

Chief Child of the Yellow Root

It is important to appreciate the unique and pivotal role played by one of the First Peoples, Chief Child of the Yellow Root. The First Peoples/Animal Peoples lived in a time before the coming of Human Peoples, preparing the landscape with the “gifts” the people will need to thrive and prosper. This particular narrative was remembered by the revered elder and linguist Lawrence Nicodemus (1909-2004), who referred to it as the story of “Son of Light,” *Sp’ukhwenichelt*, a “Coeur d’Alene prophet,” who goes “around the lake” (referring to Lake Coeur d’Alene) and “teaches the animals how to behave.”

“Long age, when the names of animals were also the names of people, *Sp’ukhwenichelt* taught every animal how to live. When Coyote went to the moon, old man *Sp’ukhwenichelt* traveled around on earth, inspected Coyote’s work and set right many things that Coyote had left undone. He was always helpful to mankind” (Palmer, Nicodemus and Connolly 1987:69).

In her own analysis of the narrative text, “Chief Child of the Root,” Gladys Reichard made the observation that among the Plateau peoples it is Coyote who is typically acknowledged as the key transformer, with the other First Peoples as secondary (1947:63-68). And while Chief Child of the Root appears in the oral literature of other Interior Salish tribes, e.g., Thompson, Lillooet and Sanpoil, references to his specific transformational deeds are not reported and his eventual demise is only vaguely conveyed. But among the *Schitsu’umsh*, as Reichard points out, it is Chief Child of the Root, along with Coyote, who play the central roles as transformers.

The story of Chief Child of the Yellow Root critically anchors the identity of the *Schitsu'umsh* with the "roots" and with the "lake." In all his journeys, Chief Child of the Yellow Root travels "the whole world" in his canoe made from a "monster fish" he had killed, and those journeys are over the lake and up the rivers of *Schitsu'umsh* country, "to where the river comes to an end." With Chief Child of the Yellow Root raised on "yellow root" and his father named "Yellow Root," clearly Chief Child of the Yellow Root's identity is associated with both the root foods of the *Schitsu'umsh*, such as camas, and *sqigwts* - water potato, as well as the healing roots, such as Indian hellebore. Given his elevated status, the story of Chief Child of the Yellow Root reiterates the emphasis the *Schitsu'umsh* place on the overall importance of the "roots" and the "lake" in their lives.

The following transcription of the Chief Child of the Yellow Root story was originally recorded and compiled by Gladys Reidard from Dorothy Nicodemus, then over 70 years old, in 1927. Dorothy was the grandmother of Lawrence Nicodemus.¹

Chief Child of the Yellow Root

There is a lodge where an old woman lives with her daughter who has a baby. Every day the daughter gathers yellow roots. She comes back with a great many of the roots. Then they would eat them. The boy grows tall. Every day she gathers the yellow roots. Then they would eat them. The family eats them. Then boy grows tall. The mother always goes out alone to gather roots. The boy is with his grandmother. The boy grows tall.

Then he asks, "Where is my father?" "You are pitiful. You have no father." "Why have I

¹ The "Chief Child of the Yellow Root" narrative is abbreviated and based upon Reichard (1946:173-201) and (1947:57-68), and appeared in Schitsu'umsh and Frey (2001:147-151).

no father?" he asks. "He has been dead a long time." "What was his name?" "He had none."

The boy takes a stick. He says, "If you don't tell me who my father was I'll kill you."

"Yellow Root was your father," the grandmother says.

Then the boy is sad. Then he lies down and covers himself with his blanket there. All day he lies like that. In the evening his mother comes back and sees him lying as he was. She thinks, "I suppose his grandmother has been telling him tales." She says nothing [The storyteller makes signs that the daughter is going to club her mother]. After she cooks the roots, she says, "Come, we are going to eat!" The boy pays no attention. Then she and her mother eat. The boy does not join them. Then the next day the same thing happens. He refuses to eat. Then the mother goes out to gather more roots. After she is gone the boy gets up and says to his grandmother, "I am leaving you forever."

Then he goes out. He goes to the edge of the water and sets down there. He sings, "Yes, then *yexiya* Chief Child of the Yellow Root *xeya, xeya.*" He washes his face, his head and his entire body. Then he reaches into the water and takes out the throat of a fish monster. He makes a canoe of it, gets into it and rows away singing his song, "Yes, then *yexiya* Chief Child of the Yellow Root *xeya, xeya.*"

Then he hears someone who says, "Chief Child of the Yellow Root, give me a ride. We'll see the whole world even to where the river comes to an end." "All right, I'll give you a ride." Then the passenger, who is Pestle Boy, jumps up and down in the boat. "You might break the canoe. Here, I'll fix a paddle for you to sit on." He fixes it. Then Pestle Boy jumps up and down. Then Child of the Yellow Root dumps him into the water. "You will no longer eat people. Don't be a man-eater anymore. They will use you for a pestle," Chief Child of the Yellow Root says.

The Chief Child of the Yellow Root goes on paddling around the lake. Suddenly he sees a tree burning there. Someone falls into the fire. He thinks, "That person will die." Then he finds Foolhen feeling for her eyebrows. They are all red and blistered from the fire. "What's the matter?" he says. "Hu uh-um, Chief . . . , I am getting this black moss," she says.ⁱ "Don't do that anymore. You might die. If you get hungry, fly to the tree there and eat the black moss raw. Don't live in a lodge anymore and don't cook your food," he says. "Thank you, Chief," Foolhen says.

Then the Chief travels on around the lake. He sees a lodge with smoke coming out there. He thinks, "That's where I'll eat." There is a good fire burning in the house, but the people are gone. He sees little Awls hanging all over the walls there. In the middle is a big one, nicely beaded. Then he goes over and takes it down. As he is going out with it all the Awls cry out, "He is taking our chief," and then go after Chief Child of the Yellow Root. They pierce him all over his body. "Don't do that," he says. He hangs the chief back on the wall, goes outside and sets the lodge afire. The Awls are crying, "*Yar, yar, yar!*" "Don't be man-eaters anymore. You are to be used for making moccasins," Chief Child of the Yellow Root says.

Then the Chief travels on around the lake. He sees something that looks like a lodge there. He goes in. There is a good fire burning, but there are no people around. Then he sees Combs hanging all over the walls. A large one decorated with beads hangs in the center. He thinks, "I'll comb myself with that comb." As he takes the Comb, the other Combs cry out, "He is taking our chief." Then they all come after him and comb him. "Don't do that," he says. He hangs the chief back on the wall, goes outside and sets the lodge afire. The Combs shriek like scared chickens. "Don't be man-eaters anymore. You are to be used for combing hair," Chief

Child of the Yellow Root says.

Then the Chief travels on around the lake. He sees another lodge there. Inside is a fire, but no people. The walls are hung with Bladders. In the middle is a fine looking large one. "I'll take it for my own use, put kinnikinnick in it or my powder," he says. Then he takes it down and all the Bladders cry out, "He is taking our chief." They come down and bump him, and some of the Bladders blow in his face! "Don't do that," he says. He hangs the chief back on the wall again. He goes outside and sets the lodge afire. He hears the bursting of many tight skins. "Don't be man-eaters anymore. Hereafter you'll be used for storing tobacco," Chief Child of the Yellow Root says.

Then the Chief travels on around the lake. He sees another lodge there. A nice fire burns inside, but there are no people. All around the walls hang Lassos. A fine one is in the middle. Then he takes it down, and when he does, all the other Lassos rope him. "It's our chief." "Don't do that." Then they tie him up. He puts the chief back and goes outside. He sets the lodge afire. "Don't be man-eaters anymore. When people want food they will use you to trap their game," Chief Child of the Yellow Root says.

Then the Chief travels on around the lake. He sees someone jumping into the water, coming up with clasped hands there. The person runs into the lodge, brings out a bucket, fills it with water, and goes back into the lodge to make a fire. The Chief looks on and sees him wringing the ends of his fingers in the pail. He comes to the person, Fishhawk. "Oh, Chief . . . , you find me humble, I am poor," Fishhawk says. Then he gives the Chief some soup. It is very good. "If it weren't for my fingernails I would have plenty to eat. I guess you saw how I catch fish," Fishhawk says. "Let me see your hands." The Chief makes the nails long. Fishhawk tries

them out and comes back happy with a good fish. "Thank you, Chief. Stay and eat with me," he says. "No, I have eaten. You eat by yourself. Then fly. Don't live in lodges anymore. Don't cook your food. Eat it raw. Take only one fish at a time and eat it all," Chief Child of the Yellow Roots says. "Thank you, Chief."

Then the Chief travels on around the lake. He sees many people there. They see him coming too. "He is coming, Chief Child of the Yellow Root," they cry. Two men come forward and carry him in their arms. The chief of the people says, "I have two daughters for you to marry."

It is so crowded that Toad is pushed away and cannot see anything. That always happens to Toad because she is so ugly! She tries again to see, but cannot. "You are so ugly that what is the use of trying to see him," they say. "That might be true," she says.

Then Toad goes out for water. She sprinkled water from the sky. She goes into her own lodge and waits. It rains hard. Everybody goes into their lodges. It is so wet in the lodges that no one can lie down. Then Chief Child of the Yellow Root tips his canoe over and lies under it. Soon it is wet as well. Then he gets up and sees a light far off there. It is Toad's lodge. She has a nice fire and everything is dry and comfortable.

Then Chief Child of the Yellow Root goes to her lodge. "Why are you dry, my grandmother?" "Now I see you close up, even if I am ugly," she says. "Why are you dry, my grandmother?" "I am not your mother's mother." "Are you my father's mother?" "No." "Are you my sister?" "No." "Are you my daughter?" "No." He gets up and asks one last time, "Are you my wife?" "I am your wife."

Then Toad jumps up and lands above the Chief's nose, right between his eyes. He tries

to pull him off, but cannot. The skin stretches. "Come, get this toad off me," he says. They try to cut off the toad, but with no luck. Toad stays on Chief Child of the Yellow Root.

Then Coyote calls all the people together. A great council is held. Coyote says, "We ought to have a sun during the day and a moon at night. I'll be the Moon." Robin says, "I'll be the Sun."

When the Sun comes up it is too hot. The people have to spend their time swimming. That's all they can do. When the Moon comes up, Coyote spies on all the people. He sees everything the people do at night and announces it to everyone.

Then the Chief says, "The Sun is too hot and the Moon, Coyote, is utterly no good!" They pull down Robin and Coyote from the sky and throw them away.

Then Helldiver's child, who has only one eye, says, "I'll be a good Sun to you. I don't see so well. I will not be too bright, not too hot." "All right then," they say.

Then Child of the Yellow Root says, "I'll be the Moon to you. "I'll go far off there so you can't very well see this toad that's on my face!"

Then, the end of the trail.
