1.5: The Jicarilla Apache Genesis Story

In the beginning the earth was covered with water, and all living things were below in the underworld. Then people could talk, the animals could talk, the trees could talk, and the rocks could talk.

It was dark in the underworld, and eagle plumes were used for torches. The people and animals that go about by day wanted more light but the night animals—the bear, the panther, and the owl—wanted darkness. After a long argument they agreed to play the thimble-and-button game, and if the day animals won there would be light, but if the night animals won it would always be dark.

The game began. The magpie and the quail, who love the light and have sharp eyes, watched until they could see the button through the thin wood of the hollow stick that served as a thimble. This told the people where the button was, and in the first round, the people won. The morning star came out and the black bear ran and hid in the darkness. They played again, and the people won. It grew brighter in the east and the brown bear ran and hid in a dark place. They played a third time, and the people won. It grew brighter in the east and the mountain lion slunk away into the darkness. They played a fourth time, and again the people won. The sun came up in the east, and it was day, the owl flew away and hid.

Even though it was light now, the people still didn’t see much because they were underground. But the sun was high enough to look through a hole and discover that there was another world—this earth. He told the people. And they all wanted to go up there. They built four mounds to help them reach the upper world. In the east they mounded the soil and planted it with all kinds of fruits and berries that were colored black. In the south they heaped up another mound and planted all kinds of fruits that were blue. In the west they built a mound that they planted with yellow fruits. In the north they planted the mound with fruits of variegated colors.

The mounds grew into mountains and the bushes blossomed, fruited, and produced ripened berries. One day two girls climbed up to pick berries and gather flowers to tie in their hair. Suddenly the mountains stopped growing …
The mountains stopped growing while their tops were still a long way from the upper world. So the people tried laying feathers crosswise to make a ladder, but the feathers broke under their weight. The people made a second ladder of larger feathers, but again they were too weak. They made a third ladder of eagle feathers, but even these would not bear much weight. Then a buffalo came and offered his right horn, and three others also contributed their right horns. The horns were strong and straight, and with them the people were able to climb up through the hole to the surface of the earth. But the weight of those humans bent the buffalo horns, which have been curved ever since.

Now the people fastened the sun and moon with spider threads so that they could not get away, and sent them up into the sky to give light. And since water covered the whole earth, four storms went to roll the waters away. The black storm blew to the east and rolled up the waters into the eastern ocean. The blue storm blew to the south and rolled up the waters in that direction. The yellow storm rolled up the waters in the west, and the varicolored storm went to the north and rolled up the waters there. So the tempests formed the four oceans in the east, the south, the west, and the north. Having rolled up the waters, the storms returned to where the people were waiting, grouped around the mouth of the hole.

The Polecat first went out, when the ground was still soft, and his legs sank in the black mud and have been black ever since. They sent the Tornado to bring him back, because it wasn’t time. The badger went out, but he too sank in the mud and got black legs, and Tornado called him back. Then the beaver went out, walking through the mud and swimming through the water, and at once began to build a dam to save the water still remaining in the pools. When he did not return, Tornado found him and asked why he had not come back.

“Because I wanted to save the water for the people to drink,” said the beaver.

“Good,” said Tornado, and they went back together. Again the people waited, until at last they sent out the gray crow to see if the time had come. The crow found the earth dry, and many dead frogs, fish, and reptiles lying on the ground. He began picking out their eyes and did not return until Tornado was sent after him. The people were very angry when they found he had been eating carrion, and they changed his color to black.

But now the earth was all dry except for the four oceans and the lake in the center, where the beaver had dammed up the waters. All the people came up. They traveled east until they arrived at the ocean; then they turned around south until they came again to the ocean; then they went west to the ocean, and then they turned north. And as they went, each tribe stopped where it wanted to. But the Jicarillas continued to circle around the hole where they had come up from the underworld. Three times they went around it, when the Ruler became displeased and asked them where they want to stop. They said, “In the middle of the earth.” So he led them to a place very near Taos and left them, and there near the Taos Indians, the Jicarillas made their home.

Collected by James Mooney in the 1890s (Erdoes and Ortiz)