

THE FIRST FIRE



The following is the myth of the first Fire and describes why some of the animals have the colors they do today. The main part of the myth only takes place at the end, when the Water Spider, Kananeki Amayehi (kah-nah-nay-skee ah-mah-yeah-hi) retrieves the Fire for Man. The Water Spiders' motif was prominent in the Mound culture and meant the same regardless of whether the Mound group was in Illinois or Florida. Each mound complex had a sacred Fire Keeper with attendants, and his motif was the Water Spider. This was shown by the number of shells, copper, wood, and stone amulets engraved with the Water Spider. Notice in the myth that the Water Spider is 1) female, same as the Sun; and 2) carries the fire on her back, the same as the shell engravings of her which indicate fire on her back. This is called the Sun Circle and Cross motif. This story may not have been exactly as what our ancestors had, but we must concede that the Water Spider was a symbol of great importance to them.

The First Fire

In the beginning, there was no fire. The world was cold until the Thunders, who lived up in Galvlati, sent their lightning and put fire into the bottom of a hollow sycamore tree which grew on an island. The animals knew it was there because they could see the smoke coming out at the top, but they could not get to it on account of the water. They held a council to decide what to do.

Every animal that could fly or swim was anxious to go after the fire. The Raven, Kolanu, offered, and because he was so large and strong, they thought he could surely do the work. So the Raven was sent first. He flew high and far across the water and alighted on the sycamore tree, but while he was wondering what to do next, the heat had scorched all his feathers black. He was frightened and came back without the fire.

The little Screech Owl, Wahuhu, volunteered to go, and reached the place safely. While he was looking down into the hollow tree, a blast of hot air came up and nearly burnt out his eyes. He managed to fly home as best he could, but it was a long time before he could see well. His eyes are red to this very day.

Then the Hooting Owl, Uguku, and the Horned Owl, Tsikili, went, but by the time they got to the hollow tree, the fire was burning so fiercely the smoke nearly blinded them. The ashes carried up by the wind made white rings about their eyes. They had to come home again without the fire, but with all their rubbing, they were never able to get rid of the white rings.

No more of the birds would venture, so the little Uhsuhi snake, the Black Racer, said he would go through the water and bring back some fire. He swam across to the island and crawled through the grass to the tree. He went in by a small hole at the bottom. The heat and smoke were too much for him too, and after dodging about blindly over the hot ashes until he was almost on fire himself, he managed by good luck to get out again at the same hole. However, his body had been scorched black, and he has ever since had the habit of darting and doubling on his tracks as if trying to escape from close quarters.

The Great Black Snake, Gulegi, the Climber, offered to go for the fire. He swam over to the island and climbed up the tree on the outside, as the black snake always does, but when he put his head down into the hole, the smoke choked him so that he fell into the burning stump. Before he could climb out again, he was as black as Uksuhi.

Now they held another council for there was still no fire and the world was cold. Birds, snakes, and four-footed animals all had some excuse for not going. They were all afraid to venture near the burning sycamore, until at last, Kaneski Amayehi, the Water Spider, said she would go. This was not the water spider that looks like a mosquito, but the other one with black, downy hair and red stripes on her body. She can run on top of the water or dive to the bottom, so there would be no trouble to get over to the island. The question was: how could she bring back the Fire? "I'll manage that," said the Water Spider; so she spun a thread from her body and wove it into a 'tutsi' bowl which she fastened on her back. Then she crossed over to the island and through the grass to where the fire was still burning. She put one little coal of fire into her bowl, and she came back with it. Ever since, we have had fire, and the Water Spider still keeps her 'tutsi' bowl.