



# Achumawi Cosmology

Excerpts from an unpublished book

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## “Overview

This research project focused on a narrative told by the Achumawi mythologist Istet Woiche to the American scholar C. H. Merriam, circa 1928. This long and philosophically complex narrative focused on the subject of illness and the decay of the physical body after death. It explores Achumawi metaphysical teachings about the end of mythic time and the beginning of mundane space/time which now dominates life on the planet earth.

“In 1907 Dr. Kroeber at the UC Berkeley department of anthropology dismissively characterized Achumawi mythology as ‘virtually unknown’. Fortunately, Kroeber’s rival C. H. Merriam ignored Kroeber’s declaration and went directly to the Achumawi to record and edit, two decades later, Woiche’s quintessential study of Achumawi mythology.”

This publication was named *Annikadel* and remains one of the classics of Native California religious studies.

## Ancient Roots

By 2004, my research notes on the Achumawi religion were beginning to become substantial. I wrote a rough draft of a text in the winter of 2006-7, while I was living in Yucaipa, California. When I drove back to my home in northern Idaho in the spring of 2007, I turned again to the task of developing a more inclusive draft of *Achumawi Cosmology*. Soon, however, I became distracted by my research

into Aztec cosmology which was linked to my ongoing study of Maringayam theology. But, as I have often found, these 'distractions' eventually offered further insight into Achumawi theology. I found myself revisiting Merriam's puzzling claim that the Achumawi believed Lizard [Annakidel] to "be the same as the White man's god."<sup>1</sup>

The Aztec and Maringayam both had to struggle with equating their own gods with those of the conquering Christians. It was never an easy task for the native theologians, due to the [ultimately inexplicable] Catholic doctrine of a triple deity with three aspects joined in one. Did Merriam come to understand that the Achumawi believed the Achumawi Lizard deity to be "the same" as *Yahweh* of the Jewish Old Testament? Many Christian texts described *Yahweh* as a father deity. He is both the father of humanity and of the Christian dying god named *Jesus*.

My assumption in 2007 was that Merriam did indeed equate the Achumawi Lizard deity with *Yahweh*, the Christian father deity. But it would have been much more credible, however, to argue that the Achumawi Lizard deity, a dying god, was an ancient precursor to *Jesus*.<sup>2</sup>

## Concluding Remarks

Numerous comparisons have been made in this text between Achumawi theology and those of their immediate neighbors such as the Shasta and Yana. And comparisons have also been cited for Pomo, Chumash, Maringayam, and other native Californians far distant from the Achumawi.

The argument has not been made that all of these cultures have identical religions, but that there are many fundamental cosmological beliefs shared by these seemingly disparate cultures. Much controversy has risen from both scholars and even native California leaders over comparative theological speculation. Yet such speculation remains a foundational obligation of scholarship in this field.

The Achumawi trinity of Coyote, Fox, and Frog Woman is compared to the Yana trinity of Gray Squirrel, Lizard, and Rabbit and to the Maida trinity of Earth Initiate, Father of the Secret Society, and Turtle. It has been proposed that in each of these theological traditions, two teams of rival gods are balanced by a third mediator god. Note that Chumash trinity of Eagle, Coyote, and Moon (datura) as the moderator, was the model initially used for this metaphysical construct.

### *From the Glossary*

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1 (Woiche, Annikadel, xxi; commentary by the editor Merriam).

2 Critics of Christian theology, with its matrix of seemingly contradictory doctrines, have good grounds to suspect that the Jewish *Yahweh* deity who is depicted in the Old Testament as an Eagle, was not the ancient Jewish supreme creator. Instead, he was a Hebrew variant of the Indo-European Eagle deity who rules the celestial axis. The father of *Yahweh*, was the higher supreme creator of the physical universe. This is the deity called *Tikado Hedache* by the Achumawi, meaning 'he who lies at the heart of the cosmos'. He is not an eagle, for he is without form.

**ABYSS**        The Achumawi conceived of the Abyss as a realm of infinite potentiality from which material matter could be manifested.

See *Air, Water* and *Earth* for the sequence of gas, liquid, and solids first manifested from the Abyss. See *Idea* for the realm of the supreme creator (World's Heart) which may have co-existed with the Abyss before the manifestation of the material realm.

- Before the creation of the dry earth (an island), the First People "were floating in a limitless ocean [covering the flooded earth surface]." (Woiche, xi; from the preface by D. Tedlock).

- Powers reported that evil Coyote scratched the first soil up "out of nothingness" (Tribes, 273).

Hypothesis: Achumawi metaphysicians conceived of the Abyss as a realm of infinite potentiality.

Hypothesis: The Achumawi, like the Pomo, considered the Abyss female. The Abyss was limitless in its potential to manifest the material world.

Hypothesis: The Clouds (Father, Mother, and Cloud Woman) are symbols of minimal physical body first manifested from the Abyss.

**BRIDGE: CELESTIAL**        The Achumawi celestial Bridge is remarkably like that of the Chumash of southern California. It is the location of the final testing of the reincarnating soul.

See *Demons: Water*. And see *Achumawi Cosmology: Volumn II, Death and Reincarnation* (Anderson) for related commentary.

Related terms: *Bahl-lot'-ka-sum* is the name of the water demons, waiting below the celestial pole bridge (Woiche, 95).

*Din-hin-na-oo'-se* is the name of a game, associated with "teetering on a long pole" (Woiche, 95).

- Demons lay below the Achumawi pole bridge, ready to seize anyone who fell off (Woiche, 95).

**WORLD CANE: BIG DIPPER**        The rotation of this Achumawi constellation marked the passage of time during the night.

Also see *Cane*. Note that Merriam used the term *Cane* to refer to an Achumawi staff of authority. It served like the big hand of a clock, pointing to the hours of the night.

Terms: : *To'-pa-to-che'mah* is the Achumawi name for a number of stars in the European Big Dipper constellations. It means "the World's Cane" (Woiche, 82).

Hypothesis: The Achumawi honored some of the stars in the European Big Dipper constellation as a staff of authority, held by the guardian god of the North Star. This deity is Lizard, closely associated with Eagle.

Hypothesis: The rotation of the lower stars in the Cane constellation brings them into contact with the earth's horizon, demonstrating that the Achumawi guardian deity of the North Star was not isolated from the fate of life on the surface of the earth. See *Marten* and *Eagle* for related commentary.

Commentary: It is probable that the Achumawi astronomers viewed the Cane's spinning around during the night as a marker of the passage of time. It is possible, however, that the Achumawi used cane and string bullroarers like those of the Mohave. If this was the case, then the World's Cane may have been depicted as a powerful bullroarer associated with thunder.

Hypothesis: The World Cane was made of elderberry. See *Elderberry*.

\* It was not until 2007 that my brother Steve took me into the middle Achumawi drainage so that I could see first-hand this land he so loved.

