Myths and Folktales of Native North America

Included in this course is a survey of traditional, recent and contemporary American Indian and Eskimo folktales, myths, legends and lore. The course program is based upon extensive description and substantial reading of source materials. The emphasis is on North American cultures, with secondary reference to parallels and influences from Mesoamerican civilizations upon Native American cultures north of the Rio Grande. The course also teaches the necessary background knowledge of anthropology, such as Native North American culture areas, the art and practice of ethnography, and the nature and intellectual power of the concept of culture. Major topics include the following: cosmology, creation myths, the problem of evil, migration legends, trickster tales, nature lore, tales of monsters and heroes, Orpheus stories, tales of terror, and culture-area specific folklore such as the Sedna myths of the Inuit and the Windigo stories of the eastern sub-arctic. In addition, the course considers the role of oral literature in the cultures of Native North America and explores the analysis and understanding of myths and folktales in their cultural settings, including the relationships of myth and ritual. The student will come to appreciate the power and depth of the modern anthropological concept of “symbol.”

Required Texts

Robert Bringhurst. *Story as Sharp as a Knife*: NW Coast
Bill Reid (Haida) & Robert Bringhurst. *Raven Steals the Light*: NW Coast
Ted Williams. *Big Medicine from Six Nations*. Tuscarora-Iroquois; NE

Grading
Mid-term Exam + Final Exam (each will count 1/3 of the Final Grade).
NB: Class participation counts significantly (1/3) in determining Final Grade.

FINAL EXAM: Dec 13. 8:00 AM

Office Hours
Office: Bailey 149
Tues/Thurs: 11:30-1:00 & 3:45; Wednesday by appointment only
phone: 245-5433
e-mail: judkins@geneseo.edu
Section I: Folklore, Mythology and Oral Literature: range and examples

Weeks 1-3 (8/27-9/12)

READING: Erdos & Ortiz (Parts 1, 2, & 3 – seven stories from each, your choice, for Discussion at end of Section I and for Midterm; brief written summaries & preparation for class presentation)

LECTURES: BACKGROUND & FOUNDATIONS

Patterns of/for behavior: Culture (Meaning) vs. Society (Structure)
Native American stories are about Meaning, not History
Culture areas of Native North America (A. L. Kroeber, and Carl Sauer)
Regional classifications North American oral lore (Stith Thompson)
Types, classes, and character of oral literature

Story-telling & its cultural contexts in oral societies (AC Parker)

Case-studies:
- Seneca-Iroquois: Old Woman Parching Chestnuts
- Seneca-Iroquois: Chestnuts Boil Over [+ Ernie Smith illustration]
- Inuit: Sedna and the Underworld: myth/ritual; world-view/social life
- Inuit: account of capture by walrus making the captive a shaman
- Navajo: The Great Gambler
- Hopi & Navajo: Coyote Tales
- Hopi: Anthropologist J. Walter Fewkes meets the Hopi god Masau’u (Cf. Seneca fieldwork)
- Haida: Berry Picking Surprise
- Pit River Indians: Jamie de Angulo learns doctoring from a shaman
- Delaware: Dickon and the traditional story teller (Walum Olum)
- Seneca-Iroquois Death Messenger vision (field notes)
- Seneca-Iroquois: Witch Pig along the twilight road (field notes)

DISCUSSION/PRESENTATIONS: ERDOS & ORTIZ READINGS
Section II: Contexts & Contents of Native American Mythologies: the Haida Case

Week 4  
(9/18, 20)

READING: Reid and Bringhurst, Raven Steals the Light (all)

LECTURES: FUNDAMENTAL THEMES & AXIOMATIC CONCEPTS IN NATIVE AMERICAN ORAL LITERATURE

Cosmology & Creation /// Creators & Tricksters
Folk tales vs. mythology: structure, function, and focus
Tradition and transmission: culture, society, and values
Variation & change: processes of adaptation, borrowing & invention
The individual and the community; the hearer, the story-teller, and the shaman

DISCUSSION OF REID & BRINGHURST READING ASSIGNMENT

Section III: Creation and Cosmology

Weeks 5-8  
(9/24 - 10/17)

READING: Robert Bringhurst, A Story as Sharp as a Knife (all)
Video: “The Loon’s Necklace”

LECTURE TOPICS:
Nature of Oral Literature
Nature of Story Telling
Nature of Myth and Symbol
Nature of Translation
Great Poets and Story Tellers of the Haida
Role of Anthropology

MIDTERM EXAM: Thursday, October 17
Section IV: Convergence of Key Symbols in the SW: Navajo Creation Mythology

Weeks 8-11
(10/16 – 11/8)

READING: Erdos & Ortiz, Parts 4, 7, and 9 – all in each Part

VIDEOS: “Seasons of the Navajo;” “The Return of Navajo Boy;” and “Hopi, Songs of the Fourth World”

LECTURE TOPICS:

Commonalities and contrasts in subsistence & social organization of Pueblo groups and Apacheans in the American Southwest
Convergence of cultural themes in the American Southwest
Navajo vs. Pueblo (e.g., Hopi) myths and folk tales
Weavings and Sand Paintings

Section V: Northeast Woodlands (Seneca-Iroquois) Myths and Folktales

Weeks 12-15
(11/13 – 12/6)

READING: Ted Williams, Big Medicine from Six Nations (all)

VIDEO: “Longhouse People”

LECTURE TOPICS:

Heroes and Quests
Twins
Monsters of the Northeast Woodlands: Iroquoian & Algonquian:
Flying Heads, Monster Bear, Stone Coats; Windigo
Monsters & Monster Slayers: a general theory of Native American Creation stories

Trickster, Coyote, Old Man, Raven: the whole tribe of tricksters
Case study: Paul Radin on Winnebago Trickster tales

Continuity in Seneca oral literature
Contributions of Iroquois religious leaders and mythographers
Contributions of Iroquois scholars, writers and intellectuals

FINAL EXAM: FINAL EXAM: 8:00 AM Dec 13