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The Navajo "Male Mountain Chant" Once More Resounds Before the Assembled Tribes

By DANE RUDHYAR

AFTER a long silence of forty years the "Male Mountain Chant," most sacred of the Navajo ceremonials, was performed this year to celebrate the first Great Tribal Fair to which representatives of the 50,000 Navajos scattered through Arizona and northeastern New Mexico came—numbering around seven thousand. To this gathering, also, the oldest and most famous of the medicine men gave the honor of their presence, participating in the sacred ritual, which gave all the evidences of being one of the most ancient known to these descendants of old Turanian stock. Turanian indeed are these proud, strong featured men who still recall in legend their eastward wanderings from beyond the seas down to this American land, where rises their sacred mountain, the Great Hogan Mountain, which stopped their exodus.

Like other Navajo rituals, the "Male Mountain Chant" lasted nine days; but it was only during the last two nights that the public was allowed to witness the ceremonies. Actually the first of these nights was mostly in the nature of a rehearsal for the last and ninth night, which we shall now describe. It occurred on September 18, a Sunday.

During the afternoon, and also during the two preceding afternoons, people had gathered in a stadium to witness various Navajo performances very much in the general spirit of a fair, and climaxing on Sunday afternoon with a spirited rodeo. Nearby a number of exhibits aimed at showing to the incoming tribesmen the best types of products, agricultural and artistic, which were brought forth in various sections of their land—prizes being given in the traditional manner of fairs.

The last stadium performance ended Sunday at 9:30 p.m. and people began to move toward the Navajo camping

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grounds half a mile away beyond a dry arroyo. Through the darkness camp fires could be seen, shivering glows in the clear cold night filled with stars. Silent Navajos flowed in groups toward the camp, while white men and women, a number of them with children, rushed in cars or on foot to get the best places within a dim circular space bounded by a low wall of intertwined piñon branches, outside of which small fires burnt showing uncertainly the outlines of covered wagons and tents. The circle had its entrance to the east, and its center—or was it rather one of the focus of an ellipse reproducing intuitively the earth’s orbit?—was occupied by huge logs piled in cone formation in readiness for the flame. Soon several thousand Navajos and a couple of hundred Whites had gathered in concentric rows, about twenty or more persons deep crowded elbow to elbow.

...And now the ceremony begins. Fire is brought to the logs. Flames burst out, dancing wildly as the north wind blows them. Two-thirds of the spectators have bent to the soil, sitting or squatting in varied positions. The other third stand back of them. Amazing silence reigns for such a crowd. Only the voices of a few Whites can be heard, proffering unnecessary comments.

A half-hour passes. The flames have also made the big logs squat on the ground. And now the voices of the medicine men begin to be heard. Ceremonies have been performed in the sacred hogan, just south of the circular space. It is said that the whole ritual is one of purification from evil spirits, but deeper still meanings arise in the mind as the various scenes of the ceremony unfold through the night.

Suddenly, a dozen or more Navajos, their almost naked lean bodies painted white, rush through the entrance of the circle toward the fire. Frenetically, humorously, panther-like in their motions, they dance around the flames, brandishing slender wands tipped with eagle feathers. They play with the fire, they chase, with their wands, sparks flying from the burning logs. Some ride the wands, like witches’ broomsticks. Indeed, the wild figures would seem like
demons conjured by medieval imaginations were it not for that dominant note of humor, almost fun, to which the spectators respond by sporadic laughter.

Still running, they scatter one after another through the entrance, and a long pause ensues, during which the public moves and shifts like billowing waves. Then, once more the painted figures rush in with strange cries, this time carrying bundles of dry weeds or twigs which they light at the fire. With these they run, whirling between the fire and the squatting crowd, sparks of the burning twigs flying in all directions. They pursue one another. Like big, wild children they seem to try to burn each other, retaliating, running ceaselessly, at time tripping and falling, rousing laughter from the crowd. One, relighting his bundle at the flames, races westward and, reaching the first line of spectators, throws the flaming bundle above and beyond the circle of people; another runs north, another south, still another east—each making his fiery throw powerfully. Then, one by one, the dancers rush off through the opening in the thick circle of people. The opening is so narrow that a Navajo, who acts as guard, has to point to it with a powerful flashlight!

Again an intermission—a long one—during which people raise themselves from the ground and move about. It is not far from midnight and the ranks of the crowd begin to thin. They will continue to do so throughout the night, many Indians lying here and there on the ground, their heads often resting on the walls of piñon branches outlining the sacred circle. Small fires are lit or re-lit, still within this circle, around which Indians gather to warm themselves. And off and on, sturdy Navajos carry to the central pyre huge logs, small trees, indeed, just as found lying on the mesas, clouds of sparks flying as the heavy trunks strike the huge burning mass.

These fire dances must be a prelude to the ceremony which, in its essence, seems to be a dramatic call to the life-power that is in the fire and in all flaming lives—including
the lives of men. As the ceremony is resumed a dozen of men led by a medicine man and including two and later more masked personages carrying symbolical raiments over their painted bodies, file in through the entrance and march ritualistically around the fire, chanting. This slow dancing around the fire after entering the circle in Indian file and this chanting repeat themselves in various ways, throughout the night. Scene after scene follow each other. Each introduces certain characters symbolically dressed. After the chanting and the slow dancing around the fire end at the west of the circle, all but the especially dressed symbolical figures squat on the ground, going on with their chanting and beating with their hands the rhythm while the symbolical figures perform animated dances. As the dances end, the dancers walk through the circle, soon followed by the other participants who wear no special costumes, but a variety of trousers, blouses, and even old overcoats.

To understand adequately the symbolism of these successive scenes and of the dances featured in each is probably impossible for any but a Navajo trained in the sacred lore of the tribe. Even the costumes offer but little help to the spectator, whose mind becomes slowly saturated with this long succession of movements and with the constant reiteration of a hypnotic kind of chanting, probably the most archaic one can hear in North America and far antedating most of the usual songs of the Pueblo Indians.

Nevertheless a general sequence is easily discernible and some scenes stand out vividly in one's memory. A pattern of development also, according to which a succession of two or three scenes seems to be repeated twice and a motive, shown at the beginning of the ritual, returns toward the close of it—particularly the dance of the sun-god and sun-goddess. This dance is a remarkable one: the two figures, man and woman (in one instance at least the woman was impersonated by a man) are sumptuously dressed and carry on their backs the disc of the sun: They spring up in the air with high steps while the medicine men
squatting at the westermost point of the circle intone the strangely monotonous chant almost entirely sung on two notes at the interval of a fourth. As the chant ends, the voices drop in a peculiar manner, recalling exactly the effect of a phonograph record when the electric current is turned off. This occurs at the end of every chant during the night. The voices ring unaccompanied except, at times, by heavy thuds, produced by striking an empty basket, scanning the steps of the dancers. All dances, beside the slow ritual around the fire, are performed west of the central fire.

The dance of the sun-god and goddess opens the main part of the ritual. Throughout the whole ceremony the symbolism of the even numbers prevails—which links it with the Chinese trend of symbolism. Two, four, six are the outstanding numbers. This is a ritual to release the potency of the universal life-force—and this potency can only become actual through the interplay of two polarities. Thus at first, the god and goddess face each other and weave patterns of steps, changing places and in every way symbolizing the interplay of two active principles—active, because the steps of the goddess are as powerful and high as those of the god;—a sharp contrast to the Pueblo Indian dances where women usually represent a purely passive earth-principle.

The scenes which follow bring the same ritual around the fire, the same intonation of the chant with different words, and two male figures whose costumes vary slightly for each scene, the main variation being in the symbolical wooden objects they carry. The two most striking of these sacred objects are: first, two figures each made of two downpointing triangles (one under the other) with colored ribbons attached to them. Each dancer carries one of these figures in each hand. They dance facing one another. They dance to the fire, presenting the symbolical figures to its flames, as if asking the central fire of the universe to pour power into these symbols of descent of energy.
The other outstanding symbol is constituted by jointed narrow pieces of wood held by two handles (one in each hand) and which open jerkily. As they open like springs in lozenge patterns the effect is one of sudden release, which may be linked, perhaps with the lightning, perhaps with the striking rattlesnake. More generally these sacred objects—which are used in several Navajo ceremonies—must symbolize the release of the magic power of life, the "manna" known under different names to all archaic races. Small eagle feathers adorn the ends of the wooden sticks, relating them still more to solar worship. Each dancer carries one of these objects, opening and closing them with sudden jerks, as they dance facing each other and also facing the fire.

After their several appearances, a woman dancer who, as a small figure, undoubtedly impersonates a young virgin—though she does not seem a very young girl—comes into the scenes. Her elaborate costume with flying ribbons brings to one's mind that of the "Bride of Montezuma" in the best of the Matachines ceremonies. First, she dances facing one of the male personages that had appeared before, dances with high, powerful steps. In another scene she comes along in the midst of the line formed by the medicine men. One of them carries on a flat basket, the symbol of a sun-disc, to which are attached four feathers in the pattern of a cross. When the west of the circle is reached—the place of all dances—one medicine man on the ground seems to hold the sun-disc vertically and the girl faces it—standing east of it—and dances to it with the same kind of high steps which seem to spring from the earth as from a springboard. While she dances, the sun-disc is supposed to move of its own power in answer to the dance. This dance obviously represents the interplay of sacred energies between the solar deity and his consecrated virgin-priestess.

The sequence of the preceding scenes is repeated twice, perhaps with variations hardly noticeable in the semi-darkness only lit by the central fire to which attendants add
intermittently huge logs, and whose flames release a pungent smoke burning the eyes. Then comes what remains in one’s memory as the most sacred moment of the ceremony. Six medicine men, most of them old and with voices shaky with age, file through the entrance. Though they wear but composite everyday clothes a noble dignity pervades them. Carrying small symbolical offerings, like small piñon branches and a roll of some substance which could not be clearly seen, they move ritualistically around the fire chanting a chant varying from the hypnotic tune which dominated so long the ceremony. They are old; they are the wisdom of the race. They come to the central fire of all life for strength, power, and knowledge. With great simplicity and poignant devotion they commune in their souls with the flame.

Once more they come, each now carrying flat in his hand a kind of halo made of wooden spikes mounted on a simple armature. Circling around the fire, to the north, they reach the sacred place of dances in the west. They form two lines of three along the east-west axis and at the sound of a new and haunting chant they perform a poignantly beautiful ritual of initiation. They have received the central flame in their noble souls; now they crown each other with the solar halo which consecrates them solar beings, true “celestials” in the archaic Chinese meaning of this term—“Sons of God.”

Each in turn steps slowly toward his polar opposite facing him and, while uttering a strange cry—the cry of some sacred animal dedicated to the sun, perhaps akin to the Egyptian jackal which was also consecrated to the sun—places the solar crown upon the head of the medicine man who is his spiritual opposite in the ritual of the universal life-force. Six times the gestures are repeated. Six times the cries of consecration resound—each time four short cries which strangely pierce the night. And slowly, wearing lightly fastened upon their ancient heads the swaying solar crowns (in which some people see symbols of the rainbow which links heaven and earth), the consecrated ones vanish in the darkness.
A new scene brings forth a young boy who dances with other personages. Two lean dancers also appear carrying the transformed symbols made of two down-pointing triangles,—and later on four dancers. The symbols have grown very tall. The two triangular shapes are mounted now upon long sticks of wood, still decorated with colored ribbons flowing with the wind. Now that the tribe has become blessed with power through the consecration and initiation of its wise men, the downpour of solar energy—symbolized by the down-pointed triangles—is magnified. The triangles are wafted to and fro toward the fire. The chants of the medicine men become more complex, taking in new tones.

The boy dancer symbolizes, probably, the new birth of power after the initiation. A new generation of wisdom has arisen. The "Christ-child within the heart"—in Christian Gnostic parlance—is growing into boyhood. And as all growth brings polarity into play, a new scene brings forth two boys of the same age and size who dance face to face, as their elders have done before them.

About this time a scene of great power is also enacted. The six medicine men file in, chanting, and gather together in a circle, shoulder touching shoulder, their backs to the public. A sense of intense concentration emanates from them. Then they break the magic group and one of them searches the crowd for someone to act in the rite. A man is picked, who joins the remaining medicine men, while his sponsor runs to the fire and enkindles two large sticks he carries in his right hand. The sticks are brought in front of the man selected for the purification. Sparks fall from the burning sticks in a small shower. The man places his hands in this shower of fire and rubs them as if washing them under a water faucet. Purification by fire! An ancient ritual which no white man present seems ever to have witnessed. The man, unharmed, leaves the circle accompanied by the medicine men.
The cycle of the ceremony begins to close. The girl dancer once more dances to the sun-disc and also with a male figure, both using the spring-like symbol above-mentioned. A mature woman is also introduced in another scene, dancing with one of the costumed male figures. The life-energy is shown pervading the entire tribe. One of the last scenes pictures a hunter with a bow and arrow chasing unseen prey. He seems like a clown, shooting arrows at lighted sparks, at the beams of powerful flashlights spectators direct toward him—perhaps an impersonation of the spirit of humor, so strong among these Indians. And, while he does this, medicine men gather again in their concentration grouping. Their magic makes a small yucca plant grow into a full plant; then after further concentration a flower appears—lastly a sort of large fruit which the bowman gives jokingly to an old squaw. And as the medicine men file away the yucca plant seems to have returned to its prior state. Magic? Hypnotism? Who can tell?

Then, before the ritual ends, the god and goddess who opened it reappear in an apparently similar dance. The cycle is closed. A couple of more scenes, which seem mostly repetitions of what had come before, nearly complete the ceremony while in the east dawn fringes the mountains with nascent light.

By this time the circle of spectators has considerably diminished. A small number of whites mix with a few hundreds of Navajos in the circle. Outside of it groups of Indians cluster around small fires which warm the chilly dawn, while the grounds are littered with sleeping figures, bundled in blankets, their heads resting on small hard pillows in the dust. At the extreme west of the circle the six old medicine men chant, still uninterruptedly, strange songs including a sort of monotonous bass and a haunting melody, like a lullaby. As one finishes singing the melody, at once another starts it again. It goes on and on, as the sky grows rapturous with pale blue mixed with light green, as if hidden behind a veil of translucent, glowing turquoises.
Nearly an hour passes, and as the sun is about to emerge from behind the hills, the medicine men reappear, each carrying the top parts of small piñon trees to which dawn is attached. They circle around the fire. They bring the small trunk to their faces, as if moistening it with their lips, directing it one side to the north, then to all other directions of space, while uttering the strange jackal cries—this after a conversation with a man coming from the west carrying a pair of shoes in his hands; an unexplained symbol. Finally the medicine men firmly put the piñon branches in their mouths as if forcing them down; and they turn heavily upon their feet, as if they were screwing themselves and the trees into the earth: the evergreen trees, symbols of the life that knows no end, of the ever renewed sun now conquering once more the skies, pouring its magic power over an earth made holy and fruitful by the ritual wisdom of his consecrated "Children."

Abstraction

By Eugenia Pope Pool

My world is not today—an hour—
Nor tomorrow—but height where I
Can face the timeless measure of the moon
And space that circles worlds
That fancy cannot trace
And silence that binds them with a web
Stronger than Eternity's embrace.