



ABORIGINAL TRADITIONS: MYTH

Sept 18



Last Class

■ “Indigenous Religions”

- *What does it mean?*
- *To whom does it refer?*
- *How are these groups connected?*

■ Oral Traditions

- *Orality and literacy are not qualitative terms, one is not more advanced than the other*
- *Are a knife and fork more advanced than chopsticks?*
- *More crude?*

Indigenous or Aboriginal?

- “Aboriginal”
 - *Earliest occupants of the land*
- In Canada, “Aboriginal Peoples” came into popular usage as collective noun for First Nations, Inuit, and Métis
- Distinction made legal in 1982

Indigenous or Aboriginal?

- “And now the federal government has moved to embrace Indigenous and all of its legal ramifications. By recognizing First Nations, Inuit and Métis as Indigenous Peoples, the government is acknowledging their internationally legal right to offer or withhold consent to development under the United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.”
- Bob Joseph, “Indigenous or Aboriginal: Which is correct?”
- <https://www.cbc.ca/news/indigenous/indigenous-aboriginal-which-is-correct-1.3771433>

Myths in Indigenous Religions

- How do we understand myths?
- What do myths do?

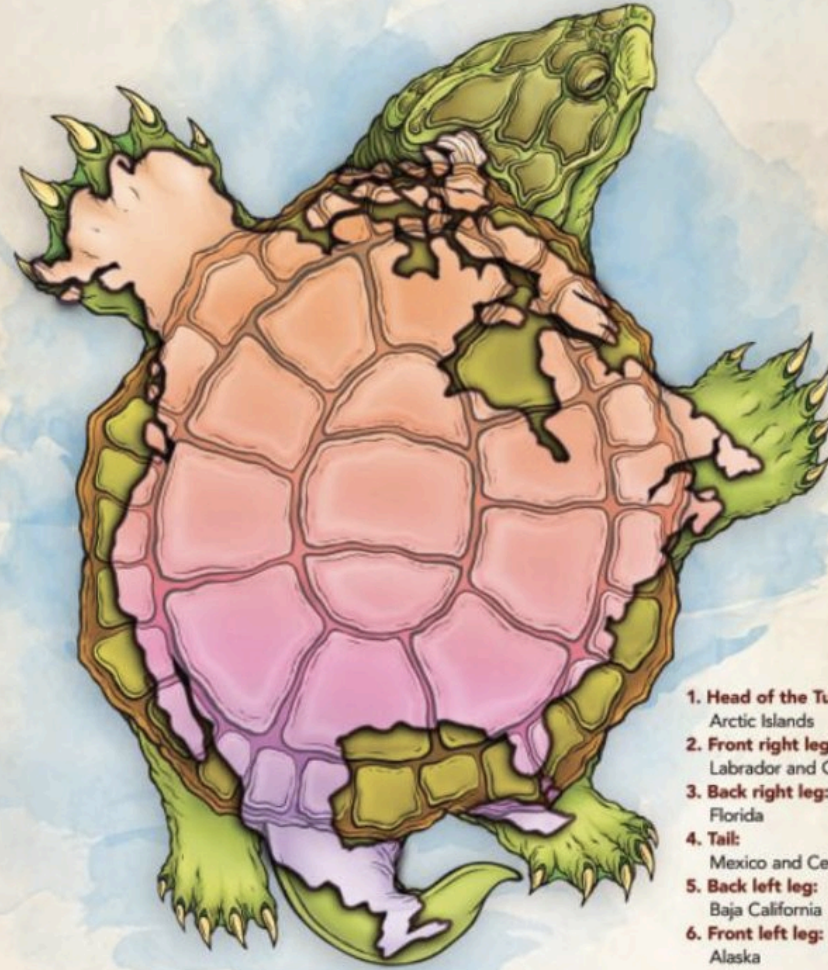
Origin Myths

- Earth Diver Tales
- Common to North American cultures across eastern woodlands area
- Generally, the world is destroyed by a flood
- Then an animal or deity brings the earth up from the waters

Turtle Island

- Sky Woman, a spirit being, descends to earth during the flood
- Seeing she is pregnant, a giant turtle offers to let her rest on his back
- She asks animals to dive to find soil, but all fail and drown
- The muskrat, the lowliest animal who was ridiculed by the others finally succeeds
- Sky Woman breathes life into the soil which spreads across the turtle's back to become North America

The Legend of Turtle Island



- 1. Head of the Turtle:**
Arctic Islands
- 2. Front right leg:**
Labrador and Quebec
- 3. Back right leg:**
Florida
- 4. Tail:**
Mexico and Central America
- 5. Back left leg:**
Baja California
- 6. Front left leg:**
Alaska

Long ago the world was covered with water, many creatures lived in the sea and the air above them. There came a time when Mother Earth was ready to give birth to her new children, but these new creatures were not water creatures and they needed somewhere new to live. The sea creature wanted to help Mother Earth. They had heard stories of earth far below the waters and the turtle agreed that if they could get some earth he would hold up the land for Mother Earth and her new children. Each animal took a turn trying to reach the bottom of the waters and each animal failed. Finally the brave little muskrat tried. He swam and swam until he saw the bottom, he knew that he couldn't make it there and back to the surface but he kept on swimming until he was able to grab some of the earth. The other animals waited and waited until they saw poor muskrat's body rise to the surface. All of the animals were sad but they saw that muskrat was able to do what none of they could; he had gathered some earth in his little paw. They took the earth and placed it on turtle's back and turtle began to grow and grow. Mother Earth now had a place for her children to live, she cast seed about and the land became beautiful and full of life. Turtle's back became a huge island that sits in the middle of the waters and is known today as America.

Meaning of Myths

- What do origin stories tell us?
- Many indigenous people in Canada refer to North America as “Turtle Island” and consider it sacred
- But it is not clear (or even apparent) that they think it was actually formed from a clump of mud on the back of a big reptile

Meaning of Myths

- Focus on relationships
- Desire for community
- Inherent relatedness of all aspects of existence

Meaning of Myths

- Tend not to imagine the beginning of time
- Presuppose the existence of the universe and focus on the origin of certain elements
 - *Language*
 - *Culture*
 - *landscape*
- Never a simple, idealized presentation of nature

Myths of the Afterlife

- Anishinaubae story
- A man whose beloved dies just before they are to be married journeys for months in search of the Path of Souls
- He finds the path, guarded by an old man
- The man will let him into the land of the dead only if he promises to return to his regular life once his wish is fulfilled

Myths of the Afterlife

- Anishinaubae story
- The man agrees, travels through a misty forest and turbulent river and finds the woman he loves
- After seeing her, he turns his canoe around and returns home as instructed, heart-broken but prepared now to continue with his life

Meaning of Myths

- What does this myth of the afterlife mean?
- Is it about the dead?
- The living?
- How?

Trickster Myths

- Tricksters are common in many indigenous religions
- Can be selfless or greedy
- Kind or cruel
- Funny or serious
- May be fools, may also reveal fools
- Often behave in scandalous ways
- Violating social order
- Not always a bad thing
- Also feature in popular culture

"You know what I noticed? Nobody panics when things go according to plan, even if the plan is horrifying. If tomorrow I tell the press that, like, a gangbanger will get shot, or a truckload of soldiers will be blown up, nobody panics. Because it's all part of the plan. But when I say that one little old mayor will die, well then *everyone loses their minds.*"

—Joker, in *The Dark Knight* (2008)



Nanabush (also Nanabozo)

Pictograph from Peterborough, Ont.



Trickster Myths

- Red Willows
- Nanabush is a trickster
- What characteristics does he display?
- What lesson do we learn?

New Myths

- Recall, for many indigenous traditions the sacred is ongoing in the present, not a static revelation in the distant past
- Contexts change, new myths are created

New Myths: Cargo Cults

- Cargo Cults emerged in the 20th century mostly in Southwest Pacific, especially after WWII
- local people believed that the goods arriving for armies were provided by deities or ancestors
- in order to receive shipments themselves they should imitate the newcomers
- they painted military insignia on their bodies, marched like soldiers, and constructed mock buildings and equipment, making guns from wood and radios from coconuts
- Some built replicas of airplanes, control towers, and headphones; waved landing signals; and lit torches along runways at night, all in the hope that the gods would send more cargo.

New Myths: Cargo Cults

- hopes were fueled by two related goals
- **First**, attaining the desired goods would allow for reciprocal exchanges with the Europeans—a practice that for many Indigenous cultures was central to establishing relationships
- **Second**, cargo cults often came to believe that these goods would help bring about a new age of social harmony, healing the wounds caused by the arrival of the colonists.

Cargo Myth: Hainuwele

- the myth of Hainuwele, Wemale tribe of West Ceram, west of New Guinea
- First recorded by anthropologists 1927

Cargo Myth: Hainuwele

- "Nine families of mankind came forth in the beginning from Mount Nunusaku where the people had emerged from clusters of bananas"
- an ancestor named Ameta found a coconut speared on a boar's tusk and, in a dream, was instructed to plant it.
- In six days a palm had sprung from the nut and flowered.
- Ameta cut his finger and his blood dripped on the blossom.
- Nine days later a girl grew from the blossom and, in three more days, she became an adolescent.
- Ameta cut her from the tree and named her Hainuwele, "coconut girl"

Cargo Myth: Hainuwele

- "But she was not like an ordinary person, for when she would answer the call of nature, her excrement consisted of all sorts of valuable articles, such as Chinese dishes and gongs, so that Ameta became very rich."
- During a major religious festival, Hainuwele stood in the middle of the dance grounds and, instead of exchanging the traditional areca nuts and betel leaves, she excreted a whole series of valuable articles (Chinese porcelain dishes, metal knives, copper boxes, golden earrings, and great brass gongs).
- After nine days of this: "The people thought this thing mysterious ... they were jealous that Hainuwele could distribute such wealth and decided to kill her."
- The people dug a hole in the middle of the dance ground, threw Hainuwele in, and danced the ground firm on top of her.
- Ameta dug up her corpse, dismembered it, and buried the cut pieces.
- From these, previously unknown plant species (especially tuberous plants) grew which have been, ever since, the principal form of food on Ceram

Hainuwele

- What might this myth mean?
- What do we know from it?
- How old is it?
- Is it an origin myth?