UCLA
American Indian Culture and Research Journal

Title
Indien Personhood III: Water Burial

Permalink
https://escholarship.org/uc/item/72z9q907

Journal
American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 29(3)

ISSN
0161-6463

Author
Miller, Jay

Publication Date
2005-06-01

DOI
10.17953

Copyright Information
This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial License, availalbe at https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/

Peer reviewed

eScholarship.org Powered by the California Digital Library
University of California

AMERICAN INDIAN CULTURE AND RESEARCH JOURNAL 29:3 (2005) 121–124

COMMENTARY

Indien Personhood III: Water Burial

JAY MILLER

In previous commentaries I discussed the generalized concept of personhood across Native North America.[1] I included funeral rituals in that discussion because of the widespread belief among Native Americans that how a person comes apart can instruct us on how he or she first came together. Well-known methods for disposing of the deceased's physical remains include burial in earthen graves, exposure on scaffolds, and cremation, but burial in the fourth element, water, is virtually ignored. Suggestions that this type of burial was practiced, however, do exist. Tulsa's Gilcrease Museum holds a huge painting that shows bead-and-feather-dressed Natives in Woodland canoes on the verge of sinking a bundled body. Docents are carefully instructed, however, to explain to visitors that the entire scene is the artist's imagining.[2]

Yet the deliberate placement of human remains into water deserves careful consideration. Unfortunately, any review of the past literature usually begins and ends with reports that Alaska Natives unceremoniously threw their deceased slaves into the sea. For our own times the immediate image called to mind is the end result of a Mafia contract that has "Guido wearing cement shoes and sleeping with the fishes." Over and above all of these peculiarities, however, is the common knowledge that "water revives," although, as we will see, this is not always a good thing.

Water is both dangerous and powerful. Blessed as holy water it serves in many rituals and other acts of faith; raging as a tsunami, it destroys. Throughout the Americas, dangerous serpents live in water, perhaps most terrifyingly

Jay Miller, PhD, is the coordinator of American Indien Studies at The Ohio State University, where his research spans the breadth of the Americas and the enigma of earthen mounds. He has degrees from the Universities of New Mexico and New Jersey and has taught at colleges throughout the United States and western Canada to classes of all Native or mixed students.

embodied by mythic anacondas in the rivers of the Amazon Basin. Among the Tsimshian of the Northwest Coast, *spanaxnox*, the abodes of wondrous beings (*naxnox*) were (and are) avoided by all those lacking the spiritual strength to deal with them. Other water beings with great power include Tie Snakes of the Southeast, the serpentine Missouri River itself, the "drawer-unders" of the Delaware, and the Underwater Panther (*piasaw*) of the Midwest.[3]

Water also transforms, as shown by the amazing change of tadpoles into frogs. Folk beliefs go much beyond this, however, and report such wonders as barnacles becoming geese according to English and Scottish folklore. In the Americas, Pamunkey of Virginia said that frogs turned into birds (shy, webbed-footed sora rails [*Porzana carolina*] who add to the mystery because they migrate at night) after the frost and cold came. Northeastern tribes displaced to Ohio believed that geese changed into beavers to restock dams and that snakes became raccoons for the winter. Micmac of the Canadian Maritimes believed old moose stags went into the sea to change into whales to revitalize their lives.[4] Chitimacha (Shitimushaw) of Louisiana said hailstones provided the spit that turned into clams on tidal beaches.[5]

The most spectacular evidence for the importance of water burial is the archaeological site called Windover, on the central Florida coast.[6] Near the pad for the space launch is a small, dark pond filled with peat. Between 7400 and 8500 BP hundreds of bodies were anchored into this shallow muck, held in place by stakes and heavy branches. Half of the pond has been excavated, yielding up 168 burials, evenly divided between males and females and between children (including adolescents) and adults. Of particular note, only females were buried with hollow bone tubes, often decorated with engraved geometric designs. Among the ethnographic Southeast tribes such tubes were symbols of life. In many ways this site points the way to the later development of mounds. Staking the bodies into the peat quagmire, even if it was to keep them submerged during postburial bloating, calls attention to the unstable and unsure world. Grave goods were highly varied, with fabrics especially so. Four types of close twining, one of open twining, one of mat twining, and one of plaiting stand in sharp contrast to the few types of later centuries. Clearly, these Early Archaic peoples had an ideal combination of leisure and skill. Though the bodies were bundled in fabrics and some hides, and some of the stakes stood above the water as (decorated?) markers, these mounded images were not played out on the ground for another millennium or more. Instead, stakes and jellied ooze secured ancestors in this uncertain land, unseen but not forgotten.

The cultural import of water burial best appears in two episodes in mythology. The better-known instance is in the *Popul Vuh*, the sacred text of the Quiche Maya. During their conflict with the Lords of the Underworld (*Shibalba*), the hero twins are coerced to jump into a bonfire. Later their bones are ground up and cast into a river, where they revive and reappear with their "same old faces" five days later.[7]

Less well known is the life of Ya'ukwekam, who helped fashion the world of the Kootenay, a language isolate of the Plateau now living in Idaho, Montana, and Canada.[8] After Ya'ukwekam provided the world with necessities for creating bows and arrows (wood, feathers, flint, sinews, tools), the people

became angry and resentful of him. They killed Ya'ukwekam and threw him into the river, where the fish tried to eat him. When he kicked away the fish, they explained that they were restoring him to life. Then he went ashore and followed his murderers, who had quickly broken camp as soon as they killed him. After careful consideration, he took revenge only on the chief and those who abused his own family.

What is unusual in this story is that there is sufficient biography on Ya'ukwekam's life to explain why he revived. His mother was Young Doe, the granddaughter of Frog, who seems to be everyone's grandmother and is the steward of fresh water. Once, when Young Doe went to the river for a drink, a man named White Stone pulled her in and married her. Ya'ukwekam is their child, so he partakes of both land and water elements in his very being. Rejected and killed on land, his watery aspect saved him and, in fact, made him even more formidable because after he came back, people were "more afraid" of him. The irony in all this is that his name in Kootenay means "the one from down under," so his affinity with water would have been obvious to these Native speakers if not to those reading about him in translations.

Last, like the Mafia connection, there are indeed unsavory aspects of water, since the element that can revive can also drown. The best reference I know to such use in sorcery is buried in actual field notes, not in publications. In the early 1950s Skagit elder Charlie Anderson explained to graduate student Sally Snyder,[9] in more detail than seems prudent to repeat here, that a shaman could shoot a probe (*łya'tǝd*) into a victim by holding a thin pebble under water in his or her hand until it enlivened and, directed by the shaman's will, shot off and into the other's body. Depending on where it struck, that person became ill or even died outright. In one instance with actual names, the pebble transformed into a bug that did the nasty deed. It was also possible to use a human hair, which was soaked in water and then squeezed until it bled profusely to kill its owner.

Since it was/is quite usual for sorcery to involve human bones, corpse flesh, and so-called ghost powder from human remains in order to kill victims, the availability or even the possibility of waterlogged burials anchored in shallow ponds begins to boggle the imagination. Surely, the regular visitation and continued use of a place like Windover was also, to a degree, a security measure to protect the living of the community.

Because a body is itself almost all water, it is remarkable that the watery grave evoked for sailors and others at sea was not much more common, at least in remote areas where such burials would not pollute a water source. Moreover, a fetus develops in amniotic fluid within the womb, water sustains all life, and after death liquidity is a major feature of decomposition.

Water burial is a way to return a body to its key primal element. It revives and transforms both the soul and the person. Sometimes water burial leads to a new life floating in a womb. Sometimes it disperses to provide a moist and nutrient-rich medium for a vast variety of other lives, making a contribution to the much larger whole.

NOTES

1. See "Indien Personhood," *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* 24, no. 1 (2000): 121–41; "Indien Personhood II: Baby in the Oven Sparks Being in the World," *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* 24, no. 3 (2000): 155–60.

2. *The Water Burial*, by N. C. Wyeth (oil on canvas), Thomas Gilcrease Museum, Tulsa, OK. Thanks to Drs. Jason Jackson and Dan Swan for drawing my attention to this source.

3. See Robert Hall, *An Archaeology of the Soul: North American Indian Belief and Ritual* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997); Robert Hall, "Ghosts, Water Barriers, Corn, and Sacred Enclosures in the Eastern Woodlands," *American Antiquity* 41, no. 3 (1976): 359–64; Jay Miller, *Earthmaker: Tribal Stories from Native North America* (New York: Perigee Books, 1992); Jay Miller, *Tsimshian Culture: A Light through the Ages* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997).

4. Frank Speck and John Witthoft, "Some Notable Life-Histories in Zoological Folklore," *Journal of American Folklore* 60, no. 238 (1947): 345–49; Frank Speck, "Chapters on the Ethnology of the Powhatan Tribes of Virginia," *Indian Notes and Monographs* 1, no. 5 (1928): 221–455, 340.

5. John Swanton, *Indian Tribes of the Lower Mississippi Valley and Adjacent Coast of the Gulf of Mexico* (Washington, DC: GPO, 1911), 354.

6. Glen Doran, ed., *Windover: Multidisciplinary Investigations of an Early Archaic Florida Cemetery* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2002), 11, 12, 18, 106.

7. See Adrian Recinos, *Popul Vuh: The Sacred Book of the Ancient Quiche Maya* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1950), 155; Dennis Tedlock, *"Popul Vuh": The Mayan Book of the Dawn of Life* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1985), 149.

8. See Franz Boas, *Kutenai Tales* (Washington, DC: GPO, 1918), 89, 123.

9. Sally Snyder, Skagit River field notes [1952–54], University of Washington Allen Library, Archives Division, Oct. 21, 195?, 53.