Live Rattlesnakes in Their Mouths While They Dance

The Moquis Are At It Again

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DO THEY PERFORM THEIR HIDEOUS TRICKS BY THE AID OF MAGIC

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THE wonders of the occult sciences are by no means confined to the strange people of the mountainous regions of Northern India, although the marvels of the science have been more developed there than anywhere else in the world. There are several tribes of Indians in Arizona Territory that perform feats as remarkable and astonishing as the greater part of those seen in India and Arabia. The Coocpahs perform a feat of levitation—that is, the power of suspending an article in midair without means of support—and at certain tribal ceremonials they frequently suspend an arrow or a spear in the air for some seconds. The Pimas of Southern Arizona have several tricks that have been handed down to their medicine men through generations long before the days of Montezuma and Cortez, in apparent violation of laws of nature. For instance, travelers among them tell of their medicine man having caused the seeming death of boys by a poisonous weed and then after the lads have had two days' experience in the spirit world the medicine men have brought them back to life. Another feat of theirs is said to be the drinking ad lib of quantities of boiling hot water with no more effect upon them than a draught from a cool, sparkling spring. The Apaches have a few feats in horsemanship that border on the incredible, but the Moquis or Mokis or Hopi Indians of Northern Arizona are the most interesting Indians in point of strange customs and startling ceremonies of any tribe in the Union.

The Moquis ("peace-loving people") live nearer to the habits of their ancestors than any Indians in the Southwest. Their tribal celebrations are to-day exactly similar to those that Coronado wrote about in his military diary when he marched through Arizona and New Mexico on expedition of conquest in 1540.

There is every reason to believe that a large part of the dances, ceremonies and religious fetes of the Moqui Indians have been handed down unchanged for hundreds of years. The tribe is cut off from association with other Indians of the Territory by several hundred square miles of burning desert that reach in every direction and by a range of lofty mountains and the rocky remains of extinct volcanoes. They lived in their present locality of adobe long before the warlike days of Coronado and Fernando Cortez. They are a proud, reserved and silent race, and for years resented any visits from white men.

The Moqui are agricultural Indians, and their two strangest dances are parts of ceremonies that woo the favor of the God of Rain where their crops have been planted and moisture is necessary to that vegetation. The country is very arid, and water is naturally the most highly prized gift the savages receive. They have a belief that somewhere away up among the loftiest peaks of the Sierra Nevadas there reposes a monster rattlesnake, many miles long and uncountable rods in girth. The good will of this reptile must be cultivated if there is to be any rain or snow for the growth of corn and melons and mesquite beans.

On each alternate year the Moqui people of the two mesas—Tewa and Walpi—join in ceremonies in propitiation of the rain gods. This is one of the years of propitiation, and the snake dance that was performed at Walpi the latter part of August was probably as hideous an affair as was ever known in America. The snake ceremonies began August 18 and extended into the last week of the month. The dancers carry living and writhing rattlesnakes about in their mouths and pack a dozen or so of the reptiles in the bosom of their garments with perfect indifference as to their bites and venom. Such a feat of occultism is probably found nowhere else. Between one hundred and two hundred young Indian braves are chosen by the Medicine Man to enact the principal parts in the rattlesnake dance. For weeks before the ceremonies half the Moqui tribe is out hunting over the sunbaked mesas, through the canyons and among the sagebrush on the foothills for rattlesnakes. By means of a forked stick the serpents are fastened to the ground whenever spied, and the Indians are adepts at catching and bagging the reptiles by a few adroit movements.

Hundreds of rattlesnakes are placed in a huge basket in the outskirts of the village. On the appointed day of the festival the chosen warriors march forth to the dancing-ground, which has been strewn by the squaws with sacred meal. The braves are scantily clad, and on each leg is a small terrapin shell, in which are placed small pebbles, which rattle loudly as the warrior moves, and make of him, in sound at least, a human rattler. Around each brow is bound a flaming red handkerchief, the upper part of the forehead being painted a deep black and the lower half with a black and white band.

The band forms in a circle and the basket of serpents is brought forth. One of the chiefs, hideously painted, opens the cage and as each brave marches past thrusts his naked arm within and jerks from it a writhing serpent, which he hands to the buck. The snake dancer bends forward his hideously marked face and seizes the snake by its middle with his teeth. The serpent struggles wildly, while his human captor, gesticulating and gyrating, joins in the solemn rhythmic movement, in which, after each brave has been supplied with serpents, the whole band is soon participating. Round about the sacred circle the entire Moqui nation sit in dumb, religious awe. There is nothing to break the stillness save the hissing of the serpents and the rattling of the pebbles in the shells of the warriors' legs. The snakes themselves, although highly animated, seem neither to rattle nor to attempt to sting. Once in a while in the course of the dance a rattler will bury his fangs in the body of a brave, but he will be pulled away as if nothing has happened, and the brave who has been bitten will continue the dance with perfect equanimity.

After perhaps a half-hour's dancing the snakes are thrown in a writhing mass into the center of the circle and are sprinkled with holy meal. The dancers draw off, and then at a given signal rush upon the mass of serpents, each brave seizing as many as he can with his two hands and then bounding away over the prairie at top speed. The snakes are then turned loose and the dancers return, racing at their utmost, to the village, and are gathered in the religious council or ceremony which follows.

The Pa-lull-kong is another dance of the Moquis, to propitiate the blacksnakes, and it takes place annually in the first week of September, and less than a half-dozen persons outside of the tried and true warriors of the nation are permitted to look upon the hideous performance. The Pa-lull-kong is performed for five successive nights, and it was only by extraordinary influence with the snake priests that three white people were admitted to the kiva during the recent performances.

Of the Pa-lull-kong the feeding of the sacred serpents is the most shocking and grewsome. This part of the Moqui ritual is performed in the dead of night in a sort of stone grotto or subterranean chamber, about twenty feet square, called the kiva, in the side of the mesa at the pueblo of Walpi. It is the holy spot among the highest order of medicine men, who are known as water priests by the Moquis. A few whites were permitted in the kiva during the recent feeding of the snakes. When the chosen guests were escorted to the grotto and helped down a few stone steps at about 11 p. m. they saw a small burning fire in the middle of the apartment. An old Indian, striped with paint from head to foot, slowly and solemnly added branches of twigs to the flames. A rude stage of adobe and stones had been made at the farther end of the kiva. Upon it were growing stalks of corn and shoots of bean plants, that flourished in complete absence from the sun. The Indian guide said it had grown there rapidly in the kiva this season, and that it meant the big snake was going to send heap rain for the Moquis this year. About the rough-hewn walls of the chamber were horrible wooden images of snakes, with green skins, blood-red and shiny eyes and black tongues. At each end of the raised stage were mammoth representatives of horned toads done in wood. The Indian guide whispered that they were "heap old"—had been there long before there were any white men, anywhere.

There were a dozen snake images, carved and painted with remarkable realism. They were lying near the growing corn. They were five and six feet long, three or four inches in girth at the largest parts. The painting on them gave a startling and eerie appearance. No one was allowed to approach nearer than about ten feet to the grewsome effigies, and no one ever handles them on pain of dreadful punishment, unless after appointment by the watch priests for participation in the annual ceremony of feeding the "sacred serpents." The heads of the images were as large as a man's head, and evidently of wood. The eyes were of a peculiar green, that gave them a shocking gleam even in the darkest part of the stone chamber. There were contrivances by which the eyes of the effigies were opened and closed as quick as an electric flash and without the least sound. The mouths could be opened and shut with an ease that was astonishing. There were two rows of shining white teeth in the mouths, and long, forked, blood-red tongues were shot forth from the throats of the snakes. The bodies were painted exactly like huge rattlesnakes. Even the scales of the reptiles were reproduced with a fidelity to nature that caused some shudders to the palefaced spectators.

At the sudden beating of a drum-like affair that sounded similar to a Hindoo tom-tom, the performers of the night came running in from an adjacent apartment, that was concealed from view by an ingeniously arranged curtain of some fabric as to resemble the walls of the kiva. There were twenty-eight dancers, and they were all strong limbed, tall and athletic Indian braves of between the ages of 18 and 30. They were nude except for breechcloths of skin, but painted with white and yellow. Strings of turtleshell rattles were tied about their ankles. At another series of taps on the tom-tom affair they ranged themselves at the front of the raised stage, and then, upon another signal, began a slow, weird dance movement in perfect unison. The rattles at their ankles were moved in exact time to the words and rhythm of their song. The Indian guide whispered that that was the way the female water snake was called to see what they were doing to please her. Other dances, songs—in different time and movement—but all of them slow and monotonous, followed for an hour or more. The spirit of each of the savage invocations was rain, and much of it.

Suddenly there was a furious beating of the tom-tom, and the dancers disappeared behind the curtain as quickly as they had appeared. Then two Indians came out with a long pole, and, having deftly fastened cords to its ends, drew it up to the ceiling. Attached to this pole was some flimsy fabric that acted as a curtain in a theater, and shut off the view of the stage when it was up. In a second a hush came over the assemblage, and every one felt that now was coming the climax. The fire was renewed, and the air became oppressively hot and noisome. Another beating of the tom-tom, and three old Indians with nothing on but prodigious strings of shells and teeth of wild beasts and paint from head to foot came forth. Each had a live rattlesnake about his neck. They danced backward and forward, unwound the reptiles from their necks and performed several feats with the writhing creatures. They threw them in the air as one would a cat; they placed them in their breechcloths and they placed the heads of the reptiles in their own mouths, while they leaped about and swung one another like rollicking little schoolboys.

Another signal on the drum or tom-tom and ten young men arrayed in paint and ornaments, as the others, ran forth upon the raised platform. Each seized one of the realistic representations of the rattlers and in a second was back of the curtain. In a moment it seemed as if pandemonium was let loose. Such a noise as came forth from behind that curtain could hardly have been heard anywhere else than in a menagerie of terrified beasts. There were ear-splitting yells, piercing shrieks, sepulchral groans, startling imitations of the screech of a lynx, the howls of a coyote and the grunt of an enraged grizzly bear, combined with hisses, roars and every harsh sound that the human voice is capable of and noises made on Indian musical instruments. The stone chamber rang with the dreadful sounds, and a number of the white visitors were indeed very much frightened.

The noises had continued for a moment or so when, at once, the serpents which had been carried behind the curtain darted their enormous heads through the holes in its lower part, one at each hole. They came out, head and back and almost half their length, moving their heads from side to side as if singling out a spectator for attack, their white teeth gleaming, their jaws opening wide and again closing with a snap and their red, forked tongues constantly darting in and out of their mouths. At the same time the performer who had taken the snake under his arm seemed about to be overpowered by its strength. It struggled to escape, twisting its ugly neck about his arm, darting its tongue into his very face, and then, rearing up, would throw itself out with a mighty spring, so that he had to clasp both arms around it and press it tightly against his naked bosom to hold it. It was simply awful. All this time the old man in the white mask—who represented the Universal Mother, the creator and fructifier of everything—was moving rapidly from one snake to another, sprinkling upon the head of each some of the sacred meal from the pouch hung at his neck. The snake stretched out their long necks as he approached, sometimes three or four feet beyond the curtain, pushing their heads against each other and darting out their tongues in their eagerness to get at the meal and their anger at the delay. As a head was thrust out the old man would throw his right arm around the slimy neck and hold it close against his side while he allowed it to lick up the meal which he held out to it in his left hand. As the snake turned and twisted it seemed to require his whole strength to hold it, as much as if he were trying to restrain an unruly horse by the bridle. At the same time the other man was struggling with the other serpent, the sweat rolling down his naked body and his muscles standing out like those on a gladiator. The unearthly cries and roars behind the curtain never ceased, while the dancers at their side kept up all the while their monotonous chant a-step to the time of the turtle rattles.

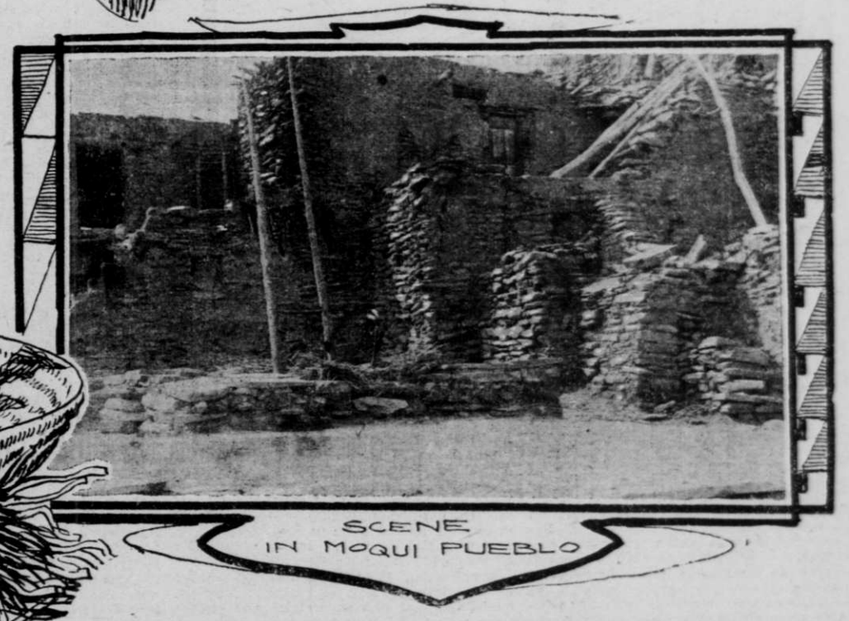
The naked, brown-skinned dancers, with their lank black hair hanging about their faces, the monster snakes thrusting their heads far out through the curtain, with their gleaming teeth and their red tongues; the masked figure holding one of the largest under one arm while he fed it with the other; the man struggling with one serpent while he strove to push aside the head of another, which was reaching out to seize him; the horrible combination of sounds from behind the curtain—all this by the dim, flickering light of the fire burning in the center, at the midnight hour, in a subterranean cavern hewn out of rock, made up a thing of weird horror never to be forgotten. The effect was the result of an ingenious mechanism of springs inside the bodies of the snakes, with clever acting on the part of the performers; but the illusion was perfect.

For about half an hour this performance lasted. In a second the serpents' heads were withdrawn and the pandemonium of noises ceased as if by magic. The tom-tom was again beaten as another signal, the curtain was lowered. There stood the growing green corn. The performers, now sleek and dripping with perspiration, once more ranged themselves at the side of the stone platform and began new dances and feats in leaping and howling. It was now past midnight. The Indian guide said the ceremony would not cease until daylight, and that several of the dancers had often kept up such extreme physical exertion for two or three days at a time.

MOQUI SNAKE DANCE

GORDON ROSS

THE SACRED UNDERGROUND CHAMBER



SCENE IN MOQUI PUEBLO