

A Maidu Legend: The Theft of Fire

Found at: <http://www.firstpeople.us/FP-HTML-Legends/TheTheftofFire-Maidu.html>

At one time the people had found fire, and were going to use it; but Thunder wanted to take it away from them, as he desired to be the only one who should have fire. He thought that if he could do this, he would be able to kill all the people.

After a time he succeeded, and carried the fire home with him, far to the south. He put Woswosim (a small bird) to guard the fire, and see that no one should steal it. Thunder thought that people would die after he had stolen their fire, for they would not be able to cook their food; but the people managed to get along.

They ate most of their food raw, and sometimes got Toyeskom (another small bird) to look for a long time at a piece of meat; and as he had a red eye, this after a long time would cook the meat almost as well as a fire. Only the chiefs had their food cooked in this way. All the people lived together in a big sweat-house. The house was as big as a mountain.

Among the people was Lizard and his brother; and they were always the first in the morning to go outside and sun themselves on the roof of the sweat-house. One morning as they lay there sunning themselves, they looked west, toward the Coast Range, and saw smoke. They called to all the other people, saying that they had seen smoke far away to the west.

The people, however, would not believe them, and Coyote came out, and threw a lot of dirt and dust over the two. One of the people did not like this. He said to Coyote, "Why do you trouble people? Why don't you let others alone? Why don't you behave? You are always the first to start a quarrel. You always want to kill people without any reason."

Then the other people felt sorry. They asked the two Lizards about what they had seen, and asked them to point out the smoke. The Lizards did so, and all could see the thin column rising up far to the west.

One person said, "How shall we get that fire back? How shall we get it away from Thunder? He is a bad man. I don't know whether we had better try to get it or not."

Then the chief said, "The best one among you had better try to get it. Even if Thunder is a bad man, we must try to get the fire. When we get there, I don't know how we shall get in but the one who is the best, who thinks he can get in, let him try."

Mouse, Deer, Dog, and Coyote were the ones who were to try, but all the other people went too. They took a flute with them for they meant to put the fire in it.

They traveled a long time, and finally reached the place where the fire was. They were within a little distance of Thunder's house, when they all stopped to see what they would do. Woswosim, who was supposed to guard the fire in the house, began to sing, "I am the man who never sleeps. I am the man who never sleeps."

Thunder had paid him for his work in beads, and he wore them about his neck and around his waist. He sat on the top of the sweat-house, by the smoke-hole.

After a while Mouse was sent up to try and see if he could get in. He crept up slowly till he got close to Woswosim, and then saw that his eyes were shut. He was asleep, in spite of the song that he sang. When Mouse saw that the watcher was asleep, he crawled to the opening and went in. Thunder had several daughters, and they were lying there asleep.

Mouse stole up quietly, and untied the waist-string of each one's apron, so that should the alarm be given, and they jump up, these aprons or skirts would fall off, and they would have to stop to fix them. This done, Mouse took the flute, filled it with fire, then crept out, and rejoined the other people who were waiting outside.

Some of the fire was taken out and put in the Dog's ear, the remainder in the flute being given to the swiftest runner to carry. Deer, however, took a little, which he carried on the hock of his leg, where today there is a reddish spot. For a while all went well, but when they were about half-way back, Thunder woke up, suspected that something was wrong, and asked, "What is the matter with my fire?"

Then he jumped up with a roar of thunder, and his daughters were thus awakened, and also jumped up; but their aprons fell off as they did so, and they had to sit down again to put them on. After they were all ready, they went out with Thunder to give chase. They carried with them a heavy wind and a great rain and a hailstorm, so that they might put out any fire the people had. Thunder and his daughters hurried along, and soon caught up with the fugitives, and were about to catch them, when Skunk shot at Thunder and killed him.

Then Skunk called out, "After this you must never try to follow and kill people. You must stay up in the sky, and be the thunder. That is what you will be." The daughters of Thunder did not follow any farther; so the people went on safely, and got home with their fire, and people have had it ever since.