The Search for the First Americans

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PART I

First American Theories, Myths, and Evidence
CHAPTER I

American Indian Creation Myths

CULTURES HOLD, AND EVEN REVERE, existential myths. It may be a source of power for a dominant class or religion, provide a comforting structure for social continuity, or reinforce a sense of cultural superiority. At the C. G. Jung Institute during the winter of 1961–62, Marie-Louise von Franz (1915–98), a noted Jungian psychologist and scholar, gave a series of lectures on creation myths that were published in 1972 as Creation Myths. According to von Franz, “creation myths are of a different class from other myths.... [T]here is always a certain solemnity that gives them a central importance.... [A]s far as the feeling and emotional mood which accompany them are concerned, creation myths are the deepest and most important of all myths.”1 Deloria, echoing the conclusions of von Franz, stated that “every human society maintains its sense of identity with a set of stories which explain, at least with satisfaction, how things came to be. Many societies begin at a creation and carry forward a tenuous link of events which they considered to be historical.”2 Yet, in the United States there is a particular fascination surrounding the First Americans that is difficult to understand in these terms. This intense interest by a dominant European-centric culture is in identifying an exact source for the First Americans—the people of another culture.

At the times of the commonly acknowledged European arrivals, approximately 1000 CE by the Vikings and 1492 CE by Christopher Columbus, there was no European presence—linguistically, culturally, or phenotypically. For the conquering Western European culture, the roots of the Judeo-Christian imperative to dominate nature ran deep.3 As Dana Villa explained, the European conquest of the Western Hemisphere objectified the earth itself.4 It represented perhaps the last great barrier to human dominion over its physical circumstance. It may be difficult, however, for a culture to distinguish between its self-perceived superiority and the grandeur of Homo sapiens at large. There is no civilization in which its creation myth recounts that the god(s) passed them by and chose, instead, to anoint a neighboring civilization. The cultural authority that sustains
an existential myth does not provide for a people to have been an inconsequentially distant relation of the first people; there must be a direct lineal descent from the creative primogenitor. As a cultural act, the social construction of a society’s creation myth is one of the few defining events in its history. However, when that myth is successfully challenged, then the creation myths of other societies are suspect as well. As pointed out by Deloria, “when secular science defeated Christian fundamentalism, in its victory it was able to promulgate the belief that all accounts of the creation or of spectacular catastrophic specific events were superstitions devised by ignorant peoples to explain the processes of the world around.”

The characteristics of creation myths, according to von Franz, are common across cultures. Typically, they fall into such categories as the awakening of consciousness; creation from above; creation from below; germs and eggs; or a mechanistic god, such as the Chinese P’an Ku, who is a master in all crafts, and the Egyptian God Ptah, who used a potter’s wheel to create the world and the other gods. American Indian creation myths generally conform to this model and can be categorized as describing an existential birth by: jumping, falling, or being pushed from the sky; arising from the earth or mud; appearing from the lake, ocean, or river; or being born in and climbing out of an underworld. Simultaneous with this creation, in many American Indian traditions they are also given an immediate awareness that they have been created. “Some have a creator, and some don’t and a few seem to have grafted a creator onto an older story that had none, perhaps under the influence of Christianity.” There also appears to be no relationship between the geographical area or linguistic roots, on the one hand, and the particular category of creation myth indigenous to an American Indian tribe, on the other.

Jeremiah Curtin’s 1898 *Creation Myths* is a straightforward and readable account of twenty-two creation stories of American Indian groups. Considering the obvious racial and other social biases typical of his time, outside of the “Introduction” chapter, there is no overt attempt to provide a pejorative interpretation of any of these myths; the only seeming constraint would be that faced by all ethnologists—Curtin’s ability to accurately capture the cultural values and priorities of non-Western civilizations within the conceptual boundaries imposed by an American-culture and English-language epistemological grid. Compounding this difficulty is the contention by American Indian scholars that as much as 90 percent of traditional American Indian “information” has never been printed and is therefore not available to scientists or the public. To the extent that this is the case, it would further constrain the ability of Western scholars to understand American Indian myths.
The existence of Curtin’s *Creation Myths* resulted from the continuing popular interest in the indigenous cultures of America. Based upon interviews of “Indians” in California, Mexico, and Guatemala, it is a compilation of consecutive Sunday articles written in 1895 for the *New York Sun* of “myth-tales as I might think of sufficient value to appear in the paper.” Curtin employed a surprisingly modern concept of what he termed the American *system* to capture the intricate set of relationships between the mental and physical domains that are necessary to create a complex myth. According to Curtin, “The American creation myths, as far as we know them, form simply a series of accounts of the conflicts, happenings, and various methods by which the first world was changed into the world now existing.” Embedded within these creation myths, Curtin believed, were “models upon which faithful Indians are to fashion their lives at all times and places.” These myths were not simply interesting stories, but rather formed an essential element of the American Indian value system.

The descriptive range of creative agency for American Indians is quite extensive. For the Pawnee, it was Tiny Little Duck; for the Crow, it was Old Man Coyote; Mandan, the Lone Man; Yakima, the Wooden Stick People; and Hopi, the Spider Grandmother. Knud Rasmussen, in his book *The Eagle’s Gift*, asked a Noatak River Eskimo named Apatac how the world was created. “Nobody can know anything for sure about the beginning of life. But whoever opens his eyes and his ears and tries to remember what the old people said, might fill the emptiness of his thought by this or that knowledge.” For the American Indian, Curtin concluded that “The wisdom of his nation is more valid, more reliable than the wiriness of his own senses. His eyes and ears might be deceived by tricksters, but not by the truth delivered to great men among his own people, preserved by them sacredly and passed down to others.”

Why do Americans study American Indian myths? As Curtin captured it in 1898, at the time that the Europeans arrived, the myth systems of the American Indians were intact. There was no culturally sanctioned process by which they were challenged. “Human history has no second example of a single system of thought developed over such a vast area.” For modern Americans, the appeal of the search for the First Americans is still rooted in a quest for confirmation of a cultural existential myth.

The late University of Cambridge physicist Stephen Hawking began *A Brief History of Time* with the story of a skeptic who challenged a philosopher (Hawking hypothesized that it was Bertrand Russell) with the statement that the “world is really a flat plate supported on the back of a giant tortoise.” When asked what supported the tortoise, the skeptic responded that “it’s turtles all
The existential myths of American Indians suffer from the same potential epistemological challenge. Although their traditions identify a primal creative agency, the same myths do not typically explain the origin of the usually animate agency, nor do they explain the occasional presence of other contemporaneous aboriginal tribes in their myths. It is, perhaps, this inability of American Indians to provide an explanation that relates their creation stories to their demonstrable material surroundings that provides First American science its most significant lever for challenging these myths.

There is discipline as well as power in capturing concepts through the written word. Bruno Latour, Steve Woolgar, and others have described science as ultimately the sum of its written reports, its so-called inscription devices. The act of writing denaturalizes a myth. Commitment to writing is one form of assigning boundaries to the physical possibilities of an oral tradition. Scientific analysis is another and is, perhaps, even more constraining than being captured by words. For a Western, science-based culture, the contest is perceived as being between laboratories and written reports, on the one hand, and campfires and oral traditions on the other.

The power to define the past is of value as a mechanism for negotiating current power relationships and, therefore, influencing the future. For American Indians, myths are a part of an enduring social fabric and are nonargumentative. They have a status that is believed to be a nondiscoverable part of human knowledge. This does not, however, mean that there is no social value to myths. Even in a science-based culture, they may be part of an ethical structure that governs the mores of that society. According to Gerard Naddaf, a professor of philosophy at York University, myth can provide both a causal explanation for the present social, and even natural, order along with some assurance of legitimacy and continuity. Myth operates to integrate potentially conflicting elements of the religious, cultural, historical, social, and political realms. The challenge that First American science presents to American Indian myths is that the material artifacts analyzed by modern science may destabilize a long-standing social order with vested interests. For some cultures, principally ancient but some modern as well, something accorded the status of myth is not irrational, but rather is considered to be a fundamental part of reality, “a liberation from excessive abstraction and objectivism,” according to Kathryn Morgan, a professor of classics at UCLA. For such cultures, myth creation and maintenance is an ontologically definitive process.

The Smithsonian Institution National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI) is a representational gallery of American Indian culture more than it is
a traditional science-based museum. The exhibits were prepared by community curators approved by, and often supplied by, the tribe whose culture was being exhibited. As such, it provides an interesting indigenous insight into some of the specific American Indian creation myths. A placard by the Cherokee tribe described the roles that Water Beetle and Buzzard played in aiding “the bird and animal people,” presumably including the Cherokee, to descend from above the sky and inhabit the world. At another Smithsonian Institution NMAI exhibit, the Tohono O’odham tribe provided a water-borne depiction of human origins through the creational agencies of Earth Medicine Man, Buzzard, Coyote, and termites. In yet two more exhibits, the Ka’apor tribe of Brazil portrayed its own creation as being “from the beginning of time,” with the creative agency provided by “Mair,” and the Pamunkey tribe of Virginia offered a less mythic statement as to its presence in what is now Virginia for “at least 12,000 years.” It was not clear as to whether the Pamunkey historical memory has an actual calculation that reaches back to that time, or whether they are basing it on the results of First American science. Regardless, such an antiquity would chronologically place their culture as one of the original inhabitants of the New World. Finally, in what might be considered a bit of hyperbole, the Smithsonian Institution NMAI itself stated that “the true significance of 1492” is its being “the most profound event in human history.” Although other events (e.g., the migration of Homo sapiens itself out of Africa) could arguably be considered of more import, the statement itself provides an indication of the cultural importance that modern American culture, as expressed through its preeminent museum system, attaches to the search for the First Americans.