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THE RAIN DANCE OF OLD SAN VICENTE

Haldeen Braddy

In the arid wastes of el estado de Coahuila, down Mexico way, there lolls upon the banks of the Rio del Norte the little town of San Vicente. A small, colony-like pueblo upon the face of the timeless and desert earth, San Vicente, sometimes called Old Presidio Fort, is located in the shadowland of the Texas and Mexico boundary. Here the feeble wind blows corkscrew flurries of dust amid the desert plants, dull mesquite and flamboyant cactus; here everywhere vulnerable to the burnished sun lie the brilliant sands of earth, impoverished, dehydrated. To the north there looms the ghostly radiance of the Chisos Mountains, which at twilight mingle with the pink silhouettes of the Sierra del Carmen into a panorama bizarre and incredible. Meanwhile, from the upper sky great clouds have mirrored all day upon the earth beneath battalions of moving shadows. Great waves of shadows have coursed the land from the seminal sky. Thus, in the dry, dead, unmoving, incredibly dehydrated world, San Vicente looks upward for the unseen and as yet unheard high winging of the Thunder Bird.

The rain dance of San Vicente, with its mixed pagan and Christian forms, is of annual occurrence, and the period of prayer lasts some fourteen days, usually from June 2 through June 16. The procedure is somewhat as follows.

The Jefe of the village summons the people for a community ceremony of prayers. Two men carry a niche which is decorated with pink paper-roses, silver Christmas tinsel, pretty leaves, and other gaudy ornaments. In the center of the decorated niche there is a picture of the Virgin Mary and of Jesus Christ. Accompanied by their fellow-worshippers, the two men now go to the fields, kneel with their faces in the dust, set up the niche in the ground, and by various sounds and gesticulations pray to their respective saints. When the niche is afterwards placed in a tree, the Jefe fires six shots from his revolver into the air as a token of faith, love, loyalty, and, more importantly, also as a charm for frightening the Devil away.
After ten or twelve days of prayer, there remain two days of dancing and feasting. To preserve a devout atmosphere, an altar is constructed against the side of the Jefe's house under the porch. This altar is decorated with net curtains, paper flowers, Christmas bells and tinsel, a clock, pages from an old magazine, wild flowers, and a portrait of Christ. Now this device may be envisaged as a final means of banning whatever persisting devils may remain after the ritual of the pistol shots.

The dancers and related personages next enter the setting. The costumes of the dancers, flamingly provocative, are of red cotton cloth. The skirts of these costumes have small tubes of river cane sewn in at the hems, so that when the dancers perform there is always a great fanfare of both movement and sound. The headdresses are composed of pieces of broken mirror, tinfoil, and any other appropriate adornment at hand. The headgear of the Capitanes, however, are more impressive, being composed of bits of mirror and of radiant feathers. These Capitanes carry large gourds embellished with crepe paper of divers hues. Moreover, they carry bows measuring from two to three feet in length. The bow has a hole bored in its center. The purpose of this contrivance is not to discharge the arrow but to make a noise, for when the bow is placed in readiness, the arrow is not discharged but is caught and thus emits a loud twanging sound.

The Capitana begins the ceremony, and she together with la Jovencita dances to the altar, where they stop, snap their fingered bows, and turn to dance again. The steps are uniformly short, and the dance is a kind of one-two, one-two-three step—hops up and down—varied only by side swings from the hips.

It is now that el Viejo comes down from the hills to capture la Jovencita. El Viejo is wicked and aged; his beard is of lechuguilla fiber; he flourishes a snaky whip; and he very probably represents the Devil. La Jovencita is youthful and jocundly beautiful; her face is tinted by the desert dawns; she exhibits a decorative bow; and she is altogether probably both Our Lady and the Life-Force. The impotent wicked would debase the virginal fecund!

But as one body the dancers turn upon el Viejo. They weave a circle round him thrice and otherwise discomfit him with raucous noise of rattling gourds. The Capitan pretends to shoot el Viejo with his bow and arrow. El Viejo falls, and the dancers throw their bows and gourds at him. Thus is the Devil exorcised; thus is la Jovencita saved. Amid the mingled music of violin, guitar, and tambourine, the performers...
now jog into the magic ring and reclaim their bows and gourds which they have symbolically smeared with the blood of the Old Man. As a nearby drum joins the approaching crescendo, the dancers with mincing steps triumphantly install la Jovencita upon the symbolic altar.

Throughout the following night there is the sound of revelry, of festival with merriment, and feasting. The feast consists of frijoles, tortillas, and fritada; the merriment is also of the carnal kind.

Thus the rain dance of San Vicente is a mixture of Indian and Christian rites. The occasion roughly corresponds with the honoring of el Día de Corpus Christi, and such figures as the altar and especially Jesus and Mary display an obvious Christian influence. On the other hand, the dance, the bow-and-arrow ritual, the rain prayers, and the decorative niche suggest an origin earlier and more native. It remains to be noted that the niche resides in the tree until it rains, and when there is rainfall, it is returned to the Jefe’s custody. Following the dancing here described, it rained on the afternoon of June 16!

There almost seem prescient omens in the dark, serious faces of the dancers. For as the gathering clouds now stampede the earth with shadows, old San Vicente—“tee-tiny” waif of the desert—looks up expectantly and, as the incantations begin, hears already—from howsoever altar—the mighty winging of the Thunder Bird.