

AmerIndian Myths

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Water Jar Boy (Tewa):

(Paraphrased, with apologies to T. P. Coffin's "Indian Tales of North America".)

The people were living at Sikyatki. There was a fine looking girl who refused to get married. Her mother made water jars all the time. One day as she was using her foot to mix some clay, she told her daughter to go on with this while she went for water. The girl tried to mix the clay on a flat stone by stepping on it. Somehow some of it entered her. This made her pregnant, and after a time she gave birth. The mother was angry about this, but when she looked she saw it was not a baby that had been born, but a little jar. When the mother asked where it came from the girl just cried. Then the father came in. He said he was very glad his daughter had a baby. When he found out that it was a water jar, he became very fond of it. He watched it and saw it move. It grew, and in twenty days it had become big. It could go about with the other children and was able to talk. The children also became fond of it. They found out from his talk that he was Water Jar Boy. His mother cried, because he had no legs or arms or eyes. But they were able to feed him through the jar mouth. When snow came the boy begged his grandfather to take him along with the men to hunt rabbits. "My poor grandson, you can't hunt rabbits; you have no arms or legs." "Take me anyway," said the boy. "You are so old, you can't kill anything." His grandfather took him down under the mesa where he rolled along. Pretty soon he saw a rabbit track and followed it. Then a rabbit ran out, and he began to chase it. He hit himself against a rock. The jar broke and up jumped a boy. He was very glad his skin had been broken and that he was a big boy. He had lots of beads around his neck, earstrings of turquoise, a dance kilt and moccasins, and a buckskin shirt. He was fine-looking and handsomely dressed. He killed four jackrabbits before sunset, because he was a good runner. His grandfather was waiting for him at the foot of the mesa, but did not know him. He asked the fine looking boy, "Did you see my grandson anywhere?" "I am your grandson," said the boy. He said this because his grandfather looked so disappointed. "No, you are not my grandson." "Yes, I am." "You are only teasing me. My grandson is a round jar and has no arms and legs." Then the boy said, "I am telling you the truth. I am your grandson. This morning you carried me down here. I looked for rabbits and chased one, just rolling along. Pretty soon I hit myself on a rock. My skin was broken, and I came out of it. I am the very one who is your grandson. You must believe me." Then the old man believed him, and they went home together. When the grandfather came to the house with a fine looking man, the girl was ashamed, thinking the man was a suitor. The old man said, "This is Water Jar Boy, my grandson." The grandmother then asked how the water jar became a boy, and the two men told her. Finally, the women were convinced. One day he said to his mother, "Who is my father?" "I don't know," she replied. He kept on asking, but it just made her cry. Finally he said, "I am going to find my father, tomorrow." "You can't find him. I have never been with any man so there is no place for you to look for a father," she said. "But I know I have one," the boy said. "I know where he lives. I am going to see him." The mother begged him not to go, but he insisted. The next day she fixed food for him, and he went off toward the southwest to a place called Horse Mesa Point. There was a spring at this place. As he approached he saw

a man walking a little way from the spring. He said to the boy, "Where are you going?" "To the spring," the boy answered. "Why are you going there?" "I want to see my father." "Who is your father?" "He lives in this spring." "Well, you will never find your father," said the man. "Who is your father?" asked the man again. "Well, I think you are my father." "How do you know that?" "I just know, that's all." Then the man stared hard at the boy, trying to scare him. The boy just kept on saying, "You are my father." At last the man said, "Yes, I am your father. I came out of the spring to meet you." He put his arms around the boy's neck. He was very glad his boy had come, and he took him down to the spring. There were many people living there. The women and the girls ran up to the boy and put their arms around him, because they were glad he had come. This way he found his father and his father's relatives. He stayed there one night. The next day he went to his own home and told his mother he had found his father. Soon his mother got sick and died. The boy thought to himself, "It's no use for me to stay with these people," so he went to the spring. There he found his mother among the other women. He learned that his father was Red Water Snake. He told his boy that he could not live over at Sikyatki, so he had made the boy's mother sick so she would die and come to live with him. After that they all lived together.

How the Incas Learned to be Civilized:

(Paraphrased, with apologies to T. R. Roberts' "Gods of the Maya, Aztecs and Incas".) After the creation of humankind, the Sun god Viracocha (although some say it was Viracocha's father, Inti) decided that mankind was without aim or purpose. Humans wandered the earth without clothing, eating wild plants, small animals, and even other people. They mated indiscriminately so that no son knew who his father was. Without leadership, Viracocha believed, mankind would always be unhappy and would remain little better than an animal. So Viracocha looked around to see if there was not one group of people, among all those inhabiting the world, who had the special abilities to make them good leaders for all the rest of humankind. Viracocha found a very small tribe that showed promise: the Ayar. This tribe was so small that it had only eight people in it; four brothers and their four sisters, but they were very intelligent. They were so smart, in fact, that they had learned, without the aid of any god, to build crude huts for themselves and to make clothes out of leaves. Although this tribe had potential, there was a problem. The leader of the tribe, Ayar Cachi, was a strong, willful, and intemperate man who sometimes took out his anger on his brothers and sisters by beating them. At other times, he threw giant stones around the countryside, creating great gouges in the hills and making such loud noises that all the animals were scared away and the tribe went hungry because they could not find meat. The other three brothers, Manco Capac, Ayar Oco, and Ayar Ayca, and one of the sisters, Mama Occlo, wanted to do something about their loud and destructive brother. Each made many suggestions, but finally Mama Occlo came up with the best idea. The great weakness of Ayar Cachi, she said, was his pride, and all they had to do was to use this pride against him. She quickly outlined her plan, and Manco Capac, the bravest brother, volunteered to set it in motion. A few days later, Manco Capac said to Ayar Cachi, "My brother, there is a beautiful llama in a cave. He is the grandest creature I have ever seen, but I am too weak to pull him from the cave. Perhaps you, with your great strength, can drag him from the cave." "You are a weak and spindly

creature, Manco Capac, if you cannot pull a llama from a hole in the ground. Show me where it is and I will get the llama, and then I shall come back and beat you for your cowardice and weakness." Of course, there was no llama, but Manco Capac led Ayar Cachi to the mouth of a deep cave in a deep valley, and with no hesitation Ayar Cachi went down into it. No sooner had he descended into the dark than Manco Capac, Ayar Cachi, Ayar Oco, and Mama Occlo rushed to the opening and filled the mouth with stones. They then climbed the high mountains on either side of the cave's entrance and pushed these giant peaks into the valley so that the cave was covered with tons of rock. Try as he might, even the powerful Ayar Cachi could not escape, and to this day he is still in the cave. Every once in awhile, Ayar Cachi tries to escape, roaring and shaking the earth, as he tries to find a way out. This is why there have always been so many earthquakes in the region. Viracocha, who had seen the whole thing, was impressed, for he knew that great strength is not as powerful as the wisdom Mama Occlo had shown in creating the plan or the courage that Manco Capac had shown in carrying the plan out. Right then Viracocha decided he had found the people to teach the people of the earth all they needed to know to be happy and prosperous. So Viracocha called Manco Capac and Mama Occlo to him, saying: "You will be the instrument that I will use to help civilize the people of the world. Now they are dirty, hungry, and stupid because they live like animals. They wear no clothes, they mate with each other like dogs, and they eat whatever they can find on the ground. I will teach you everything about growing plants, building houses, making weapons, and weaving cloth. You will teach all people these things, and when they have learned these things they will be happy. You must teach them to work together, to share what they make with one another, and to worship me for giving them these things. When you have done this, I will make you rulers over the people so that you and your descendants can make certain that people will always do what I have decreed." Viracocha continued, "I also want you to build me a great city where I will be worshiped and from which you will rule. So that you may know where to build that city I give you this golden rod that is as long as a man's arm and as thick as two fingers. After you start on your journey to educate the people, stop at dusk to make camp. Before you settle in for the night, drive this rod into the ground. When you find a place where you can stick the rod its own length into the ground, there you will build my city, which you will call Cuzco-The Navel of the World-for Cuzco will be the source of a new life for the people of the world." After the god had taught Manco Capac and Mama Occlo all the arts of civilization, they set forth to teach and rule the world. When they made camp the first night, they thrust the golden rod into the ground, just as they had been ordered. But it went in only a few inches, so they knew they were not at the right place. The place where they first camped was called Caparec Tempu-The Morning Place. The next day, the couple reached the Valley of Cuzco, and that night, after they made camp, they again stuck the rod into the earth. To their amazement, it disappeared completely from view. The place where this happened was named Huanacauri, The Place of the Rainbow, because it was a place of great promise. Unhappily, the Valley of Cuzco was inhabited by fierce people who did not want to be civilized, and they ran out carrying rocks with which to kill Manco Capac and Mama Occlo. But Mama Occlo killed the first attacker with a sling, slit open his chest, ripped out his lungs, and inflated them into a bloody balloon. This gruesome action so terrified the people that they stopped in their tracks, threw themselves on the ground, and begged for forgiveness. After the battle, Manco

Capac and Mama Occlo gathered the people together and announced their commission from Viracocha. The people were easily convinced that these two truly had something valuable to teach them, for their clothes were magnificent and they wore large golden disks in their earlobes. The disks impressed everyone the most, and so Manco Capac announced that those who proved especially worthy would be rewarded by the right to wear earlobe plugs. To begin their teaching, brother and sister divided the people into males and females. Manco Capac taught the men the arts of farming, of irrigation, and of terracing the mountainsides; he showed them how to skin animals, tan the leather, and make sandals. Finally, knowing that as soon as the people of the valley grew wealthy with crops, others would want to steal from them, Manco Capac taught the men how to make weapons: clubs, slings, bolos, lances, and bows and arrows. He then taught them the arts of war. But many tribes joined the Incas without fighting, for they saw the wealth and the powerful army of the people of Cuzco and wanted to share in this life. Meanwhile, Mama Occlo taught the women how to build looms, weave cotton into cloth, and finally to make the cloth into clothes. She also explained how to build houses and how to group these dwellings into villages for protection. After seven years, Manco Capac and Mama Occlo sent out people from the Valley of Cuzco to tell others what they had learned. These people were dressed in the most beautiful clothes so that their words would carry more power, for what man or woman standing naked would not envy and respect those who wear beautiful, warm clothing? In this way, the knowledge of the Incas was spread from group to group, and civilization was brought to many.

Somagalags (Bella Coola):

(Paraphrased, with apologies to P. Monaghan's "Goddesses and Heroines".)

The mountain mother of the Bella Coola tribe of British Columbia; she arrived on earth at the Skeena River and began traversing what was then a flat, featureless terrain. Every time she met a man, she had intercourse with him and gave birth to another mountain. As the area is now very mountainous, it is clear that Somagalags had an active sexual appetite. Her children were hillocks when they were born, but she reared them up to be the enormous mountains that line the Pacific Coast of the North American continent today. When her children were old enough to take care of themselves, she settled down at the side of the ocean, where she built a cedar house and gave birth to four more children, all of them wolves. They were very hungry puppies, who wore her out gathering food for them. But every time she returned from a hunting trip to gather food, she heard human voices within her house, only to find when she entered, her wolf children all alone. Finally, upon returning one day, she crept quietly up to the cabin and peeked through a window. There inside were four strapping lads lounging about. She leapt through the window, a stick in her hand, and beat them each soundly. The boys admitted the error of their ways and, thereafter, took care of themselves. In return, Somagalags taught them all the secrets they needed to know to survive on this earth, including the proper ways to conduct rituals. Her sons thereupon went on to find wives and establish flourishing families, and Somagalags is therefore honored as the ancestral mother of the Bella Coola people.

Old Man Coyote (Shoshoni):

(Paraphrased, with apologies to D. A. Leeming's "The World of Myth".)

Old Man Coyote was sitting out on a hillside, resting. He was just too tired to go anywhere else. He looked at himself. His skin was patchy and wrinkled, and his claws were worn down to the bone, and he could feel that there were almost no teeth left in his mouth. "What am I going to do with myself?" Old Man wondered. "I can't hunt anymore, because I get short of breath when I run. If I did catch something I couldn't eat it, because I can't chew. What's going to happen to me? I used to have grandchildren I could depend on, but they've all run away and started families of their own." He looked out across the prairies, and there stood a young, strong buffalo bull, with the sun shining on him and his head in the air, all proud and strong. "My," Old Man thought, "I used to be just like that; I wish I could be again. Maybe he can help me." He got up and hobbled down the hillside, and the buffalo just stood and watched, because he knew Old Man couldn't hurt him if he wanted to. "What do you want?" the buffalo asked, when Old Man got pretty close to him. "Oh," said Old Man, "I don't want much. I just want to be young and strong again, like you. Buffaloes have all the power. They are everything for the poor Indians: food, shelter, clothes . . ." "I know that," roared the buffalo. "Is that what you want? You want to be young and strong and beautiful?" "Yes," answered Old Man. "I can do it," the buffalo told him, "but remember. If I do it, I am not giving you my power. You will look like a young strong buffalo, but you will still be Old Man Coyote inside. Don't ever forget that." "I won't," Old Man promised. "Then sit down there on the side of the mountain, and close your eyes," the buffalo directed. "Whatever you do, keep them closed until I tell you to open them." "All right," said Old Man. He sat down on the south slope of the mountain and shut his eyes. The buffalo came running at him, and then he ran around Old Man. The first time Old Man kept his eyes shut tight, but the second time the buffalo stirred up so much dust, he sneezed and opened them. "You've just about wrecked it," the buffalo complained. "I really was going to give you some power the fourth time around, but now you've spoiled things. Shut your eyes again, and I'll do what I can." Old Man shut his eyes and put his paws over them. The buffalo ran around him again, and the fourth time he hit Old Man in the back, hard. They both tumbled down the side of the mountain, and when they got to the bottom, the buffalo said, "Now you can open your eyes. Old Man opened them and looked at himself. He was a young, springy buffalo calf, all full of life. "Thank you, my friend," he said to the buffalo, but the buffalo just snorted, and turned away. "I haven't got any time to play with youngsters," he said. Well, for the next four years, Old Man really had himself a time. He was a young bull buffalo, growing up, and he felt wonderful. He ran and he wallowed in the shallow ponds, and he met a young buffalo woman, and made love to her. My, he was happy! When the Calf-Coyote was full grown, he was running across the prairie, when he met a poor, old ragged coyote. "Oh, help me, my friend," the old coyote said. "You have everything. Make me young and strong again, like you." Calf-Coyote thought how sad the other one looked, and he forgot what the buffalo had told him when he became young again himself. "All right," he said. So they went to the Bear Butte, very slowly, because the poor old coyote was just limping along. Sometimes Calf-Coyote got impatient and ran ahead, but the old coyote always called him back and asked for help, so he would slow down again because the other was so pitiful. When they got to the Bear Butte, Calf-Coyote showed the other just where to

sit and told him to close his eyes. And he ran around and around him, twice, raising the biggest cloud of dust he could, until the other sneezed and opened his eyes. "Now you've spoiled it," Calf-Coyote said, "but I'll try again and see what I can do." So he ran around him twice more, and hit him in the back. They rolled down the side of Bear Butte, and when they got to the foot, there were two old hungry, poor Coyotes. You see Old Man had forgotten that the buffalo hadn't given him any power. So always remember, don't start anything unless you know you can finish it.

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The following story is paraphrased. Source: Vi Hilbert's, **Basket Ogress**: Haboo, Native American Stories from Puget Sound, Seattle - University of Washington Press, 1985.

A group of children knew a woman who lived all alone near the river, a few days march from their village. The children knew that she was lonely, and they wanted to go visit with her. When they asked their parents for permission to go, their parents said, "No. You can't go, because it is too far away and the Giant Woman might get you when you are away from home. The Giant Woman is powerful. She would put you in her huge clam basket." The children ignored their parents and decided to go anyway. They got into a canoe and went on their way to visit the lonely woman. When night came, they made themselves a camp on the other side of the river. They built a fire and cooked their supper. One of the children was a hunchback. When the children divided their supper, Hunchback was given the tail part. They traveled for several days. Each evening they would stop to camp overnight and eat their supper. Every time, they would give Hunchback the tail part for his share. Hunchback finally said, "If you are always going to be giving me the tail part when I would really rather have the tips, I will call the Giant Woman!" When night came again and they stopped to camp and eat their supper, it was still the tail part which he was given. Now Hunchback hollered! He hollered: "Come downhill, Giant Woman, Come downhill, Giant Woman. It is just the tail part that I am given by my playmates !" The Giant woman heard right away. She put her basket on her back and she walked. She was a huge person, this Giant Woman. She arrived where the children were. Right away she began to pick up the children one by one and put them into her basket. She grabbed Hunchback first and put him there. When all of the children were in the basket, the Giant Woman started back to her home. Suddenly she could feel something catch at her basket. She thought, "Oh, it must be Hunchback who has caught onto something." Hunchback had squirmed and squirmed until he managed to get himself up on top of the other children. Each time they came to a tree leaning over the path he tried to grab hold of it. On the fourth try, he did it. Giant Woman went on walking. When she arrived at her home with the children she immediately gathered rocks and placed them on her fire to heat. When they were good and hot she began to take the children out of her basket. Then she found that Hunchback was missing. "Oh, Hunchback isn't here ! Where is he? Maybe he managed to run away." Giant Woman ran! Hunchback was in the canoe, shoving off from shore. His paddle had holes in it. When Giant Woman threw

rocks at him, he held up his paddle and the rocks just went through. Hunchback paddled hard. Each time she threw a rock at him, he raised his paddle and the rock just went through a hole. Giant Woman gave up. she went home and put more rocks on her fire. She wanted the rocks to be very hot to cook her supper fast. The children huddled together and began talking to each other. They watched the Giant Woman heating all of those rocks on the fire. Giant Woman noticed and said to them, "What are you children saying?" The children carefully answered, "Oh, it is just that we are so happy for you that you are heating rocks. We would like for you to sing and dance before you cook us there." Giant Woman was so flattered at the request that she said, "All right!" The children said, "You will dance!" She proudly said, "Yes, I will." Now Giant Woman danced. She sang this as she danced: The children will be roasted on the rocks. The children will be roasted on the rocks. The children will be roasted on the rocks. The children said, "Oh my, but your song is so nice. Sing more. " And again Giant Woman sang and danced. The oldest and strongest of the children were making plans: "We had better push her onto the hot rocks." Giant Woman asked, "What are you children saying?" They cautiously answered, "Oh, we are just so happy for you." They whispered to each other, "When she comes near us, let's all push her." Oh! Giant Woman was coming closer, still singing. As she came close to them, all of the oldest, strongest children pushed her. Right onto the hot rocks she fell. She screamed, "Remove me, children. Remove me from the fire and I will return you to your home. " One of the children said, "Get a forked stick, and we shall remove grandmother from the fire. We shall remove her. Get a forked stick." However, the children took the forked stick, and everyone pressed her down onto the hot rocks until she was just stuck there, roasting. That is the end of the story.