

The Hopi Indian Snake Dance

(MRS. JOHN X. McDONALD)

The word "Hopi" means "hopeful, peaceful man," and they are one of the most religious and unique tribes of all the Indians.

As one of a party of fifteen, we left Winslow, Arizona, the point of departure for the Hopi Indian Reservation, a distance of 65 miles, on Thursday, August 17, 1905, at 2:30 p. m., in spring wagons, buckboards; with body-guard, out riders and mess wagon.

That day we crossed the Little Colorado river bed, also old Sunset Pass Trail, traveled by the old Forty-niners, and camped on the Little Colorado Flats. The old Spanish name for Colorado river is "Rio Lino," meaning Flax River.

Friday morning we walked three miles and viewed the mirage on the Painted Desert. The Painted Desert in Northern Arizona has called forth the efforts of our poets, and their varied impressions are expressed in many beautiful verses. At Chandler's Ranch we camped for the night, and there met a large party also going to the Snake dance.

First view of the old Walpai Hopi Indian Reservation! A colorful spectacle of probably a hundred persons crowded the high mesa overlooking this picturesque and isolated Indian village to witness the spectacular part of the Indian ceremonies, made up of the many traditional and religious ceremonies of the Indians as handed down through countless generations.

The Indian—be he pueblo dweller or nomadic plainsman—is a deeply religious person. His religion is not, however, built around a man or a personality but around nature and the phenomena of nature—the earth, sky and clouds, mountains and plains, deserts and streams, storms and sunshine, rising and setting sun, growing things; all furnish him with inspiration for worship. He has as many or more gods than did the ancient Grecians, whose religion has come down to us in the form of mythology.

The Hopi Indians live on a small reservation in the midst of the Navajo Reservation in eight villages on three high mesas of highly colored cliffs of many hues, and domes and pinnacles of black rock standing alone or in groups.

"Hogan," Indian name for Hopi House, the dwelling of this strange tribe, is a picturesque structure with its terraced walls, its ladders and chimney and olla pots. One dwelling over another, built in tiers, and reached by means of stone steps to the first story, and the others reached by means of ladders, built up, ordinarily, to the height of three stories.

The ancient dance, in the form of a prayer bearing a petition to the gods for rain, had been started late the day before by a Hopi youth beating a rawhide drum calling the braves to supplication. The high priests of the dance, their faces and bodies painted with symbols of the rain clouds, kneel before the Kiva. "Kiva" is the Indian name given to an underground lodge room, or ceremonial temple, and is the receptacle for the snakes. The walls are coated with red and yellow clay. Near the center they first erect three upright cottonwood poles, placed in tripod shape, terminating in a fork at the upper end. Upon this framework they lean the cottonwood and other boughs, entirely encircling it except on the front side, where they leave a small opening just large enough for a man to enter. A piece of canvas is placed over the opening. Three walls have deep, rectangular recesses, about ten inches in width. These serve as receptacles for various small objects such as paints, cotton, feathers, moccasins, meal, etc.

The consecration of these articles is a prayer to the yellow clouds of the north, blue clouds of the west, red clouds of the south, and the white clouds of the east to come quickly and make rain.

The Snake Kiva occupies a position on the Mesa just where it begins to slope downward towards the first terrace; the Antelope Kiva being only a few feet from it.

A board is placed over the Snake Kiva, and as each brave circles around the plaza, striking this board with the right foot, it produces a sound like thunder. While the thunder is being produced in that fashion, a boy with a long whip, on which are suspended strings of various colors, snaps it in the air, thus giving the effect of lightning.

No bribe would induce them to allow the party to enter the snake or antelope Kivas, but we were allowed to enter the third Kiva, in which minor ceremonies were to take place, and in which the paraphernalia necessary for the antelope and snake dances were being prepared.

The Antelope Race was held at 5 a. m.—sun-up. The crier gave the signal from the house-top, and simultaneously the run-

ners, who were four miles east of the mesa, started forward, yelling vociferously as they passed the cloud symbols, and at the same time the priests filed out of the Kiva one by one, all walking in a rapid and dignified manner around the central plaza. They did this several times.

The chief priest of the Antelopes carried his medicine bowl in his left hand and sprinkled toward the left. All of the priests carried two rattlers, and one of the boys carried corn stalks, each time dropping some meal without halting. After this the whole procession lined up in front of the Kiva, facing the east, the chief priest being at one end of the line, and the smallest boy at the other. They now began to shake their rattles vigorously, while the snake priests filed out one by one and made the circuit of the plaza as the antelope priests had done, halting as they turned toward the north on the last circuit, and stopping in line directly facing the antelope priests, with the two chief priests at opposite ends of the two lines. The antelope priests then shook their rattles while the snake priests waved the whips in their hands with a movement from right to left, and with a slight upward and downward motion for a few moments, their left hand holding the meal bag hanging against their rigid bodies. Then both lines danced, shaking their rattles and whips and at the same time singing a weird monotonous chant. The dancing was simply a forward and backward movement of the body, with a vigorous stamping of the right heel upon the ground. The object of this movement was to jar the turtle shell rattles upon the legs and lend an accompaniment to the singing, which was not unpleasant. This continued for about twenty minutes, when the line of snake priests stepped back about ten feet from the antelope line, each chief priest stepping forward from his respective line into the space between the lines. The snake priest placed his arm around the antelope priest's body, with his left hand on his shoulder. The snake priest held a meal-bag and a whip, which he waved up and down by the side of the antelope priest's cheek. In this manner they slowly moved in a circle in front of the Kiva. There the antelope priest took from the Kiva the bundles of green corn and melon vines, which had been placed there earlier in the day. He placed the end of a melon vine in his mouth, the snake priest supporting the lower end of it, and in this way the two resumed the dance in an irregular circuit in front of the Kiva, passing back and forth between the lines four times, and all the time sprinkling meal and water.

At the conclusion of this performance, the two priests joined the lines again, and with the rattling of whips and stamping of

the right foot on the ground, made four circuits around the plaza as before, and returned in single file to the Kiva. That ended the ceremonies for that day.

THE SNAKE DANCE

The Hopi Indian never destroys a snake. To him the snake represents the evil spirit—God created the good as well as the evil, but the good must conquer evil.

As on the previous morning, the crier ascended to the roof of the ancestral home, and made the formal announcement of the approaching ceremony, after having sprinkled meal to the rising sun.

Naked, barefoot men were seen departing, one at a time, down the west side of the mesa, preparatory to the snake dance, which was a repetition of the performance of the previous morning.

The snake priests and antelope priests had assembled in the antelope Kiva, and were singing the eight traditional songs.

The twenty-four snake priests, and all those taking part in the ceremony, wash their heads in Yucca suds, and all wear the Nak-wak-wosis, which consists of a short cotton string about three inches long, to which is attached a breath feather, stained red. These are worn in the hair during the preceding dances. Nak-wak-wosis means wish, want, desire, and is worn by everyone except the two chief priests, they being dressed differently, having blue leather arm bands just above the elbows, to each of which is tied a hawk feather, and under which were several branches of cottonwood and three white eagle feathers (chief of the air) and a thick wreath of cottonwood, and cottonwood ruffs around their ankles. About the neck were many strands of beads, some of turquoise, some of shells, and some of the priests had abalone shells. One had a small looking-glass hanging to his strands of beads.

The costume of the snake priests: bodies blackened with soot over the entire surface; face painted black with pink spot on forehead, while the surface under the chin was painted white; a large daub of pinkish paint was placed on the upper and lower arms. The legs above the knees were painted black, with a pink spot just above the knees. Wrist bands of various kinds; snake kilt bandoleer, and a hollow stick with different kinds of feathers attached to it, called "Natis," or "snake whip;" skin suspended behind from the belt, a fringed buckskin sash on right hip; red

moccasins with fringed ankle bands. Each dancer carried a snake whip and meal bag. The snake whip is a piece of wood about ten inches long, painted red, and to which it attached two long eagle tail feathers, by means of many wrappings of buckskin string. These are used during both dances.

Boys and girls were gathered on the lower mesa for the scramble with the corn stalks.

There was great animation throughout the villages, many adults and old women joining the children on the mesa.

Everything being in readiness, the crier announced the coming event from the housetop.

The dance begins, and as the last circuit of the plaza is made, the priests thrust their snake whips behind their belts, and, humming a doleful song, stepped forward and backward with the usual noise accompaniment. The snake priests began to detach themselves in parties of three from the line going to the Kiva, where a snake was handed to one of them by a snake priest. The dancer receiving the snake placed it between his lips and moved slowly forward, being accompanied by another priest who placed his arm around the dancer's neck, drawing the attention of the snake, as it were, with his snake whip, and warding off the snake's head from the dancer's face as much as possible. As soon as these two had traversed the circuit in front of the Kiva, the snake was dropped and picked up by a third man, while two other priests approached the Kiva and received another reptile and going through the same performance. The gatherers sometimes held as many as four or five or even more snakes in their hands, and it was observed that on several occasions a dancer would take more than one snake between his lips. As soon as a snake dropped, the gatherer himself would pick it up at once, or intentionally let it glide away a short distance. If the snake threatened to coil, the man touched it with the point of his snake whip, thus uncoiling it before he picked it up, the snake being ready to fight when coiled. A pinch of meal is always thrown on the reptile before it is picked up. It is astonishing, however, with what complete unconcern the dancers will move among the snakes that are being constantly dropped, even when coiled up and apparently ready to strike at the foot or leg of the man who passes in close proximity to them. Even the small boys seem reckless. After the snakes have been handled the chief priests go to one side and sprinkle a circle of meal on the ground, and in it a meal line from north, west, south and east, toward the center. The snake men are standing at one side of the circle, while a

line of women and maidens stand on the opposite side holding trays of corn meal. This they throw on the meal circle and on the snakes. The snake men then rush to the circle throwing the reptiles on it and immediately thrust their hands into the wriggling, writhing mass of snakes, catching with both hands as many as they can get hold of, and then dash away with them to the four cardinal points, releasing them at certain points, preferably behind rock piles, and deposit with them the "pahos" which they carried during the dance. "Pahos" are feathered sticks used in their religious ceremonies, and members of this tribe never pray without first planting around himself, or on his altar, or before his shrine, a number of "Pahos" or Nak-wak-wosis. "As the birds soar to the highest heavens, so may his petitions be feathered and winged to the ears of the Gods."

The antelope and snake priests now entered their Kiva, and in about fifteen or twenty minutes the snake men began to return, divested of snake costumes. They at once began to wash off the paint from their bodies, at some little distance from the Kiva. While this was going on several elderly women brought bowl after bowl of snake medicine. The men at once drank quantities of this antidote. It is said this is done to purge the participants in the ceremony from any snake charm. The women began to bring food to the Kiva—soup made of corn and mutton, meat loaves, mush, etc. As the snake men had fasted for two days, the coming meal was looked forward to with a great deal of interest, and judging from the quantities carried to the Kiva, was well partaken of.

The meal circle in which the snakes were thrown was immediately scraped up by the Hopi Indian spectators, the belief being that if this meal is sprinkled on their cornfields they will produce more abundantly. Singularly enough, large drops of rain began to fall before the ceremony was entirely finished.