

A LECTURE ON SERPENT RITUAL

By A. Warburg

Es ist ein altes Buch zu blättern,
Athen-Oraibi, alles Vettern.

The observations on which this lecture is based were collected in the course of a journey to the Pueblo Indians made twenty-seven years ago.¹ I must warn you that I have not been able to revive and correct my old memories in such a way as to give you an adequate introduction to the psychology of the American Indians. Moreover, the impressions I gained were bound to be superficial even at that time because I had no command of the language of the tribes. Nor could a journey limited to a few months produce any really profound impressions, and if these have become even more vague in the interim I cannot promise you more than a series of reflections on those distant memories. I do so in the hope that the direct evidence of the pictures may carry you beyond my words, and give you some idea of a civilization which is dying out, and of a question which is of such paramount importance in our study of civilization in general:—What elements are we entitled to call the essential characteristics of primitive paganism?

In the first place I shall deal with the rational (that is, architectonic) element in the culture of the Pueblos:—the structure of their houses with some examples of their applied art. In the ornamentation of earthenware we shall come upon the fundamental problem of religious symbolism. A drawing which I acquired from an Indian (Pl. 44b) proves that what appears to be purely decorative ornament must in fact be interpreted symbolically. One of the basic elements of cosmological imagery—the universe conceived in the form of a house—is united in this drawing with an irrational animal conception, a serpent, which appears as an enigmatic and awe-inspiring demon.

In the second place I shall speak of the masked dance of the Indians, which we shall study first as a pure animal dance, then as a dance associated with the cult of the tree, and finally as a dance with live serpents.

A glance at similar phenomena in pagan Europe will eventually bring us to the question: to what extent can these remnants of pagan cosmology still obtaining among the Pueblo Indians help us to understand the evolution from primitive paganism, through the highly-developed pagan culture of classical antiquity, down to modern civilized man?

* * *

We must exercise extreme caution in our attempt to interpret the religious

¹ The lecture was delivered in German to a non-professional audience on 25th April, 1923, and was not intended for publication. Its original title was: "Reminiscences from a Journey to the Pueblo Indians." As the journey took place in 1896, and as the lecture was meant to convey the author's personal experience, no attempt has been made by the editors to bring the argument into line with more recent research.

psychology of the Pueblo Indian. The evidence has been contaminated. Several layers of culture have been superimposed. The basic culture of the native Americans was subjected to Catholic-Spanish education, which suffered a violent set-back at the end of the seventeenth century, revived at a later date, but was never officially re-instated in the villages of the Mokis. And then there came the last layer—the educational system of North America. Yet, when we come to study more closely the religious life of the Pueblos, we shall recognise at least one purely objective and relatively permanent geographical factor which had a formative influence on religion—the scarcity of water in the country. For until the railway-tracks penetrated to the settlements, lack of water and the need for it gave rise to magic practices such as are adopted in primitive pagan civilizations all over the world in order to coerce the hostile forces of nature. Scarcity of water taught people the arts of prayer and necromancy.

“The inhabitants of these regions in pre-historic and historic times have made their home on a tract of land to which Nature has not on the whole been bountiful. Apart from the narrow valley in the north-east through which the Rio Grande del Norte flows on its way to the Gulf of Mexico the country is mainly table-land—extensive, horizontal deposits of limestone or tertiary rock, forming high, level plateaus with steep escarpments (compared in the language of the district with tables—*mesas*). On the other hand the ground is deeply seared by water-courses, with the result that ravines or *cañons* occur, sometimes a thousand feet deep with walls almost vertical at the top, as if they had been cut out with a saw... For the greater part of the year there is no rain or moisture in the plateau-country and the majority of the cañons are completely dried up; only in the period when the snow melts or during the brief rainy season a considerable body of water rushes down the bare ravines.”¹

In the north-western part of the plateau, in Colorado, are the so-called cliff-villages, i. e. dwellings now abandoned, which are built in the clefts of the rocks. The eastern group consists of about eighteen villages, which are fairly easily accessible from Santa Fé and Albuquerque. The Zuñi villages, which are of especial importance, lie farther to the south-west, and can be reached from Fort Wingate in a day. The most difficult of access, and therefore the ones which show the older features in their purest form, are the villages of the Mokis—six all told—which are erected on three parallel ridges of rock. The rock village furthest west is Oraibi, of which I shall have something more to say.

Right in the midst, in the plain-country, lies the Mexican settlement of Santa Fé, the capital of New Mexico, which came under the rule of the United States only after a grim struggle that continued even down to the last century. From Santa Fé and from the neighbouring town of Albuquerque the majority of the eastern Pueblo villages can be reached without much difficulty.

Near Albuquerque is the village of Laguna which, though it does not lie so high as the others, is nevertheless a very good example of a pueblo

¹ E. Schmidt, *Vorgeschichte Nordamerikas im Gebiet der Vereinigten Staaten*, 1894.

settlement. The village proper lies on the other side of the railway-track which connects Atchison with Topica and Santa Fé; the European settlement in the plain abuts on the railway-station. The native village consists of two-storeyed houses entered from above by means of a ladder, there being no door below. This type of house was probably intended in the first place as a means of defence against attack; the Pueblo Indians have thus produced a cross between a dwelling-place and a fortress; it is typical of their civilization and probably goes back to pre-historic times in America. The houses are built in tiers, a second or even a third dwelling of rectangular shape resting upon the first.

In the interior of such houses (Pl. 45f) dolls are suspended—not ordinary children's dolls; they hang there rather like the figures of saints in Roman Catholic farm-houses. They are called kachina dolls, faithful images of the masked dancers who act as demonic mediators between man and the natural forces in the ceremonies which accompany the yearly round of activities and are among the most typical and remarkable features of this religion of hunters and peasants. On the wall appears a symbol of the intruding American civilization, the broom.

But essentially a product of craftsmanship, serving at once a practical and a religious end, is the clay vessel used for carrying the necessary but scanty supply of water (Pl. 44f). It is typical of the drawing on such vessels that a kind of heraldic skeleton of natural forms is represented. A bird is dissected into its essential component parts so that it appears as a heraldic abstraction. It becomes a hieroglyph, not meant simply as a picture to look at but rather as something to be read—an intermediary stage between image and sign, between realistic representation and script.

In the mythology of the Indians the bird plays an important part which will be familiar to all who know the Leather-stocking Tales. Apart from the fact that it is revered like any animal as an imaginary ancestor, as a totem, the bird is a special object of worship in connection with the burial-cult. It would even appear that in prehistoric times a rapacious soul-bird was one of the essential mythical figures conjured up by the imagination of the Sikyatki. The bird owes its place in idolatrous worship to its feathers. The Indians use, as a special vehicle for transmitting their prayers, small sticks called *bahos*, which have feathers attached to them and are placed before fetish altars and planted on graves. Indians who were asked about this practice offered the plausible explanation that the feathers acted as wings to bear requests and wishes to the demonic forces of nature.

There can be no doubt that the modern pottery of the Pueblos bears traces of the influence of mediaeval Spanish workmanship, which was introduced in the sixteenth century. On the other hand the excavations of Fewkes¹ have shown conclusively that quite independently of Spanish influence an older technique existed, involving the heraldic bird-motives together with the serpent, which, in the Moki religion as in all heathen cults, is specially revered as a potent symbol.

¹ "Expedition to Arizona in 1895" in *American Ethnology*, 1895-96, Pt. II, published *Seventeenth Annual Report of the Bureau of* in 1898.

The serpent still appears coiled and with feathered head on the bottom of modern vessels, just as Fewkes found it on prehistoric specimens; on four ridges round the rim we see small figures of animals. As we know from research into Indian mysteries these animals, for example the frog and the spider, represent the points of the compass, and the vessels were placed before the fetish in the kiva or underground temple. Here the serpent, as the symbol of lightning, is the centre of worship.

In my hotel in Santa Fé an Indian, Cleo Jurino, and his son Anacleto Jurino, consented after some demur to do some coloured crayon drawings for me, representing their conception of the cosmos. The father, Cleo, was one of the priests and painters of the kiva in Cochiti. The drawing (Pl. 44b) showed the snake as a weather-god, without feathers, but otherwise drawn exactly like the figure on the vase, with a sharp-pointed tongue in the shape of an arrow. The roof of the world-house has a terraced gable. Above the wall stretches the rainbow, and rain, represented by short strokes, streams from the massed clouds below. In the middle, as master of the cosmic house of the thunderstorm (*Gewitterweltenhaus*), is the fetish, *yaya* or *yerrick*.¹

Before such paintings as this the pious Indian evokes the storm with its blessing of rain by the practice of his magic arts, of which the most astounding is the juggling with live serpents of a venomous species. For, as we can see from Jurino's drawing, the snake's formal resemblance to the lightning establishes between both the relation of magic affinity.

I had been anxious to see the Indians under the direct influence of official Catholicism, and a fortunate circumstance gave me the opportunity I needed. Father Juillard, the Catholic priest whom I had met at New Year 1895 while watching a Mexican Matachines-dance, was going on a round of inspection, and I was able to accompany him as far as the romantic village of Acoma.

We travelled for about six hours through a wilderness of gorse till we sighted the village. It rose from a sea of rocks like a Heligoland in the midst of a sandy waste. Before we reached the foot of the rocks the bells had begun to toll in honour of the priest. A crowd of brightly-clad redskins ran swiftly down the path to take our baggage. The carriages had to wait below, which proved to be very unfortunate; for the Indians stole a cask of wine which had been given to the priest by the nuns of Bernalillo. We were first of all received with the utmost respect by the *Governador*—they still use Spanish names for the ruling chiefs of the villages. He put the priest's hand to his mouth and made a kind of hissing noise as though he were drawing in the exhalation of his guest in token of reverential greeting. In company with the drivers we were taken to the main room of the chief's dwelling, and at the priest's invitation I promised to assist at Mass on the following morning.

The Indians are standing outside the door of the church (Pl. 45b). It is

¹ Explanation of figures in the drawing, as given by Cleo Jurino :

1. House of the fetish
2. The rainbow
3. The fetish
4. The white clouds
5. The rain clouds.

6. Rain.

7. Lightning

10. "The Water Serpent"

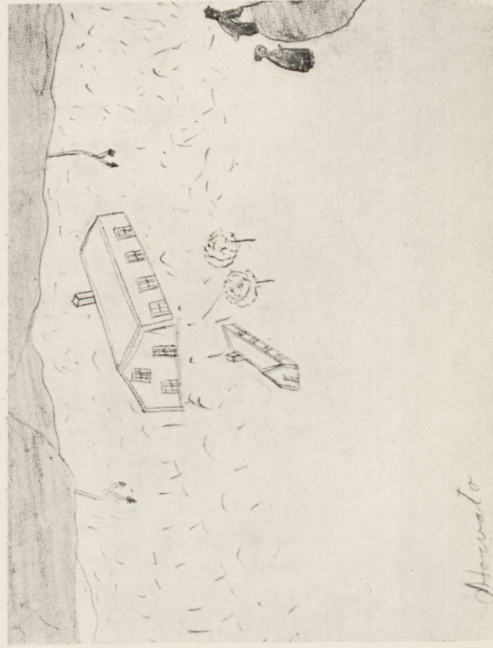
11. The four bolts mean that anybody approaching the serpent who does not tell the truth will fall down dead before you can count four.



a—Granary with Ladder (p. 281)



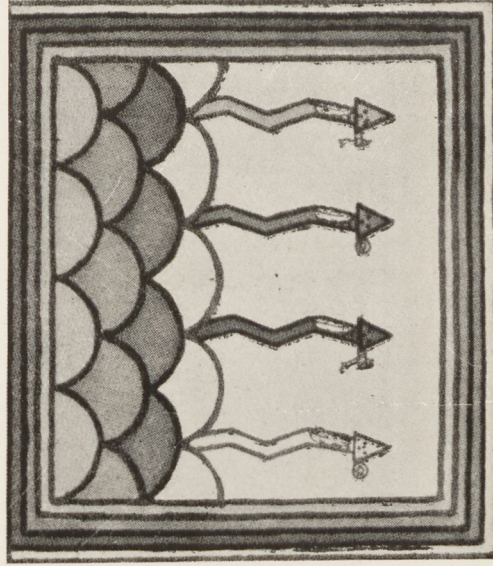
b—Cleo Jurino, Cosmological Drawing (p. 280)



d—Drawing by Indian Schoolboy, with Lightning in the Shape of Serpents (p. 292)



e—Acoma, Interior of Church with Cosmological Ornament (p. 281)



e—Moki Sand Painting, after *Journal of Americ. Ethnol. and Archaeol.* 1894, p. 18 (p. 287)



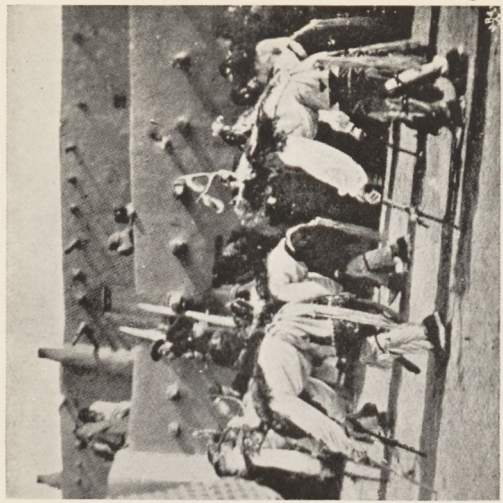
f—Girl from Laguna, carrying Water (p. 279)



a—Walpi, View of the Village (p. 284)



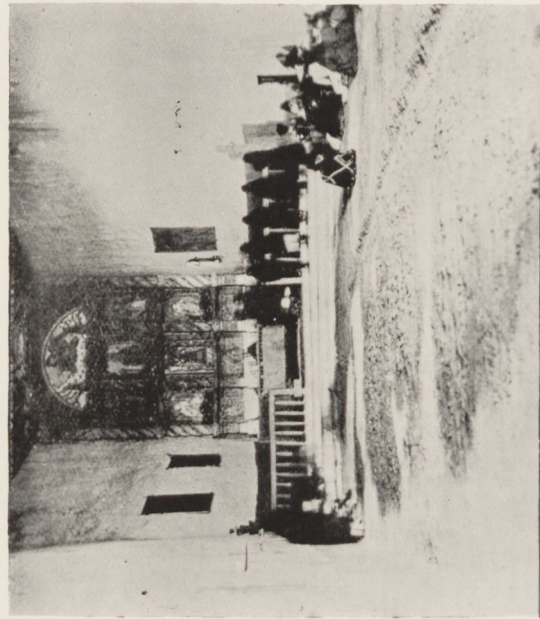
b—Acoma, Indians Standing before Church Door (p. 280)



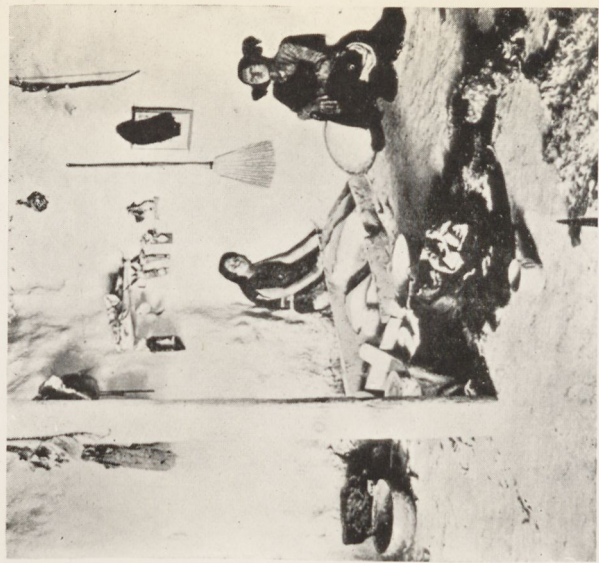
c—San Ildefonso, Antelope Dance (p. 282)



d—Walpi, Village Street (p. 284)



e—Acoma, Interior of Church with Baroque Altar (p. 281)



f—Oraibi, Interior of House, Woman baking Bread (p. 279)

no easy matter to induce them to go in. They have to be summoned by shouting loudly down the three parallel streets of the village—a duty performed by the chief himself. At last all the Indians are assembled.

They are clad in colourful woollen garments, which are woven in the open air by the women-folk of nomadic Indian tribes, though the Pueblos themselves also make them. These costumes are ornamented in white, red and blue and produce a most picturesque effect.

In the interior of the church there is a regular little baroque altar with figures of the Saints (Pl. 45e). The priest, not understanding a word of the Indians' language, had to have an interpreter to translate sentence by sentence during Mass—and the interpreter could have said just what he liked.

During the service I noticed that the wall was covered with pagan cosmological symbols, executed in the same style as the drawings of Cleo Jurino. The church of Laguna is likewise covered with such paintings, symbolising the universe with the stair-shaped roof. I can show you only a small part of such a stair. (Pl. 44c) For our attempt to photograph the interior of the church was resisted by the *Governador*, who refused to hand the keys even to the priest—a resistance which during the afternoon had been strengthened by the wine from the priest's carriage of which the Indians had in the meantime had their full measure.

In the photograph (Pl. 44c) an Indian is standing in the doorway—to his left there appears a bit of the painting. At least a denticulate ornamentation is visible, which represents a staircase—not a rectangular stone stairway, but a much more primitive form, cut out of a tree—a form still to be found in use among the Pueblos. I later found one in the plain leaning on to a little granary (Pl. 44a).

Steps and ladders are an ancient and universal device for representing the growth, the upward and downward motion of nature. They are the symbol of achievement in the rise and descent through space, just as the circle, the coiled serpent, is the symbol for the rhythm of time.

So the Indian establishes the rational element in his cosmology by depicting the world like his own house, which he enters by means of a ladder. But we must not think of this world-house as the simple reflection of a tranquil cosmology. For the mistress of the house is the most fearsome of all beasts—the serpent.

* * *

The Pueblo Indian is not only a tiller of the soil : he is a hunter too, although not to the same extent as the savage tribes which used to live in those same regions. The Pueblo uses meat as well as maize for food. His masked dances, which seem at first sight like a festive show accompanying the daily round of his life, are in reality meant as a means of providing food for the community by the art of magic. The masked dance is essentially a serious, and indeed a warlike, measure in the struggle for existence. We must not forget that although by the exclusion of cruel and bloody practices these dances differ fundamentally from the war-dances of the nomads—the Pueblos' worst enemies—they still remain predatory and sacrificial both in origin and tendency. When the hunter or the tiller of the soil puts on his mask—that is, changes into the shape of his booty, whether an animal or the

produce of the field—he believes that in a mysterious mimic transformation he can secure in advance what he tries every day to win by sober and vigilant work as hunter and peasant. The communal action of providing for food is, therefore, of schizoid nature : magic and labour coexist.

The existence side by side of rational cultivation and imaginative magic reveals the heterogeneous state of transition in which the Pueblo Indian lives. He is no longer a mere savage who is unacquainted with actions controlling the future and who grasps only the object directly before him; but on the other hand he has not yet acquired the sense of technical security of the European who awaits the future event as something bound to occur according to an organic or mechanical law. The Indian stands midway between logic and magic, and his instrument of orientation is the symbol. Between the primitive man who snatches the nearest booty, and the enlightened man who plans and awaits the result of his actions, is the man who interposes symbols between himself and the world. This stage of symbolic thought and behaviour can be illustrated by a few examples from the dances of the Pueblo Indians.

When I first saw the antelope-dance in San Ildefonso it struck me as very harmless and almost comical. For the student of folklore, however, who sets out to study biologically the roots of cultural expression, there is no moment more dangerous than when popular and apparently comical practices move him to laughter. A man who laughs at comic features in folklore is wrong, for he at once obstructs the insight into the tragic element.

In San Ildefonso, a pueblo in the neighbourhood of Santa Fé with a long tradition of American influence, the Indians assembled for the dance. First of all the musicians got ready, with a huge drum. Then they formed two rows side by side and assumed the character of the antelope in masks and gestures (Pl. 45c). The two rows of dancers began to dance in two different ways. They either imitated the animals' walk or else supported themselves on their front legs, i.e. on two little sticks with feathers wound round them, with which they moved about on one spot. At the head of each row was a female figure and a hunter. With regard to the female figure I was only able to discover that she was called the mother of all the animals.¹ The animal mime addresses his invocations to her.

By slipping into the animal mask in the hunting-dance the animal is captured in anticipation by a miming of the attack to be made during the actual hunt. And this measure is not to be thought of as mere play. In establishing contact with something entirely non-personal the masked dance means to primitive man the most profound submission to some external being. When the Indian in his miming costume imitates for example an animal by movement and sounds, he is trying to transform his own self and so to wrest from nature by magic means something to which he feels he cannot attain so long as his personality remains unchanged and unextended.

Imitation in the miming animal-dance is therefore a highly religious ritual act of self-surrender to some external being. The masked dance

¹ *πότνια θηρῶν*, cf. Jane E. Harrison, *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion*, 1922, p. 264.

among the so-called primitive peoples is fundamentally an example of collective piety.

The Indian's attitude towards the animal is totally different from that of the European. For the Indian the animal is a higher being, because the integrity of the animal-nature makes it seem a more gifted creature in contrast to man, who is weak. Before I started on my journey, these psychological facts about the urge for animal-metamorphosis came to me as an overwhelming surprise from the lips of Frank Hamilton Cushing, who was a pioneer and a veteran in the exploration of the Indian mind. With his pock-marked face and his sparse sandy hair, his age a complete enigma, he told me, as he puffed at his cigarette, of what an Indian had once said to him: "Why should a man stand higher than an animal? Look at the antelope. It is a Run. It runs so much better than a man. Or the bear, it is just Strength. Men can only do a little; an animal can do wholly what it has in it to do." And however odd it may seem, this fairy-tale-like way of thinking is the preliminary to our scientific genetics. In a state of reverential awe, in what is called totemism, these pagan Indians, like all the pagans throughout the world, unite with the animal kingdom by believing in animals of all kinds as mythical ancestors of their tribes. Their explanation of nature—by imaginatively interrelating man with animals—is not so very far removed from Darwinism; for as we impute a physical law to the process of evolution in nature, the pagans try to establish an imaginary association of man with the animal-world. The decisive factor in the lives of these so-called primitive peoples may be called a kind of mythical Darwinism of elective affinities.

* * *

It is obviously a hunting-dance that has survived in San Ildefonso. But as the antelope died out upwards of three generations ago, it may well be that the antelope-dance marks a transition to the purely demonic kachina-dances, the chief purpose of which is to pray for a good harvest. For in Oraibi there still exists an antelope-clan, whose main function is the working of weather-magic.

Whilst the imitative animal-dance must be regarded as magic miming that belongs to a civilization of hunters, an entirely different character pertains to the kachina-dance, which forms part of the regularly recurring annual festivities of the peasant-people. The nature of the kachina-dance is revealed in its entirety of course only in regions far removed from the centres of European civilization. The masked dance, with its magic ritual extending its appeal to inanimate nature itself, can only be witnessed in its more or less primitive form in parts untouched by the railway, and where, as in the villages of the Moki, even the veneer of official Catholicism no longer persists.

In Oraibi, the most remote westerly point, I was privileged by a lucky chance to witness what is called a humiskachina-dance in the market-place of a cliff-village. Here I saw the living originals of the masked dancers I had already seen as puppets in a room of this same village of Oraibi.

To get to Oraibi I had to travel two days in a small carriage from the station of Hollbrook. The carriage was what is called a buggy, with four light wheels, admirably adapted for getting over the desert, where gorse is

the only plant to be seen. The driver, Frank Allen, who took me through this country, was a Mormon. We had a very bad sand-storm which obliterated the cart-tracks, the only means of finding one's way about that otherwise trackless waste. But we were lucky enough to reach Keam's Cañon after two days' journey, and here we were cordially received by Mr. Keam, an Irishman.

From this point I was able to make excursions to the cliff-villages, which lie on three mountain plateaus extending in parallels from North to South. The first place I saw was the remarkable settlement of Walpi. It has a romantic situation, perched high up on the cliffs like a mass of rock. A narrow path high up leads past the group of houses (Pl. 45a, d). The position of Oraibi, where I was to see the humiskachina-dance, is very similar. Up in the market-place, where the old blind man sits with his cow, they had prepared a place for the dance (Pl. 46a). The humiskachina-dance is the dance of the growing corn. I witnessed it from April 28th to May 1st, 1896. The evening before the dance I was in the *kiva*, where the secret ceremonies are performed. There was no fetish-altar. The Indians simply sat there ceremoniously smoking. Every now and then a pair of brown legs would come down the ladder and presently the whole man would appear.

The younger men were busy painting their masks in preparation for the next day; for the big leather helmets are used again and again, since new ones would be too costly. The painting was done by blowing a spray of water from the mouth on to the leather mask and then rubbing the colours on.

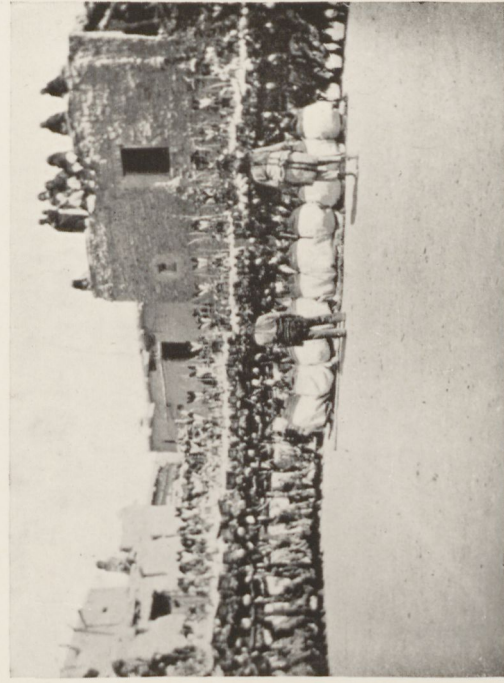
The next morning the whole audience, including two groups of children, was assembled on the wall. The Indians' relationship to their children has something very attractive about it. The children are reared gently but with discipline and they are very friendly once you have succeeded in winning their confidence. So the children were assembled there in the market-place, full of tense excitement, but all very solemn. They are brought up with tremendous religious respect for the kachinas. They all come to regard them as fearsome, super-natural beings, and the moment when the child receives instructions as to the true nature of the kachinas and is itself admitted to the company of the dancers is the great turning-point in its life.

The dance was performed by about twenty or thirty male and about ten female dancers, that is men representing women (Pl. 46b). There are two rows of dancers, with five men forming a sort of apex. Although the dance takes place in the market, there is an architectural terminal: a little stone structure, in front of which a dwarf pine-tree has been planted and bedecked with feathers, forming a little temple where the prayers are offered up in the form of the dance itself and of the hymns which accompany the dance. This temple makes a sort of visual focus for the whole ceremony.

The dancers' masks are green and red with a diagonal white strip with three spots on it. These latter, I was told, are meant to be rain-drops; and the whole symbolism on the helmet again shows the world as a series of steps, with the source of rain always indicated by semi-circular clouds and strokes emanating from them. These symbols are repeated on the woven scarves which the dancers wear round their bodies—red and green ornamentation very gracefully executed on a white ground. The male dancers carry a



a—Old Man on Dancing Ground (p. 284)



b—Oraibi, Humiskachina Dance, "Squatting" (p. 284)



c—Humiskachina Dance, "Turning" (p. 285)



d—Dancers resting (p. 284)



e—Humiskachina Dance, "Turning" (p. 285)



f—Masked Dancers (p. 285)

rattle in their hands made out of a hollow gourd containing stones. Round their knees they wear a tortoise-shell with pebbles hanging from it, so that their knees too make a rattling sound (Pl. 46f).

The chorus performs two different acts. Either the girls sit in front of the men and make a noise with their rattles and a piece of wood, in which case the men one after the other merely spin round; or else the women rise and accompany the men in their gyration. And all the time two priests keep sprinkling the dancers with consecrated flour (Pl. 46b, c, e).

The costume of the 'female' dancers consists of a cloth covering the whole figure, concealing the fact that they are men. At the sides of their masks, at the top, they wear the special hair-dress of the Pueblo-girls, a curious kind of columbine-ornament (cf. Pl. 48d). Horse-hair, dyed red, hangs down from the mask to symbolise rain, and decorations representing rain are seen on the scarves and other wrappings.

The dance lasts from morning till evening, the dancers at the head of the dance remaining always close to the little temple. At intervals the Indians leave the village and go to a projecting piece of rock to rest for a moment (Pl. 46d). Whoever catches sight of a dancer without his mask will die.

The little tree hung with feathers which, as I said, is the real focus of the dance, is called Nakwakwochi. I was struck by the fact that this tree was very small, so I went up to the old chief who was sitting at the end of the market-place and asked him why. He said: "We used to have a big tree. Now we have taken a little one, for the soul of a child is pure." So in this region we meet the perfect animistic cult of the tree which as we know persists to this day in the heathen practices at harvest-time in Europe and belongs to the basic religious conceptions of all mankind.

The function is to establish a connection between man and the natural forces, to create a symbol, that is, to link them magically together by means of some intercessor; and in this case the intercessor is a tree, which is nearer to earth than man because it is rooted in the earth. This tree is the fitting mediator leading to the powers below.

The feathers are carried down on the following day to a certain spring in the valley and planted there or else hung up as offerings. They are meant to give effect to the prayer for fertilisation, that the maize shall grow big and profuse.

Late in the afternoon the dancers were there again, unwearied, grave and ceremonious, continuing their monotonous movements. But just as the sun was about to set, a spectacle was enacted before our eyes which revealed with devastating clarity how calm and sober ritual draws its magic forms from the very depths of human passion, and how in the face of this, our ready and shallow acceptance of a purely spiritual interpretation of ceremony is doomed to defeat.

Six figures appeared: three men almost naked, their bodies smeared with yellow clay and their hair made up to resemble horns. They were wearing simple loin-cloths. Then came three men dressed as women. And while the chorus and the priests continued their reverential dance calm and unperturbed, these six executed an obscene parody of the choral movements. And not one person laughed. This rude parody was not felt to be a piece

of comic mockery; rather it was a kind of auxiliary ceremony of the more wildly exuberant dancers in an effort to ensure a rich harvest. Anyone acquainted with ancient tragedy will recognise in this the dual nature of the tragic chorus and the satyr play—"both grafted on to one stem."

* * *

Religious practice in Mexico provided a gruesome dramatic illustration of the way in which the human being enters into the deity in order to share in its superhuman strength. At one festival a woman representing the goddess of maize is worshipped for forty days and then sacrificed, and into the skin of this wretched creature the priest enters.

In comparison with this most elementary and frenzied attempt to approach the deity, all that we see among the Pueblos seems infinitely less brutal in spite of the fundamental kinship; and yet there can be no assurance that the sap which nourishes it is, even to-day, not secretly drawn from the roots of bloody sacrificial cult. The same soil upon which the Pueblos live has witnessed the war-dances of the savage Indian nomads with all their cruelties culminating in the martyrdom of the enemy.

The supreme example of magical assimilation to nature by way of the animal-world is found among the Moki Indians in their dances with live serpents at Oraibi and Walpi. I have not myself witnessed these dances, the most pagan of all the Walpi ceremonies. It is an animal dance and a ritual dance of the seasons at one and the same time. It combines in the most perfect form traits of the animal dance as seen in San Ildefonso and of the magic fertility dance, the humiskachina of Oraibi. For in the month of August, when the critical moment of the year has arrived in the work of the fields and the whole success of the harvest depends on a heavy fall of rain, the storm with its blessed relief from drought is invoked in a dance with live serpents, which takes place alternately in Oraibi and in Walpi.

Whereas in the dance of San Ildefonso the magical effect was produced by the simulation of an antelope and in the corn-dance of Oraibi by the wearing of masks, we find in Walpi the magic dance in a much older and purer form. For here the dancers and the live beast form a magic unity. The amazing thing is that the Indians have a way of handling the most dangerous of reptiles, the rattle-snake, so that it can be tamed without violence and will join in the ceremonies for days on end with complete docility, or at least without showing its usual propensities unless it is specially provoked. Such a feat would inevitably end in disaster if attempted by Europeans.

In the Moki villages two groups of kinsmen are the actors in the snake-festival—the Antelope-men and the Snake-men—who are linked by legendary tradition with these their totem animals. That totemism can even nowadays be seriously put into practice is shown by this dance, in which human beings do not merely appear in animal shapes but perform ritual actions with a most venomous live beast, the serpent. So we see that the snake-dance of Walpi is half-way between the empathy of mimic action and the blood-sacrifice itself. For the ceremony is no mere imitation of animals; they themselves play their part as actors in the ritual, not to be sacrificed, but, like the *baho*, to join in the petition for rain. For the snakes which take

part in the dance in Walpi are themselves forced to intercede in the offering up of the prayer. In the course of a ceremony extending in Walpi over sixteen days they are caught alive in the desert in the month of August and then kept underground in the *kiva*, where they are guarded by the chiefs of the snake- and antelope-clans and undergo curious ceremonies, the most important and startling of which is the washing of the snakes. The snake is treated like a novice, and notwithstanding its struggles it is dipped in consecrated water, to which all kinds of medicaments have been added.

Then it is cast on to the floor of the *kiva*, where there is a picture drawn in sand representing four lightning-snakes with a quadruped in the middle. In another *kiva* there is a sand drawing of a bank of clouds with four differently coloured streaks of lightning, in the shape of serpents, (Pl. 44e). The snakes are flung down violently on to the first sand picture so that the drawing is obliterated and the snake itself is covered in sand. There is no doubt in my mind that this magic throw is intended to make the snake provoke the lightning or bring rain.

This is clearly the meaning of the whole ceremony, and the parts of the ritual which follow prove that snakes thus initiated become in the most patent way petitioners and provokers of rain, in conjunction with the Indians themselves. They are living weather-saints in the shape of animals.

The snakes, numbering about one hundred—with their poison fangs, as we know, still left in them—are kept in the *kiva* and on the last day of the festival held captive in a bush with a band round it. The ceremony culminates in these acts: the approach to the bush, the seizing and carrying about of the live snakes, and finally the sending away of the snakes to the plain as intercessors. American anthropologists describe the seizing and carrying of the snake as an amazingly exciting act. It is done in the following way: A group of three approaches the bush where the rattle-snakes are lying. The high priest of the snake-clan pulls a snake out of the bush, another Indian with his face painted and tattooed and wearing a fox-skin on his back, seizes the snake and puts it in his mouth. A companion, taking him by the shoulders, distracts the attention of the snake by waving a feathered stick. The third is the watcher and the snake-catcher, who stands ready in case the snake should slip out of the second man's mouth. The dance is completed in little over half an hour in a small space in the village of Walpi. When all the snakes have thus been carried about to the accompaniment of the dancers' noise—they have rattles and tortoise-shells and pebbles hung round their knees—they are swiftly borne down to the plain, where they escape and disappear.

From what we know of the Walpi Indian mythology we may be sure that this form of serpent worship has a background in tribal legends. We are told of a certain hero called Ti-yo, who set out on a journey underground to discover the source of the longed-for water. He passes the various *kivas* of the princes of the lower regions, accompanied all the time by a female spider who sits unseen on his right ear and guides him—a kind of Indian Vergil to this Indian Dante; and eventually, after passing the two houses of the sun in the west and in the east, he comes to the great *kiva* of the snakes, where he is presented with the magic *baho*, which invokes the weather.

According to the story Ti-yo brings back with him two female snakes, who bear him children, also in the form of snakes—very dangerous creatures who in the end compel the tribes to change their dwelling-place; so we see that in this myth the serpents are both weather deities and totem animals with power over the migrations of the clan.

The snake in this dance is therefore not sacrificed; it is transmuted by consecration and by the mimicry of the dance and sent out as a messenger, so that when it comes to the souls of the dead it may bring down the thunderstorm from the heavens in the shape of lightning.

* * *

It is natural for the layman to think of this elementary form of emotional release through religious magic as typical of a primitive savage-state entirely unknown to Europe. And yet, two thousand years ago, in Greece—the very country from which we derive our European culture—ritual practices were in vogue which surpass in their blatant monstrosity even the things we see among the Indians.

In the orgiastic cult of Dionysus for example, the Maenads danced with live snakes entwining their hair like diadems, a snake in one hand and in the other the animal which was to be torn to pieces in the ecstatic sacrificial dance performed in honour of the god. The blood-sacrifice, carried out in a state of frenzied exaltation (Pl. 47a), is the culmination and the real meaning of this religious dance, in contrast to the present-day dances of the Moki Indians.

The emancipation from blood-sacrifice is an ideal of purification which has left a profound mark on the development of religion from east to west. The snake too undergoes this process of sublimation. In man's relation to the snake we can measure the changing of his faith as it moves from fetish to the pure religion of redemption. In the Old Testament the serpent is the spirit of evil, of temptation, like the snake Tiamat in Babylon. In Greece it is the merciless, devouring monster of the nether-world; the Erinys is encircled with serpents, and the gods in their wrath send a serpent as executioner. This conception of the snake as a destroying power from the nether-world has found its most moving tragic symbol in the myth and in the sculptured group of Laocoon. The vengeance of the gods, wrought upon their priest and his two sons by means of the destroying serpents makes this famous composition of antiquity a vivid embodiment of dire human suffering. The prophet priest, seeking to aid his people by warning them against the wiles of the Greeks, falls a prey to the vengeance of the partial gods. So the death of the father with his two sons becomes a symbol of the antique Passion; death as revenge wrought by demons without justice and without hope of salvation. That is the tragic pessimism of antiquity (Pl. 47b).

This snake as a demon expressive of ancient pessimism finds its counterpart in an antique snake-god in which we can at last recognise the benevolence and transfigured beauty of the classical age. Asclepius, the god of healing, has a snake twined round his staff as a symbol (Pl. 47c). His features mark him as the pagan world saviour in the plastic art of antiquity. It is significant, however, that even this most exalted and detached god has his roots in the



a—Maenad dancing, from a Neo-Attic Relief. Paris, Louvre (*p.* 288)



b—Laocöon. Rome, Vatican (*p.* 288)



c—Asclepius. Rome, Capitoline Museum (*p.* 288)



d—Serpentarius, Star Constellation. Leyden, Cod. Voss. Q79, f. 10^b (*p.* 289)



e—Brazen Serpent and Crucifixion, *Biblia Pauperum*. London, Brit. Mus. Add. 31303 (*p.* 290)



f—Giulio Romano, Vendor of Antidote against Snake Bites, Mantua, Palazzo del Tè (*p.* 290)

nether world of the departed souls, where the living snake has its abode. The earliest tribute of worship is paid to him as a serpent. The snake twined round his staff and he himself are one and the same—a departed soul that goes on living and reappears in the form of a serpent. For the snake is not only, as Cushing's Indians would say, the fatal bite threatening or inflicted and destroying without mercy; the snake shows also, by sloughing its skin, how the body slips out of its husk, begins again and goes on. The snake can glide into the earth and reappear. The return from the earth where the dead are lying, together with this faculty of renewing its skin, makes the snake the most natural symbol of immortality, of revival from sickness and the agonies of death.¹

In the temple of Asclepius at Kos in Asia Minor the deity was represented in transfigured human form, holding in his hand the staff with the serpent twined round it. But in this sanctuary the more true and potent nature of the God was not to be seen in the lifeless mask of stone: it was there as a live serpent in the innermost part of the temple, and in the observance of the cult it was fed, cared for and attended as only the Mokus care for their snakes.

In astrological manuscripts of the Middle Ages, Asclepius appears in the sky as a fixed star over Scorpio (Pl. 47d). He is encircled by serpents and is henceforth regarded as a constellation under whose influence prophets and physicians are born. By this elevation to the stars the snake-god has become a transfigured totem. He is the cosmic father of all who are born in the month of the year (October) when his visibility is at its height. For in the astrology of antiquity mathematics and magic came together. The snake-figure in the sky, which is found also in the constellation of the Serpent, is used as a mathematical outline. The points of light are linked together by means of an earthly image, in order to make what is boundless comprehensible, for without some outline it evades our sense. Asclepius is both these things—a mathematical figure and the bearer of a fetish. Human culture evolves towards reason in the same measure as the tangible fullness of life fades into a mathematical symbol.

About twenty years ago, in the north of Germany by the Elbe I discovered a thing which showed me in a curiously vivid way how lasting the ceremony of the snake cult must be in spite of every attempt at religious enlightenment;

¹ In the first draft of this passage, Warburg explained the symbolic power of the snake image as follows:

“Welche Eigenschaften bringt die Schlange mit, um sich als verdrängender Vergleich in Religion und Kunst einzustellen?”

1. Sie durchläuft mit dem Jahr den Lebenskreislauf vom tiefsten Todesschlaf bis zum stärksten Leben.

2. Sie wechselt die Hülle und bleibt dieselbe.

3. Sie ist nicht imstande, auf Füßen zu laufen und besitzt trotzdem ein Maximum von sich vorwärts bewogender Schnellkraft in

Verbindung mit der absolut tödlichen Waffe des Giftzahns.

4. Für das Auge bietet sie dabei ein Minimum der Sichtbarkeit, besonders wenn sie sich in der Farbe nach den Gesetzen des Mimikri der Wüste anpasst, oder aus dem Erdloch, in dem sie verborgen liegt, herausschnellt.

5. Phallus.

Das sind Qualitäten, die sie für das, was in der Natur “ambivalent” ist, tot und lebendig, sichtbar unsichtbar, (ohne vorheriges Warnzeichen und rettungslos beim Anblick verderblich) als verdrängendes Symbol unvergesslich machen.”

for in this case the Christian Bible itself was the vehicle for perpetuating the pagan tradition. In the course of a trip through the *Vierlande* I found on the rood of a Protestant church a number of biblical illustrations which had obviously been copied from an Italian Bible of the 18th century. Here I saw another Laocoon with his two sons at the mercy of the serpents, but in the act of being saved by another Asclepius. For we read in Deuteronomy that Moses in the wilderness had commanded the Children of Israel to set up a brazen serpent as a remedy against snake-bites. In this passage we are confronted by a remnant of idolatry in the Old Testament. We know that this passage can only be an insertion, made in an attempt to explain subsequently the presence of such an idol in Jerusalem. For the main fact remains that the brazen idol of a serpent was destroyed by King Hezekiah at the bidding of the prophet Isaiah. Against the cult of human sacrifice and the worship of beasts the prophets engaged in a grim struggle. And this struggle is the dominant theme in oriental and in Christian reformation right down to the most recent times. It is clear that the setting up of the serpent is directly opposed to the Ten Commandments, that it runs counter to the iconoclastic zeal of the prophets who aim at reform.

But there is another reason why every student of the Bible must see in the serpent the most vehement challenge from the powers of evil; the serpent in the garden of Eden dominates the Biblical account of the world order, as the cause of evil and of sin. In the Old and the New Testaments the snake is joined to the wood of paradise as the satanic power causing the tragedy of man who in the midst of sin still cherishes hope of redemption. Early Christianity—in its struggle against idolatry—was, therefore, plainly hostile towards the cult of the serpent. Paul was looked upon by the heathens of Malta as a sacred and immune messenger when he cast the viper that had bitten him into the flames and did not die of the bite. So strongly did the impression of Paul's immunity against vipers survive in Malta that down to the sixteenth century Italian jugglers, encircled by snakes, appeared at fairs and festivals, calling themselves "men of the house of St. Paul" and selling Maltese soil as an antidote to snake-bites (Pl. 47f). Here the belief in the immunity of those who are strong in faith returns to the practice of superstitious magic.

In mediaeval theology we find the miracle of the brazen serpent curiously retained as a legitimate part of the religious cult. On the basis of the isolated passage in Deuteronomy, directly opposed as it was to Old Testament tendency and doctrine, but re-enforced in the New Testament by a passage in St. John (III, 14, 15), the image of snake-worship was typologically compared to the Crucifixion itself (Pl. 47e). Even though it is treated as a thing to be overcome, the setting up of the animal-figure and the worship of the kneeling multitude before the staff of Asclepius is retained as a stage in man's progress towards salvation. Moses himself who, as we read, destroyed the Tables of the Law because of the worship of the Golden Calf, is forced to serve as shield-bearer of the brazen serpent.

* * *

What we have seen in this all too brief summary of the snake cult

is intended to show the change from real and substantial symbolism which appropriates by actual gestures to that symbolism which exists in thought alone. I shall be content if the pictures of the daily life and festive activities of the Pueblo Indians have proved to you that their masked dances are not a mere game, but the heathen's answer to torturing questions on the why and wherefore of things. The Indian who confronts the incomprehensible happenings in nature with a will to comprehend, identifies himself by transmutation with the causes of things. Instinctively, for the unexplained effect, he substitutes the cause in its most real and most tangible shape. The masked dance is the danced law of causality.

If religion means 'binding together' ("religio a religando, a vinculo pietatis," Lactantius, IV, 28), then the sign of development out of the primitive state will be that this linking together of man with what lies beyond becomes more and more spiritualised : no longer cleaving to the symbol of the mask, man realises causality in thought alone, and moves onwards to a system of mythology expressed in words. The will to surrender in devotion is a nobler form of assuming a mask.

In the movement which we call cultural progress the being which claims our submission and was so prodigiously near, withdraws from our grasp and becomes in the end an unseen and spiritual power. We have observed how Christian thought uses the heathen picture language of the snake to express the idea of both suffering and salvation. We might perhaps say that wherever suffering and helpless humanity is found in blind quest for salvation, the snake will be close by, as an explanatory image of the cause.

How is mankind freeing itself from this coercive bond with a venomous reptile in which it sees the cause of things? Our technical age does not need the serpent to explain and control the lightning. The lightning no longer frightens the dwellers in our cities, nor do they long for a storm as the only hope of relief from drought. We have our water supply, and the lightning-snake is led down into the ground—by the lightning-conductor. Scientific argument puts an end to mythological explanation. We know that the snake is a reptile which must succumb if we set our minds to it. Where the technical explanation of cause and effect replaces the mythical imagination, man loses his primitive fears. But we should be loth to decide whether this emancipation from the mythological view really helps mankind to find a fitting answer to the problems of existence.

The American government, like the Roman Catholic church in earlier times, has been admirably active in establishing schools among the Indians. And its intellectual optimism has had this apparent result, that the Indian children now go to school in pretty suits and little aprons (Pl. 48c) and no longer believe in the pagan demons. This is at any rate true in the case of most. And it may denote progress. But I doubt whether it really satisfies the soul of the Indian, who thinks in images and for whom poetic mythology is the true haven.

I once tried to get the children of an Indian school to illustrate a German fairy-tale, which they did not previously know. I chose a story in which a storm happens to occur, for I wanted to see whether they would draw the lightning realistically or in the form of snakes. Out of fourteen drawings,

all of which were very graphic but were obviously influenced by American instruction, twelve were realistically drawn; but two of them used the irrepresible symbol of the snake, sharp as an arrow (Pl. 44d), just as it occurs in the *kiva* (Pl. 44e).

In San Francisco I caught a fleeting glimpse of the type of man who overthrew the cult of the serpent and overcame the fear of lightning—the descendant of the indigenous race and of the gold-diggers who expelled the Indians: Uncle Sam (Pl. 48b) in his tall hat walking proudly along the street past a pseudo-classical rotunda. And away above his top hat runs the electric wire. In this copper-snake, invented by Edison, he has wrested the lightning from nature.

The American of to-day no longer worships the rattle-snake. Extermination (and whisky) is his answer to it. Electricity enslaved, the lightning held captive in the wire, has produced a civilization which has no use for heathen poetry. But what does it put in its place? The forces of nature are no longer seen in anthropomorphic shapes; they are conceived as an endless succession of waves, obedient to the touch of a man's hand. With these waves the civilization of the mechanical age is destroying what natural science, itself emerging out of myth, had won with such vast effort—the sanctuary of devotion, the remoteness needed for contemplation.

The modern Prometheus and the modern Icarus, Franklin and the Wright Brothers who invented the aeroplane, are those fateful destroyers of our sense of distance who threaten to lead the world back into chaos. Telegraph and telephone are destroying the cosmos. But myths and symbols, in attempting to establish spiritual bonds between man and the outside world, create space for devotion and scope for reason which are destroyed by the instantaneous electrical contact—unless a disciplined humanity re-introduce the impediment of conscience.

Translated by W. F. Mainland



a—A. Warburg and a Pueblo Indian



b—"Uncle Sam" (p. 292)



c—Indian School Children (p. 291)



d—Pueblo Woman and Girl with Columbine Hair Dress (p. 285)