

Kwasinaboo Puha (Snake Medicine)



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Abstract: This article is part historical narrative and part personal memoir. The author begins by explaining the Comanche tribal history of kwasinaboo puha (snake medicine). She then discusses the knowledge of kwasinaboo puha that is passed down to Comanche children through an intergenerational process that combines empirical knowledge of snake taxonomy with cultural knowledge of the kwasinaboo puha story. The author then turns to her own initiation into Comanche tribal life by listening to her grandfather's oral performance of the kwasinaboo puha story. Finally, the author reveals her adult memories of crossing paths with snakes and how kwasinaboo puha presents itself in her poetry. As a result, this article provides readers with an insight into the empirical and metaphorical practices necessary for the continuance of Comanche communal identity and survival in the Lawton area of Oklahoma.

Keywords: Comanche, kwasinaboo puha, snake medicine, knowledge, intergenerational storytelling, oral performance, poetry, Lawton, Oklahoma

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This essay, "Kwasinaboo Puha (Snake Medicine)," provides readers with an introduction to Comanche culture through stories of kwasinaboo. Kwasinaboo Puha is a core sign of



Fig. 1. Comanche shield

Comanche culture and its imagery appears on the modern-day Comanche war shield seal represented in the curvy dividing line separating the blue and yellow colors (See fig. 1). In Comanche history, children learned tribal values, morals, and problem-solving for the future by listening to wintertime stories. Children were entertained by stories when the weather conditions might be harsh and game was scarce. Families gathered around the fire and listened to stories of creatures and the many challenges they faced to survive in the Plains environment.

Kwasinaboo, one of the many creatures featured in stories, has been found in artwork, such as on hide designs and on personal adornment. For the Comanche, it was necessary to be keenly aware of the difference between venomous and non-venomous snakes, because both lived in the same areas of Comanche camps. In contrast, Cynthia Clay's enigmatic painting "Snake Medicine," depicts an example of kwasinaboo as a beloved pet (See Fig. 2).

Centuries ago the Comanche separated themselves from the Shoshone Nation located along the Platte River in today's state of Wyoming. During their separation from the Shoshone Nation, the Comanche traveled down the Great Plains and lived as nomadic hunters and gatherers. While the origin of why the Comanche were referred to as "snake people" is not known, some believe it originated when the Comanche traveled down the Snake River. Others say it was because Comanche "were as mean as snakes," while making the sign language of a snake traveling backward, with the right hand depicting a sinuous "S" movement. Consequently, the Shoshone were referred to as "snake people"; perhaps the oldest origin of snake symbolization. However, the Comanche do not refer to themselves as "snake people."



Fig. 2. Cynthia Clay's Painting
"Snake Medicine"

Healing remedies such as Snake Root were developed as a result of knowledge of kwasinaboo and experiences with snakes. Snake Root, called itse¹ in Comanche, was a traditional medicine used to ward off snakes and protect the people. It was chewed and the saliva was rubbed on footwear and, in the past, was put around the tipis to discourage snakes from entering the camping area. As a preventative measure, Comanche women would wear buckskin boots that flipped over the knee and provided a double layer of buckskin hide for added protection if they should accidentally step on a kwasinaboo. In addition, kwasinaboo's name was translated to "tail with a design" and it was considered a tribal taboo to eat one. How a tail could exist without a host remains a mystery!

The healing remedy for a snake bite is derived from Snake Root, a seasonal plant traded with the Mescalero Apache people because it is no longer found in Comanche territory. Today, Snake Root is still considered a preventative medicine and is used by traditional people, particularly if one is hiking in the woods or climbing near rocks where kwasinaboo may be located.

Like most Comanche children, I grew up listening to Comanche animal stories told during the wintertime. These stories represented the survival of one generation to the next who were brought up with Comanche values and culture. Importantly, the stories offered

something to look forward to while stimulating children to consider solutions to stories that ended abruptly, or worse, had unresolved conclusions. Further, the stories connected us to Comanche oral tradition, language and ways of being while transmitting our culture to the next generation. For example, one lesson learned was respect for elders, especially during storytelling. In the past, no one interrupted a storyteller until they completed a story. This was part of the tribal etiquette of storytelling. After all, the Comanche tribal language is at risk, and the stories, at minimum, teach the tribal names of animals in our environment.

Stories of kwasinaboo and other animals also connect tribal members to Comanche philosophy and worldview. For example, the stories of animals and their lives demonstrate their important place in a Comanche hierarchy and shared environment. In Comanche worldview, there was a place for all creatures and there was a taboo against “taking the last one” in hunting. Poaching and trophy hunting for entertainment did not exist in yesterday’s Comanche culture. One story describes Comanche camping for the first time at Medicine Bluff, near today’s Fort Sill, Oklahoma. The story begins with one individual seeing a winged serpent.

The serpent warned, “Take a good look at me because you will never see me again!” Comanche were awed by the creature and recognized encroachment into the serpent’s territory came at a terrible cost.

An important kwasinaboo story was told to me by my now deceased paternal grandfather, Oliver Pahdopony. He was a well-known medicine man, commonly known as “Chief.”² I sat with quiet respect and listened as my father and grandfather faced each other in our rural east Lawton, Oklahoma living room. It was a discussion between two Comanche men and I understood the discussion was finished when my father sat back in his chair, lit a cigarette, and seemed to have disengaged from the conversation. That is when my grandfather began to tell his story of kwasinaboo. First, he recalled when the story of kwasinaboo was told to him. At the time he was a child and heard this story for the first time, the Comanche were living at nearby Fort Sill in Oklahoma Territory in the early 1900’s and my grandfather was a baby. He explained that while he could understand the language; he was not yet able to talk or hold conversations. This is the story he told me, as he sat facing my father:

A long time ago, when the animals could talk and I was a still a baby, I was riding with my father on horseback. Other warriors were also in this group of men on horses. We rode until we reached a thick, brushy area below Piatoyah.³ We rode into the thick brush as far as we could go on horseback. Then my father carried me and everyone tied up their horses and continued the journey on foot.

The landscape with covered with branches and heavy foliage. The whole area was dry and dusty. The further we went into the dense brush, the darker our surroundings. The men began to speak in hushed tones. After a time, their voices changed to excitement because they were in great anticipation of the meeting they were about to have with kwasinaboo. At last, we arrived at our destination. Some gasped when they first saw kwasinaboo! He was enormous and entwined in a shadowy scrub oak tree!

All were quiet. Kwasinaboo looked at each person like he was trying to remember them. He looked at me—a baby! Slowly, ever so slowly, he began to unwind in the tree and then he began to speak of the future,

“Look at me closely,” he said. “Look up at your surroundings and remember what I say. Look all around you because soon, all of this will be underwater!” (O. Pahdopony)

According to Grandpa Chief, he was not surprised to hear the kwasinaboo speak as much as he was surprised by *what* the kwasinaboo had to say about water covering the whole landscape below Piatoyah. Kwasinaboo was communicating a message about the landscape that was revelatory; however, today, an artificial lake supplies water to the city of Lawton and is known as Lake Lawtonka.

Decades later, this story continues to haunt me because it was my fortune to hear a Comanche story that would not necessarily be shared with those outside the culture. It is a story of kwasinaboo and his prediction of changes in our environment that would jeopardize his existence unless there was preparation for the future. It was a warning to the warriors to prepare for change. Comanche, as nomadic people, adapted to many changes in the environment and the construction of Lake Lawtonka was one of many changes for the Comanche people.

Years later, I asked my father if he remembered the story of kwasinaboo. He was in his 80's and still very alert. He did not remember. I believe the story was meant for me and may have been the reason for my gift of kwasinaboo puha. My experiences since listening to the story of kwasinaboo have become a topic of discussion between my husband and me. Every time I uttered the word “snake” I would come across one or even more often, my husband would see one. Eventually, he asked me not to say the word again so I replaced it with “long person” or “kwasinaboo.” Recently, we watched a nature program featuring the anacondas of South America and the snake word escaped my mouth. Later that day, my husband and his friend played golf in Cache, Oklahoma, and stopped by a water station. His friend sat on a nearby bench for a brief rest before they both walked to the green. At that moment, my husband looked back to see a coiled rattlesnake under the bench.

However, my most unusual kwasinaboo experience happened in the dead of winter! Wintertime is the only time I go for walks in the woods of Cache Creek. It is a long, winding creek located on my father's historic allotment of land. On that day, the landscape was particularly beautiful because the recent snows covered the ground and the dark trees and woodland were in contrast with the white snow and clear running creek. Surely, the possibility of coming across a long person was at zero on a scale of one to ten.

I announced proudly, "We'll see no snake today!" in a playful manner.

Immediately, my husband admonished me, "Why did you say that word?" I smiled. We walked further until we came to an ancient snag. Its days as a tree were long over, and it was nothing but a shell of barren bark with a few broken, dried and decayed branches. It was not very tall and the top of it was ragged and splayed in many directions.

"Do you think you could run and kick like a ninja and knock that tree over?" I asked my husband.

My husband is a big, tall Comanche/Chiricahua Apache; it wouldn't take much effort on his part. Instead, he stretched out his arms and placed both hands on the bark, and leaned into the old snag. We listened to the stretching groans of the old, deep-rooted tree. Slowly, the elder hackberry skeleton tree gave way and fell over with a huge thud! A brown dust storm arose which seemed odd in the winter landscape.

When the smoke cleared, I heard my husband say, "Step back!" in an urgent manner. I moved backward quickly then looked down into the dark maw of an empty space where the tree once stood. There, in a perfectly coiled circle, was kwasinaboo, his unblinking eyes connected with mine. I don't know for how long we looked at each other, but time seemed to stand still. In movements that seemed almost imperceptible, kwasinaboo, moved backward and then downward into the earth hole left by the now absent roots. At first, I felt terrific fear, but after the shock, I recognized that I was responsible for destroying his warm winter shelter and I felt ashamed and sad. It was a moment when I realized how the story of kwasinaboo became part of my own worldview, while also realizing that it connected me to my communal heritage.

Today, there are continued efforts to preserve what's left of the Comanche language. The Comanche Nation annually allocates resources and funding for the preservation of tribal language, yet the number of fluent speakers is still dangerously low. The loss of the Comanche language represents the loss of tribal identity. Tribal language classes are offered at Comanche Nation College and the Comanche Language and Culture Preservation Committee hosts classes in the Comanche communities.

In addition, the Comanche people are continuing to recover and survive cultural losses as our tribal government develops sustainable tribal economies; supports language preservation efforts; provides support to the Comanche Nation College, which is the first tribal college in Oklahoma, and prepares to reclaim and put into trust some of the tribal lands that were lost.

I am uncertain how I came to have the gift to conjure kwasinaboo by saying his name; however, my poem “Kwasinaboo Puha” shares some of my thoughts on my experiences with this strange gift over the years.

Kwasinaboo Puha (Snake Medicine)

By Juanita Pahdopony

Earth smells slowly emanate upwards
Sweet grass, cedar, sage, and
Ghost medicine
Interweaving inside the sweat lodge.

My companion steps aside
I enter the dark space below me.
“Don’t say it.” he pleads—yet
Your powerful name escapes
My lips, once again!

Hidden in a snag
Hibernating in wintertime
Secreted in sweat lodge rafters
Coiled in crooks or
Sliding through dried fall prairie grasses

Moving like spring lightning
Rising up or
Flattening out
Fitting through horizontal vents
Slim magnificence and
Terrible summer wonder.

The Comanche name you
“Tail with a Design” – a magical being
Your superbly beaded design

Pahdopony

With its repetitive pattern and
Unspeakable, unblinking eyes.

Like a strange puzzle in a great mystery
I say your name and you appear like magic
Somehow this terrible pleasure
Outweighs the fear as we
Conjure you together.
The guest ~ an uninvited gift.

¹ *Taa N#mu Takwap#ha Tuboopu: Our Comanche Dictionary* translates “Itse” as medicine root.

² Oliver Pahdopony, a Comanche historian and fluent speaker (ca. 1898-1986).

³ *Taa N#mu Takwap#ha Tuboopu: Our Comanche Dictionary* translates “Pitoyah” as Mt. Scott.

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