FESTIVALS OF THE HOPI: RELIGION THE INSPIRATION, AND DANCING AN EXPRESSION IN ALL THEIR NATIONAL CEREMONIES: BY FREDERICK MONSEN.

In the three articles preceding this I have endeavored to give some idea of the character and customs of the gentle people who inhabit the strange little desert republic known as Hopi Land, but so far have but touched upon the question of their religion, which is, in much greater degree than with any civilized race that I know of, the foundation and inspiration both of their social organization and of their personal point of view.

As would naturally be the case with a simple people living very close to Nature, the mythology of the Hopitah is poetic and imaginative, and their ceremonials are entirely symbolic. The Hopi are in no sense idolators and do not worship inanimate objects such as the katsinas and other images, but the spirits represented by them. In the same way, it is not the sun itself that the Hopi reveres, but the spiritual being or force residing in it. This Sun Spirit is held to be the great creative power in Nature, and is therefore male, while the earth is, of course, the female element, as in all primitive beliefs. The origin of the Hopi mythology lies in a past so remote that, even with the wonderfully accurate system of oral tradition that is handed down from generation to generation, the source of it is lost. Some of their songs and incantations are expressed in archaic language that is now no longer understood, and the meaning of many of their ceremonial forms has been forgotten even by the priests. The division between the esoteric and exoteric forms of this primitive pantheism is not so sharply defined as in many other beliefs. While there are a number of sacred and symbolic festivals and ceremonials and many secret ceremonies at which the priests alone officiate, the understanding of all the people as to their real meaning is much clearer than is the case with people whose inability to comprehend the spirit behind the symbol has earned for them the name of idolators. The Hopi religion has grown out of an exceedingly austere environment, and it is but natural that the mind of the people, from constant dwelling on the forces of Nature that give and sustain life, should attribute godlike powers to natural phenomena. Consequently, the greater number of their religious ceremonials are for the propagation of the crops, and, expressing the greatest need of dwellers in the desert, they generally take the form of incantations or
RELIGIOUS DANCES OF THE HOPI

prayers for rain. As is the case with all primitive people, the religious philosophy of the Hopi is full of inconsistencies, but there is no question as to their sincerity and devotion to the broad principles of their own belief, nor of the reverent earnestness which lends such extraordinary interest to their ceremonies and festivals.

The Hopi believe in a future life in an Underworld where their spirits go after death, but they do not believe in future punishment. I have not yet been able to find among them any myth touching the creation of the world. Creation myths begin with the origin of the human species, but they believe that the earth as it is now was already in existence when the first human beings emerged from an opening in it called Si-pa-pu, which they conceive to have been the gorge of the Grand Canyon of the Colorado. Of course, being Nature worshipers, their belief is not monotheistic; they deify the great powers of Nature as the Father Sun and the Mother Earth, and the other forces are known by such names as the Fire God and the Rain God, the Germ God, etc.

It is but natural that people whose whole life and environment tend to confirm their belief in the Nature forces to which they are so close and which alone affect their existence, should be but little affected by the efforts of Christian missionaries. Great energy has been displayed in the attempts to convert the Hopi, but they maintain almost untouched not only their primitive mode of life and government, but their religious beliefs and the strange ceremonies that with them are acts of worship.

I well remember a conversation that once took place between Pú-hu-nóm-tiwa, one of the head snake priests, a missionary and myself. The missionary was, of course, doing his best to convert the Snake Priest and was enthusiastically telling him of the follies of the Hopi belief, when the Snake Priest answered quietly: “We may be foolish in the eyes of the white man, for we are a very simple people. We live close to our great mother, the Earth. We believe in our God as you believe in your God, but we believe that our God is best for us. Our God talks to us and tells us what to do. Our God gives us the rain cloud and the sunshine, the corn and all things to sustain life, and our God gave us all these things before we ever heard of your God. If your God is so great, let him speak to me as my God speaks to me, in my heart and not from a white man’s mouth. Your God is a cruel God and not all-powerful, for you always talk about a devil and a hell where people go after they die. Our God is all-powerful and all-good, and there is no devil and
there is no hell in our Underworld where we go after we die. No, I would rather stick to my God and my religion than to change to yours, for there is more happiness in my religion than there is in yours.”

DURING the year the Hopi have many festivals, most of them of nine days’ duration, and a number of these are attended with elaborate secret rites in kivas or underground ceremonial chambers, and terminate with the spectacular public performance designated by the white people as the “dance.” Of the many important ceremonies, none is so well known as is the so-called Snake Dance, which, on account of its spectacular character and the time of its performance,—late in August,—has been most often visited by the whites, but so far, I believe, the Snake Dance has been usually written about from the viewpoint of an alien, rather than that arising from an intimate understanding of and sympathy with the Hopi and their beliefs, and so the meaning of it has been almost lost in the accounts given of the spectacle itself. The Snake Dance is a prayer to the spirits of the clouds, the thunder and the lightning, that the rain may fall on the growing crops, so that they may reach maturity and the people may not suffer from starvation.

The date of the Snake Dance is always decided by the head Snake Priest, who is guided by certain phases of the harvest moon, or, more probably, by the condition of the crops. Sixteen days in advance of this date the first announcement is made by the town crier, who ascends to the highest housetop and there proclaims in a loud voice to the people of the pueblo that the great festival is about to be celebrated. Eight days afterward, or on the first day of the nine days’ ceremony, the Snake Priests retire to their underground kiva and begin the preparation of pahos or prayer sticks, also making the sand paintings on the floor of the kiva and erecting the sacred altar, before which the sacred and secret ceremonial of snake washing and blessing will take place. The sand painting is a piece of strange and very interesting symbolism. It is in four colors, yellow, blue, red and white, which denote the world directions, North, West, South and East. A square bowl decorated with cloud terraces and pollywogs, bird tracks and rain symbols, is placed to hold the sacred water. Surrounding it, and describing a complete circle are six ears of corn, four of which are of the colors that indicate clouds from the North, West, South and East, while the fifth indicates the thunder cloud, and the sixth the clouds from the Underworld.
At noon on the second day the priests begin their hunt for snakes, traveling out over the desert toward the north and scattering widely during the hunt. Their first effort is to capture such snakes as are found wandering about on the sand, but they dig into holes for the shyer reptiles which have sought cover. All kinds of snakes are captured, but rattlers are supposed to be the most efficacious as rain bringers, and therefore are the most eagerly sought. At sunset the priests reassemble at some place previously agreed upon, and march in single file back to the village. The next day the hunt is toward the west, the next day toward the south, and the last day toward the east. When the snakes are captured they are doubled up and tucked in small buckskin bags carried for the purpose by the priests who upon arriving at the kiva transfer them to a large bottomless jar standing upon a stone bench.

On the ninth day at high noon and when the sun is shining through the opening on the roof of the kiva, the jar is carefully lifted from the bench, allowing one snake at a time to emerge; when it is taken by a priest who sprinkles it with sacred corn meal and then carefully washes it in a bowl of yucca suds. After this washing, the snakes are thrown upon the sand painting in the middle of the kiva, where they are carefully guarded by the priests. Strangely enough, the snakes do not show resentment, but rather seem to be in a more or less contented frame of mind, which continues even when carried about in the teeth of the priests during the public dance later in the day.

Co-operating with the Snake Clan in this, its most important festival, are the Antelope men, whose kiva is also the scene of elaborate ritual, and from which can be heard the constant chanting of secular songs. The Antelope kiva also contains an altar ornamented with paintings of cloud and rain symbols, and with a sand painting like that already described in front of it. The kisi in the plaza where the Snake Dance is to take place has already been constructed, these preparations taking place on the eighth day. The kisi is in the form of a conical hut built of cottonwood boughs and cornstalks. In front of it is a small hole made in the ground and covered with an old plank. This hole represents the Si-pa-pu, or entrance to the Underworld, where reside the spirits of their ancestors.

The Snake Dance takes place late in the afternoon of the ninth and last day of the festival and begins when the Antelope Priests leave their kiva and rapidly circle four times in front of the kisi, each time stamping heavily on the Si-pa-pu plank with the right
"AT NOON ON THE SECOND DAY THE PRIESTS BEGIN THEIR HUNT FOR SNAKES: TRAVELING OVER THE DESERT SINGLE FILE."
“THE SNAKE DANCE BEGINS WHEN THE ANTELOPE PRIESTS LEAVE THEIR KIVA AND CIRCLE FOUR TIMES IN FRONT OF THE KISI.”
From a Photograph by Frederick Mousen.

"GROUPS OF THREE ARE FORMED BY THE SNAKE MEN: EACH GROUP CONSISTING OF A CARRIER PRIEST, AN ATTENDANT AND A GATHERER."
From a Photograph by Frederick Monsen.

"THE GATHERER WITH A FEW STROKES OF HIS FEATHER WHIP REDUCES THE SNAKE TO SUBMISSION."
"AFTER THE SNAKE DANCE THERE IS A CEREMONY OF PURIFICATION, FOLLOWED BY A GREAT FEAST."
"The procession is headed by a young boy who bears the ti-po-ni, the sacred badge of office, the right to carry which is hereditary."
"When the priests are seated on the lower terrace, they began to play upon their flutes a strange and melancholy air."
"The priests rose, and fell silently into line, with the two maidens in advance."
foot, as a signal to the spirits of the Underworld that they are about to begin an important ceremony. After the Antelopes have lined up in front of the kisi, the Snake Priests leave their kiwa and, walking rapidly with majestic strides, they repeat the performance of the Antelope men and then line up in front of them and begin the dance by swaying backward and forward all together and in strict time to the chanting of the Antelope Priests. The dancers keep up a peculiar shuffling motion of the feet and a rhythmic movement of the hands, and the Antelope men do the chanting for all the rest of the ceremony while the Snake men are dancing with the snakes.

Groups of three are now formed by the Snake men, each group consisting of a carrier priest, an attendant and a gatherer, and these wait their turn in front of the kisi, where the snakes are handed to the carrier priest. Soon all the dancers are furnished with reptiles, and, holding the squirming snakes in their teeth, they dance slowly and with closed eyes around the plaza. The carrier priest is followed by the attendant, who holds a snake-whip with which he distracts the snake and so diverts its attention from the man who carries it, and the gatherer is always ready to snatch up the snakes when they are dropped to the ground. I have often noticed rattlesnakes held closer to the rattles than to the head, so they could easily run their heads into the eyes and hair of the carrier priest. It was nervous work watching them, for it often appeared as if nothing could prevent a fatal stroke, but the priests never seemed to be unnerved or disconcerted in the least, and the programme is never changed. After the plaza has been circled twice with each snake, it is dropped to the ground, the shock of the fall being violent enough usually to cause the rattler to coil and shake its rattles. Then the gatherer with a few strokes of his feather whip reduces it to submission, picks it up and hands it to one of the Antelope men to hold. When all the snakes have been danced with, each one receiving the same treatment, the head Snake Priest strews meal in a circle at one side of the floor and the Snake Priests all gather around it. Then, at a given signal all the snakes are thrown within the circle, where they are sprinkled with sacred meal by numbers of Hopi maidens. Then another signal is given, and the Snake Priests swoop down, grab up as many snakes as they can carry and rush down the sides of the steep mesa to the plains below to release the snakes in certain sacred places, so that they may carry the prayers from the living to the dead, and the ancestors of the Hopi may intercede for them with the Nature Gods, that there may be plenty of rain.
Meanwhile, the Antelope men march back to the kiva, after stamping once more upon the Si-pa-pu plank in front of the kisi. Later, the Snake Priests return from the fields to their kiva and strip off their regalia. After this they go to the edge of the mesa where the women are stationed with great bowls of dark-colored liquid, prepared with many mystic rites and in great secrecy. This is a strong emetic and is absorbed in large quantities by the priests, and the resultant effect is known as the purification ceremony. Immediately after it the priests relax and are their sociable selves again. Now they are ready to feast, for they have fasted during much of the time given to the ceremony. Vast quantities of food are brought to the kiva and left on the roof by the wives and sisters of the Snake Priests. There is general rejoicing in the village and everyone keeps open house.

The Snake Festival is celebrated in five of the seven Hopi villages; on the even years at Oraibi, Shipaulovi and Shimopovi, and on odd years at Walpi and Michongnovi. Alternating biennially with each of the five Snake ceremonies are five Flute ceremonies. The Flute Dance, as it is called, is also a festival of nine days’ duration and is quite as interesting in every way as is the Snake Dance. Preceding each one of these festivals are foot races and other sports meant to be tests of agility and endurance, and processions of interest and often of great beauty. The festival culminates in receptions and general feasting.

These feasts are never marred by drunkenness, because the vices of the white man’s civilization have not yet corrupted the Hopi festivals. So far as I know, this is the only aboriginal race that has never invented an intoxicating drink, and even to this day the better element refuses the white man’s whiskey, because it “takes away their brains.”

While I have seen the secret and sacred kiva ceremonies of the Snake Dance and other religious festivals of the Hopi, it has so happened that my experience with the Flute Dance has been almost wholly confined to the public ceremonial, so that I have only a general knowledge of the meaning of much of the elaborate symbolism employed. Like the Snake Dance, the Flute Dance is a prayer for rain, and the one of which illustrations are given here was unusually protracted and elaborate because of the suffering occasioned by the terrible and long-continued drought which destroyed crops and herds throughout the whole western country, ten or a dozen years ago.
I CAN give but a fragmentary description of the Flute Dance, as I was only a spectator with all the people, and could not follow, step by step, the complex symbolism of the appeal to the Cloud Spirits. This much I do know, that the Flute Dance is a poetic, pastoral festival, in which the weird and,—to a white man,—revolting features of the Snake Dance are entirely wanting, and the gentler side alone of the Hopi nature is brought out. The meaning of it, of course, is an act of worship of the great forces of Nature upon which depend the life and death of the Indian. As in the case of the Snake Dance, the announcement that the festival is to take place is made sixteen days before the public ceremonies, and eight of these days are passed in the intricate and complex ritual and elaborate secret ceremonies before the Flute altars. These altars are not unlike the Snake altars. They are adorned with symbolic paintings and before each one is the sand painting on the floor, already described in connection with the Snake Dance. In the particular Flute Dance to which I refer, which took place at Michongnovi in the year of the great drought, thirty priests officiated. In addition to these, two Hopi maidens and a number of small boys took part in a procession that was genuinely imposing in its dignity, from an altar in the pueblo proper, down the precipitous trail and through the side of the mesa to the large spring at Toreva. The procession was headed by a young boy who bore the *Ti-po-ni* or standard, the sacred badge of office, the right to carry which descends from father to son.

At the spring a number of intricate rites took place. At the close of these preliminary rites, all the priests sat down around the spring, which may be likened to an amphitheater sunk into the sand, which is held back by rocky terraces that go down step by step. In the center of the last depression is the basin of water, which measures perhaps twelve by fifteen feet across. When the priests were seated on this last terrace, with the maidens standing like bronze statues in the background, they began to play upon their flutes a strange and melancholy air, which was more like a dirge than anything I have ever heard in any country, savage or civilized. These Hopi flutes are not properly flutes, but a species of flageolet, played at the end instead of at the side. The tone is very soft and strange, and this effect is intensified by the fact that they all played in unison. They were not always all on the key, but the effect of weirdness was rather heightened than marred by a slight dissonance.

As they played, the aged priest rose and began to go slowly down
into the water. He stepped carefully and shudderingly because the water was very cold and he was very old, but he resolutely knelt in the water where it was shallow at the edge of the spring, then rose again and slowly made his way, getting always deeper under the water, into the center, where he disappeared entirely and remained under for what seemed like several minutes to me, but in reality must have been no more than a few seconds. Then he emerged with both upraised hands full of corn and vegetables of all kinds, melons, and all the things given by the kindly Earth that the people may live. These he brought up one by one and handed to the priests seated around the spring who blessed each article of food as it came out of the water and laid it aside. After all had been taken out of the spring the aged priest, shivering piteously but hopeful and serene, came up from the water. The other priests rose, and fell silently into line, forming a procession, with the two maidens in advance, which slowly took its way back to the village on the top of the mesa. The march was slow and frequently halted, for the reason that the rites and observances connected with it were many and elaborate, the priests and their attendants pausing every few steps to mark strange, symbolic figures on the sand by strewing the sacred corn meal. Special prayers were also uttered and the strange minor chant formed an undertone to the entire ceremony, until finally the procession reached the public plaza on top of the mesa. By this time it was nearly dark, but the ceremony went on in the center of the plaza where other mysterious symbols were outlined on the rocky floor with the strewn corn meal, and numbers of supplementary chants were sung until night closed down entirely and the moon appeared, when some of the Indians came out, holding torches high above their heads to illuminate the scene. There are no words for all the ghostly beauty of that scene, the silver moonlight, the sharp ink-black shadows, through which the torches show like smoky yellow points of flame, the white night, the wide silence, and the creeping chill in the air!

THEN came something so extraordinary that I am aware that it will sound as if I were drawing on the rich stores of my imagination for the coincidence which closed the festival. But all I can say is that to my unutterable astonishment, it happened exactly as I tell it. At a certain stage in this part of the ceremony there was a pause. No one left the plaza, but everyone stood as still as a graven image, and not a sound broke the hush, apparently
RELIGIOUS DANCES OF THE HOPI

of breathless expectancy. The stillness was so unearthly that it became oppressive, and a few white friends who were with me began to urge in whispers that we leave the plaza as all was evidently at an end, and go back to our camp below the mesa, when suddenly there rang out such a wild exultant shout of unrestrained, unmeasured rejoicing as only Indians can give in moments of supreme religious exaltation—rain-drops had splashed on devout, upturned faces.

Their prayers had been answered. The spell of the drought-evil had been broken, and the long strain of the solemn ceremonial gave place to such a carnival of rejoicing as it seldom falls to the lot of civilized man to see. The older Flute Priests retired; their work was done; and the mothers hastened swiftly and silently about, hiding away their little ones under husks and corn shucks, branches and blankets, until the children were stowed away out of sight as snugly and safely as squirrels in their nests. The flutes gave way to the tomtom, and in a few minutes the plaza was filled with numbers of the younger men dressed in most fantastic and grotesque costumes. These represented the Katecina, spirits who are regarded as intermediaries between men and the Gods of Nature. These Nature Spirits are supposed to be very peculiar, grotesque beings, with enormous heads and very long beaks. Tiny images of the Katecina are given to the children as dolls in order to familiarize them from babyhood with the useful or dangerous beings that inhabit the Hopi pantheon, and the only punishment as well as the only inducement to good behavior ever offered to a Hopi child is the admonition that if they are not good, kindly and obedient, the Katecina will catch them. That was why the children were all safely hidden away before the young men, masked and attired as Katecina appeared, and the carnival began. With brief intermissions it was kept up all night, and within a few hours the clouds had rolled from the western horizon over the entire sky, and a gentle, steady rain was falling. To add to the strangeness of the whole thing, the drought over Kansas, Missouri and other parts of the West did not break for some time after.

From the white man’s point of view, this answer to prayer was, of course, the merest coincidence, but not all the power of church and government combined could convince the Hopi that their God had not heard them when the Christian God was deaf to the prayers of churches and missionaries, and that their devotion to the ancient faith had brought relief from famine and life to themselves and their flocks and herds.