

OMAHA IMAGES OF RENEWAL

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ABSTRACT/RESUME

In 1911 Fletcher and La Flesche published their comprehensive volume on the Omaha, written from an Omaha viewpoint as one of the last comprehensive ethnographies of a northern plains society. The author reviews their work, noting how easily it can be comprehended in terms of the Omaha of today, a society which has not disappeared, but which has undergone change and renewal.

En 1911 Fletcher et La Flesche publièrent leur ouvrage d'ensemble sur les Omaha, rédigé du point de vue des Omaha, comme une des dernières ethnographies complètes d'une société des plaines du nord. L'auteur fait le compte rendu de leur oeuvre, remarquant combien il est aisé de la comprendre dans les termes des Omaha d'aujourd'hui, une société qui n'a pas disparue, mais qui a subi un changement et un renouvellement.

Introduction

The Omaha are one of the five Dhegiha Siouan tribes. In early historic times they were farmers and bison hunters in lands bordering the middle and upper Missouri River. Today they occupy a reservation in eastern Nebraska. During their buffalo hunting days, the Omaha practiced an elaborate ceremonial order.¹

Much of what outsiders know today about traditional Omaha ceremony was recorded by Alice Fletcher and Francis La Resche during the last decades of the nineteenth century. Francis La Flesche was himself a member of the tribe and experienced many of the ceremonies as a participant. They reported their findings in *The Omaha Tribe*, the 27th Annual Report of the Bureau of American Ethnology, published in 1911. Their work is an ethnographic classic because it provides detailed description of a Native American ceremonial order. It is also a classic because it explains that order in relation to cosmic images that underlie Omaha thought and experience.

Fletcher and La Resche describe an image of cosmic union that runs through Omaha thought and surfaces in myth, ceremony, and social organization. Omaha clans are divided into moieties called *Inshtacunda*, "Sky People," and *Hongashenu*, "Earth People." "Myths," according to Fletcher and La Flesche, "relate that human beings were born of a union between the Sky People and the Earth People." This union, they say, "was conceived to be necessary to the existence of the tribe." Omaha renewal ceremonies channel the energy of creation into the life of the tribe. They are a kind of ritual theatre that make the tribe's cosmic images manifest for all to see and experience. This paper describes images of renewal that these ceremonies bring to the public view. It recontextualizes information given by Fletcher and La Flesche in *The Omaha Tribe* and argues that their interpretive language resonates well with modern understandings of traditional cosmology.

The Sacred Pole

The Omaha came to their present location along the middle Missouri River from a place that was "near a large body of water, in a wooded country where there was game" (Fletcher and La Flesche, 1911:70). Throughout the historic period they moved extensively. Even after taking up residence in earth lodge villages copied from those of the other Missouri River tribes, the Omaha continued to move as a single tribal unit during the annual buffalo hunt. Their camp circle, the *Huthuga*, was divided into northern and southern halves. The Sky People camped to the north, the Earth People to the south. The *Huthuga* was open to the east like the tipi of a single family. "Through

it, the people went forth in quest of game, and through it they returned with their supply of food, as one enters the door of one's home" (Fletcher and La Flesche, 1911:137-138). Omaha images of renewal follow the multiple connections implicit in the metaphor of the Huthuga as a family dwelling of the tribe as a whole.

During their existence as buffalo hunters, the Omaha represented their tribal identity by a Sacred Pole that was carried from camp to camp by a priest or "Keeper," selected from a particular group within the Honga, or Leader clan which occupied a position to the south of the Huthuga. Fletcher and La Flesche wrote that the Omaha Sacred Pole and its ceremonial traditions presented a central image from which to understand the overall cosmology of the tribe. The Sacred Pole, like the Huthuga, represented an essence of Omaha identity.

When the buffalo disappeared and the Omaha settled on their reservation in eastern Nebraska they abandoned the ceremony of renewing the Pole. Its last Keeper was an old man named Shudenachi, "Smoked Yellow," a reference to the appearance of the Honga's Sacred Tent. Fletcher and La Flesche believed that if the Pole and its story were buried with Smoked Yellow rather than being transferred to the care and keeping of anthropology, "the full story of the tribe (would) be forever lost, for that story was as yet imperfectly known." The Pole and its sacred legend they said, could provide "a point of view whence to study, as from the center, the ceremonies connected with these articles and their relation to the autonomy of the tribe" (Fletcher and La Flesche, 1911:222). In September of 1888, Smoked Yellow agreed to tell the story of the Pole to Fletcher and La Flesche. The story Smoked Yellow told to Fletcher and La Flesche came to rest at the center of the 27th Annual Report of the Bureau of American Ethnology.

We would call the Pole's origin story a "myth." To the Omaha, it is tribal history. It tells of essential rather than contingent truth. Its events reflect universal patterns of relationship between the social and the natural order rather than the particular happenings of a single time and place. In order to understand Indian history, the scholar must become familiar with the conventions of a symbolic language that was, and continues to be, enacted in the tribe's ritual order. The following is a precis of the Sacred story as Fletcher and La Flesche recorded it:

The son of an Omaha chief was hunting alone in the forest at a time when the elders were in council "to devise some means by which the bands of the tribe might be kept together and the tribe itself saved from extinction." On his way home he came to a great forest and in the night lost his way. He stopped to rest

and to find the "motionless star" (the pole star) for his guide when he was suddenly attracted by a light. When he approached the light he saw that it was "a tree that sent forth light. He went up to it and found that the whole tree, its trunk, branches, and leaves, were alight, yet remained unconsumed."

The young man watched the luminous tree "until with the rising of the sun the tree with its foliage resumed its natural appearance." He remained by it throughout the day. "As twilight came on it began to be luminous and continued so until the sun rose again. When the young man returned home he told his father of the wonder. Together they went to see the tree; they saw it all alight as it was before but the father observed something that had escaped the notice of the young man; this was that four animal paths led to it. These paths were well beaten and as the two men examined the paths and the tree, it was clear to them that the animals came to the tree and had rubbed against it and polished its bark by doing so."

The young man's father told the Chiefs of all the tribes, Myson has seen a wonderful tree. The Thunder birds come and go upon this tree, making a trail of fire that leaves four paths on the burnt grass that stretch toward the Four Winds. When the Thunder birds alight upon the tree it burst into flame and the fire mounts to the top. The tree stands burning, but no one can see the fire except at night."

The men of the tribe returned to the tree. They stripped, painted themselves, put on their ornaments and "ran as in a race to attack the tree as if it were a warrior enemy." The first to reach the tree struck it as he would an enemy. Then they cut the tree down "and four men, walking in a line, carried it on their shoulders to the village." They made a tent for the tree and set it up within the circle of lodges.

"The chiefs worked upon the tree; they trimmed it and called it a human being. They made a basketwork receptacle of twigs and feathers and tied it about the middle." Then they painted the Pole and set it up before the tent, leaning it on a crotched stick which they called among the (a staff)."

When the people were gathered, the Chiefs stood up and said, "You now see before you a mystery. Whenever we meet with troubles we shall bring all our troubles to Him (The Pole). We shall make offerings and requests. All our prayers must be accompanied by gifts. This (the Pole) belongs to all the people, but it shall be in the keeping of one family (in the Honga gens) and the leadership shall be with them. If anyone desires to lead and to take responsibility in governing the people, he shall give him authority."

When all was finished the people said, "Let us appoint a time when we shall again paint him and act before him the battles we have fought." The time was fixed. It was to take place in "The Moon When the Buffaloes Bellow." This was the beginning of the ceremony of Waxthexexigithe and it was agreed that this ceremony should be kept up (Fletcher and La Flesche, 1911:217-219).

Waxthexexigithe: The Ceremony of Renewal

The Sacred Pole had the power of motion, the power of life. During the "moon when the buffaloes bellow" this life was renewed. The renewal ceremony was called Waxthexexigithe. It took place after the fourth communal hunt of the season and following the four ceremonies connected with the buffalo tongues and hearts. Its name means, "the Sacred Pole - to tinge with red." Alice Fletcher and Francis La Flesche described the ceremonial events that made up Waxthexexigithe. The following is a precis of their description (Fletcher and La Flesche, 1911:230-244) juxtaposed with my own analysis of symbolic meanings suggested by information from the overall context of their ethnography.

When the time for renewal was on hand, the Waxthexeton sub-clan of the Honga clan, who had charge of the Pole, called the Seven Chiefs of the tribe's governing council to their Sacred Tent. Inside the closed tent, they sat clad in buffalo robes. They let their hair flow down their backs outside the robes to mingle and blend into a single protective covering. Each Chief let his head fall onto his left arm. Each of the Seven Chiefs crouched on the ground in imitation of a buffalo. The actions they took together evoked the spirit of the buffalo herd at peace. "Without a knife or spoon, in imitation of the buffalo's feeding," the Seven

Chiefs ate the food provided for them by the Keeper of the Pole and his clan. Any food that fell to the ground was pushed toward the fire. "No one", the legend says, "must take anything claimed by the Pole." The Seven Chiefs then decided on the day of renewal. They sent runners to locate a herd of buffalo.

The chiefs prepare for the renewal ceremony by establishing their identity, and hence that of the tribe, with the buffalo herds on which their lives depend. They merge their unbound hair with the hair of their buffalo robes. They rest their heads on their left arms, suggesting the support the tribe will gain from the Honga clan of the Hongashenumoiety whose Sacred Tent is to the left of the Huthuga's entrance. They eat food prepared by the Honga "in imitation of the buffalo's feeding." Francis La Flesch knew these rites from personal experience. As a boy of 15, he served as a runner to locate the buffalo herd during one of the last tribal hunts.

The Chiefs in council decided "the number of men to be called on to secure poles for the communal tent." Each of the Seven Chiefs then took a reed from a bundle kept throughout the year in the Sacred Tent. There was a reed in the bundle for each man of the tribe. The Chiefs called out the names of the men whose reeds they had chosen. They called out the accomplishments of each man. The tribal herald then took the reeds out into the Huthuga and gave them to the men who had been chosen. Each man took his reed back to the Sacred Tent, accepting the distinction conferred on him by the Seven Chiefs. Each man then placed his reed back in the bundle held by the keeper.

The actions of this choosing device reinforce an image of concentric dualism. The reeds are taken from a singular bundle that represents the tribe as a whole. They are distributed to singular individuals among the circle of clans that make up the Huthuga. Each man then returns his reed to the keeper of the Pole in affirmation of his acceptance of the common task at hand.

After returning their reeds to the bundle, the chosen men went back to the circle of the lodge that forms the Huthuga. From each lodge, they selected a single pole to be used in the construction of a tipi for the ceremony of renewal, Waxthe-xetons. They struck the chosen poles as they would an enemy warrior. They recounted their valiant deeds. Other men and women of the Waxthe-xetons sub-clan carried the selected poles toward

the SacredTent. Nearit, they constructeda semi-circularlodge open toward the center of the tribal circle.

The chosen men struck a pole of each lodge in the Huthuga in the same way that men in the sacred legend had struck the Thunderbird tree that gave off light beneath the "motionless star." Fletcher and La Flesche point out that in the He'dewachic ceremony, an ancient increase rite "related to the cosmic forces as revealed in the succession of night and day and the life and growth of living things" a cottonwood tree is struck in a similar fashion (Fletcher and La Flesche, 1911:251-252). A parallel to the beginning of the Sun Dance is also obvious to students of modern Plains Indian religion. The ceremonial lodge created from the poles thus consecrated represents all the individual families of the tribe. It was called wawube, "holy" or "sacred," because within its circle, the tribe would be renewed. It was a sacred circle within the sacred circle of the Huthuga. The entire complex of selecting and distributing the reeds and poles plays upon the logic of a metonym in which there is a reciprocity between part and whole. A single reed stands for a man of the tribe, a single lodge pole stands for a family of the tribe, and the Sacred Pole stands for the tribe as a whole.

The tribe now came to a halt for the duration of the ceremony. Guards were stationed at the opening of the Huthuga to ensure that people and horses would not move casually across its entrance, which had now become sacred. The Seven Chiefs, the Keeper of the Pole, and the leaders of each clan, wearing buffalo robes "in the ceremonial manner," walked quietly into the Sacred Tent and took their places. Members of the Xuka, group belonging to the clan that camped to the left of the Honga, acted as servers in this and every other ceremony conducted by the Honga. After each song was sung, a marker stick was laid aside. If the ritual order was accidentally disturbed, the Keeper of the Sacred Pole was obliged to rise and weep until the servers of the ceremony came to wipe away his tears.

Throughout the ceremony of renewal, the Honga support the tribe's identity in the same way that the Keeper physically supports the Pole as he carries it from camp to camp. That support is not possible without a reciprocal support from the tribe itself, a function that is performed by the Xuka. They are there to wipe away the Keeper's tears. Francis La Flesche reports an incident that happened to him as a boy that illustrates how pervasive was this image of reciprocal responsibility for maintaining order in the cosmos. When the tribe was moving during the summer buffalo hunt, the horses he

and a friend were driving nearly knocked over the Keeper and his sacred burden. In recompense, he took a scarlet cloth to the Keeper and addressed the Pole through him as follows: "Venerable man! We have, without any intention of disrespect, touched you and we have come to ask to be cleansed from the wrong that we have done." The old man "took from me the scarlet cloth, said a few words of thanks, and re-entered the tent; soon he returned carrying in his hand a wooden bowl filled with warm water. He lifted his right hand to the sky and wept, then sprinkled us and the horses with the water, using a spray of artemesia. This act washed away anger of the 'Venerable Man' " (Fletcher and La Flesche, 1911:245).

The wife of the Pole's Keeper carried the Pole to the edge of the Renewal Lodge. There, the Keeper leaned it on its "staff" toward the center of the Huthuga. The Seven Chiefs pulled reeds from the bundle, one by one, and spoke the name of the man each represented. As each name was spoken, the herald advanced to the Pole and shouted the man's name so that it could be heard throughout the Huthuga. If the man named was a chief, the herald shouted the name of his son. Every man called was expected to send one of his children to the Pole with a special offering of buffalo meat. The ritual song began:

They, the people, are touching the object of power.
They are touching what is theirs.

As the song continued, a member of the Keeper's sub-clan untied the skin that concealed the wickerwork object bound to the middle of the pole.

The words of this song reinforce the metonymic images of the reciprocity between the tribe's parts and its entirety that has been established by the preceding exchanges of reeds, poles, buffalo meat, and individuals. Through these exchanges, the people are said to be "touching a power that is theirs." The song serves to focus attention on the ceremony of renewal that is to begin.

The figure of a circle, open to the East, was cut in the prairie sod immediately in front of the Pole. It was called, Uzhin'eti. Fletcher and La Flesche say that uzhin refers to "the wistfulness of a child as when it stands before its parent waiting to share in some good thing." Ti, they say, means "house" (Fletcher and La Flesche, 1911:241). Thus, the name of this altar within which

the tribe's renewal is enacted marks it as a place where each person receives the blessing of being a child born of the cosmic union that brings about the tribe as a whole. Fletcher and La Flesche reinforce the message of their translation by quoting an old man who said, "As I stand before Uzhin'eti I seem to be listening for the words of the venerable ones who gave us these rites (Fletcher and La Flesche, 1911: 241).

This "keyhole shaped alter" Uzhin'eti, which is probably of great antiquity among Plains Indian people replicates the form of a single lodge and of the Huthuga itself. It represents a concentration of their collective energy. Its name in Omaha communicates a metaphoric association between a person of the tribe and the tribe's collective traditions. It suggests an interdependence between generations. The renewal to be conducted within its enclosure ensures that each person stands before the tribe with "the wistfulness of a child as when it stands before its parent waiting to share in some good thing."

On the following day, the wickerwork object, called the "wrist shield," after the wrist guard of a bowman, was fully opened. It contained the down of a Crane. Songs repeated the attributes of the Pole, "unity of the Tribe, unity of the Seven Chiefs which made them 'as one heart, as one voice,' the authority of Thunder." A song celebrated the wrist shield as a "round object," like the sun, and referred to its power as being like that of a man's bow "used for the defense of life and to secure the game that gave food, shelter, and clothing."

The Pole is called "Venerable Man." It represents the Thunderbird that in Omaha imagery empowers the male creative energy. In ceremony, the Pole is supported by its staff at a 45 degree angle, the elevation of the Pole Star above the horizon in the latitude occupied by the Omaha. The Pole may also suggest the phallic power of male procreation. Certainly the wrist shield serves as a symbolic device to reinforce the metonymic image that the Pole is simultaneously a whole man and his various parts, just as the tribe is a single entity made up of many complementary parts. The song's evocation of the round sun extends this image to include the power of the sun itself as an attribute of the Pole. This, in turn, reinforces the idea of cosmic complementarity, since the Pole was discovered as a blessing of the night, "the great mother force" (Fletcher and La Flesche, 1911: 505).

Meat offerings, brought by children of the men whose reeds had been called, were placed before the Pole. The priest of the Honga cut fat from the buffalo meat offerings, pounded it into paste, and mixed it with red paint. Buffalo fat symbolized abundance; red, the color of life. The singers sang, "I make him beautiful! I make him beautiful!", and the people cried out laughing, "Oh how beautiful he is!" With deliberate motions, the Honga priest approached the Pole and brushed it with reddened buffalo fat. Sweetgrass was burned on a buffalo chip at the center of the alter, Uzhin'eti, "where the fireplace would be in the lodge."

Finally, the people have an opportunity to touch the Pole in ceremony. They touch it with their offerings. They touch it with their gifts of buffalo meat and fat. They touch it through the intermediary of their children, wistfully "standing before its parent waiting to share in some good thing." They touch the Pole with fat that stands for the teeming energy of the buffalo herd. They touch it for the purpose of tribal renewal. The song of praise to the Pole's beauty is reflexive. It is also a song in praise of beauty in the life of the tribe.

The priest's wife held Seven Arrows to represent the Seven Chiefs. She wore a ceremonial costume, like that of her husband, and a buffalo robe around her waist, skin side out and painted red. "Across her cheeks and her glossy black hair red bands were painted and to the heel of each moccasin was attached a strip of buffalo hair like a tail (Fletcher and La Flesche, 1911:235)." She held the Seven Arrows above the sweetgrass smoke. As the twelfth song was sung, the Woman shot the Seven Arrows through the basketwork. She shot the Seven Arrows through the wickerwork wrist shield of the Pole, through the Crane's down, and into the ground. "When the arrow was not checked by the wickerwork or down, but passed clear through the bundle with sufficient force to stand in the ground on the other side, a shout of joy arose from the people, for this was an augury of victory over enemies and of success in hunting."

Fletcher and La Flesche note that the renewal ceremony was divided into two parts. In the first part, performed by a man, they say that the Pole represented "an authority granted and guarded by the supernatural powers." In the second part, performed by a woman, they say it stood for

"the men of the tribe, the defenders and providers of the home" (Fletcher and La Flesche, 1911:243). The two parts of the ceremony, according to the authors, "reflected the fundamental ideas on which the tribal organization is based, the union of masculine and feminine." The renewal ceremony expressed a complementary reversal of male and female activities. While the ceremony was prepared by men of the tribe, the actual shooting on which success in hunting depended was done by the Keeper's wife, a woman of the complementary Inshtacunda moiety. In addition to meaning Sky People, Inshtacunda also means "Flashing Eyes," a reference again to the power of Thunder.

After the two parts of the ceremony were complete, the young men of the tribe rode away from the camp circle on their horses. "Suddenly some one of them turned, and crying, 'They have come! they have come !' the whole company charged on the camp. (This was done in so realistic a manner as to deceive the people into the belief of an actual onslaught of an enemy, to the temporary confusion of the whole tribe.)" The Chiefs and leaders remained in the Sacred Tent in front of which inclined the Pole, while the warriors charged images of the enemies they had encountered during the past year. So ended Waxthexe xigithe, the ceremony of renewal.

The story of the Pole's origin begins with a council among chiefs of the tribe "to devise some means by which the bands of the tribe might be kept together and the tribe itself saved from extinction." The ceremony of renewal ends with a temporary scattering of the tribe, a reminder of an everpresent danger of dissolution, followed by an affirmation of the defenses that have kept it together during the past year.

The Mark of Honor

The Sacred Pole is called Waxthexe. According to Fletcher and La Flesche, Xthexe means, "mottled as by shadows." It "has also the idea of bringing into prominence to be seen by all the people as something distinctive." The prefix Wa, they say, indicates that "object spoken of had power, the power of motion, of life." Xthexe also refers to "the Mark of Honor" that was tattooed on the forehead and throat of a young woman whose father had joined the Hon'hewachi or "night dancing" society. Members of this society were an "Order of Chiefs" who had gained by contributing one hundred acts or gifts, "which have relation to the welfare of the tribe." The girl who received the tattooing became known as a "woman chief." Fletcher and La Flesche

say that, "The name of the Pole, Waxthexe, signifies that the power to give the right to possess this 'Mark of Honor' was vested on the Pole...the design tattooed on the girl were all cosmic symbols" (Fletcher and La Flesche, 1911:2t9). The mark on the young woman's forehead symbolized the sun at its zenith, "from which point it speaks," and its life-giving power passes through her body and out into the camp circle. The mark on her throat was a four-pointed star radiating from a perfect circle.

Fletcher and La Flesche present the Pole's origin story and the rites surrounding the "Mark of Honor" in different sections of the ethnography, yet it is clear from their comments that the two are complementary. The name they share suggests that both are images of the tribe's identity. The Pole's origin story is about the visionary experience of a chief's son. The ritual of tattooing the Mark of Honor initiates a complementary visionary empowerment of a chief's daughter during her father's induction into the Hon'hewachi Society.

A chief's son discovers Waxthexe beneath the star around which all other turn. The trails of game animals converge upon it, creating an image of the world's quarters and directions. The tree was, like the Huthuga itself, the center of a great circle upon which the trails of animals converged. The burning center of the young man's vision could be seen only during the dark hours of night, just as the star that marks the center of the heavens is visible only at night. The young man's vision was a blessing of the night, "the great mother force" (Fletcher and La Flesche, 1911:505). The Pole itself was a result of that blessing.

A chief's daughter receives the Mark of Honor at the precise moment when her body lies in a direct line between the sun's highest point in its arc and the earth's center. Fletcher and La Flesche say that she received the Mark of Honor on a bed of fine robes, facing west "for, being emblematic of life, she had to lie as if moving with the sun." The tattooing was completed as the sun passed directly overhead.

The tattooing ceremony aligned sun-sign and star-sign with the young woman's body. When the sun came into line with the newly completed marks tattooed on her body, the people chanted a song whose words mean literally, "the sun, the round sun, comes, speaks or says. Yonder point, when it comes, comes, speaks or says." As the girl received the star sign, the people chanted a song whose words mean, "Night moves, it passes and the day is coming" (Fletcher and La Flesche, 1911:504-505). Fletcher and La Flesche translate the words literally as follows:

Night - moving - going.

Night - moving - going.

Night - moving - going.

Day - is - coming.

Day - is - coming.

Day - is - coming.

The young woman received the sun's power when she was at a point on the earth's surface directly between the earth's center and the highest point in the sun's heavenly arc. Her complement, the young man in the origin story, received his power by recognizing the star around which all other turn. Both boy and girl came into contact with powers beyond themselves when they were centered in ceremony. Through them, the tribe as a whole became centered. One single center may be found in many places. The Pole was a center that traveled as the people traveled. The Mark of Honor worn by a young woman was also such a center. The young man found his center burning beneath the steady star around which the star-world reeled as he watched it, amazed, through the night. The young woman found hers in the sound of all living things like a great wind. She found herself centered between earth and sky.

Vision comes through a shift in perspective. The young man's lonely vigil through the night showed him how stars circle around a single point of light among their multitude. The tree beneath that central star burned itself into his mind. The night force and his isolation revealed this sky-world to him. "The whole tree, its trunk, branches, and leaves, were alight, yet remained unconsumed." But by day, "the brightness of the tree began to fade, until with rising of the sun the tree with its foliage resumed its natural appearance" (Fletcher and La Flesche, 1911:217). The young woman gained her shift in perspective by day, when the sun was at the highest point in its arc.

During the tattooing she "strove to make no sound or outcry" (Fletcher and La Flesche, 1911:506). The sharp rattle of the serpent-tailed flint, "representative of the teeming life that 'moves' over the earth," wrote its signature on her silence. "Because this life is 'moving,' it makes a noise. Even the sun as it 'moves,' it is said, 'makes a noise,' as does the living wind in the trees" (Fletcher and La Flesche, 1911:506). The four points of the tattooed star stood for, "the life giving winds into the midst of which the child was sent through the ceremony of Turning the Child" (Fletcher and La Flesche, 1911:505). The symbols of night and day were aligned with the sun's path across the sky, with young woman's face, with the part in her hair, with her

waiting womb, and with the earth itself. As the tattooing was completed, people sang the following words:

Yonder unseen is one moving
 Noise
 Yonder unseen is one moving
 Noise
 For that reason - over the earth
 Noise
 Yonder unseen is one moving
 Noise
 Yonder unseen is one moving
 Noise
 The cry of the living creatures

The ceremony for tattooing the Mark of Honor perfectly aligns the girl's body with male and female cosmic forces. The ceremony channels the energy of creation into the life of the tribe. The ceremony centers the girl who is to become a woman of earth, directly beneath the zenith point, the sky's center and the center of day. It centers her, and through her renews the spirit of life. "By the union of Day, the above, and Night, the below," according to Fletcher and La Flesche, "came the human race and by them the race is maintained." "Tattooing," they say, is "an appeal for the perpetuation of all life and of human life in particular" (Fletcher and La Flesche, 1911:507).

Conclusion

Nice Fletcher and Francis La Flesche described the Omaha tribe in terms of "certain fundamental religious ideas, cosmic in significance [that] had reference to conceptions as to how the visible universe came into being and how it is maintained" (Fletcher and La Flesche, 1911:134). "Human conditions," they say, "were projected upon nature, and male and female forces recognized." They interpreted the complex Omaha ceremonial order as an expression of these otherwise invisible cosmic principles. "The Above," they say, "was regarded as masculine, the Below feminine; so the sky was father, the earth, mother." Omaha rites, myths, songs, and beliefs, they say, expressed the fundamental complementarity of these principles. "The union of these two forces," they conclude, "was regarded as necessary to the perpetuation of all living forms, and to man's life by the maintaining his food supply."

The Omaha Tribe appears in 1911, just as anthropology was beginning to establish itself as an academic discipline taught at universities in North America. It was one of the last and one of the greatest in a series of complex and detailed "total" ethnographies that appeared as Bureau of American Ethnology Annual Reports. To university based scholars seeking validation of their discipline as a science, the language of cosmic symbolism used by Fletcher and La Flesche appeared old fashioned and unscientific. Fortune (1932) and Mead (1932), who did field work among the Omaha in 1930, focused on social hierarchy and social pathology respectively. Their ethnographies reflect an unwillingness to accept at face value the Omaha symbols and categories of thought as presented by Fletcher and La Flesche. They looked for hidden realities behind those meaningful to the Omaha themselves. With the exception of Lévi-Strauss (1964), and Barnes (1984), both of whom recognized the complex structure of Omaha dual organization, scholars throughout most of this century have regarded *The Omaha Tribe* as an antiquarian cupboard full of ethnographic curiosities rather than as an important ethnographic statement about a Plains Indian cosmic order.

I believe that a modern reader of *The Omaha Tribe* will be rewarded by its interpretive language as well as by its wealth of ethnographic detail. Students of traditional cosmologies will find an honesty and integrity in the language of Fletcher and La Flesche because it reflects the "emic" or Native categories of thought by which the Omaha people have understood themselves as individuals and as a tribe. Reading Fletcher and La Flesche is almost infinitely rewarding because they present information in an Indian way that allows the reader to learn by formulating questions and then returning to the myths, ceremonies, songs, and beliefs to discover their multiple interconnections and associations.

In 1911, Fletcher and La Flesche believed that they were documenting a tribal identity that had already come to an end. Alice Fletcher, in particular, worked for years to implement an assimilationist Indian policy of which she was in part an architect (Prucha, 1984; Barnes, 1984). In the light of hindsight, we now know that the Omaha were merely changing, not vanishing (Ridington, 1987). Although their ceremonies no longer focus upon the Sacred Pole, the Huthuga, and the buffalo hunt, the cosmic images that gave life to these rites are still very much alive, as is the tribe itself. Recently, the Hethushka or "warrior" society has been revived to continue its traditional function, which Fletcher and La Flesche described in 1911 as being "to keep alive the memory of historic and valorous acts." Sky People and Earth People continue to complement one another. Throughout this century, women bearing the Mark of Honor have continued to carry the fundamen-

tal images of tribal identity "into prominence to be seen by all the people as something distinctive."

NOTES

1. This paper is dedicated to Maggie Johnson and the memory of Helen Grant Walker, two Omaha women who carried *Xthexe*, the Mark of Honor, through most of the years of this century. I would like also to thank Margaret La Flesche for introducing me and Jillian Ridington to these Omaha Women of Honor.

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