

Osage Creation Account (Black Bear Clan Version), Recorded 1920s

THE OSAGES LIVED IN THE MISSOURI RIVER VALLEY, between the Mississippi River and the Great Plains (and many still live in part of that territory, in what is now Oklahoma). This tale begins after Wa kon ta, the Creator, has instructed the Osages that they are to become a people and they have realized that they must find a home. They are looking down on the earth but can see only water. Remember that this is an oral history and would have been told aloud in the Osage language. This version, transcribed by ethnologist and Omaha Indian Francis La Flesche and either translated by him or by an interpreter, attempts to convey the repetition and cadence of the oral version. Because you may find this document difficult to interpret, it may help to compare it with the other exploration accounts.

The people spoke to one another, saying: "O, younger brothers, look you, it is not possible for the little ones¹ to become a people. Let search be made for a way." They mediated upon continuing the descent. They sat in great perplexity. Then they took the downward course to earth. They found the earth engulfed in water that lay undisturbed. . . .

The people spoke to one another, saying: "O younger brothers, what shall we do?" They said to one another, "it is impossible for the little ones to dwell upon the surface of the water. Let us cause search to be made." The Sho'-ka,² who stood near, even as these words were spoken, hastened to the Water-beetle and quickly returned with him. The people spoke to the Water-beetle, saying: "O, grandfather, it is not possible for the little ones to dwell upon the surface of the water. We ask of you to make search for a way out of our diffi-

culty." Verily, at that time and place, it has been said, in this house, the Water-beetle replied: "O, my grandchildren, you say it is not possible for the little ones to dwell upon the surface of the water. You ask me to search for a way out of your difficulty. I shall make search for a way." Thereupon he pushed forth, even against the current. Running swiftly upon the surface of the water, he came to a bend of the water, then spoke, saying: "It is impossible for me to give you help, O, my grandchildren. Although it is not possible for me to help you, I will say to you: my walk of life is upon the surface of the water. The little ones shall make of me their bodies. When the little ones make of me their bodies, they shall be free from all causes of death as they travel the path of life. When the little ones make of me their bodies, they shall cause themselves to be difficult to overcome by death."

[Conversations with the Water-spider, the Water-strider, and the Red-breasted Leech yield similar advice but no help in finding a home.]

Then they spoke to the Great Elk, saying: "O, grandfather, it is not possible for the little ones to dwell upon the surface of the water, O, grandfather. It is not possible for the little ones to make the waters to become dry. We ask you to seek for a way out of our difficulty. It is not possible for the little ones to dwell upon the surface of the water."

Verily, at that time and place, it has been said, in his house, the Great Elk threw himself suddenly upon the water, and the dark soil of the earth he made to appear by his strokes. Then he spoke to the people, saying, "O, elder brothers, I have given you cause to be grateful and happy. When the little ones go toward the setting sun against their enemies and take with them this dark soil as a sign of their supplications, their prayers shall never fail to be heard as they travel the path of life." . . .

[The Great Elk throws himself upon the water three more times, bringing up blue soil, red soil, and yellow soil.]

The dark soil of the earth, he held up to view and spoke to the people, saying: "This dark soil of the earth I have not made without a purpose. When the little ones use it as a sign of their supplications, when they put it upon their faces as a sign of their supplications, and moisten, with their tears, even so much as their eyelids, their prayers shall never fail to be heard as they travel the path of life."

Then he held to view the blue soil of the earth, and spoke to the people, saying: "This blue soil also I have made for you to put upon your faces. When the little ones go toward the setting sun against their enemies and take with them this blue soil as a sign of their supplications, their prayers shall never fail to be heard as they travel the path of life." . . .

[The Great Elk gives similar instructions regarding the red soil and the yellow soil. The Osages then send one of their own, their "younger brother," who has taken the form of a puma,³ to explore the new land.]

Then after a time the people said to one another: "There are signs that our younger brother is returning. Stumbling, tripping again and again as he hastens, running repeatedly as he hurries homeward. Go, some of you, and speak to him." And some of the brothers hastened to meet him and to speak to him. In response to their inquiries, the Puma spoke, saying: "O, elder brothers, yonder stands a man, O, elder brothers. Verily, a man whose appearance excites fear, a man who is like us in form." Then the people spoke, saying: "O, younger brothers, look you, I have said, we are a people who spare none of our foes, a people who are never absent from any important movement. Whoever this man may be, we shall send him to the abode of spirits. It matters not whose little one he may be, we shall make him to lie low."

In the direction of the man they hastened. They made one ceremonial pause. Then, at the fourth pause, the Puma spoke, saying: "There he stands, O, elder brothers." "It is well," the people replied. "We shall send him to the abode of spirits." Their index fingers they thrust into their mouths, to moisten them and to give them killing power.⁴ Verily, at that time and place, it has been said, in this house, the man spoke, saying: "I am a Hon'-ga (a sacred person), O, elder brothers." He stood saying. Then the Puma spoke, saying, "O, elder brothers, he speaks clearly our language." "I am a Hon'-ga," the stranger continued, "who has come from the midst of the stars. O, elder brothers, Young-chief is my name, I who stand here, Radiant-star is my name, I who stand here, Star-that-travels is my name." Then the people replied: "It is well." The stranger continued: "Young-chief is a name you shall use as you travel the path of life. The radiant star also is a name you shall use as you travel the path of life."⁵ In giving you these names I give you cause to be grateful and happy, O, elder brothers." "It is well," the people replied. . . .

[The Osages send the Puma out several times to look for ceremonial objects, but most of his trips fail to yield any.]

The people spoke to one another, saying: "There are signs that our younger brother is returning, stumbling again and again in his haste, running from time to time as he hastens homeward. Go, some of you, and speak to him." Then some of the brothers hurried to him and spoke to him, saying: "O, younger brother." To their inquiries the Puma replied: "O, elder brothers, verily, an animal of some kind stands yonder, O, elder brothers, an animal that is formidable in appearance, an animal with cloven feet. O, elder brothers, the animal has horns upon its head, that make it formidable in appearance." Then the people spoke to one another, saying: "O, elder brothers, our younger brother has come home in great alarm. He had seen an animal standing yonder. Verily, an animal that is fear-inspiring in appearance. An animal with cloven feet. The animal has horns upon his head."⁶ It is well!" the people exclaimed. "Make haste," they said to one another. "Look you, we are a people

who spare none of the foe, a people who are never absent from any important movement. It matters not whose little one that animal may be, we shall send him to the abode of spirits."

They moved forward with quickened footsteps. They made one ceremonial pause. At the fourth pause they came near to the place. Then the Puma spoke, saying: "There it stands, O, elder brothers." The people drew near to the animal, and stood in line, then spoke, saying: "It is a female, O, elder brothers." Verily at that time and place, it has been said, in this house, the people spoke, saying: "We shall make of the animal the sacred articles we need, O, elder brothers. Even its skin we shall consecrate to ceremonial use, O, elder brothers. Behold the length of its back. Even the back of this animal is fit for ceremonial use. Out of its skin we shall make ceremonial robes, to commemorate the consecration of the skin to ceremonial use."

From Francis La Flesche, *Smithsonian Institution, Bureau of American Ethnology, 36th Annual Report* (Washington, DC, 1921), 221-37. The Osages' Hun ka (Earth) subdivision has seven clans, of which the Black Bear Clan is one. The other subdivision is the Tsi shu (Sky).