Native American Creation Legends

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Native Creation Myths: the Navajo Legend

Tlingit
Jicarilla
Apache
Seneca - Iroquois
Menominee
Cherokee
These creation myths are very important to the peoples that created them. They are foundational to those cultures, much as the Declaration of Independence is foundational to American society. These myths are neither “right” nor “wrong” – rather, they are important insights into the emergence of these vibrant cultures.
Navajo creation story – Nihaltsoh -The third World (Yellow World)

The beings were happy in the Yellow World. Then one day something happened. Coyote took Water Monster’s baby. Water Monster was very angry. He was so angry that he decided to make it rain. It rained and rained. The water rose higher and higher. Then the water began to flood. The beings did not know where to go to escape the flood.
First Man tried to help them. He told them to come to Blanco Peak. But the water kept rising. It rose higher than the mountain. First Man wondered what to do. He planted a cedar tree. But this did not grow higher than the water. He planted a pine tree. But the pine tree was too short. He planted a male reed. The reed was still too short. Finally, First Man planted a female reed. This reed grew to the sky. The beings climbed onto the reed. They started to climb up. When they got to the top, they found another world. This was the Fourth, White World. This is the place where all beings live today.
The Seneca-Iroquois Legend

THE WOMAN WHO FELL FROM THE SKY

A long time ago human being lived high up in what is now called heaven. They had a great and illustrious chief.

It so happened that this chief's daughter was taken very ill with a strange affliction. All the people were very anxious as to the outcome of her illness. Every known remedy was tried in an attempt to cure her, but none had any effect.
The Seneca-Iroquois Legend

While the people were at work and the young woman lay there, a young man came along. He was very angry and said: "it is not all right to destroy this tree. Its fruit is all that we have to live on."

With this remark he gave the young woman who lay there ill a shove with his foot, causing her to fall into the hole that had been dug. Now, that hole opened into this world, which was then all water, on which floated waterfowl of many kinds. There was no land at that time.

It came to pass that as these waterfowl saw this young woman falling they shouted, "Let us receive her," whereupon they, at least some of them, joined their bodies together, and the young woman fell on this platform of bodies.
When these were wearied they asked, "Who will volunteer to care for this woman?" The great Turtle then took her, and when he got tired of holding her, he in turn asked who would take his place. At last the question arose as to what they should do to provide her with a permanent resting place in this world. Finally it was decided to prepare the earth, on which she would live in the future. To do this it was determined soil from the bottom of the primal sea should be brought up and placed on the broad, firm carapace of the Turtle, where it would increase in size to such an extent that it would accommodate all the creatures that should be produced thereafter.
After much discussion the toad was finally persuaded to dive to the bottom of the waters in search of soil. Bravely making the attempt, he succeeded in bringing up soil from the depths of the sea. This was carefully spread over the carapace of the Turtle, and at once both began to grow in size and depth. After the young woman recovered from the illness from which she suffered when she was cast down from the upper world, she built herself a shelter, in which she lived quite contentedly.
The Seneca-Iroquois Legend

In the course of time she brought forth a girl baby, who grew rapidly in size and intelligence. When the daughter had grown to young womanhood, the mother and she were accustomed to go out to dig wild potatoes. Her mother had said to her that in doing this she must face the west at all times. Before long the young daughter gave signs that she was about to become a mother.
The Seneca-Iroquois Legend

Her mother reproved her, saying that she had violated the injunction not to face the east, as her condition showed that she had faced the wrong way while digging potatoes. It is said that the breath of the West Wind had entered her person, causing conception. When the days of the delivery were at hand, she overheard twins within her body in a hot debate as to which should be born first and as to the proper place of exit, once declaring that he was going to emerge through the armpit of his mother, the other saying that he would emerge the natural way.

The first one born, who was of reddish color, was called Othagwenda, that is, Flint. The outer, who was light in color, was called Djuskaha, that is, the Little Sprout. ...
The Cherokee Legend
The Story of Corn and Medicine

The earth began as nothing but water and darkness, and all the animals were in Galúnlati, above the stone vault that makes up the sky. Eventually Galúnlati became so crowded that the animals needed more room, and they wanted to move down to earth. Not knowing what was below the water, they sent down the Water-beetle to explore.
The Cherokee Legend

Water-beetle dove below the water and eventually came back with some mud from below. That mud grew and grew, and finally it became the island that we call earth. This island of earth is suspended at its four corners from ropes that hang down from the sky, and legend has it that some day the ropes will break and the earth will sink back into the water.
The Cherokee Legend

Because it grew from mud, the new earth was very soft. Many of the birds flew down to explore the new land, but it was too wet for them to stay. Finally Buzzard flew down, hoping it was dry, but the earth was still wet. Buzzard searched and searched, especially in the Cherokee country, and finally he became so tired that his wings flapped against the ground. His wings dug valleys where they hit the ground and turned up mountains where they pulled away, leaving the rugged country of the Cherokee. Eventually the earth was dry and the animals moved down. There still was no light, however, and so the animals set the sun passing from east to west just over their heads. With the sun so close, many of the animals were burned, giving the red crawfish its crimson color. The animals raised the sun again and again, until it was high enough that all could survive.
When the plants and animals first came to earth, they were told to stay awake for seven nights, as in the Cherokee medicine ceremony. The animals all stayed awake the first night, and many stayed awake the next few nights, but only the owl and the panther and a couple of others stayed awake all seven nights. They were given the ability to see at night and so to hunt at night when the others are asleep. The same thing happened among the trees, and only the cedar, pine, spruce, holly and laurel stayed awake all seven nights, which is why they can stay green all year when the others lose their leaves.
The Cherokee Legend

Humans came after the animals. At first they multiplied rapidly, and the first woman gave birth every seven days. Eventually there were so many of them that it seemed they might not all survive, and since then to this day each woman has been able to have just one child each year. Among these early people were a man and a woman name Kanáti and Selu, whose names meant "The Lucky Hunter" and "Corn", respectively. Kanáti would go hunting and invariably return with game, which Selu would prepare by the stream near their home. She also would always return home with baskets of corn, which she would pound to make meal for bread.
Kanáti and Selu had a little boy, and he would play by the stream. Eventually they realized that he was playing with another little boy who had arisen from the blood of the game washed by the stream. With their son's help they caught the other boy, and eventually he lived with them like he was their own son, although he was called "the Wild Boy".

Kanáti brought home game whenever he went hunting, and one day the two boys decided to follow him. They followed him into the mountains until he came to a large rock, which he pulled aside to reveal a cave from which a buck emerged. Kanáti shot the buck and, after covering the cave, he headed home.
The boys got home before him and didn't reveal what they had learned, but a few days later they returned to the rock. With a struggle they pulled it aside and had great fun watching the deer come out of the cave.

They lost track of what they were doing, however, and soon all sorts of game animals - rabbit and turkeys and partridges and buffalo and all - escaped from the cave. Kanáti saw all these animals coming down the mountain and knew what the boys must have done, and he went up the mountain after them. He opened four jars in the cave, and from them came fleas and lice and gnats and bedbugs that attacked the boys.
The Cherokee Legend

He sent them home, hoping he could find some of the dispersed game for the supper. Thus it is that people must now hunt for game. The boys went home, and Selu told them there would be no meat for dinner. However, she went to the storehouse for food, and told the boys to wait while she did so. They followed her instead to the storehouse and watched her go inside. She put down her basket and then rubbed her stomach, and the basket was partly full with corn. Then she rubbed her sides, and it was full to the top with beans. Watching through a crack in the storehouse wall, the boys saw all this. Selu knew that they had seen her, but she went ahead and fixed them a last meal. Then she and Kanáti explained that, because their secrets were revealed, they would die, and with them would end the easy life they had known.
The Menominee Legend
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One night long ago a Menominee Indian dreamed that Manabush, grandson of Ko-Ko-Mas-Say-Sa-Now (the Earth) and past founder of the Mitawin or Medicine Society, invited him to visit the god. With seven of his friends the Indian called on Manabush who granted their request to make them successful hunters. One of the band, however, angered the god by asking for eternal life. Manabush, seizing the warrior by the shoulders, thrust him into the ground and said, "You shall be a stone, thus you will be everlasting." The Menominee say that at night kindly spirits come to lay offerings of tobacco at the rock and that if one looks closely he can see their white veils among the trees. The legend is that when the rock finally crumbles away the race will be extinct.

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When Mashé Manido, the Great Spirit, first made the earth, he also created a large numbers of manidos or spirits. Some of these spirits were benevolent, but many were malevolent, and they went to live beneath the earth. Kishä Manido, the Good Spirit, was one of these spirits. He took a bear who lived near where the Menominee River flows into Green Bay and Lake Michigan and allowed the bear to change his form. The Bear, pleased at this gift from the Good Spirit, came out of the ground and changed into the first human.
Bear found himself alone and called to an eagle to join him. The eagle descended from the sky and took the form of a human too. Bear and Eagle were deciding whom else to ask to join them when a beaver came by and asked to join their tribe.

Beaver too became a human and, as a female, became the first woman. When Bear and Eagle came to a stream, they found a sturgeon, and Sturgeon became part of their tribe as well. It is from these early people that the Bear, Eagle, and Sturgeon clans of the Menominee originated.
One day when Bear was going up a river, he got tired and stopped to rest. As he was talking to a wolf, a crane flew up to them. Bear asked the crane to fly him up the river, promising to take Crane into his tribe in return. As Crane and Bear were leaving, Wolf asked if he could join them, both for the trip and in their tribe. Crane took both of them on his back and flew them up the river, and this is how the Crane and Wolf clans came into the tribe of Menominee people.
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Bear took the name Sekatcokemau. He built the first wigwam for his people, and built a canoe so that he and his people could catch fish like sturgeon. The Good Spirit provided the people with corn, and with medicinal plants. However, the Good Spirit realized that the Menominee were afflicted by hardship and disease from the malevolent spirits. To help his people, the Good Spirit sent his kindred spirit Manabush down to earth.
Manabush went on to accomplish many great feats for his people. Once there was a great water monster who killed many people, especially fishermen. Manabush let the monster eat him and then stabbed it from inside and killed it. To get his people fire, Manabush went far to the east across the water to the wigwam of an old man and his daughters. The daughters found a little rabbit shivering outside their wigwam and took it in to warm it by their fire. Manabush grabbed an ember from the fire and fled back with it across the water, bringing fire to his people. Once he climbed a mountain and stole tobacco from a giant who kept it there, and he had to flee from the giant to bring tobacco back to his people.
The Menominee Legend

As he fled, he hid himself just before a cliff, and the giant ran past him and over the cliff. When the giant climbed back up the cliff, bleeding and bruised, Manabush grabbed him and threw him to the ground, making him the grasshopper that today can only chew at the tobacco plants in the fields.

Once Manabush was out hunting and deceived some birds into singing with him. When they were close, he caught a swan and a goose on a sand bar and killed them for his dinner. [Later...] the bodies of the birds were missing. He ran out on the sand bar just in time to see people in canoes disappearing around a point of land. Realizing they had stolen his meal, he ran after them yelling "Winnebago! Winnebago!", which is the name the Menominee have used ever since for their thievish neighbors to the south.
The Jicarilla Apache Legend
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http://www.gly.uga.edu/railsback/CS/CSCreation&Emergence.html

The Creation and the Emergence

In the beginning there was nothing - no earth, no living beings. There were only darkness, water, and Cyclone, the wind. There were no humans, but only the Hactcin, the Jicarilla supernatural beings. The Hactcin made the earth, the underworld beneath it, and the sky above it. The earth they made as a woman who faces upward, and the sky they made as a man who faces downward. The Hactcin lived in the underworld, where there was no light.
The Jicarilla Apache Legend

There were mountains and plants in the underworld, and each had its own Hactcin. There were as yet no animals or humans, and everything in the underworld existed in a dream-like state and was spiritual and holy.

The most powerful of the Hactcin in the underworld was Black Hactcin. One day Black Hactcin made the first animal with four legs and a tail made of clay. At first he thought it looked peculiar, but when he asked it to walk and saw how gracefully it walked, he decided it was good. Knowing this animal would be lonely, he made many other kinds of animals come from the body of the first. He laughed to see the diversity of the animals he had created.
All the animals wanted to know what to eat and where to live, so he divided the foods among them, giving grass to the horse, sheep, and cow, and to others he gave brush, leaves, and pine needles. He sent them out to different places, some to the mountains, some to the deserts, and some to the plains, which is why the animals are found in different places today.

Next Black Hactcin held out his hand and caught a drop of rain. He mixed this with some earth to make mud and made a bird from the mud. At first he wasn't sure he would like what he had made.
The Jicarilla Apache Legend

He asked the bird to fly, and when it did he liked it. He decided the bird too would be lonely, so he grabbed it and whirled it rapidly clockwise.
As the bird became dizzy, it saw images of other birds, and when Black Hactcin stopped whirling it, there were indeed many new kinds of birds, all of which live in the air because they were made from a drop of water that came from the air.

Black Hactcin continued to make more animals and birds. The animals and birds that already existed all spoke the same language, and they held a council. They came to Black Hactcin and asked for a companion. They were concerned that they would be alone when Black Hactcin left them, and Black Hactcin agreed to make something to keep them company.
The Jicarilla Apache Legend

The man they had made was lying face down, and it began to rise as the birds watched with excitement.

… The birds and animals were afraid the man would be lonely, and they asked Black Hactcin to give him company. Black Hactcin asked them for some lice, which he put on the man's head. The man went to sleep scratching, and he dreamed that there was a woman beside him. When he awoke, she was there.
These two, Ancestral Man and Ancestral Woman, had children, and the people multiplied. In those days no one died, although they all lived in darkness. This lasted for many years. Holy Boy, another Apache spirit, was unhappy with the darkness, and he tried to make a sun. As he worked at it, Cyclone came by and told him that White Hactcin had a sun. Holy Boy went to White Hactcin, who gave him the sun, and he went to Black Hactcin, who gave him the moon. Black Hactcin told Holy Boy how to make a sacred drawing on a buckskin to hold the sun and moon, and Holy Boy, Red Boy, Black Hactcin, and White Hactcin held a ceremony at which White Hactcin released the sun and Black Hactcin released the moon. The light grew stronger as the sun moved from north to south, and eventually it was like daylight is now.
The Tlingit Legend
No one knows just how the story of Raven really begins, so each starts from the point where he does know it. Here it was always begun in this way. Raven was first called Kit-ka'ositiyi-qa-yit ("Son of Kit-ka'ositiyi-qa"). When his son was born, Kit-ka'ositiyi-qa tried to instruct him and train him in every way and, after he grew up, told him he would give him strength to make a world.

After trying in all sorts of ways, Raven finally succeeded. Then there was no light in this world, but it was told him that far up the Nass was a large house in which some one kept light just for himself.
Raven thought over all kinds of plans for getting this light into the world and finally he hit on a good one. The rich man living there had a daughter, and he thought, "I will make myself very small and drop into the water in the form of a small piece of dirt." The girl swallowed this dirt and became pregnant.

When her time was completed, they made a hole for her, as was customary, in which she was to bring forth, and lined it with rich furs of all sorts. But the child did not wish to be born on those fine things.
Then its grandfather felt sad and said, "What do you think it would be best to put into that hole? Shall we put in moss?"

So they put moss inside and the baby was born on it. Its eyes were very bright and moved around rapidly.

Round bundles of varying shapes and sizes hung about on the walls of the house. When the child became a little larger it crawled around back of the people weeping continually, and as it cried it pointed to the bundles. This lasted many days. Then its grandfather said, "Give my grandchild what he is crying for. Give him that one hanging on the end. That is the bag of stars."
The Tlingit Legend

So the child played with this, rolling it about on the floor back of the people, until suddenly he let it go up through the smoke hole. It went straight up into the sky and the stars scattered out of it, arranging themselves as you now see them. That was what he went there for. Some time after this he began crying again, and he cried so much that it was thought he would die.

Then his grandfather said, "Untie the next one and give it to him." He played and played with it around behind his mother. After a while he let that go up through the smoke hole also, and there was the big moon.
The Tlingit Legend

Now just one thing more remained, the box that held the daylight, and he cried for that. His eyes turned around and showed different colors, and the people began thinking that he must be something other than an ordinary baby. But it always happens that a grandfather loves his grandchild just as he does his own daughter, so the grandfather said, "Untie the last thing and give it to him."

His grandfather felt very sad when he gave this to him. When the child had this in his hands, he uttered the raven cry, "Ga," and flew out with it through the smokehole. Then the person from whom he had stolen it said, "That old manuring raven has gotten all of my things."
Conclusions

Remember, these myths are neither “right” nor “wrong” – rather, they are important insights into the emergence of these vibrant cultures.
No Assignment – this is a “Bye” Week, so you can get ready for the MIDTERM!