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Moki Snake Dance, Oraibi, 1898—Throwing the Snakes.



The Snake Men—Moki Snake Dance.



Antelope Priests in Line.



Snake Dance of Mokis—Carrying the Snakes in the Mouth.



Photographs copyrighted, 1898, by G. Wharton James.
Man Descending into Antelope Kiva at Walpi.



View of Walpi.

THE SNAKE DANCE OF THE MOKI INDIANS, ARIZONA.—II.—[See page 167.]

THE SNAKE DANCE OF THE MOKIS.—II.*

BY G. WHARTON JAMES.

At noon of the ninth day the ceremony of washing the snakes takes place in the snake kiva. This is a purely ceremonial observance. The priests have ceremonially washed themselves, but their snake brothers are unable to do this, hence they must have it done for them.

In the underground kiva, hewn out of the solid rock—a place some sixteen feet square—squat or sit the thirty-four or five priests. I was allowed to take my place right among them and to join in the singing. When all was ready the chief priest reverently uttered prayer, followed by another priest, who, after prayer, started the singing. Three or four of the older priests were seated around a large bowl full of water brought from some sacred spring many, many miles away. This water was blessed by smoking and breathing upon it and presenting it successively to the powers of the six world points, northwest, southeast, up and down.

At a given signal two men thrust their hands into the snake-containing ollas, and drew therefrom one or two writhing, wriggling reptiles. These they handed to the priests of the sacred water. All this time the singing, accompanied by the shaking of the rattles, continued. As the snakes were dipped again and again into the water, the force of the singing increased until it was a tornado of sound. Suddenly the priests who were washing the snakes withdrew them from the water and threw them over the heads of the sitting priests upon the sand of the sacred altar at the other end of the room. Simultaneously with the throwing half of the singing priests ceased their song and burst out into a blood-curdling yell, "Ow! Ow! Ow! Ow! Ow! Ow!"

Then, in a moment, all was quiet, more snakes were brought and washed, the singing and rattling beginning at a pianissimo and gradually increasing to a quadruple forte, when again the snakes were thrown upon the altar, with the shrieking voices yelling "Ow! Ow!" in a piercing falsetto, as before. The effect was simply horrifying. The dimly-lighted kiva, the solemn, monotonous hum of the priests, the splashing of the wriggling reptiles in the water, the serious and earnest countenances of the participants, the throwing of the snakes, and the wild shrieks fairly raised one's hair, made the heart stand still, stopped the action of the brain, sent cold chills down one's spinal column, and made goose-flesh of the whole of the surface of one's body.

And this continued until 50, 100, and even as high as 150 snakes were thus washed and thrown upon the altar. It was the duty of two men to keep the snakes upon the altar, but on a small area less than four feet square it can well be imagined the task was no easy or enviable one. Indeed, many of the snakes escaped and crawled over our feet and legs.

As soon as all the snakes were washed, all the priests retired except those whose duty it was to guard the snakes. Then it was that I dared to risk taking off the cap from my lens, pointing it at the almost quiescent mass of snakes, and trust to good luck for the result. Here is the fruition of my faith, in the first and only photograph ever made of the snakes of a Moki kiva after the ceremony of washing.

And now the sunset hour draws near. This is to witness the close of the nine days ceremony. It is to be public, for the snake dance itself is looked upon by all the people. Long before the hour the house tops are lined with Mokis, Navajos, Utes, Putes, cowboys, miners, Mormons, preachers, scientists, and military men from Fort Wingate and other Western posts. Here is a distinguished German savant, and there a representative of the leading scientific society of France. Yonder is Dr. Jesse Walter Fewkes, the eminent specialist of the United States Bureau of Ethnology and the foremost authority of the world on the snake dance, while elbowing him and pumping him on every occasion is the inquisitive representative of one of America's leading journals.

See yonder group of interesting maidens; their hair is fixed up in the whirls on each side of the head that symbolize the squash blossom, the Hopi emblem of purity and maidenhood. Some of them are "Copper Cleopatras," indeed, and would be accounted good-looking anywhere. Here is a group of laughing, frolicking youngsters of both sexes, half of them stark naked, and, except for the dirt which freely allies itself to them, perfect little "fried cupids" as they have not inaptly been described. Now, working his way through the crowd comes a United States Congressman, and yonder is the president of a railroad. Perhaps one hundred and fifty outsiders saw the dance at Walpi two years ago.

Suddenly a murmur of approval goes up on every hand. The chief priest of the antelopes has come out of the kiva, and he is immediately followed by all the others; and, as soon as the line is formed, with reverent mien and stately step, they march to the dance plaza. Here has been erected a cotton-wood bower called the

"kisi," in the base of which ollas have been placed containing the snakes. In front of this kisi is a hole covered by a plank. This hole represents the entrance to the underworld, and now the chief priest advances toward it, sprinkles a pinch of sacred meal over it, then vigorously stamps upon it, and marches on. The whole line do likewise. Four times the priests circle before the kisi, moving always from right to left, and stamping upon the meal-sprinkled board as they come to it. This is to awaken the attention of the gods of the underworld to the fact that the dance is about to begin.

Now the antelope priests line up either alongside or in front of the kisi—there being slight and unimportant variations in this and other regards at the different villages—all the while keeping up a solemn and monotonous humming song or prayer, while they await the coming of the snake priests.

At length, with stately stride and rapid movement, the snake men come, led by their chief. They go through the same ceremonies of sprinkling, stamping, and circling that the antelope priests did, and then line up, facing the kisi.

The two lines now for several minutes sing, rattle, sway their bodies to and fro and back and forth in a most impressive and interesting manner, until, at a given signal, the snake priests break up their line and divide into groups of three. The first group advances to the kisi. The first man of the group kneels down and receives from the warrior priest, who has entered the kisi, a writhing, wriggling, and, perhaps, dangerous reptile. Without a moment's hesitation the priest breathes upon it, puts it between his teeth, rises, and upon his companion's placing one arm around his shoulders, the two begin to amble and prance along, followed by the third member of their group, around the prescribed circuit. With a peculiar swaying of body, a rapid and jerky lifting high of one leg, then quickly dropping it and raising the other, the "carrier" and his "hugger" proceed about three-fourths of the circuit, when the carrier drops the snake from his mouth, and passes on to take his place to again visit the kisi, obtain another snake, and repeat the performance. But now comes in the duty of the "gatherer," the third man of the group. As soon as the snake falls to the ground, it naturally desires to escape. With a pinch of sacred meal in his fingers and his snake whip in his hand, the gatherer rapidly advances, scatters the meal over the snake, stoops, and like a flash has him in his hands. Sometimes, however, a vicious rattlesnake, resenting the rough treatment, coils ready to strike. Now watch the dexterous handling by a Moki of a venomous creature aroused to anger! With a "dab" of meal, the snake whip is brought into play, and the tickling feathers gently touch the angry reptile. As soon as he feels them, he uncoils and seeks to escape. Now is the time! Quicker than the eye can follow, the expert "gatherer" seizes the escaping creature, and that excitement is ended, only to allow the visitor to witness a similar scene going on elsewhere with other participants. In the meantime all the snake carriers have received their snakes and are perambulating around as did the first one, so that, until all the snakes are brought into use, it is an endless chain, composed of "carrier," snake, "hugger," and "gatherer." Now and again a snake glides away toward the group of spectators, and there is a frantic dash to get away. But the gatherers never fail to stop and capture their particular reptile. As the dance continues, the gatherers have more than their hands full, so, to ease themselves, they hand over their excited and wriggling victims to the antelope priests, who, during the whole of this part of the ceremony, remain in line, solemnly chanting.

At last all the snakes have been brought from the kisi. The chief priest steps forth, describes a circle of sacred meal upon the ground, and, at a given signal, all the priests, snake and antelope alike, rush up to it, and throw the snakes they have in hands or mouths into the circle, at the same time spitting upon them. The whole of the Hopi spectators, also, no matter where they may be, reverently spit toward this circle, where now one may see through the surrounding group of priests the writhing, wriggling, hissing, rattling mass of revolting reptiles. Never before on earth, except here, was such a hideous sight witnessed. But one's horror is kept in abeyance for awhile as is heard the prayer of the chief priest and we see him sprinkle the mass with sacred meal, while the asperger does the same thing from the sacred water bowl.

Then another signal is given! Curious spectator, carried away by your interest, beware! Look out! In a moment, the snake priests dart down, "grab" at the pile of intertwined snakes, get all they can in each hand, and then, regardless of your dread, thrust the snakes into the faces of all who stand in their way, and like pursued deer dart down the steep and precipitous trails into the appointed places of the valley beneath. Here let us watch them from the edge of the mesa. Reverently depositing them, they kneel and pray over them and then return to the mesa as hastily as they descended, divesting themselves of their dance paraphernalia as they return.

Now occurs one of the strangest portions of the whole ceremony. The antelope priests have already returned, with due decorum, to their kiva. One by one the snake men arrive at theirs, sweating and breathless from their run up the steep trails. When all have returned, they step to the top of their kiva, or, as at Walpi, to the western edge of the mesa, and there drink a large quantity of an emetic that has been especially prepared for the purpose. Then, "Ye gods! gaze on if ye dare! The whole line of them may be seen bending over, solemnly and in most dignified manner, puking forth the horrible decoction they have just poured down. This is a ceremony of internal purification corresponding to the ceremonial washing of themselves and the snakes before described. This astounding spectacle ends as the priests disappear into their kiva, where they restore their stomachs to a more normal condition by feasting on the piki, pikami, and other delicacies the women now bring to them in great quantities. Then for two days frolic and feasting is indulged in, and the snake dance in that village at least is now over, to be repeated two years hence.

But the intelligent reader says: You have merely described the dance, and that is not all. What is behind the dance? A most reasonable question, and one that should be answered as far as possible.

What, then, is the significance, the real meaning of the snake dance? It is not, as is generally supposed, an act of snake worship. Here I can do no more than give the barest suggestion as to what modern science has concluded. It is mainly a prayer for rain in which acts of sun worship are introduced. The propitiation of the spider woman at her shrine by the offerings of prayers and babes by the chief antelope priest demonstrate a desire for rain. She is asked to weave the clouds, for without them no rain can descend. The lightning symbol of the antelope priests; the shaking of their rattles, which sounds like the falling rain; the use of the whizzer to produce the sounds of the coming storm—these and other similar things show the intimate association of the dance with rain and its making.

Allied to rain are the fructifying processes of the earth; and as corn is their chief article of food, and its germination, growth, and maturity depend upon the rainfall, this has come to have an important place in the ceremony.

The use of the snake is for a double purpose. In celebrating this ceremony it is the desire of the snake clan to reproduce the original conditions of its performance as near as possible, in order to gain all the efficacy they desire for their petitions. In this original performance the prayers of the snake mother were the potent ones. Hence the snakes must now be introduced to make potent prayers.

The other idea is that the snakes act as intermediaries to convey to the snake mother in the underworld the prayers for rain and corn growth that her children on the earth have uttered.

Other questions, also, naturally arise. Are the Mokis ever bitten by the venomous snakes, and, if so, what are the consequences? And what is the secret of their power in handling these dangerous reptiles with such startling freedom?

There are times when the priests are bitten, but, as was suggested in the snake legend, they have a snake venom charm liquid. This is prepared by the chief woman of the snake clan, and she and the snake priest are alone supposed to know the secret of its composition. It may be that ere long this secret will be given to the world by a gentleman who is largely in the confidence of the Hopi, but, as yet, it is practically unknown. That it is an antidote there can be no question. I have seen men seriously bitten by rattlesnakes, and in each case, after the use of the antidote, the wounded priests suffered but slightly.

As to the "why" of the handling of the snakes. The "fact" it is easy to state; but when one enters the realm of theory to explain the "why" of the fact, he places himself as a target for others to shoot at. My theory, however, based upon my own experience in the handling of these dangerous reptiles, is that a fear within yourself arouses a corresponding fear within the reptile. As soon as he feels fear he prepares to use the weapons of offense and defense with which nature has provided him.

If, on the other hand, you feel no fear, and, in touching the creature, do not hurt him so as to arouse his fear, he may be handled with impunity.

Be this as it may, the fact remains—for I have examined the snakes before, during, and after the ceremony—that dangerous and untampered with rattlesnakes are used by the Hopi in this, their prayer to "Those above" for rain.

THE New York Zoological Society has secured from express companies a concession in rates on live animals, which is of great value to all zoological gardens and preserves throughout the United States. Formerly the cost of transporting live animals was very high, but the rate which has now been obtained will enable large quantities of them to be brought East at a minimum of expense.

* The reader is referred to the first article on the Snake Dance in the SCIENTIFIC AMERICAN for June 24, 1899, as some of the illustrations in that issue are mentioned in the present article.