

Coyote and the Shadow People: a Nez Perce Story

As told recorded by Archie Phinney in 1929-30 from his mother (Phinney1934:282-285)

Coyote and his wife were dwelling there. His wife became ill. She died. Then Coyote became very, very lonely. He did nothing but weep for this wife. There the *Pa'y awit*, the Death Spirit came to him and said, "Coyote, do you pine for your wife?" - "Yes, friend, I long for her most painfully," replied Coyote. "I could take you to the place where your wife had gone but, I tell you, you must do everything just exactly as I say; not once are you to disregard my commands and do something else." - "Yes," replied Coyote, "yes friend, and what could I do? I will do everything you say." There the *tsa'wts'aw*, the ghost told him, "Yes. Now let us go." Coyote added, "Yes, let it be so that we are going." They went. There he said to Coyote again, "You must do whatever I say. Do not disobey." - "Yes, yes, friend. I have been pining so deeply and why should I not heed you?" Coyote could not see the spirit clearly. He appeared to be only a shadow.

They started and went along over a plain. "Oh, there are many horses; it looks like a round-up," exclaimed the ghost. "Yes," replied Coyote, though he really saw none, "yes, there are many horses."

They had arrived now near the place of the dead. The ghost knew that Coyote could see nothing but he said, "Oh look, such quantities of service berries! Let us pick some to eat. Now when you see me reach up you too will reach up and when I bend the limb down you too will pull your hands down." - "Yes," Coyote said to him, "so be it that thus I will do." The ghost reached up and bent the branch down and Coyote did the same. Although he could see no berries he imitated the ghost in putting his hand to and from his mouth in the manner of eating. Thus they picked and ate berries. Coyote watched him carefully and imitated every action. When the ghost would put his hand into his mouth Coyote did the same. "Such good service berries these are," commented the ghost. "Yes, friend, it is good that we have found them," agreed Coyote. "Now let us go." And they went on.

"We are about to arrive," the ghost told him. "There is a long, very, very long lodge. Your wife is there somewhere. Just wait and let me ask someone." In a little while the ghost returned and said to Coyote, "Yes, they have told me where your wife is. We are coming to a door through which we will enter. You will do in every way exactly what you see me do. I will take hold of the door flap, raise it up, and, bending low, will enter. Then you too will take hold of the door flap and do the same." They proceeded, in this manner now to enter.

It happened that Coyote's wife was sitting right near the entrance. The ghost said to Coyote, "Sit here beside your wife." They both sat. The ghost added, "Your wife is going now to

prepare food for us.” Coyote could see nothing, except that he was sitting there on an open prairie where nothing was in sight; yet he could feel the presence of the shadow. “Now she has prepared our food. Let us eat.” The ghost reached down and then brought his hand to his mouth. Coyote could see nothing but the prairie dust. They ate. Coyote imitated all the movements of his companion.

When they had finished and the woman had apparently put the food away the ghost said to Coyote, “You stay here. I must go around to see some people.” He went out but he returned soon. “Here we have conditions different from those you have in the land of the living. When it gets dark here it has dawned in your land and when it dawns for us it is growing dark for you.” And now it began to grow dark and Coyote seemed to hear people whispering, talking in faint tone, all around him. Then darkness set in. Oh, Coyote saw many fires in a long-house. He saw that he was in a very, very large lodge and there were many fires burning. He saw the various people. They seemed to have shadow-like forms but he was able to recognize different people.

He saw his wife sitting by his side. He was overjoyed and he joyfully greeted all his old friends who had died long ago. How happy he was. He would march down the aisles between the fires, going here and there, and talk with the people. He did this throughout the night. Now he could see the doorway through which his friend and he had entered. At last it began to dawn and his friend came to him and said, “Coyote, our night is falling and in a little while you will not see us. But you must stay right here. Do not go anywhere at all. Stay right here and then in the evening you will see all these people again.” - “Yes, friend. Where can I possibly go? I will spend the day here.”

The dawn came and Coyote found himself alone sitting there in the middle of the prairie. He spent the day there, just dying from the heat, parching from the heat, thirsting from the heat. Coyote stayed here several days. He would suffer through the day but always at night he would be made merry in the great lodge.

One day his ghost friend came to him and said, “Tomorrow you will go home. You will take your wife with you” - “Yes, friend, but I like it here so much. I am having a good time and I should like to remain here.” - “Yes,” the ghost replied; “nevertheless you will go tomorrow, and you must guard against your inclination to do *ha’ynam waku’*, foolish things. Do not yield to any queer notions. I will advise you now what you are to do. There are five mountains. You will travel for five days. Your wife will be with you but you must never, never touch her. Do not let any strange impulse possess you. You may talk to her but never touch her. Only after you have crossed and descended from the fifth mountain you may do whatever you like.” - “Yes, friend,” replied Coyote.

When dawn came again Coyote and his wife started. At first it seemed to him as if her were going alone yet he was dimly aware of his wife's presence as she walked along behind. They crossed one mountain and, now, Coyote could feel more definitely the presence of his wife; like a shadow she seemed. They went on and crossed the second mountain. They camped at night at the foot of each mountain. They had a little conical lodge which they would set up each time. Coyote's wife would sit on one side of the fire and he on the other. Her form appeared clearer and clearer.

The death spirit, who had sent them, now began to count the days and to figure the distance Coyote and his wife had covered. "I hope that he will do everything right and take this wife through to the world beyond," he kept saying to himself.

Here Coyote and his wife were spending their last night, their fourth camping, whence, on the morrow, she would again assume fully the character of a living person. They were camping for the last time and Coyote could see her very clearly as if she were a real person who sat opposite him. He could see her face and body very clearly, but he only looked and dared not touch her.

But suddenly a joyous impulsion seized him; the joy of having his wife again overwhelmed him. He jumped to his feet and rushed over to embrace her. His wife cried out, "Stop! Stop! Coyote! Do not touch me. Stop!" Her warning had no effect. Coyote rushed over to his wife and just as he touched her body she vanished. She disappeared – returned to the shadow land.

When the death spirit learned of Coyote's folly he became deeply angry. "You inveterate doer of this kind of thing! I told you not to do anything foolish. You, Coyote, were about to establish the practice of returning from death. Only a short time away the human people are coming, but you have spoiled everything and established for them death as it is."

Here Coyote wept and wept. He decided, "Tomorrow I shall return to see them again." He started back the following morning and as he went along he began to recognize the places where his spirit friend and he had passed before. He found the place where the ghost had seen the heard of horses, and now he began to do the same things they had done on their way to the shadow land. "Oh, look at the horses; it looks like a round-up." He went on until he came to the place where the ghost had found the service berries. He went on and finally came to the place where the long lodge had stood. He said to himself, "Now, when I take hold of the door flap and raise it up you must do the same." Coyote remembered all the little things his friend had done. He saw the spot where he had sat before. He went there, sat down, and said, "Now, your wife has brought us food. Let us eat." He went through the motions of eating again. Darkness fell and now Coyote listened for the voices and he looked all round, he looked here

and there, but nothing appeared. Coyote sat there in the middle of the prairie. He sat there all night but the lodge didn't appear again nor did the ghost ever return to him.