

Furry Academia

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Dedicated to explaining “were” and “furry” to “ordinary” people
Also dedicated to the were/furry communities

Note: This document has been modified from its original format. The only thing that has been modified is that headers/footers do not appear on every page. The information they contained has been moved to the front of this document. Some extra information has also been added for the curious.

A Works Cited is provided at the end of this paper for people who wish to do further research.

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Thanks for the furriness Ryu.

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Animals have been an integral part of human life. Today’s society keeps them as pets, or tries to save those species of animals which we are about to lose forever. Other societies, such as those of Native Americans, respect animals and all other parts of nature in general. They try to learn as much as they can from them, since they believe that they came before humans, and are superior because of this (Brown 94). Still, other humans in today’s modern society prefer to live or act like animals. Animals have been a part of movies and stories throughout time. In some stories, they retain their feral nature, while other times, they have become human-like to portray important messages.

American Indians have lived off of the land for hundreds of years. During this time period, there have been many pieces of folklore passed around from tribe to tribe, and from generation to generation. Most of these pieces of folklore talk about animals, and are designed to teach us lessons, or to explain how the world as we know it today was created. One of the most interesting things about these animals is that they have human-like qualities, such as their being able to talk with man. These kinds of animals have been around since Egyptian times, with such figures as Anubis, the jackal-headed god of death. Another example of this is the almighty Sphinx, who has the head of a man, and the body of a lion, which is still standing, albeit weathered, to this day (Benton 32-33).

Talking animals in the Native American culture might seem childish, or make the culture seem primitive compared to today's modern society because of the many Disney movies that play on this theme, but to Native Americans, animals are superior to humans. These talking animals were known as the First People, and were gods in disguise. When humans and the world we know now were created by them, the First People lost their human qualities and became the animals that they are today (Ballinger 44-45).

One of the most popular stories in American Indian folklore is the story of the creation of the world. There are many variations of it. One variation is that Silver Fox created the world by "the power of his thought," but Coyote "is responsible for the evil in the world." This variation is popular among a tribe in northwest California (118). Another variation sets Wolf, the Elder Brother of Coyote, as the creator of the world which is utopian. Coyote then transforms the world into a "human" world, or the world as we see it today. Comanche tribes believed in this story. Apparently, the reason why Coyote decided to change the world from a utopian one ("... to make humanity's life...easy and deathless") to a normal one was that he wanted "to make people take life seriously" (142).

There are many other characters in Native American mythology. Coyote is the main creation character in the plains, whereas in the Northwest part of the United States, Raven is. In Raven's creation story, he drops a stone into water and it becomes the world we now live in. Another important story involving Raven tells of how Raven steals the Sun, Moon, Stars, Fresh Water, and Fire, entitled "Raven Steals the Sun," and brought them into the world for all to enjoy ("Raven (mythology)"). There are other titles to this story such as "Raven Steals the Moon" (Ballinger 57-59) and "Raven Steals the Light" (Bastian 158). In each story, Raven steals something, and in two of the three different variations of this story, the authors say that Raven's feathers turn black (they were originally white) because they became charred while holding the Sun too long. This explains why a Raven's feathers are black, so say the Native Americans. This part of the story is not mentioned in Ballinger's version. Instead, at the end Raven broke the moon in half, which explains why we only see parts of the moon at certain times (waxing and waning). "He then broke the moon into halves...and threw [half of] it up hard into the air, the sun as well" (Ballinger 59). By contrast, "Raven Steals the Sun" is the only story in which Raven steals more than the Moon, Sun and Stars.

Lastly, another interesting story involving Coyote is "How Bluebird Got Its Color." The story tells of Bluebird bathing in a lake each morning for five days while singing a magical song, and on the fifth day, he emerged from the lake with blue feathers. Coyote, who was then green, also wanted to be blue. Bluebird told Coyote what he did, and he did just that. Coyote then emerged on the fifth day also blue. He was so happy with his new color (even his shadow was blue), and was looking to see if anyone noticed it that he did not watch where he was going and ran into a tree stump, where he fell into a pile of dirt. He was covered with dust. This is why coyotes are the color of dust and bluebirds are blue (Bastian 113-114).

Animals are present in other parts of Native American culture besides stories, such as in paintings. Brown notes, "Among the Plains tribes, an animal painted on a shield or lodge cover

is understood to be really present with the fullest of its particular spiritual powers” (Brown 62). For example, if a wolf was painted on the shield, the bearer would have “fleet movement[s] and knowledge of vast terrain” (72). Another example of this is if an animal is painted on a person’s tipi. Animals were painted around a tipi in such a manner that if a person entered the tipi, he or she would feel as if entering the animal itself. Only someone who had received a vision or someone carefully chosen was allowed to paint an image on a tipi, as it held a great connection to the spiritual world (73).

Animal skins are also a part of their culture. Some tribes believe that to puncture an animal skin or hide is not appropriate. A hunter would need to run after the animal on foot and suffocate it to keep the animal’s “sacred life breath.” If the animal’s hide was to be used as clothing, the skinner would not try to cut the skin in any way. It was believed that doing this would dishonor said animal. If a person was to put on the skin of an animal as clothing, they then would “partake of the spiritual quality or power latent” in said skin. “[A]ll beings and resources of creation were understood to manifest...powers, which could be assimilated by humans” (66). Even the bones which are leftover are treated with care, as hunters associate them with both death and life, for there cannot be death without life. “[B]one is...the very source and essence of life” (70).

Reincarnation is another big part of Native American culture. Most reincarnation is human-to-human, meaning that a human soul will be reincarnated into another human. A warrior’s life that is cut short will be reincarnated. The Native Americans could tell when a person was reincarnated via birthmarks, or if past life was recalled in a person’s memory. This mostly happened to tribes living on the plains and the Eastern United States (Mills 24). One interesting thing that Mills points out is that the Karankawa tribe, which lives on what is now modern-day Texas, are said to have “mourned the birth and celebrated the death of children, ‘because...death [is] ...a journey from whence he will return, but...birth [is] ...an entrance into a

life of perils and misfortunes” (25). Tribes in California have reported transmigration (reincarnations into animals) (25). This is often rare, as Mills notes that human-to-human reincarnation happens four times as much as human-to-animal reincarnation or being an animal before birth. She also says that there have been eleven cases where a human was transformed into an animal at death, but then reborn again as a human. Even though human-to-animal reincarnation seems rare, there have been a lot of unrecorded cases, of course, since these recordings have only started in recent human memory. Land hunters are said to return as wolves, sea hunters return as killer whales, and common people return as owls or ghosts. A tribe by the name of the Kwakiutl also believes that twins will be reincarnated as salmon (32-33). Mills also notes that people can have dreams or visions of people that are soon to be reincarnated (161-162).

The last subject that is to be discussed about Native American mythology is that of vision quests. A vision quest usually encompasses a person going out into the wild and finding his or her animal helper. This animal must choose the person. The animal helper then gives that person a certain power, or a cure for an illness. When said person returns with his or her animal helper’s gift, the elders say that the animal helper’s gift is only a “feeble reflection” of the animal’s true power. The visit with a person’s animal helper must remain private, or the power he or she received will disappear. If a person were to discuss what their animal helper was in the open, the animal helper may not help that person, or worse, turn against them (159-160).

“People may think that they know about animals, but...a human’s powers are insignificant.

Animals have special abilities which they depend upon to live, giving us only the powers which they no longer need” (159). All of the above is from a Dene Tha tribe’s point of view. The Lakota tribes viewed finding out a person’s animal helper much differently. The Lakota Brave Buffalo said, “Let a man decide upon his favorite animal and make a study of it.... The animals want communicate with man, but...man must do the greater part in securing an understanding”

(Brown 95). In the Lakota sense, animals will help a person in need only if he or she takes the time to understand their ways. Animal helpers can also be known as totems, spirit guides, or guardian spirits (Mills 31).

Guardian spirits are nothing new in today's modern world. Many people have heard of a guardian angel protecting them. Sylvia Browne is a claimed medium, or psychic, who is a person who "claims the ability to receive messages from spirits [or] ghosts" ("Medium (spirituality)"). She can supposedly sense spirits near or related to a given person, among other information. There are many other people who claim to do this. Unfortunately, most of them refuse to be tested in a controlled environment, such as Sylvia, so the information they give may or may not be credible ("Sylvia Browne"). Regardless of whether or not a modern or "New Age" person having a guardian spirit protecting them is true or not, some people believe that they do. Most of the time, these people do not discuss their beliefs out in the open, for fear of being ridiculed or called crazy. Most of the time, these guardian spirits, or totems, as mentioned earlier, will be of animals. Some people decide they have a totem as a way of representing themselves. Others believe that they have a totem of an animal if some of their human traits (such as a heightened sense of hearing) coincide with an animal's traits or abilities. Still, others actually believe it is their spirit guide ("Totem"). "Some Native Americans and other followers of tribal religions take a dim view of New Agers' and others' adoption of totem animals, arguing that a non-adherent cannot truly understand totemism apart from the cultural context..." ("Totem").

This New Age movement is called *Therianthropy*. Wikipedia describes this best as: "a generic term for any transformation of a human into another animal form, or for a being which displays both human and animal characteristics, either as a part of mythology or as a spiritual concept" ("Therianthropy"). Some people think that this belief means that a person believes that he or she can truly transform into an animal. This is known as clinical lycanthropy, but this is not the case so long as this belief does not harm the person or others around him or her. Clinical

lycanthropy involves a person feeling and acting like an animal (not necessarily a wolf, as the name suggests), which is believed to be brought on by an episode of psychosis. If a person were to try and change themselves into their desired animal via potions and sacrifices, among other rituals, they would be known as shamans, the same kind in many Native American cultures (“Clinical lycanthropy”). This could be related to a person dying as an animal in a past life, and then being reincarnated as a human, which was one form of reincarnation, as Mills stated.

Therianthropy, since it deals with the belief of half-human, half-animal creatures, can be considered *anthropomorphic*, or *zoomorphic*, much like our Coyotes, Ravens, Bluebirds, and Wolves of days long past. Anthropomorphism is the act of giving human-like qualities to animals. Zoomorphic characters are humans but with animal features, such as a girl with cat ears that are so often depicted in Japanese animated cartoons, or *anime*. Zoomorphic art in anime is known as *kemono* (“Kemono”). Both terms above have huge overlapping points, and are the same in essence (“Therianthropy”).

Therianthropy, in its fullest, is the belief that a person identifies with, or has characteristics of an animal, whether it is just a nickname, or something deeper and more spiritual. People who believe in this subculture refer to themselves as *therianthropes*, or *therians* for short. Some even use the slang term *were*, but this is an incorrect use of the word, as it just means man. The type of therianthropy described above is known as *spiritual therianthropy*. This is the most common type. Still others perceive their animal side as just another side of their personality. Some people argue that therianthropy is a split-personality disorder, but most therians do not have it in the clinical sense (“Therianthropy”).

Animals involved in therianthropy are often *power animals*. Mills describes “power animals” as “...polar bears, walrus, wolves, and perhaps also foxes – animals which are themselves ‘hunters’ in some sense” (Mills 117). However, a person does not have to be spiritually connected to an animal to associate with it. A person could just be using an animal in

their nickname because it “looks cool” or it represents the amount of cunning or anger they have, etc. “Some skeptics argue that, because of the preponderance of predators or other dangerous species, most therians are purposefully or unconsciously claiming inner association with impressive animals for ego-based purposes” (“Therianthropy”).

This subculture has no god or other authority. Therians typically meet online in chat rooms or message boards to discuss their ideas and beliefs about the subject. They can meet offline in gatherings called *howls*, but it is just a gathering *in real life*, as the online community puts it. Some very spiritual people in the therian grouping tend to want to show their animal side on the outside by getting full-body tattoos, or even canine implants (“Therianthropy”).

As far as Therians versus the Dene Tha tribe’s point of view, most therian’s animal helpers or totems would have already forsaken them, as most if not all Therians talk about what animal they are. The Lakota tribe seemed to have no trouble with the former, as long as a person truly learned about the animal they needed help from, or chose as their totem or guide.

On the other side of this fence regarding human-animal beings, we have the *furries* (a slang term is *fur*), who are interested in the art and stories regarding human-animal beings (“Furry lifestyler”). “[I]t is said that furries view therianthropy as ‘taking it too far’ or ‘too seriously’, while therianthropes assert that furries are frivolous, juvenile, and/or don’t respect or understand the true nature of animals” (“Therianthropy”). Furries do have a similar belief that they have an animal side or have totemistic beliefs. They also do believe that animals exist within humans, such as from a past life via reincarnation, much like the Native American believe. Furs unlike weres, like to express themselves more as far as their “animal side” goes. This is usually represented in their drawings, stories, or even their outward appearance. Besides tattoos, some furs even go so far as to get plastic surgery to get the desired effect (“Furry fandom”). Furs have gotten together at conventions they’ve held (“Furry lifestyler”).

Another interesting fact that separates the furs from the weres is that some furs feel the need to dress up as their character (or *fursona*, a play on words of “persona”) in fursuits. This is a shocking parallel to Native Americans wearing animal skins to gain their power as discussed earlier. Fursuits are used for fun at furry conventions such as Further Confusion, or some furs even use them while performing sexual intercourse, known as *yiffing* (“Furry fandom”). “Yiff” is a term coined by the furry community meaning something that is sexually appealing. Artwork that is drawn by furries that is considered pornographic in nature, and uses furs as the main subject or subjects is classified as yiffy (“Yiff”). Unfortunately, the general media has taken this sex aspect of the fandom and blown it out of proportion, labeling furry fandom as something totally perverted, which scares people not familiar with the fandom away from it. People have even gone so far as to make anti-furry or furry hate websites (“Furry fandom”). Interestingly enough, animals that we consider to be furry (or otherwise anthropomorphic) are used everyday in commercials or other advertisements.

These two groups overlap greatly. They both are basically a modernized way of thinking about Native American beliefs in animals in some senses. Collectively, these groups can be seen as one group, and how far a person is into the subculture spiritually will define if he or she is a were or a fur. When being introduced to or finding out about the subculture, people struggle with which “side” to be on, and the response is “whatever feels ‘natural’ or ‘right.’” Still others are told that they need to find out by soul searching via meditation, etc. The Therianthropy Resource notes that a person might have something similar to Medical Student's Disease, meaning they scrutinize anything and everything they do or see as being attributed to them being a therian, such as a person “...hear[ing] a high-pitched noise coming from [a] TV set - must be [their] ability to hear into the lupine hearing range (while in actuality, any human whose hearing isn't significantly damaged can hear the high-pitched sound from the TV)” (“The Therianthropy Resource”).

This subculture has more information about it than that is mentioned here. Amazingly, not much, if any, has been written about this subculture in books. Since furs and weres feel they can express themselves online more freely than if they were in the public eye where they would be ridiculed and shunned due to stereotyping, a majority of information about them is found online.

In 2006, it seems that some Native American cultures have wormed their way into modern society and have become something totally new with the advent of the Internet and other forms of communication. Unfortunately, our society as a whole is very stubborn, and doesn't accept new things very well. We must remember that we are all different, and that we should not shun other people because of their race, religion, personal beliefs, and so forth. We must respect Native Americans (and any other race or group of people) as much as we respect ourselves, because Native Americans seem to be the last source of honor there is in this world, as they respect and use animals to their fullest potential, unlike the slaughterhouses of today.

Unfortunately, we do not live in the world that elder brother Wolf had created.

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