; legend is closer to history and to human affairs. This threefold classification dates from distinctions made by Jakob Grimm in the early nineteenth century.

This manner of classifying Native American oral traditions focuses on story content considered in terms of external criteria. Other classificatory criteria include the context and function of a story since these may vary for the same story over time and from culture to culture. As early as 1915, Franz Boas insisted that native classifications be considered; however, a full-scale study of native classifications of oral traditions has never been done.

From the point of view of the academic study of religion, myth has come to be widely used to designate narratives that have major religious importance. It is also commonly, and more narrowly, used to refer to creation and cosmic transformation narratives. Such events are set in the primordium, a setting signaling that the narrative and the events of which it tells are fundamental.

In contrast, from the modern Native American point of view, the word myth has the meaning the word bears in common usage: it refers to a misconception or a story without base. To many Native Americans, myth is a pejorative term that indicates insensitivity and misunderstanding on the part of those who apply it to their stories. Concern for native sensitivity is all but entirely missing from studies and presentations of Native American oral traditions that use the terms myth and mythology.

Story Types in North America. A great many of the stories in North America have to do with creation or with origins resulting from cosmic transformations; these stories often correlate with story types found throughout the world. Most tribes in North America have stories that tell of the beginning of the world that is presently lived in (not one of long ago); the origin of human beings; the origin of plants and animals; the origin of the sun, moon, and stars; and the origin of aspects of the human condition such as death, disease, laziness, and sexuality. I shall summarize the types of these stories, with a discussion of their variant forms and geographic distribution.

Earth diver. The distinctive feature of the earth-diver story type, as the term designating it indicates, is the attribution of the origin of the earth to the result of some figure diving to the bottom of primordial waters to get a bit of sand or soil from which to create the earth. The diver is most commonly animal, and usually there are a number of these divers who try in succession to dive for soil. Only the last diver succeeds, and this figure is usually gone a very long time, being dead or nearly dead when he or she surfaces. Besides the divers, there is a creator figure as well, and it is the work of the creator to take the bit of sand or soil and, through kneading, stretching, singing creation songs, or some other means, to expand this nascent earth to its present size. The created earth then lies upon the primordial waters. Sometimes it is not well anchored, and it shakes or wobbles. This condition is resolved by the erection of pillars in the cardinal directions or some other security measure usually associated with directional orientations.

Earth-diver stories commonly conclude with a post-creation inspection; the creator sends someone on a journey to inspect the newly made world and to measure its extent. Typically these figures do not attend only to the business assigned, but tarry to satisfy their own interests or desires. In consequence of this forbidden action, the figure is transformed in a way that explains his or her nature. In one story, for example, Buzzard is sent out to catch birds. He is punished by being condemned to eat corpses; hence buzzards are carrion eaters.

This type of creation story is found throughout North America and is certainly the most common and widespread story type in the area. In some locations it appears only as an incidental theme, while elsewhere it has developed into long elaborate stories containing amazing detail and hundreds of elements. These stories are set in the beginning of time or following an era concluded by the cataclysmic event of a world destruction by deluge. [For further discussion of earth-diver myths in North America, see North American Indians, article on Indians of the Far North.]

Emergence. In emergence type creation stories, a world exists at the outset without its creation being described or in any way accounted for. There are also peoples living in a world below the present earth surface when the story begins. This story type is concerned with the ascent of these human beings and their search for or travel to a habitable world; it is more about finding the proper place in the world than the cosmic creation. Two major types of stories are commonly a part of emergence mythology: the story of the emergence journey onto the earth surface and the story of migration from the emergence place to the current village site or homeland. The distinctive segment is the story of the emergence journey. Numerous elements are commonly found in that story. The plight of those in the depths of the earth is usually one of darkness, deprivation, fear, and ignorance. The pre-emergence peoples must avoid heroic figures, designated by a deity, to come to them and escort them on their emergence journey. The journey may be arduous, the way not well known. Sometimes there is no way out of the lower world; then, in a manner similar to the earth diver’s diving for soil, various persons, or more typically animals, attempt to break through the earth’s surface from below. Many may fail before one succeeds. The means of ascent may be a vine, a tree, a reed, or a mountain. It grows mag-
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brother then spares him his life at the cost of his becoming the model for the Pure Peace society by devoting himself to the curing of illness. Through the ritual of theft of light, fire, water, game, fish, and many other things necessary for human life are found widely, but especially in western North America from the Southeast all the way north through the Northwest Coast area. As with the emergence story, theft stories account not so much for creation as for a prismatic transformation. The condition that motivates the act in this type of story is the loss or lack of something—such as light or game—that is necessary for human life. Often, it has been secreted by giants, monsters, or deities residing in an inaccessible place. The story centers upon a heroic figure who, through courage, tenacity, or magic, and sometimes aided by clever disguise, enters the place where the missing life is needed. By theft, the hero achieves the release of this necessity and, consequently, life becomes possible. A moral twist is sometimes added when the return of the man is humiliated or shunned; the result is that the ideals that would have existed are lost, resulting in turn in discomfort and inconvenience.

World Parent. The world-parent type cosmogony has been occasionally identified, particularly in the North American Southwest. Among the most common examples cited are stories of the Luceno and Dehe tribes of southern California. There is some suggestion of a sexual creation in these stories, yet a close consideration of the known examples suggests that they are more like the world-creator type stories. The main characters are brother and sister, and their struggles for dominance coincide with the brother sexually assaulting the sister. Through the increased sexual desires of all people, usually including a small piece of earth. Another common cited example of world-parent creation is the Zuni story of creation recorded by Frank H. Cushing in the late nineteenth century. However, none of the many subsequently recorded accounts of Zuni creation involves the sexual creation by a sky father and earth mother that is reported. It is possible that one existed.

The climate and the mountainous setting at the world’s rim engage in a final determining context: the one who can move a mountain is the father will be the winner. The bad brother tries first. After great effort he moves the mountain a little. As he turns toward the good brother the good brother effortlessly moves the mountain up against the back of the bad brother. Turning around his accomplishment, the bad brother assuages his nose against the mountain and twists it into a permanently deformed shape. The good

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Trickster stories. The most widespread and best-known stories in North America center on a complex figure that has come to be known by the term trickster. This figure takes various physical forms, including Coyote, Raven, Mink, Blue Jay, and a variety of anthropomorphic figuRes. Although many collectors and interpreters of North American oral traditions have not considered trickster stories anything other than entertainment, more attention has been given in recent decades to the interpretation of these stories than perhaps to any other story type. It is important that the stories of the trickster are not all of a single type and the roles and characters the trickster plays are many and often complex. The trickster figures may also appear as the protagonist in many of the other story types I have discussed.

Basic human needs—sexuality, food, sense of self, subsistence, and knowledge—almost always shape the character of the trickster, but by being exaggerated to their limits. The trickster is often grossly sexual. He has sexual relations with his daughter or mother-in-law, thus breaking the most unspeakable of taboos. He has often greatly exaggerated sexual organs, such as a penis so long that he must roll it up and carry it in a pack on his back. The trickster is often so concerned with satisfying his hunger that he will eat anything (and assuredly food that is forbidden to him). Furthermore, he is unworkable and foolish, often giving the wrong tricks on people, resulting in their suffering, embarrassment, or death. He is slow to learn, but taciturn to the point of being able to learn nothing. Trickster stories are about tricksters, but the stories about him are without doubt entertaining, if sometimes bawdy. Yet the stories are almost always highly valued by native Americans. Doubtless this is because among the earliest stories people have formed about a prankster or buffoon; they are stories about the nature of the world and the nature of being human. In some stories the trickster is viewed as essentially the comic creator, but more often he is a transformer or fixer. Because of the mythic actions of the character, such things as war and marriage may be related. Trickster stories often reflect a character of the trickster, sometimes using his positive aspects of being human are accounted for and their meanings are explored. Even physical features of the cosmos such as the Milky Way are attributed to acts of the trickster. In some stories the trickster is comparable to the culture hero type of figure, who steals fire, light, water, or game; in fact, the trickster is often portrayed and considered in this very role. Trickster stories seem also to be related to the stories of creation that feature two anthropomorphic creator figures, for the trickster often plays opposite the positions of creator-deity. In negative cases, for the trickster is not a deity or even a spiritual being, yet through his actions he reverses and
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thereby readers creation. [For further discussion, see Tricker, sources, overview article and article on North Ameri- can Tricksters.]

"Orpheus." Another story type widely known among the peoples native to North America is one which depicts the death of one member of a close male-female relationship. Usually it is the woman who dies. The griot attempts to create the illusion that the dead are unreachable by the living and he (or she) departs on a journey seeking the dead loved one. This journey is often long and arduous, yet the unification of the soul rapidly pays off and the place of the dead is reached. Contact with the departed lover is often contingent upon tests the seeker must pass; success leads to contact and renewed joy and happiness. An agreement is usually made establishing the conditions under which the lover may be taken back to the world of the living. Often this is no agreement not to touch the dead person or to look back until the pair is once again among the living. Sometimes the seeker must agree to treat the lover kindly after they return and to never strike or of- fend her. Invariably, the conditions are for some reason—eagerness, carelessness, or curiosity—set kept, and the loved one immediately disappears to return to the dead, closing forever the possibility of the dead re- turning to life. This story type, widely known through- out the world, is commonly identified by a reference to Orpheus, the male character of the version of this story in Greek mythology. It is a story about the falsity of death, but also more broadly about the human condi-

tion.

Speech. The idea that speech is a creative force is commonly found in the stories of peoples native to North America. These peoples commonly hold the view that the appropriate tellings of stories are creative acts, that is, that the creation of the creative ordering pow- ers of which the stories tell. In some cases the power of the story and speech is identified with the power of creation and the potential for stories of creation. For the Navajo, thought and speech are personified as a powerful figure in the stories of creation; more sig- nificantly, the pair appears as the origin of stories of the most profound and central element of Navajo religion.

Performances of Myth. Native American languages, with some significant exceptions in the historical peri- od, do not have a written counterpart to utterance. Therefore, to write and read myths is alien to Native American cultures. The stories are kept alive in the minds and hearts of the living members of the cultures, who bear the constant responsibility of preventing their loss. The telling of many of these stories is restricted to particular locations, particular occasions, and to those who are qualified and choose to tell them; in some cases stories are sold to be owned by certain members of a community. Stories may serve as autho- rity for, as interpretation of, or as directions for the perfor- mance of ritual rite or they may have the function of ritual praxis. Many Native Americans are reluctant to permit stories to be recorded either in written or oral form. More than anything, this reluctance is based on the fear that such recording processes truncates and thereby the living dimensions of a story tradition, in which the telling of stories is a crea-
tive and nourishing act. In comparison, a written text extracted from a culture is a lifeless shadow of a story "event," and is inherently prone to misunderstanding and misuse.

Interpretive Approaches. What do we or can we learn of the religion and culture of a tribe from its stories? What can be learned from these texts about the story process and its formation, development, history, and function? One view holds that such stories are a culture's means for expressing fundamental social, cultural, and religious values. Another view maintains that they express feelings and structures common to all human beings. Clearly, the same story types and motifs are found over extensive geographic areas and on sev- eral continents, among disparate culture types, value systems, worldviews, ecological conditions, and suste-
mance patterns, by limiting the cultural-species analyses of stories at the level of type, motif, or theme. The study of mythology in North America faces many challenges and obstacles.

A number of strategies have been adapted to meet the difficulties facing the task of interpreting the mytholo-
gies of North America. The most widely practiced ap-
proach is the analysis by form. This form, based on biological classification of storytelling, examines the way in which stories are structured and their function in the storytelling, the relationship between a story and an audience, the audience's reaction, and the expected and actual effects of the telling. It is the approach of a story by looking at the text in its cultural context and the way it functions within the social and cultural event as well as a text.

Doll Hymes has made a range of important contribu-
tions to this development of the study of North Ameri-
can mythology, working primarily with materials from Northwest Coast tribes. Hymes has effectively demon- strated that the free transformations of stories, the "text," which we often use, are frequently radically different from the stories as originally told. Subsequently directing his analysis to the native language texts, he shows that we cannot comprehend the deeper levels of their meaning if we are not aware of the untranslatable lin-
guistic markers, repetitive language, tense, and other features, which are often observable only when consid-
ering the story in the language in which it is told and as it is actually told. He has also called attention to the difference between the way in which a story is performed, from an outline demonstration of a story for an outside in-quirer to a full performance including many elements of style, such as gesture, facial expression, intonation, articu-
ation, and vocal tempo. Other elements of performance include such features as the insti-
mentation for the storytelling, the relationship between a story and the audience, the audience's reaction, and the expected and actual effects of the telling. Hymes describes his approach as listening to the text in all its details while looking for covariation in its form and meaning.

Based on almost any criteria, mythology is important to the study of religion, and the study of Native Ameri-
can religions is no exception. Mythology is a central aspect of the religious aspects of Native American mythology has scarcely be-

en within the academic study of religion. The poten-
tial for improving our understanding of this area is significant.

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