

Good and Evil in Native American Mythology

Oksana Y. Danchevskaya
Moscow State Pedagogical University

Good and evil have always been walking hand in hand across the planet. They both are essential for our understanding of the world, as without evil, we would never know what good is. But despite the fact that presumably all mankind shares the most general perceptions about evil – basically that behavior is listed in the Ten Commandments – indigenous peoples often see it somewhat differently from what Westerners are used to. For example, Native Americans “had no notion of sin”, and “our attempts to understand the causes and consequences of negatively valued behavior, or even to recognize it as negative, in Native American narrative often limp along on weak analogies to our own Euroamerican experience” (Wiget 10). Indeed, if we explore Native American mythology, we will discover that it is rather difficult to draw a clear line between good and evil as they are not only often interconnected, but both keep the world in balance.

One of many sources of information about negative behavior and its consequences for Native Americans are eschatological myths, where the previous worlds ceased to exist due to human misconduct. Thus, the first three worlds of the Hopi, the second world of the Navajo and the previous world of the Pawnee were destroyed because of vices. The Creator’s wrath was caused by “fighting and killing” (the Navajo – O’Bryan 5), when people became wicked, “suspicious of one another and accused one another wrongfully until they became fierce and warlike and began to fight one another” (the Hopi – Waters, 12), as well as got “wholly preoccupied with their own earthly plans”, forgot to “respect their Creator”, and “the pure pattern of man’s existence... was contaminated by evil” (Ibid. 17, 12, 145); became “fearless, disrespectful” and lacking “good judgement” (the Pawnee – Gill, Sullivan 214).

Those myths provide us with a whole list of behaviors which are considered negative – or, as Euroamericans would call it, vicious and sinful. A special attention is paid to the religious component: “people who found no time to sing praises to the Creator” (Waters 20). Although this could be attributed to the influence of Christianity, respect for the chief deity has always been important in all belief systems. Other “sins” mentioned above can be shortened to *fighting, murder, cruelty, and aggression*.

In a Teton Dakota myth, the Thunderbird from the west hardly escapes death (by snatching the wizard’s gray bonnet): “You are an evil thing. You delight in *destroying* and *killing*. You have even killed your own brothers”, to which the Thunderbird retorts, “I will

destroy and kill forever.” (Walker 207) This myth illustrates the motif that an evil creature rarely takes the path of correction.

Moreover, there are numerous misdeeds which cause at least censure or punishment, such as *drunkenness*, which is “a great crime” (Morgan 237); *prostitution*, as “a prostitute... [is] otherwise an evil woman” (Wissler 93); *stealing*, so people should “refrain from theft” (Wallis 75); *selfishness*, thus “on the spiritual level man must cut down the evil grown from the assertion of his own selfish will” (Waters 142); *jealousy* and *charming* people: “a common motive for the use of evil magic seems to have been jealousy on account of a love affair with one’s wife” and “also applied to charming a person of the opposite sex” (Lowie 346, 345); *polygamy* (Wallis 75), “all evil spirits in Winnebago mythology have polygamy as one of their outstanding characteristics” (Radin 92); *abandoning* “a wife or children is a great wrong, and produces many evils” (Morgan 239); and “anyone who *disrupts a grave* is an evil ... person” (Crawford, Kelley 879). The Delawares believe that even “people who have *mistreated dogs* will not cross” the bridge in the afterlife because the soul there is “guarded by spirit dogs” (Ibid. 579), which means that good treatment of animals is as important as the one of people. From the moral point of view, all those behaviors are still culturally universal and are considered negative by the majority of peoples.

It is most likely that it was the syncretism of traditional beliefs and Christianity that generated the idea of retribution after death. So, the Hopi believe that only “an individual who obeys the law of the laws and conforms to the pure and perfect pattern laid down by the Creator becomes a kachina when he dies and goes immediately to the next universe without having to plod through all the intermediate worlds or stages of existence”, and “those who are at peace in their hearts already are in the great shelter of life. There is no shelter for evil. Those who take no part in the making of world division by ideology are ready to resume life in another world” (Waters 165, 334), while among the Iroquois “the wicked, after death, pass into the dark realm ..., there to undergo a process of punishment for their evil deeds”, “where punishments are meted out to ... [the man’s spirit] in proportion to the magnitude of its offences” (Morgan 169). The Sioux believe that at birth, a man is given a spirit “to guard him against the evil spirits and at death it conducts him to the land of the spirits, but does not go there itself”, but “if he has led an evil life”, no spirit “will accompany him” (Walker 158).

To be blessed with a happy life in both worlds, one needs to behave – that is a general idea. “Except in particular cases all the Indian nations ... are governed almost altogether by the advice of their chiefs and the fear of punishment from the evil spirit not only in this, but in the other world.” (Skinner, 1914, 499) Still, even for the wicked there is a chance for salvation (here we again notice some parallels with Christianity) via redemption, as “evil deeds in this life are neutralized by meritorious acts” (Morgan 169), and the latter “cancel the evil, thus placing heaven, through good works, within the reach of all” (Ibid. 216). To help people lead a good life, gods instructed them through various ceremonies (Wallis 75), and those instructions are revised every time the ceremony is repeated.

Moreover, a person has to be very careful about the use of the power he possesses: “When you receive a wonderful power and use it for evil you lose the power. You have to use it for good to keep it” (Waters 246).

An idea that seems to be much more a part of traditional Native American beliefs than the influence of Christianity is that many diseases are caused by evil spirits or malice: “evil spirits entering the body are the cause of sickness and death and all the medicine ... is to drive the spirits (sick) away” (the Apache) (Reagan 319), “but other times it came “from outside”, drawn by the person’s own evil thoughts, or those of a Two Hearts” (the Hopi) (Waters 11). Everything bad that happened to a fellow tribesman was ascribed to supernatural reasons: “pestilence and disease were supposed to be the work of evil spirits” (the Iroquois) (Morgan 163). Moreover, “not until evil entered the world did persons get sick in the body or head” (Waters 11), thus many ceremonies and the work of medicine men in indigenous North America were aimed at driving evil spirits away. Nevertheless, the latter could come not only from people, but also from contact with some animal beings like snakes, coyotes or badgers (Newcomb et al. 33) and produce other negative effects, for example, “any person, whether old or young, male or female, might become possessed of an evil spirit, and be transformed into a witch” (Morgan 164-5). Witches were powerful and dangerous, as well as old people: “a very old man, or a very old woman, because of age and experience may have supernatural powers which they can use for good or evil, and only a Shaman can defeat their harmful purposes” (Walker 92).

According to another widespread idea, evil could come from menstruating women. She was not allowed to “approach a sick patient, because of the evil effect she would have on his condition by her presence” (Kroeber 181). Especially important is the first period, which sets all future life of a woman, as when a girl “has her first menstrual flow she then becomes a woman. At that time, she is very mysterious and is susceptible to the influences of the spirits” (Walker 218). It can even affect her destiny after death: “the influences that surround a young woman during her first menstrual flow will control her after life either for good or for evil, according to the preponderance of good or evil influences at this time” (Ibid. 141), that is why she receives much attention from her parents and the help of a medicine man during those days. A cautious attitude to women who are menstruating is characteristic of many traditional cultures, as well as a certain period of time (most commonly – 40 days) to those immediately after childbirth, so this feature is not so unique.

The main difference between Native American and Western views is that “Native religious traditions are not caught up with questions of “good” and “evil” but are rather concerned with issues of balance and imbalance” (Crawford, Kelley 1118). This idea is very important if not vital. Though everyone knows that “there are both heavenly and evil powers, and the latter will try to deceive you” (Skinner, 1915, 740), and that “evil ... will always exist [and] must be acknowledged in order to maintain the world’s balance” (Crawford, Kelley 727), “most Indians worship evil as well as good, believing it is better to appease the wrath of the evil, than to incur its enmity” (Reagan 306). That is widely represented in their myths, especially in the ones describing the deeds of the twin brothers, the trickster, who “knows neither good nor evil yet he is responsible for both” (Radin IX), like Old Man of the Blackfoot, as well as some other characters like, for example, Ocasta

of the Cherokee, who is “equally evil and good” and “is considered one of the creator’s helpers” (Gill, Sullivan 221).

Probably, the most popular is the cycle about the twin brothers which is spread throughout all North American continent (just as in the mythologies of some other indigenous peoples of our planet). “The motif of twins in creation myths is prevalent in many parts of the world and tends to take one of two forms. Either the twins are opposites in terms of their relation to creation – one constructive, one destructive [as Good Mind and Evil Mind of the Iroquois], – or they work in tandem as a sacred pair [as Monster Slayer and Born for Water of the Navajo]. The first type clearly represents a sense of the essential duality of existence from the very beginning.” (Leeming 357) Therefore, the mythical twins “symbolize the counterbalancing principles of good and evil” (Cirlot 356). Antagonistic Divine Twins are present in the myths of the Cahuilla, Iroquois, Huron, Tewa, Algonquin, Yuma; the tandem ones – in the myths of the Zuni, Navajo, Papago, Kiowa, Hopi, Acoma and Laguna Pueblo, Sioux, Seneca, Apache.

In other words, “not relying on simple good versus evil scenarios, ... Indian religions tend to view the world as it is” (Crawford, Kelley XXXVI), “without the constrictions of Western definitions of Good and Evil” (Ibid. 663). Duality is essential for harmony and balance, which means that evil is also essential for our life. As an example of the most pronounced duality in mythology Krickeberg mentions the Iroquois worldview, noting that their “ritual reveals the necessity of a dark as well as a light side to the world. The civilized idea of 'evil' has no place here: Iroquois religion is founded on a belief in the existence of two halves of the universe which fit together like night and day, summer and winter, seed-time and harvest and keep the mechanism of the cosmos in motion” (Krickeberg 187). For the Navajo, the universe is also “an orderly, all-inclusive unity of interrelated elements. It contains both good and evil, which are complimentary yet embodied in each other in an intricate duality. Evil is the absence of control. Control depends upon knowledge. Good is that which has been brought under control. Evil can be brought under control by investing it with holiness” (Crawford, Kelley 138).

Thus, despite some general similarities (partially due to the influence of Christianity) with the Western perceptions of what is considered good and what – evil, there is a significant difference in the attitude to that: in contrast to the Western position, which is to fight evil, punish and eradicate it with all possible means, for Native Americans it is more relative, and they accept it as an integral part of the world balance. Good cannot exist without evil, and the harmony of the universe is feasible only in the balance of these opposites, counterpoising the impact of each other on the world and people.

Works Cited

- Cirlot, J.E. *A Dictionary of Symbols*. London: Routledge, 1971.
- Crawford, Suzanne J. and Dennis F. Kelley. *American Indian Religious Traditions: An Encyclopedia*. Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2005.
- Gill Sam D. and Irene F. Sullivan. *Dictionary of Native American Mythology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994.
- Krickeberg, Walter, et al. *Pre-Columbian American Religions*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1969.
- Kroeber, Alfred Louis. "Ethnology of the Gros Ventre." *Anthropological Papers of the American Museum of Natural History*. Vol. I, Part IV. New York, 1908.
- Leeming, David. *Creation Myths of the World: An Encyclopedia*. Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2010.
- Lowie, Robert H. "The Religion of the Crow Indians." *Anthropological Papers of the American Museum of Natural History*. Vol. XXV, Part II. New York, 1922.
- Morgan, Lewis Henry. *League of the Iroquois*. New York: Carol Communications, 1962.
- Newcomb, Franc J., Stanley A. Fishler, and Mary C. Wheelwright. "A Study of Navajo Symbolism." *Papers of the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology*. Vol. XXXII, No. 3. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Peabody Museum, 1956.
- O'Bryan, Aileen. "The Dîné: Origin Myths of the Navajo Indians." *Bureau of American Ethnology Bulletin*, No. 163. Washington DC: Government Printing Office, 1956.
- Radin, Paul. *The Trickster. A Study in Native American Mythology*. New York: Philosophical Library, 1956.
- Reagan, Albert B. "Notes on the Indians of the Fort Apache Region." *Anthropological Papers of the American Museum of Natural History*. Vol. XXXI, Part V. New York, 1930.
- Skinner, Alanson. "Political Organization, Cults, and Ceremonies of the Plains-Ojibway and Plains-Cree Indians." *Anthropological Papers of the American Museum of Natural History*. Vol. XI, Part VI. New York, 1914.
- "Societies of the Iowa, Kansa and Ponca Indians." *Anthropological Papers of the American Museum of Natural History*. Vol. XI, Part IX. New York, 1915.
- Walker, J.R. "The Sun Dance and Other Ceremonies of the Oglala Division of the Teton Dakota." *Anthropological Papers of the American Museum of Natural History*. Vol. XVI, Part II. New York, 1917.

Wallis, Wilson Dallam. "The Canadian Dakota." *Anthropological Papers of the American Museum of Natural History*. Vol. 41, Part 1. New York, 1947.

Waters, Frank. *Book of the Hopi*. New York: Penguin Books, 1977.

Wiget, Andrew, ed. *Handbook of Native American Literature*. New York and London: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1996.

Wissler, Clark, ed. "Societies of the Plains Indians" *Anthropological Papers of the American Museum of Natural History*. Vol. XI. New York, 1916.