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## Indien Personhood II: Baby in the Oven Sparks Being in the World

JAY MILLER

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The process, particularly as a series of sequential timings, of creating an Indien person, according to accepted (“traditional”) beliefs, highlights the importance of fire, cooking, infusions, and, ultimately, dissolution.<sup>1</sup> The same pan-human use of fire, distinguishing them from animals, also accounts for the gestation of a baby, suggesting that ontology here recapitulates cosmology.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, the universal equation among the heart of a person, hearth of a house, beacon of a town, and sun of the sky underscores the importance of heat and light for all healthy, communal life.<sup>3</sup> In stark contrast, the “dark” includes disease, harm, danger, and death.

Though underreported, links between sparks, spirits, and life have been confirmed for the Ojibwa Shaking Tent, Delaware curings, Lakota Yuwipi, and, more universally, the flames, or tongues of fire, of Pentecost.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, esoteric beliefs among Pawnee, Delaware, and Lushootseed equate the kindling of fire by friction with coitus.<sup>5</sup>

Each person is an especial instance of “mind”—that primordial vitality, force, movement, energy, and power deified by a high god or creator localized at the center of each tribal universe. According to southern California

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Luiseno, "All things that manifest or are suspected to possess *ayelkwi* [knowledge-power] are considered 'persons.'"<sup>6</sup>

In the abstract, each person possesses four aspects that may be characterized as anatomy, attitudes, abilities, and associations.

### ANATOMY

In Plains Cheyenne belief, a proper person was conceived of blood from the mother, substance (flesh) from the father, and two blessings from the Creator—a life soul indicated by the heartbeat, pulse, blinking eyelids, food digestion, growth, and the like; a consciousness inhaled at birth indicated by breathing, speech, understanding, and access to cosmic power.<sup>7</sup>

In greater detail, Alaskan Tlingit conceptualize the person as a container for holding the "mind" inside at the heart, surrounded by bones, flesh, and skin. As framework, the skeleton consisted of a spine and eight long bones, which hardened over a lifetime, located in the four limbs. Material, mortal components came from the father, while immaterial and immortal aspects derived from the mother, who represented her crest's matriline.<sup>8</sup>

While each child represented a successful conjoining of kin dreams, desires, hopes, and prayers, its external gender was sometimes determined by which parent reached orgasm first or which possessed the stronger or more powerful will; at other times, a child's sex was left to greater cosmic forces. For example, among Quebec Inuit, couples yearning for a daughter set up their tent facing inland and far from shore; for a son, their tent faced the sea at the tideline, "the domain of the hunter and the large marine animals."<sup>9</sup>

In some sense, the pregnant woman provides an oven for the fetus, where water and blood in her womb provide the medium that receives semen from the father to ignite the cooking process of creation. Their heated conjunction congeals into infusions of ever increasing solidity, density, and growth that becomes the baby. In this manner, blood became flesh, semen became bone, and water became clear fluids, lymph, and fibers. The insertion of soul(s) produces a heartbeat, then a pulse, then a breath, most evident as condensed vapor. Similarly, delineation of a face leads to a permanent image that casts a shade or shadow which detaches at death and may continue on.

Full-bodied, a baby takes on peculiarities of appearance and attitude derived from its ancestry, both human and cosmic, and from experiences of the parents. Just as her blocking of a doorway will complicate delivery, so his staring at a rabbit will cause a harelip. Thus, both parents must constrain and modulate their actions and thoughts in the best interests of the birth to come. Serious sin or immorality of either parent results in a stillbirth, interfamily accusations of neglect, and, potentially, a divorce.

While life is often set off by a spark, the infant only receives this animating gift at birth, thereby sustaining the body heat its mother had provided until then. Indeed, this link between motherhood and ovens is confirmed by the widespread belief tabooing males away from both a birth and a pit oven while in use.<sup>10</sup>

## ATTRIBUTES

Since Tlingit women provide the immortal and men the mortal aspects of life, a baby's face comes from its father. While each combination is unique, its personality traits derive from inherent links to relatives, as modified by social claims to adoptions, totems, crests, clans, phratries, or moieties. Since many of these are named for animals, certain zoological traits were also expected to be displayed.

For example, in the Abenaki charter epic of the Maritimes, Giant Frog swallowed all the waters, causing a drought, and everyone began to die of thirst. People moaned that they were as dry as some animal—a turtle, beaver, wolf, trout, or haddock, to name a few. Their culture hero killed Frog, then toppled a birch tree onto its body to expel the water. Gushing down the trunk and branches, this flood formed river systems with a pond in place of the leaf at the end of each twig. As water reached the ancestors, some of them plunged in to drink, immediately changing into the animal whose thirst they claimed. Others remained human but took their named animal as the sign, insignia, badge, or totem to their ancestral lands, including camps and hunting territory, along a particular stretch of waterway.

Families were expected to inherit some physical attributes from their animal. For example, among Maine Penobscots, "The members of the Whale family (Stanislaus) are pointed out as large, portly, and dark persons, those of the Rabbit family (Newell) as small, timid, and weak, those of the Bear family (Mitchell 2) as orderly and dignified, and so on."<sup>11</sup>

During a lifetime, moreover, character is strongly influenced by foods, friends, and other associates, both good or bad. Ideally, a person achieved final maturity and full respect as a grandparent, raising a second generation with less demands on earning a living, a parental task.

Styles of hair, clothing, and ornaments reinforce male or female identity. Sometimes, *berdache* wear clothing of both genders to emphasize their intermediate status, but babies with confusing genitalia were dressed as girls simply because boys went nude, as with the Nuu-chah-nulth founder of a famous whaling shrine until he forced the issue by raping two women.<sup>12</sup> Among Lushootseed, where few or loose clothing was worn, obvious anatomy provided primary identity since transgenders are always said to be "acting like" their adopted cross-gender role.<sup>13</sup>

## ABILITIES

Kinship also produced predisposition to particular careers, tasks, and specialties, as in Native California.<sup>14</sup> However, techniques were never enough for success, which relied first and foremost on access to or reserves of power provided by a guide, partner, or guardian met during a quest or vision. In the most dramatic, if extreme, example, an encounter with Thunder, especially as a lightning bolt (a flame writ across the sky), a Lakota visionary became a *heyoka*, a "contrary" warrior doing everything backwards. With the same intensity, for Skidi Pawnee, "Each step in the Creation was achieved through two [thunder] storms, one to create the lifeless form, the other to revitalize it;

and, as the world was created in tempest, so every spring the [thunder] storms revived the dormant earth, signalling the beginning of the new year and the renewal of all things. . . . The male storm fertilized the female earth."<sup>15</sup>

Yet no life runs entirely smoothly. In the event of serious dysfunction or misfortune, a person may default on hopes and expectations. Sometimes, inability to assume proper or expected male or female roles leads to cross-dressing and a transgender identity, sometimes as punishment for charges of cowardice and treachery.

### ASSOCIATIONS

Any and all of these serial infusions and additions is engendered as manly or womanly, so any person can and does combine both male and female attributes ranging from the mind, body, dress, and skills to strong spiritual influences. Overall preponderance of one gender over the other(s), however, determines personal identity, role, and activities. An equal balance between the two, however, seems to result in an honored transgender or *berdache* identity.

Disease, despair, disruption, or harm disable a person through the ill will of powerful others, contact with dangerous substances, puncture by a sharp object magically shot by a hired sorcerer, violation of taboos, or a general lack of self-care. Most can be cured or put right by shamans with powerful immortal allies, but some prove fatal.

Attacks of witchcraft were preconditioned by social anxiety about food, sex, health, success, and/or honor, as well as intensifying frustrations dealing with kin, kith, and competing access to resources.<sup>16</sup>

### DISSOLUTION

At death, or grave illness, the series that began life repeats in the same order to end it, starting with breath and ending with the skull, long bones, and valued possessions such as stone tools. At least one soul became a ghost or other postmortem residues. Another soul went to the afterworld, perhaps to reincarnate in the same family or another species.<sup>17</sup> Other souls in the joints, blood, or pulse points either dissolved or took on independent existences.

Generally, the timed diffusions within this series were marked by rituals, memorials, or post-funerals held by family members or the community for its deceased leaders. After the flesh was gone or removed, the bones could be bundled for secondary burial, sometimes in a communal ossuary, as among the Huron.<sup>18</sup> Skulls and stone tools were left at shrines, while in central California cremated remains were re-cremated at a rite called Lonewis a year later.<sup>19</sup> The advantage of these post-mortuary events was that they could be regularly scheduled because the timed series was generally known and guests could be invited with advance notice, unlike the death itself, which was rarely convenient.

## FINALE

Today, as science and medicine dominate knowledge of the person and the body, the series of infusions making up an individual involves a genetic code—of four nucleotides of DNA and RNA sequencing amino acids and proteins in chromosomes packaged as egg or sperm to produce a fertile zygote conditioned by intermittent hormones and chemicals, affected or not by radiation and other potent exposures—to produce a fetus that then gestates into a baby in timed trimesters until birth, when training begins to struggle with the tensions between nature and nurture.

Instead, for Native America, a timed series of about twenty infusions (counting by ten fingers and ten toes) combines specific genetic and community traits with cross-species bonds and cosmic forces to create one individual who is more a microcosm than a unique being, adding another spark to a world already aglow with complex, gleaming diversity. More than merely lighting one little candle, Indien personhood seeks to enhance multifaceted existences among all beings, throughout time and over space.

## NOTES

1. As in this article's antecedent ("Indien Personhood," published in the *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* 24:2 [2000]), I use the European solution for distinguishing those indigenous to India from those of the United States by the expedient of a single vowel (*a* or *e*): *Indian* for the East Indies and *Indien* for the West Indies.

2. Sometimes only mortal humans possess fire, as among Crow Absoroka who say their dead go to the Other Side Camp, inhabited by spirits, ghosts, and ancestors who are collectively called Without Fires according to the warrior Two Leggings in Peter Nabokov, ed., *Two Leggings: The Making of a Crow Warrior* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1967), 156.

3. Jay Miller, "The Matter of the (Thoughtful) Heart: Centrality, Focality, or Overlap," *Journal of Anthropological Research* 36:3 (1980): 338–342; id., "High-Minded High Gods in North America," *Anthropos* 75 (1980): 916–919.

4. A. Irving Hollowell, *The Role of Conjuring in Salteaux Society* (Philadelphia: Publications of the Philadelphia Anthropological Society, 1942), 51; Jay Miller, "Delaware Personhood," *Man in the Northeast* 42 (Fall 1991): 17–27, 26; Yuwipi information from Miller's field notes.

5. James Murie, *Ceremonies of the Pawnee*, ed. Douglas Parks, Smithsonian Contributions to Anthropology 27 (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1981), 150; Delaware and Lushootseed statements are from Miller's field notes.

6. Raymond White, *Luiŝeño Social Organization*, Publications in American Archaeology and Ethnology 48:2 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1963), 143.

7. Ann Terry Sawyer Strauss, "Northern Cheyenne Ethnopsychology," *Ethnos* 5:3 (1975): 326–357; id., "Being Human in the Cheyenne Way" (Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago, 1976).

8. Sergei Kan, *Symbolic Immortality: The Tlingit Potlatch of the Nineteenth Century* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1989), 51, 52.

9. Bernard Saladin D'Anglure, "Inuit of Quebec," in *Handbook of North American Indians: Arctic*, vol. 5, ed. David Damas (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institute Press, 1984), 496.
10. For a summary of this pit oven taboo for men among the Salish of North America and Ge of South America see Claude Levi-Strauss, *Introduction to a Science of Mythology*, vol. 4: The Naked Man (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), 612–613.
11. Frank Speck, "Abenaki Clans—Never," *American Anthropologist* 37 (1934): 528–530; id., "Malecite Tales," *Journal of American Folklore* 30 (1917): 480–481.
12. Arnold Pilling, "Cross-Dressing and Shamanism among Selected Western North American Tribes," in *Two-Spirit People: Native American Gender Identity, Sexuality, and Spirituality*, eds. Sue-Ellen Jacobs, Wesley Thomas, and Sabine Lang (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997), 69–99; Aldona Jonaitis, *The Yuquot Whaler's Shrine* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1999), 145.
13. Jay Miller, *Lushootseed Culture and the Shamanic Odyssey: An Anchored Radiance* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1999), 96.
14. William McKern, "Functional Families of the Patwin," *University of California Publications in American Archaeology and Ethnology* 13:7 (1922): 235–258.
15. Susan Golla, "Skidi Pawnee Religion: A Structural Analysis" (master's thesis, George Washington University, 1975), 43–44.
16. Deward Walker, ed., *Witchcraft and Sorcery of the American Native Peoples* (Moscow: University of Idaho Press, 1989).
17. Antonia Mills and Richard Slobodin, eds., *Amerindian Rebirth: Reincarnation Belief among North American Indians and Inuit* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994).
18. Bruce Trigger, *The Huron: Farmers of the North, Case Studies in Cultural Anthropology* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1969), 106–112.
19. Robert Heizer, ed., *Handbook of North American Indians: California*, vol. 8 (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Press, 1978), 268, 297, 776.