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Navajo Symbols of the Sun ¹

By FRANC JOHNSON NEWCOMB

THE FIRST circle that was ever scratched on a smooth rock with a bit of flint was, in all probability, a symbol of the sun,—the obvious ideograph of that phenomena of nature which made the deepest impression on the mind of archaic man. This sun circle is one of the simple symbols that, after the manner of certain implements of the stone age, does not belong to any definite region or race but marks a characteristic period of human development among all primates in all countries. To this same category of universal symbolism belong triangles to represent clouds, vertical dotted lines depicting rain, a crescent for the moon, and a jagged line for the lightning. Perhaps even more complicated designs, such as the cross, the square, the spiral, and the swastika should be added to this list, but here we meet with students of symbology who argue that these were borrowed from older and more sophisticated civilizations.

The American Indians of the Southwest had no need to borrow their symbols of the sun. It is indeed rather astonishing that they did not regard the sun as a diety and become sun-worshippers in a land so dominated by the solar disc. But none of the present day Amerinds are worshippers of the sun, although the religious ceremonies of every tribe do contain various prayers and rites dedicated to the sun and the human blessings derived from its rays. The sunrise, the sunset, the equinox, and the eclipse are all included in this comprehensive ritual, but the sun itself is regarded more as a divine miracle than as a god.

In the Navajo legend of creation, the First People, who were the Immortals, carved the sun from a piece of stone. They made it in the shape of a circle, for even in the beginning, the circle seems to have symbolized objects and forces

1. See Sand Painting, frontispiece.

of eternal duration. When it was the right shape, they covered its face with their most precious stone—the clear blue turquoise, marked its forehead with white dawn-light, and lined its chin with the gold of the sunset. Then they added turquoise horns to indicate strength and power, decorated it with prayer plumes, and placed it in the eastern sky. Here it remained stationary, sending out its rays of heat and light ever from one place. This did not prove satisfactory to the First People, for soon the eastern country became a hot barren desert while the western land was always covered with snow. At a general council it was decided that the sun must move across the sky and, in order that it might be endowed with life and the power to move, it must be given a spirit.

Through legend and symbol, all archaic people have attempted to account for the movement of the sun, the moon, and the stars in terms within the periphery of their understanding. They were familiar with the birds, butterflies, and insects which propelled themselves through the air by means of wings, and in consequence, the heavenly bodies were often symbolized as wearing wings or circlets of feathers, to signify their power of traveling through space like the birds. The figure of the Winged Globe mentioned in the Book of Malachi as the “Sun-of-Righteousness with healing on its wings,” is a symbol that has wandered, under various modifications, into every part of the Old World to adorn religious and governmental insignia, statues, coins, and temple frescoes. Students of symbology find surprisingly similar feathered sun-symbols carved on Mayan ruins, incised in the walls of long-abandoned cliff houses, and painted on plaques used in the present day religious ceremonies of our Southwestern Indians.

The Navajo Indians, however, did not add wings to their blue-faced sun. The horns, which it already possessed, were identical with wing power, while the prayer feathers on its head and at the tips of the horns were indicative of movement. But, being a stone object made and placed in the sky

by creatures of the earth, it had no spirit-life or motivating force. All spiritual energy, at this particular period of creation, was supposed to be confined to the beings who lived on the earth. When it was decided that the sun must be given life, Johonohai, who was one of the First People, agreed to die so that his released spiritual energy might belong to the sun. So it came about that the first death on earth started the movement of the greatest heavenly body; the second death gave life to the moon, and each succeeding death added to the number of heavenly bodies that received power and energy to move through space.

In the legend which belongs to the Wind Ceremony, it is told that the lightning serpents carried the spirit of Johonohai to the sun. In the Arrow Chant, the story says that he was a human arrow shot upward from a large black bow. In the Eagle Ceremony he was supposed to have been given wings which carried him to his destination, and in the Shooting Chant he seems to have made use of all three of these agencies. As the legend varies, so do the sand-altars made by the Navajo medicine men. In the Wind Chant we find the blue face of the sun crossed by two serpents; in the Arrow Chant, the spirit stands on the face of the sun, while a shaft of lightning with barbed arrows encircles it; feathers adorn the sun symbol used in the Eagle Ceremony; while the Shooting Chant shows us several variations of the same symbol. But no matter how simple or how elaborate the Navajo Sand-altar-of-the-sun may be, its purpose remains the same. This purpose is to capture some of the radiant energy of the sun for human healing and spiritual benefit, through the medium of religious ritual, painted symbol, and chanted prayer.