Understanding Culture and History through Native American Mythology and Legends

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The study of ancient civilization is a field that can seem mysterious and difficult to understand. There are, however, some clues that provide glimpses of what daily life might have been like for certain peoples throughout the world. Typical clues used by historians today include ancient artifacts found on excavation sites, written histories, and even entire cities dug up from underground. Another useful source of information in determining the way life was in the age of certain ancient civilizations exists in legends and mythology passed down from one generation to another. The oral tradition is especially prevalent in the ancient Native American cultures. It is so valued that many of these stories were passed down to the present. These Native American legends and mythology provide revealing insights into the culture and history of tribal communities.

Using Mythology to Understand History

Upon first reading or hearing one of these stories, one may be tempted to assume that it is simply an amusing story with no real cultural significance. This notion, however, is erroneous and one must take a more serious look at each story passed on. Each of these narratives was told for a reason; something was taught as typical cultural norms and values revealed themselves. Concerning the subject, Professor Herbert W. Luthin stated, “Stories are always more than just entertainment. Much of the conscience and philosophy of a culture is expressed, either directly or indirectly, in the myths of its people.”¹ Discerning these norms, however, may present a bit of a challenge. There are certain aspects of society that are understood by that particular society and a story might not specifically state a certain, understood aspect of culture. For example, motivations for a character acting in a certain way may or may not be explained. The motivation may just be understood by the culture, and any given member of that society would act in that way.

particular way, given that circumstance. This ambiguity requires the reader to approach each of the narratives with a certain sense of objectivity and somewhat of an analytical mind. Otherwise, certain actions may be misinterpreted.

Despite the problems associated with the interpretation of the narratives, they remain a very important source for determining societal norms as shown in several extensive analyses on the topic. Thomas C. Blackburn conducted a study of the Chumash people’s culture using their oral narratives passed down from the earliest of Chumash generations. Using these narratives, he identified several cultural aspects specific to this particular tribe. Of all the important norms that he discovered, some of the most significant are the reality of life as the Chumash people understood it, the way life ought to be or the values they worked toward, and the social norms associated with different types of interpersonal relationships. Melville Jacobs conducted a similar type of study using the stories of the Clackamas. He discovered that the stories of that particular tribe emphasized the relationships that people shared one with another. While many of these narratives are understood to be fictional stories, several of them retell actual historic events and are therefore presented as histories. Many histories, however, have over time become “legend” and are embellished to the style of such. Still, the fact that these legends exist imply that certain amazingly catastrophic events must have occurred near these peoples. The combined work of these and several other scholars studying this field show that the culture and philosophies of these individual tribes can be understood, and so can certain major historic events, simply by analyzing the traditional stories of each tribe.

**Perceived Reality of Life Made Evident**

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2 Luthin, p. 47.
Each culture views the world through a type of lens which helps them understand the reality around them. The ancient American peoples were no different and the information found in their oral narratives presents that reality. The Clackamas presented through the character Coyote the inherent qualities of a male as being very sexually active and adventurous with the ability to reconstruct the future while presenting women as fragile and socially dependent on men, except where men are not present (i.e. a husband dies, abandons the family, etc.), and having strong maternal instincts.\(^4\) This was one of their realities. A great majority of the Chumash narratives take place on Chumash lands. Other lands simply were not as much of a concern for them in their reality. While many Europeans have an aspiration to go up toward the heavens, from where they perceive they left the presence of God, many native tribes have an aspiration to go down toward the earth, from where they believe they emerged.\(^5\) This emergence from the earth couples a belief that all life began as one and slowly split off into several different categories of life. As stated by one Navajo holy man, “The Navaho people have always believed in evolution.”\(^6\)

The spiritual beliefs of the tribes were a very integral part of their culture; there was very little differentiation between the religious and the secular.\(^7\) One very important spiritual reality that is common to many tribes is that all things in the universe are living, sentient beings and anything that happens in one’s life is a direct result of the relationship that they have with their

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\(^6\) Alexander, p. 384.

surroundings. This can lead to a belief that life outside one’s normal surroundings can be unpredictable and dangerous as the spirits surrounding him may view him as an unwanted stranger. For this reason, it is crucial to be at peace with the environment. The Navajo call this concept Hózhó. One Navajo described, “Hózhó means that all things should be right and proper. It means maintaining good health, avoiding excess in all things, being thankful and prayerful, adhering to the old stories and songs, believing in oneself, and recognizing one’s responsibility towards all aspects of the world we live in.” A Chumash narrative demonstrating the belief in this concept tells the story of the grandson of a woman, Momoy. Momoy is a prominent character throughout the Chumash tales, but this tale is centered on the adventures of her unnamed grandson. In one of his escapades, he proved himself to be quite the warrior by defeating a bear. Later on, he played a popular Chumash sport and wagered on the outcomes of the games. Due to his greatness, not luck, he won every single wager. Chance was not even considered. Later, as the rich men of the village were tired of seeing him win all the time, Coyote was asked to cast a spell on him to make him lose. From that point on, he lost every single wager and lost all of his belongings. A different part of this same narrative shows that Momoy always warned her grandson not to venture off too far. His disobedience to this council led him into much danger. He even got into a bit of mischief with the sun himself. This belief of the general danger of all things around them led the Chumash to a belief that even surrounding tribes were dangerous and should be avoided. One must only deal with those most familiar to him to protect himself in this dangerous, ever changing world.

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8 Blackburn, p. 66, 67-68.
10 Blackburn, p. 126-134.
11 Blackburn, p. 73-74.
Societal Values Made Evident

As important as it is to understand life as it is, people must push toward certain values and encourage life as it should be. The oral narratives provided an effective way for each tribe to communicate these values to its members. Certain stories portray the importance of certain ideals as its characters succeeded when they gave heed to their society’s norms. A powerful example of this is seen in many of the creation or emergence stories that the tribes would tell. Though the exact details differ, most tribal emergence stories portray a group of individuals working together to create the earth, thus demonstrating the connection all living things have together and the importance of mutual respect and a sense of community and cooperation.¹² In many cases, unfortunately, these values were not a reality for the natives. Clackamas, for example, would portray many instances of unwanted Oedipal relationships in their stories specifically as a means of ventilating the frustration they felt about not being able to solve that reoccurring problem in their society. Humor was also used to demonstrate what not to do, as characters doing improper things were seen as foolish and were laughed at.¹³

A value commonly held in many tribes underlined the importance of hard work and selflessness. Most societies shunned laziness and punished it in the stories.¹⁴ In one particular Chumash narrative, Coyote was married to Toad. Wanting to create mischief, Coyote used magic to turn himself into a beautiful woman, traveled into another town, and met Duck, who fell in love with him in an instant. On their wedding night, Coyote refused the passes of Duck by pretending to be sick. Duck fed Coyote during this time and Coyote seemed to enjoy his freeloading stay with Duck. However, the spell that Coyote used was only temporary. He soon

¹² Alexander, p. 385-386.
¹³ Jacobs, p. 135, 144.
¹⁴ Ibid, p. 139.
turned back into a man and had to run away from the village. When Duck realized who he had
married, he angrily made his way into the village of Coyote and killed his wife, Toad, as
punishment for tricking him into marrying a man and eating all his food.15 Thus one could see
the value of honesty toward peers and the condemnation of foolishness.

In another story, Coyote was a very lazy father of sixteen sons. He would go out to hunt,
but when he returned, he would eat all the food himself, never sharing with his children or his
wife. As a punishment he got diarrhea. This diarrhea worsened until he fell down to his sick bed.
Coyote wanted his death to be mourned, so he asked his sons to go to the top of the hill and
announce his death, to attract mourners. The first son he asked only went a few steps up the hill
when he announced it. This displeased Coyote and he sent his next son to complete the same
task. This next messenger went a bit further, but that still was not what Coyote had asked for.
Every son was asked to climb the hill and each one went slightly farther, but never reached the
top. This laziness made Coyote very angry and he resorted to sending his youngest son up the
hill. The youngest actually went all the way up the hill to announce the death of Coyote. His
father was finally satisfied and expressed his love for his youngest son due to his diligence.
Mourners came, but Coyote killed and ate them, but once again he did not share with anyone.
This annoyed his wife, Frog, for the last time. Infuriated, she dried up all the springs of water
which prevented her husband from quenching his thirst.16 Thus, the laziness of Coyote and each
of his sons was punished, teaching listeners the importance of hard work, completion of
assignments, and providing for a family by sharing what one receives.

Interpersonal Relationships

15 Blackburn, p. 172-175.
16 Ibid, p. 204-207.
Another insight into the culture of each tribe is the role individuals play in interpersonal relationships. Family forms were complex and ranged from monogamous marriages to incestuous relationships. Whether seen as good or bad, these relationships were a very common theme throughout each story and the Clackamas narratives especially emphasized these social relationships. The relationship between spouses or lovers as found in the Chumash society seemed to be brittle and easily broken, while the relationship between siblings was seen as very strong and lasting. Of all the relationships, one of the strongest seemed to be the bond between grandparents, and grandchildren.

One Chumash narrative tells of some boys from the mainland who had great lives in their villages. They were each married to very beautiful women and were quite rich. One day, they went across the sea to an island. There, they were met by another village and were treated quite well. Each boy was well fed and given another beautiful wife while on the island. The boys stayed there for quite some time until they remembered their families. Concerned that their families back home would worry, they traveled back home to their wives. They soon forgot all about their new wives on the island. The island wives, however, missed their husbands. Some of them swam across the sea to find them, but when they arrived at the shore, Coyote met them, disguised as one of the husbands. One of the girls was deceived by the trick and Coyote took them for himself. In this story one can see the lack of exclusive love for a spouse. While polygamy is not a concept unique to Chumash people, it is interesting to note how quickly the boys forgot about both their mainland wives and, in turn, their island wives. Also, interesting to

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17 Jacobs, p. 127, 132.
18 Blackburn, p. 57-58, 60-61, 62.
note is how easily the island wives joined with Coyote. One of the wives in particular did not hesitate to become infatuated with Coyote when he met them on the beach.

The sibling relationship can be exceptionally strong in certain tribes. A Chumash narrative tells of two brothers travelling to visit their sister. The older brother and the sister understood that the brother-in-law hated the two boys and wished to cause them harm. With the help of their sister, they escaped the attacks of their brother-in-law and ran away. This story demonstrates the love had among siblings. The sister was willing to trick even her husband to protect her brothers. Another thing to note is the wisdom of the older brother, who almost acted as a parent for the younger one throughout their adventures. A second narrative further underscores the superiority of the sibling relationship. Thunder and Fog were brothers. Thunder found a very beautiful girl and married her. Thunder and Fog would travel the world every day, but every morning, after they would leave, Fog would claim to have forgotten his belt. He would return home and kiss his sister-in-law. Thunder knew what Fog was doing, but did not say anything. Eventually, Thunder’s wife became pregnant. Later, she bore a child that looked exactly like Fog. From that point on, Fog decided to not forget his belt anymore. Although the story continues, this specific part particularly shows that the brothers would even ignore adultery to avoid contention within the family. Fog, on his own, decided to stop committing adultery, not at the request of Thunder.

One final noteworthy form of interpersonal relationship is the intense bond between grandparent and grandchild. In fact, in the very story of Thunder and Fog, the girl was raised by her grandmother, for her mother was too foolish to survive long enough to raise her herself. Several of the Momoy stories in the Chumash culture are about grandmothers taking

\[\text{Blackburn, p. 60-61, 113-116.} \]
\[\text{Ibid, p. 61, 104-112.} \]
responsibility for the rearing of the children and it is even apparent that the stories collected by Blackburn were retold by people quoting their grandparents, showing that this bond between grandkids and grandparents is still strong today in the Chumash culture.\textsuperscript{22}

Histories

Just as these narratives reveal the culture of their accompanying tribes, they also may be able to reveal certain historical occurrences. One widely used example of this is the famous story of the deluge. The Kwakiutl tell a story about a worldwide flood that only a few survived and had to repopulate the earth. The Tolowa have a similar story as do countless other Native American tribes.

Certain details are of course different. For example, the Tolowa pass the story on as if a tidal wave hit. It came as a result of the people being disobedient to their elders and partying after dark. All the people died except for a boy and his sister. As there were no men left for the girl, she married her brother. She gave birth to a boy. Later, a single woman survivor came into contact with them. The brother married this other woman as well and she gave birth to a girl. Both babies grew up and married each other and the repopulation of the earth began.\textsuperscript{23} The Kwakiutl report that both rain and a tidal wave hit. A large group of people were saved by previously built canoes, as they seemed to know what was going to happen before it happened. After the wave hit, the canoes split up and each group established a different tribe.\textsuperscript{24}

By simply looking at the myths, it is difficult to conclude exactly what happened. Each flood may have occurred separately, or perhaps it was the same flood being told from different

\textsuperscript{22} Blackburn, p. 96-97.
\textsuperscript{23} Luthin, p. 67-76.
viewpoints. It is difficult to differentiate between fact and fiction as these myths have become more legendary than anything else, but reading into the accounts, at least one thing is made certain: something catastrophic must have occurred for such a large number of tribes to have passed this story down. Further evidence is required to determine the exact details, but one can definitely conclude that a large number of Native Americans believed in a worldwide flood long before Columbian contact.

The Importance of the Narratives

The oral tradition is a method of communication that must continue for the study of Native American culture and history. They can be difficult to record as several storytellers view them as sacred and do not readily share them with outsiders. It seems, however, that they will continue to be passed on from one generation to another. More narratives are also in the making, as many of these tribes are still in existence today and storytellers still wish to pass their knowledge on to further generations. Thus, one can study the modern culture of each of these societies through these modern oral narratives.

Just as modern cultural values and norms can be determined by studying the popular fiction and nonfiction of the modern society, Native American myths and legends are an informative fount from which the scholar of history can learn of the people of the ancient Americas. They provide valuable insights into the way these cultures viewed themselves and their lives. Aspirations they held and actively worked toward reveal themselves. Important interpersonal relationships are described and commented on. Even a few historical inferences can be made by studying these myths. Legends and mythology of the Native Americans, when

25 Fast, p. 188.
objectively studied, are and will continue to be an important source of historical and cultural information.