

WILD JUSTICE

NATURAL RECIPROCITY IN FOLKTALES

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RECIPROCITY GOVERNED ALMOST EVERY ASPECT of traditional Hopi life, from ceremonies in which the Hopi offered the sun appropriate gifts and it sent rain clouds to sustain their crops, to daily activities in which women's work was a gift to men, and men's work a gift to women. Accordingly, Hopi sent a gift package to Washington, D.C., that included items with potent spiritual symbolism: honeyed cornmeal, tobacco, and prayer sticks. In turn, the Hopi expected the U.S. president to provide protection for their lives and lands. The president missed the point.¹ Indeed, the idea that reciprocity might ground equitable diplomacy with any native people was an alien one to the government currently pushing its borders to the Pacific Ocean.

But what the U.S. government missed, folktales from Siberia to South Africa elaborated, expressing a model of natural reciprocity that inspired generosity, compassion, and humility. Such reciprocity made all subject to the consequences of their actions, regardless of their race, culture, or class. At the same time that the Hopi bundle was traveling to Washington, the tale in which High John tricked Massa

RIGHT: BABA YAGA ADMONISHES CAPTIVE

