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# Myth as Ritual: Reflections from a Symbolic Analysis of Numic Origin Myths<sup>1</sup>

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*Among the Numic-speaking people of the Great Basin region, sacred stories or myths are told within a strict ritual setting. Within this myth-telling context, three ritual events (i.e., male puberty, female puberty, and the marriage ceremony) are examined through a symbolic analysis of 25 variants of two series of Numic origin myth. This allows for an interpretation of myth and ritual as cultural modes of symbolic expression that form levels of native realities. The various ritual processes encoded in the origin myths are identified and interpreted in an over-all context of myth as ritual.*

According to theoretical perspectives or scholarly purposes, ritual genres occur in a variety of forms and contexts (van Gennep 1960; Turner 1967, 1969, 1974; Rappaport 1971a, 1971b, 1979). Some, for instance, demand their expression be witnessed at the group or inter-group level in both the ethnologic (e.g., rituals of intensification, calendrical rites, etc.) and strict ethnographic context (e.g., rituals of affliction, initiation rites, etc.). "Contingent" or "life-crisis" rites (e.g., birth, puberty, marriage, death, etc.), on the other hand, occur at the level of the individual and have been grouped under a broad category of "rites of passage" after van Gennep's (1960) landmark study (Turner 1967:6-16). These "life-crisis" rituals are fundamental to all cultures and have been traditionally interpreted in terms of status, roles, and reciprocity.

Rituals operate at three distinct levels among the Numic-speakers of the North American Great Basin. Although some variance has been noted by anthropologists in the past, "individualistic" or "life-crisis" rites appear to be fundamental to all Numic groups. A second level involves group or inter-group rites or ceremonies, such as mourning ceremonies, dances, healing rites, etc. Although a number of anthropologists have questioned their authenticity and occurrence (Steward 1938, 1955, 1972; Thomas, Pendleton, and Cappannari 1986), they nonetheless exist (Hultkrantz 1986; Liljebblad 1986). The problem with rites of this sort is not their existence, but rather their place and role in Numic society. A third level posits ritual as an ethnographic or cultural category. As an oral narrative, myth has all the characteristics of ritual and should be considered ritual in and of itself.

Sacred myths, as opposed to "just so stories," legends, or historical tales, imply a ritual setting. Among the Numa they must be recited only at night during the winter (Cooke-Smith 1940:204; Franklin and Bunte 1990:33; Fowler and Fowler 1971:21, 69-76; Inter-Tribal Council of Nevada 1976:11; Laird 1984:30; Liljebblad 1986:650; Lowie 1909:232; 1924:311; Shimkin 1947:329; Steward 1933:323, 1936:357). The telling of "sacred" myths requires that they be told in their entirety (Shimkin 1947:329; Liljebblad 1986:650) and each tale has a stylized beginning and ending that

serves to separate them and their telling from the profane world of secular matters (Inter-Tribal Council of Nevada 1976:12; Laird 1984:28; Miller 1972:26; Shimkin 1947:330; Steward 1943:260).

Sacred myths embody, maintain, and perpetuate the cosmological concerns, world-view, and ethos of Numic culture. This idea contradicts past approaches in the anthropological literature that found ritual to be secondary or parenthetical for the Numa, and religious conceptions such as world-view to be non-existent. For instance, Steward (1938:45-46, 1940:490-493, 1955:113-114; Steward and Voegelin 1974:50-51), in an attempt to show the social fragmentation of the "cultural ecological equation," suggested that for the Numa "ritual was everywhere exceedingly limited and practically none was attached to economic activities." It appears that Steward had an "exceedingly limited" view of ritual and religious phenomena in general.<sup>2</sup>

More recently, Hultkrantz (1986:631), in categorizing Great Basin religion, claims that "there was no unitary religious system and no world view that provided a dogma of supernatural sanctions." Building on Steward and other Great Basin specialists adoption of a "cultural ecological" approach, Hultkrantz (1986:631) suggested that the Numic-speakers had no religious system or that it was so diffuse as to not "constitute a set of defined beliefs, values, and rites." Here again, the charge that Great Basin populations lack any religious system or world-view says more about a perspective antiquated by its own assumptions, methods, and theoretical orientation, than about the indigenous people of the Great Basin. In fact, it hints at the subtle racism or, more properly, an overt ethnocentric attitude that has characterized Great Basin anthropological interpretations of the past.

To rectify this situation and to illuminate the relationship and interconnectedness of myth and ritual, this paper will explore three major "rites of passage" (i.e., male puberty, female puberty, and marriage) through a symbolic analysis of 25 variants of two Numic

origin myth series entitled "Origin of People" and "The Creation of Indians." As contingent rites, these three major rites of passage are examined and discussed in the context of their mythic reality. The ethnographic data on the three 'life-crisis' rituals will be delineated and compared to their exegesis in the origin myths. Observations are restricted to three groups of Numic-speakers (i.e., Northern Paiute, Western Shoshone, and Southern Paiute).

## NUMIC RITUALS

In Numic culture, childbirth, menstruation, male and female puberty rites, death, dance, marriage ceremonies, communal rabbit and antelope hunts, the annual mourning ceremony, shamanistic practices, and even myth telling, all occur within a formal or informal ritually-defined context. Whether these are collective or "individualistic," the concepts and symbolic expression they share must be seen in light of ritual events and religious activities. The use of shared symbols within even the most "individualistic" ritual, proves that the ritual acts were practiced within the context of a shared worldview.

### Male Puberty Ritual:

For boys in Numic society there is an informal puberty ritual that consists of the killing of the first big game (i.e., mountain sheep, deer, or antelope) by the boy (Crum and Dayley 1997:19-20; Harris 1940:64-65; Kelly 1932:162; Steward 1933: 293:294; 1941:256; Stewart 1942:333; Whiting 1950:106). There is some variance to this puberty ritual, but on the whole, a general set of observances can be discerned.

For the Southern Numic, after killing a big game animal, the boy was confined and lectured to by his father. He was instructed in the "tribal legends" by his father, used a head-scratcher, was given a new name, and runs uphill and east at dawn. The father then washes the boy to end the rite (Stewart 1942:333).

Among the Central Numa, there are a few accounts of male puberty rites.

**Among the White Knife Shoshone:**

The young man was isolated for five days when his voice cracked and deepened, in much the same way as was his father at his birth. The same dietary and behavior tabus were observed, and for the same reasons. He had to keep a fire constantly burning in this "make-self-over-hut." Every morning before sunrise, he ran as fast and as far as he could for the load of firewood which was to last until the next morning. On the last of the five (or seven) days, the boy brought water from the creek, washed himself thoroughly, and donned new garments. The first deer he killed could not be eaten by himself or any of his immediate family, but was given to other kin in the camp group. This ensured luck in future hunting (Harris 1940:64-65).

In a recent account, when a pubescent boy's voice changed (at 12 or 13 years of age), his mother, maternal grandmother, or another relative would bathe him in cold water and pray for him. After that, he went with his father; that is, they went hunting, and he killed some game. When he carried home what he had killed, they would give it away. After it was given away, they would bathe the young man once more in cold water and pray for him (Crum and Dayley 1997:19-20).<sup>3</sup>

Among the Western Numic, specifically the Surprise Valley Northern Paiute, with a change of voice, the boy must abstain from eating game, run for five days, and must also stack sagebrush for five days (Kelly 1932:162). Another account states that the first big game the boy kills is taboo to him, and also that he must use a sinew-backed bow (Steward 1941:256, cf., Hopkin 1883). Both Kelly and Steward said that the male puberty rite was carried on for five days, afterwards the boy was able to smoke. Another account of the puberty ritual for the Owens Valley Northern Paiute suggests that when a boy reached his sixteenth or seventeenth year, his grandfather (not specified as to maternal or paternal) would cut flesh from inside the ribs of the first big game into a loop, and then lower this hoop over the boy without touching him. Steward (1933:294) adds that when the ritual was concluded, the boy took up residence in the sweat house with the other men.

**Female Puberty Ritual:**

The taboos, prohibitions, and ritual activities that mark a girl's entry into womanhood establish this as a highly formal and rigid period of time for Numic women. Menstruation and parturition involve a general set of observances to be ascribed to (see also Buckley and Gottlieb 1988; Knight 1991; Powers 1980, 1986). Among the Southern Numic (Shivwits and Moapa) there is no menstrual hut, but a girl upon first menses was not supposed to eat meat for a month, and later abstain from meat during the menstrual period (Lowie 1924a:272). Among the Kaibab Southern Paiute, a similar rendition of the female puberty rite is told. While there is no dancing or singing associated with the rite, there was a special hut (*Caskani*) built by the girl's mother, and for five days the girl would lie on a hot bed, drink warm water, and avoid animal food or eggs. The girl could not touch her face, eyes or hair. Her hair was tied behind her head and she must use a scratching stick. In addition, the girl remained alone for her first menses and had to prepare her own food. After five days, the mother pierced the girl ears, bathed her, and painted her face and the top of her head red. Subsequently, the girl's would retire to the menstrual hut with other females. Many of the same taboos remain for subsequent menses, but older women had the option of not using the headscratcher. Often several menstruating women shared the same hut (Kelly 1964:98).

**Among the White Knife Shoshoni:**

The first menses marked the puberty ceremony for the maiden. The familiar tabus were strictly observed. The girl was secluded from the men in the camp during this first period until five days after the appearance of the second menses. At each subsequent menstrual period she retired for five days, the flow usually being completed by that time. She wore only her oldest and dirtiest garments, and these were carefully put away until the next period of menstrual seclusion. Since none could eat the seeds or roots which a woman gathered during this time, a surplus was sometimes produced which was set aside



for the next period (Harris 1940:65).<sup>4</sup>

Among the Western Numic, at the first menses, a girl was secluded from the rest of the group in a hut of rye grass or sagebrush built north of the main camp or village. The term for this hut was the same as for the parturition hut (*Huni'\_no'bi*; *Huni* = menstrual blood) (Kelly 1932:162\_163). The girl had to stay there for one month, bathe every five days, use a headscratcher to rid herself of lice, and was forbidden to eat meat. The girl must avoid people, tie her hair with sagebrush, and wear a sagebrush belt. Sagebrush is also worn around the arms and legs. At the end of one month she exchanged or threw away her clothes.

In Steward's (1933:293) account of the female puberty rite, he recorded that the rite lasted for five days — two days being allowed after the theoretical three days of menstruation — and that after the first three days she would be bathed in cold water and then steamed in a pit by her parents. She would run to the west, and her grandmother would have her carry wood and water daily. For the Mono Lake, the girl had to run each morning and evening for about one mile. She avoided eating meats and salt, and was only able to eat pinenuts and acorns. A feast commenced on the last day (Steward 1933:293).

Another account states that a girl reaching her first menses would be secluded with two older friends and that she was under special guardianship of her grandmother. She had to stack wood for twenty-five days and at the end of each five day period she bathed. Meat was taboo for the twenty-five days; abstention from meat is the most persistent trait in the complex. During subsequent menses, the girl spent five days in seclusion using a headscratcher (Lowie 1924:274).

#### Marriage Ritual:

While there is some variation among groups, three basic marriage ceremonies were observed (Fowler and Fowler 1971:215). First, among all groups, a man, and often his friends, might steal a woman from her husband or family. In the second instance, a man fights the woman's husband or other suitor, and the victor claimed

possession of the woman. But neither had weapons and there was no 'intent to kill' (Steward 1941:252). A third type of marriage rite among the Western Numic (Northern Paiute) was a rigid but still informal ritual. For five nights, the male would come to the girl's tent or lodge. If the mother or grandmother grew dirt in his face or the woman cried and/or turned her face, the marriage ceremony was terminated and he would leave. If not, on each of the five nights he would move a little closer to the woman. Each day the man would arise before dawn and leave. On the fifth night, the man would spend the whole night laying next to the girl. The following morning (the sixth day), the man would go hunting. If unsuccessful, the ceremony would begin again. If successful, the man would bring the game back to camp and they were considered married (Fowler and Fowler 1971:215).

#### Rituals in Numic Myth

In restricting the following analysis to the 25 variants of the origin myth, a distinction must be made about the latent and manifest qualities of the "life-crisis" rites considered below. Except for the marriage ceremony, the rites displayed in the origin myth is latent in character and appear as individual elements.

Taking each of the two Series origin myths separately, the emphasis and themes expressed in the 25 variants are again divided. Series I origin myths have both the male and female puberty ritual in latent form, whereas Series II variants stress the female puberty ritual as latent and the marriage ceremony as manifest.

#### SERIES I

Series I myth (Origin of People) consists of 15 variants, 12 variants are complete (M1, 2, 4, 6, 7, 8, 9, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15).<sup>5</sup> When compared with them, M5 is aberrant, M10 is synoptic, and M3 relates only the initial episode.

To summarize this Series I myth:<sup>6</sup>

Coyote meets the first women, mother and daughter, who have *vagina dentata* or teeth in their vagina, while he is

hunting small game. They live on an island in the middle of a lake. Coyote kills 5 animals (2 mountain sheep, 2 bucks, and 1 antelope) in 3 days. After many failures in the 3 days, Coyote successfully breaks the *vagina dentata* with a vertebra from either a mountain sheep or deer and copulates with one or both women. They conceive and deposit many children in a basket or jug. Carrying the container on his back, Coyote sets out for home and involuntarily releases groups of people along the way. At home he is left with only the babies of the myth teller's group.

### Male Puberty Ritual

Several symbolic elements in the Series I myths articulate the male sexual maturation theme and, thus latently, the boy's puberty rite. Coyote is introduced as a rabbit hunter, a rabbit-skin blanket maker, or the daughter represents a rabbit by having a rabbit tail. In this last case, the daughter represents Coyote's quarry (M7, M9, M14, M15). Rabbits are the principle quarry of immature boys and women. The prepubescence of Coyote is expressed in other ways. A "white hair" on Coyote's tail tells him that he is "just like a little boy" (M9). Coyote is, thus, symbolically prepubescent.

Maturity is achieved as Coyote begins the sequence of killing five 'big game' animals in three days. He hunts mountain-sheep, deer (bucks), and antelope in their specific habitats. He kills two mountain-sheep, two bucks, and an antelope. This epitomizes his change in status, particularly since he kills five animals representing all three big game. For the Numic people, the killing of any one animal is considered sufficient to mark puberty. Other variants of the myth also express this change of status. In a number of versions, he kills deer (M2, 3, 9, 11) and/or mountain-sheep (M3, 7, 11). In the Central and Western Numic variants, Coyote hunts swans (M12, 13) or ducks (M14, 15), prior to the removal of the *vagina dentata*. In one, Coyote provides the women with a 'feast of ducks,' thereby demonstrating his change of

status to a good provider (M14).

Coyote is unaware of the *vagina dentata* and is told, discovers, or deduces the fact that the women possess 'teeth in their vaginas.' Other versions indicate the existence of previous men or suitors by the bows and arrows hanging on the walls of the women's house. Bows and arrows, in this case, are a metaphor for men. It is implied that the women have castrated and/or eaten their previous suitors (M6, 7, 12, 13). Lowie (1909) explicitly recognized the metaphorical value of native terminologies with respect to the identification of males.<sup>7</sup> Certain terms have a double meaning. The term *pakan* (-a") (Crapo 1976:106; cf. Miller 1972:166; Crum and Dayley 1993:277) means both arrow and penis in Central Numic dialects. In some versions, after Coyote has arrived at the island, he is presented with a feast of duck eggs. In certain of the dialects in Central and Southern Numic languages, the term *tawiih* (\_a") stands for both eggs and testicles (Crapo 1976:185; cf. Miller 1972:123; Crum and Dayley 1993:277). As part of the symbolic repertoire, these terms indicate the male reproductive element.

Coyote's actions to rid the women of their *vagina dentata* is evidence of his attempt to dominate the women. After several unsuccessful attempts to mate, Coyote employs a vertebra from his kill to remove the *vagina dentata* and successfully copulate with the girl and/or her mother. The women are cannibals and dominated the males and the land, prior to the extraction of the *vagina dentata*. They devour any men that come to the island. The women are over-consumptive and non-reproductive and are therefore obstacles to the origin and perpetuation of the Numa.

As soon as the *vagina dentata* are eliminated, the women conceive and reproduce at an enormous rate and consumption is normal. Parenthetically, no foodstuffs are mentioned after the breaking of the *dentata*. Coyote's copulation with the women strengthens his new role. Impregnation follows immediately and typifies Coyote's new-found adult status (M4, 6, 7, 9, 15).

The women tell Coyote to leave (M2, 4, 7, 8, 9, 11, 12) or remind him that "his brother, Wolf,

is lonesome for him" (M9). In most cases, the women give Coyote a jug or basket, which contains a multitude of children (M2, 4, 6, 7, 9, 10). Coyote departs the island carrying the container full of babies on his back. As he goes home, Coyote involuntarily releases the children from the container. When he arrives home, he is left with the last children (M12, 13, 14, 15). These are always identified as the ancestors of the myth-tellers' group.

### Female Puberty Ritual

Numic beliefs and behaviors associated with menstruation are also symbolically expressed in the Series I myth. Like menstruation, the hunting episode reveals its cyclic nature as Coyote kills mountain sheep, deer, or antelope. The hunt is completed on the fourth day with Coyote returning to the mountains. The specifics of the hunt (i.e., the killing of five animals in three days) correspond inversely to the Numic menstruation rite which lasts five days, "two days being allowed after the theoretical three days of menstruation" (Steward 1933:293). In other words, Coyote kills five animals in three days, one for each of the five ritual days during which women can not eat meat.

Kelly (1932:163) states that "...it (menstruation) comes from there (north)". Lowie (1909:214) states that the origin of menstruation and the origin of the menstrual hut were attributable to Coyote. It is logical to assume that Coyote, as originator, is perceived as coming from the north. For the Numic-speaking people, the terms for "north" and "south" are the same terms for "up" and "down" (Kelly 1964:134; Fowler and Fowler 1971:38; cf., Goss 1972:123). It can be suggested that in this sequence, Coyote's movement from the mountain (up) to the desert (down) and back to the mountain (up) is representative of the association of Coyote with north, as well as that of the cyclic nature of menstruation.

Coyote employs various implements to remove the women's vaginal teeth in his attempt to copulate with them. In some variants, he uses a mountain-sheep or deer

neck vertebra to rid the women of their vaginal teeth (M1, 2, 7, 11). During the rutting season, mountain-sheep and deer exhibit a swelling of the neck. The ramming exercise exhibited during this period is common to both species (Einarsen 1956:365; Smith 1954:57). To the Numic-speakers, the neck is perceived as strong and powerful (M8) and symbolic of a penis — it swells for ramming, which leads to copulate. Accordingly, the neck vertebra of either species are perfect tools for breaking the teeth and represent male sexual dominance. Western Numic variants mention "sticks" and "stones" as the implement to rid the women of the teeth in their vagina. The wood, in the form of a stick or twig, and the stone(s) (M12, 13, 15) are formal aspects of land, diametrically opposed to women and water, and are therefore appropriate male tools for conquering female domination.

The interactions of the women and of Coyote provide for the events leading up to the removal of the *dentata*. In the majority of the variants (M1, 6, 7, 8, 9, 11, 12, 13, 15), Coyote rids the mother as well as the daughter of her *vagina dentata*. And in some variants (M7, 8, 9, 11, 15), Coyote impregnates not only the girl, but her mother as well. This corresponds to the custom of one man marrying a woman and her mother (Laird 1984:16; Harris 1940:50; Whiting 1950:100). In some cases, Coyote goes to each of the women and removes the *vagina dentata*. In some versions, the daughter is the antagonist, while the mother aids Coyote or the opposite may occur, where the mother is hostile toward Coyote and the daughter is ambivalent or gives him a warning about their *vagina dentata*. Whatever the case may be, the variances of detail all point to the fact that for Coyote and the women, the rights and rules for marriage span the continuum from submissive to dominant. This continuum changes with the sex of the dominant characters. At the first, the earth is covered with water and the women who kill and eat the male suitors are in the dominant role. With Coyote's breaking of the *vagina dentata*, the role shifts and it is Coyote



and land that are dominant.

## SERIES II

Compared to the Series I myth, Series II is relatively unique in that it only occurs among the Western Numic or Northern Paiute people. Contrary to the Series I myth, which outlines both male and female puberty rites, Series II concerns itself with the female puberty ritual and the marriage rite, although both are inverted.

In the Series II myth:<sup>8</sup>

An unnamed woman has many adventures on her journey to a man who lives on the summit of the mountain. The woman, fleeing two cannibals, visits three animals (beaver, gopher, and rat), who are directly related to her. She proceeds to the summit, where she marries the man and they have four children. The children are divided up into two sibling groups of a brother and sister each, who quarrel and fight despite their father's warnings. After repeated but failed warnings, the father 'throws' the children in two directions separating them into two opposite-sex pairs. The father and mother die, and the two pairs are the ancestors of two tribes, one being the Numa.

### Female Puberty Ritual

Whereas the Series I myth is dichotomized by a simple distinction of men and women (male and female), the versions of the Series II myth exhibit a dichotomy of groups and individuals. Series II variants begin with an unnamed woman being alone and isolated. In the key variant (M16), an unnamed woman is off in her own camp. Other versions tell of a woman and baby sitting outside of a lodge (M18, 20) or outside of a lodge where men are gambling (M17). That the woman is isolated and detached from the group appears in almost every complete version of Series II. When she speaks, no one hears (M16, 17, 18, 20), metaphorically implying a non-existent state. This is symbolic of menstruating women, since unless ritually

cleansed, a menstruating woman was not allowed to interact in such secular activities as gambling, or in the healing rituals.

As in Series I variants, the numbers three and five have significance to Numic cosmogony. Homologous to the Series I myth, the woman's three visits and encounters with the two cannibals, represent the menstrual cycle in latent form. The woman encounters two cannibals and visits three kin related to her through matrilineal descent. In the key variant (M16), this is stated explicitly; Beaver, Gopher, and Rat are of the woman's first ascending collateral generation. Beaver and Gopher are females and Rat is male. Beaver, Gopher, and Rat and the two cannibals represent, metaphorically, the three days of menstruation and the five day ritual period.

In other versions (M17, 18, 19, 20), these confrontations and visits are recounted differently but the structure is similar. In one (M17), the woman encounters three cannibals before visiting Gopher and Rat. In another (M18), the woman confronts two cannibals and has three visitations with an old woman and two men; all of which are unnamed. In still another (M19), the woman has three separate encounters (i.e., cannibal, old woman, and Rat). In another version (M20), the woman has two encounters with a cannibal and visits Beaver, who has cannibals living with her.

### Marriage Ritual

The journey ends when the woman reaches the man's camp. The man and woman enter into an inverted marriage ceremony (see below). This inverted marriage ceremony has the same metaphoric importance as the breaking of the *vagina dentata* in Series I. As the turning point of the myths, male dominance prevails over the female elements of non-reproduction and over-consumption.

In all of the versions of Series II, the woman comes to the man instead of the man coming to the woman, as practiced in Numic reality. Various aspects of the Numic marriage ceremony are manifest in six out of the ten versions of this myth (M16, M17, M18, M19, M20, M24). The



woman sleeps a little closer to the man's bed each night; a reversal of the marriage ceremony. In the key variant, the narrator says explicitly that he doesn't know how many nights it was. Other versions (M18, 19, 20, 21, 24) either explicitly state or imply that it was five nights. In M19, the man resides in a menstrual hut (*Huni'no'bi*), a direct association with menstruation. In some variants (M16, 17, 19, 20, 24), the man provides the woman with food; venison (M17, 19, 20, 24) or mountain sheep meat (M16). She reciprocates by presenting food gathered on her journey (M16, 18, 19) or by preparing the meat from his hunt (M24). On the fifth day, one version (M24) states that the woman prepares (boiled) venison. Series II myth's inverted marriage ceremony is a transformation of the breaking of the *vagina dentata* in Series I.

## DISCUSSION

This analysis has centered upon the symbolic meaning of various elements in Numa origin myths in an attempt to show that the Numic-speaking groups have a logically-ordered, conceptually-based, and symbolically-expressed system of thought and knowledge. As mentioned earlier, two out of the three ritual events in the origin myths are latent (i.e., male and female puberty rite) and the other, the marriage ritual, is manifest, although inverted. To classify such rites as manifest or latent has some obvious implications, but in the context of myth, or an oral narrative has little specific value other than general information. The point is that whether they are latent or manifest, the two origin myth series relate, through concepts and symbolism, essentially the same message to the listening public. And while this content is often inverted, its meaning through many levels of context allows for the themes of male and female sexual maturation to be explained and reinforced.

In Numic culture and society, female puberty, menstruation, and parturition require that a set of general restrictions be observed. The ritualized seclusion, the name and placement of the hut, the use of the headscratcher, tabus on eating meat, salt, and grease, etc., are all near-

universal in form. The only aspect that shows variance is the specific time frame allowed for each of the three female rituals. For the girl's puberty ritual and for parturition, the specific duration of time are exaggerated and correspond to 25 or 30 days, a factor divisible by 5. Accordingly, the numbers, three and five, had a special significance for the Numa (Lowie 1923:154; Stewart 1942:332). Among all Numic groups, these numbers hold a special relationship to the male and female puberty rites, menstruation, parturition, and specifically the Western Numic marriage ceremony. Their expression is a fundamental fact of Numic life. Perhaps, this is why the exact duration of menses is specified in terms of days rather than the prescribed month usually considered for the first menstruation and for parturition.

As shown in other papers (Myers 1990a, 1990b, 1992, cf., 1987), Series I and II are transformations of each other differing in form or content, but exhibiting the same context. In this light, the involuntary release of the children by Coyote in Series I is comparable to the artificial separation of the two couples by the father, husband of the unnamed woman in Series II. Metaphorically, both Series show a theme of male and female sexual maturation through the male and female puberty rites. But rites are on the ground activities, whether "collective" or "individualistic," and have to be interpreted as such. In Numic mythology, such rites as male and female puberty, menstruation, and parturition are all classed as ritually "individualistic;" yet they assume a collective stance or public attention to the ritual act. Whether they are implicit in the public eye, or explicit, which is more likely, each of the above rites is known publicly and the message sent acts as confirmation of the set of beliefs, values, and ideals within a sacred setting. The fact that all people go through the same ritual act, observe similar taboos and prohibitions, and demonstrate for the group the proper or correct way of doing things, serve to reinforce the "sacredness" of the ritual act. A good example of this is the male puberty rite from the White Knife Shoshone, wherein the first deer killed could not be eaten

by the boy or any of his immediate family. It was given to other kin in the camp group. Therefore, to say that this rite is "individualistic" misses the point in assuming that this is a private matter.

### CONCLUSION

Each ritual act has as its primary role a public awareness that codifies and reinforces the basic concepts, assumptions, and assertions on which a given culture is based. The existence of the covert yet implicit male puberty ritual in the Origin myth proves the existence of shared Numic rituals which are based on a common world view.

From the above examples, it is clear that myth, as a set of beliefs in narrative form, and ritual, as on-the-ground activity, correspond in ways that are culturally logical. They can only be relevant to people who possess a common world view. Not only does myth validate and reinforce on-the-ground ritual, but it is in itself a ritual form. Told only under restrictions that serve to delineate sacred time, myth is ritual in narrative form. It is hoped that this analysis serves to contradict the erroneous assumption that the Numa are ritually impoverished.

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### NOTES

1. The present essay was abstracted from a paper presented at the Great Basin Anthropological Conference, Boise, Idaho, on October 8, 1992.
2. Two years before his death, Steward (1970) published, *The Foundation of Basin-Plateau Shoshonean Society*, confirming his basic orientation. By omission, he relegated religious phenomena or the components of

religion to a secondary status as a force in the integration of society.

3. Steward (1941:256) says that pubescence "brought only intensification of instruction, which had begun in childhood, concerning conduct and hunting."
4. Crum and Dayley (1997:17-18) give a additional account of this ritual.
5. See Footnote 3, Myers 1997.
6. See Footnote 2, Myers 1997.
7. See Footnote 4, Myers 1997.
8. see Footnote 5, Myers 1997.

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