

WITH THE INDIANS FOR A DAY

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INTRODUCTION

The life of the Indian, his literature and religion is colored by his imagination. The most common things are subject matter for his poems because he sees the hidden beauty in great as well as humble beings. His legends are full of metaphors, similes, and personifications. In his myths you can sense the beats of his heart in every word, for the Indian is a sensitive soul who vibrates to the beauty around him and tries to give his beauty back to us through prose, poetry, and even ordinary speech. I attempted to study the imaginative quality of Indian literature. To achieve my purpose I visualized myself visiting the Abenakis, Navajos, Zunis and Hopis and listening to their songs, myths, and legends in their proper setting.

"Massa Jos EK", I heard in the distance, "Massa Joe EK". An old Indian with white hair and a weary look is explaining to a young fellow about the "Great Small Mountain of Massachusetts". I stood unnoticed near them, paying attention to their conversation. Though the language they spoke was not perfect, it seemed grammatical in its expression. "Strong adjectives agreed with strong nouns." Though I tried to understand what they said, the tone of the old man's voice was low and I only succeeded in capturing a series of unintelligible words made up of many consonants and a few vowels.

As I looked around I saw a group of Indian girls sitting together under the "P8guas", or moon. One of them stood up and at the request of her friends sang "Pskwasaw 8NI N8KSKWa" - "Bouquet Girl". The accords of the melody danced in the air:

"Call me not Marguerite or Madelaine any more...
I am Bouquet Girl and my name is Bouquet...
Bouquet this bouquet cost me a lot
It cost me fifty silver dollars
I am Bouquet Girl since my name is Bouquet
What is fifty silver dollars compared with my pleasure
And heart_strings..?
I am Bouquet Girl since my name is Bouquet."²

As her friends grouped around her and joined in her singing, it seemed as if she remembered that day...December 8...when she received the bouquet of flowers in commemoration of the Presentation of the Virgin.

The song suddenly stopped. Nikis and Najmajdan8t were making too much noise with their discussion. Nikis said he had been in Kazen'iteKwork. His older and wiser friend was somewhat perplexed and answered he could not have been there since—"there is no such meaningless word in our language. No such place exists". Nikis became angry at his unbelief. But nevertheless, he gave him an explanation: "I called i Kazen'iteKwork because, according to a tradition, a whirlwind once roused havoc along that stream breaking and uprooting trees. The tumbling of trees is called Kazen and I called the river 'Kazen'itekun' ".³ In the meanwhile, hidden by the shadows of some pine trees, I enjoyed the conversation of these poor, simple people. In its simplicity, it is artistic.

My acquaintances moved towards a fire. The night was getting near and I decided to follow them. Wijokamit was going to tell a story and I wanted to hear it. "When I was about ten years of age, when I went muskrat hunting, an old man used to tell me this story:", Wijokamit said in a rich, powerful voice. The whole Indian tribe had had their eyes fixed upon him. Everything was silent, and the story promised to be interesting. "They were dancing and drinking bitter water when a white man of great nobility appeared... He was polite... he gave them money to buy liquor. I noticed he paid special attention to women and when he spoke to men it was only to encourage them in their frolics. He paid for the liquor, and, strange enough, his pocket was never empty...". At this point the storyteller stopped, looked around, searched with his eyes among the mountain shadows and dried his brow with a piece of cloth. He continued in a low voice: "At dawn of day the noble white man was still dancing with his coat on, something like a Prince Albert coat and through the slit the women and then the men too, saw his tail and all said he is the devil, and while looking at him, he slowly disappeared' ".⁴ Nobody spoke for a minute, and I felt the blood freeze in my veins.

I wanted to leave: the P8guas was high in the sky and soon it would be midnight. I tried to sneak out unnoticed. As I walked down the road I could hear the melody of their song:

"Dear friend, where have you been travelling?
I also have been spotting, Koanodana.
Dear friend, where do you come from now?
From the mountains right here Koanodana."

One of the men asks the other for a drink of water. His 'friend' refuses but the Indian continues his plea:

"Dear friend I am very sick.
What then can you do now Koanodana?
Dear friend I am dying
Well friend here have a drink, Koanodana."⁵

"Goodness triumphs at the end", I said to myself. It was late, however, and I could not indulge in philosophizing. At a turn in the road I looked back at my friends the Abenaki: good, simple people that enjoy life giving beauty and meaning to their existence.

I still remember the day I spent with the navajos, the "Bedouins" of America, that large nomad tribe which wanders in the deserts and table lines of Arizona and New Mexico. I was with the "Divé", or the people, as they call themselves.

Coming from the hills with his flocks of sheep and goats, I saw a navajo youth who had "the dreamy look of a herdsman".⁶ I came close to him and interrupted his meditation. "I heard you singing in the distance", I ventured to say. "Yes, it was the 'Mountain Song'", he answered, and with a soft, melodious voice sang:

"Thither go I!
chief of all mountains,
Thither go I
living forever,
Thither go I,
calling me "son, my son",
Thither go I!!"

"This is one of our 'holy songs', which are given to us by the gods", he explained. "Songs of peace and blessing to protect people against all evil. Our Hozhonji songs are like the Psalms of David... We sing them as the white man says his prayer. Our hero, Nazenezrani, is like the bible hero David. The songs were made by our own Holy Ones."⁸ I was very much impressed by the sincerity of his faith and his childlike confidence in God. "Whom do you sing to?", I asked him. "We sing to the mountain as to a God, for the mountain is pure and holy and blesses man calling him 'son' ". I left him deeply engrossed in his thoughts and started to walk down to the village. I could not help raising my heart to God in prayer, asking Him to reward their sincerity with the light of faith.

As I reached the village all I could see was a series of 'hogams' piled against one another. Sitting at the doorway of one of these rude, stone huts I saw an old woman weaving a colorful blanket with an interesting design. She stopped her work for a while, caressed the braids of an alert, vivacious girl who was sitting at her side. "Let us see", she said with a quivering voice. "Where did we leave off last time? Ah,, Yes! I remember!! Today I shall teach you the Creation of man." I stood next to the Indian woman and her granddaughter and listened attentively. The feet of the first man were made of mud and his legs of lightning, his body of white corn and yellow corn. His veins were of striped corn and blue corn, the calico corn made the hair on his arms and body, the black corn made his eyebrows, and the red corn was his blood... The Gods made him of all kinds of water, and their arms of the rainbow... His skull of the sun and his speech of thunder."⁹ The little girl stood up; she was perplexed and fascinated by the

legend. "What was he called, then?", she asked "Anlthtahnah—Olyah", the old woman said staring at her with her fading, reddish eyes. "This means, 'Created from everything' ". She looked at the blanket she was weaving and folded it on her lap. Then she continued the legend about the first human beings: Talking God, House God, White Corn Boy, Yellow Corn Girl, They Holy Spirit Girls, all of them made of the universe, which was full of the Holy Spirit. The grandmother signaled at a distant mountain. I looked and the huge mass of rocks and purple earth standing against the blue. She said: "The mountains bless people with lights and rainbows and the Gods cover us with flowers. Whenever you are sick pray to the Yehs, for they control sickness, my dear little girl". I wanted to know what the newly created people did for their subsistence. She answered me promptly. "Then the new people ate some white corn, for although they were made of corn it was good for them to eat it and we Navajos still live on corn to—day."¹⁰ As soon as she said this she entered her hut, went to the kitchen and selected the best of the ears of corn hanging from the ceiling. "A present for you", she said as she came back with her golden treasure and offered it to me. "From a Navajo"

"Look at the 'To' yollanne'", cried a small, brown Zúfi Indian maiden. It was sunset and their sacred mountain gleamed with fire. After a minute's interruption the group of young women continued to grind their corn "swaying back and forth with rhythmic swing".¹⁴ As I watched them work, I heard their voices rise clear and high. They sang the "Corn Grinding Song":

"O, my lovely mountain,
To'yollanne!
O, my lovely mountain,
To'yollanne!
High up in the sky,
See Rain—Makers seated
Hither comes the rain clouds now—
He—ya, Ha—ya, He—ya!
Behold yonder
All well soon be abloom.
Where the flowers spring—
Tall shall grow the youthful corn plants".¹²

I was somewhat puzzled by the personification: "High up in the sky, see Rain—Makers seated". One of the women explained to me in a courteous manner that the Rain—Makers were the spirits of the Zúfis who dwelled in nether world and came at the summons of the Gods to make rain for the Zúfi people. The clouds were their masks, for their faces were too holy to be seen by men. As she spoke I noticed her delicate features. Her gentle and refined manner were characteristic of the Pueblo Indians, of which the Zúfis form part.

Meanwhile, the women continued to grind their corn in the “metates”, or stone grinding troughs. I listened to their song:

“Yonder, yonder see the fair rainbow,
See the rainbow brightly decked and painted
Now the swallow bringeth glad news to your corn—
...Now hear the corn plant murmur,
‘we are growing everywhere!’
Hi, yai! The world fair!”¹³

The rainbow is imagined as the Rainbow Youth and is described as “brightly decked and painted”. The swallow is the summoner for rain.

The night was coming and the great To’yollanne began to fade away. It looked like a specter struggling with the mist and shadows. I said good—bye to the Zuñis. Was it coincidence, or was the true God pleased with the trusting confidence of his children on the Creator they did not know? The answer is far beyond my reach. All I know is that as I was leaving some raindrops fall on my arms. They had sung for rain, I remembered...

The Hopi Indians have always fascinated me. Their legends are graceful, full of charm. In their mythology they have given full vent to their imagination. I decided to pay them a visit.

It was dawn when I reached their village. They were planting some sticks on the Mesa. I wondered what was their purpose. A small, graceful youth told me they were the “Bahos”, or emblematic prayer sticks into whose ends prayers were breathed. They planted them at dawn: “When the yellow line comes over the mountain, because they pray, and if they pray when the sun rises, the sun will carry the prayers up, up!!” I asked to whom they prayed. “We pray to Him who makes the rain—that makes all things—it is the Power and it lives behind the sun”.¹⁴ I heard his name was “Wonawill” and he was the supreme, life—giving bisexual Power referred to as “He—She”. The Indian continued: “He pervades all space, and is associated with the Supreme Power, and through this Supreme Power becomes the giver of life”. I was interested in his explanation. His religious beliefs seemed sincere. But I still wanted to know under what aspects they conceived God. So I asked the Hopi whether this Power looked like man. “No”, he answered, “we only know that it IS”. I then remembered the words of God in the Bible: “I AM WHO AM”.

I walked down to the Pueblo with my new acquaintance. He brought me to his home to meet his mother. She signaled us to be silent because she was sleeping her baby. The woman bound the child on a board and then fastened the board and the baby on her back. She swang to and fro thus turning into a living cradle. As she gently rocked her baby she sang this “Lullaby”:

“Puna, puna, puna (sleep),
In the trail the beetles
On each other’s backs are sleeping,
So mine, my baby, thou,
Puna, puna, puna”.¹⁵

I imagined the allusion to the beetles would be the work of the Indian fantasy. However, the woman explained to me that next to their village the beetles carried one another on their backs in the hot sun. And so the child must close its eyes and sleep upon its mother’s back. I must confess I became then rather envious of the Indians, for they had in store a supply of similes, metaphors, and personifications which would never be exhausted. And I remembered how often I struggle to find a convenient one, and how seldom I succeed.

Having come all the way to see the Hopis, I thought I should meet their chief. However, my wish was not granted. “He is praying”, my friend answered me when I asked whether I could see the chief. “Where does he pray?”, I asked him. Even if I was not allowed to speak to him I might be able to see him... “He goes to the edge of the cliff and turns his face to the rising sun and scatters sacred corn meal. Then he prays for all the people. He asks that we may have rain and corn and melons... He prays that all the people may have health and long life and be happy and good in their hearts... He prays for everybody in the world... He prays for all the animals... He prays for all the plants. He prays for everything that has life. This is how our chief prays”.¹⁶

The face of the Indian was transformed. As he spoke, a spiritual radiance came to his eyes. I was more than impressed. It would not be too much to say I was entranced, spellbound, at his words.

My visit came to an end. I thanked the Hopi Indian for his kindness. However, to thank him was so poor a way to pay him back for the songs, the poems, the legends, the myths — and especially for the lesson he taught me on “how to pray”!

NOTES

- ¹Henry Lorne Masta, *Abenaki Indian Legends, Grammar and Place Names*, Odenak P. Q., 1932, Les Boix Francs, editors, p. 13.
- ²Ibid, pp. 108 - 109.
- ³Masta, *Abenaki*, pp. 19-20.
- ⁴Ibid, pp. 48-49.
- ⁵Masta, *Abenaki*, p. 10.
- ⁶Natalie Curtis, *The Indian Book*, New York, Harper and Bros. 1907, p. 347.
- ⁷Curtis, *Indian Book*, p. 352.
- ⁸Ibid, pp. 351-352.
- ⁹Hastein Klah, *Navajo Creation Myth*, Museum of Navajo Ceremonial Art, Santa Fe, New Mexico, 1942, pp. 102-103.
- ¹⁰Ibid, p. 103.
- ¹¹Curtis, *Indian Book*, p. 429.
- ¹²Ibid, p. 430.
- ¹³Curtis, *Indian Book*, p. 431.
- ¹⁴Curtis, *Indian Book*, pp. 492-493.
- ¹⁵Ibid, p. 480.
- ¹⁶Curtis, *Indian Book*, p. 494.

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