

HOW THOUGHTS CAN KILL IN "PSYCHIC DUELS" *

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The most extraordinary duels in the world are fought in California. Not in the movies, either, though any of these contests would make a tensely dramatic scene.

The strangest of all personal battles are fought by clashing minds. Not a pistol is fired. No sword flashes through the air. The fighters merely face one another and hurl their thoughts and power until the weaker fighter falls down helpless - - paralyzed, maybe, or even dead. Yes, stone dead.

You don't believe thoughts can kill?

Testimony that thoughts have this deadly power has come to Washington recently from two sources.

Chief Wi'ishi, athletic young Indian of the Mission tribe in California, visiting Washington, told of his own experiences in such combats. With smiles and gestures, he showed how the power is hurled from heart to heart, straight as the blow of a fist from a Joe Louis or a Max Baer.

And listening to Chief Wi'ishi, Dr. John P. Harrington of the Bureau of American Ethnology nodded his assurance that these psychic battles do take place, sometimes with crippling or fatal results. White men are not generally welcome at these little known events. But Dr. Harrington has spent many years among the Mission Indians, studying vanishing customs of the aboriginal New World. He has attended some of the secret contests, and has heard stories of other duels which have become Indian history.

From what he has seen and heard, Dr. Harrington has come to a surprising conclusion about the American Indian's psychic powers. It seems surprising in view of the fame of Hindus in this field. He says plainly that American Indians surpassed Oriental mystics of India in psychic exploits.

As for white men in America, Dr. Harrington dismisses the lot with a casual: "We are mere infants compared to the Indian in use of mental power."

The American Indian set great store by psychic development, regarding material show as not nearly so important, he explains. All Indians tried to develop their minds in such matters as concentration and meditation. They

* San Francisco Chronicle (newspaper), Sunday, September 15, 1935. Also published in Daily Palo Alto Times, December 20, 1935. (The tribe to which Wi'ishi belonged is probably Luiseno). W. D. Strong (Univ. Calif. Publs. Amer. Arch. and Ethnol., Vol. 26:168, 1929) describes Cahuilla shaman's contests.

tried to learn healing and killing art through dreams, and to draw on reserves of power that they felt within them.

American Indians could - and a few still can - perform stunts equal to the famous Hindu rope trick and other illusions of the fakirs in India. They mastered the secrets of hypnotism. They claimed power to kill an enemy 100 miles away. More startling than that, they claimed power to restore life to an apparently lifeless form.

All this being the case, you can see why a battle of power between two master minds would be a super-attraction in the Indian world. For the Indian crowd, it had all the excitement of Spain's bull-fighting contests - - well known men in a supreme struggle before their eyes, with death perhaps for a sudden ending.

For the fighters, the contest was a solemn and necessary business. They had to go through with it. They were medicine men, depending heavily on psychic powers in their healing. Well, then, they were expected to show off on these occasions, let the public see that they could indeed work wonders.

If a medicine man won a knockout victory, he could count on plenty of patients. If he lost! Down went his prestige. He might be left paralyzed, helpless. But he had to take that risk.

The psychic battles took place, and still do, Dr. Harrington explains, at inter-village fiestas which Mission Indians hold at intervals. More than anything else, the villages look forward to these fiestas. Village chiefs arrange for the affairs in advance and pay for them by an elaborate system of banking, using shell wampum for money.

Messengers of the chief giving the fiesta go out to invite the people of villages all around. And on the appointed day, each group arrives at the village in ceremonial entry, hearing welcoming speeches and returning them.

"Among the invited villagers of a group," says Dr. Harrington, "there is sure to be a medicine man, one revered for his powers over the unseen universe. He walks over to men of his own class and power, who may be standing among the receiving group, and in a very few words he invites them to a test of power.

"They draw a line on the ground, like the goal line for a tug-of-war, while the challenger goes down to the creek and prepares for the contest by painting his face or putting on ceremonial costume, even if only adding a feather to his hair or fixing his necklace.

"When he emerges, he is no longer the man that retired from their sight. He is changed, like a rampaging bull. He marches on, with clutching hands, extracting from the air an invisible power.

"Beyond the line stand the waiting medicine men - sometimes not merely one, but four or five opponents lined against him. They stand tense, not knowing what fate is in store for them. Every one knows that men have fallen dead in these contests.

"Still the challenger comes on, snatching, forming, and holding the invisible power of the universe in his two hands, and ready to throw it when least expected.

"Suddenly he throw it! One of the receiving medicine men falls, foams at the mouth, kicks, and lies still. The crowd stirs, wondering if he is stunned or dead.

"But the injured medicine man staggers to his feet again. He gathers power, and with gestures of catching and holding it, he suddenly shoots it back at the intruder. All the medicine men hurl their power at the challenger. Still, the intruder does not fall. He pushes forward daringly and crosses the line in triumph."

After the contest, which in this case does not include a funeral, the winning medicine man is the hero of the fiesta. He has withstood the power of four of the most powerful medicine men of the countryside.

"Indians with knowing smiles and secret conversation about the fiesta ground congratulate the winner on having crossed the line," says Dr. Harrington. The man's reputation is made for months to come. He will have no trouble in getting cases of sickness of the kind he knows best how to cure, and he is sure of liberal payments. He is a great doctor."

But what actually happens when mind struggles with mind "to the death"? Chief Wi'ishi, who talks halting English in his soft, very low voice, explains it one way. Dr. Harrington another.

Says the young chief: My father, he medicine man. My grandpa, my great-grandpa, he medicine man. Only medicine man's son has this power. It given to me by my father. Power thrown from here - inside - so. Power strike down, ill."

Dr. Harrington's explanation is that if an Indian dies in these combats, he really kills himself. It is the fear, the excitement of the contest, and perhaps the sickening feeling inside that he is indeed not so strong as his rampaging opponent.

Chief Wi'ishi, politely smiling, is not quite sure that all this talk of auto-suggestion is as good as his own simple explanation. But, whatever the inner facts may be, as Dr. Harrington points out, the fundamental fact remains: thoughts and fears act as weapons in these fights, dealing knockout blows.

In these Indians, the subconscious mind, Dr. Harrington goes on to explain in Freudian terms, becomes so conditioned to seeing certain activity follow certain stimuli that it is only necessary to furnish the accustomed environment for the Indians to expect a given result. In this case, the downfall or "permanent damage" to the weaker fighter is a foregone conclusion. Therefore, it happens.

Like the Hindu, who can make a tree grow before the astonished eyes of a crowd, the Indian medicine man performs similar feats that depend on hypnotism of a whole group. Dr. Harrington has seen them raise a stick from the ground without touching it, make it sink again, or follow them. Tables can be made to engage in the same unnatural behavior.

"That's hypnotism," says Dr. Harrington, accounting for medicine man's "power" in modern terms. "The Bible miracle of Aaron's rod turning into a serpent before the eyes of Pharaoh is somewhat similar, and may have been achieved by similar means.

Like the Indian whose own fears and self-suggestion kill or paralyze him in a psychic duel, the Indian who knows he is being attacked by a powerful medicine man with magic rites, may actually die of heart failure, or a stroke. Or he may worry himself into a "rundown" physical state in which he is ready to take almost any disease that comes along. If he dies in a reasonable time, the medicine man has done nothing to kill - except induce the victim to destroy himself.

The Indian, accustomed to regard psychic forces as tremendously real, is a ready prey for such thoughts. So, the medicine man "gets his man" more often than he could in a more resistant and tough-minded society.

As for the medicine man's ability to raise the dead, Dr. Harrington finds, while that is impressive to hear about, it actually is not an example of psychic power, either on the part of the Indian doctor or the patient. It is merely an accident, when it happens.