

The Origin of Death*

The story of the origin of death, due to a decision of two personages, one of whom wants man to be immortal, while the other one wishes him to die, is widely spread in western North America.

Among the *Thompson Indians*, Coyote and Raven discuss whether man is to be immortal or mortal. Raven wants man to die, because otherwise there would be too many people. He calls them his enemies. In a council, Raven, Crow, Fly, Maggot, vote for death, because they want to feed on corpses. Coyote wants death to be like sleep. The decision is made in favor of Raven, and Raven's daughter is the first one to die. When Raven wishes to change the decision, Coyote says that it cannot be altered (Teit, MAFLS 11: 1). In another version Spider says that Ant will cut himself in two, and will die. Ant replies that he will revive after a few days. Spider wants people to remain dead, because otherwise there would be too many. Fly is consulted, and decides in favor of Spider, because he wants his children to live on the dead bodies. Spider's child dies, and in vain he regrets the decision (Teit, JE 8: 329). In still another version Raven asks Old-One to let his child die for good (Teit, JE 8: 330). — In the *Kutenai* tale the chief wishes that everybody shall die twice. The people agree, excepting Raven, who wants to eat the eyes of corpses. His decision is accepted. The people kill Raven's two children, and he wishes in vain to have the previous decision reversed (Boas, BBAE 59: 213). — The *Lillooet* versions are as follows: some one asks Raven that people shall die. Raven consents. The man's child dies, and he regrets the decision (Teit, JAFL 25: 356). In another version Raven wins over Old-One,

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and therefore people die. Raven's child is the first one to die, and he regrets the decision (Teit, JAFL 25: 356). It seems likely that in the former *Lillooet* version the persons have been reversed by mistake. — A *Shuswap* fragment probably refers to the same tale. The son of Old-One dies, and thus death is introduced (Teit, JE 2: 746). — A *Sanpoil* tale is not very clear. A man kills and buries his son, and his sister disappears in the cave in which her brother had been buried. Fox, Hawk, and Eagle try in vain to bring her back. Three days after this the Vulture loses his daughter, and asks the chief to restore her to life. Then he is told, that, since at his instance it was decided that people shall die, the girl cannot be restored (Gould, MAFLS 11: 106). — The *Ute* tell of the discussion of two brothers. The younger one wants man to return after death; the elder one wants him to remain dead. The younger then kills the elder one's child, which, owing to the previous decision, cannot return to life (Powell, RBAE 1: 44). — The *Shoshoni* version is very brief. Wolf says that the Indians shall not die, Coyote wants them to die (Lowie, PaAM 2: 239). — The *Assiniboin* say that Iⁿktoⁿmⁱ discussed the question of life and death with the animals. Some one wanted people to revive after four days, but Iⁿktoⁿmⁱ decided they should remain dead (Lowie, PaAM 4: 104). — The *Quinault* tell that Eagle's child dies, and Raven decides that it must remain dead (Farrand, JE 2: 111). — The *Coos* say that child of a man dies. His cousin wants it to remain dead, while he himself wants it to come back after four days. Then the child of the other man dies and cannot be revived (Frachtenberg, CU 1: 43; translation in lower Umpqua, CU 4: 41). — In *Takelma*, Coyote refuses to lend his blanket to a Bug whose child has died because he does not want it to revive. Then Coyote's child dies, and cannot be revived on account of his previous refusal (Sapir, UPenn 2: 99, see also JAFL 20: 49). — The *Klamath* say that death was arranged in a discussion between K'mu'-kamtch, Mole, Fly-Bug, and Garter-Snake. Garter-Snake wants man to shed his skin as he does, while the others want man to grow old and die (Gatschet, CNAE 2: 103). — Professor Kroeber informs me that the *Yurok* have several versions of the tale of the origin of death, in all of which the larva of a locust, sometimes associated with the mole, appear as the actors. Often they are designated as «those through whom we die». According to one ver-

sion, they plot death, and they are evils that are partly checked; in another one there is an argument in which they prevail over their opponents. The latter become anchored under certain rocks along the course of the river in which their spirits still reside. — The *Hupa* tell that the culture-hero tries to travel around the world to make it large enough for people, when old, to be rejuvenated. His enemies plot to prevent this, and place women in his way who seduce him and thus thwart his plan. Therefore man is mortal (Goddard, UCal 1: 132). — According to the *Shasta*, Cricket's child dies, and Coyote wants it to be buried. He wants man to die, because the world will be too full. When Coyote's child dies, the previous arrangement cannot be changed (Dixon, JAFL 23: 19; Kroeber, UCal 4: 180). — In another version the same story is told of Spider and Coyote (Frachtenberg-Farrand, JAFL 28: 209). — Among the *Wintun*, Ollebis wants people to go up to the sky when old, to bathe there, and return young. He orders Buzzard to build a road for this purpose. Coyote tells Buzzard to stop work. Coyote is the first to die (Curtin, *Creation Myths of Primitive America*, 163, 174). The *Achomawi* tell that Fox wants man to come back after death. Coyote wants him to remain dead. Nobody comes back after death, and so Coyote prevails (Powers, CNAE 3: 273). — The *Yana* tell that Coyote, Cottontail-Rabbit, Gray-Squirrel, and Lizard are in a sweat-house. Coyote wants man to die. The others object, and want the dead to come back. Lizard causes a man to become sick. He dies, and is buried in a sweat-house. He moves until Coyote kicks the grave. Then the people make a rattlesnake, which kills Coyote's son. Although he wishes him to revive, the former decision cannot be changed (Sapir, UCal 9: 91). — Among the *Maidu*, Earth-Namer wants people to come back to life. Coyote objects. Then Coyote's son is bitten by a rattlesnake and dies. In vain he wishes him to revive (Dixon, BAM 17: 46, 47; PAES 4: 29, 51). In another *Maidu* version, Earth-Initiate wants people to revive. Coyote objects (Dixon, BAM 17: 43; JAFL 16: 34). Still another *Maidu* version has been recorded by Merriam. Hi'-kaht wants people to revive. Meadow-Lark objects, and Coyote agrees with Meadow-Lark. Then Coyote's child is bitten by a rattlesnake and dies. It cannot be revived on account of the previous decision (Merriam, *The Dawn of the World*, 55). The *Nishinam* (southern *Maidu*) say that Moon wanted men to

return, as the moon waxes and wanes. Coyote wanted bodies to be cremated. The Moon created the rattlesnake, which killed Coyote's child, and the decision could not be changed (Powers, CNAE 3: 341). — The *Wishosk* have a similar contest between Frog and Spinagarlu. Frog's child dies, and Spinagarlu decides that he shall remain dead. Later on Spinagarlu's child dies and cannot be revived (Kroeber, JAF 18: 96, 499). — In a *Miwok* tale, Black-Lizard wants people to revive. Meadow-Lark refuses, saying that dead bodies stink (Merriam, *l.c.*, 55). In another version Falcon tries to revive his wife, but Meadow-Lark says that he smells a dead body. If he had not done so, the dead would revive after four days (*Ibid.*, 132). In still another version Coyote is south of the first person that died; Meadow-Lark, north. The corpse stinks. Coyote wants to revive the dead one, but Meadow-Lark objects, saying that there will be too many people (Kroeber, UCal 4: 203). — The *Gashowu Yokuts* say that some people wanted the dead to lie near the house for three days. Meadow-Lark disliked the smell, and persuaded people to burn the body (Kroeber, UCal 4: 205). A rather confused statement has been recorded among the *Truhohi Yokuts*. Two insects argue. One of them does not want many people to live. He arranges that medicine-men shall kill people, and that there shall be a ceremony for the dead. Coyote agrees. Other people do not like it. Apparently this belongs to a similar tale. A *Yau-elmani Yokuts* story seems to be confused with the origin of the human hand. It is stated that Coyote brought it about that people die because human hands are not closed like his. Lizard then made the human hands as they are; but Coyote ordained that man should die. — Among the *Yuki*, death is brought into the world through the instrumentality of Coyote, whose son dies and is buried by him. The creator offers to restore him to life, but Coyote insists that the dead shall remain dead (Kroeber, UCal 4: 184). — The *Pomo* of Clear Lake believe that Meadow-Lark is responsible for permanent death (Merriam, *l.c.*, 213). — The *Luiseno* tell of a quarrel in which Fog, Thunder (?), and Wind (?) wanted man to die, while others wanted him to live and change. No further details are given, but the myth seems to form part of that of the dying god (Kroeber, JAF 19: 313). — Among the *Diegueño* the people deliberate whether they shall die forever, leave for a time and return, or live forever. The Fly decides that they are to

die forever (Du Bois, JAFL 14: 183). — The *Papago* say that a Worm wanted people to die, and that death was introduced as a result of a discussion in which it was said that the world would be too small if everybody continued to live (H. R. Kroeber, JAFL 25: 97). — The *Cœur d'Alène* tale probably belongs here, although the record differs somewhat in type. A woman has twin children who faint away. When their mother returns in the evening, she notices tracks of feet. She observes the children secretly, and hears them arguing. The one says it is better to be dead; the other one wishes to be alive. When they discover her, they stop talking; and since that time people die. Apparently this story contains elements of the dog-mother story¹ (Teit, MAFLS 11: 125).

I doubt whether the *Wishram* story of the origin of death belongs here. Coyote's and Eagle's wives and their two sons die. They are brought back from the country of the Ghosts, but Coyote lets them escape from the box in which they are carried. Therefore people die for good. If he had not done so, they would come back to stay in our world during the fall and spring.

Of somewhat different type is the story of the Plains. Two individuals agree that if an object thrown into the water comes up after having been thrown in, man shall revive. If it stays at the bottom, he shall remain dead. In a tale of the *Hare Indians* the beetle *agotsuté* (*Lamia obscura*) and Frog argue. The former wants man to die; the latter, to live. The former throws a stone into the water, which sinks, and therefore man dies (Petitot, 115). — The *Dog-Rib Indians* say that the animals wanted the dead to be like seeds thrown into the water, that spring to life. The culture-hero Chapewee, however, decided that they were to be like stones, that disappear (Sir John Franklin, *Narrative of a Second Expedition to the Shores of the Polar Sea* [London, 1828], p. 293). — The *Kaska* tell that Fox and Bear have a contest. Fox throws a stick into the water, which rises to the surface: therefore old people are to come back young. Then Bear throws a stone on top of the stick, so that it does not come up again, and therefore people do not revive after they have died (Kaska, JAFL 30: 434, 444). — In an *Arapaho* story, buffalo-chips are thrown into the water, which float.

¹ See, for instance, Thompson Indians (Teit, MAFLS 6: 62; 11: 30).

Then a stone is thrown in, which sinks (Dorsey and Kroeber, FM 5: 17). In another *Arapaho* version a stick is thrown first, then a buffalo-chip, pith, and a stone. The story is referred to the whites and the Indians, pith representing the whites (*Ibid.*, FM 5: 81). The same tale occurs among the *Blackfeet*. Old-Man throws into the water a buffalo-chip, saying that if it floats, people shall be dead for four days. Old-Woman does not accept this, but throws a stone into the water, saying that if it sinks, people shall remain dead forever (Wissler, PaAM 2: 20). In another version the woman's child dies a few days after, and cannot be revived on account of the previous decision (Grinnell, *Blackfoot Lodge Tales*, 138). In a *North Piegan* version the same discussion occurs; but when Old-Man throws the buffalo-chip, Old-Woman transforms it into stone (Wissler, PaAM 2: 21). At another place it is stated that a woman's child is sick. Old-Man goes to a river with the mother, and asks her whether he shall throw a stone or buffalo-chip. If what he throws floats, the child will recover; if it sinks, it will die. She chooses the stone, which sinks, and therefore the child dies. Therefore all the people must die (Grinnell, *Blackfoot Lodge Tales*, 272). — In a *Cheyenne* tale it is agreed that if a stone floats, and if a buffalo-chip sinks, man is to live. When the stone is thrown into the water, it floats for a moment and finally sinks. When the chip is thrown in, it sinks for a moment and then rises (Kroeber, JAFL 13: 161). — In the *Comanche* story it is said that in former times the dead came to life after four days. Coyote throws a stone into the water and says the dead shall do as the stone. As it did not come back, the dead remain dead (Lowie-St. Clair, JAFL 22: 280). — The *Jicarilla Apache* say that Raven divined to see whether people would die. First he threw into the water a stick on which skins are stretched when drying. When this came to the surface, he tried again and threw a stone muller. It did not come to the surface, and therefore people die (Goddard, PaAM 8: 194). Russel records the same story from the *Jicarilla Apache*, telling that a log was thrown into the water which sank (JAFL 11: 258). — The *Navaho* tell of a divination. The hide-scraper is thrown into the water; and the disputants say that if it floats, man is to live. When Coyote divines, he throws a stone into the water, and, since it sinks, man is mortal. He says that if man were not mortal, the earth would be too small (Matthews, MAFLS 5: 77).

Hans Egede has also recorded a similar tale from *Greenland*. A dispute arose between two men regarding the advantages of having man die. Since that time man is mortal (see also Rink, *Tales and Traditions of the Eskimo*, 41; David Crantz, *Historie von Grönland* [Barby, 1765], 262). I do not feel quite certain that this story is correctly interpreted. It is probably analogous to the story of the origin of day and night, told on the west coast of Hudson Bay (Boas, BAM 15: 306).

Petitot (114) records another *Hare-Indian* tale, in which it is said that a man and his wife were playing and dancing on the border of the sky. They began to cry, «Oh, our children!» and since that time man is mortal.

It appears from these notes that the story of the origin of death due to a discussion occurs in two principal forms – a western one, in which the decision is made in a council; a second one, in which the decision is due to an act of divination. In the former case all the typical forms of the story end with the incident that the child of the person who instituted death dies, and that then the decision cannot be revoked. This story is found in a continuous territory extending from southern California northward as far as Lillooet. It is probably not known to the coast tribes in the region of the Columbia River. The second type, in which death is due to the outcome of divination, has been recorded among northern Athapascan tribes, the Arapaho, Blackfeet, Cheyenne, Comanche, Jicarilla Apache, and Navaho. It is therefore characteristic of the whole region of the eastern foot-hills of the Rocky Mountains and of the adjoining territory. It cannot be stated with certainty how far east it extends in the Mackenzie area.

Outside of the district here described, tales of other types are found. The tales of the origin of death which are found on the North Pacific coast north of Vancouver Island have been discussed in my summary of Tsimshian mythology (RBAE 31: 663). — In the *Pawnee* tale of the origin of the basket-game the origin of death is mentioned. The gods make the images of a boy and of a girl. They give arrows to the boy, and order him to shoot animals in order to see whether man is to be mortal or immortal. They say, «Let him kill one of the animals; and whatever kind he kills, let it be so!». There is no further explanation of the incident (Dorsey, CI 59: 44). In a quite different tale, Lightning places the constellations on the ground. They would have

lived on earth an immortal race if a wolf had not been sent by the star Fool-Coyote to steal Lightning's bag. The Wolves are killed by the people, and thus death is introduced (Dorsey, MAFLS 8: 17). — The *Caddo* say that Coyote was dissatisfied because some dead returned while others staid away. Therefore he arranged so that everybody should remain dead (Dorsey, CI 41: 14). In another version it is said that all the people want the dead to return after a short time. Coyote wants them to remain dead. The dead are revived in a medicine-lodge to which the souls come in a whirlwind. Coyote shuts the door of the lodge when the whirlwind approaches, and since that time people die (*Ibid.*, 15). — The tales of the *Cherokee* (Mooney, RBAE 19: 254) and of the *Zuñi* (Cushing, RBAE 13: 72), and of other tribes farther to the east, do not belong here (see also Cree [Simms, JAFL 19: 334], Winnebago [Radin, JAFL 22: 311]).

In the territory under discussion there are also some tales of the origin of death that do not belong here, as the *Hupa* story of the child of the culture-hero that was taken out of its grave by its father, but ran back ten times. For this reason people remain dead (Goddard, UCal 1: 224).

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