

THE ORIGIN OF DEATH  
(COEUR D'ALÈNE)

Once a woman had twin children who fainted away. Possibly they only slept. Their mother left them in the morning; and when she returned in the evening, they were still lying there. She noticed their tracks around the house: therefore she thought they must come to life and play during her absence. One day she stole on them unseen and found them arguing with each other inside the lodge. One said, "It is much better to be dead." And the other said, "It is better to be alive." When they saw her, they stopped talking, and since then people die from time to time. There are always some being born and some dying at the same time, always some living ones and some dead ones. Had she remained hidden and allowed them to finish their argument, one would have prevailed over the other, and there would have been either no life or no death.

James Teit in Franz Boas, ed., *Folk-Tales of Salishan and Sahaptin Tribes*, p. 125.

## S M O H A L L A S P E A K S

(NEZ PERCE)

My young men shall never work. Men who work cannot dream, and wisdom comes in dreams.

You ask me to plow the ground. Shall I take a knife and tear my mother's breast? Then when I die she will not take me to her bosom to rest.

You ask me to dig for stone. Shall I dig under her skin for bones? Then when I die I cannot enter her body to be born again.

You ask me to cut grass and make hay and sell it. And be rich like white men. But how dare I cut off my mother's hair?

It is a bad law, and my people cannot obey it. I want my people to stay with me here. All the dead men will come to life again. We must wait here in the house of our fathers and be ready to meet them in the body of our mother.

See Herbert J. Spinden: *The Nez Perce Indians*, p. 261, and B. Alexander, *Mythology of North America*, p. 150. The Nez Perce Indians belong to the Sahaptin stock and culturally and geographically to the Great Basin area. Thus their culture was a composite of elements derived partly from the Plains, partly from the Pacific coast. Agriculture was absent before the coming of the white man. Various kinds of roots formed the staple of their diet. Their religious concepts were of marked simplicity. No cosmogonic myths; little ceremonialism. The dream was the chief means of communication with the spiritual world. It was perhaps due to the paucity of their religious traditions

MYTH OF CREATION  
(OSAGE)

Way beyond, a part of the Osage lived in the sky. They desired to know their origin, the source from which they came into existence. They went to the sun. He told them that they were his children. Then they wandered still farther and came to the moon. She (old them that she gave birth to them, and that the sun was their father. She told them that they must leave their present abode and go down to the earth and dwell there. They came to the earth, but found it covered with water. They could not return to the place they had left, so they wept, but no answer came to them from anywhere. They floated about in the air, seeking in every direction for help from some god; but they found none. The animals were with them, and of all these the elk was the finest and most stately, and inspired all the creatures with confidence; so they appealed to the elk for help. He dropped into the water and began to sink. Then he called to the winds, and the winds came from all quarters and blew until the waters went upward as in a mist.

At first rocks only were exposed, and the people traveled on the rocky places that produced no plants, and there was nothing to eat. Then the waters began to go down until the soft earth was exposed. When this happened, the elk in his joy rolled over and over on the soft earth, and all his loose hairs clung to the soil. The hairs grew, and from them sprang beans,

corns, potatoes, and wild turnips, and then  
grasses and trees.

From Alice Fletcher and Francis LaFlèche,  
*Tribe*, p. 63.

## SPIRIT LAND

*Told by Cheyenne-Chief*

(PAWNEE)

There was a village, and among the people was a man who had a beautiful wife. He thought much of her and spent his time in hunting game, so that they might have plenty to eat.

After a time they had a son, who grew up. When he was about twelve years old his mother died. Then the man took good care of the boy, for he was his only son. The boy became sick and died.

The man did not know what to do, whether to kill himself or to wander over the country. He decided to wander over the country. He mourned four days at the grave of his son; now he was to roam over the country. He went many days, and after a while he came to some timbered country. He went through it. He had his quiver filled with arrows and a bow. While in this timber he heard people talk in his language, and he stopped. . . . One came to him and said: "What a wonderful tree! All of you come! I have found a wonderful tree. It looks like a man." The man stood still, and the others came and said: "Truly this is a wonderful tree. Look, it has eyes, nose, and hair! Look, here is a quiver and bow." At this saying the man shrieked, and said: "I thought you were all dead! Here you are wandering over the country." As soon as he spoke they ran away. He could hear some of them say, "He has caught me!" Another would say, "He has caught my foot," when the creature was caught by

briers and grapevines. They ran a long way, then they **stopped**; and they began to tell how narrowly they had escaped from the man.

While they were talking, the man came upon them again, and away they went. The man followed them up. This time they disappeared on the side of a hill, and, as it was now late in the day, the man made up his mind to follow and to try and stand with them. He thought, as he was wandering, "Why not remain with these people?" He got to the place where they had disappeared, and under a thick grapevine found an entrance large enough for a man to crawl in; there, far within, was a cave. He knew the leader. He had carried the sacred bundle and had led the war party; but he now saw them and knew they were lost; that they had been attacked by the enemy, and that they had been scalped. He sat there looking at them. They were talking about him. The man did not go entirely inside, for he himself was afraid. While they were talking, someone shrieked, "There he **is!**" and they would pile themselves one on top of another. . . .

The leader, who was sitting under the bundle, **said:** "Boys, keep quiet! This man is of our people. Get up and make a fire, and we will hear what he has to say." Fire was made, and each took his place where he **be-**longed in the circle. And then the leader asked him what brought him there.

"Nava," said the man, "I lost my wife. We had a son and he **died**, too. I was left all alone. I have mourned for him a long time, longing for death, so **that I** might join my wife and son. I wandered from **home** until **I** came here. **I** am here, and **I** am glad **I**

can now make my home with you, my brothers; for I do not care to be with my people any more."

The leader spoke and said: "It is good, but we can not let you live with us. We are dead. What you see are spirits. We should have gone to the Spirit Land but for this bundle which you see. It belongs to our people, and Tīrawa released our spirits, so that we could wander back and return the bundle. Brother, I am glad you came to us. We will teach you the ceremony of this bundle; then take it home, and let our people know that the bundle is again found."

The man sat a long time, for he knew that to accept what this man said was to become a power among his people and be a leader. But at last he spoke and said: "My people, I am poor in heart. I cannot accept what my brother has offered, for I am never to return to my people. If I cannot see my son I am ready to die." Here he stood up and continued: "My brothers, take pity on me; take me with you to Spirit Land that I can see my boy. I cannot take the bundle to my people, for I am not happy." He passed his hands over the leader's head and on down the arms. "Take pity on me," he said once more.

The leader sat with downcast head. Then he stood up, took down the bundle, took out sweet grass and put it in the fire, then opened the bundle. He looked at all the things in the bundle; he took them outside, so that the gods who gave them might look at them. Then he said: "My brothers, I must help this man to remain here. I will go to the gods in the west, who will receive this man's words. I pity him. I think the gods will pity him. I go."

He disappeared. The others watched and watched.

At last they heard the wind descend. The leader had come back. He went to the bundle, took out native tobacco and burnt it, offering it to the gods. Then he spoke: "My son, the gods in the west have received your words. All the gods sent their words to Tirawa, and Tirawa has given his consent for the people in Spirit Land to come and see the living. They are to camp with them four days and four nights, without speaking one to another. You are to be allowed to be near your son and to speak with him, but not to touch him. . . . Those who wish to remain with their relatives as well as those who wish to go to Spirit Land will be permitted to do so. Now, my son, go. Get your people. Let them come and make their camp in the neighborhood."

So the man left that same night. He noticed that he was very swift. Why, he could not understand. Finally he reached the village. A crier was called and told to go through the camp and let the people know that they were wanted at a certain place; that they were to meet their dead friends.

The next day they broke camp and went south. For a long time they traveled, until finally they came to a wooded country. Here they pitched their camp. The man went to the camp of the spirits. He was told that the dead people were also on the way, and that the next morning they would arrive. The man went to the camp, and notified the crier to go quietly and tell the people to be ready to see their friends. Some mocked and others believed. . . .

The next day people began to make preparations to meet their dead friends. Medicine ointment was put upon their heads, faces, and hands. Some time in the



afternoon they saw a great dust which reached the heavens. People began to get frightened; others rejoiced, for they were again to see their dead friends. People rejoiced with song. Then the spirits began to pass through. As they passed, the people saw their dead friends, but they did not dare to touch or speak to them. As they kept up the marching, the man's son came. He caught his son. Now he was told . . . not to speak [touch?] to him. . . .He did not do this, for as soon as he caught his son he spoke to him and hugged him, and in his heart he said: "I will not let you go!"

As soon as this was done the spirits went off. The other spirits also disappeared. The man went away broken-hearted. The people returned home, and the man never came back. The people said: "He is with the scalped men." But afterwards he was seen, and had over him a horse robe. He was wild, did not seem to care to be with his people. So he was forgotten; for had he not caught his son, then the spirits and the people were to have lived once more together, and death was to have been unknown.

From George A. Dorsey, *Traditions of the Skidi Pawnee*, pp. 74-8. A few lines have been omitted.

## COYOTE AND THE ORIGIN OF DEATH

(CADDO)

In the beginning of this world there was no such thing as death. Everyone continued to live until there were so many people that there was no room for any more on the earth. The chiefs held a council to determine what to do. One man arose and said that he thought it would be a good plan to have the people die and be gone for a little while, and then to return. As soon as he sat down Coyote jumped up and said that he thought that people ought to die forever, for this little world was not large enough to hold all of the people, and if the people who died came back to life, there would not be food enough for all. All of the other men objected, saying that they did not want their friends and relatives to die and be gone forever, for then people would grieve and worry and there would not be any happiness in the world. All except Coyote decided to have the people die and be gone for a little while, and then to come back to life again.

The medicine men built a large grass house facing the east, and when they had completed it they called the men of the tribe together and told them that they had decided to have the people who died come to the medicine house and there be restored to life. The chief medicine man said they would sing a song that would call the spirit of the dead to the grass house, and when the spirit came they would . . . restore it to life again. All of the people were glad, for they were anxious for

## CREATION MYTH

(Zuñi)

Before the beginning of the new-making, Awonawilona solely had being. There was nothing else whatsoever throughout the great spaces of the ages save everywhere black darkness in it, and everywhere void desolation.

In the beginning of the new-made, Awonawilona conceived within himself and thought outward in space, whereby mists of increase, steams potent of growth, were evolved and uplifted. Thus, by means of his innate knowledge, the All-Container made himself in person and form of the Sun, whom we hold to be our father and who thus came to exist and appear. With his appearance came the brightening of the spaces with light, and with the brightening of the spaces the great mist-clouds were thickened and fell, whereby evolved water in water; yea, and the world-holding sea. With his substance of flesh outdrawn from the surface of his person, the Sun Father formed the seed-stuff of twin-worlds impregnating therewith the great waters, and lo! in the heat of his light these waters of the sea grew green and scums grew upon them waxing wide and weighty until, behold! they became Awitelin Ts'ta, the "Fourfold-Containing Mother Earth," and Apoyan Tachu, the "All-Covering Father Sky." From the lying together of these twain upon the great world-waters, so vitalizing, terrestrial life was conceived; whence began all beings of earth, men and the creatures, in the Fourfold Womb of the Earth. Thereupon the Earth Mother repulsed the Sky Father,

growing big and sinking deep into the embrace of the waters below, thus separating from the Sky Father in the embrace of the waters above. . . .

Now, like all the surpassing beings, the Earth Mother and the Sky Father were changeable, even as smoke in the wind; transmutable at thought, manifesting themselves in any form at will, like as dancers may by mask making . . . Thus as a man and a woman spake they, one to another:

"Behold," said the Earth Mother, as a great terraced bowl appeared at her hand and within it water, "this is as upon me the homes of my tiny children shall be. On the rim of each world country they wander in, terraced mountains shall stand, . . . whereby country shall be known from country, and within each, place from place. Behold again!" said she as she spat on the water, and rapidly smote and stirred it with her fingers. Foam formed, gathering about the terraced rim, mounting higher and higher. "Yea," she said, "and from my bosom they shall draw nourishment, for in such as this shall they find the substance of life whence we were ourselves sustained. For see!"

Then with her warm breath she blew across the terraces; white flecks of the foam broke away, and floating over above the water, were shattered by the cold breath of the Sky Father attending, and forthwith shed downward abundantly fine mist and spray! "Even so shall white clouds float up from the great waters at the borders of the world, and clustering about the mountain terraces of the horizons be borne aloft and abroad by the breaths of the surpassing soul beings, and of the children, and shall be hardened and broken by the cold, shedding downward, in rain spray,

the water of life, even in the hollow places of my lap. For therein shall chiefly nestle our children, mankind and creature-kind, for warmth in thy coldness! Even the trees on high mountains near the clouds . . . crouch low toward Mother Earth for warmth and protection.

"Even so!" said the Sky Father. "Yet not alone shalt thou be helpful unto our children, for behold!" and he spread his hand abroad with the palm downward and into all the wrinkles and crevices thereof he set the semblance of shining yellow corn grains; in the dark of the early world-dawn they gleamed like sparks of fire and moved as his hand was moved over the bowl, shining up from and also moving in the depth of the water therein.

From Frank Cushing, *Outlines of Zuni Creation Myths*, pp. 379 ff. According to Benedict, Cushing's translation of the Zuni myth of emergence is a "poeticized version that draws heavily upon his interpretative powers." Still, the philosophizings and schematic analogies of Cushing's tale "are characteristic of Zuni esoteric speculative attempts at synthesis of ceremonies, clans, societies, directions of the compass, colors and patron animals." (p. 256). For a literal version of this myth compare the translation by Ruth Benedict in her brilliant study in *Zuni Mythology*.

RAIN SONG

(SIA)

White floating clouds.

Clouds like the plains

**C**ome and water the earth,

**S**un, embrace the earth

That she may be fruitful.

**M**oon, lion of the north,

**B**ear of the west,

**B**adger of the south,

Wolf of the east,

**E**agle of the heavens, shrew of the earth,

Elder war hero,

Warriors of the six mountains of the world,

Intercede with the cloud people for us,

• That they may water the earth.

Medicine bowl, cloud bowl, and water vase,

Give us your hearts,

That the earth may be watered.

**I** make the ancient road of meal,

That my song may straight pass **over it—the** ancient  
road.

White shell bead woman,

Who lives where the sun goes down,

Mother whirlwind, mother **Sûs'sistumako**,

Mother Ya-ya, creator of good thoughts,

Yellow woman of the north, blue woman of the west,

Red woman of the south, white woman of the east,

Slightly yellow woman of the zenith,

And dark woman of the nadir,

I ask your intercession with the cloud people.

From Mathilde Stevenson, *The Sia*, p. 130.

THE IMAGE THAT CAME TO LIFE  
(TLINGIT)

A young chief on the Queen Charlotte Islands married, and soon afterwards his wife fell ill. Then he sent around everywhere for the very best shamans. If there was a very fine shaman at a certain village, he would send a canoe there to **bring** him. None of them could help her, however, and after she had been sick for a very long time she died.

Now the young chief felt very badly over the loss of his wife. He went from place to place after the best carvers in order to have them carve an image of his wife, but no one could make anything to look like her. All this time there was a carver in his own village who could carve much better than all the others. This man met him one day and said, "You are going from village to village to have wood carved like your **wife's** face, and you cannot find anyone to do it, can you? I have seen your wife a great deal walking with you. . . . I am going to try to carve her image if you will allow me."

Then the carver went after a piece of red cedar and began working upon it. When he was through, he went to the young chief and said, "Now you can **come** along and look at it." So the chief went with him, and, when he got inside, he saw his dead wife **sitting** there just as she used to look. This made him very happy, and he took it home. Then he asked the **carver**, "What do I owe you for making this?" and he replied, "Do **?\$** you please about it." The carver had felt sorry to see how this chief was mourning for **his** wife, so he

said, "It is because I felt badly for you that I made that. So don't pay me too much." He paid the carver very well, however, both in slaves and in goods.

Now the chief dressed this image in his wife's clothes and her marten-skin robe. He felt that his wife had come back to him and treated the image just like her. One day, while he sat mourning very close to the image, he felt it move. His wife had also been very fond of him. At first he thought that the movement was only his imagination, yet he watched it every day, for he thought that at some time it would come to life. When he ate he always had the image close to him.

Some time later, however, the image gave forth a sound from its chest like that of crackling wood, and the man knew that it was ill. When he had someone move it away from the place where it had been sitting they found a *small* cedar tree growing there on top of the flooring. They left it until it grew very large and it is because of this that cedars on the Queen Charlotte Islands are so good. When people up this way look for red cedars and find a good one they say, "This looks like the baby of the chief's wife."

Every day the image of the young woman grew more like a human being, and, when they heard the story, people from villages far and near came in to look at it and at the young cedar tree growing there, at which they were very much astonished. The woman moved around very little and never got to talk, but her husband dreamed what she wanted to tell him. It was through his dreams that he knew she was talking to him.

John R. Swanton, *Tlingit Myths and Texts*, pp. 181-2.



ence, when they jumped about the floor and lisped all sorts of absurdities and lies in their so-called spirit language; to me all this seemed only amusing and as something that would impress the ignorant. A real shaman does not jump about the floor and do tricks; nor does he seek by the aid of darkness, by putting out the lamps, to make the minds of his neighbors uneasy. For myself, I do not think I know much, but I do not think that wisdom or knowledge about things that are hidden can be sought in that manner. True wisdom is only to be found far away from people, out in the great solitude, and is not found in play but only through suffering. Solitude and suffering open the human mind, and therefore a shaman must seek his wisdom there.

From Knud Rasmussen, *Observations on the Intellectual Culture of the Caribou Eskimos*, pp. 52-4. A few repetitions omitted.

THE LAND OF HEAVEN  
(CARIBOU ESKIMO)

Heaven is a great land. In that land there are many holes. These holes we call stars. In the land of heaven lives Pana [the Woman-up-there]. There is a mighty spirit, and the *angatkut* hold that it is a woman. To her pass the souls of the dead. And sometimes, when many die, there are many people up there. When anything is spilt up there, it pours out through the stars and becomes rain or snow. The souls of the dead are reborn in the dwellings of Pana and brought down to earth again by the moon. When the moon is absent, and cannot be seen in the sky, it is because it is busy helping Pana by bringing souls to earth. Some become human beings once more, others become animals, all manner of beasts. And so life goes on without end.

From *Uiaap. 7y.* told by Kibkarjuk.