

Pomo Cosmology

An unpublished Book
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The field of Pomo studies was dominated in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries by Dr. Alfred Kroeber and S. A. Barrett who laid the foundations of white Christian exegesis of Pomo narratives which survived the California Holocaust. In Pomo Cosmology Anderson provides a critical analysis of Kroeber and Barrett's findings, suggesting an alternative cosmological model for understanding Pomo reincarnation theology.

The Creation of the Physical World

Excerpts , 2020

“Barrett mistakenly assumed that because the traditional Pomo refused to tell a white scholar about the supreme creator deity and his creation of the physical cosmos: ‘The existence of this universe is largely assumed and there is, therefore, no true creation story accounting for the details of its origin, as there is among a number of the other Central California tribes’.¹

Stephen Powers preceded Barrett in promoting this misinformation, claiming that the Pomo only have ‘a vague conception of a Supreme Being ‘who is a ‘wholly negative person.’² In this statement, Powers fundamentally distorted Pomo theological traditions about the supreme creator who was a wholly positive (not negative) deity. Powers was so hostile to native California culture that he constantly denigrated their traditional beliefs, and/or distorted them. He was correct in his commentary, however, in his assertion that the Pomo supreme creator “takes no part or interest in

1 (Barrett, Pomo, 49).

2 ((Powers, Tribes of California, 208; edited by R. F. Heizer, Univ. Calif. Press, 1951).

mundane affairs”. But he was fundamentally incorrect in his conclusion that the Pomo supreme creator was ‘evidently a foreign graft upon their cosmology’.”³

The Kuksu Deity

“Kroeber and Barrett joined other early twentieth century scholars to place emphasis on the *Kuksu* deity when characterizing the Pomo religion and neighboring tribes of north central California. In their more generous passages they called this theology the *Kuksu* religion, but more typically they denigrated it as the ‘*Kuksu* ‘cult’.⁴ But *Kuksu* is an inappropriate deity to choose as representative of the greater theological conceptualization of the Pomo and their neighbors. *Kuksu* is a deity of healing and plays an important role in their rituals, but he is not the supreme creator deity. *Madumda* was his equal, but both *Kuksu* and *Madumda* were demigods subservient to the supreme creator. “

Kuksu Theology

“Kroeber dismissed the *Kuksu* religion, as well as the distinctive southern California Datura religion as ‘extinct for all practical purposes.’⁵ He dismissed even the possibility of ever understanding either religion, on the grounds that ‘the survivors are few, and of their culture only memories of the grandfathers’ times remain’.⁶ Clearly, Kroeber had no understanding of the staying power of the native Californians and of their profound distrust of Kroeber and his many colleagues.

Kroeber does acknowledge in his discussion of the *Kuksu* theological tradition that: ‘Questions put to the natives are likely to bring deceptive replies. . .’⁷ California Christians were a profoundly racist and religiously intolerant people in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It was dangerous for native people to tell American scholars if they or their family members were maintaining ancestral traditions, in the secrecy of their homes or in remote places in the hills beyond the view or knowledge of Christian society. Professional anthropologists could be told about practices of one’s grandparents if they were no longer alive and could not be punished. Kroeber writes as if utterly oblivious of this reality; it is one of his profound short-comings as a scholar.”

Glossary: Kuksu Religion

“Kroeber mapped the spread of *Kuksu* theology all the way south into the Ennesen (Salinan) and Ohlone territory. He cited reports of Pomo *Hiwei* and *Lolei* dances among the native workers in these southern Catholic production centers. In his analysis, he acknowledged

3 Powers, like other Christian scholars working in California in his era, presumed intellectual inferiority among the native peoples. The Pomo belief in a withdrawn supreme creator predated Christian mythology by thousands of years. Presumably this belief had its roots in western Asian culture and was spread by the first boat migrants to cross over to the west coast of North America.

4 (Barrett, Pomo, 364, “Kuksu Cult”).

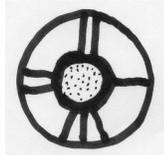
5 (Kroeber, Handbook, 368).

6 (Kroeber, Handbook, 368).

7 (Kroeber, Handbook, 384).

that these Kuksu-like ceremonies may only represent the presence of northern California natives forcibly relocated by the Spanish to the Ennesen center.⁸

Hypothesis: In his discussion on parallels between Ennesen and Northern California metaphysics, Kroeber failed to recognize that these similarities were indications of a common ancestral religion instead of a Spanish era transfer of cultural traits.”⁹



Pomo Reincarnation Theology¹⁰

Excerpts , 2020

“One cannot understand Pomo teachings about the Path of the Dead without some knowledge of the fundamentals of Pomo cosmology. To begin with, the Pomo divided the cosmos into three basic regions. The middle realm is the earth where Coyote is the dominant ruler. Below it is the Lower World and above it is the Upper World. All three of these realms were created by the Pomo supreme creator.

Coyote was also a creator according to Barrett, thus his title *Iwi Madu'mda* which he translated as ‘Coyote Creator’.¹¹ A better translation would probably be ‘the crazed creator’, with the connotation of Coyote being awesomely powerful but flawed in his actions because he overextended himself. Coyote goes beyond his abilities and becomes crazed by his constant exposure to supernaturals beyond his capacity.

Coyote’s primary role in Pomo cosmology was as transforming deity, one who transmuted life on the surface of the earth.¹² Humans loved Coyote, for he personified many of the good and bad traits of humanity. Coyote was smart and powerful, but he was also unreliable, filled with lust and greed, and

⁸ (Kroeber, Handbook, 548).

⁹ (Pomo Cosmology, Anderson; glossary term “Kuksu Religion”). Note that in *Chumash Cosmology* (Anderson) this argument for a common ancestral theology is elaborated. And Kroeber’s use of the phrase “Datura Religion”, in characterizing the Chumash religion, is also questioned.

¹⁰ *Pomo Reincarnation Theology: Descent to the Nadir Real, the Judgment of the Soul, and the Ascent into Paradise*, Anderson, 2004.

¹¹ (Barrett, Pomo, 505; “Coyote Creator”).

¹² Barrett identified Coyote as “without question the most important single character in all Pomo mythology” (Pomo, 21). This is only true if you count the number of times Coyote is mentioned in Pomo myths as an indicator of his importance in traditional Pomo theology. Actually, the supreme creator is the most important Pomo deity.

often overstepped his own powers and thus got himself in perpetual trouble. The Pomo considered Coyote immoral, and he was the ideal personality type that fits Lowell Bean's characterization of an immoral holder of power. But Bean is fundamentally wrong in his charge that all native California holders of power, such as politicians, religious leaders, medical doctors, were immoral! Bean and the many American scholars who joined him in denouncing native California leadership as necessarily amoral, missed the point of Pomo ethical teachings entirely. The primary purpose of Coyote tales was to teach the young, and constantly remind the adults, that they have to struggle to overcome their Coyote personalities (greed, pleasure principle) and become responsible, moral members of society."

Bibliography

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Coyote is a lower deity, the one who governs life on the earth, the Middle World. He symbolized all that is admirable and that which is contemptible about the human personality. And since he rules life on the earth he is the most important deity for humans worried about life on the surface of the earth. Others, with more spiritual concerns in mind, place most importance on higher deities, especially Madumda.