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War Poems of the Papago Indians

By RUTH MURRAY UNDERHILL

THE PAPAGOS, of the southern Arizona desert, have always been a peaceful people, adapted to the slow rhythm of tilling the earth and of gathering food from the roots and the cacti and the dwarf trees of their majestically barren land. War, to them, was not only unwelcome, it was abhorrent. Yet, they had to fight. In the hills, to the north and east of them, lived the Apache, who were always hungry and who swooped down periodically on the peaceful farmers:

So that, when you came out of your house at dawn, you never knew but an Apache would jump off the roof yelling.

Tradition calls the Papagos good fighters. But the loathing for war must have been deep in them, as in many of the Southwest peoples, for all their customs and ceremonies seem bent on minimizing martial glamor and martial rewards. They had no system of battle honors: the warrior wore no insignia and was never asked to boast of his exploits. Of course he took no land. The Papagos had no idea that any land was eligible for residence except their own desert. But also, he took no booty and no captives. All possessions of the enemy were thought to be imbued with an evil magic and to touch them might bring death. Therefore even the warrior dying on the field of battle was dangerous to his friends, since he had touched the enemy, and he must be burned immediately. The man who had killed an enemy was dangerous and, instead of being received with honor, must go through a long period of purification before he could return to the circle of his people.

Yet, the Papagos had war poetry which is moving and even passionate. But it rarely mentions fighting. Its burden is the call to duty; the arduous march to the enemy's country; the prayer for power and the reward of valor. But

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this reward has nothing to do with conquest or with glory. It is conceived in the terms of a farmer of the Southwest who sees only one supreme blessing—rain. To the Papago, the taking of a scalp brought rain, and a raid into the enemy's country, if it were to bring any satisfaction, must be thought of as pleasing the supernaturals, so that they caused the corn to grow.

This is the consummation celebrated in the songs and speeches offered before war. The fragments presented here were taken down in Papago from the ceremonialists who had inherited them, and they are translated as accurately as the change of construction would allow. The length of line could not always be kept but the proportion of long and short is the same. Space has dictated the omission of some of that repetitious matter which, to the white man, slows the movement of the thought, while, to the Indian, it is a ceremonial requisite.

THE WAR PRIEST INCITES HIS PEOPLE TO BATTLE

What I say to you now
I have said yonder, at the village that we built.
I have told the old men,
I have told the old women,
I have told the children,
I have told the women.

Is my food so much to me
That I should eat what I have
And all day sit idle?
Is my drink so much to me
That I should take the sweet water poured out
And all day sit idle?
Is my wife so much to me
That I should gaze upon her
And all day sit idle?
Is my child so much to me
That I should hold it in my arms
And all day sit idle?

It was uncontrollable, my desire.
 It was the dizziness of war.
 I ground it to powder
 And therewith I painted my face.
 It was the madness of war.
 I tore it to shreds
 And therewith tied my hair in a war knot.

Then did I hold firm my well-covering shield
 And my hard-striking club.
 Then did I hold firm my well-strung bow
 And my smooth, straight-flying arrow.
 To me did I draw my far striding sandals
 And fast I tied them.

Over the flat land did I then go striding.
 Over the seated stones did I then go stumbling.
 Under the trees in the ditches did I then go stooping.
 Through the trees on the high ground did I go thrusting.
 Through the mountain gullies did I go brushing quickly.

In four halts did I reach
 (Not the enemy, be it observed but)
 The shining white eagle, my guardian.
 Then kindly to me he felt
 And brought out his white crystal.
 Our enemy mountains it made white as with moonlight
 And all around them I went striding.

Our enemy waters it made white as with moonlight
 And all around them I went striding.

There did I seize and pull up and wrap tight
 Those things which were my enemy's.
 All kinds of seeds and beautiful clouds and beautiful winds.
 Then came forth a thick stalk
 And a thick tassel
 And the undying seed did ripen.

Thus did I do on behalf of you, my people.
 Thus should you also think and desire,
 All you, my kinsmen.

This speech, with its passionate yearning toward the achievement which makes the earth bring forth, is typical.

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There follows an account of a war party, with the journey in vivid detail and the fighting gulped down by one brutal sentence at the end. During the journey, the war leader sits alone at night, while his men sleep and one by one the scouts come in to report.

Then went the youth, and, sometime in the night,
Came to me, stepping lightly.
Then I said: "How goes it?"

(The scout replied)

"The outspread earth spreads, silent.
The seated rocks sit silent.
The standing trees stand silent.
The running beasts run silent."
Then I said:
"Come now, make ready my young men."
Then I stood.
And I made the war speech.

The dawn rushed upon us.
We waited no more.
We rushed in.
We made an end.

So much for the fighting, which the song leaves as untouched as though it were enemy property. Now come some of the most impressive of the rituals, recited to the hero who has taken a scalp, by his ceremonial guardian. The hero must remain aloof from human beings for sixteen days.

Yonder, lo you see,
A solitary tree stand, dripping shadow.
There you seat yourself.
Your wife must not come near and look upon you.
Your child must not come near and look upon you.
Thus it must be with you.

In his retreat the hero must fast, almost to starvation because, in that state, he will dream and receive power. Men dreaded this vigil, even more than the hardships of war and most appropriate are the lines with which the guardian terminated each of his speeches:

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Verily, who desires this?
Do not you desire it?
Then learn to endure hardship.

The guardian bound up the long black hair of his charge, as if it were for war, saying:

It was a twisting wind.
With it, I knotted your hair at the back of your neck,
Twisting it as the wind twists.

Later, he brought the half gourd of water, which might only be drunk twice a day, at sunrise and sunset. Before receiving his first sip, the hero might have walked all day, home from the enemy country without touching a drop. To his delirious relief, a mouthful of lukewarm water typified not only the intoxication of war but the height of desire.

Within my bowl there lies
Dazzling dizziness,
Bubbling drunkenness.
Great whirlwinds, upside down, above us,
A great eagle heart,
A great hawk heart,
A great bear heart,
A great twisting wind—
All these have gathered here
And live within my bowl.

Now you will drink it.

The sixteen days of isolation ended. Meanwhile, the people had danced nightly about the scalp, singing:

A cactus plant had a flower
The little thing died,
The little thing died.

Poor crow,
Hanging there!
Poor crow!

and just one song so fierce that it explains what the Papagos meant when they sang of the "black madness of war" and strove to be possessed of it.

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Kill the Apache!
Kill the Apache!
Dry the skin!
Dry the skin!
Soften it!
Soften it!
I am happy with it.
A-a-a-a-h!

But there are still some Apaches left!

The night of final lustration came and the warrior's weapons were purified by dancers who leaped upon them around the fire while old men sang:

Sitting with my back against the dawn,
I got drunk, my younger brothers.
The white wind met me and it drove me mad.

Then ancient warriors smoked over the new hero and his guardian told symbolically of victory:

Thus did I wreak ill on my enemy
By many devices.
Did cause him, fighting, to become like a ghost
And to fall asleep.
Thus did I wreck ill on my enemy.

Thus did I wreak ill on my enemy.
Those with whom he went about and talked
I did cause him to hate.
Becoming like a ghost, falling asleep.
Thus did I wreak ill on my enemy.

Thus did I wreak ill on my enemy.
The child whom he caressed,
I did cause him to hate.
The wife with whom he lay, I did cause him to hate,
Becoming like a ghost, falling asleep.
Verily it was this which I desired.

From the east then, white blasts rushed.
From the west then black blasts rushed.
From both sides, rushing together,
They lashed one another.
Beneath the rain I went (in the enemy's land)

I seized my women (whom he had captured
I seized my children.

Then came I back to that land.
I stood upon it and stood firm.
I sat upon it *and sat still.*

Pueblo in Moonlight (Zuñi)

By KATHERINE KENNEDY

*These were a people
to the heart not unremembered:*

In the moonlight
the Pueblo lies sleeping,
tier upon tier of silence
housed in clay.

Bright chiaroscuros
of silver and black
shadow the Plaza . . .

On the roof of the Kiva
the ladder slants
toward the morningstar:
Moy'a'clunata.

*O ghostly drums
loud in the silence,
O forgotten voices
chanting the old cry:*

*"Where are you, our Sky Fathers?
Where are you, our Sky Mothers?"*

Beyond the summit
of Corn mountain
a coyote howls . . .

Then silence again
louder than drums,
waiting . . .