



THE GOSHUTES

AT A GLANCE: COYOTE STORIES AND GOSHUTE TRADITION

Every culture has its own stories, and many cultures have a proper time and place for telling certain stories. For the Goshutes, storytelling was a winter activity; they believed it was dangerous to tell stories in the summer. This prohibition makes sense in the context of the Goshute lifestyle. In the other seasons, the Goshute people were busy with the work of food gathering and storing. They had more leisure time in the winter. Some Goshutes also attribute winter storytelling to the hibernation of snakes, which were disturbed by the telling of stories.

Storytelling was, and continues to be, an important method of cultural transmission for the Goshutes. Historically, the Goshutes led highly mobile lifestyles to make the best use of their generally arid, desolate homeland. Because it was not practical to move works of art from place to place, they transmitted cultural values through stories.

Many Goshute stories feature Wolf and his younger brother Coyote. Wolf is a responsible brother and a force for good. Coyote is a trickster known for causing trouble. Sometimes Coyote's actions work out for the best in the end, but that cannot be counted upon. Coyote sets an example of what not to do, and many stories illustrate the consequences of "Coyote-like" behavior. Coyote can be trusted to keep the story interesting, and Goshute tales are frequently entertaining and humorous.

Just as Aesop's fables or Biblical parables were meant to make complex values lessons comprehensible to the masses, Coyote stories teach Goshute values without alienating the audience. In Pia Toya, Coyote tries to trick Mother Hawk to get what he wants, so he must feel her wrath. The Goshute people got a beautiful mountain range to remind them

of Mother Hawk's strength. The story of Coyote and Frog teaches that Coyote must "reap what he sows." "Coyote Eye-juggler" is more complex. In this story, Coyote plays with things he does not understand and loses his eyes in the process. He is tricked by the women and ends up at the bottom of the cliff literally licking his wounds. This story is a good example of the level of silliness and gore found in many Goshute tales. (Do not have students look up other stories on the internet, as they may not be age appropriate.) The humor and vivid imagery keep the attention of the listener and make the story memorable, which is important in oral tradition.

The connection to the Goshute homeland is obvious in the story Pia Toya. Pia Toya, or Ibabah Peak, is the highest peak in the Deep Creek Mountain Range, and these mountains have important meaning to the Goshute people. The waters that flow down through the mountains provide a crucial resource in the desert homeland of the Goshutes. Additionally, the Deep Creeks are home to many food and medicinal plants used by the Goshutes, such as pinyon pines, sego lilies, and elderberries. Many of the animals the Goshutes use for food—including rabbits, mountain sheep, antelope, and deer—can be found in the Deep Creek range as well.

The Deep Creek Mountains provided valuable natural resources; however, the environment of the Goshute homeland was primarily sparse desert. The challenging landscape meant that the Goshutes needed to be able to count on each other to survive, and a person who acted selfishly could endanger the livelihood of the whole group. Coyote is always looking out for himself, and he pays the price for his actions. Through Coyote stories the Goshutes



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reinforce the idea that each individual is responsible to the group. This lesson is not unique to the Goshutes—it can be found in the stories of many other cultures—but the Goshutes’ desert environment makes it all the more important. Individual Goshute families gathered plant foods, and the support of the family group was the first responsibility of any family member. Hunting was done in larger groups that met a few times throughout the year. Each individual involved in the hunt needed to trust and depend on everyone else in the hunt. Coyote’s selfishness would not be welcome in the family or the hunting group.

Today another crucial function of oral tradition is that it facilitates the preservation of the Goshute language, which in recent years has been in danger of being lost. Though the language is now being taught in elementary school on the Goshute Indian Reservation, the home has always been the primary place for teaching the Goshute language to young people. By passing down these stories, the Goshute families transmit the language and values of their people and preserve their culture for future generations.