EAGLE DANCE OF THE MESA GRANDE (DIEGUENO) TRIBE*

Anonymous

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The past month has witnessed the disappearance of one more link in the chain between the remnant of Indian life in Southern California and the past. The eagle dance has been held for the last time. It was performed only in commemoration of the death of a chief, and the last chief of the Mesa Grande tribe is dead.

With old Cinon Duro, or, to use his Indian name, Mata Whur, "hard rock," the wealth of the traditions of the Southern California Indians was also buried, excepting for fragmentary records gathered by a few ethnologists. This ancient man had no son to whom he could intrust the sacred mission; he was over 100 and had practically outlived his own descendants.

In 1860 he had four sons. This to itself is an illustration of civilizing influences, a fact which is further emphasized at the spectacle of the dances, when the gap between the little group of eight or ten dancers, all over ninety, wiry, athletic, tireless, and the lounging spectators of their own people, young fellows, none of them over forty, is especially noticeable.

Even at his extreme age Cinon's death was an unexpected shock to his people, coming accidentally through a fall from a horse. This was one year ago, and his burial rites were solemnized both in the Catholic faith, which the Indian religiously observes, and the ancient nature worship which is his religion. None appreciated the tragedy of his race more than this ancient chief, whose last words were "Mo-some! Hoomow-no-some!" (It is finished; the tribe is finished).

The Catholic services were followed by the fiesta for the dead which lasted seven days and nights. Almost immediately preparations were begun for the eagle fiesta, the mark of honor to the last hereditary ruler of a people whose boast it had been that "when the hills were young they had played upon their crests." This fiesta was to be given in one year when the brown September hills and turning oaks and willows would mark the anniversary of his death.

The celebration was the gift of the Duro clan, old Cinon's own, to its sister clans and to all the tribes of Southern California. Its welcome also extended to the white visitors, and a large number of these availed

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themselves of the opportunity for a closer study and recording of the customs of the passing people. Over 500 Indians were present, representing the Pala, San Ysidro, Inaja, Rincon, Santa Ysabel, Mission, and Agua Caliente tribes, coming from the seashore, the desert edge, the fertile valleys to the north, and far southern mountains.

For fully a month before the last three days of the fiesta practice dances were held in groups of three nights each at the old rancheria, a large square inclosure of brush-built ramadas with an open plaza in the center, at one end of which was a carefully leveled circle of earth, beaten hard by the tramping of many bare feet, the dancing floor of the ancient Indian ceremonials.

He also carries two clapping sticks and is elaborately painted with markings of white and blue. He pauses and bows before old Antonio, brother of the chief, who beats time with a rattle formerly made of dried deer skin inclosing deer toes, but now deteriorated to a baking powder can filled with pebbles.

Then the dance begins, a group of squaws intoning a low musical chant.

The solemnities of the night were prefaced during the afternoon by the tatahuila, or whirling dance; a dance really joyous in character and in contrast with the somber fierceness and tragedy of the night ceremonies, seeming almost the comedy of dances. There is but one principal performer and an attendant who resembles the funny man in a circus act, leading the dancer to fresh exertions and exploits.

This man enters the circle first with smiling countenance trotting around the ring and rattling his clapping sticks. Then kneeling in the center of the circle he strikes an attitude of invocation, holding it immovably for perhaps five minutes, while the real dancer appears, clad only in the pluma, or feather skirt and head dress of eagle feathers.

Faster and faster he whirls, crouching, leaping, sidestepping airily, his flying feather garment seemingly bouying him up in the air. Under and over clap the time-beating sticks, higher he leaps, whirling about several times before touching the earth, an astonishing exhibition of strength and agility.

Ever whirling, whirling, a veritable dervish, he passes about the circle with a marvelous sureness of direction. All this time, at intervals, the family of Cinon toss handfuls of money and yards of calicoes upon the dancing floor, which are gifts eagerly gathered in by their guests. For from half to three-quarters of an hour the athlete, a man of some fifty years, continues his strenuous exertions, and then at their height stops suddenly, quietly, and walks steadily from the circle - a performance in itself not the least of his feats.

The purple dusk settles into the star gemmed blackness of the night. From far and near the people of the mountainside and the strangers gather. Cowboys in leather chaps and jingling spurs jostle alike their Indian comrades, gay with cerise and green handkerchiefs, and young city fellows in khaki. Matrons in calicoes, girls in white shirt waist suits, businesslike women with notebooks, and Indian maidens with scarlet ribbons entwined in their glossy locks, all mingle with one common interest.

An ethnologist from a distant city stands by the adjusted mechanism of his phonograph, which is to perpetuate the existence of the quaint aboriginal chanting, the ancient language from the primeval Yuman stock, the heritage despised and forsaken by the last of its possessors. Outside, beside the restless, tethered ponies, automobiles chug and chir, a strange juxtaposition of extremes.

At the calling cry of a summoner a line of ancient figures file in full war regalia. Standing before the seated group of cantadoras, the women who had grown old beside them, they begin a slow shuffling step, grunting a low, strongly accented, "mh-m-m-hm!" with each heavy thud of the bare feet. They are led by the centenarian, Antonio, and his shrunken form, and the pathetic dignity in his drawn, parchment-like face is the epitome of the whole inexorable drama.

And now mingling with the utter barbarism of the dancers' voices comes a gentle underbreath of tone, droning, almost inaudible, like insects on a midsummer afternoon. It gathers in volume with a steady swelling rhythm, low, musical, with slight minor inflections. The voices are as one voice, a full barytone quality that slides easily and accurately through the many intricate changes of the theme.

Higher in the scale, louder and more intense grows the resonant melody, plaintive and heart piercing in its weird modulations of thirds and fifths that is never cognized in our modern system of notation, the primitive nature cry of the nature people. Fiercer grows the movement of the dancers, stamping, crouching, with outthrust arms and wild bursts of guttural melody; and more passionately the swaying climbing cadences of the singers rise, in strange accents of twos and threes, the essence of the elemental.

From the midst of the turning, twisting figures one deplumed dancer leaps, and with his staff, scatters living coals from the bed of fire about the dancing floor. The old warriors circle about this central figure, back and forth their bare feet treading the glowing embers, occasionally stooping to gather them in their hands and placing them to their lips, a veritable fire-eating incantation.

Singers and dancers alike are wrought to a frenzy of exaltation, and the scene is awe inspiring even in this its last expiring gasp, when on a sudden all ceases, a thick, utterly motionless silence falls upon the entire scene. Then the old men walk slowly about uttering a peculiar indrawn neighing sound and the war dance is finished.

As usual, the first two days and nights of the fiesta were by forerunners, working up to the final pitch of the last night. Then the sacred eagle would be killed with great ceremony, mysteriously and without pain, and his freed spirit would carry the last communication from the living to the dead.

The spectators move cautiously about, looking at one another with uncertain smiles and conversing in low tones, while a huge oak log fire is being built in the center of the beaten earth of the vacant circles. Then Antonio appears marching with solemn tread about the blazing logs and keeping time with his rattle to a plaintive reiterated monotone of chanting.

Gradually he is joined by groups of the relatives and friends of the dead chief, all singing the mournful, low-toned refrain and moving in single file about the fire with a curious twisting step which throws the body far to one side and then the other. Forty or fifty people join in the procession, young and old, gay gallants with brilliant neckerchiefs and their grandfathers in overalls, old women and girls, some of them bowed with grief, the tears streaming down their faces, and all with a settled solemnity of aspect.

Then as the burden of this mourning becomes unbearable it is all hushed at a signal, and the announcement is made that at the rising of the morning star the sacred eagle will be killed by magic, painlessly, by the Indian medicine men, who will thus show their superiority over the white medicine men.

The bird is borne in by the four hechiceros or medicine men, each of whom is hideously painted and garbed elaborately in the feather skirts and headdresses which are a mark of rank in the tribe. The leading conjurer, Narciso, a powerfully built man, carries the eagle about the inner circle, close to the flaring, smoking blaze of the fire.

The bird stares straight ahead with wide-open, curved beak and lolling tongue. It is for some reason strangely stupid. Its feet are bound together with cords, but it makes no movement to attack its captors with its powerful beak.

Even when with shrieking and muttering incantations and medicine men strike it with their feathered wands and blow tobacco smoke into its eyes it does not heed, but stares inscrutably back into their contorted faces, perhaps beyond into the vista of its fast-approaching destiny when it shall be traversing the star-strewn path of the Milky Way, "the pathway of departing spirits," on its heavenly mission.

The witch doctors seemingly exhaust every effort in the working of the charm; they breathe heavily as though spent with exertion, grimacing, crouching. With mystic passes they point their wizard wands at their helpless victim, and at length, when more than one white spectator has turned away, the fine head suddenly lifts and is thrown back as though in a final struggle for its swiftly departing life, sinks slowly from side to side, and then hangs limp upon the feathered breast. The messenger has departed.

The dead body is carried in triumph by one and another during the interminable figure of the dance. A raw chill creeps into the air. The remaining spectators gather their wraps more closely about them. The fire becomes a smoldering heap of embers.

Low on the eastern horizon the long night watch of the stars is paling before a gray creeping tinge of light. The dancers halt. The head men, the capitans, pluck the large feathers from the bird for the making of dancing skirts.

The denuded body is wrapped in red cloth, and a grave is dug in the warm earth underneath the spot where the fire has burned all night. Reverently the old men kneel about the tiny grave. Softly the mourners chant as the bird is lifted to the north, the south, the east, and the west.

Then as the grave is filled and smoothed by the old hands of the kneeling men, the white-haired Antonio lifts his arms to the skies, a last high priest to an ancient rite speeding the departed messenger, pleading that sorrow, sickness, hunger, and death might not visit the pueblo, and invoking the power of the great eagle god, who brought the people for many moons from the far south across the mountains and the desert, in that far past time when the earth was young.

And so has the fiesta of the eagle dance passed.