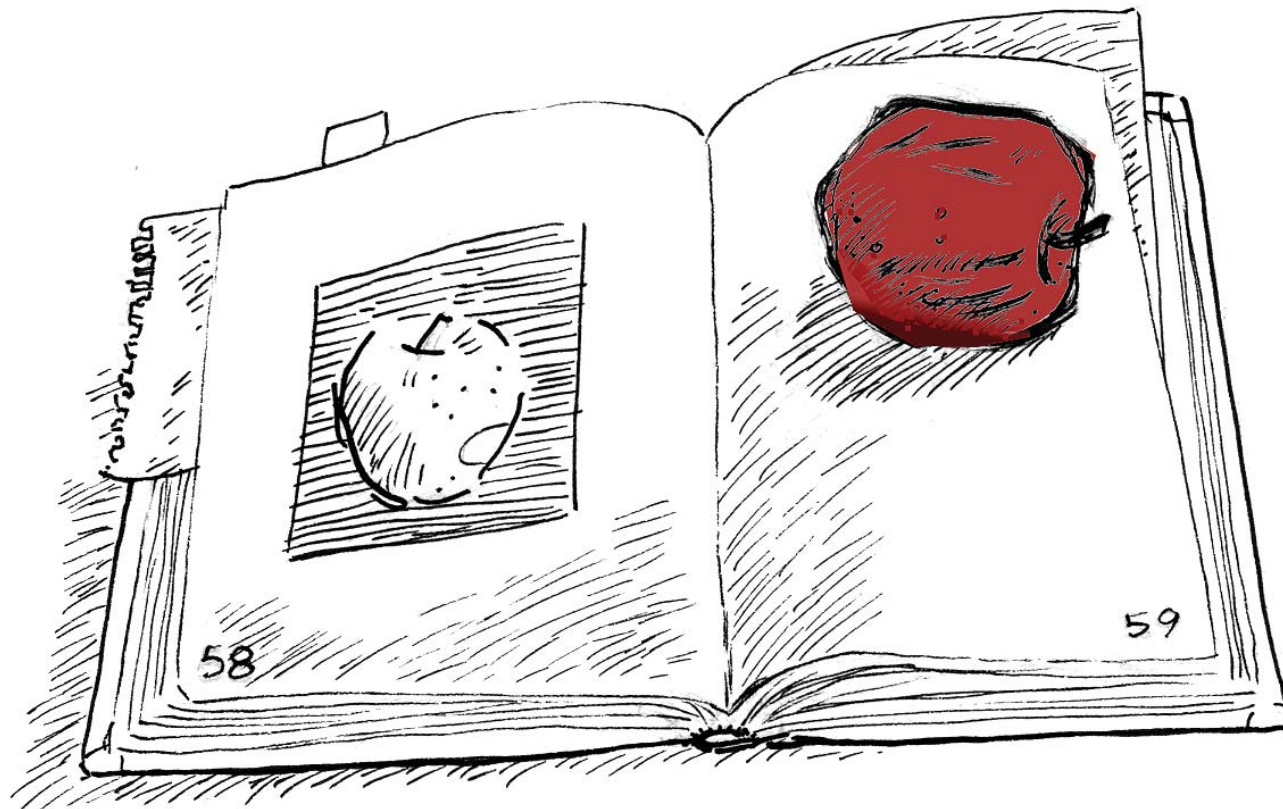


Native American Folktales



overview

- The First Americans themselves are a diverse collection of various social groups.
- These groups are made up of networking tribes of unique people.
- Most origin myths related by the different bands do have common attributes:
 1. often show the people emerging from out of the land itself; some explain that their ancestors arrived out of a labyrinth-like cave underground
 2. some tribes say the first people emerged from lake-beds to settle in nearby territories
 3. all of these stories establish a divisional hierarchy of nature and human
 4. all of these are anonymous stories told in an oral tradition, passed down from generation to generation
 5. very few First Americans developed written form of communication in North America

overview

The system of oral traditions strengthened social knowledge for their individual structured cultures.

These traditions include:

- myths
- rituals
- songs
- poems
- prayers
- parables
- legends
- narratives

(Taken from contemporary critic Kenneth Lincoln.)

overview

To complicated matters: when white Europeans began the process of removing First Americans out of their territories, the natives were forced to relinquish their languages, their society structures, their religions, their oral traditions as well as their land. Many stories have been lost and entire cultures erased due to Spanish and English settlement policies—but also because *the people themselves did not want to have their culture bond by the printed word.*

In a manner of speaking, Native languages exist as a living, spiritual, *and* meditative practice. Those who were able to maintain their ancestral histories and folk tales did not want to translate their beliefs into English: an aspect of the holiness of the prayer would be lost. The living word, the spoken phrase, would become static and penned up. The original intentions of a love chant or death prayer would be lost.

overview

- The oral tales more often were chants, performance pieces, art recitations.
- Extreme amounts of cultural meanings are lost in the appropriations.

Critic Kenneth Lincoln proposes, the reality of the song-poems is altered since the original word does not lie flat on the page—the spoken word may be visually presented in one line of text, or broken into stanzas and restricted to form.

The original First American poems and stories were created specifically by an unknown author.

- The intentions was to leave the works anonymous.
- No one could “own” the work, nor own the idea.
- The idea itself “found” the chanter.
- The song-poem was intended for the tribe and for nature. Through performance the poet, or story-teller gives the song, prayer, chant, story back to the world.
- **The spoken word is a living thing; language is a sacred idea.**

overview

Story Tellers themselves serve as:

- historians, record keepers
- educators of natural history and science
- a source of culture; a physical representation of art
- a means to establish sense of self for a collection of people
- educators of traditional customs

Origin of the Alabama and Coushatta Tribes

The Alabamas and Coushattas **were made from clay** in a big cave under the earth. They lived in this cave a long time before some of them decided to go to the surface of the earth. After they started upward, **they camped three times on the way**. Finally they reached the mouth of the cave.

Here they saw that a large tree stood in the cave entrance. The Alabamas and Coushattas went out of the cave on opposite sides of a root of this big tree. **This is why these two tribes differ somewhat in speech, though they always have lived near each other.**

At first these people stayed outside only during the night, returning to the cave when day came. One night when they left the cave to play, they heard an owl hooting. Most of the people became so scared that they ran back into the cave and never returned to the surface of the earth. **This is why the Alabamas and Coushattas are so few.** Had the owl never hooted, all the people would have remained on the surface of the earth, and the Alabamas and Coushattas would be more numerous.

“Origin of the Alabama and Coushatta Tribes.” *Myths and Folktales Of the Alabama-Coushatta Indians of Texas*.
Ed. Howard Martin. Austin: Encino Press. 1977. Print.

Myth • Fable • Parable • Folktale

Myth: is a religious teaching—the culture which developed these stories viewed them as a truth, as a religious mystery to explain how a god or goddess became a deity.

Fable: allegory with an explicit moral presented to reader at closing of story.

Parable: is a brief story, based in realistic terms and contain an explicit teaching of morality or philosophy. In other words, can deal with religious morality or cultural expectations. Magical situations do not happen in parables.

Folk-Tale, Fairy Tale: based on fantasy and magical situations.

These stories *can* teach a moral lesson, but are *not required* to teach a lesson.

- More entertainment rather than a religious, moralistic teaching.
- Are based on children's notions of the world as divided into black and white.
- Prepares children for the violent world of their times.

Specific Folktale Characteristics

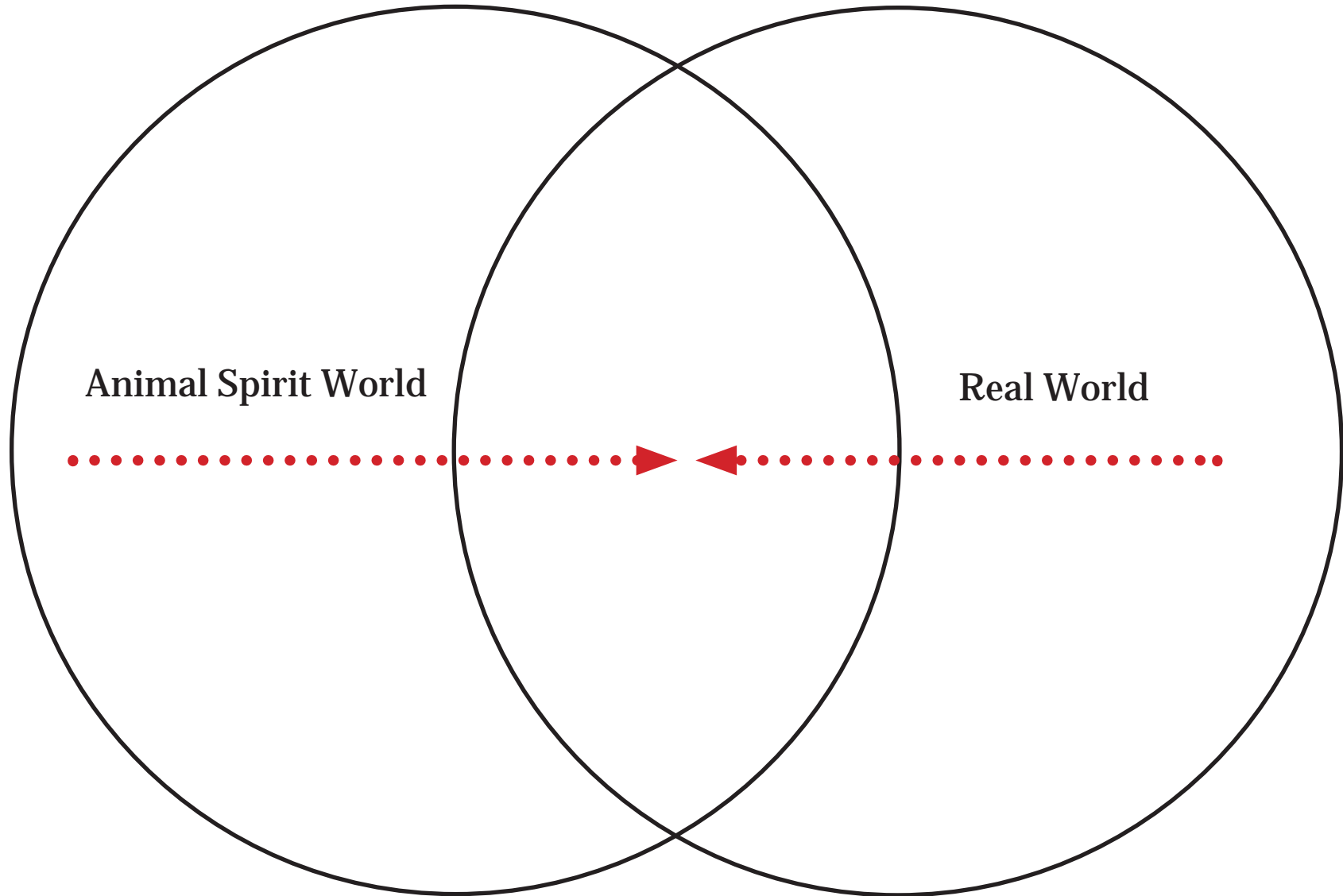
- magical creatures abound
- magical situations frequent
- protagonists down-trodden: orphan, stepchild, cast-out prince, prodigal son
- protagonist goes through psychological, physical, spiritual transformation
- protagonist must prove worthiness before transformation; must earn title
- protagonist is pure good
- antagonist is pure evil } no in-between grey areas
- extreme violence, gruesome situations
- pattern numbers
 - > in the Old World Europe the people used three as a pattern:
 - three tasks, three wishes, three journeys, due to Judeo-Christian influences
 - > in the New World, the pattern was set as four (sometimes five or seven)
 - perhaps due to the four principal directions of North, South, East, West
 - > some tribes associate specific deities with these cardinal points

Animal Guides

Animal spirits or inanimate object spirits exist everywhere, some in disguise, some in plain sight.

- It is the aim of humanity to recognize the spirit and to gain its good will in order to benefit their lives.
- An element of the supernatural exists in everything, including human-made objects. These spirits are present in everyday waking life interacting with humans.
- Each tribe often designed their own Trickster animal spirit; cycles of stories involve a specific hero-character who tricks a higher authority into action.

Spirit World // Real World



How Fire Came to the Alabamas and Coushattas

There was a time, far back, when bears owned Fire. These animals guarded Fire very closely and even carried it about with them. They allowed no creature except a member of the bear clan to use Fire or even to approach it.

One day the bears put Fire on the ground and went away to eat acorns. Now, Fire needed much attention. Since the bears did not come back that day, Fire grew weaker and weaker, and finally began calling for help. But the bears had travelled so far into the woods that they couldn't hear Fire's cries.

Some Alabamas and Coushattas heard him, though, and hurried to his aid. They got a stick from the north and laid it on Fire. In the west they found another stick and fed it to Fire. The people found the third stick in the south. Then they went to the East for another stick. When the people put down all of the sticks, Fire blazed up.

After the bears finished their meal of acorns, they returned to claim Fire. However, Fire said, "I don't know the bears any longer."

This is how Fire left the bears and went to live with the Alabamas and Coushattas.

"How Fire Came to the Alabamas and Coushattas." *Myths and Folktales Of the Alabama-Coushatta Indians of Texas*.
Ed. Howard Martin. Austin: Encino Press. 1977. Print.