

The Yokuts Indians

by Mary Ann Brensel

BELIEFS

Yokuts believed in the power of spirits or gods in nature. They thought it was important not to make a spirit angry. They believed that birds and animals had spiritual power. They felt that the grizzly bear was an evil spirit and should not be killed. They thought that the eagle was a powerful spirit for good. Eagle feathers were very important religious objects.

Each member of the tribe had the spirit of an animal as a personal guardian, like what some people today call a “guardian angel.” If a Yokuts had a deer as guardian, he could never kill a deer or eat deer meat.

The Yokuts believed in life after death. They were respectful of death and were afraid to make a dead person angry. When someone died, the family was not allowed to say that person’s name out loud. Since it was easy to accidentally say the dead person’s name, the name was usually given to a new baby. That way the name could be said out loud and the dead person would not become angry.

A member of the tribe called a shaman was in charge of the religious ceremonies and beliefs. The Yokuts believed he could talk to the spirit-gods. His job was to cure sick people and scare off evil spirits. He also spoke to the gods and told them what the tribe needed.

Myths and Legends

compiled by Mary Ann Brensel

A Yokuts California Creation Story

A great flood occurred upon Earth long, long ago. While Earth was still covered with water, there were no living creatures upon the land. Then out of the sky one day glided an enormous Eagle with a black Crow riding upon its back, searching for a place to light.

Around and around Eagle flew until he discovered a projecting tree stump, or what appeared to be a stump, upon which he landed to rest. There on the flat surface was a home at last, a home which was large enough for Eagle and Crow to roost upon. From there, they surveyed the greenish gray water as far as they could see. The sky was a brilliant bright blue with a few white, drifting clouds occasionally swirled by a passing breeze. All seemed serene to Eagle and Crow.

Small fish were visible below the water, sometimes leaping out of the sea playfully. Hunger caused Eagle and Crow to swoop down, catching a meal for themselves from time to time. Soon a game developed between the two birds to see which one would be the winner in the fish-catching contest. Upon their return to the stump, however, they always shared their fish.

The two birds often flew in opposite directions exploring for land, and because of Eagle's great size and wingspan, he soared to great heights and surveyed widely. But no land did they find, and no other flying creatures did they see. Between themselves they wondered, "How can we possibly think of a way to make land? We know we cannot dive deep enough to find dirt, and the fish are of no help except to provide food." Day after day, these scenes were repeated as the birds explored in search of land and wondered how to create land.

One morning, much to their surprise, a Duck was swimming around and around their stump. Occasionally, it dived deep in the water and rose to the surface chewing small fish. One time, Duck emerged with more mud than fish in its mouth.

Eagle and Crow talked excitedly about this. "Can Duck possibly bring up enough mud for us to build land?" they wondered. How could they let Duck know that mud was what they needed most?

An idea occurred to Eagle, which he bird-talked to Crow. "If we supply fish for Duck, maybe he will bring up more mud than fish." Through trial and error, the two birds caught fish for Duck, placing them at the edge of the stump, until Duck learned that the fish were for him in exchange for mud. When Duck appeared on the surface after a deep dive, Eagle and Crow brushed off the mud from Duck's bill and his body with their wings. Progress was slow but steady.

Gradually, Eagle had a pile of mud on his side of the stump, and Crow had a similar pile on his side. Each placed fish on his own side for Duck, who now responded by carrying more and more mud to Eagle and Crow. This became a great game of fish-and-mud exchange.

Duck worked very hard, and consequently, he was always hungry. The birds were surprised at how large each one's mud pile grew every day. In bird talk they said, "Duck is helping us to make a new world. This we will share equally."

Occasionally, Eagle and Crow flew toward the horizon, exploring for any new signs of land. They always returned with nothing new to report; however, they did notice a slight lowering of water around the tree stump. "Surely the flood must be coming to an end," Crow and Eagle agreed.

Each day they watched for a change in the waterline. Each day their piles of mud seemed higher and higher. Faithful Duck kept up his good work as Eagle and Crow caught fish for him and scraped mud from him for each side of the new world.

One day, Eagle flew high and far in search of dry land and did not return until late. The sun had set and darkness had enveloped his world on the stump. The next morning to Eagle's great surprise, his pile of mud had grown much higher. After looming across at Crow's mud pile, however, Eagle was astounded to see that Crow had given himself twice as much mud while Eagle was away. "Is this your idea of sharing the new world equally?" shouted Eagle to Crow.

Of course, they quarreled all that day and the next over Crow's unfairness. The following day, however, they went back to work making their new land. Eagle

decided that he must catch up. He caught two fish for Duck and put them in his usual place. Duck responded by bringing up mud twice to Eagle in exchange for his two fish. All three animals worked very hard for many, many moons.

Gradually, Eagle's half of the new world became taller and taller, much taller than Crow's half, even though Crow seemed to work just as hard as Eagle. Duck was faithful to his task, never tiring in his effort to supply mud. Of course, Duck continued to give Eagle twice as much mud for his two fish. Crow never seemed to notice that Eagle's half of the new world was growing larger than his half.

One morning as the sun rose brightly the two birds looked down through the water and saw what appeared to be land. "So that is where Duck finds the mud," they said. They were pleased to see that the water was subsiding. How they hoped that soon they would be high and dry on their new world!

But all was not so easy, for that very night lightning flashed across the waters, and thunder rolled and rolled from one horizon to the other followed by a heavy, drenching rain. Eagle and Crow sought shelter in holes they dug into the sides of their mud piles. All night long the rain continued to fall, washing away much of the new world into the sea.

When the rain stopped and the sun rose, Eagle and Crow looked out upon the waters and saw an arc of many colors reaching from one edge of the horizon across the sky to the other horizon. This brilliant display held their eyes in wonderment. What did it mean? They marveled at how long the colors lingered in the sky. Eagle flew toward the scene for a close look, returning when the arc disappeared.

In bird talk, Eagle and Crow decided that the storm of the night before must have been a clearing shower. They began their land-building project again, hoping that Duck would resume his work as mud-carrier. Soon the sun's rays burned strong and hot, drying the mud until it was hard. Duck appeared, and the team of three continued to build the two halves of the new world.

Day by day, the waters subsided, and new land began to show above the waterline. Eagle's half emerged taller and taller and was hard-packed by the hot sun. Crow's share of the new world was still great, but it never became as large as Eagle's half of the new world.

In retelling this creation story, Yokuts tribal historians always claim that Eagle's half became the mighty Sierra Nevada Mountains. They also tell how Crow's half became known as the Coast Mountain Range.

Yokuts historians end their tale by saying that people everywhere honor the brave and strong Eagle, while Crow is accorded a lesser place because of his unfair disposition displayed during the creation of the new world by Eagle and Crow.

From *Myths and Legends of California and the Old Southwest*, compiled and edited by Katharine Berry Judson, 1912. Glenn Welker
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The Lizard Hand

It was Coyote who brought it about that people die. He made it thus because our hands are not closed like his. He wanted our hands to be like his, but Lizard said to him, "No. They must have my hand." He had five fingers, and Coyote had only a fist.

Coyote replied, "Well, then they will have to die." That is how it came to be that humans must experience death.

From Kroeber, University of California Publications in American Archaeology and Ethnology, iv, 231, No. 38.

A Yokuts Prayer

My words are tied in one
With the great mountains,
With the great rocks,
With the great trees,
In one with my body
And my heart.

You all do help me
With supernatural power.
And you, Day!
And you, Night!
All of you See me
One with this world!

From *The Tache-Yokuts: Indians of the San Joaquin Valley*, written by
Marjorie W. Cummins, Pioneer Publishing, Fresno, CA
<http://wwN.sacred-texts.com/nam/calscclsc18.htm>

The Origin of Fire

The people in the foothills had no fire. Only to the west in the plains was there a man who had fire, and he had it all. Now one day as the man slept, Antelope, selected for his swiftness, was sent to steal the fire. He took the fire and fled. Antelope was still in sight of the place from which he had started when a rain came and put out the fire. Then others tried to bring it. The last was Jackrabbit. After he had stolen the fire, he hid in a thick bush. There he burrowed and crouched over the fire, holding it in his hands under his belly. From this the palms of his hands are black. When he stole the fire, it was not extinguished, and so he obtained it for the people.

<http://WNW.sacred-texts.com/nam/calscclsc18.htm>

Why Animals Are the Way They Are

The birds and animals from the foothills went to war with the animals of the lake below. With the warriors from the mountains was Coyote. He had a large quiver full of arrows. In the morning he got up, knotted his hair behind, took his bow, and called to all, "Get up, get up, or I will kill you. I am ready to go to war."

All the way down to the plains Coyote led the way and hurried the others. Alongside him was Hummingbird, and he and Coyote were the leaders. There were also three Owls with the party. One of these carried an inexhaustible supply of arrow points in his mouth, another carried sinew, and a third carried feathers for arrow shafts. As the arrows became used during the fight, the Owls produced these materials and kept the animals supplied. After a long fight, the people from the mountains beat those of the plains.

But there were two animals they could not kill — Fish and Turtle. One of these was slippery, the other was hard, and the arrows glanced off their backs. Then Coyote broke his leg, took out the bone, stuck it into the end of his arrow, and shot. He struck the Fish in the back of its neck and killed it. Then he shot at the Turtle and struck it in its head and killed it.

Now Eagle, who was the chief of all, sent off the victorious mountain animals. He said, "You cannot live here any longer. You must go away. Where do you want to go?"

Coyote said, "Wishawishawisha! Wishawishawisha! Wishawishawisha! I do not want to go."

Hummingbird agreed with him.

Eagle said, "Well, what are you going to become? What will you be? I am going to fly high up in the air and live on squirrels and sometimes on deer."

Dog said, "I will stay with people and be their friend. I will follow them, and perhaps I will get something to eat in that way."

Buzzard said, "When something dies, I will smell it. I will go there and eat it."

Crow said, "When I see something lying dead, I will peck its eyes."

Coyote said, "I will go about killing grasshoppers. That is how I will live."

Hummingbird hummed, "I will go to the flowers and get my food from them.

Condor added, "I will not stay here. I will go far off into the mountains. Perhaps I will find something there."

Woodpecker said, "I will get acorns and make holes in the trees."

Bluejay chirped, "I am going to make trees grow over the hills. I will work."

Rat said, "I will go where there are old trees and make my house in them.

Mouse squeaked, "I will run here and there and everywhere: I shall have holes, and perhaps I can live in that way."

Trout added finally, "I will live in the water, and perhaps I can find something to eat there."

That was the time they stopped being like us and scattered.

From McClurg, A.C. *Myths and Legends of California*, 1912.

http://www.archive.org/stream/mythsandlegends00judsgoog/mythsandlegends00judsgoog_djvu.txt