

THE MOHAVE INDIANS AND DR. KROEBER

QUOTES FROM A TEXT BY DR. ANDERSON
ON MOHAVE CULTURAL HERO MYTHS

The Mohave Indians lived on the Colorado river, which separates California and Arizona. The Fort Mohave Indian reservation is located just across the river from Needles, California. The immense desert region to the west of the reservation is called the Mohave Desert, which includes the vast East Mojave National Scenic Area.

A Mohave Miracle Child Story

Books on Mohave folk tales are hard to find. The following text is taken from a recently released booklet by Dr. John Anderson called *Tales For the Christmas Season*. The fourth chapter features a Mohave cultural hero story about a miraculously conceived child named *Ahta-hane*. This narrative was preserved by Triyere Kavasuk, from the Mohave Indian reservation. Kavasuk used Alfred Kroeber, a noted anthropologist from the University of California, as a consultant when he recorded this story somewhere between 1900 and 1910.

"As a tobacco inspired magical child, Ahtahane had the power to command the clouds to bring rain at his will. He called on rain at the time of his birth, for example, to protect him from his dangerous uncle who was his father's older brother. In spite of all his family could do to secret the baby, the uncle learned of his birth and prophesied: "The child is wise and will be a doctor.

It made rain so that no one would know it was being born, but I knew it, for I am a doctor too." By this time in the story, the hero's father was dead and the uncle was a serious threat. His mother thus bore him... outside of the normal protection of the family.

... the Mohave miracle child went south to seek adventure. He overcame a series of demons, including the horsefly. After many triumphs, he went to the House of the Sun in the northeast. Here he died and was resurrected with an even better body. When all seemed lost, he was miraculously resurrected from a blood clot placed under a basket. After his resurrection, the Mohave hero challenged the man-eating demon who lives with the Sun's Daughters. The Mohave called this supernatural *Kwayu* meaning 'meteor-man'. In passages remarkably similar to Pomo narratives about the *Giliks* the Mohave miracle boy defeated his adversary in battle. Meteor-man made the mistake of trying to overcome the boy with tobacco smoke, but failed (because he didn't know that tobacco was the boy's favorite plant).

Next the Sun challenged the miracle child, but proved incapable of deceiving him. The Sun became frightened and fled from the boy. But the miracle child pursued and captured the Sun who was subsequently metamorphosed into the contemporary sun of the existing world. Before this cosmic transformation, the hero called out: "You thought I was a little boy and did not know anything, but I am wise." ¹

Dr. Kroeber Denigrates the Mohave

Kroeber encouraged the general public to dismiss Mohave folklore, for example, as inferior to white American lore. It was not even as advanced in his opinion as that of other native peoples of California. "If Mohave civilization had been advanced enough to allow of their finding some clear central theme to hold together the welter of details and names," he complained, "their great tales would no doubt seem impressive to us."

With these denigrating words, Kroeber revealed his general insensitivity to native California culture. Unfortunately generations of white anthropologists followed Kroeber, in misleading the California public about the significance of Mohave folk lore. This resulted in an under appreciation of their oral literature, including narratives like the T. Kavasuk story..." ²

The Power of Mohave Dreaming

"Kroeber comes closest to appreciating the richness of Mohave culture in his commentary on their visionary literature. In a number of related writings, he argued that vision dreams were the very foundation of Mohave life. "There are no people whose activities are more shaped by this psychic state, or what they believe to be such, and none whose civilization is so completely, so deliberately, reflected in their myths"

1 (Anderson, Tales, 18).

2 (Anderson, Tales, 19; side box).

A typical Mohave narrative, according to Kroeber's model, describes a journey of a cultural hero or two brothers, beginning with their births and ending with their transformation into an animal or a landmark. This characterization is accurate in some respects, but fails to mention the pivotal role played by vision dreams in these Mohave narratives and their fundamental importance to plot development. Such omissions prevent Kroeber from fully appreciating the significance of Atahane's ability to 'dream' his future, while still in his mother's womb. The hero's soul (shadow) could act upon the living, even before it was born. Kroeber describes such unborn souls as dwelling at *Avikwame* or playing at *Aha'av'ulpo*.³

Casual Asides

"Kroeber does not hide his cultural bias against the Mohave. This is evident throughout his writings, but his attitude against Mohave spiritual healers is especially negative. He classifies them as 'shaman' and proclaims that "Shamanism is deeply stained by the beliefs that pervade all Mohave thought."

Kroeber and many later American anthropologists who publicly expressed admiration for his work often made statements of this type, denigrating native Californian religions in casual asides which were deeply offensive to the native peoples among whom they worked. To "stain" something means to soil, to bring shame upon, to dishonor it. Clearly, in using this term Kroeber intended to condemn Mohave spiritual healing as a shameful tradition (compared presumably to his Christian upbringing).

Careful readers of Kroeber need to be aware of the constant appearances of such cultural judgments in his writings. Making such judgments is necessary in studies of ethnology and can serve a positive purpose if it is done in an open discussion between people of different beliefs. But Kroeber and his colleagues were not on equal footing with the California Indians they studied. They were from a privileged social circle, while the Mohave intelligentsia being interviewed by them were typically low income and without an equal voice in American society. As a result, I believe that Kroeber paid a bitter price for his disdain, which was the withdrawal of full cooperation from his 'informants.'

... Kroeber's writings about the Mohave seem tainted by an underlying frustration. I get the feeling that he was subconsciously frustrated over his inability to make full sense of the cultural materials he gathered among the Mohave. He appears to have been offended, moreover, by their standoffishness and this brought out the worst in him. Thus his Mohave writings suffer more than usual from his long-standing obsession with physical objects and technology as a basic standard for judging native achievements.... Kroeber's attachment to the technological fallacy was not focused on the Mohave but was generalized throughout his writings. Thus he equally condemned the Yuman (southern neighbors of the Mohave) as inferior because they elevated

3 (Anderson, Tales, 20; Side box).

dreaming as thoroughly and consistently as the Mohave." ⁴

This web page presents the views of the author, and does not necessarily represent the views of the Chumash Indians, either individually or in a group.

Tales For the Christmas Season is no longer in print. The first edition appeared in 1996, with a second edition in 1999. It will eventually be entered in full text for free download through the John M. Anderson Library Project.

⁴ (Anderson, *Tales*, 32, footnote 69).