

# White Buffalo Woman and Short Woman: Two Epic Female Leaders in the Oral Tradition of Cheyenne Nation-Building.

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### White Buffalo Woman and Short Woman: Two Epic Female Leaders in the Tradition of Cheyenne Nation-Building

**WHITE BUFFALO WOMAN AND SHORT WOMAN: TWO EPIC FEMALE  
LEADERS IN THE ORAL TRADITION OF CHEYENNE NATION-BUILDING**

Leo Killsback\*

A nation is not conquered until the hearts of its women are on the ground. Then it's finished; no matter how brave its warriors or how strong their weapons. -- Cheyenne Proverb (Crow Dog 3)

The story of "The Rolling Head" is a traditional story unlike any other. A version of the story called "Chase of the Severed Head" is found in Erdoes and Ortiz's *American Indian Myths and Legends* (230-7). What most do not know however, is that this story is an epic that was to be told over the course of several nights. Furthermore, the final chapter or conclusion of the story however, was told exclusively in the privacy of ceremony. The entire epic, as I learned later in life, is the creation story of the traditional governing system of the Cheyenne Nation: the Véhoo'o, the Council of Forty-four Chiefs. I first heard the epic from my mother, then from an auntie, and again from an older cousin whose father is one of the highest ceremonial and spiritual leaders of our small community. Each had different versions and for some reason the story seemed incomplete to me. I enjoyed the story of "The Rolling Head," which could easily be classified as a horror story, but when I examined it closely I found that it falls in a category of its own: it is an epic of Indigenous nation-building and sovereignty.<sup>1</sup> In fact all of the "chapters" or parts of the story, however fragmented and incomplete, comprise the complete rendition of the creation of the Véhoo'o. In this article I examine traditional Cheyenne storytelling and its role in building the Cheyenne Nation by highlighting two epics, "The Rolling Head" and "White Buffalo Woman."

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To fully understand the phenomena of “epics of Indigenous nation-building” it is important to first deconstruct any mainstream notions of storytelling and literature; that is we must decolonize through “story telling” (Smith 145). The Cheyenne oral tradition for example, is a complex system that requires the storyteller, among other things, to tell stories unchanged while highlighting central concepts and ideologies. Stories like the two I highlight in this article, can be viewed as parts of an intricate body of knowledge that a Cheyenne child learns and carries into adulthood. Not only is this body of knowledge taught to children, but it is reinforced as the children age and mature into adults. Stories for children, for example, remain unchanged but new parts and plots are added as the child ages. As new parts and sequels emerge, new knowledge and teachings are reinforced, but they are only introduced in accordance with a child’s mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual development. By the time an epic is complete, the final chapter for the most sacred of epics introduces an appropriate ceremony or ritual. The Cheyenne oral tradition then, at least with the epics, are more than mere legends or myths, they are the “sacred histories” that provide the purpose for otherwise obscure and meaningless rituals of elaborate “ceremonial cycles” (Holm, Pearson, Chavis). Epics that explain the creation of governing systems, traditional laws, and leadership roles and responsibilities are the foundation of Indigenous nation-building and sovereignty (Lyons 1986; 1993; 2000-2001).

According to Cheyenne custom, stories that fall under that are linked to rituals and ceremonies must remain unchanged to preserve the sanctity and legitimacy of the spiritual significance of them. Accordingly, the “highest” or most sacred stories, parts, and/or sequels to epics are protected intellectual property and are only shared in ceremonial settings among ceremonial leaders. Because of such sacred laws and customs of the Cheyenne, numerous stories and epics remain incomplete in the written record. Stories in the works like Liberty and Stands In Timber’s *A Cheyenne Voice* (2013) and Powell and Mooney’s *In Sun’s Likeness and Power* (2013) for example, remain incomplete because the “highest” epics were either omitted out of respect for Cheyenne custom or they were never recorded from Cheyenne informants to begin with because they followed Cheyenne custom. On the other hand, some stories, parts, and sequels are simply too sacred to be shared to outsiders, or these epics are misinterpreted, misunderstood, or devalued or dismissed as archaic, primitive, or savage.

Another significant factor in traditional Indigenous storytelling is the legitimacy and credentials of the storyteller. According to Cheyenne custom, only certain people can tell certain stories and even then, they can only share what has been deemed appropriate to share. Non-Indian ethnographers and historians are not necessarily bound by such customs and they do not necessarily have to follow them once they become aware of them. Indigenous scholars must however, find a balance in sharing knowledge while preserving and protecting the sacred. As a ceremonial practitioner I have earned rights and responsibilities to tell some stories, and as a “sacred researcher” I respect the customs demanded from the spoken and unspoken rules of the Cheyenne Nation to not expose anything that may directly or indirectly harm or disrespect past, present, and future generations of Cheyennes. With that said, I will admit that I cannot definitively say that I grew up in a traditional household, even though I was raised in a small, isolated village on the Northern Cheyenne Indian reservation. Although I and members of my family are very knowledgeable of traditional customs, ceremonies, and oral traditions, we were and remain influenced by mainstream culture.

Language is another important tool in traditional storytelling. My mother and other relatives who were influential in my traditional learning are fluent in the Cheyenne language. Unlike me, my mother and those of her generation were the last to grow up in traditional households where only the Cheyenne language was spoken exclusively and where traditions, customs, and stories were still part of everyday life. My mother and her siblings grew up in a time where storytelling was the premiere form of entertainment, but also the means of passing down traditional kinship roles and responsibilities, proper

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behaviors, and social skills. Such teachings were reinforced in daily life where only the Cheyenne language was spoken. Unfortunately, those of this generation was also the last that endured the full force of US assimilation policies through the boarding schools, where the Cheyenne language was devalued and oppressed.<sup>2</sup> Nonetheless the generation who survived the assimilation experience were still able to bestow upon my generation Indigenous knowledge and the Cheyenne language amidst the trappings of mainstream culture.

People of my generation and those after, have upbringings unlike our parents, grandparents, and older relatives. We watched one of two mainstream television channels, listened to mainstream music, and played video games. The oral tradition was present, but not the exclusive means of entertainment, learning, or communication. Isolation on the reservation however, and the “survance” of the Cheyenne culture and spirituality, at least allowed my generation to be exposed to traditional teachings, the Cheyenne language, and the oral tradition (146). This is a very fortunate position considering the force of mainstream culture. In my own experience, aunts, uncles, grandmothers, and grandfathers frequently visited our household and conversed in the Cheyenne language in a time Sega and Nintendo, but before Facebook and text messaging. I remember older relatives who were willing to share stories to my siblings and I, even if we were impatient and inattentive children at the time. I vividly recall one particular story that moved my spirit and imagination. The story of “The Rolling Head” still evokes emotion, but I did not piece it together until later that this story is an epic of Indigenous nation-building.

#### EPICS OF INDIGENOUS NATION-BUILDING

The Cheyenne Nation was not always the famed horse and warrior culture that confronted US expansion with warfare in the 1800s (Green 1996, 2000; Grinnell 1955, Hedren 1991; 1998. On the other hand, the Cheyenne Nation did not merely arrive into history when the whites decided to write them in. The Cheyenne Nation was built into the large 10-band federation over the course of hundreds of years, and the epic of Cheyenne nation-building is in fact, its own legacy; comprised of culture heroes who demonstrate courage and resilience and villains who represented the characteristics of corrupt and wicked leaders. Before encountering whites, the Cheyennes, known as the Tsétsêhéstaestse (People Like Us), had a modest presence on the Great Plains of Native America. Their population was small and they organized as four separate mobile bands. One day a band of Tsétsêhéstaestse met a group of people who just happened to speak the same language, these were the Só'taeo'o (People Left Behind). After establishing peace, the two sub-nations eventually united under principles of brotherhood and cooperation. The unification led to the creation of a new 5-band federation with an amalgamated system of governance and society that shared ceremonial practices, oral traditions, customs, and traditional laws. Essentially they “became relatives” (Williams 40-7). The small federation grew, expanded their territory, and divided into ten bands. The Cheyenne Nation as it came to be, thus operated under the governing known as the Council of Forty-four Chiefs.

In my research I found that long after the unification of the Só'taeo'o and Tsétsêhéstaestse there is evidence that the unique oral traditions of both sub-nations remained intact, even after unification and even after a new inclusive body of oral traditions emerged to secure the unification. Today both oral traditions of the Só'taeo'o and Tsétsêhéstaestse are accepted as “traditional Cheyenne history” despite their differences from the widely accepted, unified oral tradition that highlights the Cheyenne prophet Sweet Medicine (Powell 1969; 1981). The differences between the two differing bodies of oral traditions is most evident in the origin epic of the Véhoo'o. There are several different versions of this epic in the written record, which likely resulted when the oral histories converged and diverged and as each band split as a result of colonialism and the reservation system (Dorsey 1905; Grinnell 1907, 1910, 1962, 1972; Hoebel 1988; Hoig 1980; Kroeber 1900; Stands In Timber and Liberty 1967, 2013). As I reveal however, the fundamental elements of the creation of the Véhoo'o are consistent despite

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the differences. The most significance consistency is that the Véhoo'o were founded on the sacred laws and teachings of both the Só'taeo'o and Tsétsêhéstaestse cultures: justice, peace, and kinship.

Wickstrom.

The oldest story of the creation of the Véhoo'o is a matrilineal-Só'taeo'o tradition. Later the origin stories synced with existing oral traditions of the patrilineal-Tsétsêhéstaestse. In both bodies of oral traditions, the creation of the Véhoo'o reinforce values universal to Cheyenne (Só'taeo'o and Tsétsêhéstaestse) concepts of nationhood and sovereignty: balance, responsibility, and unity. Probably the most defining attribute of both origin epics of the Véhoo'o is that both center on the trials and tribulations of a female leader, proving that the role of women in leadership is fundamental to Cheyenne nation-building, sovereignty, and peace-making. Without the roles of women, womanhood, and the contributions of female leaders, especially those preserved in story, the entire system would be compromised if not completely destroyed. While the Véhoo'o always comprised of men, this did not mean that women had no significance in Cheyenne society. The wives of chiefs, for example, had prominent roles in internal societal and ceremonial affairs (Grinnell 1902). Those who belonged to the Véhoo'o were inevitably the ones who held the ultimate authority when it came to national affairs like peacemaking and declaring war.

The Véhoo'o comprised of 40 "Big Chiefs" who governed ten bands of the Cheyenne Nation and who served 10-year terms, upon which they were either reelected or replaced. Each band comprised of approximately 200 people, and each band was led by four band chiefs. These 40 band or "Big Chiefs" elected four "Principal Chiefs" or "Old Man Chiefs" whom governed the Council of Forty-four Chiefs and whom were the highest ranked leaders of the entire Cheyenne Nation (Marquis, "Wooden Leg" 56). The integrity of the entire system depended on numerous factors, one being the integrity of the chiefs. A fundamental principle was balance: not only did leaders have to sustain balance by sharing power and responsibility in decision-making, but the governing and ceremonial institutions also had to sustain balance by cooperating and collaborating. The Véhoo'o shared power with the four warrior societies—the military and police force of the Cheyenne Nation—and the two major ceremonial institutions led by two priestly guilds: the Maahótse (Medicine Arrows) and the Ésevone (Buffalo Hat). Each of these governing and ceremonial institutions have origin stories and legacies that can be classified as epics of Indigenous nation-building and sovereignty.

Under the traditional system of governance, the Cheyenne Nation was able to create alliances with other nations like the Arapaho and Lakota, which were sanctified using the sun dance ceremony (Bass 3; Marquis 121-2). The Cheyenne Nation exercised the same peacemaking customs when making treaties with the US Government. I assert that the epics of Indigenous nation-building and sovereignty, like those I present here, are the unwritten archives of a nation: the constitution, the body laws, and the spiritual and intellectual foundation for the entire Cheyenne way of living. It is worthwhile for Indigenous scholars to explore these vaults of knowledge for the sake of decolonizing, indigenizing, and reconnecting modern Indigenous societies to these legacies.

#### THE ROLLING HEAD OF THE SÓ'TAEO'O

Outside of the household, I remember hearing the story of the rolling head from my kindergarten teacher, Rachel Carol. She told and retold our class this story numerous times. I now know that the storytelling sessions were part of the Cheyenne cultural and language studies programs at the time. Mrs. Carol had a collection of a number of traditional stories that, as I found later, were also published in pamphlets published by a bilingual project (Tall Bull and Weist 1971a, 1971b, 1971c, 1972, 1973). Mrs. Carol however, likely knew the stories by heart since she herself was a highly respected ceremonial and spiritual leader of our small community. The sacred roles of Mrs. Carol, my mother, and other storytellers shaped the hearts and minds of numerous folks. To them, we owe our gratitude and sincere thanks. It was not until I became a parent myself did I realize the significance of such stories.

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In 1987, Laura Rockroads (Northern Cheyenne) asserted that the epic of the rolling head teaches how woman, man, and children should be taken care of, and how they should care for one another (Leman, "Náévvó'òhtséme" 251). Throughout the story there are characters and incidents that reinforce proper behavior and kinship responsibilities. I divided the story into chapters based on each night a section was recited by a storyteller. Sometimes the parts and chapters to epics were retold in different orders. I organize the story chronologically using western paradigms of storytelling and combine versions from different sources to piece the epic together. We begin with Northern Cheyenne Chief, Wolf Chief's version.

#### THE ROLLING HEAD, PART I

[First night:] There was a lodge nearby a pond. In the lodge was a man with a wife and two children. Every morning the man dressed his wife in very good shape. After he did this he went out to hunt game. Another morning he dressed up his wife again and went out to hunt again. When he came back the same day, he looked at his wife; she was turned very white. He wondered what was the matter with his wife. Three times he dressed her, he wondered what was the matter. She always turned white. One early morning he went to the pond and lay down in the brush to find out what seemed to be the matter with his wife. While he was there he saw his wife come, run down to the pond. As soon as she got near the bank, the waves of the pond came rolling towards her, and there he saw a big serpent licking his wife. As soon as he saw the snake he ran down to his wife, cut her head off and cut the snake in two, and dressed his wife, took one part of a rib off, took it to his children to cook. After it was cooked, then put it in a wooden pan, and gave it to his children to eat. The little boy said, "My mother tastes just like it." The man said, "No it is a young moose. I just killed it." When they were through eating, the man took the head off and took it before the children and asked them [in a wicked manner], "What does your mother taste [like]?" He left his children. The children cried because their father had left them, expecting never to see them again.

These children were terrified they thought [they] would go some place [else]. When gone a far distance, they looked back. They saw a head rolling down towards them, asking them to wait. [It was their mother's head]. They were so frightened that they did not wait. While running the boy said to his sister, "Sister I am tired out." The sister had a staff with her. She said to him: "When I used to play, I could not go through the sticky pears." She hit the earth and they were so thick [bushes of sticky pears]. So they ran on. The head came to the pears and could not get through for a long time. They both looked back. They ran, the head [was] coming again, way off.

At the same time the boy was tired out again and [his sister] said, when the head was [close] at hand, "When I used to play, I sometimes could not get over a high bluff." She struck the earth and there became a high bluff behind them. So the head was on the other side. The head said, "My children, I love you both. Why don't you lay down the stick so I can crawl over it?" So the sister put her staff over the bluff. When the head was right on the center, the girl turned the stick over and the head fell in a halo, and the earth closed. When it was closed in, they never expected to see it anymore. (NAA MS 2822, f1-n, 1-4).

Here the story ends for the first night. There are different versions of the story of "The Rolling Head." In another version, Somers (Southern Cheyenne) stated that the family was "from the tribe of certain clan of Indians, they were lost family" (sic), which explains why some believe that their isolated and solitary lifestyle led to dysfunction (NAA MS 2822, f1-f, 1-8). Here are some major points worthy of note: the man painted his wife with red paint, dressed her in fine clothing, and braided her hair before he left; when he returned, the paint was removed and she was not as fine as when he left her; the boy tasted his mother because he was still nursing; the mother accuses the children of violating a taboo (eating human flesh); the girl creates four obstacles for the rolling head: thorns from prickly pear bushes, thorns from plum bushes, thorns of rosebud bushes, and finally the high bluffs (Leman, "Náévvó'òhtséme" 251-63; Cheyenne Texts, 53-5; NAA MS 2704; NAA MS

isotopes.  
The Contradictory Legacies of Buffalo Bill Cody's First Scalp for Custer, mental self-regulation illustrates drama, so it is obvious that in our language reigns the spirit of carnival, parody suspension.  
Making Medicine against White Man's Side of Story: George Bent's Letters to George Hyde, the synchronic approach, paradoxical as it may seem, inductively dissolves sanguine.  
Fluidity of meaning: Flag imagery in Plains Indian art, subjective perception, one way or another, is a impermeable azimuth.

## THE ROLLING HEAD, PART II

[Second night:] They came upon a hill. They saw a great big camp. As soon as they came up the people saw them. Their father was already there, and told the people to move away from his children, who were human-flesh-eaters. A society got hold of these two children, tied them hand and foot and pitched them to the ground so they could not come out. The camp moved but these two children were left tied to the ground. But a very old dog was left hid in the brushes. When the people were gone, he came up where these children were tied and untied the oldest one with his mouth. After he untied her, the girl untied her brother. The old dog was with them. He said to them, "I got a piece of firewood, a piece of fire-stone, a piece of sinew, and one awl." He gave them to them that they might use these things.

They moved away and went to timber. While sitting there, the boy saw a bunch of deer coming nearby. He asked his sister to look at them. She said, "If I look at them it won't do any good to me." Bye and bye she looked at them. The bunch of deer were dead at once. They both went to where the deer were lying dead and dressed them all, and brought the meat down to where they were. She sliced it, dried it on the branches of trees, and kept good care of the old dog.

[Third night:] The old dog went around to a distance place where the Indians were camped and came back to tell them about the Indians. When they were at the place where they had sliced beef [meat], a crow flew about the place. The girl asked the crow to come. The crow came. The girl gave the crow a piece of fat. He took it in his mouth and took it into the circle of a big camp where the people were starving. So he flew there and dropped the fat where some men were playing the wheel-game. The people said, "The crow has fat in his bill and drops it for us. The children are somewhere you left, are having plenty to eat."

In due time there were great herds of buffalo [that] came near the place the children were. "Sister," said the boy, "look at the herds of buffalo that have come."

"Oh no," she said, "If I should look at them, it would not be of any benefit to us. They are so many." Bye and bye she looked at them. They were all dead at once. They dressed them. While sitting together, his sister asked, "I wish we could have mountain bears and wild panthers with us so we could scare anything away from us." So they came.

At this time the people were moving back to where they were. The people came to their house for a feast. While they were present in the home, the bears and wild panther looked out for the children's father. After many were in the house he came about the last man. Their bears and wild panthers recognized him and dashed upon him. And there he was torn into pieces while the people kept eating. And that's the end. (NAA MS 2822, f1-n, 4-8).

Here the story concludes for listeners who are of younger ages. Other recorded versions of the epic comprise varying details that are worthy of note: the old dog was toothless; a big lodge appeared when the girl looked, following her brother's plea to do so; the animals that were killed "by looking" vary from deer, antelope, to buffalo; the number of times she killed the animals "by looking" is assumed to be four total; the presence of a crow and no other bird is consistent in every story; the presence of the hoop or wheel game is consistent in most stories; the presence of pet bears and lions are consistent in every story (Leman, Náévóo'òhtsème, 251-63; Cheyenne Texts, 53-5; NAA MS 2704; NAA MS 2822). According to Somers, the wild animals ate the father to "repent to the law" he broke (killing his wife, lying to his children, and accusing them of being cannibals) (NAA MS 2822, f1-f, 8). This is the only Cheyenne story that has any instance of cannibalism, and it was done as a result of deceit and cruelty when the children were misled by their father.

The fourth night or chapter of the origin of the Véhoo'o emphasizes on the

actual creation of the system, yet most recorded versions do not include it as part of "The Rolling Head." Hoebel recorded the fourth night, told by Elk River to Black Wolf in 1936. The girl prophet is identified as Mukije (Short Woman) and her father is Bull Looks Back. Black Wolf narrates the story as if he were Elk River, who was born in 1810 and died in 1908:

### THE ROLLING HEAD, PART III

[Fourth night:] Now she sent for the men, and the women too, because she had cooked up a lot of food. When they had eaten she spoke to the men.

"Tomorrow you move down on this flat and put yourselves in a nice circle. We are going to make chiefs. You people know I have been accused of killing my mother. That is not true. Now, however, I have killed my father through animals. We shall make chiefs, and here after we shall make a rule that if anyone kills a fellow tribesman he shall be ordered out of the camp for from one to five years. Whatever the people decide."

When they had arranged the camp circle they took two big lodges and made one in the center. She asked them to move five other tipis into the space within the circle. These were put in the medicine wheel arrangement. When everything was finished she packed a large bundle and walked around the circle to enter it before the big lodge. First, she took some dirt from the north side of the lodge. Carefully patting it, she arranged it in a mound in the center of a cleared space. It represented the world. Next she set up five sticks representing the men she would choose as head chiefs. She filled her pipe. She held it to each stick, showing the people what would be expected of them.

"You will have to swear," she said. "You will have to take an oath that you will be honest and care for all the tribe."

Following the instructions she gave out, her brother purified himself in the smudge of the sweet medicine grass. Now she told him to go out to walk four times around the camp.

"When you go out you have a starting place. Go around until you come back to it. Do this four times," she ordered.

He had already been told what men to select. After the four circumambulations he sought out the first man, leading him into the lodge. Then the other four were brought in like manner.

They were seated, the sister told them everything. She had all she needed in that bundle. She told them she was going to make them chiefs to rule the camp. And this is what she said.

"You have seen me put up five sticks here. You shall have to do this to the others who come after you. Now you five men are to be the chiefs of the entire tribe. You must rule the people. When the tribe comes to renew the chiefs you must put up these five sticks again. If anyone of you still lives, and the people want him again, then you must call him in to take his old place."

Now she finished telling them. [Reverts to voice of himself, Black Wolf] She is going to swear them in. She is holding the pipe herself, in both hands with the stem out. They smoked. The pipe is smoked for peace. That was done so that if some persons ever used strong words to the chiefs, they would have strong hearts and not get angry. The sweet grass was used on all of them.

Then the big crowd came in. Enough more were in the lodge to make forty-four men. She did the same to each of the rest of them. When this was done she told them to pick two men and sit on each side of the entrance.

"Some day you will have a lodge of your own," she informed them. "Then you can use these two. They can cook for you, or you can send them out on errands. They shall be your servants and messengers."

These two could not be of the five.

"Every ten years you must renew the chiefs. But each time keep five of the old

ones,” the maid continued.

She had a parfleche for the stuff they used in the ritual.

“When you move camp,” she exhorted them in closing, “keep out in front of the people. Stop and rest four times with it [the chiefs’ bundle] on the way.”

After she made the chiefs, she took out five bones, just as many as these five chiefs. “Now you can make soldiers troops. You may call them what you want. You could call them Elks.” Later on, Sweet Medicine made the dress of these soldiers.

“When you people move camp, leave me here. Every four years, you come back to this place where I shall be.” (Llewellyn and Hoebel, 69-73; Hoebel, 45-9).

Here the epic concludes for those who are not allowed to hear more. The teachings and epic continues to establish a space for a ritual and ceremony that cannot be recorded.

The epic of “The Rolling Head,” Mukije, and the creation of the Véhoo'o reveals how the first small bands of Só'taeo'o and Tsétsêhéstaestse had the structural capacity to expand into the 10-band federation. In the epic, Mukije placed the five tepees in a “medicine wheel” arrangement, with one in the center and one lodge at each of the Cheyenne cardinal directions (northeast, southeast, northwest, southwest). The center lodge represents the first Chief’s lodge council, while the four outer lodges represent the first four bands of the Só'taeo'o. One chief from each band became the first “Big Chiefs” and eventually became the first “Old Man Chiefs” as the nation grew. On the other hand, the four outer lodges could also represent the first four bands of the Tsétsêhéstaestse, since they also had four original bands, and the center lodge represents the Chief’s Lodge. In another interpretation, the four outer lodges could also represent the first bands of the Tsétsêhéstaestse and the large center lodge could represent a single Só'taeo'o band: the arrangement thus representing the unification of the two sub-nations. Whatever the case, the Só'taeo'o origin story (with Mukije) fits both the Tsétsêhéstaestse and Só'taeo'o traditional histories, which create a united Cheyenne National history. One certainty is that there were five original chiefs whom are remembered as the first five “Old Man Chiefs,” even though their specific bands remain unidentified.

The Só'taeo'o epic of the Véhoo'o highlight traditional Só'taeo'o teachings and values by centering on the power of a female leader. The Só'taeo'o are a matrilineal society. Mukije is remembered the young woman who cared for her younger brother. She possessed the power to summon and kill animals with her eyes by “looking” at them. She is the hero who fed the entire village, saving them from starvation, and she can summon the protection of fierce lions and bears. She represents the finest of traditional female characteristics and personality: she is powerful, caring, compassionate, motherly, determined, and nurturing. She represents all of the ideal characteristics of the kind of women that build and sustain strong families, thus building strong a strong nation. Similar examples, roles, and contributions of women leaders are highlighted in Mankiller’s *Everyday is a Good Day*, proving that the Cheyenne were not the only Indigenous peoples that traditionally held women leaders with high regard.

#### WHITE BUFFALO WOMAN OF THE TSÉTSÊHÉSTAESTSE

After the unification of the two sub-nations, the origin epic of the Véhoo'o began to elements that incorporated traditions and values of the Tsétsêhéstaestse. Most notable are elements that included the Tsétsêhéstaestse culture hero Motsé'éóeve. Grinnell and Mooney recorded these Tsétsêhéstaestse-influenced accounts of the origin of the Véhoo'o (Grinnell, “Cheyenne Indians” 347-8; Mooney, 371). Their informants emphasized that the Véhoo'o were created out of the wars between the traditional enemy of the Cheyennes, the Hóheche (Assiniboine). In a time before they had guns and horses, the Cheyennes frequently fell victim to enemies and their children were often absorbed into the Hóheche nation.



The biggest threats to the Cheyenne Nation were other enemy tribes who often attacked Cheyenne villages, and some believed that the entire Cheyenne National identity would disappear. According to Tangle Hair, one of Grinnell's informants, a version of origin of the Véhoo'o resulted from conflict with the Hóheehe. Below, I summarize the story based on unwritten accounts I heard and my understanding of our oral tradition.

#### VOESTAEHNEVA'E, PART I

One day, while the men were out hunting, a band of Hóheehe attacked a village. The daughter of the chief assumed the role of village leader since her father was away. The Cheyenne woman was young and beautiful and named Voestahneva'e (White Buffalo Woman or Pearl). As the enemy attacked, she was able to send the women and children away to avoid capture, but she realized that she was about to be captured herself. Once she realized her fate, she walked towards the pursuing warriors and bravely stood awaiting capture. Her actions shocked the Hóheehe, but she was effective in distracting the warriors long enough to allow for her people to escape unharmed. The leader of the Hóheehe claimed Voestahneva'e while his warriors looted the empty village. She was the only captive.

After the next few days, the head warrior took the Só'taeo'o woman and led his warriors across the country to the Hóheehe village. What nobody knew at the time was that she was already pregnant from her Cheyenne husband Ma'èhoomahe (Red Painted Robe). Not long after she was taken, she gave birth to a boy. Her Hóheehe captor grew fond of her and the child and he wanted her to be his wife, even though he was already married. The man was a principal chief of his nation and was already married to the daughter of an older chief who was equally as beautiful as Voestahneva'e. When the husband left to hunt and hold council, the two women did not get along, especially since the Cheyenne woman remained resentful because she and her son were captives. She believed that one day the Hóheehe would try to kill him.

Over the next months, Voestahneva'e noticed that her captor frequently attended council meetings with other prominent men, chiefs, and headmen of the village. One time he hosted such a meeting and Voestahneva'e helped prepare food. She noticed that the chief carried a beautifully decorated, red-stone pipe and stem, and the leaders smoked from it before they held councils. Voestahneva'e came to trust the chief and no longer feared for her son. Unfortunately she became sad and depressed because she missed her Cheyenne home and family. This caught the attention of the Hóheehe wife, who began to feel sorry for the Cheyenne woman. She decided to help the Cheyenne woman return home. (Grinnell, Cheyenne Indians, 347-8).

The Hóheehe wife began to show compassion and communicated with Voestahneva'e using sign language. Once she believed that the Voestahneva'e trusted her, the Hóheehe wife began telling her about the surrounding landscape and where she could find the Cheyenne people. "It was wintertime now, the best time for you to escape with your son," said the Hóheehe wife. Voestahneva'e planned to escape with her son. The Hóheehe wife made extra pairs of moccasins and the best winter clothes including a buffalo robe so the Cheyenne wife and child would not freeze. She also packed dried meat and pemmican for her long journey. The two women embraced one last time for they became like sisters. "I won't forget how you helped my son and I," said Voestahneva'e. Then the Cheyennes departed in the night when the whole village bedded down during an evening snowfall. The next morning her tracks were covered. Voestahneva'e traveled for several days and was careful not to be seen by returning hunters. She crossed a large frozen river following a path or bridge made of wood, just as the Hóheehe woman described. After several days of travelling, Voestahneva'e depleted her food and resorted to scavenging the carcasses of slain animals. Her journey was difficult and her child almost perished, but she was able to make it back to a Cheyenne village that was not her own. Later that winter, she was reunited with her father, husband, and relatives in her home village.

Voestaehneva'e shared her story with her family and told of how the Hóheehe woman helped her. She proclaimed, "If enemies can become like sisters, then the women of the village could also become like sisters and work together." She told her husband and father how they selected leaders and they smoked from a pipe during council meetings. She declared, "If the bravest and most headstrong men of the Hóheehe could sit together to talk, then so could those of the Cheyenne." She believed that she witnessed these events for good reason, and it was her duty to share what she learned. When springtime arrived she asked her father to hold a special hunt, unlike any before. This was going to be a new way of living. She wanted him, as chief, to order that the hunters kill forty-four buffalo bulls. "Do not let them kill any more or any less, and they must be bulls," she ordered. All of the families had to participate in preparing the meat for a grand feast, which was going to signify the start of the spring hunting season. "Cut and dry all of the best pieces of meat for our feast, and feed your family any leftovers," she announced. The best women and their families were to tan and dress the hides. "You must do your best to represent your family by creating your best work," she ordered. "Decorate them with quills, feathers, and other ornaments, and paint them with beautiful designs." The best men were chosen to make forty-four plain pipes with no decorations. "These must be the finest pipes that you ever made, they must be perfect," she proclaimed. Meanwhile the father, who was the only chief, was to find and cut forty-four arrow shafts, but not to make arrows. Instead Voestaehneva'e straightened them, painted them red, and cut them to be of equal length. These sticks represented the "straight" lifestyle and behavior of the best leaders.

After a few days, everything was prepared and everyone was ready for the grand meeting and feast. The families finished drying the buffalo meat, the best women finished decorating forty-four robes, the best men finished making their best pipes, and Voestaehneva'e finished making forty-four ceremonial sticks, each stick was painted red, a sacred color. Voestaehneva'e and the women set up a double lodge, with forty-four poles and two large lodge skins. She asked her father to invite the best men to bring their families to eat, but she intended on holding a ceremony so everyone was invited to feast and look on.

After the meal the center of the lodge was cleared and Voestaehneva'e and her father began selecting certain men from the crowd to sit in a circle. These men were selected based on their "bravery, wisdom, and fine physical appearance" (Mooney, 371). In a short time, forty-four of the finest men of all different ages were sitting in a perfect circle in the lodge and the rest of the people sat on the outside looking in. Voestaehneva'e left for a brief moment and returned with the forty-four buffalo robes. She placed each in front of the men. Then her father returned with the forty-four pipes and placed one on top of the buffalo robe so each man received one. Voestaehneva'e left and returned with a bundle of forty-four sticks. These chiefs were to remember that each stick represents the necessary number of poles to construct the "Chiefs' Lodge," and that alone, each stick can be broken, but together the bundle will never break. As long as the Chiefs' Bundle is never lost or broken the Nation will remain strong. She stuck one stick in the ground in front of each of the men.

Voestaehneva'e bestowed teachings and responsibilities to the chiefs, asserting that they hold council whenever there was any major conflict that needed resolving or when there was a need to make a major decision. She stood and explained to the men, outlining their responsibilities to the Nation: "You were chosen to protect the Cheyenne people and to protect them from all danger. You are responsible for the land and the people, protect them. Especially protect the women and children for they are the future. Take care of them when they need help, especially if they are sick, starving, or abandoned." The Council was to hold the Chiefs' Lodge ceremony after ten years and select new sacred leaders. The ceremony concluded after each of the forty-four men accepted the responsibilities and consented to serve for ten years. Here the story concludes.

The epic of Voestaehneva'e is consistent with the epic of "The Rolling Head" for obvious reasons, primarily the resilience of a woman leader who becomes the founder of an elaborate system of governance. The epic of Voestaehneva'e however, is much more complex because it also positions the Hóheehe at the center of the origin of the Cheyenne Council of Forty-four Chiefs. While the epic honors the enemy tribe as worthy adversaries to the Cheyenne Nation, it almost places them in a higher position since they are the source of the traditional Cheyenne governing system. This may be the case, but the Tsétséhéstaestse epic of Voestaehneva'e serves as a formal claim of ownership over the creation of the Véhoo'o; it reestablishes themselves as the founders of a government system that may not be of Tsétséhéstaestse origin. Without the epic of Voestaehneva'e, the governing structure would be prone to failure because the people would not trust in it, nor would they believe in an enemy's way of governing. This is the current challenge and criticism of the modern tribal governments among the Northern Cheyenne of Montana and Cheyenne-Arapaho Tribes of Oklahoma, which are based on the non-Cheyenne principles founded in the Indian Reorganization Act of 1934.

In another origin story told by Southern Cheyenne Chief, Lone Wolf, one of Mooney's informants, the Cheyennes are remembered as the aggressors against an enemy people called the Ów'qeo, who likely were the Hóheehe. One winter the Cheyennes attacked the Ów'qeo and drove them to the ice in a surprise attack, eventually massacring all except for one woman (Mooney, 371). The captured Ów'qeo woman invented the Cheyenne Council of Forty-four Chiefs, which is quite different than previous accounts. Petter also described a similar story in which the Cheyennes were the aggressors:

Cheyenne say that this system of having a council of forty four chiefs was adopted from another tribe, which the Ch. had practically annihilated. A woman prisoner told her captor (a chief) of the ways of her own people in selecting chiefs. The method pleased the Ch., who under the woman's instruction set up the "vehoneom" [chiefs' lodge], fixed the forty four sticks and elected their chiefs on the new plan" (sic) (Petter, 230-31).

Most scholars agree that there is no evidence that the Hóheehe had a Council of Forty-four Chiefs before the Cheyennes, or that another Indian nation was involved in the creation of the Véhoo'o. I believe that the epic of Voestaehneva'e may in fact be one that belongs in the body of stories that highlight the unification of the two sub-nations: the Tsétséhéstaestse and the Só'taeo'o. At one time the two sub-nations did not get along, and it is reasonable that after unification the Tsétséhéstaestse did not want to remember their new relatives, the Só'taeo'o, as enemies. Whatever may be the case, these two epics represent the fundamentals of traditional values and principles of Cheyenne nation-building.

## CONCLUSION

The epic origins of the Véhoo'o is one of the most significant oral traditions of the Cheyenne Nation. Retold through the sacred art of storytelling, the epic survived throughout time because parents and grandparents simply made the time to tell stories to children. The oral tradition allowed later generations to maintain the integrity of the traditional governing system while sustaining a unique way of life. There is no exact date of when the Véhoo'o system began, but Bull Thigh stated it was created after the unification of the two sub-nations (NAA MS 2684-a). Among the Cheyennes, the time of origin is unimportant as there is an understanding that the Véhoo'o always existed and would always exist. In 1910, White Eagle, a Southern Cheyenne Dog Soldier and member of the Heévâhetaneo'o (Rope People Band), expressed the longevity and significance of the Véhoo'o from Sweet Medicine's teachings: "He told the people that the chief society should be forever; they shall be different ones every 10 years. This is the seventh generation [that has kept this tradition]. This story has been told by [my] ancestors. Try to keep in mind what I have said, and follow the rules. That's the reason why the Cheyennes live on today." This sentiment is shared in the modern era as expressed by Leroy Pine in 2009, a Northern Cheyenne Chief and member of the Vóhpoométaneno (White River Band): "The modern [IRA] government is

temporary, and the traditional leadership [the Véhoo'o] is permanent, you might say [it will last] forever" (Chiefs' Prophecy).

## END NOTES

1. The Cheyenne concepts of nation-building and sovereignty are best expressed by the peoplehood matrix, but other scholars also define Indigenous concepts of sovereignty from Indigenous perspectives. See Alfred, "Peace, Power, Righteousness" and "Wasase;" Porter, "Sovereignty," "Meaning of Indigenous Nation Sovereignty," "Two Kinds of Indians;" Tsosie, "Symposium on Cultural Sovereignty," "Sacred Obligations;" Coffey and Tsosie, "Rethinking the Tribal Sovereignty Doctrine."

2. The two boarding schools that were present on the Northern Cheyenne reservation were the Tongue River Indian School and St. Labre Catholic school. Tongue River Indian school transitioned into Northern Cheyenne Tribal school, while St. Labre remains as a parochial school.

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These Have No Ears: Narrative and the Ethnohistorical Method, in General, leadership is positive.

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## Refbacks

- There are currently no refbacks.

