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Speakers in the Night: California Indian Storytellers

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LISTENING to the recounting of familiar myths and tales constituted a favorite form of amusement for the California Indians, and many a long winter night was passed in this manner. Specially gifted elderly persons, generally men, their memories well stocked with traditional lore, were the storytellers. They held forth by firelight, usually in an assembly house, chief's dwelling, or other large structure, with their audience, composed of men, women, and children, clustered around them. Commonly, a raconteur prolonged his recital far into the night.

Narrative talent was greatly admired and individuals who excelled as tellers of stories enjoyed high respect and their services were in constant demand. Sometimes they received small gifts from their listeners. Members of Modoc and Maidu audiences, for instance, presented them with food (Voegelin 1942:102). Storytellers did not, however, form a special class or guild. The nearest approach to professionalism came in the Miwok tribe where outstanding narrators traveled from village to village and entertained with myths and tales from their rich repertoires (Gifford 1917:283-284; Curtis 1924:147). They were rewarded with food, baskets, and furs.

A raconteur could relate certain stories only at the proper time and in the proper season. Those set in the prehuman, mythical era had to be told at night. Otherwise disagreeable consequences would follow. The

Yuki and Pomo were strongly persuaded that a narrator became hunchbacked if he described happenings of the mythic past during daylight hours (Foster 1944:200; Barrett 1933:48). The Pomo also held that daytime storytelling hastened the coming of night.

Winter was the prescribed season for presenting accounts of the gods and supernatural events. It was after the first winter rains fell that Miwok storytellers commenced reciting the tribe's sacred stories (Merriam 1910:15), whereas the Honey Lake Paiute reserved theirs for stormy, presumably winter nights (Riddell 1960:80). The Pit River Achomawi season began with the first December moon and ended about the twentieth of March (Merriam 1928:iv). Many northern Californians, including the Modoc, Shasta, Atsugewi, Achomawi, Wintu, and Mountain Maidu firmly believed that mythtelling in summer attracted rattlesnakes (Voegelin 1942:102; Holt 1946:33). The two last-mentioned tribes feared that the snakes would bite both the narrator and his auditors (Voegelin 1942:102), a concern shared by the Tubatulabal and Yokuts (Voegelin 1938:48, 1950:799). Perhaps this same apprehension kept the Owens Valley Paiute from beginning their storytelling until "after the snakes disappeared" (Steward 1936:357). The Wintu and Mountain Maidu also felt that recounting myths in an improper season hastened the arrival of winter (Voegelin 1942:102).

These restrictions did not apply to ordi-

nary tales. Parents or, more often, grandparents amused children with simple stories any time the youngsters showed an inclination to listen, and northeastern Californians recounted anecdotes ostensibly based on actual experiences of living persons whenever the opportunity arose (Voegelin 1942:102). Tubatulabal narratives describing what were regarded as real happenings could be told in the summer or at any other season (Voegelin 1938:48). Curiously enough, the widely told Orpheus myth, an account of a mortal man's efforts to bring his wife back from the land of the dead, was included in this group.

For reasons of custom, the storyteller in some groups remained seated by the fire; in others he stood facing his audience. A Kamia raconteur not only stood but swayed his body from side to side as he proceeded (Gifford 1931:72). Certain other rules had to be carefully observed. Once launched into a myth, a Karok narrator had to finish it, for to fail to do so would cause his back to become crooked (Harrington 1930:131 Note). Among the Owens Valley Paiute, tribal traditions had to be recited with deep seriousness because an improper or frivolous telling insulted the animals and natural phenomena mentioned, which in turn avenged themselves (Steward 1933:323).

Guides existed too for the audience's behavior. Often the assembled listeners were obliged to lie down. A Sierra Miwok raconteur began his presentation with a warning to the children, "I am going to tell stories of the old days now. All of you lie down and stretch out on your backs, otherwise you will be hunchbacked" (Freeland 1951:178). Similarly, the Pomo narrator cautioned his auditors not to sit up, lest they suffer the same affliction (Barrett 1933:42). Yuki men, allowed to smoke while hearing a profane tale, had to put their pipes away when a sacred myth began (Foster 1944:201).

Members of the audience were not re-

quired or expected to listen passively, however. They responded with expressions of amazement at marvelous happenings, with chuckles or roars of laughter to the ludicrous and bawdy antics of the trickster, Coyote, and with shudders and signs of loathing at the evil deeds of cannibals and other fearsome bogies which frequented the narratives. On occasion, a character's behavior brought forth demonstrations or statements of approval or disapproval. Yet there were times when contemplative quiet was demanded. When a Yuki elder introduced a narrative with, "This is a story they told long ago," the gathering knew that a myth was to follow and that its telling called for silence on the part of all (Foster 1944:201). Listeners interrupted only to say, from time to time, "That's been done," and "It happened like that."

Certain acts sometimes had to be performed following a storytelling session. In the northeastern part of the state, those who had attended bathed early the following morning to make themselves "healthy" (Voegelin 1942:102). The same custom prevailed among the Tubatulabal. When the morning star appeared, the old people roused the previous night's auditors and ordered them outside to jump into an icy pool, to make them "strong; keep them healthy" (Voegelin 1938:49). Those who wished to escape this early morning plunge presented the storyteller with a few pine nuts, acorns, or seeds. To avoid incurring any obligation whatsoever, a man covered his head with a blanket so as not to hear the narration and slept.

Some people were, of course, more adept at storytelling than others. They could hold an audience spellbound even when the tales they recounted were familiar in every detail. And there were those who could make the most colorful adventure sound dull and prosaic. Individual differences in literary skill were clearly recognized by the Owens Valley Paiute (Steward 1936:357). Several men were

acknowledged as exceptionally fine raconteurs; others frankly considered themselves to be incompetent. Muddled, wordy, or tedious renditions provoked derision. Probably many a would-be narrator refrained from relating his stock of myths and tales at public gatherings in fear of handling them poorly, thus leaving himself open to ridicule.

To win his audience's approval a storyteller needed several talents. A gift for speaking in public was essential because if a narrative was not presented in an engaging and accomplished manner, it failed to please. Quite often the raconteur used a language that differed from the ordinary speech of conversation. A special religious and ceremonial idiom was required for the reciting of Pomo myths (Aginsky and Aginsky 1971:54) and essentially all Mohave sacred stories were told in an almost ritualized ("preaching") style (Kroeber 1948:1). The native Californian narrator also employed a variety of set verbal phrases.

A teller of tales had to be equally an actor, able to impersonate the characters by changing his voice to fit theirs, to mimic their facial expressions, and to illustrate their actions with appropriate hand and body movements. When one of the personages burst into song, he sang the verses (Gifford and Block 1930:43). Oftentimes a Yokuts storyteller imitated the characteristic sounds of the birds and animals which played a part in the sequence of events (Latta 1936:4).

Also required was the ability to improvise and originate. The competent performer did not repeat mechanically what he had heard or learned. Instead he recreated the tale by arranging the incidents and plots into a unique expression, pleasing to himself and his auditors. The Owens Valley Paiute raconteur seems to have enjoyed an unusual degree of freedom in grafting the new onto the old (Steward 1936:357). Sometimes he used only the central theme of a prose narrative, embel-

lishing it with novel episodes and characters. Karok tellers of Coyote tales too were allowed a great deal of latitude in transposing, reshuffling, and omitting episodes, as well as in elaborating minutiae (Bright 1954:1). Yet a narrator could not be too inventive because his listeners, having heard it all before, were acutely aware that there was a conventional way of treating a particular myth or tale. A version which departed too far from the time-established standard incurred disapproval.

Another requisite was a prodigious memory. The Mohave reciter of a "Great Tale," a pseudohistorical account of clan migration which took several nights to complete, had to carry in his mind a bewildering array of places and personages (Kroeber 1951:71). In other tribal groups, gifted raconteurs held so much literary material in their memories that they could perform for hours at a time and night after night without retelling a single myth or tale. A Nomlaki Indian stated that, "The old people would sit in the sweathouse and tell stories for a week without repeating one" (Goldschmidt 1951:390).

By what means did a narrator acquire his stock of tribal lore? Much of it he absorbed informally, almost unconsciously. From his earliest days, an Indian youth heard the traditional stories recited countless times, until he knew their basic substance and many of the salient details by heart. Some, through individual interest, special aptitude, or family tradition, absorbed more than their fellows. Perhaps half in jest, a Yuki declared that the one who stayed awake the longest became the storyteller of the next generation (Foster 1944:201).

Frequently an elder, generally a relative, took a hand in instructing a responsive child. An aged Modoc woman, renowned for her fund of stories and tenacious memory, recalled how her grandfather had taught her tribal myths (Curtin 1912:viii). In like man-

ner, a Yurok, who in his youth had displayed an unusual interest in the old native life, remembered how kinsmen and near kinsmen had imparted oral traditions to him (Spott and Kroeber 1942:252).

To make certain that the sacred literature was preserved and perpetuated properly, Karok and Shasta elders subjected youths to a stringent learning process. After dark in the sweathouse, the sleeping quarters for males, a venerable Karok recited a myth to a boy, who repeated it after him a passage at a time (Harrington 1932:8). A girl received instruction in the same manner from a female relative. Equally exacting was the training undergone by Shasta children. During the winter boys and girls gathered at the house of a certain old woman to repeat myths sentence by sentence until they had mastered them (Holt 1946:338). Those who disliked the tedious drills and were reluctant to attend were warned that their backs would become crooked if they failed to do so. Yuki instruction took a more institutionalized form. A good part of a ritualistic period of instruction, supervised by an old man, was devoted to the teaching of mythology surrounding Taikomol, the Supreme Being, and his adventures with Coyote. A full day at this "boys' high school" was long and arduous, and not uncommonly, parents came and sat behind their sons to support them, also to review their own knowledge of the sacred stories (Foster 1944:210-211). If a restless youth moved and disturbed the telling of a myth, instruction ceased immediately until the next day.

On the contrary, the Mohave and Yuma felt that no training in mythology was needed, for these Colorado River tribesmen professed and partly believed that individuals dreamed the stories they recounted. Indeed, they went so far as to avow that the unborn soul of the narrator transcended time and was projected backward to witness the various supernatural events (Kroeber 1948:1). "I was

there, I saw him," declared the Mohave detailing the death of the god Matavilya and the deeds of Mastamho, the culture hero (Kroeber 1925:754). There existed, nonetheless, a mechanism for standardizing the various accounts and the manner of their presentation. The myths were recited in the presence of older men, who freely criticized a narrator's version and his delivery.

Time and the impact of American customs and institutions have dealt harshly with the storyteller's art. Today the good raconteurs are gone, and the traditional myths and tales, told as far back as aboriginal memory reaches, are seldom heard. In some tribes a few aged persons cling to the old stories and find simple pleasure in relating them to anyone who cares to listen; in others they are no longer told. Even where the oral traditions are still alive, they are generally presented in an impoverished or debased form, for the figures of mythology have become vague and their deeds half forgotten. And they no longer evoke the same emotional response because the unthinking faith in their validity has weakened or disappeared.

For most younger Indians today, listening to the radio and phonograph, viewing television, reading comic books, and attending movies have taken over the amusement function of storytelling. Strangers to the world of religion and culture reflected in the oral literature, they find little of interest in the miraculous deeds of gods and godlike creatures or in the ludicrous capers of Coyote. Many are scornful of the aboriginal myths and tales; some are embarrassed or repelled by them. Conceivably the arising awareness among American Indian youths to the value of preserving native customs and beliefs could rekindle an interest in the ancient stories.

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