

Lecture #3: The World that Coyote and Raven Made

Suggested Readings:

Philip J. Deloria and Neal Salisbury, eds, *A Companion to American Indian History* (2004).
Richard Nelson, *Make Prayers to the Raven* (1983) [Koyukon, Alaska]
Adrian Tanner, *Bringing Home Animals* (1979) [Mistassini Cree, Subarctic]
Gilbert Wilson, *Buffalo Bird Woman's Garden* (1917; 1987) [Hidatsa, Great Plains]
Shepard Krech, *The Ecological Indian: Myth and History* (1999)

Outline:

I. Coyote Steals the Sun and Moon:

Trickster figure central to many Indian belief systems: Coyote, Great Hare, Raven
Coyote tricks Eagle into letting him look into box containing moon and sun that they've stolen from Pueblo Kachinas, result is release of moon, coming of winter (and hence seasons)
Relationship of Indians to universe of animals and plants far different from European notions of nature we discussed last time. No comparable monolithic category like nature. Instead: multiplicity of creatures and spirits in a living universe filled with sentience, gifts, and dangers. Death and violence everywhere: life lives by killing.

II. Opening Caveats and Generalizations

Danger of lecture is its tendency to offer sweeping generalizations re all Indians: almost always a hazardous and misleading undertaking, with problems similar to those of "nature."
Most reliable generalization: extraordinary diversity of North America's native peoples.
Another generalization: intimacy of chosen adaptations to environment, complexity of niches
Environment not *determinative*, but offers limits across an (often wide) range of options
Map of vegetation/physiographic regions also maps ranges of most likely subsistence possibilities, and these in turn map into classic culture areas (from 1920s anthropology)

III. Living with Fish and Trees

Given diversity, best way to examine these generalizations is through individual cases
Take Northwest Coast peoples (Tlingits, Haidas, Tsimshians, Kwakiutls, Salish, etc.)
Richest and most reliable source of subsistence = salmon, which followed their own ecological cycle of traveling far upstream from ocean to lay eggs, give young best chance of survival
Hook/spear/net/weir/trap technologies to catch salmon: technology helps define human niche
Techniques for handling cedar for boats, tools, houses: culture embedded in physical world
Attached to this material world of tools, technology, subsistence: symbolic world of ritual: inviting the salmon to return up the streams. Intervening in natural cycles.

IV. Bringing Home Animals

Case of Mistassini Cree east of Hudson's Bay shows this spiritual intervention
Hunting strategies and techniques linked to gift relationship with animals, who sacrifice selves that hunters may live, in return for ritual gift payments: gifts maintain cycles
Orderly social universe maintained in mobile community by clearly articulated spatial relationships, representing male/female, old/young, single/married, individual/group
Variability of resource base (animal populations) requires spreading of subsistence across numerous species, maintenance of low population densities (Liebig's Law)

V. The Planters' World

Horticulturalists can be more sedentary, store food across hungry times, level seasonal cycles
But ritual universe applies here as well: cycle of planting, weeding, harvest accompanied by ritual dances, ceremonies; agriculture often linked to seasonal hunting activities too
Storage of food critical to maintaining larger population (possibility of class hierarchy too)
Except in Southwest, horticulture largely a woman's activity; mixed corn/bean/squash crops

VI. Fire and its Ecological Effects

To clear fields: fire. Indians' greatest ecological effect on North American landscapes
Occurred across continent, different effects depending on ecosystems: in Northeast, open, park-like forest in area around villages; in midwest, eastward extension of grasslands
More often than not, increased game resources by edge effect: grassy, open landscape

VII. Sacrificing Buffalo to Make the Corn Grow

Fire as a genuine manipulation of landscape we'd recognize as such: virgin land a myth
But for Indians the most important effort at manipulation came through universe of ritual:
Indian communities recognized their vulnerability to fluctuation in seasons, and sought to regularize their subsistence by supplicating the spirits that controlled fluctuations.
All linked in ritual relationships: story of Petalesharo being told by Quaker missionary that he should stop hunting, settle down, and depend solely on "civilized" farming; Petalesharo responded that to stop hunt would mean stopping the sacrifice of bison meat, which in turn would mean that corn crops would fail. Missionary thought he was crazy. Who was right?