

UC Merced

The Journal of California Anthropology

Title

The Androgynous Nature of Coyote

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/4wr3h206>

Journal

The Journal of California Anthropology, 5(1)

Author

Laird, Carobeth

Publication Date

1978-07-01

Peer reviewed

The Androgynous Nature of Coyote

CAROBETH LAIRD

MYTHIC Coyote was the begetter of mankind. He was also pattern-setter, possibly for human beings in general, but most assuredly for the Chemehuevi. Since Chemehuevi women as well as men say, “We followed Coyote,” we might expect to find among the myths some evidence of Coyote in a female role. In the first part of the tale called *Sinawavi Sihigawa’ipi*, Coyote Went to Get Basketry Material (literally, Coyote’s Going to Get Basket-Weaving Twigs) clearly depicts his androgynous nature.

Coyote was living with his elder brother [Wolf] at *Ku’uyiwavi*, Ku’u-Plain on Snow-Having.

“*Haik*^{ya}! My tail-*aik*^{ya}, what shall I do-*aik*^{ya}?” Coyote asked.

“What shall you do? Having gone to gather weaving-twigs, weave!”

“*Haik*^{ya}! All right-*aik*^{ya}! Then I will do that way-*aik*^{ya}! I will go gather weaving twigs-*aik*^{ya}!”

With this, Coyote went to gather twigs at a stand of the shrub called *sihivimpi*, which he had previously burned off.

“There are many weaving twigs here-*aik*^{ya},” Coyote said as he worked.

Even as he spoke, Coyote heard something.

“*Haik*^{ya}, I am becoming a shaman as I grow old-*aik*^{ya}!” he exclaimed. “Or what is it anyway-*aik*^{ya}? Or could it be these flies-*aik*^{ya}? First-off, I am going to kill them all at once-*aik*^{ya}!”

With this, Coyote stooped down and elevated his buttocks. The flies all entered his anus, whereupon he squeezed his anus tight shut. Standing up and listening, he heard:

Káasarúpik^{ya}ain^{ya}ni
‘The tip of my wing’

wooh wooh máik^{ya}ni^{ya}
‘says wooh wooh’
Káasarúpik^{ya}ain^{ya}ni
wooh wooh máik^{ya}ni^{ya}
táantívaitu^wanimi
‘towards the south we’
piivootikávoróg^wah
‘are going to eat *piivo*’o’
táantívaitu^wanimi
piivootikávoróg^wah
káasarúpik^{ya}ain^{ya}ni
wooh wooh máik^{ya}ni^{ya}
káasarúpik^{ya}ain^{ya}ni
wooh wooh máik^{ya}ni^{ya}

“*Haik*^{ya}! I shall own a real song-*aik*^{ya}!” With this, Coyote was going along singing the song and dancing.

Then the Chief of the Sandhill Cranes said, “Look at that Coyote! What is he doing dancing around under us?” He thought to himself, “Would that he would look up!”

Coyote looked up.

“*Haik*^{ya}, my nephews-*aik*^{ya},” he cried, “I am going to go with you-*aik*^{ya}!” So saying, Coyote was running along under the flock of Sandhill Cranes with his face turned upwards.

“That Coyote is doing badly running along under us,” said the Sandhill Crane Chief. “We will alight and give him feathers.”

Thereupon they all alit.

Then the Chief said, “We will give him some of our feathers.”

“All right,” they agreed.

Coyote caught up with them. “My nephews-*aik*^{ya}, I am going to go with you-*aik*^{ya}! I am going to eat *piivu*’u with you-*aik*^{ya}!”

Then the Sandhill Cranes gave him feathers,

while Coyote busily stuck them on himself. He was going around acting just like one of the flock.

The Chief spoke: "Coyote, you will begin to fly by flying down onto that knoll. Do not go past it. You will alight on it facing down-country, not turning around." Thus the Chief instructed him.

"All right-*aik*^{ya}, I'll do just that-*aik*^{ya}!"

With this, Coyote flew downstream. "I feel good all over-*aik*^{ya}!" he exclaimed. Being now a Sandhill Crane flying, he cried "'ooh 'ooh 'ooh 'ooh 'ooh 'ooh," [imitating the call of the Sandhill Cranes, a very long, very nasal vowel with a falling pitch.] Going along saying thus, Coyote flew right over the little knoll. From far below it, he returned and flew back to the knoll, alighting upon it facing upstream towards the Sandhill Cranes.

Then *Tsakooratog*^{wa}*intimi*, the Chief of the Sandhill Cranes, spoke again: "That Coyote did not do as he was told. We shall kill him."

The flock flew down to where Coyote sat and immediately, without pausing, they knocked him down with a rock and took back all their feathers. Having spread the spilled brains of the dead Coyote on a boulder, they flew on their way.

When they approached their destination, they alit. Then the Chief said, "Some of you go out scouting!" When the scouts returned, they reported, "There are many people!"

Then the Chief remembered Coyote. "Would that that one might arise!" he thought to himself.

The Sandhill Cranes charged on the band of people, killing many of them at once. Then they went on their way.

Meanwhile Coyote came to life. "*Haik*^{ya}, I overslept-*aik*^{ya}, I must have fallen asleep-*aik*^{ya}! . . . I felt good when I had feathers-*aik*^{ya}! . . . My nephews have left corn mush for me-*aik*^{ya}! Why, it tastes good-*aik*^{ya}!" As he was eating, Coyote exclaimed, "What is the matter with my head-*aik*^{ya}? It feels cool on top-*aik*^{ya}!" Coyote touched the crown of his head and exclaimed, "Why, it is my brains that I have eaten-*aik*^{ya}!"

Immediately Coyote said, "I am going to follow on my nephew's tracks-*aik*^{ya}!"

Kunugunugunugu-waik^{ya}!
Sigisigisigi-^{ya}aik^{ya}!"

[These two magic phrases were repeated constantly. This was Coyote's way of traveling very

rapidly. *Kunugunugunugu-waik*^{ya} took him one "Indian mile," from the crest of one ridge to the crest of the next; and if there was an intervening stream, *sigisigisigi-^{ya}aik*^{ya} took him over it.]

As Coyote was going along in this manner, he found a white stone (*tosatimpi*) and tossed it into the cavity where his brains had been, and it rattled about sounding

tosatimpikon'nokkon'nokkon'noko
tosatimpikon'nokkon'nokkon'noko

as he traveled.

Coyote arrived at the place where the Sandhill Cranes had attacked the people. He read their tracks. "Here I would have gone out scouting-*aik*^{ya} with the others-*aik*^{ya}. Here I would have made a charge with my nephews-*aik*^{ya}! I would have attacked with the rest-*aik*^{ya} if I had not fallen asleep-*aik*^{ya}!" At the place where they had fought, Coyote was looking around, he was inspecting all the dead bodies.

Then he found a woman, a pregnant woman. He pressed her with his feet and the infant came out.

"*Haik*^{ya}, my tail-*aik*^{ya}, what am I going to do with this one-*aik*^{ya}?" Thus said Coyote, consulting his own tail.

"You will shape mud into breasts for yourself. Having done so, you will make a roasting place and in it you will roast yourself. Then you will cause the child to suck. In this way you will raise it," said that tail of his.

"Yes-*aik*^{ya}, that is the way I shall do-*aik*^{ya}! I will roast myself-*aik*^{ya} after having made mud breasts-*aik*^{ya}, then I will cause the infant to suck-*aik*^{ya}!"

Having prepared a roasting pit and gathered wood, Coyote was roasting himself. Then in the morning, he bathed. This he did for four nights.

The baby kept growing.

"Now let me return to my house-*aik*^{ya}!" Coyote said.

Coyote set out on his return journey. As he went, he constantly sang a song for his infant:

Nivagantigangkúuyiwáaváh
'At Snow-Having's Ku'u-Valley'
kú'uminkárvátsi
'your father's brother stays'

This he sang continually.

The child kept on growing. It began to know

how to walk.

Then when Coyote was about to arrive, he asked his own tail, "*Haik*ʔa, my tail-*aik*ʔa, what shall I do with these, my breasts-*aik*ʔa?"

"Before going any further hide them here," his tail said. "Your daughter has now grown so that she will not suck anymore."

"All right-*aik*ʔa, that is what I will do-*aik*ʔa!" So saying, Coyote took off his breasts and hid them away. Then they resumed their journey. Coyote singing:

Nivagant̄igangkúuyiwáaváh
kú'umingkarivátsi

When he came close to the house, Coyote left the little girl hidden and went on alone.

He arrived at the house. Wolf said, "Why did you leave the little girl? Go fetch her! I want to see my brother's child."

"Yes-*aik*ʔa, that is what I did-*aik*ʔa, I came off and left her-*aik*ʔa! I came here first-*aik*ʔa, thinking to myself-*aik*ʔa, 'I wonder if he still lives there-*aik*ʔa?' Now I am going to fetch her-*aik*ʔa!"

Saying thus, Coyote went and brought his daughter to the house. Then they all went to bed.

When it got to be morning Wolf said, "I am going out to hunt big game. You two will stay home. You, Coyote, will cook for the little girl. There is much food here." So saying, Wolf went out to hunt big game. Then at evening he packed in a mountain sheep. Coyote, being a glutton, spent the whole night boiling meat. In the morning, Wolf went out again to hunt big game, Coyote staying home with his daughter. This they did every day. All the while the little girl was growing.

Then one morning Wolf killed a lamb close to the house. Having done so, he shouted "*Huu*" to Coyote.

"*Haik*ʔa! What happened to you that you are shouting *Huu*-*aik*ʔa?" Coyote asked as he went to Wolf.

"I called because I have killed a lamb, and I want you to pack it to the house and butcher it."

"All right-*aik*ʔa, I'll do that-*aik*ʔa!"

When Coyote got back to the house he said to the little girl, "I have packed in a lamb-*aik*ʔa which your uncle has killed-*aik*ʔa!" As he began to butcher the lamb, the little girl was sitting close by, admiring it.

"*Haik*ʔa, sit further off-*aik*ʔa!" Coyote told her, "This is bad-*aik*ʔa for a little girl to sit close to-*aik*ʔa! You will have lamb blood burst on you-*aik*ʔa! Sit a little further off-*aik*ʔa! You will have lamb blood burst on you-*aik*ʔa!"

The little girl continued to sit very close.

"Take hold of him-*aik*ʔa!" Coyote said.

The little girl grasped the lamb, and Coyote with the tip of his knife spattered blood onto her inner thighs. "There-*aik*ʔa! Blood has burst on you-*aik*ʔa! You would act that way-*aik*ʔa no matter what I said-*aik*ʔa! Now blood has burst on you-*aik*ʔa!"

"You threw it onto me yourself!" the little girl said.

"No-*aik*ʔa! Blood burst on you-*aik*ʔa! Without saying a single word-*aik*ʔa, go gather wood where-with to roast yourself-*aik*ʔa! Dry yucca stalks will do for wood-*aik*ʔa! There is plenty up there close by-*aik*ʔa which you will put into your pack basket-*aik*ʔa! Take with you your uncle's crook-*aik*ʔa! . . . You are not going to eat any of this-*aik*ʔa! It is bad-*aik*ʔa! One who is menstruating-*aik*ʔa does not eat meat-*aik*ʔa!"

Then the little girl got angry. Taking her packbasket and the *poro* (magic crook), also a rabbitskin blanket, she started off. When she reached the place where she had been told to gather wood, she hung up her packbasket, draped her rabbitskin blanket over it, and, taking the *poro*, departed towards the north.

Meanwhile Wolf, while going about hunting big game, saw all that Coyote had done. He saw his niece's departure, and marked how pitifully she was traveling. Wolf thought to himself, "Would that she might throw that *poro* over herself!" The little girl while going along threw the *poro* over her head. Then she turned and picked it up. She looked up and saw a boy standing facing her. He called her "Mother." The little girl stood jabbing the end of the crook into the ground. "My child," she said, "together we will go north." Then they went off together.

In the evening, Wolf returned to his house.

"*Haik*ʔa! When I sent the little girl to get wood-*aik*ʔa, she just stayed standing up there-*aik*ʔa in one place-*aik*ʔa! I am unable to call her back-*aik*ʔa," said Coyote. "Whatever happened that she is just standing there-*aik*ʔa in one place-*aik*ʔa?"

"That is not the little girl," Wolf said. "That is a stick with a basket hung upon it. Long ago the little girl departed, she is already far away." Then he chided Coyote: "Did I tell you to treat her in that way, to cause her to go away? When I ordered you to butcher the lamb, did I tell you to throw blood onto her?"

"Yes-*aik*^{ya}, that is what I did-*aik*^{ya}!" Coyote said. "I merely did it so that she would go get *aik*^{ya}!"

Then Coyote mourned for his daughter:

Kayuyayuyayuuu-waik^{ya}!

Kayuyayuyayuuu-waik^{ya}!

Kayuyayuyayuuu-waik^{ya}!

Kayuyayuyayuuu-waik^{ya}!

Thus ends the myth, or more accurately, the portion of a myth, which most clearly depicts Coyote in a partially female role. This is obvious from the very title usually given this tale, for everything pertaining to basketry is as definitely within the woman's sphere of activity as that which has to do with the hunting and preparation of big game is in the man's. The very setting of the opening episode indicates that someone will be required to do woman's work. Wolf and Coyote are living at Snow-Having, but not in the high cave which, according to the closing myth of the great Wolf and Coyote cycle, was their permanent home. They are living in a house (made, of course, of poles thatched with brush) in *Ku'uyiwavi*. *Yiwavi* may be translated as plain, valley, or, on occasion, meadow; *ku'u* is a species of grass bearing edible seed. At least, George Laird believed it to be a grass; he had never seen any, but stated that "in Coyote's time" it was plentiful in that locality. One listening to this myth would immediately understand that Wolf and Coyote were living temporarily in a plain or valley at the foot or on the slopes of Snow-Having for the purpose of laying in a supply of seed. They are a womanless household, therefore one of them must perform the task of seed-gathering, after weaving the necessary baskets. Naturally, this one will not be the majestic

Wolf. The task falls to Coyote, who at the beginning of the story is setting about it in a lackadaisical and desultory manner which leaves him wide open for distraction.

This distraction is provided by the passing overhead of the flight of Sandhill Cranes. Hearing their unfamiliar song, Coyote jumps to the conclusion that he is becoming a shaman in his old age. George Laird explained that the word used indicates that he was already old. Coyote was young when the world was young, when he pursued Louse to her island home and begat upon her the ancestors of the human race; he aged with the aging of the world. But true shamans invariably acquire their songs in their youth.

The Sandhill Cranes, as their song indicates, are on their way south to eat *piivo'o* (or *piivu'u*—this is one of the words in which *o* and *u* are interchangeable). It is a small, edible tuber, "about the size of a pea," and is to this day a favorite food of sandhill cranes. Coyote, once the Chief of the Sandhill Cranes has drawn his attention to their presence, is consumed by the desire to accompany them. His basketmaking and seed-gathering chores vanish from thought, and are mentioned no more throughout the myth. The Chief at first shows a willingness to adopt him into the flock, and all the Sandhill Cranes consent to give him feathers. But when Coyote by his disobedience proves his unworthiness, they at once kill him by knocking out his brains and take back their feathers.

There ensues the farcical episode of Coyote, brought to life by the will of the now distant Chief, mistaking his own brains for corn mush, kindly left for him by his "nephews," the Sandhill Cranes. I do not know whether or not the Chemehuevi, in aboriginal times, equated brains with intelligence; at any rate, Coyote's tossing a white stone into his cranium, where it rattles noisily as he travels, provides a nice touch. We must remember that "in the beginning" Coyote was demoted from his position as

elder brother "because he had no sense."

Though not a shaman, Coyote possesses his own magic. He is able to track the Sandhill Cranes who took their flight through trackless air, and, although now earthbound, to follow them with magical swiftness. Coming upon the site of their slaughter of the band of people, he imagines himself a warrior, taking part in the fight.

Finding the body of a pregnant woman, Coyote is diverted from his warlike fantasy. He delivers a living child by a very primitive form of midwifery, pressing her abdomen with his feet, beginning high up and working downwards to expel the contents.

Perhaps we should digress for a moment to consider the nature of these massacred people. All the characters of myth are referred to as "people," but eventually all important characters are spoken of by their animal names, which are, in effect, proper names and also indicate beings which at times at least are only partially human and which manifest certain characteristics of the mammal, bird, or insect whose name they bear. But these people, including the dead woman and the child which comes forth from her, are never referred to except as human. May we speculate that the progenitors of mankind, whom Coyote set free from the storage basket-egg sac-womb in which they were hatched when the world was young, have now multiplied on the earth, and that their descendants are precariously coexisting with the as yet undeparted animals-who-were-people? If so, this brings Mythic Coyote in direct contact with members of the human race and gives a peculiar significance to his dealings with the child that he proceeds to rear.

In order to nurse this child, Coyote now assumes in part a female form, moulding himself breasts out of mud and subjecting himself to the ritual roasting. But even when performing the functions of a nursing mother, Coyote does not consider himself a female. In the song which he constantly sang to the child,

evidently a growth-promoting song, he refers to Wolf as "your *father's* brother." From here on there is no indication that the child is not Coyote's actual offspring.

The elastic, dreamlike quality of mythic time is particularly evident in the ensuing portions of this narrative. Aside from the mention of the ritual number four in the statement that Coyote roasted himself for four nights, there is no mention of days, months, or years. The pursuit of the Sandhill Cranes and all connected episodes move very swiftly; yet on the return journey the child grows from infant to toddler and is spoken of as "a little girl," no longer requiring breast feeding nor designated by the sexless term applicable to a child in its first few years. Coyote's constant singing might have had the effect of inducing a magical rate of growth; but he excuses his failure to bring the child with him when he first presents himself to his brother by saying that he was uncertain whether or not Wolf still lived there, implying the passage of at least several months.

However, Wolf is still living in the house on the plain at the foot of Snow-Having, and continues to live there throughout the rest of the story. There is no mention in this myth of the home cave; neither is there any further mention of the seed-gathering project.

Coyote continues in an androgynous role. He stays home and cares for the little girl, and packs in the game—activities which would normally be carried out by a woman; and he butchers and cooks the meat, tasks not unbecoming to a hunter. Time continues its dreamlike, unmeasured passage, indicated by the statements: "This they did every day" and "All the while the little girl was growing."

Then comes the curious episode of the lamb's blood. Coyote uses forms of *paipitsak*^{qi-} (or *paipitsak*^{o-i-}), meaning "to have blood burst out upon (or spatter upon) one" in warning the little girl to sit further off from the lamb he is butchering. These words are never

applied to menstruation; but the listener understands clearly that in the myth they are "Coyote talk" with a double meaning—implying that if blood from the lamb spatters upon the little girl, she will have menstruation. Also it is understood that the child is not adolescent, not actually old enough to menstruate. The treacherous Coyote, when his warnings are not heeded, suddenly tells the little girl to take hold of the carcass—that is, to steady it for him. Then with the tip of his knife he throws blood upon her inner thighs. Immediately and gloatingly he insists that "blood has burst out upon" her. He tells her that she must "without saying anything" go gather wood for her ritual roasting, and that she will not be allowed to eat any of the lamb because "one who is menstruating"—and here he speaks plainly and uses the correct term, *naariitsi*—"does not eat meat." The child, hurt by such unjust treatment, protests that Coyote himself spattered the blood on her. But Coyote shouts her down, insists that she is menstruating And here arises the intriguing question: Does this myth obliquely imply that Coyote is responsible for the menstrual function?

The little girl sets out, taking with her as directed her packbasket, a rabbitskin blanket, and her uncle's *poro*.¹ But, as any deeply wronged child is apt to do, she runs away, leaving her packbasket and blanket hanging up to deceive Coyote.

Wolf, pictured as totally lacking in a sense of humor, has the human (or divine?) quality of compassion, which is absent in Coyote. He provides the lonely girl with a son—not an infant, requiring care which she would be unable to give, but a boy old enough to be of some service—and mother and son go on together. This episode ends with Coyote's noisy mourning for his lost daughter.

The Mythic Coyote of the Chemehuevi shares certain characteristics with the Coyote

depicted in Chumash mythology, but the differences are perhaps greater than the similarities. The Chemehuevi *Sinawavi*² is more like the Chumash *Šnilemun*, the Coyote of the Sky, in that he has a name that is unique and is the only one of its kind; he resembles more closely the Chumash Coyote (or Coyotes) of earth in that he shares the life-style of the other animals who were people. Also, the Chemehuevi Coyote and the Chumash Coyote share many traits of character—perhaps the main difference being that in Chemehuevi mythology Coyote is one, and even if he has sons they are not referred to as "little Coyotes." The Chumash Coyote also sometimes appears in female form: "Now Coyote can make himself look like a beautiful woman for a little while, but only for a little while, and then he changes back to being himself again."³ In my opinion, this is more illustrative of Coyote as the great Imitator than it is of true androgyny.

Poway, California

NOTES

1. Coyote apparently never achieved his great ambition to become a shaman, never "carried the *poro*." When he used a *poro* to hook the north wind down from the sky (see *The Chemehuevis*, p. 205-206), it must have been his brother's, for after Wolf's death Coyote rummaged through his possessions and appropriated forbidden objects.

2. More correctly, *Cinawavi*. In my early notes I did not distinguish the difference between *s* and *c*. For the sake of consistency, and because the majority of words were not reheard at a later date, I have retained *s* in all words contained in material collected while under the direction of J. P. Harrington.

3. See *December's Child, A Book of Chumash Oral Narratives*, edited with an analysis, by Thomas C. Blackburn (University of California Press). The direct quotation is from p. 173.

