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DIVINE CHILDREN

Carobeth Laird

The draft of this brief discussion of one aspect of Chemehuevi myth was recently discovered by Margaret Laird in some of her mother's papers. It covers some (though not all) of the same material discussed in Chapter 18 of Laird's Mirror and Pattern: George Laird's World of Chemehuevi Mythology (Malki Museum Press, 1984), but from a somewhat different perspective. We can only speculate as to why it was not included in the larger work. It has been lightly edited.

— Thomas Blackburn

In two of the three great myths which depict Wolf and Coyote as living together on Snow-Having, neither has a wife. In the first of these three myths (4-1) Coyote briefly takes to wife the woman named Body Louse, who is an aspect of Ocean Woman, first of the divine beings. The eggs which he brings back across the ocean hatch out into human beings. But the race of man is not spoken of as "Coyote's children." The Chemehuevi in particular (but by implication all mankind) are follower's of Coyote's example, but are never referred to as his children. In the second myth of this group, Coyote has a daughter and a grandson, both of whom are truly divine children, since neither comes into being in the ordinary manner.

When Coyote, pressing his feet upon the body of a pregnant woman slain by the Sand Hill Cranes, delivers a living child, forms himself breasts out of mud, subjects himself to ritual roasting and bathing, and thereby is enabled to nurse the infant, it immediately becomes his. After the child has passed into that stage of development where sex is linguistically distinguished, she is spoken of a "Coyote's daughter." Because she is his brother's daughter, Wolf, whose all-seeing eye has discerned the whole procedure, speaks of her as his niece. This child's magical growth is characteristic of children of the gods. In the brief time (or the

timeless period) which is taken up by Coyote's journey back to the valley on Snow-Having where his brother resides she becomes a toddler no longer requiring the breast, and in a matter of days (the swift, repetitious, symbolic days of myth) she has grown into a girl child of undefined age. Age in mythic or aboriginal times is never defined in terms of years. The narrative still speaks of her as "the little girl" and George commented that "of course" she was not old enough to menstruate. Her fascination with the lamb that Coyote brings in to butcher and her actions in general suggest a girl of nine or ten years old. When Coyote attempts to thrust her into a premature adolescence by spattering lamb's blood upon her inner thighs and then sending her out to gather wood for her ritual roasting, her action is typical of all children who believes themselves unjustly treated—she runs away. Then it is that the all-seeing Wolf takes pity on her and creates for her a son. This is the only child in Chemehuevi mythology born in the way that Wolf would have decreed for humans—which they would have followed if Coyote had not set them a different example. He is formed out of the divine compassion and brought into being by a single gesture which Wolf wills the girl to make—the backward-casting of his sacred crook. When she turns to pick it up, there stands "the boy," not an infant, a boy already big enough to accompany her northward and to hunt for her. Coyote's daughter also has attained some maturity; after standing silent for a while, poking at the earth with the poro, she acknowledges him as "my son." Thus is brought into being Coyote's grandson, whose subsequent history will be almost as miraculous as his creation—he is destined to fall under a spell that will transform him into a mountain sheep, at the moment of his death to regain briefly the form of "a person wearing moccasins," and (after Coyote has buried fragments of his body under a basket) to come to life as the horse, and then to "go away westward" (become extinct).

Another wonder-child who, like Coyote's daughter, comes into being by expulsion from the womb of her dead mother, is Kangaroo Rat. After Cicada and his brother discover their

mother in the process of being raped by the Snake, they kill them both, trample upon the belly of their mother to expel the already formed offspring, and (with only two exceptions) kill each one as it emerges in the form of a small animal. This is a necessary act, since if these creatures (lizard, mouse, etc.) had been permitted to live, all such animals would today be poisonous and constitute additional dangers to mankind. Only the snake, the first to come out, escaped them, and for that reason we have poisonous snakes. The last to be expelled is Kangaroo Rat, and her they determine to keep for their little sister. She too is a child who grows magically. After their act of matricide and the killing of the animals, the brothers set out to travel about, taking the infant sister with them. At birth she was theriomorphic, but from the instant of her adoption she has a human form. And again, like Coyote's daughter, she grows magically in the course of a journey. Her growth is measured by the size of the pack-baskets the brothers give her. These baskets are made out of the rib cages of animals. Each one the brothers kill is a little larger than the one before, until at last she carries a basket made out of the rib cage of a deer. The brothers also quickly reach maturity. As the story opens, they are children young enough to beg to be told a story and to squabble over possession of the handstone because they want to try their hands at the woman's work of grinding on the metate. By the time they reach Coyote's village, the trio consists of two young hunters and a nubile young woman, a young woman who has been sexually initiated at a very early age.

Cicada and his brother are memorialized in the title of their saga, "Struggle for the Handstone" (7-2), which might more properly be translated "Two Struggle for the Handstone," since it is a struggle which goes on forever in the sky where two small, dim stars of that name constantly fluctuate in brilliance. Unlike other myths, which may be "mentioned in several ways," this tale has one name only. After their arrival at Coyote's village, the younger brother (who is never named in the text of the myth or in the commentary upon it) drops out of sight,

while Cicada goes on to become a great civilizing hero. The motive for the brothers' killing of their mother might seem to be their indignation because she left the seed which she had been toss-roasting to burn while she went off to confront and ultimately to copulate with the serpent. On a deeper level it is made inevitable by the compulsion which governs all the acts of the gods—namely, to prepare earth for its future inheritors, the human race.

Two of the divine children described in these myths are brought up by their paternal grandmothers. George Laird thought that the story of Pivisatsi (5-1) might be incomplete since it makes no mention of the boy's parentage. Although this may be true, I tend to disagree. The myth as it stands has its own peculiar, dreamlike quality, which sets it apart from all the other Chemehuevi myths with which I am familiar. It is a sort of inversion of the account in Genesis of the naming of the animals, with the boy, Pivisatsi, in the role of Adam, bringing the animals for naming to his grandmother and Coyote (and equivalent to the Hebrew Yah-weh, divided into male and female aspects). When the boy is a mere infant, just able to creep about in the vicinity of his grandmother's sleeping place, he sits daily twisting Coyote's red milkweed fiber into string, making at first a tiny snare just big enough to catch a louse, yet all the while singing his song of power. Each day he sings, grows, makes a larger and larger cord, until at last, having a cord strong enough to snare a mountain sheep, he has one that will suffice for every purpose. Then, catching the monstrous bird Person-Carrier, he is carried away to an adventure that partakes of the nature of a shaman's initiatory ordeal. In other stories of such children, the protagonist knows instinctively how to make a bow and arrows; in this, he knows instinctively how to make the more primitive snare and is instructed by Coyote in the use of the bow and arrow. On the island to which Person-Carrier takes him, the boy (as he continues to be called) proves that the wives of that frightful being are unable to kill him, and then, as a test of his power, destroys Person-Carrier's power-spot, the stump

of a dead tree standing in the water, with a ball of earwax, and the next day kills the monster himself by snapping the same childish weapon at him, striking him over the heart. And still, at no period, does he construct a bow and arrows. In this present world Pivisatsi appears as a species of small brown bird (for which George knew no English or Spanish name).

The other boy brought up by a grandmother is a child of tragedy, his father having been killed in a battle with Gila Monster's company, his mother carried away captive, and he himself thrown away to die on the field of carnage. His wounded grandmother, recovering consciousness, finds the abandoned infant and brings him up "any way she can." This boy, untaught, makes himself a frail bow and arrow. When he has shot the leg off a certain small brown bird (yu'uravatsi), the bird speaks to him, addresses him as "my grandson," and demands that he make her a leg. The boy is amazed to find that he has two grandmothers (the relationship term she used is the same as that employed by the grandmother who raised him, indicating that she is the "other grandmother's" sister. The boy obliges by tying a twig on for a leg; then Yu'urvatsi tells him the whole sad story of how he came to be orphaned and instructs him how to make a hardwood knife with which the grandmother who has raised him (win'namakasaamaa'ipitsi is also the name of a bird) is to split him in two. After this has been accomplished, the boy becomes Dove Boys. This is the signal (apparently long-awaited) for the gathering of the war party which will, with the aid of the Dove Boys and their mother, "the captive woman," destroy Gila Monster, his "partner" (co-chief) Turtle, and all the members of their company. This division, which is in effect a duplication, results in a great accession of power, both to the one who has become two and to all those with whom he is associated.

The ordeal of the divided boy in no way resembles that of Pivisatsi, yet it also may be considered a type of initiation. It must be that both these accounts reflect the experiences of shamans in the aboriginal world, since the

Chemehuevi differed from many Native American peoples in that their pubescent youths apparently were not subjected to any ordeal equivalent to the "roasting" and abstention from certain foods, etc., which girls had to undergo at the first menstruation. The Chemehuevi boy became a man when he killed his first deer.¹

The twin sons of the Sun are miraculously conceived by a solitary woman when the rays of the Sun (his "whiskers") penetrate her vagina. There is nothing unusual about their growth except that, when they are infants, their father visits them and leaves gifts in the mother's absence—much to her bewilderment. When they reach the appropriate age, they express a desire for flutes. The mother gives careful directions as to how the single stalk of carrizo is to be cut, and of which ends their respective flutes are to be made—the elder's from the butt end and the younger's from the top. Then the boys exhibit the typical difference between paired siblings: the elder is the wiser and wishes to obey the mother, the younger is wilful and insists on going contrary to her instructions, and the elder eventually yields. However, the carrizo cannot be ob- [a portion of the text is missing].

The progress of Gecko from an infant strapped to a cradle board to young manhood, like that of Coyote's daughter and Cicada's little sister, takes place during the course of a journey. After an old man has been pegged down to the ground (14-1) and the helpless infant laid on top of him, they are abandoned by the callous band who are eager to be off to the spot where there are squawberries. In his song of power the old man speaks of the child as his grandson, but whether this is an actual or a courtesy relationship is not clear, since in the myths all old men are addressed as togoni, "my maternal grandfather," and all young men associated with them automatically become togotsi, "daughter's child." Here again time is telescoped. Even as the old man sings his lament, mingled with the affirmation that his "earth-roots will break off," the cradle board slips to the ground, the screaming infant wriggles loose from his lashings, is immediately able to creep, and does creep out of sight of the grandfather. Then he is

a toddler, a small boy making a tiny bow and arrow, killing a small lizard, flinging his bow on its body and making a slighter larger bow and arrow, and so on until he kills a lamb and next a full-grown mountain sheep. Then he is able to say "this suffices," and retaining the bow, he makes many arrows to go with it and, from the hide of the mountain sheep, a quiver to contain them. By this time all the old man's earth-roots have broken, and he too has armed himself and will eventually overtake the boy (Gecko) who by now is exchanging shots with the cruel relatives who have been feasting on squawberries. (It is only at the end of the tale that we learn the boy's identity; we are told that the reason the gecko has a "slick nose" is that the enemies' arrows glanced off it.)

This child, again like Coyote's daughter and the boys destined to become Dove Boys (but unlike Pivisatsi), has no song of his own to help him grow. Growth is promoted by the song of the grandparent. In this case the song does not stop when the boy becomes a toddler. The boy's entire progress from discarded infant to young warrior is accompanied by the song of one who, for most of the time, is not even sure of his continued existence. The growth of the child parallels the old man's access of power. All the actors in this drama are lizards of various species, which is remarkable in view of the fact that lizards (with the exception of Gila Monster, whom the Chemehuevi do not classify as a lizard) are usually presented at the very bottom of the mythic hierarchy.

Dove-Woman's son is stolen in infancy by Wind-Woman, also called Devil-Woman, the personification of lustful and enslaving female sexuality. By her constant sexual demands she so elongates and enlarges the captive child's penis that by the time he grows to young manhood it is a burden for him to carry and prevents his becoming a hunter of big game. As he wanders about one day he encounters four young women, his cousins, who tell him "she with whom you are staying is a devil." They reduce his penis to normal size by blowing upon it through a tube cut out from one of his carrizo arrow shafts. That night his demon-wife

grumbles because his penis is "not anywhere." The following day on the advice of his cousins and in the pride and vigor of his regained manhood, he kills a mountain sheep, ties it tightly in the top of a high tree, and sends Wind-Woman to pack it home. While she, "having become the wind," is blowing her hardest to bring it down, he escapes, and with the help of various men whom he meets, out-distances the swift (swiftly blowing) Wind-Woman, who is finally imprisoned in the earth, where she becomes Echo. Youth, held in thrall and devitalized by a demonic woman, has been set free and given manly vigor by the healing and enlightening power of the four cousins. All the terrible power of the wind has been neutralized by the breath of the young goddesses.

This myth presents the child as victim; but like the discarded infants previously discussed and Coyote's wronged daughter, he achieves a free and triumphant maturity.

Other children appearing in the myths are less remarkable, less tinged with magic. *S̄nt̄n̄yáh*, who consents to his mother's plan to kill the husband and father Great Horned Owl (7-1) is remarkable only in that he had a personal name separate from his animal identification—which, from the appellation Skunk gives his mother (Ground Owl's little mother), would seem to be Ground Owl. He accompanies his mother on her journey to marry Hawk, and her song as they endeavor to flee from danger is an encouragement to him and an exhortation to greater speed. He drops out of sight when they reach the end of their travels. In 7-1 the implication is that Coyote has many children (they, together with his wife, are spoken of as his "company"). In 12-1 both Chipmunk and Skunk have many children who behave in an ordinary manner. Flycatcher's infant (11-2) is mentioned briefly.

When Coyote's children are enumerated, there are always three daughters and a son. The son is only mentioned by his name, Rat-tail. The circumstances of their birth and growth are never described, but there is esoteric significance in their number: three daughters, reminiscent of the triple goddess, who by the

addition of a son make up the sacred number. Badger also, the great shaman whose curing process is described in 7-1, has three daughters. When he sees something heaped up (the dead bodies of *Sintiniyah* and his mother) in the midst of his adobe ground, he asks each of his daughters, beginning with the youngest, and finally his wife if she sees anything. (Here again we have three plus one in a magical or sacred context—something that is obscure to the present day student but which the Chemehuevi initiate would have found fraught with meaning.) When each in turn answers Badger affirmatively, he begins his song of power and sets out to restore life to the slain—traveling “under the earth” and enjoining the members of his family (who alone have the power to see him as he travels thus) to “follow him closely with their eyes.”

What do these children of the myths tell us about the aboriginal attitude towards children? There is a chilling implication that on occasion an unwanted infant might be “thrown away” or abandoned. It also appears that the tie between mother and child was apt to be closer and more enduring than that between father and child; and that perhaps the strongest bond of all was between grandmother and grandchild. Perhaps in the sacred narratives the relationship with the father’s mother is heavily stressed because in aboriginal times which they mirror men’s lives were hazardous and young women did not long remain widows. It would have been a very natural thing for a woman past the age of childbearing but still vigorous, a respected “old woman,” to undertake the upbringing of an orphaned or even a half-orphaned child, particularly if that child happened to be her son’s son. Since Coyote went to such pains to preserve the life of his “daughter,” and particularly since women were no less valuable and useful than men, we may assume that daughters also were usually well cared for by their mothers or grandmothers. The myths seem to indicate that large families were the exception.

Little boys when very young began to emulate the ways of hunters, making (or having

made for them) toy bows and arrows, lying in wait by watering places to ambush small birds. Little girls had small pack-baskets and learned their roles early by imitating female relatives (the little girl, Kangaroo Rat, brought up by two brothers without the assistance of a woman, was provided with a pack-basket suitable to her size and instinctively knew how to gather seeds). The little boy Coyote used as a spy (13-1) spun about in ordinary play, after the manner of children everywhere. Groups of children played games and took sides—but George was at pains to state that there was “no such game as throwing the fat” (12-1), it was merely invented by Skunk on the spur of the moment to confirm his suspicion that Chipmunk was keeping the best game for himself.

Both men and women rocked and sang (or hummed wordlessly) to their infants (as the Sun rocked his twin sons in their mother’s absence in 13-1).

Children were generally obedient, but even when disobedient were not harshly disciplined. (George told me long afterward that the Chemehuevi never whipped their children “because that might break their spirit.”)

NOTES

1. Compare Mircea Eliade’s (1970) statement: “There are no rites of passage from one age group to another in Siberia and Central Asia.” *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*. Bollingen Series LXXVI, Princeton University Press.



