

UC Merced

The Journal of California Anthropology

Title

Chemehuevi Myth as Social Commentary

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/65x2p0kt>

Journal

The Journal of California Anthropology, 4(2)

Author

Laird, Carobeth

Publication Date

1977-12-01

Peer reviewed

Chemehuevi Myth as Social Commentary

CAROBETH LAIRD

WE are told that in pre-contact times, when the stars in the heavens and the seasons on earth revolved changelessly and with no hint of coming destruction, the Chemehuevis sometimes held great gatherings. The knotted string was sent out, indicating the number of days that would elapse before the approaching festival; food was prepared in abundance; and the People came from near and far, to eat, to rejoice, to decide matters of consequence, and to hear the words of the High Chief. The lesser chiefs came with their families and spoke to each other in the language of chiefs, which was unintelligible to the common folk. And the great Chief himself, a man of such dignity that his words were generally conveyed through a spokesman, instructed the People in the way of life.

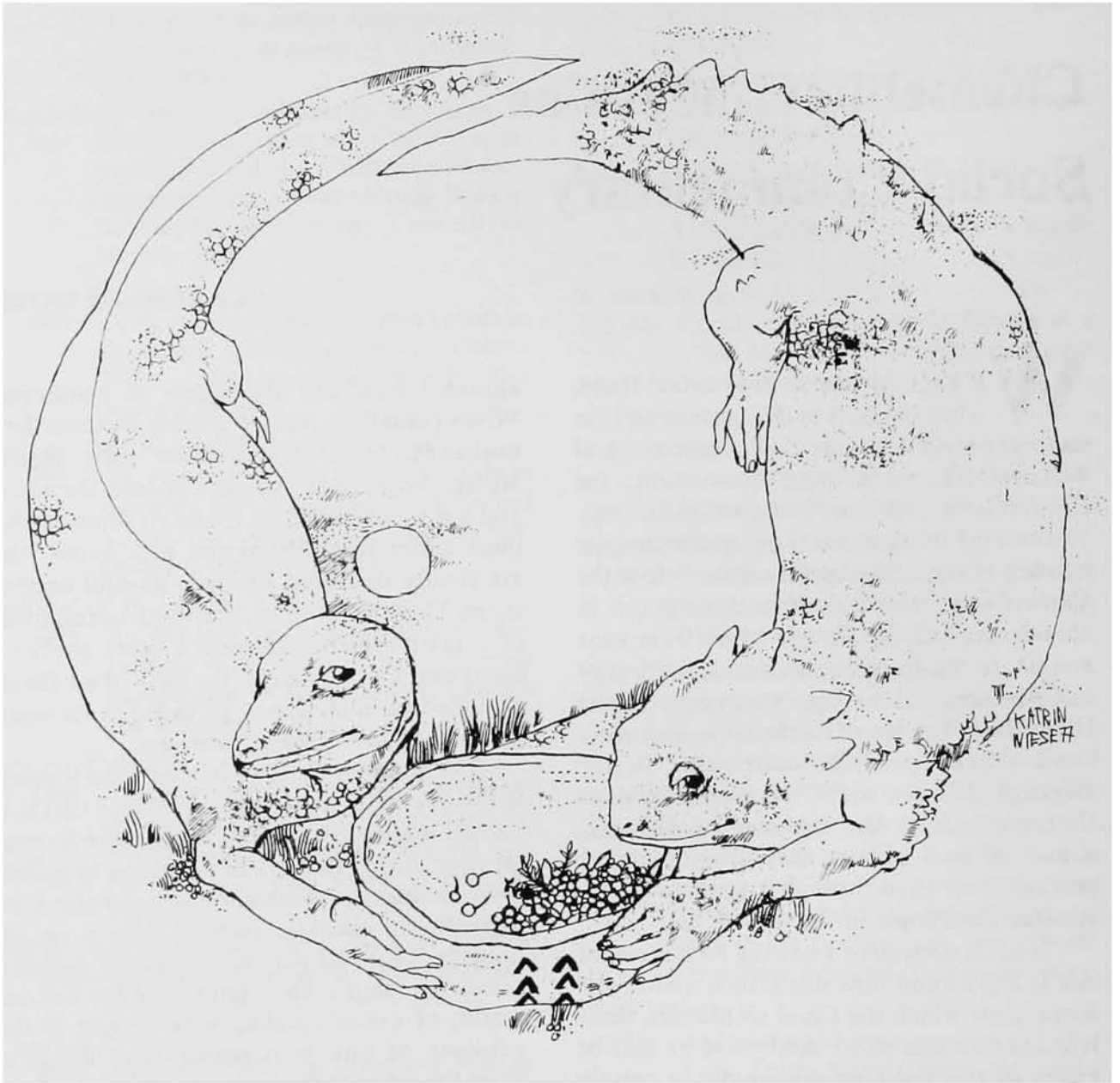
There is no way of knowing how much of this is legend and how much fact; and of the moral code which the Chief inculcated, there remains no single word. And yet there may be traces of this teaching discernible in certain fragments of the great mythic cycles which survive. These myths reach back to the youth of the world, to the beginnings of all things. Patterns set for human behavior by Mythic Coyote were often far from admirable, and of these we need say no more at present. Yet many tales had moral value, showing the dire results that followed impulsive and improper actions.

The most numerous of these moralistic

episodes inculcate the value of obedience. Wives (usually a pair of sisters) disobey their husbands, grandsons disobey their grandfather, the younger sibling disobeys the elder, and a son disregards his mother's warning. All these suffer retribution, and even those who are finally delivered undergo painful experiences. There is, however, one myth or fragment of a myth which inculcates a more sophisticated morality—namely, the duty of a tribe or extended familial group to care for its weak and presumably useless members.

The name of this tale is "Old Man Rooted to the Earth."¹ There can be no doubt that this and all other Chemehuevi myths were formulated by *homo ludens*. Expeditions to gather food, to hunt, to gamble, or to make war were marvelously exciting, imbued with a zestful urgency. One has the impression of unjaded senses rejoicing in the freshness of the natural world, of nerves tingling with delight in the presence of unknown powers and dangers. Even the primary mysteries of procreation and death seem to have been regarded as cosmic jokes.

The narrative begins: "People were camped seed-gathering." These prehuman "people" (animals who were people) seem to have been Lizard People, judging by the appellations of those who are mentioned by name. Winter and spring must have been spent at the seed-gathering site, for the story con-



tinues: "When it got to be summer, they said: 'That one, Young Chuckwalla,² will go to look at the squawberries.' " Young Chuckwalla must have been endowed with some outstanding power or notable ability, for he was set apart by a speech peculiarity. In commenting upon this myth George Laird said that "he had a different way of talking, and only one

girl in the group could understand him." Of the various people whom George Laird heard tell this story, only 'Iluh³ could imitate Young Chuckwalla's speech—no one else even attempted it. Therefore we do not know how Young Chuckwalla replied to this command; we are merely told that he went off toward the desert. It is a characteristic touch of Cheme-

huevi humor that a youth whose speech could not be generally understood was sent to bring back a report on a matter of importance. However, Young Chuckwalla proved equal to the task. Finding that the squawberries were indeed ripe, he crushed some between his palms and smeared them over the front of his body. (Hence the red bellies that male chuckwallas have at this present day.) Bearing this visible proof, the young man returned to camp.

Immediately the people were frantic to be off. Today if one friend remarks to another, "I noticed that the supermarket has fresh strawberries," the comment produces little reaction. But picture a small, isolated community which has been subsisting for months on a diminishing supply of seeds gathered the previous autumn, supplemented by a few small animals and grubs, a little jerky, and the occasional fresh meat that the (possibly unlucky) hunters have brought in. Imagine how the people's mouths would water at the prospect of fresh fruit! They might well be tempted to leave behind an old man so infirm and crippled (symbolically "rooted to the earth") that it would slow them down to attempt to take him along on the expedition, as well as a squalling, unwanted infant— orphaned, perhaps, or the child of an immature and careless mother. (In such cases it was customary for the child to be cared for by a grandmother; but in this instance there was apparently only a grandfather.)

The myth gives no explanation for the callous and cruel conduct which it describes. It merely states that the people caused an old man to lie down, drove spikes through his forehead, upper arms, and other parts of his body, placed an infant bound to its cradleboard upon his chest, and departed. In the accompanying commentary it is explained that the wooden stakes immediately put forth roots, so that the old man literally had roots in the ground. (Note that every myth was told in a more or less fixed form, often deliberately

leaving certain points obscure; but these matters were invariably clarified in the discussion which customarily followed.)

The old man lay moving his body from side to side as best he could in order to rock his crying grandson. And as he rocked, he sang:

How bad,
my grandson, my grandson!
How bad,
my grandson, my grandson!
My earth-roots
which will break off!
My earth-roots
which will break off!
How bad,
my grandson, my grandson!

Thus he sang continuously as he rocked the infant.

In myth, also indubitably in the daily life of the people whose world-view found expression in myth, song is equated with and reenforces action. The first and recurrent part of the old man's song is a lament and is sung in a sort of baby talk (*nara-* for *haga-* 'how'⁴). "How bad" means "how cruelly we have been treated" and expresses self-pity and pity for the abandoned infant. But the lament is interspersed with an affirmation: "My earth-roots/which will break off." The listener knows immediately that this earthbound old man is not powerless, that an element is entering into the tale which transcends the physical and will alter the whole situation.

While his earth-roots are still holding fast, the old man's rocking combines with the infant's feeble struggles and paroxysms of weeping to produce a gradual motion in the cradleboard. Slowly, slowly it moves from the old man's body to the ground. The baby continues to cry and to struggle and eventually looses himself from the cradle-lashings. He begins to creep about (already his magical growth is underway) and soon creeps out of sight.

Now the old man sings:

My earth-roots
which will break off, which will break off!
My earth-roots
which will break off, which will break off!
How bad,
my former grandson, my former grandson!
My earth-roots
which will break off, which will break off!

The word by which he designates his grandson (daughter's or niece's child) now bears the suffix which usually means "deceased" (see Laird 1976:69-70). If the boy were known to be dead, it would be impermissible for the grandfather to speak of him in this way, or to speak of him at all except by a circumlocution; but in commenting upon this usage George Laird explained that this is the correct way to mention a relative who has disappeared, whose whereabouts are unknown, and who may or may not be dead.

And now at last, yielding to the cumulative pressure of a song that by repetition becomes increasingly impregnated with power, the roots growing downward from the old man's feet begin to give way.

Here the narrative shifts to follow the progress of "that same one, the (preadolescent) boy," whose growth, like that of other mythic infants, is obviously not conformable to the limitations of non-mythic time. We are told that "the boy was growing as he went along." Apparently without any kind of sustenance, he passes through infancy, childhood, and adolescence while those who abandoned him are still feasting upon the newly ripened squawberries. The stages of his maturing and the route he follows are marked by the bodies of the animals he kills.⁵ First he makes a very small bow (and, needless to say, an arrow to match it in size) and kills a small kind of lizard.⁶ He flings the bow on the lizard's carcass and proceeds on his way. Next he makes a slightly larger bow and kills a mouse.⁷ Again he discards the bow (the arrow naturally

remaining in the dead animal), travels onward, makes a larger weapon and kills a cottontail rabbit.⁸ This procedure is repeated with a jackrabbit⁹ and a young mountain sheep.¹⁰ Then, "working largely," he makes a bow and arrow with which he kills a full-grown mountain sheep.¹¹

The grandson (no longer referred to as "the boy") thinks to himself, "This bow suffices for my purpose." (Literally he says, "This bow fits." "It fits" is the phrase used of the earth when Wolf and Coyote reported to Ocean Woman that she had stretched it to its proper size [Laird 1976:149].) He makes a quiver out of the hide of the mountain sheep and many arrows to fill it. Then he continues on his way towards the camp of his cruel relatives; and upon arriving, he begins to exchange shots with them.

The story now returns to the old man. His roots have all broken loose. It is possibly worth noting that the text does not state that "he broke them loose" but that "they all broke loose." The power summoned by the old man's song transcends the strength of the singer; but from this point on becomes more and more assimilated by him.

The grandfather, now armed with his own bow and quiverful of arrows, sets out to trace the route of his lost grandson. And as he goes, he sings:

How bad,
my former grandson, my former grandson!
Here he made an arrow and went on,
here he killed a lizard and went on,
his bow he discarded as he went!
How bad,
my former grandson, my former grandson!

As he sings of the signs of his grandson's progress, the animals that he kills and the bows that he discards, the syllables *-vininyi-* creep into the old man's song. This is a mark of shamanic power. (When, in the tale called "Coyote Got Duck for a Shaman," Coyote attempted to sing a song which Duck had given

him he could not repeat these magic syllables because he had never succeeded in becoming a shaman.¹²) Now hearing the song of the old man rooted to the earth, the eager listeners realize that a dramatic denouement is imminent.

The grandfather eventually comes upon his grandson, shooting arrows at his wicked relatives and being shot at in return. Now indeed it becomes obvious that the supposedly helpless old man is or has become a being of tremendous power. He fights as Wolf fought, stringing his bowstring with arrows from one end to the other and letting all fly at once (Laird 1976:199). Thus he mows down the enemy.

When all are dead, he and his grandson live on in that place.

At the end of the story we are told that the grandson was Gecko. The relatives' arrows glanced off his nose, making it slick; and that is the reason geckos today have slick noses.¹³ George Laird tended to believe that the old man was the sort of striped, long bodied lizard which has a large head like a bulldog's,¹⁴ but could not be absolutely positive. He could not give the English name of the species described.

"Old Man Rooted to the Earth" is a brief story but tremendously important in its implications. There is no substitute for myth, legend, and parable in the childhood of an individual as well as in the childhood of a race. They are the best means which man has yet devised to inculcate those moral values without which the social contract cannot function.

Poway, California

NOTES

1. Laird, unpublished manuscript, Harrington Collection, Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. All Chemehuevi myths referred to in this article were dictated by George Laird.

2. Wivosatsi; the adult chuckwalla is *tcagwara*. See Laird 1976:116.

3. 'Iluh was the man who was George Laird's principal instructor in Chemehuevi mythology. See Laird 1976:xxiii.

4. Compare songs sung by Young Cottontail Rabbit and Young Jackrabbit; in Laird (1976:152-153).

5. In another unpublished Chemehuevi myth the growth of a magical child, Pack Rat, is indicated by the increasing size of the animals which her brothers kill in order to make pack baskets out of their ribcages.

6. *Sigipitsi*.

7. *Pu'wintcatsi*.

8. *Tavutsi*.

9. *Kamî*.

10. *Mîntcatsi*.

11. *Naxa, naga-*.

12. Laird, unpublished manuscript.

13. *Mugwiya*. Spanish *guico*. See Laird 1976:166.

14. *Tompotsa*.

REFERENCE

- Laird, Carobeth
1976 The Chemehuevis. Banning: Malki
Museum Press.

