

The Shaman's Poro (Sacred Crook) in Native American Rock Art

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A Shaman's Poro or Sacred Crook is exhibited in the Visitor's Center at Mitchell Caverns in the Providence Mountains of the Eastern Mojave, with the following description: PORO

Having the classic appearance of the shepherd's crook, the poro was the shaman's (medicine man's) sign of his or her position. It was also believed to have magical powers.

The poro or crook had been found in a cave in the Providence Mountains and was worn smooth on the central area of the staff, where it had apparently been gripped over years of use.

At the 1994 San Diego Museum of Man Rock Art Symposium, a paper was presented by Todd W. Bostwick on "Hohokam Petroglyph Bird Designs in the South Mountains, Phoenix, Arizona." During the course of his presentation, he showed slides of two separate petroglyph panels featuring groups of human figures, with one person in each panel holding what was called a "cane" (Figures 1 and 2). In both instances the crook is held at the center of the staff. The same two panels are also pictured in Polly Schaafsma's book, *Indian Rock Art of the Southwest*, pages 92 and 93 with the caption by each picture referring to the crook as a "cane."

The caption under each picture refers to the figures as holding a "cane." I am indebted to both authors for drawing my attention to the crook design in rock art, and stimulating my desire to do research on the crook, even though I believe referring to a crook as a "cane" is totally inappropriate.

Carobeth Laird, in her landmark book, *The Chemehuevis*, relates many crook insights and myths. At the beginning of her chapter on "Shamanism and the Supernatural," she writes about the chief symbol of office for a shaman in this Eastern Mojave tribe.

The Chemehuevi shaman required no feathered headdress, no regalia of any kind, no eagle feathers or down, no sacred bundle, no collection of healing herbs. His one indispensable piece of equipment was his Poro (or pooro), a rod shaped like a shepherd's crook. This was an archetypal object of great power. . . . In the myth 'How Wolf and

Coyote Went Away,' it is said that with a single twist of his poro Wolf tunneled through a great mountain and that Coyote used his poro to hook the wind down from its high level so that it might sweep across the surface of the earth. In that ancient, storied time, 'When the Animals Were People,' after all Wolf's or Coyote's warriors had been killed in battle, slaughtered by malevolent beings, or had died of thirst, they were revived by the touch of a poro in the hands of Wolf or of some other pre-human shaman. The poro was peculiarly the shaman's badge of office; it is not to be confused with piiri, a crooked stick upon which an old man might lean in his infirmity.

(Laird 1976:31)

Carobeth had married the legendary anthropologist and ethnographer, John Peabody Harrington, in 1916. But her informant for her books on the Chemehuevi and source of information on the poro was her second husband, George Laird.

Harrington believed time was running out in the quest to record American Indian languages and culture. He drove himself and his young wife relentlessly, and forced her to give their child over to her parents to raise. She tells of her marriage to this eccentric genius in her book, *Encounter with an Angry God*. Perhaps she was looking for a way out when Harrington sent her ahead to Parker, Arizona, to find an informant from whom she could record the Chemehuevi language. It was in a blacksmith shop in Parker, after earlier failure to find someone who knew the pure Chemehuevi language, that she had been led to find a George Laird. She stepped into the dark shed to see his face illuminated by the coals of the forge . . . and they were never separated again until death parted them. She divorced Harrington and married her Chemehuevi informant. Carobeth was born in 1895; and George was twice her age, having been born in 1871 of a father who was three-quarters Scotch and one-quarter Cherokee, and a mother who was of pure Chemehuevi blood. In 1887, when George Laird was sixteen, he cared for a Chemehuevi man who was dying a slow and painful death. To enable the long months to pass with some diversion from the suffering, the dying man taught George the pure Southern Chemehuevi dialect, and the Chemehuevi myths and oral literature which even in 1887 were passing into oblivion.

Figure 1.



Figure 2.



Figure 3: South Mountain, Pima Can

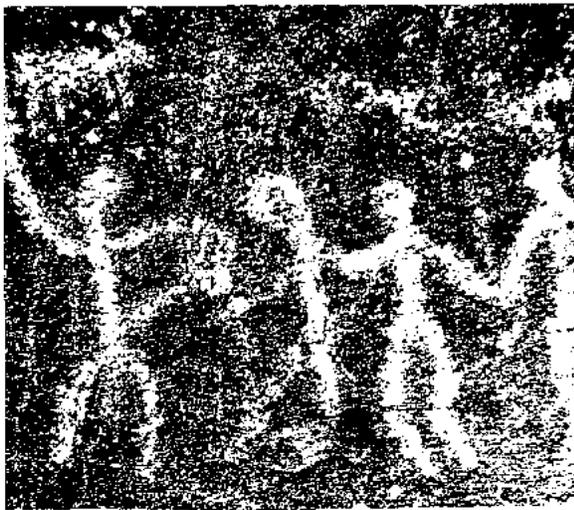


Figure 4. Migration Panel, Coso



Figure 5. Processional, Butler Wash

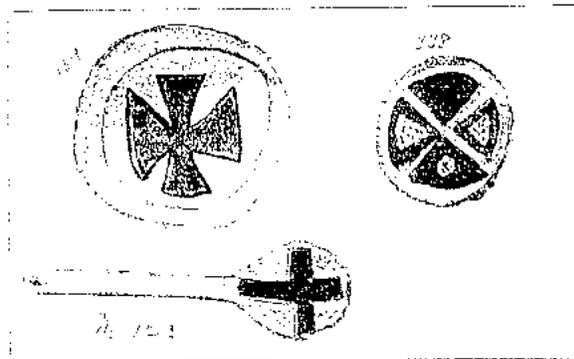


Figure 6. Processional Crooks?



Fig. 8 ACross designs on vessels
used in the feast celebrating
a girl's attaining puberty."

Fig. 7 Grass Valley, Mojave
(Patterson 1994: 57 and 197)



The last book by Carobeth Laird was entitled *Mirror and Pattern: George Laird's World of Chemehuevi Mythology*. In it she writes about the shaman's crook and her excitement when the crook now exhibited at the Mitchell Caverns Visitor Center was discovered.

In mythic times, the one essential piece of equipment for a shaman was the poro, the sacred crook or wand by means of which he restored the dead to life. To what extent was the poro used in the aboriginal era? George described it to me; he spoke of a shaman as one who "carried the poro."

(Laird 1984:273)

George had told her of how the poro was used ceremonially and at special times, but Carobeth had never seen one.

Then on January 5, 1981, George Luteran, a member of the Sierra Caves Task Force of the National Speleological Society, while exploring a shelter cave in the Providence Mountains, discovered one of these sacred crooks whose very existence (except in myth) I had begun to doubt.

(Laird 1984:273)

Luteran recognized the importance of his discovery, and wrote to the Providence Mountain State Park Ranger that he was certain that he had found a shaman's poro. Carobeth Laird tells of her excitement upon seeing the poro a few months later, recognizing how valuable the insights George Laird had shared would be in interpreting the ceremonial and mythological role of the shaman's crook.

If John Peabody Harrington had not insisted upon sending me to Parker, Arizona; if I had not reluctantly gone; if I had not been intrigued by Ruby Eddy's description of George Laird's linguistic capabilities; if our eyes had not met across the blacksmith's forge - if at any place a link in this chain of events had been broken, I doubt if significant information on the poro and the mystique surrounding it would now survive. It was called to my attention that there is a smooth place on the wand where the hand of the shaman had gripped it. My hand found it easily. I gripped the rod where it had been polished by years of contact with a man of power.

(Laird 1984:274)

Other insights and mythic references in Laird's books will be quoted hereafter in relation to specific petroglyph sites and crook usages.

But returning to the South Mountain panel in Pima Canyon, my friend, Phil G. Garn, who guided

me to the crook sites, raised a question as to whether the "crook" might not have legs and be another person in the sequence of people (See Figure 3). This reminded me of the famous Migration Panel in Little Petroglyph Canyon in the Coso Range of the Mojave Desert, where some figures in the progression have crook characteristics (Figure 4). But even more suggestive is the Processional Panel up from Butler Wash in Utah, where the figures with crooks are very distinct as the panel begins (Figure 5), but where at the upper end some of the figures have the appearance of walking crooks (Figure 6). Could it be that the shaman and the crook were so intimately associated that the figures were on occasion symbolically merged?

The symbolic association between fertility and the shaman's crook is graphically portrayed in a petroglyph panel at the Grass Valley site located in the Eastern Mojave approximately 16 miles north and east of Mitchell Caverns. Here there are vulva symbols, encircled and enclosed crosses, with two crook figures below (Figure 7), one of which extends to the crack at the base of the basaltic surface and appears to have been chiseled and re-chiseled for emphasis. Alex Patterson, in his *Hopi Pottery Symbols*, illustrates the encircled cross as an emblem of fructification in the girl's puberty celebrations (Figure 8), and refers to the enclosed cross as the eye of Co-tuk-inunwa, from which germinative elements descend to provide for life and fertility (Patterson 1994:62). The Grass Valley panel was pictured in my paper on "Native American Encircled and Enclosed Crosses Having Prehistoric Puberty/Fertility Symbolism," given at the San Diego Museum of Man Rock Art Symposium in 1994, when Todd Bostwick's paper raised my consciousness regarding the poro.

In the books of Carobeth Laird, Chemehuevi myths describe how the poro had great powers for fruitfulness:

Cottontail Rabbit pried open the crack with his poro and gave to all the world a plentiful supply of plants bearing edible seeds.

(Laird: *The Chemehuevis*, 153)

Cottontail Rabbit with his poro (a typical Chemehuevi touch) opens the crack, and an abundance of seeds pours forth. . . . In the Chemehuevi story the dead mother of the orphans is the dead and barren earth; but when the poro opens the crack in the rock (vagina of the Earth Goddess), life and fecundity are restore.

(Laird: *The Chemehuevis*, 215-216)

Alex Patterson, in his *A Field Guide To Rock Art Symbols Of The Greater Southwest*, pictures a

petroglyph at Cedar Mesa, Utah, which shows a "copulating couple and a crook, graphically emphasizing a symbolic association between crooks and fertility." Carobeth Laird in her *Mirror and Pattern* also gives a powerful description of the poro's creating might.

Power for this miraculous creation was transmitted through that most powerful object, Wolf's sacred crook, which Coyote had ordered the girl to take with her.

(Laird: 1984, 244)

The Tylerhorse Canyon Creation Panel, actually located in the Gamble Spring-Burham Canyon locale in the Antelope Valley at the foothills of the Tehachapi Mountains in California, has what appears to be a crook above the polychromatic pictographs of the creation/fertility symbols (Figure 9). A crook appears to be similarly located to the above right over the most familiar section of the Rochester Rock petroglyph panel in UtahCa panel which has creation/fertility/birthing themes among the many symbols (Figure 10).

Carobeth Laird also records many myths and stories relating to the regenerative, resurrecting, and curative powers of the poro or sacred crook.

Back in the warrior's camp, Dove Boys found everyone dead for want of water. They went about raising up certain ones by touching them with the poro and giving them water; then those resurrected ones set about reviving the others.

(Laird: *The Chemehuevis*, 179)

That regenerating rod of power, by which those Immortals who had been killed in various ways were revived and by which in later times the shaman performed his curative work.

(Laird: *The Chemehuevis*, 216)

When Wolf and Mountain Lion raised up their slain companions and restored them to life, they did so, as always, by touching them with their sacred crooks.

(Laird: *Mirror and Pattern*, 370)

In the story time, restoration to life was a routine procedure: A a touch of the poro, the shaman's wand, was all that was necessary.

(Laird: *Mirror and Pattern*, 264)



Fig. 9 Tylerhorse Canyon Panel



Fig. 10 Rochester Rock Panel

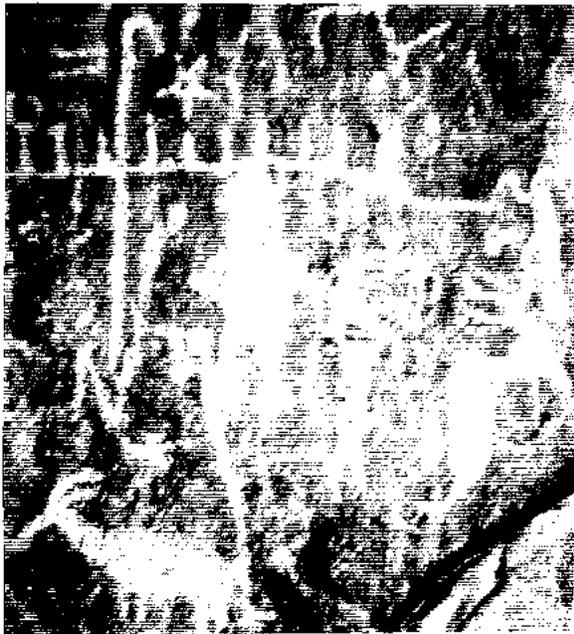


Fig. 11 Arrow Canyon, Nevada

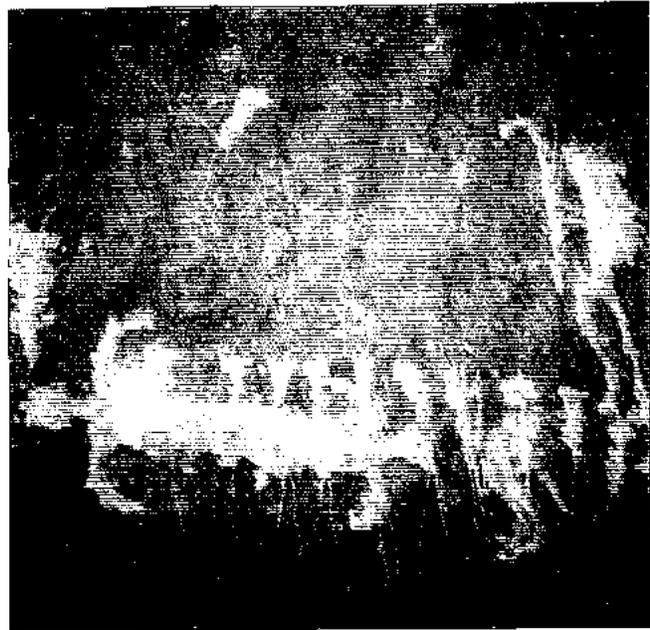


Fig. 12 Processional Panel, Utah



Figure 13. Natural Bridges, Rock Ruin



Figure 14. Second Rock Ruin Panel



Figure 15. Kachina Bridge, Utah

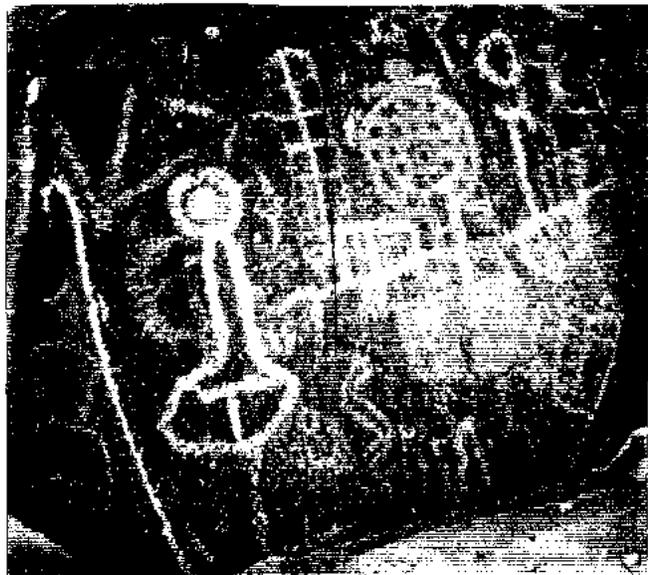


Figure 16. Warm Springs, Arizona



Figure 17. Renegade Canyon, Coso



Figure 18. Greenwater, Death Valley



Fig. 19 Swansea, Owens Valley

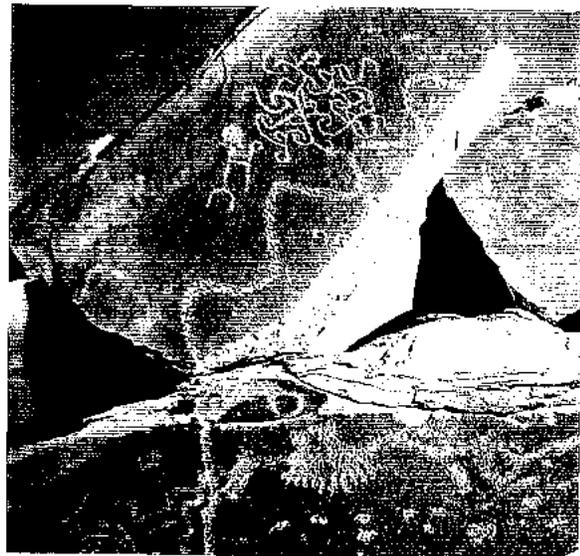


Fig. 20 Little Colorado River

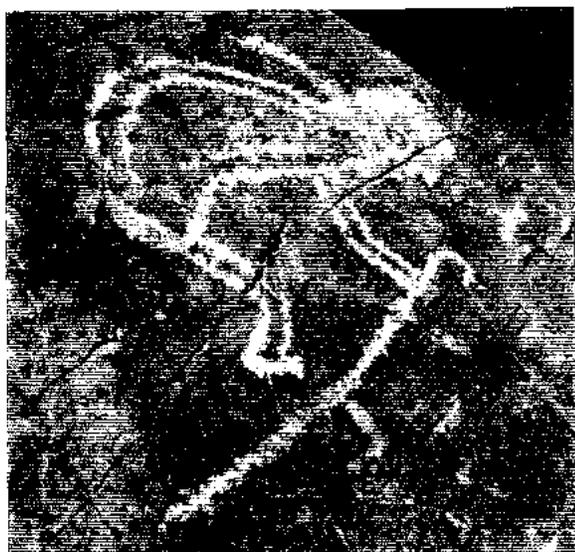


Fig. 21 Pony Hills Crook Bearer



Fig. 22 San Tan Mountain, AZ



Fig. 23 Cave of Life Staff with Bird Effigy, AZ



Fig. 24 White Rock Canyon, N.M.



Fig. 25 Coso Range, California

In petroglyphs, when a figure is made upside down or sideways, it is usually felt that death or at least illness is being portrayed. While it is more difficult to definitely determine the intent of the shaman-artist with respect to resurrection and curative panels than with the fertility designs, the panel in Arrow Canyon in southern Nevada has a big-horn sheep in what appears to be a death position and another big horn under the crook which is upright (Figure 11). Then in the Processional Panel north of Butler Wash in Utah, there is a horizontal figure that at least appears to need the regenerative or curative powers of the approaching shaman with his crook (Figure 12).

The crook designs also seem to identify a locale of great power, as at the Rock Ruin site on a high cliff near Kachina Bridge at the Natural Bridges National Monument in Utah. Several crooks are also around the base of Kachina Bridge, including the twin crooks noted in Alex Patterson's *A Field Guide To Rock Art Symbols*, under the "Staff" designation on page 190. But if size denotes power, then the painted red crook behind the ruins on the western side, being more than 60 feet long, represents a strong energizing force (Figure 15). In fact, the white pictograph figure at the end of the empowering crook may well be one of those female underwater creatures associated with regeneration and life-giving rain (Leone Letson Kasner, *Spirit Symbols in Native American Art*, page 70). Other sites where crooks seem to have strong power associations are at Warm Springs in the Black Mountains of northwestern Arizona

(Figure 16), and in the crook and atlatl panel in Renegade or Little Petroglyph Canyon in the Coso Range (Figure 17).

The association of crooks and atlatls at Little Petroglyph Canyon in the Coso Range is a familiar and far-ranging feature, dealt with by J. Walter Fewkes in the *The Mimbres Art and Archaeology*, page 28. When the bow and arrow replaced the atlatl or throwing stick, the antiquity and veneration of the atlatl gave rise to symbolic and ceremonial uses. Hopi priests gave him the following explanation: These crooks or *gnelas* have been called warrior prayer sticks, and are symbols of ancient weapons. In many folk tales it is stated that warriors overcame their foes by the use of *gnelas* which would indicate that they had something to do with ancient war implements. Their association with arrows on the Antelope altars adds weight to this conclusion.

(Fewkes: 1914, 28)

Two of the many examples of atlatls with crook characteristics are found at Greenwater Canyon, Death Valley National Park (Figure 18), and at the Swansea site on the Northeast side of Owens Dry Lake in the Owens Valley, California (Figure 19).

Fewkes' use of the Hopi word for crook or crooks, namely *gnela*, or the plural, *gnelas*, raises the issue of translation, and the many different tribal languages and words for crook. Alex Patterson in his *Hopi Pottery Symbols* spells the word "gnwela," and includes not only the crook, but also scroll-like figures, double ended, linked like waves, and in half circles (page 167). One of the best examples of these variations, including a person holding a crook, is found among the petroglyphs at Inscription Rock along the Little Colorado River in Arizona (Figure 20).

Crook symbols are found not only in California, Nevada, Arizona, Utah, and New Mexico, but also among the Plains Indians. There may be multiple interpretations and meanings, and their stratigraphy or chronological layering of usages and customs meaningful. Crooks have also been called prayer sticks or coup sticks. Dennis Slifer and James Duffield, in their book, *Kokopelli: Fluteplayer Images in Rock Art*, deal with the role of the crook "in modern Pueblo ceremony as badges of office, prayer stick bundles, and altar pieces" (page 7). They describe the Pochtecas, traders who carried baskets and walking sticks or crooks, and even advance a trader/pochteca hypothesis for the origin of the Kokopelli traditions. The Pochtecas traveled widely between Mexico and the Southwest, and even the Mimbres petroglyphs at Pony Hills in southwestern New Mexico seem to illustrate the humpbacked, crook-bearing human (Figure 21).

In translations to English, crooks have also been called wands, rods, poles, staffs, and canes. For the benefit of moving the terminology toward some consistency and differentiation, I would like to suggest the following definitions:

Crook - The Crook-necked staff was the shaman's instrument of great power and identifying authority (Laird:1976,31). See Crook Bearer petroglyph from the San Tan Mountains of Arizona (Figure 22).

Staff - A straight stick or pole, which may be decorated with pennants, crescents, geometric designs, bird and animal effigies (McCreery and Malotki:1994:150). See Cave of Life staff with bird effigy, Petrified National Forest, Arizona (Figure 23).

Rod - A short ceremonial stick, with wand-like powers, which was also a shaman's piece of equipment, as exhibited in the display case at Mitchell Caverns in the Eastern Mojave along with the Poro or Shaman's Crook. See White Rock Canyon glyph, New Mexico (Figure 24) and the famous patterned-body anthropomorph from the Coso Range (Figure 25).

Cane - A Post-European contact corruption of crook symbolism, used both by the Spanish and the Lincoln administration, to confer recognition and demand allegiance, further diluted and destroyed the religious significance of the crook.

(Waters: 1950, 384-385, 393).

Each of the definitions above could have been illustrated by many different petroglyphs and pictographs, so the examples provided are intended only to show the types of instruments involved. Also, it is wise to emphasize the tentative nature of such illustrations; for example, the patterned-body anthropomorph in Renegade Canyon in the Coso Range could be holding a simplified atlatl in one hand and darts in the other, though the costume indicates a ceremonial intent. If this attempt to provide consistency of terminology leads others to advance better, more comprehensive definitions, my goal will have been realized.

Even more consciously to invite response and discussion, I want also to suggest a stratigraphy or chronological layering of crook usages and traditions. With the perspective provided by the uses, oral traditions, and mythology recorded by Carobeth Laird, as well as the

obvious antiquity of petroglyphs dealing with the Shaman's Crook, I am convinced that with the passage of time, the growing cross-cultural familiarity with the crook symbol, the use of the crook for more secular purposes and by persons who were not shamans, and, ultimately, the impact of the European invasion and the destruction of native culture, served to cause a chronological deterioration of crook symbolism and sacredness. As when a cave is excavated, the most recent deposits are at the surface and each layer thereafter is older and older, so also I am proposing a similar stratigraphy for crook usage and meaning, from the more recent to the most ancient, as follows:

Canes were given to Pueblo leaders by the Americans, and, earlier, by the Spanish, in appropriation of crook mystique for political purposes and in violation of the religious meaning.

Crooks were carried by traders/pochtecas, using a sacred symbol to obtain attention and safe passage as they traveled across lands occupied by peoples who gave to the crook great respect and veneration. Crooks developed multiple meanings with the passage of time, as the crooks of long deceased shamans gave sacredness to holy places like altar pieces and prayer sticks. Crooks were the shaman's indispensable piece of equipment and sign of office, having regenerative and curative power, attested to by myth and oral tradition.

The beginnings of a stratigraphy regarding the relation of fertility and fructification to the crook is also possible, again going from the most recent to the oldest:

Crooks are given to Apache girls in sacred ceremonies today in recognition of their advance into womanhood.

("Growing Up Apache," Arizona Highways, September 1992, pp. 19-23).

Crooks seem to have been used by others in Mimbres pottery designs, as in the bowl depicting a man and a woman holding crooks, with parrots also pictured, "having something to do with a love story"

(Pat Carr, Mimbres Mythology, p. 4).

Crooks as the Shaman's badge of office, had powerful implications for fertility and procreation, and had a relationship to "the generative organ, the phallus.

(Laird: 1976, 216)

I think the concept of chronological layering is helpful, because not all areas in the Southwest have had access to ethnographic data on crook usage and mythology which might suggest a stratigraphy. On the other hand, there are examples of similarity across great distances, as in Laird's telling the story of Coyote using "his poro to hook the wind down from its high level" (Laird:1976, 31), and Fewkes describing the Hopi Flute ceremony where "a crooked stick is said to be used to draw down the clouds for the rain they contain is much desired" (Fewkes: 1914, 29).

Fewkes, in his Hopi Katchinas, illustrates supernatural beings holding crooks in plates X, XII, XXV, and XXX. A brief but helpful article on "Crook-neck staffs" on page 13 in *Spirit Windows: Native American Rock Art of Southeastern Utah*, by Winston B. Hurst and Joe Pachak, notes that hundreds of staffs were found in Anasazi Great Houses of Chaco Canyon, and that a staff found in Grand Gulch in Utah is now in the museum at the Edge of the Cedars State Park. The study of the crook in Native American rock art represents a fascinating and complex subject for study, and since I have not read previously of the writings of Carobeth Laird being quoted in papers on the Shaman's Sacred Crook, I hope my use of the recollections of her Chemehuevi husband, as to crook usage and mythology, will make a contribution.

The crook has been an intriguing subject for artists in this century. "The Procession" by Stephen Mopope, a Kiowa artist, features couples on horseback, with one carrying a crook, parading past onlookers. One of the most famous paintings of Western artist, Charles M. Russell, entitled "The Medicine Man," shows a shaman on horseback carrying his crook with great pride and dignity. "Autumn Hunt" by Donald Vann makes the crook carried by one of his figures the most compelling symbol. An Albuquerque artist, J. Yazzi, painted a procession with a figure in the sky holding a crook, and entitles his work, "The Long Walk with Chief Spirit." The crook also is the dominant symbol in one of the photographs of Edward S. Curtis, showing several braves on horses. So even in our time, what Carobeth Laird called the "mystique" surrounding the crook still persists.

Acknowledgments

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