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A Birthday Wish from Native America

By

ALICE C. FLETCHER

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THROUGHOUT the region drained by the Mississippi river, a ceremony was once practised that had for its purpose the establishment of peaceful relations between groups of unrelated people. Remains of its paraphernalia found in the caves of Kentucky, in old burial sites, bear witness that for generations before the coming of the white race this rite was honored by tribes of different linguistic stocks. Both Spanish and French travelers make mention of it, as did some of the missionaries. Among the latter the account given by Marquette has a special interest, not only for the description he gives of the ceremony itself, but by reason of the statement that he carried with him, as a gift from a friendly tribe, the peculiarly decorated pipe belonging to this rite and that the respect shown this sacred object by the various tribes he met enabled him to pursue in safety his epoch-making voyage down the Mississippi in 1672.

Although Marquette published this striking illustration of the widespread influence of a native rite, no interest was aroused or effort made to secure any definite knowledge of so remarkable a ceremony. It was occasionally mentioned, under different names, by travelers during the two centuries following, but its true significance seems to have lain hidden from casual observers.

About thirty-five years ago the writer had the good fortune to witness this ceremony, to discern something of its beauty, and to enter on a persistent effort to learn about it. This was finally successful, whereby was secured all the songs and rituals, and a full explanation of the details of the rite as practised by the Pawnee tribe.[1]

A comparative study of the ceremony as performed by different tribes has brought to light minor variations that are of historical interest, as they evidently had been brought about by changes in environment. For example, the tribes living in the buffalo country used for the symbolic fat, required in a certain part of the ceremony, that taken from the buffalo rather than from the deer, as the bison was more essential to the welfare of those people.

The rite is evidently old, yet it seems to rest on foundations still more ancient, based on the Indian conception of Nature. This conception, briefly stated, regards Nature as a unit, animated in all its parts by an unseen, living power, and is like to a great family of which man is a member.

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[1] See The Hako, *Twenty-second Report Bureau of American Ethnology*, pt. 2, 1903.

The belief that Nature is a great family is fundamental to this ceremony. The complex sacred objects used in the rite represent day and night, the heavens with its sun and stars, the earth with its land and water; all these are symbolically present and in sympathy with the underlying and probably the earliest purport of the ceremony, namely, the natural desire for children that the life of the people may be continuous. Under the influence of the idea of Nature as set forth in the ceremony, a development seems to have come about in the purpose of the rite that gave to it a wider outlook and led it into a broader channel of feeling, so that it became a means by which to extend the peaceful tie of the family beyond the merely natural limits, and to draw together two groups of persons having no common kinship, into the semblance of a family relation.

The ceremony required the presence of two wholly unrelated groups of people. One group was called "the fathers" and was composed of the kindred of the man who took the initiative in organizing the party, of twenty or more, and who was termed "the father". These persons generally belonged to the well-to-do class, as the requirements for the ceremony were such that only skilful hunters and thrifty households could supply the needed articles. The second group, called "the children", was made up of the relatives of the man chosen by "the father" to receive the visiting party and who was known as "the son". "The father" and "the son" had to be of equal standing in their respective tribes. "The father" selected a man, versed in the rite, who knew all the songs, the ritualistic movements, and manifold details of the ceremony, and he became the priestly leader, to whom the entire company must yield absolute obedience.

The honor accorded those men who assumed the responsible positions of "father" and "son" was of so high a character that the labor involved in the accumulation of the articles demanded for the ceremony was willingly undertaken, as the honor not only bestowed tribal distinction on these men and their associates, but it brought to them the promise of peace, of prosperity, and of future happiness.

This ceremony was always distinct from tribal rites, from vocations of the people, from gatherings of religious or secular societies, and in no way did it conflict with them. An old priest of the rite, speaking of the time when it could be performed, said: "We take up the sacred emblems [ceremonial objects] in the spring, when the birds are mating; in the summer, when the birds are nesting and caring for their young; in the autumn, when the birds are flocking; but, never in winter, when all things are asleep. In this ceremony we are praying for the gift of life, of strength, of plenty, and of peace, so we must pray when life everywhere is stirring." In his words an echo is heard of the vital belief as to Nature.

Music holds an important place in this ceremony, so much so that in some tribes it is called "To sing with". Each tribe used songs of its own composition when performing the ceremony. The Pawnee version has nearly a hundred. The songs that belong to this ceremony, composed by different tribes, are among the more melodious of the many hundreds of Indian songs, various in their character, that have been gathered by the writer. To the Indian, words do not seem to be essential to the purpose of a song, therefore they may be many, few, or altogether absent. Talking with an old Indian about this peculiarity, he made the following wise remark: "Words talk to us, but harmonious sounds unite the people."

The use of the songs belonging to this ceremony differs in one respect from the use of those that pertain to tribal rites, to societies of one kind and another, in that they are not held as the exclusive property of a clan or a group and forbidden to be used by others; on the contrary, they are declared to be "free to all". Consequently, among the tribes familiar with the ceremony, its songs are sung by old and young. Many are choral in form, communal in feeling, pleasing in rhythm and in melody. The writer has several times heard one or two hundred men, women, and children joining heartily in these chorals that voice an appeal for peace and happiness.

The teachings in that portion of the ceremony which was open to the public were general in character: they emphasized man's dependence on the unseen living power that animates all Nature, a power that was called by different names in the various tribes, but recognized by all as the source of the gifts of life; they also set forth man's reliance on the family tie for the gifts of peace and happiness. The teachings in the secret portion of the ceremony were reserved for "the son"; these dealt with the extention of the bond of the family relation beyond that of blood kinship through symbolic acts that recognized the permeating living power within Nature as that which brings all forms into being.

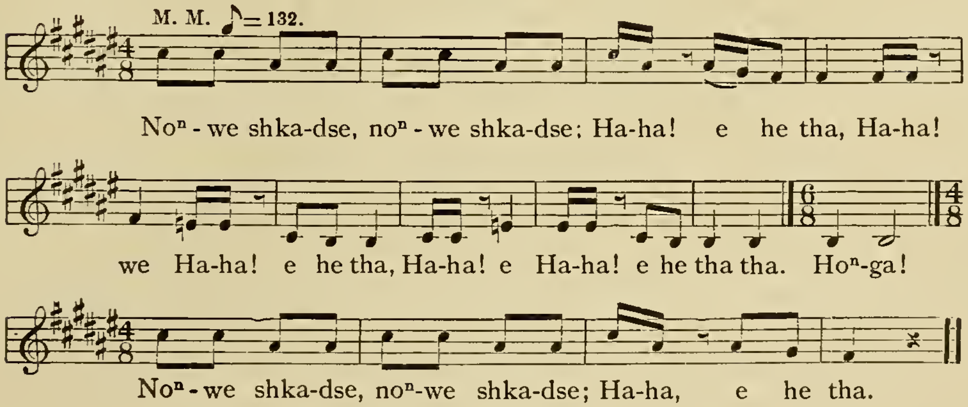
Space forbids more than these general statements regarding this thoughtful, humane, native rite, which is elaborate, extended, and noteworthy in structure. It stands like a lofty edifice, strong in outline, compactly built, yet ornamented with details full of color, replete with symbolism; within are enshrined noble, poetic thoughts embodied in action, rhythmic movement, and song.

In the past life in our land, this ceremony has played an important part and exercised a far-reaching influence. On the material side it caused commodities to be exchanged, whereby the handicraft of one region was made known to other sections. On the immaterial side, the thoughts of the native seers expressed in the rite bore forward the mind of the people toward a conception that closely approached that of the brotherhood of man, a conception recognized as among the noblest known to the human family.

In 1884 the British Association for the Advancement of Science and the American Association for the Advancement of Science met at Philadelphia. On that occasion the writer carried the sacred objects belonging to this ceremony on what was probably their longest journey, in order that, for the first time, the songs of the rite might bear their message of peace and good-will across the line of race, and, through the human spirit of the ceremony of which they were a part, bring together the peoples of the old and of the new America.

Once more the spirit of this ancient ceremony is evoked! The following hitherto unpublished song from the Oto version of the rite is here presented in its native guise, that it may convey to him, whom we honor and who is gifted to discern beauty under a strange exterior, the wish, which is the burden of the song, that to him may be granted the perennial happiness that knows not years, being ever the companion of immortal youth.

SONG


M. M. ♪ = 132.
Noⁿ - we shka-dse, noⁿ - we shka-dse: Ha-ha! e he tha, Ha-ha!
we Ha-ha! e he tha, Ha-ha! e Ha-ha! e he tha tha. Hoⁿ-ga!
Noⁿ - we shka-dse, noⁿ-we shka-dse; Ha-ha, e he tha.

Noⁿ-we shka-dse, noⁿ-we shka-dse;
    Ha-ha! e he tha, Ha-ha! we Ha-ha! e he tha,
    Ha-ha! e he tha tha. Hoⁿ-ga!
Noⁿ-we shka-dse, noⁿ-we shka-dse;
        Ha-ha! e he tha.

There is but one stanza and three words to this song. The first and fourth lines repeat two of the words: *no^n-we*, a pathway (typifying life's onward movement), and *shka-dse*, play. The third word, *ho^n-ga*, occurs at the end of the third line and gives the key to the meaning of the song. *Ho^n-ga* is a ceremonial term applied to the child, upon whom, during the secret portion of the ceremony, are placed the symbols of life, of strength, of plenty, of the continuity of all that makes for happiness and peace. Laughing vocables, indicative of care-free joy, fill the rest of the musical measures.

The little Song makes the picture of a bright pathway, free from danger or trouble, where play the children filled with the potentialities of Happiness.

WASHINGTON, D.C.

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