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Yaa'vya's Poro: The Singular Power Object of a Chemehuevi Shaman

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During the winter of 1980-81, the Sierra Caves Task Force of the National Speleological Society was studying cavern development in the vicinity of the Providence Mountains, San Bernardino County, California. On the second day of the expedition George Luteran, a member of the task force, left camp early in the morning to investigate some of the shelter caves in the immediate vicinity. While examining one of the shelters, Luteran noted a carved wooden stick hidden in the nest of a pack rat (*Neotoma lepida*). Having read Carobeth Laird's *The Chemehuevis* (1976), Luteran immediately recognized that the object resembled the ethnographer's description of a Chemehuevi shaman's poro. The Bureau of Land Management was contacted, and on January 14, 1981, the author visited the shelter with Luteran and others.

THE "PORO"

When we reached the shelter, it was noted that pack-rat midden, not human midden, filled the hollow. Approximately three cubic m. of sticks, branches, wood debris, and duff was piled against the back wall in a manner common to pack-rat nests. The shelter room was visually surveyed, and nothing of human origin was noted other than a "dot in cap" flanged and solder-seamed tin can (ca. 1900) which was on the floor. George Luteran pointed to a stick within the shelter that upon first glance appeared to be just another piece of the pack rat's nest. The stick was long, slender, and shaped from a desert willow (*Chilopsis linearis*) sapling to form what

looked much like the classic shepherd's crook.¹

Total length of the artifact on the outside edge is 159 cm. and 157 cm. on the inside edge. Its height is 131 cm. when it is stood on end with the long straight portion perpendicular to the floor. At the thickest part, the circumference of the stick is 7 cm. and at the tip 2.5 cm. When stood on end and measured from the tip of the curved end to a point on the straight edge parallel to the floor, the distance is 22.5 cm. (Fig. 1). The tip of the curved end of the stick is notched or whittled and two notches are also apparent from 14 to 18.5 cm. from the tip. Both of these notches are clean-cut and their superficial appearance would leave one to believe they were made with a sharp metal knife. The purpose of the notches is unknown; however, they may have



Fig. 1. The "poro," held by Michael K. Lerch, compared to piñon pine harvesting implements used by the Panamint (on display at the San Bernardino County Museum).

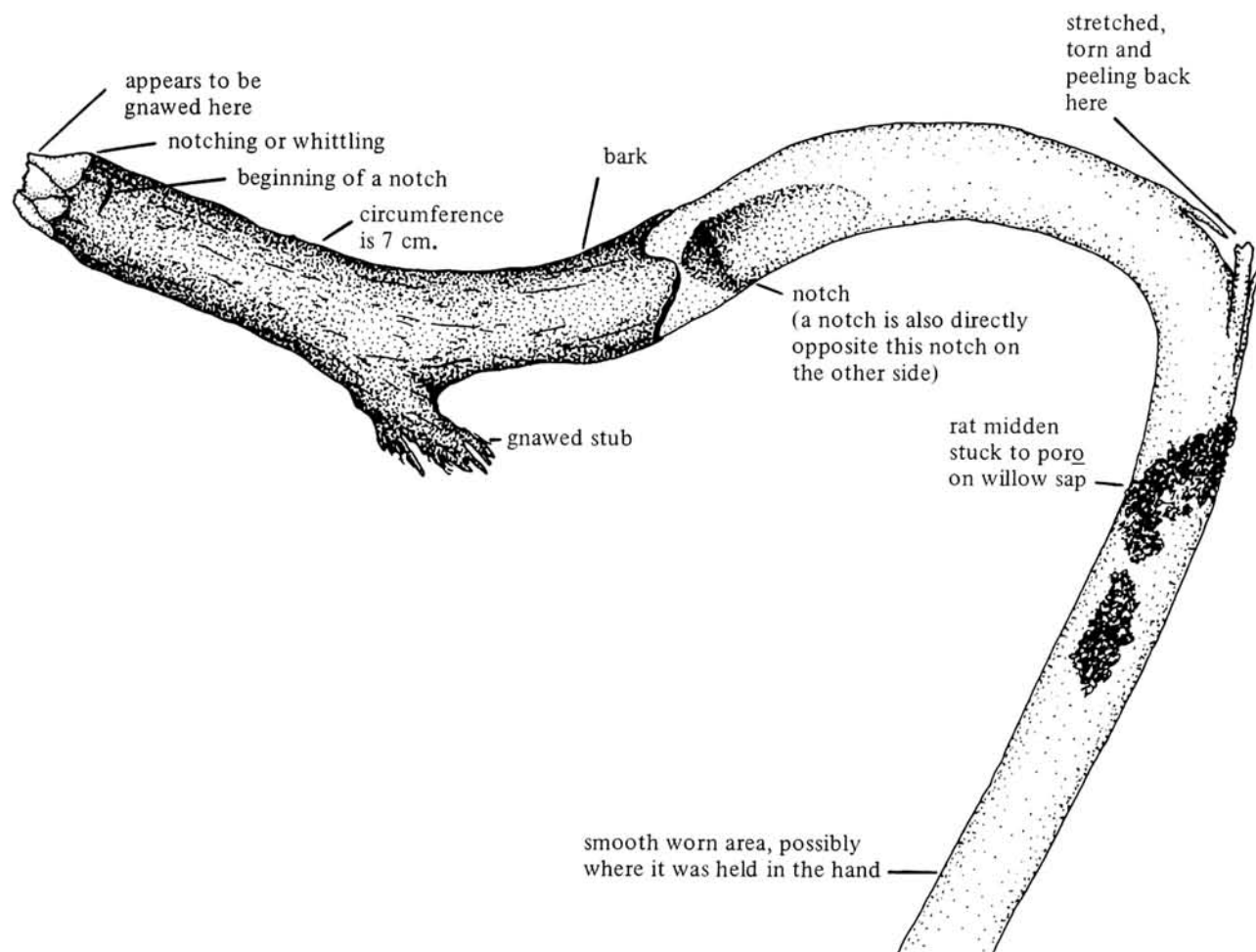


Fig. 2. Detail of the hooked end.

been made so that some type of cording could be tied around the object for support or suspension. The tip end of the stick also shows some signs of having been gnawed. The butt end of the stick is sharpened and smoothed; it appears to have been naturally and finely sanded, with no apparent gnawing. Most of the bark of the sapling is stripped from below the two notches down the straight portion of the staff to the butt. The stripped area is smooth and slick and appears to be worn and oily. This may be the result of human handling. The exact tensile strength of the object has not been measured but, judging from the thickness of the wood, the object was probably never meant to bear weight. Nor is the object the shape of a typical piñon pine

cone harvesting stick. "Harvesters" are comparable in size to this artifact and are sometimes stripped of bark, but lack the crooked end noted on this unusual piece (Fig. 2).

The description of the artifact found by Luteran should be compared with the description of a *poro* given by Laird (1976: 31). The *poro* was described to Laird by her Chemehuevi husband, George, as follows:

The Chemehuevi shaman required no feathered headdress, no regalia of any kind, no eagle feathers or down, no sacred bundle, no collection of healing herbs. His one indispensable piece of equipment was his *poro* (or *pooro*), a rod shaped like a shepherd's crook. This was an archetypal object of great power, known in many ages and to many

cultures. It was the rod of Aaron and of the Egyptian priests, the magic wand, the scepter of authority. . . . The poro was peculiarly the shaman's badge of office, it is not to be confused with piiri, a crooked stick upon which an old man might lean in his infirmity [Laird 1976: 31].

If Laird's description is correct, the object found in the shelter may be a Chemehuevi poro. In June of 1981, the author visited Mrs. Laird in Poway, California, where for the first time Laird saw what she believed to be a Chemehuevi poro. Her initial remark upon seeing the object was:

. . . It is precisely the way George described it . . . it has the distinguishing characteristic—the crook, shaped by heat. If this was, and I'm sure that this must be, the poro, this is absolutely the most sacred artifact of the mythic era and of the precontact or earlier Chemehuevis [Laird, personal communication 1981].

It is suggested that the artifact is more than just a variation on a component of a piñon harvesting assemblage, and the possibility that it is a poro is supported by Chemehuevi folklore and myth.

FOLKLORE AND MYTH

In 1976, Laird described the significance of the poro in the Chemehuevi myth "How Wolf and Coyote Went Away":

In the myth, 'How Wolf and Coyote Went Away,' it is said that with a single twist of his poro Wolf tunneled through a great mountain and that Coyote used his poro to hook the wind down from its high level so that it might sweep across the surface of the earth. In that ancient, storied time, when the animals were people, after all Wolf's or Coyote's warriors had been killed in battle, slaughtered by malevolent beings, or had died of thirst, they were revived by the touch of a poro in the hand of Wolf or of some other pre-human shaman [Laird 1976: 31, 196].

In elaborating to the author on the above quotation, Laird described the poro as being useful to the Chemehuevi shaman in a number of ways: (1) tunneling through mountains; (2) capturing the wind so that it might be used to travel more rapidly; and (3) reviving the dead or healing the sick. In regard to the first use, tunneling through mountains, it is interesting to note the surroundings in which the object was found. The mountain range is a limestone formation where dozens of solution caves and rockshelters have formed. The National Speleological Society alone has recorded at least 50 caves/shelters in the area. This list does not take into account the many "hollowed out" shelters which are found in the vicinity of "Poro Cave." As early as 1860, 1st Lt. M. T. Carr of the First U. S. Dragoons visited the area and reported:

. . . Just below the spring the Indians have cleared away the rocks and bushes and planted pumpkins and watermelons. The vines look very well and will produce good crops. The Indians have run small ditches around the garden, by means of which they can irrigate it thoroughly. They have also dug out large holes under the rocks, in which they live; in there we found an old olla, and several terrapin shells full of salt mixed with a yellowish kind of earth [Casebier 1972: 34].

This is the only known record reporting that the Chemehuevi Indians hollowed out shelter caves. In Chemehuevi mythology, as previously mentioned, Wolf uses a poro to carve tunnels through mountains. That the artifact was found in a shelter which appears to have been carved out under a limestone cap and that this shelter is located in an area where many similar type shelters are found provides an interesting parallel with Wolf's use of the poro in Chemehuevi mythology. Perhaps the story about Wolf was used as an explanation for the many caves in this mountain range.

During my visit with Mrs. Laird, she recounted several Chemehuevi stories that mentioned poros. Mrs. Laird was particularly interested in the fact that the artifact was found stuck in a rat's midden, recalling the myth of Woodrat and how he used a sharp stick to kill his game:

Now it was not uncommon for a dancer to be overcome in the ecstasy of the dance, then stiffen and fall down and stay in that condition until morning, when he could get up and walk off. But what Woodrat was doing was to position himself between two fat bucks, stab them with his sharp stick, and when they fell over dead suggest to the others by his song that in the darkness and mystery they had simply fallen over in a trance. And that is the way he got his game. That was Woodrat [Laird, personal communication 1981].

She continued with a fragment of a Chemehuevi story about "Yucca Old Man":

'Yucca Old Man,' who called the animals, summoned them, with the same call Woodrat used. 'Summit-Dwellers, Slope-Dwellers, Valley-Dweller,' he called to the mountain sheep and the deer, 'Come and dance the war dance with me.'

And then they had this fragment of a story about the old man who had a long poro with which he used to hit people. When Woodrat stabs people with the sharp end of a stick, he too may have used his poro—you see he was dancing with his poro.

You see the thing that I suggest . . . is that just possibly, you see, the Chemehuevi and the Native American thought, in general, makes connections that we wouldn't see. To them the world is more interconnected, more integrated [Laird, personal communication 1981].

What Laird was suggesting then was a relationship between poros and woodrats and the reason why a poro might be embedded in a woodrat midden.

Earlier, Laird described a shaman who lived in the Providence Mountains at a spring between the mountain range in which the artifact was found and the next range to the west. A possible candidate for this spring is the one closest to where the artifact was found. The shaman's name was ?Ilyaa/yi?ivYa or Yaarii?vYa (Laird 1976:11). He is said to have lived most of his life, much of the time without human companionship, beside a spring between the two ranges, where he irrigated a small field. He was a mountain sheep shaman and was said to be able, by shamanistic power, to protect "his" game (both mountain sheep and deer) from all would-be hunters.

The shaman reportedly occupied the area until 1925 (Laird 1976), about the same time that the lead dot can found in "Poro Cave" would have been dropped there. One may speculate that the "poro" may have belonged to whoever dropped the can there, much as Carobeth Laird did when she said:

What would have been more natural than for this man when he couldn't carry the poro himself and didn't want it passed on to unworthy hands or burnt with the rest of his possessions, to have entrusted it to a woodrat's nest? This seems to me an absolutely logical thing for a Chemehuevi to do. From an aboriginal point of view that would be a logical and almost inevitable thing—if he was in this cave and felt he was close to death, he could no longer 'carry the poro,' he would have thrust it there [Laird, personal communication 1981].

CONCLUSIONS

Based upon consultation with Laird, comparisons made of the object with the description of a poro, and the non-accidental, final disposition of the object in the pack rat's midden, it is suggested that the object is indeed a poro. Furthermore, folklore, myth, and historic documentation relating to the area in which the object was found seem to

reinforce an association between "Poro Cave" and a Chemehuevi shaman who may have purposively placed the object there.

We can only speculate what actually occurred at "Poro Cave" and why this unusual crooked stick was thrust into the pack rat's midden and subsequently abandoned. It is of interest to note, however, that five years after Laird published her monumental work, *The Chemehuevis*, in 1976, material evidence has been found which appears to substantiate her ethnographic documentation. Such material evidence suggests that her work is a dependable source of data, which includes information essential to an understanding of prehistoric Chemehuevi culture.

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NOTE

1. The "poro" is now located and on display at Mitchell Caverns State Park Museum in the Providence Mountains.

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