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NOTES

Three Mexican Tar Baby Stories

BY JEAN BASSETT JOHNSON

The following versions of the well-known Tar Baby story were obtained in the Mazatec village of San Miguel Soyaltepec, Oaxaca, the Chinantec village of Chiltepec, Oaxaca, and the Nahuatl village of San Juan Tetelcingo, Guerrero, respectively.¹

I. *Mazatec*

An old woman went to look at her bean patch, and she saw that the rabbit had been eating it. She went to court to accuse him, and on the way she met a man who said to her, "Where are you going, old woman?" "I am going to court, my bean patch has been eaten up," she answered. The man then told her, "I also am going to court, as I have some business to attend to, but let me tell you this, make a figure of wax, put a piece of bread in its hand, and place it in the middle of the road." She did so, and the old rabbit came along. "Good day to you!" he said to the figure. "Good day to you, old blackie! Why don't you speak to me? I am going to give you one!" He slapped it, and his hand stuck. He slapped it again, and his other hand stuck. "Now I am going to kick you, if you don't let me go," he said. He did so, and his foot stuck. The old woman came back and killed him.

II. *Chinantec*

A man had a chile field. The rabbit was going to eat the chile-sprouts, so the man put a little negro of wax in the road. When the rabbit arrived, he asked the little negro, "What are you doing here? If you don't get out of the road, if you don't get out of the way, I will hit you in the face," and he hit the little negro in the face with one hand. When he hit him, his hand got stuck. Rabbit said, "Let go of my hand! I have another hand with which to hit you," and he hit him, until both his hands and feet were stuck. Then he bit him with his teeth, and his mouth got stuck. There, stuck fast, he died.

III. *Nahuatl*

There was a gardener who had a patch of watermelons, to which animals were doing much damage. The gardener put a doll of wax in the watermelon patch. Uncle Rabbit came, and, fighting with the doll, became completely stuck. Then the Coyote appeared, and was about to eat Uncle Rabbit. "No, don't eat me," Uncle Rabbit told him. "I am a prisoner here because the gardener wants me to marry his daughter, and I don't want to because she is too big for me. If you wish, I will change places with you, and you can marry his daughter." Coyote agreed and took the Rabbit's place. The gardener came, and began to beat the Coyote, who protested that he was willing to marry the girl. Coyote finally got loose, and ran away to find Uncle Rabbit. He found him and was going to eat him, but Uncle Rabbit said—etc.

¹ The Mazatec story was recorded in text by Irmgard Weitlaner de Johnson in 1938, the Chinantec version by Roberto J. Weitlaner in 1939, and the Nahuatl version was collected by the writer in 1940.

In the light of the considerable literature on the Tar Baby² the above versions have several points of interest. The Mazatec and Chinantec versions, coming from contiguous areas, are among the shortest yet collected. In spite of their brevity, they agree with the synthetic definitions of W. N. Brown³ and Ruth Cline,² save in two points, namely, that they completely lack the amorous or sensual element, and that the thief does not escape, but is killed. Further, they agree perfectly with the nine fundamental points of the Tar Baby story as stated by A. M. Espinosa,⁴ save in a few non-essential details, and again in the point that the thief does not escape after punishment.

Among the majority of the versions recorded from the Oaxaca region, the tale is much more complicated, both as to number of elements and number of characters.⁵ Coyote generally appears, as in the present Nahuatl version, taking the part of the stupid jackal of the Indian versions, who is tricked and finally done to death. The Mazatec tale is the only one in which the old woman goes to the local court for assistance in capturing the pillager.

In a story recorded by Boas from Pochulata, Oaxaca, a town about one hundred miles west of Tehuantepec, the old woman is advised on the road by an ant to make four little monkeys of wax, by means of which the rabbit is captured, but escapes by playing the customary marriage trick on Coyote.⁶ A parallel closer to the Mazatec-Chinantec is afforded by the tale from San Mateo Cajonos, Villa Alta, Oaxaca (Zapotec), which was collected by Radin. Here a man's bean field is being raided, and by means of the Tar Baby he captures two rabbits, the second of which is caught by attempting to liberate the first.⁷ Radin records yet another version from Mitla, Tlacolula, Oaxaca (Zapotec), in which the rabbit is captured but regains his liberty through Coyote by the marriage trick.⁸

² Cline, Ruth. *The Tar Baby Story*, *American Literature* 2 (1930): 217-227.

Espinosa, A. M. *Notes on the Origin and History of the Tar Baby Story*, *JAFL* 43 (1931): 129-209.

Sapir, E. *Yana Texts*, *UCPAAE* Vol. 9 (1910): 227-28.

Dixon, R. B. *Shasta Myths*, *JAFL* 23 (1910): 34-35.

Parsons, E. C. *The Provenience of Certain Negro Folk Tales*, *FL* 30 (1919): 227-234.

³ Brown, W. N. *The Stickfast Motif in the Tar Baby Story*, 25th Ann. Studies, *Phil. Anthro. Soc.*, vol. 1 (1937): 3.

⁴ Espinosa (note 4, p. 196) states that "the Hispanic American versions are of European origin," a statement by no means conclusive, since some versions suggest more strongly African versions.

⁵ Mechling, W. H. *Stories from Tuxtepec, Oaxaca*, *JAFL* 25 (1912): 200, 201-202; 549. In these versions Rabbit escapes with the aid of Coyote. Tuxtepec is in the Chinantec region, but a few hours from Chiltepec in the Valle Nacional.

⁶ Boas, F. *Notes on Mexican Folklore*, *JAFL* 25 (1912): 254.

⁷ Radin, Paul. *El Folklore de Oaxaca*, *Anal. de la Esc. Int. de Arq. y Etnol. Am.*, 1917: 186.

⁸ *Id.*, 153.

Thus it is seen that in the Oaxaca-Guerrero region there are two main versions of the Tar Baby story, differing primarily as to whether the predatory Rabbit escapes with the aid of the stupid Coyote, or is captured and put to death. The former appears to be much commoner than the latter, which bears a closer resemblance to the Afro-Iberian versions. The Mazatec and Chinantec versions give little internal evidence of acculturation, while other Oaxaca versions and the Guerrero tale bear the general mark of the Trickster cycle so often repeated in American Indian tales. The author has collected a large number of the tales of the Rabbit-Coyote cycle among the Cahita (Yaqui-Mayo) group of Sonora, almost all of them bearing patent evidence of European introduction. It so happens, however, that the Tar Baby story was not collected in Sonora, although it may exist there.

It was, perhaps, this Trickster element which permitted the Tar Baby story to become so quickly diffused and subsequently acculturated in America, and to give rise to such a large number of versions. Consequently, the nature of the Mazatec-Chinantec versions seems to indicate a different, and perhaps more recent introduction in the localized area than those more numerous occurrences of the version involving the Coyote and the escape by marriage trick, such as the Nahuatl tale.

The Snake Dilemma

BY WILLIAM MARION MILLER

The following story was gathered in a little river-bank town in southeastern Ohio. It is a story often told locally and is usually localized in a town having two hospitals. The events of the tale take place in the *other* hospital, but it is related by a person who got it from a nurse or other worker (always anonymous) in the hospital where the patient was *not* being treated. Here is the story:

Some one—usually a young man whose name is being kept a deep secret—has gone swimming in an open stream. He accidentally swallows some water while diving, but attaches no importance to so minor a happening.

A few weeks later the swimmer becomes ill and seems to be suffering from a violent form of pernicious anemia, although possessing a ravenous appetite. Local physicians throw up their hands at the case and the patient is rushed to a hospital. Specialists are called, X-rays are taken, and finally a diagnosis is reached. Although great secrecy is sworn all around, the story leaks out, but an air of secrecy still pervades the whole affair.

The specialists have decided, and the X-ray has confirmed their findings, that the water taken in by the swimmer in his dive contained a snake egg. The egg has developed and a snake has hatched. It lives and flourishes in the young man's stomach. For some time no trouble is experienced, but after a while the young man becomes anemic. His appetite is excellent, but