

1961

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Recommended Citation

Ehrlich, A. S. (1961). A Navaho Myth: The Hero Twins (A Psychoanalytic Evaluation). *Journal of the Minnesota Academy of Science*, Vol. 29 No. 1, 24-32.

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A NAVAHO MYTH: THE HERO TWINS

(A PSYCHOANALYTIC EVALUATION)

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THE MYTH. Changing Woman (or Turquoise Woman) gives birth to twins, the Sun being their father. The older boy was Nayenesgani the Slayer, and the younger was called Child of Water. The Sun warned his wife Changing Woman to hide her sons from the giant Yeitso. She dug a hole in the floor, and every time she heard Yeitso coming she put them in it and covered the hole with a flat stone. The great giant came often *for he was in love with her* and jealous of the Sun, but she kept the little ones hidden. The children grow up quickly and go to seek their father, the Sun. He had a wonderful palace in the east where White Shell Woman was his wife. When they arrive *he cruelly attempts to kill his own offspring*. Finally, when he fails to kill them, the Sun gives them the straight lightning and the crooked lightning. Then they kill Yeitso, the Giant, who was the Sun's eldest child. The gigantic stature of Yeitso and the diminutive size of his antagonists are emphasized. But it is really the Sun who kills the giant and when the elder brother rushes in, he does so with his father's stone sword . . . When they had killed the big giant Yeitso, they carried his scalp as a trophy and hung it on a tree, reporting to their mother. While relating the encounter to her, they swooned and lay unconscious whereupon she prepared a concoction of herbs struck by lightning, sprinkled them with it, and shot a spruce and pine arrow over their bodies, thus reviving them (Roheim 1950:321, 319).²

¹The author wishes to thank Drs. James L. Gibbs, Jr. and Robert S. Merrill for the helpful comments and suggestions they made on the earlier draft of this paper. Acknowledgment of help must also be given to my very patient brother-in-law, Dr. Milton Kramer (a psychiatrist), whose pointed comments often made the problems of symbol interpretation and Freudian theory come into clearer focus. Any misgivings of interpretation or questionable emphases which still exist in the paper are to be attributed wholly to the author.

²There appears to be some doubt in the conclusion of the myth as to whether it was the twins or the Sun who kills Yeitso. In another version of the myth which Roheim cites (1950:321-322), it is more clearly shown that it is the father (the Sun) who kills Yeitso. If we assume that it was the father who kills his own son, then how does this conclusion fare in relation to the traditional Freudian Oedipus complex interpretation?

Myths, according to Freudian tradition, have their origin in the egocentric attitude of the child (Mullahy 1955:89). If this be true, then the assumed conclusion is really quite a weak ending. Even if one grants that Yeitso, the giant, is a father substitute, and through this substitute the twins transfer the hostility which really belongs against the father, one still must ask why it is that the twins, themselves are not the actual executors of the killing of this father substitute—. The phenomenon of myth, as Freud explained it, should certainly allow the child-like egocentric attitude, not only to be in possession of such power, but to be capable of using such power. This display of power (egocentrism) never really manifests itself, if the Sun is the one who kills Yeitso.

ROHEIM'S INTERPRETATION OF THE MYTH. In analyzing this Navaho myth, Roheim points to the following interpretation:

. . . (a) the sun tries to kill his own children, (b) the children kill the giant who had made amorous advances to their mother, i.e., that the giant is a father substitute, and (c) it is really the Sun (or Monster Slayer with the Sun's sword) who kills his own child. . . .

The common identity of the Sun and the hostile giant is quite clear. He cherishes the giant, but tries to kill the two heroes who later will be the slayers of the giant. And the Sun is the father of the two heroes. If there ever was an obvious Oedipal myth surely this is it (1950:322).

Having satisfied himself with the interpretation that the myth is Oedipal in nature, Roheim goes on to make another inference which concerns the religious sphere of Navaho life:

Since Navaho religion is mainly a curative practice based on this myth, and the Navaho need these rites for bad dreams and all sorts of 'bad' events (f.i. if lightning kills sheep), we may say that the spiritual life of the tribe is based on Oedipal guilt feelings (1950:322).

ROHEIM, PSYCHOANALYSIS, AND THE NAVAHO. Geza Roheim holds a rather strange position in anthropology. He was a prolific writer who energetically attempted to merge psychoanalytic method and ethnographic data into a meaningful synthesis. Yet, in spite of the many articles and books he wrote in joining them, one finds relatively little comment on Roheim or his works in the various anthropological journals. Spiro (1958:168) has noted, "his [Roheim's] works are little read and even less appreciated by his anthropological colleagues . . ." Devereux (1953:420), in an obituary note for Roheim, announced "Under the guest editorship of the present writer a special issue of the *American Anthropologist* is being prepared for publication next year. This issue will contain a basic appraisal of Roheim's works and a comprehensive bibliography of Roheim's writings." The "special issue" has yet to appear.

Certainly no one can deny that Freud's theories have had their impact on almost every sphere of human life imaginable. In his book, *Psychoanalysis and Anthropology* (a book which has never been reviewed by any of our anthropological journals), Roheim used Freudian psychoanalytic method extensively in analyzing primitive mythology. In this brief article an attempt is made to look, in a rather somewhat critical manner, at one of Roheim's applications of psychoanalytic method to ethnographic data, namely, his "The Oedipus Complex of the Navaho."

Before going into the actual critical analysis of this chapter, it might perhaps be well to point out at least one assumption which Roheim made while interpreting myths and dreams of various primitive groups—it is an assumption dealing with the meaning of symbols. According to Roheim, there are symbols which carry with them a "potentially universal" meaning (1950:22-23). The connotation carried with this concept is of great importance in that it is really the basis upon which the book has been written. The attempted proof of "potentially universal" symbols is the means by which Roheim questions the necessity of knowing or being aware

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of the cultural context in which the myth occurs, when interpreting the myth. Via such potentially universal symbols, cultural context virtually becomes an immaterial element in the interpretation of mythology (Roheim 1950:16). As one can readily see, Roheim is throwing the gauntlet before the anthropologist. He is challenging one of the most widely accepted concepts within the field of anthropology—cultural relativity. In discussing the potentially universal symbol, Roheim cites the snake as an example:

It does not follow that the snake must necessarily become a phallic symbol to all children. But it is eminently suitable for three reasons: (a) its shape; (b) the fact that it is dangerous; and (c) its power of rejuvenation. We assume that the snake perceived as a penis means, an attempt to transform the dangerous object into a libidinal one. Secondarily, whenever the necessity arises to convey a meaning and yet hide it, 'snake' will be the symbolic equivalent of penis. This connection is what I would term 'potentially universal' (1950: 22).

For a moment, let us take a closer look at the second part of Roheim's statement, and attempt to see its implications. Perhaps one might begin by asking what sorts of phenomena would lend themselves "to convey a meaning and yet hide it" at one and the same time. It seems to be quite apparent that Roheim, in a rather indirect manner, is referring to the phenomena of myths and dreams, and to the symbolism contained in them. For by definition (Freudian), dreams and myths are the very products of this "necessity" to repress. Also it would appear that by his indoctrination, the psychoanalyst who strictly adheres to Freudian interpretations *au* Roheim would, by necessity, almost always look to the snake (or almost any other such potentially universal symbol one may desire to cite) as being a sexual symbol.³ One might say that Erich Fromm's book, *The Forgotten Language*, is a testament for this statement.⁴

It might be noted that many psychoanalysts classified as Neo-Freudians have been much more reserved in their statements about universal symbolism. Erich Fromm, in *The Forgotten Language*, discusses the nature of symbolic language. In his remarks, he makes reference to a concept which he terms "symbolic dialects":

Some symbols differ in meaning according to the differences in their realistic significance in various cultures. For instance, the function and consequently the meaning of the sun is different in northern countries and in tropical countries. In northern countries, where water is plentiful, all growth depends on sufficient sunshine. The sun is the warm, life-giving, protecting, loving power. In the Near East, where the heat of the sun is much more powerful, the sun is a dangerous and even threatening power from which man must protect himself, while water is felt to be the source of all life and the main condition for growth. We may speak of dialects of universal symbolic language, which are determined by those differences in natural conditions which cause certain symbols to have a different meaning in different regions of the earth (1951:19).

In general, one may say that the Neo-Freudians have been much more willing to give broader interpretations of symbols. They appear to recognize the fact that symbols may have a variety of meanings:

³ For elaboration on this point, see Mullahy's discussion of Freudian symbolism (*Oedipus Myth and Complex*, 1955, pp. 81-84).

⁴ See "Dream of a Young Homosexual" (1951:162) where Fromm offers a classical Freudian and a Neo-Freudian interpretation of the same dream.

"The particular meaning of the symbol in any given place can only be determined from the whole context in which the symbol appears, and in terms of the predominant experiences of the person [or culture] using the symbol." (Fromm 1951:20).

Let us now turn to the Navaho myth cited at the beginning of the paper. We have noted that Roheim sees the tale as an obvious Oedipal myth. One wonders just how valid Roheim's interpretation really is.⁵ Was Roheim justified in concluding that this myth is a symbolic representation of the unconscious incestuous drives resulting in hate against the father-rival? Indeed, at first glance it does appear as if the myth has the Oedipus complex as its base. However, as one examines the myth more closely keeping in mind the particular intra-familial situation of the Navaho, some doubts arise as to the correctness of Roheim's interpretation. Kluckhohn and Leighton have made the following comment concerning Navaho myths:

In almost every case the plot seems to be a symbolic resolution of characteristic intra-familial difficulties which must be repressed or suppressed in actual childhood and life . . . Brother and sister are the central *dramatis personae* and this is because the central conflict in the child training process is surrendering the breast to a favored younger brother or sister (Roheim 1950:330).

Hence they (Kluckhohn and Leighton) have perceptively noted that the Navaho boy is "always the king in every family, but each king, save the very last child in the series must come to know the meaning of dethronement" (Leighton and Kluckhohn 1947:36).

Kluckhohn and Leighton have provided information which legitimately allows one to formulate the hypothesis that the myth need not be interpreted as a father-son conflict over mother's affection, but rather as an expression of the sibling rivalry found within Navaho intra-familial life.⁶ One may return to this Navaho myth, re-examine it, and see how the proposed interpretation of sibling rivalry fits the content of the story. As the myth is interpreted, one shift in meaning need occur at the outset of the story—Yeitso, the giant, should be viewed solely as the eldest brother, and not as father substitute. The myth then proceeds to unravel as a description of Navaho intra-familial relations.

As the myth opens, the stage is immediately set for sibling rivalry; on the one hand, there are the newly born twins, and on the other, Yeitso their older brother. However, it is stated that Yeitso's jealousy was directed against his father (the Sun), rather than against his younger brothers. In light of this fact, one might ask how sibling rivalry can be the underlying issue in this myth. Perhaps this question can best be answered by posing another: If the eldest son was really jealous of his father, why did Changing Woman have to hide her younger sons from Yeitso? May it not be assumed that Yeitso was attempting to hide his real jealousy of Nayenësgani, the Slayer,

⁵The use of the word "valid" in this statement is intended to mean "strong" as opposed to a meaning of "founded on truth or fact."

⁶Should the reader be interested in the specific problem of sibling rivalry within primitive groups, he is referred to the following articles: (1) Sibling Rivalry Studies in Children of Primitive Groups (Levy 1935:205-214); (2) Doll Play of Pilagá Indian Children (Henry 1944); (3) Symbolic Sibling Rivalry in a Guatemalan Indian Village (Paul 1950:205-217); (4) Sibling Rivalry, The Oedipus Complex, and Myth (Herskovits 1958:1-15).

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and Child of Water, by transferring it to Sun, and that the parents, aware of the real jealousy, take precautions to hide the young twins from Yeitso.⁷ In this context, the word "hide" connotes a meaning of protection. Hence, the parents (father as well as mother) are seen as sheltering and protecting individuals in the eyes of the child (twins) during his infantile growth. As the child (twins) grows up, he, like all other children, begins to feel the pressures of disciplinary demands and, more important, the anxieties of weaning. To the young undisciplined child (twins) the sudden imposition of disciplined behavior is a harsh experience; the removal of the breast as a source of food may readily cause the child (twins) to look upon this act as a "cruel attempt" to take his life.⁸ But as was mentioned before, the last child born into the Navaho family really never "comes to know the meaning of dethronement." The last child tends to "hang on" while the elders of the family continue to baby him.⁹ From the Navaho intra-familial viewpoint, Yeitso has been killed by his younger brothers. Their birth has caused Yeitso to surrender his mother's breast—to give up his once secure source of nutrition. This is the twins' death blow to Yeitso. It should be noted that if one should prefer to take the alternate ending (See Note 1), namely, that it is the father who kills Yeitso, his eldest son, one might show that this conclusion also fits into the proposed interpretation. The father, through sexual intercourse with Changing Woman, may be viewed as a causative agent in the birth of the twins. Sun's actions, sexually, have led to the birth of the twins which, in turn, has brought about the usurpation of Yeitso's previously secure position within the family.¹⁰

Roheim, in attempting to prove the Freudian interpretation of the Oedipus complex among the Navaho, also draws upon two other sources: (1) associations, and (2) ethnological data. It may be seen briefly how Roheim approaches these two types of material. The first of these materials to be cited is a dream (and Roheim's interpretation of it) of a four-year old Navaho boy. The key symbol in the dream is an owl:

I was walking in the woods and heard an owl. Then I shot at it. It flew away and I kept on shooting, shooting with Daddy's gun.

The owl in the dream looked like a monkey. (He means one of the toys we have in the play hours sometimes called He-Bear, sometimes called She-Bear, sometimes Monkey.) His older sister D showed him how the owl

⁷ Leighton and Kluckhohn, in their field studies of the Navaho have observed: "Children who have recently been weaned seem to find the sight of the new baby at the mother's breast a disturbing experience . . . Probably the upset is aggravated by their being continually cautioned not to step on the new baby, not to scuff dust in its face, etc" (1947:36).

⁸ An interesting parallel occurs at this point in the story:

- (a) In myth—the twins go off on a journey and an attempt is made to kill them.
- (b) In real life—the Navaho mother often completes the task of weaning by going off for a visit of some days or a week, while the baby is left behind (Leighton and Kluckhohn 1947:34).
- (c) Common point—both the attempted murder and the weaning process are associated with a journey.

⁹ It has been said of Navaho parents: "They do *indulge* them [younger children], but they do not 'spoil' them . . ." (Leighton and Kluckhohn 1947:33).

¹⁰ To fortify this idea, one might make a special comment as to how the myth is brought to a close. It states that the elder of the twins rushes in to kill Yeitso with his father's stone sword. Would it be unreasonable to assume that the sword is a phallic symbol, once again, pointing to the procreative act of the father as the deathblow to Yeitso?

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screams. His mother told him that the owl was like a cat and that if he was naughty the owl would take him. By owl they always mean a man-owl.

Before telling the dream, he and his brother have been playing. The doll whom they call Daddy (a big doll representing a Red Indian) was 'fighting' the one usually called She-Bear (or Monkey). What they call a fight is evidently coitus because the Daddy doll is lying on top and between the legs of the She-Bear doll, and they rub it and wriggle it on the underlying doll with great excitement.

Notwithstanding the fact then that traditionally the owl is a male, in this case it should be identified with the mother because (a) he identifies it with the doll usually called 'She-Bear' doll, (b) his elder sister and mother told him about the owl, and (c) the game that preceded the telling of the dream was 'father on top of mother.'

The latent meaning of the dream is that the dreamer is 'shooting' mother with father's penis (Roheim 1950:324-325).

Upon examination of Roheim's interpretation, it might be noted that two possible associations could have been made with the owl—the elder sister or the mother. However, Roheim, bound by his rigid approach, chooses only to see the owl as the mother-symbol. Certainly the fact that the owl in the dream looked like a monkey makes the association with the She-Bear doll (sometimes called Monkey) a plausible one. Yet, it should be emphatically pointed out that the possible association of the owl with the elder sister is not an unreasonable one either.

Particular attention should be paid to the manner in which the dreamer has related his dream-experience with the owl. In reciting his dream he states: "I . . . *heard* an owl." Previous to the dream, it has been noted that his older sister D had shown him how an owl screams. This conceivably gives one quite strong grounds on which to point to the owl as a sister-symbol. Such an interpretation would then symbolically reveal the repressed sexual desires between brothers and sisters which are brought about by the strict brother-sister incest taboo. In consideration of other studies made on Navaho myths and tales, one sees that this theme (breaking the brother-sister incest taboo) is not an uncommon one. In fact, it appears to be one of the most popularly recurrent themes (Kluckhohn and Leighton 1948:136). Kluckhohn has noted in *Navaho Witchcraft* (1944:58): The Navaho ambivalence (largely unconscious) towards siblings finds expression in phantasy not merely in the pattern of killing a sibling as witchcraft initiation. Anecdotes relate other instances where brother kills brother or sister . . . That the unconscious feelings are ambivalent rather than entirely negative is suggested by the circumstance that brother-sister are the commonly mentioned incestuous pair. . . .

At this point, a comment should be made concerning both of Roheim's interpretations. Roheim was probably well aware of the fact that alternative interpretations of the cited myth and dream could be given. He hints at this when discussing the phenomenon of sibling rivalry, but, in the end, he really overrides the importance of sibling rivalry in Navaho mythology with his omniscient, Freudian-Oedipal interpretation (Roheim 1950:330-332). Rather than see figures in myths and dreams as possible brother or sister symbols, Roheim constantly tends to eliminate sibling rivalry and tensions

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by interpreting these figures as father or mother symbols. In this way, he neatly transfers many of the strained relations found between Navaho siblings to parent-child relationships.

Finally, one may turn to the ethnological data which Roheim uses. He cites two Navaho institutions which he feels point out the Oedipal background of the Navaho: (1) polygamous marriage in which a man marries a woman and her own daughter by a previous marriage, and (2) the teasing relationship between grandfather and grandson.

Looking first at the case stated for polygamous marriage, the evidence seems weak. Certainly within a traditional Freudian frame of reference, the term *incest* connotes sexual intercourse between consanguinal relatives. (Freud most certainly envisioned incest in this perspective throughout his interpretations.) One fails to see the incestuous facet of a polygamous marriage where the Navaho male takes both a woman and her daughter as his wives. In theory, either the woman or her daughter could be considered as a potential mate for the wife-seeking male. Secondly, if polygamous marriage is brought about by the incestuous desires between father and daughter (actually step-daughter), why is it that the Navaho woman, as opposed to the male, seems to be the instigator of this particular institution? ¹¹ Roheim, in referring to *A Navaho Autobiography* collected by Walter Dyk, reveals the following situation:

Women seem frequently to suggest that men take extra wives, usually daughters or sisters. . . . An old man remarks when his wife offers him her eldest daughter, 'I have no business having two wives.' (Roheim 1950:340).

In the cited passage, the Navaho woman clearly appears dominant. The social situation as depicted by Dyk does not strengthen Roheim's Oedipal assumption, but rather weakens it.

Turning to the second institution which Roheim mentions, that of the teasing relationship with grandfathers, it is not necessary to dwell upon this aspect of Navaho life at any great length. Roheim, in citing this institution, feels the grandfather-grandson relationship "displaces the boy's aggression from the father to the next ascending generation" (Roheim 1950:341). It should be noted that this in-

¹¹ The author is aware that the psychoanalyst might answer this question in the following manner: "The Navaho practice of this particular type of polygyny foresees the potential sexual attraction between the father and his stepdaughter. With this realization at hand, polygyny of this kind becomes a socially accepted stop-gap on a potentially explosive act which would be disruptive to the Navaho family unit." The reasoning behind such an argument is indeed impressive, but, unfortunately it does not fit the ethnographic material. There appear to be other reasons for wives pressing their husbands to marry step-daughters. Using the same source which Roheim cites, I should like to point out two situations which might lead to a father-stepdaughter marriage:

"Two months later she spoke to me about her daughter, saying she was going to give the oldest girl to me. When I found out the girl was pregnant, I didn't say anything. Two days later she spoke to me about it again" (Dyk 1947:44).

In another section of Dyk's book the husband, after catching his oldest wife in the act of sexual intercourse with another man, turns to his wives and says:

"You can both go ahead, and lie with all the men you want to. I have seen you both lying with lots of men . . . You can go wherever you please." The oldest one said, "Don't leave us. If you stay with us, I will give you my other daughter." (Dyk 1947:57).

By citing these passages the author is not claiming that these are the sole reasons for father-stepdaughter polygyny among the Navaho. He does, however, wonder how Roheim, in using Dyk's book as a source for proving his hypothesis, could have overlooked these non-Oedipal, situational factors leading to father-stepdaughter polygyny.

terpretation of the teasing relationship again assumes the *á priori* existence of the Oedipus complex in terms of the father-son conflict. It assumes that the teasing relationship with grandfathers has had to *displace* the normal outlet for youth's aggressions, namely the "normal" Oedipal outlet. Roheim simply cannot conceive of the teasing relationship as being an institution culturally indigenous to the Navaho; rather, he can envision it only as a psychological displacement (Roheim 1950:347). At this point, one comes to a kind of stalemate. Roheim has pointed to a psychological explanation of the teasing relationship with grandfathers. It can only be stated that, in view of the rather strained interpretations and associations which he makes along with the seemingly contradictory ethnological data which he either overrides or disregards, one cannot accept his basic assumption of the *á priori* existence of the Oedipal complex. This interpretation of this particular facet of Navaho life seems circular in nature.

CONCLUSION. For all practical purposes, the sibling rivalry interpretation of the "Hero Twins" myth embodies, in the main, a criticism of a psychoanalytic approach to mythology as applied by Roheim. This is not the same as saying that psychoanalytic methodology cannot lead us to an understanding of mythology. On the contrary, an attempt is made to contest the correctness of Roheim's interpretation with very similar tools. Roheim's implements are Freudian; the writer's are more of a Neo-Freudian temper. Both approaches, however, incorporate one of Freud's most fundamental theories—the experiences occurring during one's childhood play a very important part in the development of the individual's personality. From the two Navaho studies by Leighton and Kluckhohn (1947 and 1948), one cannot find any citations of interpersonal tension which would lend support to Roheim's position. In fact, the results from psychological tests taken by two groups of Navaho children seem to point to quite an opposite conclusion: (1) Parents play a very small part in the child's feelings of fear, anger, and shame, and (2) "Parents particularly have pleasant associations for their children" (Leighton and Kluckhohn 1947:166, 173). On the other hand, time and again, the two studies pointed to sibling rivalry as the major focus of Navaho youths' aggression and that the sibling rivalry appears to be a by-product of the weaning process.

At this point one might ask which interpretation is the correct one. A clear-cut dichotomy between "right" and "wrong" cannot be proved. The most one can do, at present, is attempt to weigh the evidence supporting each of the interpretations; after this is done, which interpretation is accepted almost becomes a matter of individual choice. We live in a world in which two realms of the unconscious exist: the biological and the cultural (White 1949:161). Both of these unconscious realms are determinants of our behavior. The anthropologist, being a student of culture, looks to explain the unconscious cultural factors; the psychoanalyst attempts to explore and make known the intra-organismal unconscious (White 1949:

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160). Anthropology asks if meaning could be found by investigating the cultural unconscious (or milieu) of the Navaho. It may be concluded that the myth gains its meaning (via symbols) from the cultural milieu in which it exists. Hence, the explanation is a culturalogical one. Roheim, on the other hand, has remained within the biological realm of the unconscious and has offered a psychological explanation. The former approach places emphasis upon knowledge of the cultural context in which the myth occurs; the latter, virtually looks to context as a non-essential.

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