

THE MOHAVE "GHOST DOCTOR"

The Mohave, along with the other River Yumans, had a number of beliefs centering around the idea of ghosts.¹ The "ghost doctor" or *n'avđi sumac*, was a shaman who possessed the ability, as a result of experiencing a power dream, to deal with ghosts in a variety of situations.

Following cremation, the soul remained near the site of the pyre four days. At the end of this time the soul changed into a ghost which was then able to see the road to the afterworld. This started at Topock and ran south into the desert in the neighborhood of the Bill Williams River.² In the afterworld the ghosts met their dead relatives and friends and lived a pleasant existence, plentiful food being provided by four "vines," one each of corn, beans, melons, and pumpkins. After a time in the afterworld the first of several metamorphoses occurred, which finally resulted in charcoal in the desert, the final stage.

In addition to this conception, the Mohave believed that some people turned into owls after death. As one informant phrased it, "the owls are persons—the dead ones." If cremation did not completely destroy the heart, the small piece remaining turned into an owl. A drop of blood from the heart would also develop into an owl. This supposedly accounts for the fact that newly hatched owls are quite red. A shaman who killed a person by witchcraft watched the site of his victim's cremation for four days to see if a baby owl would appear. The baby owl would hide in the brush until the older owls came to get him. When the owl grew up his cry would tell the name of the man who bewitched him. The shaman tried to prevent this by capturing the baby owl and throwing it in the river. Owls were dangerous omens; an owl crying near the house at twilight meant a death in the family.

The *n'avđi sumac*, or ghost doctor, was familiar with the spirit world in all its ramifications. He obtained his power in a dream as a child, but did not start to practice until early adulthood. In his hair he wore owl feathers, which had been dipped in red paint. The ghost doctor was able to cure people who became ill as a result of violating the funeral taboos or dreaming of dead relatives or friends. People afflicted with the ghost sickness were afraid of darkness, experienced nightmares, were unable to sleep at night, and cried for long periods of time. The shaman could also produce these symptoms by witchcraft, causing the victim to see whirlwinds, in which ghosts travelled, and to have bad dreams, which produced the sickness.

The ghost doctor also could take people to the spirit world, although he did not encourage this because it was dangerous. He warned the person who wished to see a dead relative: "Be careful. If our hands slip apart, I'll have to look for you all night. If I don't find you before morning we will both be stuck here." The shaman and the person who was to accompany him dressed in their best clothes and painted themselves. About twilight they built a small brush shelter and then lay down to sleep with their hands clasped. In less than an hour they were transported to the afterworld. The ghost doctor knew exactly where the person's family was, so they went directly there.

¹ Kelly, 1949; Devereux, 1935, pp. 113-114.

² Devereux, 1935, p. 114, states that the land of the dead is under the Colorado River. Drucker, 1941, p. 148, agrees with my information in saying that the land of the dead was to the south.

They visited with friends, relatives, and sweethearts who were glad to see them. Their hosts showed them around the afterworld, although it was too big to see all of it in the short time available to them. The relatives and friends tried to pull the ghost doctor's companion away so that he would have to stay with them. By dawn the visit was ended. The shaman awakened first and aroused his companion. Both of them had to fast and bathe for four days following this experience.

The ghost doctor also utilized his power over owls to prevent certain instances of crop damage by rats. Occasionally a shaman who had some power over mice and rats of various kinds sent them to eat the seed of a man whom he disliked. If this happened several times, while nearby plots were not bothered, the farmer knew that he was being harmed by this shaman. The farmer then went to the ghost doctor for assistance. The shaman found an owl and took two feathers from each wing, attaching them separately to four poles which were erected at the northwest, northeast, southwest, and southeast sides of the field. Two additional poles were placed in the center of the field, with a third pole as a crossbar between them. Then the farmer planted his field again. At night a number of owls came to the field and sat on the crossbar, remaining for four days during which time they killed all the rats. According to one informant, the last person who had this power has been dead for about fifteen years.

All students of the Yuman tribes of the Colorado River have stressed the absence of attempts to increase the crop yield or to prevent crop failure by supernatural means. Castetter and Bell, for example, summarize their findings in the following quotation: "In fact, Kelly reports that attempts to control the supernatural with reference to agriculture, even by the simplest of magical devices, were almost certainly absent among the Cocopa and we found no evidence of such, apart from the Yuma continence, fasting, etc., mentioned, among the River Yumans."³ Field work with the Mohave reinforces the conclusions arrived at by these men. The magical practice described above, in which the ghost doctor used his power over owls to rid a farmer's field of rats, gives indirect confirmation of the generalization offered by Castetter and Bell. The ghost doctor drove away rats that had been visited upon a particular farmer by witchcraft. He did not use his power in the interest of the whole tribe against the "natural" depredations of rats. Interfering with the processes of nature, even though these might bring disaster, was not part of the Mohave way of life.

In concluding this note on the Mohave ghost doctor, the close connection of this status to that of "scalper" or "enemy dreamer," *axwe sumac*, is worthy of mention. This official was a shaman who accompanied war parties and took the scalps of slain enemies. He "tamed" them on the way home, and then turned them over to the *k^waxot*, or "custodian of the scalps" along with the prisoners, who were usually women and girls. His role was based upon his ability to cure the "enemy sickness" which resulted from close contact with foreigners and which pervaded the scalps until they were "tamed." The *axwe sumac* was also said to have been the director of the mourning ceremonies held in honor of dead warriors. He spoke in the spirit language on these occasions and cured people who fainted during the ceremony, or violated the taboos in connection with it. Informants also said that the "enemy dreamer" cured people who became insane as a result of dreaming of their dead relatives. As indicated above,

³ Castetter and Bell, 1951, p. 227.

this was also described as the function of the ghost doctor, as was the curing of people who violated the taboos at mourning ceremonies and funerals. The symptoms of both "ghost sickness" and "enemy sickness" were largely the same, described by informants as "insane" behavior.

These discrepancies indicate the possibility that the *n'av̄di sumac* and the *axwe sumac* may actually have been the same official, although informants persisted in discussing them separately. Logically, the scalps, which were pervaded with "enemy sickness" were also part of a dead person, and thus might have caused the "ghost sickness." This would not apply to the disease resulting from contact with live foreigners, such as the female prisoners, unless both "ghost sickness" and "enemy sickness" were different aspects of the same disease, which resulted from contact of a personal kind with all but "Real Mohaves."⁴ It is possible that one official dealt with sickness arising from all personal contact with non-Mohaves, both ghosts and foreigners, but that the people used separate terms to distinguish his role in connection with warfare and the enemy, from his dealings with the ghosts of dead tribesmen. On the other hand, there may have been two separate types of status, usually, but not necessarily, filled by the same shaman, since the same person sometimes dreamed the power to perform several shamanistic specialties. A third possibility is that the discrepancies found in the informants' statements simply reflect confusion arising as the patterns of the culture started to break down under the impact of white domination. Further research, or data in the possession of one of the other students of the Mohave, may clarify this point.

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⁴ Devereux, 1935, pp. 125-139.