THURSDAY, MARCH 12, 1885

THE SNAKE-DANCE OF THE MOQUIS OF ARIZONA

The Snake-Dance of the Moquis of Arizona; being a Narrative of a Journey from Santa Fé, New Mexico, to the Villages of the Moqui Indians of Arizona, &c.
By John G. Bourke, Captain Third U.S. Cavalry.
(London: Sampson Low and Co., 1884.)

THE Pueblo Indians of New Mexico and Arizona have this general name from living in towns (Spanish *pueblo*, from Latin *populus*). Near a river, or oftener on the top of a steep-cliffed *mesa* or table-rock, may be seen these picturesque communal settlements, with their close rows of flat-roofed dwellings, walled with stone and mud, rising in terrace above terrace reached by wooden outside ladders, the whole forming a fortification strong enough to resist a sudden attack of the Apaches or Navajos of the plains, whose ravages in old times led the ancestors of the present Moqui, Zuñi, and other Pueblo tribes to resort to their peculiar architecture. Though these peoples were brought more or less under Spanish rule from the sixteenth century, and had to conform more or less to the Roman Catholic Church, the general barrenness and inaccessibility of their region saved them from being Europeanised to the obliteration of the native culture, like the nations of Mexico proper. In the Pueblos the archaic system of society, framed on maternal descent and exogamy, is still in full vigour, while the complex native religion seems almost as perfectly preserved as if the missionaries had never made the Indians wear silver crosses to their necklaces and march in procession to church on Corpus Christi. Thus it has come to pass that now, when the country has become United States territory, and the traveller bound for San Francisco passes close under the mud-walls of Laguna, there is made accessible to anthropologists a remarkable phase of barbaric society among a mild and intelligent people, where its study can be followed into the minutest detail. A few years ago, Mr. Cushing's papers in the *Century Magazine*, describing his life in Zuñi, excited wide interest. Now we have another instalment of Pueblo literature from Capt. Bourke, the officer selected by Gen. Sheridan to examine the manners and customs of the Indians of the South-Western Territories, and who in August 1881 went with a party to see one of the great rites of the Moqui religion, never before witnessed by a white man.

On his way to the Moqui towns, Capt. Bourke paid a visit to the Pueblo of Santo Domingo. Here the Indians profess to be Catholics, but (as the cura of the parish last year admitted to the writer of the present notice) they keep their old religion too. This comes out in the description of the festival Capt. Bourke's party were present at, where the procession-dance was performed by men with bodies painted pink and white, and wearing only the cotton kilt of their forefathers, while the women's headdresses were thin wooden tablets of Zuñi make, cut in the step-pattern which in Pueblo art conventionally

represents the rain-clouds, for the coming of which to fertilise their arid country the ceremonies of Pueblo religion are one unceasing prayer. The clowns had the same prominent position as in the Zuñi dances sketched by Cushing; naked all but the old Mexican *maxtli* around their loins, and painted all over in black and white stripes, with tortoise-shells rattling at their knees, and their hair tied in with corn-shucks, they pranced hither and thither among the dancers. The whole purpose of the dance has been so far changed that it has become a procession bearing offerings to the shrine of St. Dominic, but even here the clowns are allowed their old licence, and chaff the Saint himself quite familiarly. There seem to have been more secret rites which the visitors were not allowed to see; indeed, when Capt. Bourke and Mr. Moran attempted to descend, note-book in hand, by the ladder through the sky-hole into one of the *estufas*—that is, the large cellar-chambers which serve as temples and council-houses—they were seized and ignominiously “fired out” by the yelling crowd below. A few days later, however, when they reached the rocky *mesa* on which stand the three Moqui Pueblos of Suchongnewy, Hualpi, and Hano or Tegua, to visit which was the object of their journey, Capt. Bourke found his way so well prepared by Mr. Cushing, that he was allowed the utmost liberty in examining everything connected with the snake dance, the great event around which all social and religious life naturally centred at the time.

A few days before, the young men had been out to the north, west, south, and east to collect snakes, and in one of the *estufas* Capt. Bourke found the whole catch stowed away in three great earthenware *ollas*. Next day the reptiles were to be seen turned out in a writhing mass, while two very old men lying on the ground were “herding” them: whenever a snake tried to wriggle away, they sat up, and with their eagle-feather wands gently brushed it till it turned back to the heap. These snakes were of several kinds, but mostly rattlesnakes, and youths came down the ladder from time to time bringing others, up to five feet long, wriggling in their hands. When the time approached for the ceremony, the visitors were politely got away to sit on a terrace-roof, where they could command a view of the procession, close to the sacred rock in the *plaza* or square, near which was planted in the ground a cottonwood sapling, apparently as a symbolic sacred tree; between the two stood a miniature conical lodge covered with buffalo hide, imitating in shape the *tepi* of the Sioux, and strongly suggesting a past time when the ancestors of the Pueblos may have lived as roving hunters on the prairie. The house-tops were crowded with women and naked children waiting for the procession. A noise of whirring and rattling, and there came forth from the arcade an old man sprinkling water on the ground, another carrying a basket of the sacred meal, men and boys with rattles, and another old man bearing a ceremonial bow, and whirling around his head a flat slip of wood fastened to a cord, in which we may recognise the “bull-roarer” known alike to the sacred rites of Australians, Kafirs, and ancient Greeks. Then came a party of dancers with their bodies painted green-black and faces blackened down to the upper lip and pipe-clayed below, with kilts of painted cotton, coyote-skins

hanging behind, rattles clanking at their knees, and eagle-feather wands in their hands. There was chanting, stamping, and a circuit made around the sacred rock, with the pantomimic dance of planting corn; after which the women and girls, gay in blankets of scarlet and white, carried around their baskets and scattered corn-meal. The dancers' party filed off through the arcade, but soon returned marching two and two, the left-hand men carrying snakes, some in their hands, some in their mouths or actually between their teeth, while the right-hand men, toward whom the snakes' heads were kept turned, tickled them with the feather-wands. Slowly the dancers tramped round the *plaza*, raising their knees to waist-height, the snakes writhing and squirming to get free till their bearers dropped them on the ground at the east corner, and the squaws half-smothered them in showers of the sacred meal. They were picked up by men and boys and passed on to safe keeping in a receptacle lined with buffalo-skins in the sacred lodge. Again and again the dancers came round with more snakes held in their teeth, even two at a time by one daring performer, till all, above a hundred, had been carried round, when they were passed out again, placed within a circle of meal in front of the sacred rock, smothered in meal again, prayed over by the chief priest, then caught up in handfuls by the dancers, who rushed with them to the eastern crest of the precipice and down the break-neck trails to the foot, where they released the reptiles to the four quarters of the globe.

The question how this extraordinary performance is managed may be in part answered. The idea of its being a mere trick may be set aside, as the snakes have not their fangs drawn, and indeed it is mentioned that the youths, though they handle the creatures recklessly while stretched at length, call in the aid of the old men as soon as a rattlesnake begins to coil ready to strike. It may be suspected, however, that the snakes have been made to bite cloths or such things before the dance, so as to reduce their poison and make them less dangerous. It is plain that the wands with the eagle-feathers are highly effective in keeping the snakes back by fanning and tickling. We are not told exactly how they act, but the Moquis believe that the snakes dread their enemy, the eagle, whose mode of attack, they say, is to tap the serpent gently with one of his wings, and exasperate it into making a spring. When the snake has lunged out all its force and struck nothing but feathers, its strength is gone, and it lies uncoiled on the ground, where the eagle seizes it in his talons and flies off with it. There may be in this story a hint of the actual purpose of the feather-wand. Through want of knowledge of the Moqui dialects, Capt. Bourke's party did not get much information on the spot as to the origin and purpose of the snake-dance, but this want was in some measure supplied at Zuñi, where Nanahe, a Moqui by birth but a Zuñi by adoption, gave an explicit account in the Zuñi language, which Mr. Cushing translated. The care and preparation of the dance, Nanahe said, belong to a secret order first established in the Grand Cañon of the Rattlesnakes, and the Moqui ancestors migrating eastward brought it with them. At first all members of the order were of the Rattlesnake gens, but as time passed, that clan became

numerous and mixed with the other clans. To keep the order from getting too big, no members were taken in unless belonging (that is, by descent through the mother) to the Rattlesnake gens, or unless when a member dies his son is taken in, as was Nanahe's own case; but a man would not come in merely by inheritance if he had not the proper qualities, and on the other hand a man of brave heart and good character would be likely to be admitted, although neither his mother nor his father was a Rattlesnake. "From the Moqui villages the order spread to other villages, but the headquarters remained among the Moquis. If a man was bold and courageous, and had a stout heart, and led just such a life as the order told him, and obeyed its orders, he could carry snakes in his mouth and they couldn't hurt him; but if he did not conform his conduct to such requirements, a bite from one of the snakes would be as fatal to him as to any one else." Here we seem to see the main point of the whole rite—that the snake-dance is primarily a ceremony of the Snake clan, to which the living snakes are considered to stand in the relation of patrons or kinsfolk. The present reviewer thinks this Nanahe was one of the Moquis he saw at Zuñi last year, who put his crossed fingers in his mouth to show how two snakes are held at once, describing also how, by chewing a mouthful of clay, a better grip is got of the slippery reptiles. We may fairly trust his account given here of the ceremonies of the order, the use of the four medicine-roots, the bathing and fasting, the smoking of the sacred pipe, and the ceremony with which the young men, when they catch a snake, seize it behind the head, hold it up toward the sun in their left hand and stroke it lengthwise with the right, praying to their father, the Sun, "Father, make him to be tame; make him that nothing shall happen that he bring evil unto me. Verily, make him to be tame"; then addressing the rattlesnake, "Father, be good unto me, for here I make my prayers."

Capt. Bourke quotes from *Harper's Weekly*, March 25, 1882, a description of a snake-procession in Central America considerably resembling that of the Moquis. This illustrated newspaper is not readily met with in England, but it would be worth knowing what authority there is for the account. If trustworthy, it would add another fact to the list of Central American or Mexican analogies in the Pueblo culture. Among these are the manufacture and ornamentation of the Pueblo pottery, excellently described by Col. Stevenson in the second *Report of the Bureau of Ethnology*; also the use of the *metate* or stone corn-crusher (perversely printed *metale* in this book). The description of a Moqui marriage, quoted from a Mormon bishop, which consisted in bathing the couple and then tying them together by the ends of their new cotton garments, bears an almost perfect resemblance to the well-known Aztec marriage ceremony. On the whole the new evidence which comes in as to the Pueblo Indians conforms to the judgment which Buschmann long ago formed on such scanty vocabularies as had been made of their languages. These languages he classed in the Sonoran family, not belonging to the Aztec family, but showing strong traces of Aztec intercourse and influence.

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