

How the World Was Made

A Cheyenne Creation Myth

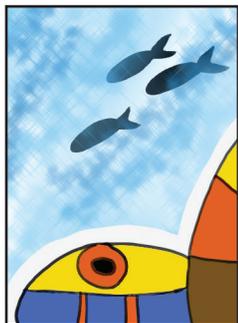


At the beginning of time, there was nothing but darkness. Maheo the All Spirit lived in this void all alone in this darkness. He was tired of the dark—there was nothing to see and nothing to hear. Maheo was a very powerful spirit and he decided to use his power to create the world.

Maheo first imagined water, a vast liquid thing from which all life would spring. He created water in the form of a great salty lake and then made animals that swim in the water. He made all types of fish and aquatic animals that spent their days and nights swimming the vast salty sea. Then, Maheo created the sand that lay at the bottom of the giant salty sea and fashioned bottom-feeding creatures like snails, lobsters, and mussels to live on that sand.

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Next, Maheo made animals that live on the water, including birds such as geese, terns, loons, and ducks. Maheo delighted to hear their wings flapping and their feet splashing on the water. But Maheo could only hear the noises made by his new creations, he could not see them.



"I would like to be able to see the things I created," Maheo said to himself. So Maheo created light and delighted in seeing all the fish swimming in the water and all the birds swimming on the water.

"How beautiful," Maheo murmured, for he was truly amazed by his creations.

After much flapping and floating, one of the birds—a goose—called out to Maheo: "Great Maheo, thank you for making this wonderful world. We are so happy, but we sometimes get tired of swimming and need to get out of the water."

"So fly," said Maheo and waved his arms in the air. Maheo watched as the birds took flight and exclaimed, "How splendid they are!"

In time, the birds became tired after all their swimming and flying. "Please, Maheo, we need a solid place to rest and to make our nests. We need a place to land," said a loon.

"And how shall I make this land," asked Maheo.

Just then, one of the birds saw something at the bottom of the water—it was the sand. The bird dove down deep and came back with a mouthful of mud. The bird gave the mud to Maheo, who rolled it into a ball. As Maheo rolled it, the ball became bigger and bigger and wider and wider. But Maheo had a problem—where could he set this giant ball of mud so it wouldn't sink back down to the ocean floor?

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Maheo turned to the sea animals for help. “One of you must let me place it on your back.” Maheo said. Many animals came to Maheo’s aid, but the mud kept slipping off of them, for their backs were too narrow to carry such a wide load.

Then Grandmother Turtle came to Maheo and said, “I am very old and slow, but my back is broad and hard, so I will try.”

Grateful, Maheo placed the mud onto her broad back where it grew and spread until it covered Grandmother Turtle and Maheo could no longer see her.

“Let the earth be known as our Grandmother,” said Maheo and from then on, the turtle who carried the earth on her back was known as Grandmother Earth.

Now there was land, but the land was empty and bleak. Maheo made plants and trees grow from the earth and the birds happily built their nests in these trees. But there was no one but birds to walk the land, so Maheo decided to make humans. He pulled out one of his right rib bones, blew onto the bone, and then placed it on the land. The bone slowly began to move and change and it transformed into the first man. Maheo then pulled out one of his left rib bones. He did the same thing with this bone and it transformed into the first woman.

As time passed, Maheo saw that humans had needs. They needed to eat, they needed clothes to stay warm, and they needed shelter, so Maheo created different animals to help with those needs. He made deer, porcupines, prairie dogs, and all sorts of animals as new needs arose.

Finally, Maheo used his power to make buffalo, and Maheo regarded the buffalo as the most perfect animals—of all the animals he created—to help the humans. Humans could use buffalo for food. They could use buffalo for clothes. They could use buffalo bones for tools. They could use many parts of the buffalo for many things and for this reason, buffalo are sacred to the Cheyenne.

