

THE VERIFICATION OF A TRADITION

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Like other Indian tribes, the natives of the pueblo of Acoma, in western central New Mexico, have a legend of their genesis and migration. In so far as the creation is concerned, the story of course is nothing short of the mythic, since the origin of any aggregation of kindred in the prescriptorial stage of culture must necessarily be accounted for in the same manner as the origin of any natural phenomenon of which they have no direct knowledge. It also has been found that the parts of these traditions which recount the movements of a people from place to place and note the adoption of other peoples as a part of their tribal organization, the oral record deals with actual fact and has been passed from generation to generation with such fidelity that the now archaic expressions of the ancients are still repeated each time the story is authoritatively told. So carefully, indeed, are such traditions and rituals uttered that the slightest error in their repetition sometimes brings to an end an entire ceremony.

The writer has devoted considerable attention to the verification, by comparison with known occurrences, of those parts of the lore of southwestern tribes that relate to the historic period of that section, and has found that such legends have been preserved so faithfully that they coincide fully with events known to have transpired as remotely as three centuries ago. Therefore when we hear from native lips a story of ancestral deeds, apparently unprofaned by Caucasian contact and without an undercurrent of the marvelous, its integrity may usually be relied on.

The story of the fate of Katzímo is a part of the Acoma migration tradition which takes that people back untold ages to the mystic Shípapu whence every Indian came and whither his shade must some day return. The earlier part of the story is therefore largely mythic, for it deals with a time whereof the memory of man runneth not to the contrary. Then the successive occupancy and abandonment of one locality after another is told in elaborate detail until the present valley was reached and the lofty crest of Katzímo became the home of the ancients.

In this part of the legend there is nothing that savors of the mystic; it is a plain story of the probable, unaffected by the civilizing influences that have been hovering over their fortified home for more than three and a half centuries.

Katzímo was their abiding place, but how long ago no tongue can tell. We only know that the present Acoma was occupied when Coronado came, in 1540, with such an array of glittering splendor as this land had never before and has never since experienced. Five hundred, or just as likely a thousand, years may have passed since the falling away of a great rock mass that hitherto had given accessibility to the summit. Just such masses have fallen a thousand times since, some of them so recently that the elements have not had time to round their clean-cut edges.

The few inhabitants that remained in the village at the time of the catastrophe were cut off from their kindred in the fields below. In a short time their flesh became food for the ravens, and their bones remained to be bleached and powdered by a torrid sun and blown or washed away by wind or rain. Then the present Acoma was selected as a homesite, and there they lived when Coronado, and Espejo, and Oñate, and Vargas came, and there they live today—an honest, peace-loving, industrious community.

The legend of Katzímo was first noted and published¹ by Mr Charles F. Lummis, the well-known author, by whom it was communicated to Bandelier. In giving expression to his opinion Bandelier says: "Whatever may be true in this folk-tale about the rock of Katzim-a (as the Mesa Encantada is called by the Acomas), it is certain that its appearance and the amount of detritus accumulated around its base give some color to the legend."² It is not probable that Bandelier examined the talus closely or he would not have failed to observe the potsherds scattered over the summit. Knowing the mesa to be inaccessible by ordinary means, he doubtless viewed the cliff from the plain.

In 1895, accompanied by Mr James S. Judd, now of Middletown, Conn., I visited the pueblo of Acoma, where the Katzímo tradition was repeated to me. Proceeding to that interesting

¹ St. Nicholas, 1890. Since this reference was made, Mr. Lummis has informed me that he first published the tradition in 1885.

² Papers of the Archaeological Institute of America, Am. ser., iv, Final Report, II, pp. 313-314, Cambridge, 1892.

cliff, I found little difficulty in making my way over the talus and up the great cleft near the southwestern corner to within about 60 feet of the summit, and while descending found traces of the hand and foot holes that must have formed a part of the original trail. The talus, I observed, contained numerous fragments of pottery, unquestionably of ancient ware. Some of the sherds gathered were decorated in a vitreous glaze, a method of ornamentation now unknown to any of the Pueblo potters. While it was found impossible to reach the crest of the mesa save by artificial means, I was satisfied that a sufficient body of evidence existed in the cleft and at the base to prove the verity of the Katzímó tradition.

In July last an attempt was made by a representative of a prominent educational institution (who evidently had no previous training in archeologic work) to determine the truth of the legend of the Enchanted Mesa. With the aid of a life-line fired from a Lyle gun, this explorer was drawn to the summit, where he spent part of an afternoon in an examination of the surface. Nothing was found to indicate that the crest had previously been inhabited or, indeed, even visited.

A few weeks after the expedition of the University explorer, having completed some archeologic work west of Acoma, I decided to make another visit to Katzímó and scale the cliff. Equipping myself with an extension ladder comprising six 6-foot sections, some 200 feet of rope, and a pole-pick, I procured the remainder of my outfit at Laguna, where I had the good fortune to enlist the services of Major George H. Pradt, of that place; Mr A. C. Vroman, of Pasadena, Cala.; Mr H. C. Hayt, of Chicago, and two Laguna Indians. The trip to Acoma was made on September 1st. The following day was spent at that pueblo in witnessing the Fiesta de San Estevan, and early in the morning of the 3d our party proceeded northeastward three miles across the valley to the Enchanted Mesa.

It is not necessary to enter into the details of the climb, which occupied a little more than two hours. Very little difficulty was experienced in reaching the summit by way of the cleft above mentioned, through which, according to the tradition, the trail formerly passed. The truth of the legend was fully borne out by the finding of a series of ancient holes pecked in the stone to receive the rungs of the rude trail-ladder.

After being on the summit a few moments a sherd of ancient pottery was found by Major Pradt, and during the succeeding twenty hours several more fragments of earthenware, two broken stone axes, a large flint arrowpoint, and a portion of a well-worn shell bracelet were also picked up on the surface. A rude stone monument, whose origin was undeterminable by the leader of the previous expedition, was readily found at the edge of the eastern cliff wall and proved beyond peradventure to be of artificial character. No foundation walls are now traceable, however; but since the more extensive talus heaps below are composed largely of earth, it is not improbable that the structures that formerly existed on the mesa were built of the "adobe balls" which formed the principal building material of the Rio Grande tribes when visited by Coronado in 1540. No water remains on the surface of the mesa save in a few eroded "pot-holes" in the sandstone; on the contrary, during each heavy rain, the water flows off in many cataracts, carrying much sand and stone with it. Only a few thin patches of soil now remain on the mesa top; much of it has been washed to the talus slopes during comparatively recent years, as the numerous dead trees on the bare rock floor now testify.

Altogether, there is abundant evidence that the Enchanted Mesa was inhabited at a remote period, and that the tradition to that effect is substantially true.