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See also: Paganism; Unitarianism.

Cowboy Spirituality

As expressed in poetry and song, cowboy spirituality is a classic example of tension between formal religion and heartfelt spirituality that runs deep in American culture and religious life. Protestant-rooted ideas about the authority of individual conscience, the virtue of plain speech, and disdain for the pretentiousness of ritual and hierarchy characterize cowboy spirituality, as do romantic ideas about nature as a production of God, comparable to the Bible, and belief that awareness of God's hand in nature is far superior to citified churchgoing. On spiritual matters, cowboy verse often combines sentimental, even tear-jerking feeling with gallows humor and honest respect for the grim facts of life. As Allen McCanless wrote in his famous "Cowboy's Soliloquy," first published in 1885,

> My ceiling the sky, my carpet the grass.
> My music the lowing of herds as they pass;
> My books are the brooks, my sermons the stones,
> My parson's a wolf on a pulpit of bones.

As the last line of the stanza illustrates, cowboy verse is a peculiar blend of reverence and irreverence that aims to get at the heart of things, often by reference to the earthiness of life and death. Cowboy verse is also forthright about interpreting people and imagery in the Bible, as if they existed, in a kind of eternal way, in the cowboy culture of the American West. Thus another stanza of McCanless' "Soliloquy" reads,

> Abraham emigrated in search of a range,
> When water got scarce and he wanted a change.
> Isaac had cattle in charge of Esau
> And Jacob run cows for his father-in-law;
> He started in business down at bedrock,
> And made quite a fortune by watering stock.

One of the most complicated and important aspects of cowboy spirituality is the cowboy's relationship to nature. Respect for the power and grandeur of nature is a recurrent theme, as is cowboy pride in a close working companionship with natural forces. At the same time, however, companionship with the forces of nature turns easily into violence, both in imitation of nature's ways and in efforts to conquer her. This aspect of cowboy spirituality fits Richard Slotkin's thesis that the mythology of the American frontier centers on the embrace of violence as a means of generating vitality, and thus helps place cowboy culture in the larger context of American mythology of the West. As interpreters of American culture often argue, the ideal of the frontier West exists in opposition to stereotypes about the effeteness and artificiality of urban life. The ideal of the rugged, cowboy West serves as an antidote to the anti-ideal of enervated life in polite society. In this respect, the violent aspects of cowboy culture – bull riding, shoot-outs, drunken brawls – are sometimes presented as part of the rough morality of nature. McCanless defended cowboy justice by appealing to the big lives of biblical heroes:

> If I'd hair on my chin, I might pass for the goat,
> That bore all sin in ages remote;
> But why this is thusly I don't understand,
> For each of the patriarchs owned a big brand.

In recent years, disagreements about appropriate use of rangelands pitted environmentalists against ranchers and cowboys, and contributed to the strength of the Republican Party, which often opposed restrictions on rangeland in Western states and capitalized on local hostility to federal government intervention. Ranchers and cowboys have not been immune to concerns about the environment, however. Overgrazing has taken its toll on the arid and fragile ecosystems of the West, water is often scarce, and some ranchers and cowboys have started running bison because they need less grass and water than cattle. And for a number of these cowboys and ranchers there is not only a practical reason for running bison, but a belief that it is morally right to prefer native species such as bison over those imported from other continents.

The main difficulty in defining cowboy spirituality lies in understanding the relationship between cowboy mythology and the lives of real people who actually rode (and still ride) the range. On one hand, "cowboy" is a metaphor for high-testosterone, just-do-it behavior that is just as appropriate in the city or suburbs as out on the high plains under a big sky. In this respect, the term "cowboy" can even by used as a verb – as in " 'cowboy' that door shut" or " 'cowboy' that jar open." Tommy Lee Jones flying a space ship with reckless dexterity in *Space Cowboys* and then propelling himself to the moon in a heroic act of self-sacrifice that enables his buddies to reach Earth in safety is another example of the expansive use of the term "cowboy," and one that reflects the emotional and gritty ethics of cowboy spirituality. On the other hand, real cowboys lived, and still live today, working long days in the saddle, punching cows for little pay in all kinds of weather. As

members of a proud but often desperately marginal subculture, real cowboys often have lives that are considerably sadder and less romantic than the mythology of cowboy culture would suggest. Still, these real men and boys, and some women as well, write and resonate with the poetry that idealizes their culture.

Amanda Porterfield

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See also: Bison Restoration and Native American Traditions; Disney Worlds at War; Manifest Destiny.

Creation Myths of the Ancient World

Creation myths in Egypt, Mesopotamia, and Greece generally express the idea of the creation and defense of an ordered cosmos from out of primordial chaos. Many connections can be made among these different mythic traditions in their attempts to make sense of the natural world. For example, the idea of water as the primordial source of life can be found in all of these traditions. Moreover, water is then used by the gods to punish and purify in the Gilgamesh epic of Mesopotamia (ca. 2000–1600 B.C.E.), in Greek stories of Zeus (the weather-god), and even in the Hebrew story of Genesis. Here we see myth struggling to comprehend the moral purpose of the destructive power of nature. There are many other connections among mythic motifs, including the bull as a symbol of fertility and power, stories about the struggles of the sun-god to maintain the order of day, and stories about the divine origin of the cycle of the seasons. One must be careful, when undertaking such a synthetic approach, however, because these mythological traditions each have their own integrity. And even within a single tradition there are conflicting stories and rival cosmogonies.

Mesopotamia

The complexity of the mythologies of Mesopotamia reflects the linguistic and political diversity of this region. Two of the better-known and more recent texts in this tradition are the epic of Gilgamesh and the *Enuma Elish* (ca. 2000–1200 B.C.E), the Babylonian creation epic. But there are other creation stories, which make use of the same or similar gods and goddesses. Older Mesopotamian cosmogonies focused on various nature gods including: An or Anu, the sky-god; Enlil, the wind-god who originally separated sky from Earth; and Ea or Enki, the creator god who came from out of the primordial waters to create life on land. This pantheon also included the sun-god, Shamash, and the mother-goddess, Ninhursaga. These older Sumerian stories tend to make the creation event a natural occurrence in which the primordial abyss, Apsu or Abzu, was opened and the world was created according to principles of natural order. That these gods represented order and justice in the cosmos is illustrated by the sun-god, Shamash, who gave Hammurabi his famous code of laws (ca. 1700 B.C.E.). A recurrent theme in these early myths is the struggle of the gods of order against chaotic monsters who rise out of Apsu's abysmal depths. The standard interpretation traces this struggle of cosmos against chaos in Mesopotamian myth to the unpredictability of the Tigris-Euphrates river system.

The cosmogony of the *Enuma Elish* presents a creation story in which this struggle against such violent destructive forces predominates. In this story we find the triumph of a younger god, Marduk, in his struggle against the chaotic primordial waters, the male Apsu, now representing fresh water, and the female Tiamat, who represents the salt water. The other gods arise from out of Tiamat who is impregnated by Apsu, in a symbolic representation of the deposition of silt in the delta. In the course of this story the noisy and active younger gods anger the static tranquility of Apsu and Tiamat. A cycle of violence ensues and finally Marduk, the noisy young upstart, leads the gods in a final decisive battle against Tiamat. Marduk defeats Tiamat and splits her body, creating heaven and Earth. Along the way Marduk also slays Kingu, Tiamat's champion. Marduk ordains that human beings are to be created out of Kingu's blood. In one version, when Tiamat is slain, her body is opened and the waters flow out through various orifices. The Tigris and Euphrates flow out of her eyes and her body becomes the mountains from which these waters flow. The danger of her overflowing flood is always present and religious rituals are used to prevent this threat of chaos.

The moral of these Mesopotamian myths is that the human being is a minor and inconsequential portion of a much larger struggle within the natural world. The primeval creation scene focuses on the coming of order out of nothing and the struggle of order against disorder. The creation of human beings comes later. Indeed, the Mesopotamian myths profess that human beings are created to suffer and die as servants of the gods. The Mesopotamian gods are, for the most part, indifferent to human suffering. When they do intervene in human affairs they do so for their own pleasure.