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Author

Laird, Carobeth

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Intimations of Unity

CAROBETH LAIRD

IT is a truism that certain mythological themes occur and reoccur and certain mythological episodes are endlessly repeated and variously combined, disguised at times almost beyond recognition as they are filtered through widely disparate cultures and adapted to widely differing environments. Apparently behind every god, demigod, or hero stands an archetypal figure, seen “through a glass darkly” but nonetheless present and indestructible.

This is especially true of the mythologies of Native Americans. I have neither the requisite scholarship nor time to undertake an in-depth study of so vast a subject—indeed, it is a subject which will engage armies of scholars for generations to come. However, I am familiar with Chemehuevi mythology. I shall therefore venture to point out a few of the correspondences between the Mythic Coyote (or Wolf and Coyote) Cycle of the Chemehuevi and the Trickster and Hare Cycles of the Winnebago, as related by Radin (1956).¹ These parallels would be interesting enough if found within the same culture area or the same linguistic stock; they are extraordinarily challenging when they occur in the sacred narratives of tribes separated by roughly two-thirds of a continent and speaking unrelated languages.

First, let us compare certain of Trickster’s characteristics and exploits with those of Mythic Coyote.

Trickster has a name, *Wadjunkaga*, said to mean “the tricky one,” but in no way related to

other Siouan words for “tricky” (Radin 1956: 132).

Mythic Coyote, unlike most of his contemporaries in that pre-human era when the animals were people, also has a special name: *Cinawavi*, closely related to *cina’avi*,² the coyote of the world we live in at present. *Cinawavi* also bears a vague phonetic resemblance to *Šnilemun*, the Coyote in the Sky of the totally unrelated Chumash (Blackburn 1975).

Trickster is apparently an amorphous being, gradually assuming a more human form as the cycle progresses.

Mythic Coyote is known as “Imitator,” partly because of his desire to emulate others, partly because of his ability to assume various shapes; but even when he looks like a man he seldom if ever is completely anthropomorphic and his identity is betrayed by certain coyoteish characteristics (Laird 1976:197-198, 211).

Trickster has a very long detached penis which he carries in a box and sometimes projects for great distances. This penis at times appears as Trickster’s alter ego. It is shortened to normal length when gnawed by a chipmunk which Trickster is trying to extricate from a stump.

Mythic Coyote also has as his alter ego a detachable penis which gives him sound advice and is useful when he wishes to impersonate two persons at once. Coyote’s penis is shortened during his first attempts to cohabit with Louse, who has a *vagina dentata* (Laird 1976:251). He apparently has



or retains from the beginning a mysterious sky-penis, mentioned much later in the cycle, with which he rapes and kills his mother-in-law (Laird 1974:221).

Trickster shoots a stick at a waterfall and forces it to earth.

Mythic Coyote hooks the north wind down from the sky with his magic crook and causes it to blow across the surface of the earth (Laird 1976:205-206).

There are many other correspondences between Trickster and Mythic Coyote, as well as between Trickster (and Hare) and other Chemehuevi heroes or demigods (notably

Southern Fox, Cottontail Rabbit, and Cicada) but few so striking as to require special mention in this brief paper. Trickster, Hare, Mythic Coyote, and the others were instrumental in preparing the earth for mankind. Trickster and Hare gave useful gifts and slew monsters. Mythic Coyote set the pattern for man's work and general lifestyle, over-riding Wolf's intention that human beings should accomplish their purposes and propagate themselves by means of spiritual power. Cottontail Rabbit reduced the Sun's heat to make the earth habitable and made edible seeds, fresh water, and yucca dates readily

available to mankind. Southern Fox produced certain springs of water. Cicada slew a race of cannibalistic giants. None of the three last named heroes was ever reduced to the role of buffoon. Yet the Chemehuevis say, "We followed Coyote."

It is in the Hare Cycle, which Radin gives as a supplementary Trickster myth, that we find events and exploits readily identifiable in the saga of Mythic Coyote:

Hare's grandmother is Earth.

Mythic Coyote (in one version) is created by Ocean Woman, who made the earth from her own body³ and therefore may be regarded as equivalent to Earth Mother.

Hare establishes the menstrual cycle by throwing blood onto his grandmother's legs while both are engaged in dressing a wildcat which he has killed. He forbids her to eat meat and tells her to build her menstrual hut a long way from the house they share; but she deceives him by progressively lowering her voice as she calls back to him, and actually builds the hut close by. The explanation is given that Hare wanted his grandmother out of the house so that he could eat all the wildcat meat himself.

Coyote initiates the menstrual cycle by throwing blood with the tip of his knife onto the inner thighs of his daughter. He is engaged in butchering a mountain sheep lamb which his brother has killed. First he warns the little girl to sit farther off so that the blood will not spatter on her; then suddenly tells her to take hold of the carcass, tosses the blood onto her thighs, tells her she is menstruating, and that she cannot eat any of the lamb "because meat is bad for one who is menstruating." He then orders her to go gather wood for the ritual roasting of herself in the earth. She deceives him by hanging her backbasket on a stick and draping her rabbitskin blanket over it, so that she appears to Coyote to be standing in one place while actually she is traveling far to the north, never to return. Coyote justifies his actions to Wolf by saying it was just a way to

make the young girl go out to gather wood. His gluttony has been mentioned much earlier in the narrative, not in connection with this episode.⁴

Hare goes on a quest for his grandfather's scalp. He is carried across the ocean by a female beaver. Approaching a village, he encounters a man (the young chief) and queries him as to his habitual actions on nearing and entering the village. Hare then kills and skins him, puts on the skin and makes his way into the village, mimicking all the actions which have been described to him. He puts on the young chief's headdress (a human scalp—Hare's grandfather's) and escapes. After another perilous journey across the sea, he gives the scalp back to the old man. Restored to wholeness, the grandfather ascends to heaven with a noise like thunder.

After his brother, Wolf, has been killed and torn to shreds by the Bear People, Mythic Coyote goes on a quest for Wolf's scalp, which he must have in order to restore him to life. He travels a long way into enemy territory, leaving along his route many caches, each consisting of a bow and four arrows. Outside the Bear village, he encounters two old women gathering wood for the Scalp Dance. Disguising himself, he interrogates them as to their habitual actions. Then he kills them, skins them, inserts himself into one skin and his penis into the other, and successfully assumes this dual role. Late that night, still in the semblance of two old women, he dances vigorously. When the scalp is placed upon his head, he cries out in his own voice, clears the dance-circle in a great leap and becomes a single entity, running for his life. He is pursued by the Bears, stands and fights wherever he has a cache of weapons, and when these are all used up escapes his pursuers by various ruses, always with the help and advice of his penis. When his enemies finally turn back, they induce a tremendous blizzard which leaves the whole visible world covered with snow. Safely and comfortably ensconced in a cave, Coyote

passes through this ultimate ordeal. He places fragments of his brother's body, together with the scalp, under a large basket and lies down in the home cave to await results. Toward morning the reconstituted and revived Wolf departs for the sacred North, uttering long wolf-howls as he goes. Coyote follows a long way behind. In the course of this journey, Wolf leaves his perfect handprint on a rock, and seeing it, Coyote places his own paw-like print beside it (Laird 1976:207).

At the end of the Winnebago Trickster Cycle, Trickster leaves the imprint of his buttocks and testicles on a rock and then departs for heaven.

Commenting upon "The Winnebago Hare Cycle and its Cognates," Radin (1956:125) asks:

. . . Are we dealing here with the disintegration of [Trickster's] creative activities or with the merging of two entirely distinct figures, one a deity, the other a hero, represented as either human or animal? Has a hero here been elevated to the rank of a god or was Trickster originally a deity with two sides to his nature, one constructive, one destructive, one spiritual, the other material? Or, again, does Trickster antedate the divine, the animal and the human?

I am inclined to accept the suggestion that Trickster does indeed represent a primal, undifferentiated Being. The Chemehuevi deal with this problem of the dual nature of man, or of the differentiation of man from God, by formulating the Wolf-Coyote duad. Throughout Chemehuevi mythology the figure constantly recurs of two siblings of the same sex who are essentially one. Usually there is an elder brother or sister who has great wisdom and foresight, yet never exercises control over the foolish and impulsive younger sibling. It would almost seem that we have here the beginning of the doctrine of free will, of man freed from divine constraint and given the privilege of learning by bitter experience.

(Only in the case of the evil Yucca date-Worm-Girls, both of whom are wholly vicious, is the younger sister dominant [Laird 1976:187ff.].) Wolf always directs Coyote explicitly and wisely when he sends him on his various missions, and Coyote, true to his careless and disobedient nature, fails to follow directions. But we are told that Wolf knew from the beginning that his older/younger brother would be disobedient and that he foresaw the consequences of that disobedience: Wolf, then, in his immense dignity, embodies the divine qualities, including omniscience; Coyote embodies all the human faults and foibles along with some of the more desirable human qualities (notably a sense of humor) and is capable of feeling shame and remorse.

Mythic Coyote is the prototype of mortal man, although he is definitely a hero, one of the forerunners, performing feats impossible to humans. But in that dawn-time there was a spiritual hierarchy. Wolf ranks next to, or perhaps stands as, the masculine counterpart of Ocean Woman, with whom all things began. Mythic Coyote, chosen as exemplar by all mortals and in particular by the Chemehuevi, never even attains the status of true shamanhood, although always, particularly in old age when the time was past for acquiring spiritual power, deluding himself that he was on the threshold. Wolf stands as the shaman par excellence, excelled by none and equalled by few.

Poway, California

NOTES

1. This work includes the Winnebago Trickster cycle, pp. 3-53, and the Winnebago Hare cycle, pp. 63-91. Unless otherwise noted, all references to Trickster or Hare are contained in one or the other of these cycles.

2. *Sinawavi* and *sina'avi* in texts collected in 1919 and 1920, before I had learned to distinguish between Chemehuevi sibilants.

3. The creation of Mythic Coyote by Ocean

Woman (Laird 1976:151) has been mentioned by contemporary Chemehuevis and is also contained in a myth collected by Laird in 1919, now in the Anthropological Archives of the Smithsonian Institution.

Laird, unpublished manuscript, Harrington Collection, Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

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