

**UC Merced**

**The Journal of California Anthropology**

**Title**

Chemehuevi Religious Beliefs and Practices

**Permalink**

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/1bt8j4z3>

**Journal**

The Journal of California Anthropology, 1(1)

**Author**

Laird, Carobeth

**Publication Date**

1974-07-01

Peer reviewed

# Chemehuevi Religious Beliefs and Practices

CAROBETH LAIRD

*AUTHOR'S NOTE: The contents of this paper are derived in part from material contained in my forthcoming book, The Chemehuevis, and in part from texts which were not available to me at the time I wrote the book. These texts were recorded by me in 1919 and the spring of 1920, and are now included in the Harrington Collection, Anthropological Archives, the Smithsonian Insti-*

*tution, Washington, D. C. For all this older material the informant was George Laird, who became my husband in 1923. He was born in 1871 and lived through the transition from aboriginal society. Brief notes upon present day practices are based for the most part upon observations by my daughter, Georgia Laird Culp.*

UNTIL their numbers were decimated by disease and their culture overwhelmed by the rising tide of white settlers in the latter part of the nineteenth century, the Chemehuevi possessed a vast body of oral literature. This consisted principally of myths and songs.<sup>1</sup> Myths could not be recounted during the hot months; if this taboo was broken, "someone"—not necessarily the narrator—would be bitten by a rattlesnake. In winter, when the snakes were dormant, the people clustered around a skilled teller of tales who filled the whole night with wonders. The basic structure of a myth remained unchanged through countless repetitions, and some myths retain hints and implications of great antiquity. But the narrator might combine remembered fragments into a single myth, add humorous touches, or bring the tale up to date by a change of locale or by mention of articles or customs unknown in very early times.

In Chemehuevi thought, there are two

eras of world experience. This present time was preceded by the time when "the world was young," or the "dawn" era, when "the animals were people." These "people" are creatures of a primeval dream. They are sometimes anthropomorphic, sometimes theriomorphic, or again they exhibit both animal and human characteristics, although their life-styles and thought processes are invariably those of human beings. They change size at will, appear or disappear, and even seem to be two different sorts of being at one and the same time. At the close of the mythic era, the animal people "went north" to some mysterious and unidentified habitat; yet they are also spoken of as having been transformed into and replaced by the animals which roam the earth today. With the exception of *Cēnawavī*, Mythic Coyote, whose name differs slightly from that of *cēna'avī*, the ordinary coyote, the names of the forerunners are for the most part those applied to the beasts, birds, reptiles, and insects of the modern era.

Mention is made of a very few mythic personages, however, who had no counterparts in the world of actual animals; e.g., *Nēnēno'ovi*, People Carrier, a roc-like bird who carried off people for his wives to cook, and *Tavahukwampi*, Sun Spider (*tava-*, sun; *hukwampi*, black widow spider).

The myths afford important glimpses of aboriginal culture and intimations of prehistory, although it may be that their most valuable revelations are spiritual, metaphysical, and psychological. Many are exciting tales of warfare and magic, others are origin myths or what might be termed pattern-setting myths, stories of how Coyote set the pattern for human work and living. His elder brother *Tēvatsi*, Wolf, was immensely wise and would have set easier patterns if mankind had chosen to follow him; but the saying goes, "We followed Coyote." Wolf is the prototype of magical man, the all-powerful, all-wise, pompous, and completely humorless shaman. Coyote is typical of sensuous man—erring, lascivious, disobedient to his betters, full of outlandish humor, in every battle the first to be killed and the last to be revived. We might even say that Coyote foreshadows technological man, for it was he who set the pattern for the making of arrows and for other toilsome human activities involving the use of tools.

We have two versions of the Creation Myth, differing only in detail. In both there was in the beginning only water, the Immortal or Self-Mythologizing Water.<sup>2</sup> According to one story, the Primeval Four—Ocean Woman (*Hutsipamama'u*), Wolf, Mountain Lion (*Tukumumuuntsi*), and Coyote—floated in a sort of basket or woven boat upon the primeval sea. Ocean Woman rubbed dead skin from her body, formed it into balls, crumbled them, and sprinkled the resulting dust on the surface of the waters. Thus the land was formed. When there was enough to support her, Ocean Woman lay down upon it, face up, with her head toward the west. She then stretched it,

pushing at it with outspread arms and legs. Wolf ran up and down from north to south, reporting on how far the land extended, while Coyote ran to the east and back again. When at last Coyote declared, "it fits" (meaning "it is large enough to accommodate the needs of the beings who will inhabit it") the earth was finished.

In the other version, Ocean Woman fell from the sky in the form of a worm. She made the land by crumbling a little soil onto the water, and stretched it out as in the previously given account. Then she rubbed dead skin from her crotch and made Coyote. He ran over the earth and reported its size to her. When it was finished, she created Wolf and Mountain Lion. Because Wolf was sensible and Coyote had no sense, it was determined that Wolf would be Coyote's elder brother. Mountain Lion plays no part in either version; he is merely present. One might be tempted to read significance into the fact that the Primeval Four represent four great predators: man, wolf, mountain lion, and coyote.

In the next myth of this series, the goddess appears in a dual aspect, as mother and daughter living on an island in the sea. She is not called Ocean Woman. The mother is presented as an unnamed old woman who, like Wolf, knows all things before they happen. The daughter is *Poo'(w)avi*, Louse. She is desirable, provocative, elusive, and dangerous. While out hunting upon the mainland, Coyote comes upon Louse's tracks, overtakes her, and is enticed to the seashore. There he persuades her to ferry him across to her island home, only to have her attempt to drown him in mid-passage. Coyote outwits her by turning himself into a waterspider. He runs nimbly across the waves and reaches the island before her. There the old woman, sitting by her brush house in the shelter of a windbreak, has already begun to weave a large storage basket.

Coyote's union with Louse is accom-

plished after some difficulty, for she has a toothed vagina. When he is ready to return to his home on *Nēvagante*, Snow Having,<sup>3</sup> where his brother, Wolf, awaits him, the old woman deposits Louse's fertilized eggs in the storage basket and ties its top securely. She gives it to Coyote with the strict injunction to take it directly to Wolf. Coyote again turns himself into a waterspider and carries the basket across the water in the manner that a waterspider carries its egg sac. By the time Coyote has reached the shore, the basket has become very heavy and movement within it excites his curiosity. He opens the basket and all the tribes of earth pour forth. Coyote is so busy naming them that he does not get the container closed again till only a few weaklings and cripples, together with the excrement, remain inside. Crestfallen, he takes this worthless mess to his brother, and the great Wolf transforms it into the Chemehuevi, the best of all people.<sup>4</sup>

At the time of this myth, Coyote is said to have been very young. In a later story, when apparently ordinary mortals coexisted with the animal people, he is represented as aging, though not yet old.

The last myth of this series deals with the great battle between Wolf and Coyote on one side and the Bears, *Papawawē*, on the other. The two brothers stand high on their mountain, clad in rainbow colors, and the Bear People advance like a storm across the desert, with lightning flashing from their lances. Through Coyote's envy and treachery, Wolf is slain. Coyote brings him back to life on the third day, but instead of returning to the home cave on Snow Having, Wolf goes north and Coyote trails behind him.

The Sun is called *Tavapētsi*, a word consisting of the root word for solar light or heat, *tava-*, plus an honorific, animate postfix. Yet when the sun is referred to in a Chemehuevi myth, even when referred to as a personage, an inanimate pronoun is used. The

Sun is said to have begotten twin sons upon a woman by projecting its "beard" (the rays of light which emanate at sunrise or sunset) into her vagina; and later, in the woman's absence, "it" is said to have visited the infants and left them presents. In one myth Cottontail Rabbit, *Tavutsi*, ambushes the Sun and hits it with a stone, thus breaking off large, flaming chunks, reducing its heat, and making the earth more habitable. The Moon also takes inanimate pronouns, although *Mi(y)arogopitsi*, the word for "moon," incorporates *togo-*, maternal grandfather. When the ambusher of the Sun watches the Moon rise (emerge, as an animal from its den), he sees it accompanied by innumerable crows. Neither the sun nor the moon was worshipped.

The question arises: Are the animal people or other personages in the myths to be considered as gods? I think not, with one exception. Prayers were addressed to Ocean Woman, or more respectfully, Ocean Old Woman, *Hutsipamaa'ēpētsi*, who (except for her initial appearance as a worm) was never animal in form. On the occasion of a child's losing a baby tooth, the tooth was thrown away with the request that Ocean Old Woman would give "a good big one" in its place. It is my impression that she was also petitioned for help in times of trouble. Modern Chemehuevis, indoctrinated with the concept of a male deity, sometimes address prayers to Wolf but I believe this was not done in aboriginal times.

The root of the datura (*Datura meteloides* A. DC.) was used as a hallucinogenic. In the dreams or visions which it induced the whereabouts of lost articles might be revealed, or the name of an enemy who was employing evil magic. Always the "east root" was taken for this purpose, and its removal was accompanied by an apology for the resultant disturbance to the plant and a request for the desired information. On these occasions the datura was addressed courteously as "old

woman." However, so far as I know, no plants appeared as mythological characters. Certain caves also (or, perhaps more accurately, the spirits who inhabited them) were able to grant boons: a desired song or shamanistic powers. One going to spend the night in such a cave would politely make his request, accompanying it by some small gift—a pair of moccasins, perhaps, or a piece of buckskin, or a small amount of tobacco. But I think it would be inaccurate to say that *datura* plants or caves were worshipped.

Shamans did their work with the aid of spirit-animal familiars, *tuhug(w)antēmē*, sing. *tuhug(w)antē*. It has been stated that with the exception of the deer, *tēhiyq*, and the mountain sheep, *naxq*, *naga*-, the two principal game animals of the Immortals and also of the humans who followed them, only the animals who had been shamans in the dawn era could act as shamans' familiars in this present time. Yet the bear was a powerful shaman's familiar, although in certain tales he appears as a pet of the Immortals, "the kind who did not talk." (However, in the myth describing Wolf and Coyote's departure, mention is made of a whole tribe of Bear People, one of whom was Coyote's aunt; these Bears definitely were "the kind that talked" and conducted themselves in every way as other groups of prehumans did, and so definitely must have had shamans among them.)

Familiars might be either helpful or dangerous. The mouse, *pu(w)intcatsi*, and the woodrat, *kaatsi*, were beneficent, because they were able to steal the disease away from a sick person. The bear, *papawa*, conferred great strength, and in general bear shamans are said to have been successful healers. The bat, *paatcatsi*, had power to produce cold, consequently a shaman who possessed this familiar could heal burns. The mountain lion and the rattlesnake, *kwiwatsi*, conferred upon their possessors the power to do great harm. Persons who had inadvertently acquired dan-

gerous familiars would often try to keep their powers secret for fear of being blamed for illnesses or misfortunes for which they were not responsible.

The acquisition of a familiar came about through persistent dreaming and lonely meditation, or through visiting a sacred cave. Yet occasionally the familiar and the accompanying power would come suddenly, without solicitation. With the "helper" came the song by which it could be summoned. A general predilection towards shamanism and even specific songs could be inherited.

It is said that occasional shamans actually had the power to assume the form of the animal familiar, but only did this when alone. A bear shaman whose fame still lingers could turn himself into a bear, but he was said to have been less successful as a healer than most bear shamans.

The essential function of a shaman was to cure disease. The Chemehuevi word for shaman, *puh(w)agantē*, is invariably translated into English as "doctor" and the practice of his art is known as "doctoring." For this work he needed no herbs, no material accessories. Doubtless when he sang he accompanied himself with a rattle, but the one bit of equipment which was always mentally associated with the shaman was the crooked stick or *porq*—which may have been merely a digging stick endowed in this particular context with magical power. This crooked stick was the equivalent of the rod of power which appears in universal mythology. A shaman could be described as one who "carried the *porq*." If such a one owned a dangerous familiar which he could not control, if he caused disease rather than curing it, he went in peril of his life.

One individual, not necessarily a shaman, was thought to be able to project a curse upon another, and the rite of curing was usually aimed at revealing the guilty party and causing him to confess.

The Chemehuevi knew the curative properties of certain plants, and referred to them, or to preparations made from them, as medicine. But the word for medicine, *navuaganumpĕ*, might be roughly translated as "material for curing one's self." Therefore such medicine was not primarily connected with shamanistic practice. There is also a tradition of charms, objects which might be hidden or perhaps hung up where they were visible. Some of these were protective, others could be used to do harm. In the latter case, it would be the function of the shaman to uncover such an object and to reveal the identity of the enemy who had placed it.

In addition to shamans' songs, there were other hereditary songs which served as oral maps, delineating the hunting ranges over which the owners of the songs were privileged to range. The principal songs in this category were the Deer Song and the Mountain Sheep Song—the latter, at least, having numerous versions, each version belonging to a closely related group. A person claiming such a song was known as a "deer" or a "mountain sheep," as the case might be. There was an intimate, esoteric bond, felt rather than defined, between a man, his song, the animal from which the song took its name, and the territory over which the song "traveled." As has been noted, there were also deer and mountain sheep shamans, but every possessor of an hereditary song was by no means a shaman. Before a hunt, the Deer Song was sometimes sung all night long. During this singing, one or more persons would fall over in a trance, and the number of men so affected would foretell the number of deer to be killed on the following day.

In the periods from 1889 to 1890, the Chemehuevi were much influenced by the Ghost Dance, which was called *Nĕkapĕ*, the old name for the Scalp Dance or for any "circle dance." The Ghost Dance was first preached by a Paiute named Wovoka, but

the form which reached the Chemehuevi bore strong traces of Mormon influence. Chemehuevi settlements were first contacted by "a pipe sent down from the north," which was followed perhaps a year later by a man who told them about the Ghost Dance and taught some of the Ghost Dance songs. Men who would have normally learned their own hereditary songs were imbued with the ambition to become Ghost Dance singers. This was a contributing factor to the loss of their ancient cultural heritage. Even more potent deteriorating influences were the deprivation of hunting ranges, displacement, confinement to small areas, and indoctrination in fundamentalist Christianity.

From time immemorial the Chemehuevi have buried their dead, although the myths attest the fact that there may have been occasional cremations. In aboriginal times and on into the nineteenth century a Cry, *Yagapĕ*, or mourning ceremony was held at which the property of the dead person was burned, his horses killed, and items of value not too closely associated with the deceased, including some which were acquired especially for the occasion, were given away. The Cry was frequently held in early autumn, when food was plentiful. It was a great event, in which several families might join to honor relatives who had died during the past months. A runner bearing a knotted string was sent out to summon guests from far and near. The number of knots in the string corresponded with the number of days which would elapse before the appointed time, and one knot was untied each day. During the months of preparation which preceded the Cry, a nest of young eagles was located. The fledglings were taken captive, and as the time approached an eagle, *mĕngĭ*, now grown to maturity, was killed and skinned. The eagle's skin, with feathers intact, was displayed on the wall of the *havaganĭ*, the large shed or "shade house," built for the occasion, together with articles

for distribution. At the burning of property which closed the great commemorative rite, the eagle's skin was "the last to go into the fire." It is to be noted that the Chemehuevi did not adorn themselves with eagle feathers.

During the Cry the song or songs belonging to the dead person or persons were sung, also other songs. Singing, alternating with weeping and feasting, went on all night long for several nights. Last of all the Talking Song, *'ampagahuv(w)iyavĕ*, was sung by the high chief or a member of his family. This was a very sacred song, deriving its name from the fact that part of it was spoken or declaimed. Other songs could be "borrowed," that is, sung by persons who were not their hereditary owners, but the Talking Song could not be sung by anyone who did not have chief's blood. It is my impression that it directed the soul on its long and possibly perilous journey.

The soul was said to rise from the grave on the fourth night after burial—although obviously, when the Cry was held several months after interment, ties remained to be loosed in that ceremonial. The land of the dead lay to the north. It was a pleasant place where crops were unfailingly good. There kinship groups or incipient clans were not distinguished, as in this world, by the hunting songs which they held in common but by the ownership of different colored corn. Sometimes the spirit of a dead relative returned to fetch a loved one. A dying girl said she saw her deceased father waiting to take her with him and leading a white horse for her to ride.

However, it might be said that as a rule when the Cry was finished the dead went about their business and the living about theirs. Naturally, certain precautions were observed. The brush hut where someone had died was abandoned and the name of the dead person was not to be spoken for a long time. Indeed, the worst possible insult was to mention a person's dead relatives in one's presence. If it became absolutely necessary to

refer to the deceased, it was done in a very circuitous way. An individual's dead father or mother would be spoken of as "so-and-so's former (male or female) relative."

As a sign of mourning, women cut their hair—the closer the relationship, the shorter the hair. This was done immediately after death occurred. At this time there was naturally a certain amount of formal and much informal mourning. Songs were sung and possessions burned. But the great burning, singing and feasting took place later, at the Cry, when widely scattered families could be gathered together.

The custom of "crying for the dead" survives into the present, but now the Cry is held on the night preceding the funeral. There is no burning, although a few of the deceased's possessions may be laid in his coffin. A few years ago when a very old man, the last of his generation, died, a bow especially made for the occasion was buried with him, along with his best hat, cigarettes, and other items. Persons from six different tribes were present, mourning not so much the passing of an individual as of a way of life. A Paiute sang his version of the Talking Song, no Chemehuevi being left alive who knew it, and this singer has since died. At present-day Cries, such fragments as are remembered of hereditary songs are sung, and frequently the only singing is provided by Mohaves (long-time neighbors and frequent enemies) or by members of other unrelated tribes. Sometimes in the early part of the evening Christian hymns are sung to guitar accompaniment, but after midnight the old ways take over. At daybreak the circle dance is danced; then the white undertaker is admitted and the body is borne to the cemetery, with perhaps a pause at a local church for services.

Besides the Cry, another great collective event was the Gathering, *Suupaaru'(w)apĕ* or *Nagarĕpi*. This was more purely social than the Cry, yet not without religious or ethical

significance, for in ancient times the high chief employed such occasions to address the people and instruct them in the way of life. After the decay of aboriginal culture, after the Cry was merged with the funeral, Gatherings also became confused with Cries in people's thought. An elderly man told me he had attended the last great "powwow," held about 1915. When I asked him its significance, he replied, "Have you never heard of a memorial service?" Yet in more primitive times, Gathering and Cry were distinct. The former afforded an opportunity for the chief to speak to the people (or perhaps to be deposed by them!), the latter was the true "memorial service."

#### NOTES

1. All myths incorporated songs, but, as will be seen, there were other song categories which transmitted valuable information.

2. *Tewiin(y)agah*, telling a myth, and *Narēwiin(y)apah*, Primeval Water. This word is applied to the water which existed before land was created, to the sea, and also in one myth to a primeval lake of fresh water from which all lakes, ponds, tanks in the rock, and other drinkable waters were spattered out.

3. Chemehuevis now living say that Snow Having is Charleston Peak in Nevada; George Laird once tentatively identified it as Mt. Whitney. The Sierra Nevada or certain peaks thereof fit well the description given in the myths: a summit or summits bare of vegetation, perpetual snow, long slopes or valleys where camps for gathering seed or basketry material might be located.

4. Chemehuevi is a word of uncertain Yuman origin. The Chemehuevi call themselves *Nēwēwē*, People. There was, however, another name, now almost forgotten: *Tuumontcokowē*, Black Bearded Ones or Black Bearded Faces. Both this name and *Nēwēwē* were formerly applied to the present Chemehuevi as well as to others now classified as Paiute.

