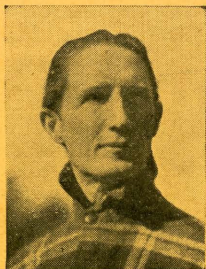


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# Hopi Snake Dance and Fish Ceremony

By Robert E. Callahan

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## HOPI SNAKE DANCE

By Robert E. Callahan

Adobes, adobes! Mud-made Hopi houses!  
Peepholes! Odd-shaped doors and windows!  
Crooked ladders that lead to second and  
third story roofs!

No book about the West would be complete without many pages depicting the life of the American Indian. He had his art, music, song and dance; much of which, however, the white man has never understood.

The weird cry of the Indian in the forest, the shriek of his war call on the wind-swept plains, the drone of his beating drum, and ceremonial dance, wrote the first chapters of American history, and of all dances, song or Indian drama, the Hopi Snake Dance is the most colorful ceremony of its kind known on the American Continent.

For centuries, back in the hills of Arizona, there has lived a secret clan of Indians, who annually give a religious dance in which they fondle poisonous snakes as a child would handle a Christmas toy. It is in appreciation of the gathering of crops and in prayer for rain, that this annual historical and dramatic ceremony is given.

So come with us to a desolate, ancient village, miles from any railroad. The blistering August sun beats down with relentless fury upon the mud-made houses, with odd-shaped doors and windows, and crooked

ladders—in striking contrast to the white man's habitation. Scores of these ancient weather-beaten adobes, the color of desert dust, are perched high on a mesa along the edge of precipitous cliffs; long strands of red peppers hang at the doors; strings of corn, clay water-jars and dried coon, rabbit and wild cat skins, swing from hand-made beams which support the roofs.

A huge throng of people are crowded about the large open court or patio; some are gazing from peepholes, windows and doors; others are sitting, some are squatting on the ground. Great crowds are standing like packed sardines on the flat clay-baked roofs.

Thousands of Indians in their brilliant red blankets, deep purple and bright blue shawls, green and orange scarves, stand out in colorful contrast to the drab background of adobe and barren sky.

Indians here, Indians there, Hopi and Navajo everywhere; from far away they come—Apaches, Yumas, Pueblos and Zunis; a few scattered Sioux, Mohawks, Mission and Cheyenne, attired in the colors of the virgin forest, the moon, stars, and the redness of a sunset sky, Autumn leaves or desert flowers—a shirt or sash for every color; beaded moccasins of every hue; trousers fringed and ornamented with white beads, sea-shells or porcupine quills.

Countless tall Navajos wearing hammered silver bracelets, artistic rings and turquoise beads, and wrapped in blankets of the most brilliant colors to be found.

Indian maidens, bronzed and beautiful, with long strands of seashells, or polished squirrel teeth, and gleaming strings of beads around their necks; a few tall, lean, lonely looking men, bare above the waist, red beaded bands around their foreheads, are sitting astride hillside ponies, halter around the horse's head, drowsily standing in the shadows of the Hopi's home.

Silence suddenly falls upon the colorful throng as the village crier, attired in bright blue shirt, drab brown trousers and a red beaded band around his forehead, is seen climbing a ladder, moving with the poise and majesty of a king. He mounts the third story roof, and takes his stand with upstretched hands, silhouetted against the opal sky, and now, with startling quickness his strong voice breaks the stillness of the colorful multitude, as it rings out in a clarion call.

The air is tense with wonderment; there is a sense of awe as the antelope priests, eight in number, attired in weird costumes of gunny sack, bodies like dusty prison walls, heads wrapped with skins, entwined with dry cornstalk leaves, emerge from the

sacred Kiva and thread their way to the plaza.

They circle it four times and take a position beside the "Kissa," the depository for the poisonous snakes. We hear them shake their rattles and stamp their feet . . . the weird dance is on.

Eight dancers are moving rapidly from the snake Kiva; their bodies are painted a greyish black, splotched with dull brown. Their headgear is of fur, feathers and porcupine quills. Long moccasins, resembling the Eskimo toboggan, encase their thudding feet; long foxskins dangle from their waists.

They have circled the plaza now and have formed a line before the Antelope Priests; there they sway back and forth, bending and rising their elastic bodies in perfect rhythm to the stamping of feet and the continuous rattle of little gourd drums.

Three groups comprise the dancers; those who seize the snakes and hold them between their teeth as they prance about the plaza. The huggers, who offer protection by stroking the snake's head with an eagle feather; and the gatherers, who pick up the snakes as they are dropped to the ground and start scuttling toward the excited spectators.

Round and round they go, holding the rattlesnakes in every position; by the head—by the body—by the tail—utterly oblivious

"My seven braves," he said, "Will go into yonder land, and in the light of the midnight star, must catch seven fish, without hook or line, and bring them back alive. Then my braves will help me feast upon the fish, and Big Chief will be free from pain—it is the wish of the Great Spirit."

The young brave bowed his head to his superior, backed out of the tee-pee and within a few minutes, seven braves had departed from the Indian camp in quest of seven fish.

When dawn broke, the seven braves returned, and each one had small rainbow trout. As they entered the council tee-pee, the Chief rose from his bed of wolf skins and sweet grass, instructed them to dig up and transplant a young pine near the open flap of the tee-pee. "The seven fish must be tied by their tails to branches of the young pine," he said, "A nest of sweet grass must be placed in the top of the bush, and the tail of each fish must be cut and placed in the nest."

After this procedure, the Chief slowly rose on hands and knees, and feebly crawled out of his council home toward the young plant, where he took from his medicine bag a narrow strip of buffalo bone and a pouch of red and green paint. He painted four red and four green stripes across the bellies of the fish. Then one of the braves

took four gourd dippers of water from the stream and poured it into a boiling kettle half filled with sweet grass and buffalo fat in which, after the water was boiled, he bathed his hands.

Next came the final part of his dream. He stretched himself upon the ground, his face to the blazing sun; then he asked for the Fish God dance, and to the drone of a beating drum, the seven braves slowly began a new step and danced around his prostrate form. Bending, rising, and in perfect step, they circled the gaunt frame of the Chief. The youngest of the braves suddenly broke from the line of dancers and leaped upon the prone man, to take several symbolic steps upon his spine, to be quickly followed by the other braves, who pounced upon the old Chief in order to drive from his body the evil spirits which were about to send him to the Happy Hunting Ground.

After the dance, one by one, each Indian beheaded his fish, handing half the body to the Indian Chief, taking the other half for himself, and again the dance continued.

Seven times the dancers circled the Chief, their steps faster, their voices louder, and their stoical faces grim with determination. As they passed around the Chief the seventh time, they formed a circle around the tee-pee, then sat down to watch the old Chief, who turned over, rose to his hands and

knees, crawled back into the tee-pee, turned his face to the open flap, and one by one ate each fish. As he swallowed the last piece of flesh, the seven braves also ate their painted fish.

As the twilight shadows enveloped the Indian camp, dogs barked, drums beat, and the squaws began a dance which would not cease until the rising of another sun. Near the flap of the council tee-pee, the leader of the seven braves was fanning the air with a colorful blanket saturated with sweet grass and buffalo fat, which was to induce sleep and ward off evil spirits that might enter the Indian's home during the night.

The following dawn every person in the little village was in a happy frame of mind; the Chief had regained his vigor and strength, and felt more like a man of thirty than a man of his eighty summers. Again he was ready to lead his tribe through important councils, guide them through peace and war, and carry them through many successful hunts.

To this day the Fish Indians dance in commemoration of their implicit faith in the dream of the old Chief, and each year, ever since that dance, seven braves are picked from the tribe to perform the ceremony in order that they may become strong, and go through life purified and prepared to enter the Spirit World.