

A Chapter of Zuñi Mythology

by Matilda C. Stevenson (1849-1915)

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Citation

[Stevenson 1894] Matilda C. Stevenson (1849-1915). "A Chapter of Zuñi Mythology", contained in [Wake 1894], 1894, pages 312-319.

[Wake 1894] C. Staniland Wake (editor). *Memoirs of the International Congress of Anthropology*, published by The Schulte Publishing Company, Chicago, 1894, 357 pages, hardcover.

Contributing source: Harvard University

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MEMOIRS
OF THE
INTERNATIONAL CONGRESS
OF ANTHROPOLOGY.

EDITED BY
C. STANILAND WAKE,

ON BEHALF OF
THE PUBLICATION COMMITTEE.

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CHICAGO:
THE SCHULTE PUBLISHING COMPANY.

1894

A CHAPTER OF ZUÑI MYTHOLOGY.

BY MATILDA C. STEVENSON.

AT a time when all nations are agitated by the celebration of the discovery of a new world by Columbus, it seems peculiarly appropriate to study the character of the people occupying this continent upon his landing. To those interested in the humanities this glorious picture of discovery is marred with a touch of pathos that a race spreading in such numbers over our territory, a race which could never be subjugated into slavery, has, during these four hundred years, been driven before the progress of civilization, not only from their homes and hunting-grounds, but from the very presence of their gods. Those who know that with these peoples almost every act of life assumes a religious character, and that every mountain of their land, every river, every spring is directly associated with their gods, must feel sympathy for them and wonder at the magnanimity they have shown their white oppressors. The American race was divided into many tribes, speaking many languages and many dialects, and there are still many such divisions, but numbers of tribes in our territory have become amalgamated by coming into closer proximity as they were driven before the white race, while other tribes have passed away.

A number of tribes of our Southwest are termed pueblo Indians, living in houses built of stone and adobe.

Explorers of the past decade have enlightened the world with their discoveries of pre-Columbian ruins distributed over portions of Colorado, Utah and the entire area of New Mexico and Arizona. These ruins have been classified into five groups: the valley, cliff, cave, cavate and mesa ruins. The valley or plain ruins, once the homes of agricultural peoples, cover New Mexico and Arizona. Here they lived until, driven by a powerful foe from their happy homes along the water-courses and by the springs, they sought refuge in cliffs and caves of canyon walls. Wherever in that arid land a fountain of water is to be found there stands a pueblo or the ruin of a pueblo. This mystic land reveals to the archæologist a touching tale; the niches in the canyon walls are filled with the fame of the cliff-dwellers, and we rebuild in imagination the worshipping-places

and homes whose ruins remain the mute yet eloquent witnesses of a people long passed away. Many of the cliff buildings are in a good state of preservation, while the valley homes of long ago are but heaps of stones; about these ruins are scattered the fragmentary lares and penates of a remote civilization.

It has not been determined how many generations of cliff-dwellers lived in these strange retreats. Some of these places have long since become inaccessible, owing to the wearing away of the approaches by the same elements that fashioned the recesses of the canyon walls which served as foundations for their worshiping-places, fortresses and homes. When the cloud of war grew less foreboding these people ventured from the lofty abodes, where their trials and privations had been great, and built themselves homes on mesas—flat-topped mountains or table lands. The difficulties of the mesa life imposed a great tax upon the people; the fields of grain were far away on the low lands, and the maidens grew weary carrying water up the steep acclivities from the springs below, and after a time many of the inhabitants returned to the plains and valleys, erecting dwellings upon the ruined towns of their forefathers, thus completing a cycle; and many such cycles may have occurred. The Tusayan Indians of Arizona, a group of the Tewan and the Acoma of New Mexico are the only tribes now living upon these high plateaus in our own territory; but cliff-dwellers still exist in remote regions of Mexico.

The earliest history we have of the pueblo Indians dates back to the year 1530. Spanish adventurers penetrated the country and returned with extravagant accounts of these people and their wealth; and a series of general and systematic invasions followed for their conquest, and these continued from time to time until the Hidalgo treaty of 1848. According to the accounts of the invaders there were between eighty and one hundred of these pueblos; at present there are some thirty-two. The villages are all of the same general type. The people, although possessing common characteristics and following similar pursuits, and although strikingly alike in physical structure, belong to four distinct stocks: Shoshonean, Keresan, Tanoan and Zunian. It is of the Zuni that I shall now speak.

The tribe is divided into clans, descent being through the maternal side, and though the children in a sense belong to the mother, the father is far from an unprivileged person, and his position toward the child is hardly less important than the mother's. One must not

marry a member of the mother's clan, neither is it admissible to marry into the father's clan. I have witnessed more than one love-making in Zuni, and in essentials it does not differ widely from that experienced by our own youths and maidens. I call to mind a couple whose love was not sanctioned by the girl's parents, and, though they determined that she should not meet this lover, she managed to glide by the well to her trysting-place each day at eventide, the hour when the maidens gather to fill their water vases, which they carry, Egyptian-like, upon their heads, and when they exchange their bits of gossip. When I discovered them one autumn evening in the gloaming the youth was endeavoring to take the maiden's hand, and she was objecting with her lips, but bidding him take courage with her bewitching eyes, whose luster the shadows of evening could not veil.

There are many real love matches, while others are prudential marriages, which are, of course, arranged by the elders of the girl's family. It has been suggested that in Zuni the girl takes the initial step in love-making. On the contrary, these people hold such forwardness on the part of their women much as we regard the husband-seeker. The woman indicates her satisfaction at the call of a suitor by offering him a draft of cool water and food. If she hesitates, owing to her uncertainty or her coquettish desire to excite anxiety within the breast of her lover, she is reminded of her duty by either the father or mother, should the young man be desired for a son-in-law.

While their system of government is characteristic of a primitive state of culture, it is, nevertheless, quite complete as far as it goes, meeting the requirements of the established authority. While we profess to mete out justice to the accused, primitive law makes no such pretension. The rich and prominent man is favored; the poor and despised must suffer to the full extent of the law. The governor, who has a staff of assistants, is ex-officio the judge, before whom are tried all persons charged with ordinary offenses. In more important cases the six *Absbiwanni* (rain-priests) are present and interfere if in their judgment the governor fails in a proper decision. Witchcraft is always tried by the priest of the Society of the Bow and his associates. The chance for a sorcerer's life is the relating of some marvelous story sufficient to impress the judges of his occult knowledge of medicine.

The earth is watered by the deceased Zuni of both sexes, who are controlled and directed by a council composed of ancestral gods.

These shadow-people collect water in vases and gourd jugs from the six great waters of the world, and pass to and fro over the middle plane, protected from view of the people below by cloud masks, the clouds being produced by smoke; and when it is understood that, the greater the smoke offering, the greater the inducement for the rain-makers to work, it is not surprising that smoking is one of the conspicuous features of Zuni ritual.

The Ahshiwanni, a priesthood of fourteen men who fast and pray for rain, the Kokko, an organization bearing the name of anthropomorphic beings (principally ancestral) whom they personate, and thirteen esoteric societies are the three fundamental religious bodies of Zuni. It must be borne in mind that the religion and sociology of these people are so interwoven that the one cannot be studied without the other.

The Society of the Kokko personate anthropomorphic gods by wearing masks and other paraphernalia. There are six estufas or chambers of the Kokko for the six regions: the north, west, south, east, zenith and nadir, and these rooms present fantastic scenes when the primitive drama is enacted by the personators of these anthropomorphic gods. The costumes worn at such time are quite elaborate and of artistic design. As soon as the mask is donned the actor loses his identity as a man, his body becoming the abiding-place of the god he personates.

The esoteric societies, with but one or two exceptions, have nothing to do with anthropomorphic beings, this category of gods being zoomorphic. These societies deal essentially with the anagogics of medicine, feats with fire, knives, arrows and general legerdemain.

The medicine practices are for extracting disease inflicted by the sorcery of men or of the lower animals. The other performances are to bring rain and snow. No society convenes without giving much time to invocations for rain, not, however, appealing directly to the sun-father, their supreme deity, and to the rain-makers, as the fourteen rain priests do, but to the beast-gods of their worship, to intercede with the sun-father and rain-makers.

A complete system of rain cult has been instituted by these people of an arid land, for in a region where the rain seldom falls the greatest boon to man seems to come from the clouds. At the winter and summer solstices synchronal meetings of most of these societies are held, and also at other times. The members of a society meet for a number of nights previous to the ceremonial to rehearse their

songs, which, however, are not begun until late in the evening, the earlier part being devoted to relating epic stories—at least this used to be the custom, but at the present time the glowing accounts of the feats of their war-gods and experiences with the hated Navajo have been replaced by tales of the wrongs suffered at the hands of the white man. The women and children as well as the men are devotees in their observances of the practices of their societies.

The Zuni are an agricultural and pastoral people, maize being their staple article. Every color and shade of corn may be found, these primitive agriculturists having observed the greatest care in the development of varieties. The reds range from the richest cardinal to the faintest blush of pink, and a similar variety of shades runs through the blues, yellows and purples. They have pure white and black, and the variation in the individual ears is remarkable. Almost the same variety of color is to be found among the beans. All this care of propagation has a religious significance. They do not attribute the introduction of cattle, horses and sheep to Europeans, but to the creative power of their culture hero.

It is only by long and intimate relations with these people that one may gather correct data of their religion and sociology. They are so hospitable, so ready to serve others in many ways, yet so reticent, so diplomatic, that one might live much in their midst without knowing anything of their real life.

Zuni is built upon a knoll in a broad valley walled by picturesque mesas of red and white sandstone, and on the site of a village which they deserted during a flood to flee to a mesa near by for safety, according to their account. Although this table-land is several hundred feet above the valley, yet, according to Zuni tradition, the waters reached nearly to the summit of the mesa, and in the dire extremity the rain-priests determined to sacrifice a youth and maiden in order to propitiate the angry waters. The two were dressed in their most beautiful clothes and adorned with many necklaces of turkis and other precious beads, and cast into the waters. The offering stayed the calamity, and the victims were turned to stone, and are to be seen in a columnar rock broken near the top into two parts which are capped with head-like forms. These are called the father and mother rocks. This reference to the casting of the two into the waters leads to the inference that at some period in the past human sacrifice was practiced by these people.

Zuni is the name given by the Spaniards; they call themselves

“Ah-shi-wi,” meaning all people, reference being to themselves alone.

The natural impulse of the human mind is to seek for truth and to account for the phenomena of nature, and thus philosophy grows. Mythologic philosophy is the fruit of the struggle for knowledge of cause. The reasoning of aboriginal peoples is by analogy, for at this stage of culture science is yet unborn. So the philosopher of early times is the myth-maker. The philosophy of primitive peoples is the progenitor of natural religion, and religion is invented through long processes of analogic reasoning. The Zunian belongs to this stage of culture. He is conscious of the earth he treads upon, but he does not know its form; he knows something of what the earth contains beneath its surface, of the rivers, the mountains, the sun, moon and all celestial bodies of the solar system to be discerned without the optical inventions of man; he sees the lightning, hears the thunder, feels the winds and knows the value of rains and snows; he is acquainted with the beasts of the forests, the birds and insects of the air, the fishes of the rivers, and knows that these living things possess attributes not attainable by himself, and so he endows these animals with superior or supernatural qualities. When one becomes ill from any other cause than that of a wound it is attributed to some foreign element thrust into the body and beyond his power to overcome. Nothing is left him then but to appeal to the creatures of superior qualities, and thus a system of theurgism develops, when religion and medicine become a sort of dualism, for the animals of his worship are his doctors, acting through the agency of the theurgist. These theurgists are the destroyers of evil inflicted by sorcery; they have no power within themselves to avert such evil; in dealing with sorcery of man they must first become entirely under the influence of the beast-gods of the cardinal points—the Zuni having relegated the cougar to the north, the bear to the west, the badger to the south, and the white wolf to the east. Now, in order that the theurgist should heal his patient, this foreign object in the body must be extracted, and the means adopted to this end is curious. The lips are applied to the flesh, and the disease is drawn out by sucking. This process of sucking to cure disease is not confined to the Zuni, but is common among aboriginal peoples of the world, differing only in minor details.

A theurgist must be a person regularly initiated into a medicine order of a secret society and may be either man or woman. All but one or two of the thirteen esoteric societies comprise several orders, that of medicine being considered the most important division.

Though young children of both sexes enter this order, they do not practice healing until in the opinion of elder theurgists they have reached years of discretion, when they become members of the first degree. At these ceremonies of initiation a sand-painting is one of the prominent features. A ground color of sand is laid upon the floor in front of the slat altar and made perfectly smooth, and upon this figures are delineated by sprinkling powdered mineral pigment from between the thumb and fingers. These paintings, of more or less elaborateness, are common among all the pueblo Indians, the Navajo, the Mission Indians of California and tribes of the north, and are all used in connection with medicine practices. I cannot say how widespread the observance of sand-painting is, but the low-caste people of India design their gods in sand paintings on the ground by sprinkling in the same way, and they also have sprinkling-cups for the purpose. Unlike our Indians, they do not have a ground color of sand, but spread the surface with diluted chips of the sacred cow. The high castes have greatly elaborated the sand-paintings, which are used by them purely for decoration. This same feature is to be found in the Renaissance, when the tables of the French were bordered in elaborate designs with powdered marbles. If I have digressed from the main subject it is because it seems a point of interest to note at what remote regions of the globe the custom of sand-painting is observed.

It has been mentioned that the mission of the theurgist, acting as the agent of the beast-gods, is to extract the object which causes disease, and much sleight of hand is brought into practice, especially at regular meetings, when patients gather in large numbers in the ceremonial chamber to be healed of real or imaginary disease.

Our concepts of the universe are altogether different from those of primitive man; we understand natural phenomena through philosophical laws, while he accounts for them by analogy; we live in a world of reality, he in a world of mysticism and symbolism; he is deeply impressed by his natural environment, every object with him possessing a spiritual life, so that celestial bodies, mountains, rocks, the flora of the earth and the earth itself are to him quite different from what they are to us. The sturdy pine, delicate sapling, fragrant blossom, giant rock and tiny pebble play alike their part in the mystic world of aboriginal man. Many things which tend to nourish life are symbolized by the Zuni as mother. When the Zuni speak of the earth-mother, they symbolize the earth as the source of all vegetal matter which not only nourishes man, but which also supports the

game which gives animal food to man. The earth is mother, the great one to whom they are indebted for sustenance. Ancestors are passing to and fro over the middle plane hidden by the cloud masks. The character of the clouds influences Zuni thought concerning them. If the clouds are white and fleecy the shadow-people are passing about for pleasure. Heavy rain clouds indicate that the shadow-people will water the earth; but there is a proviso. The smoke offerings which produce the clouds may have been sufficient, but this is not all: the daily life, especially of their priests, must be such as not to offend the council of ancestral gods which controls and directs the rain-makers, for, should such be the case, the council would withhold its power, and, in doing so, would leave evil-beings free to use their power, and those who send the cold winds would drive away the cloud masks. Thus the Zuni account for wind clouds.

These people rarely cast their eyes upward without invoking the rain-makers, for in this arid land rain is the prime object of prayer; their water vases are covered in cloud and rain emblems, the water in the vase symbolizing the life or soul of the vase.

The cereals distributed by the personators of ancestral gods are recognized by the intelligent as symbolizing only the blessings which they desire and anticipate, yet each person receives the gift with the same solemnity, and plants it with the same reverence as if it actually came from the god of cereals in the under world. While their gods preserve from evil they also bring evil; they bring plenty or want at harvest time. Thus the gods are supposed to hold within their power all prosperity and all adversity, and by means of ceremonies and many prescribed observances the gods are induced to preserve from evil and bring happiness. Thus the daily life of the Zuni is so controlled that every act of life assumes something of a religious character, and although their religion is fraught with much fear, and although their trials and hardships in the observance of the cult in which all their hopes and ambitions are centered are many and severe, from early childhood to old age, they feel great pride in the long and tedious rituals of their esoteric societies, and real joy in personating their anthropomorphic gods when they join in the rhythm of song and dance.