

Pohonichi Miwok Myths from "Indian Myths of South Central California" (1907) by A. L. Kroeber

[Editor's Note: I've only reproduced the four Miwok Myths that appear in the paper. These myths were given second-hand by the Yokuts, who live just southwest of the Pohonichi Miwok. Myths of other tribal groups, including several Yokuk, 6 Costanoan, and 1 Shoshonean, are available in the original paper. The Pohonichi Miwok, now called the Mariposa Miwok or South Sierra Miwok, historically lived in the southern part of present Yosemite National Park and adjacent foothill areas. — DEA 2004]

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INDIAN MYTHS OF SOUTH CENTRAL CALIFORNIA

BY
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I. INTRODUCTION

The material on which this paper is based was collected in the years 1901 to 1906 as part of the work of the Ethnological and Archaeological Survey of California carried on by the University of California's Department of Anthropology, which owes its existence and continued support to the interest of Mrs. Phoebe A. Hearst.

California presents three principal ethnological divisions. First, in the extreme northwest of the state, bordering on the Pacific Ocean and Oregon, is a small area whose native culture is fundamentally isolated to an unusual degree. Second, in the region commonly known as Southern California, that is to say the territory south of Tehachapi pass in the interior and of Point Concepcion on the coast, there is some diversity of ethnological conditions, but the area as a whole is quite distinctly marked off from the remainder of the state. Third, there is the remaining two-thirds of the state, an area which has been called, in an ethnological sense, and in distinction from the Northwestern and Southern areas, the Central region. This central region consists of what is ordinarily known as northern California and central California, two areas of about equal extent lying north and south of the latitude of San Francisco. Northern California is constituted by the Sacramento valley and the adjacent portions of the Sierra Nevada and Coast Range; central California, by the San Joaquin valley and the parts of the same mountain ranges contiguous to it. The Sacramento valley drains southward, the San Joaquin valley northward. The drainage of both enters the ocean at San Francisco; so that the selection of this city to mark the separation of the northern and southern halves of the Central region is not fortuitous.

The mythology of northwestern California is still rather imperfectly represented by collections of traditions, but its general characteristics have been discussed in a paper on "Wishosk Myths" in a recent number of the *Journal of American Folk-Lore*.¹ The mythology of the Central region, both northern and southern, is treated in the present paper. That of the northern half is comparatively well known through several collections, and will be summarized here. That of the southern half,—south central California,—is very little known, but is illustrated by the new material which constitutes the present paper. The mythology of Southern California is quite distinct from that of the North-western and Central regions, and deserves separate discussion.²

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Mythology of the Southern Central Region.

...

Miwok.

The few Miwok stories given were obtained in the course of investigations among the northernmost Yokuts. They were told by two men living among the Chukchansi of Madera county, Bill White and Captain Charlie. Both of these men were half Pohonichi Miwok and half Yokuts in descent. The humming-bird of the Costanoan people disappears as a creator among the Miwok. The eagle is mentioned as chief in mythical times, but, at least in the stories told, about everything of consequence connected with creation is performed by Coyote. The Miwok creation myth mentioned as given by Powers is from a more northerly portion of the stock than that represented in the present paper, but shows Coyote in the same important role. The existence of primeval water, and a diving for the earth from which the world is made, are the only incidents contained in the fragment that was obtained by the author. A second story tells of the theft of fire though not through him. All these ideas are typical of almost all parts of central California. It is illuminating that the fourth myth given, the only one obtained not dealing with creation, is that of the bear and deer children.

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II. THE MYTHS

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7.—Pohonichi Miwok. The Beginning of the World.

Told among the Chukchansi Yokuts.

Before there were people there was only water everywhere. Coyote looked among the ducks and sent a certain species (Chukchansi: yimelt) to dive. At first it said it was unable to. Then it went down. It reached the bottom, bit the earth, and came up again. Coyote took the earth from it and sent it for chanit (Yokuts name) seeds. When the duck brought these he mixed them with the earth and water. Then the mixture swelled until the water had disappeared. The earth was there.

8.—Pohonichi Miwok. The Theft of Fire.

Told among the Chukchansi Yokuts.

At first, there was no fire. The turtle had it all. He sat on it and covered it up. He lived far up in the east in the mountains. Coyote went to that place. He lay down like a piece of wood. The people who lived there came by and saw him. "I am going to take this piece of wood," they said. They took him home and put him in the fire. Coyote tried to get into the fire under the turtle. The turtle said: "Stop pushing me." Now Coyote got some of the fire. Then he ran down-hill with it westward into this country, where then there was no fire and it was cold. He caught a quail and with its fat he made his fire blaze up. Now the people first all became warm. The Mono (Shoshoneans) were far back up in the hills; the Chukchansi (Yokuts) in the middle; the Pohonichi (Miwok) were the ones who received the fire. Coyote was one of them. That is why the Mono cannot speak well; it is too cold where they live.

Coyote made the eagle the chief of the people. They enjoyed themselves and made dances. They were warm now because they had fire. They lived well. They wore no clothes. Some men wore a blanket of rabbit skins or of deer skin; others wore nothing. They used hollow stones to cook in, made of soft red stone. The eagle told them: "Go out and catch rabbits," and then they caught rabbits to eat. To get salt they went beyond the North Fork of the San Joaquin.

9.—Pohonichi Miwok. The Origin of Death.

Told among the Chukchansi Yokuts.

When the first person died Coyote was south of him, the meadow-lark to the north. Now the dead person began to stink. The meadow-lark smelled it. He did not like it. Coyote said: "I think I will make him get up." The meadow-lark said: "No, do not. There be too many. They will become so hungry that they will eat each other. Coyote said: "That is nothing, I do not like people to die." But the meadow-lark told him: "No, it is not well to have too many. There will be others instead of those that die. A man will have many children. The old people will die but the young will live." Then Coyote said nothing more. So from that time on people have always died. Coyote said: "It will be best to put them into the fire." And so the dead were buried.

10.—Pohonichi Miwok. The Bear and Deer Children.

Told among the Chukchansi Yokuts.

The thunders were two boys with supernatural powers. Their mother was the deer. The grizzly bear also had two children. The two women went to the creek looking for clover (Chukchansi: malich). Now they loused each other. Then the bear bit the back of the deer's neck and killed her. The two deer-children made a little sweat-house. After the bear had killed and eaten their mother, they killed the two bear-children in this sweat-house with fire. Then they struck the ground and made a noise and fled to their grandfather. He was powerful and had a large sweat-house. The bear pursued them. She had nearly caught them when they escaped into the sweat house. The bear put in her head looking for them. Her hind legs were still outside. The boys' grandfather had supernatural powers with fire; his amulet was a white rock at the top of the house. When all the bear's body except her hind legs was in the house as she looked about for the two boys, the white fire-rock entered her anus and burned her to death inside. Then the two young deer became thunders. After awhile they also had supernatural powers. They made so much noise in the house that their grandfather was afraid. They went up above, where they still are. 1

The half-Chukchansi from whom the Pohonichi tales just given were obtained did not seem to know any story of the stealing of the sun, of a hero who is dug out of the ground as a child, and of a contest between the coyote and the lizard determining the shape of the human hand.

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1 The Miwok of Yosemite also state that the thunders are two boys who were deer. They control snow and rain.

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III. ABSTRACTS.

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7. *Pohonichi Miwok*. At first there is only water. Coyote sends a duck to dive and it brings up earth, from which he makes the world. (Cf. 1, 11, 15, 25, 37.)

8. *Pohonichi Miwok*. The turtle, far in the mountains, alone has fire. Coyote turns himself into a piece of wood, is put the fire, and runs off with it to the Miwok. (Cf. 16, 26.)

9. *Pohonichi Miwok*. On the first human death, Coyote wishes to revive the person, but the meadow-lark, thinking there will be no room on the earth, prevails that men should die. Coyote institutes cremation of the dead. (Cf. 12, 17, 38.)

10. *Pohonichi Miwok*. The grizzly bear and the deer, two women, each have two children. The two women go out together and the grizzly bear kills the deer. The deer children kill the two bear children in a sweat-house, and flee from the grizzly bear to their grandfather. As she enters his sweat-house she is killed by his supernatural power. The two boys become thunders. (For the thunder twins, cf. 23. Cf. the Kwakiutl, Çatloltq, Thompson, Kathlamet, and Lutuami parallels cited by Dixon, 341; also Dixon, 79., and Powers, 341.)

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A. L. Kroeber

About the Author

A. L. Kroeber was born June 11, 1876. He is known as an influential anthropologist of the early 20th century. He sought to understand the nature of culture and its processes through studying the cultures of the American Indian people. He was a professor at University of California Berkeley and is most known for his work with Ishi, the last survivor of the Yahi Indian people. A. L. Kroeber died in October 5, 1960.

Bibliographical Information

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