

Ceremonial Practices of the Modern Seminoles*

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THE modern Florida Seminoles are descendants of the Indians who remained in the Everglades after the close of the Seminole war in 1842. One hundred years later we find a people radically transformed both in material aspects of life and in their ideas and religious customs. In this instance we are concerned with their ceremonial and medicinal practices—vestiges of a much richer life which has vanished due to the coming of white people in ever increasing numbers to what was formerly a cloistered Indian world. To discover and record these remnants of the Seminole's former life before it disappeared forever from the minds of the older generation was one of the chief objects of the 1939 study.

A medicine man of the Big Cypress swamp settlements was my chief informant. He consented to interpret many phases of ceremonial life, especially those connected with the annual Green Corn dance and his own specialty, medicine. A number of chants from the old medicinal formulas, many of them rendered in the special medicine man's language, with its archaic words and phrases were recorded on phonograph records. A similar study was made by Miss Frances Densmore. This was published in 1932 by the Smithsonian Institution. She used the same informant I did and was able to record "75 songs of the corn and hunting dances as well as the alligator, catfish, quail, screech owl, and other dances." The songs sung for me include several from the Green Corn Dance, the horned owl chant from the hunting dance, several of the Seminole mourning chants, as well as a number of medicinal formulas. I shall now give a few of the general features of Seminole social organization, ceremonial and medicinal practices.

In the Seminole social organization descent is counted only on the mother's side and with clans as a basis, a child belongs solely to the clan of the mother. Nine clans are found among the Big Cypress people, all

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but one of them being named after some animal. Thus Panther, Wildcat, Tiger, Bird, Otter, Wind, Wolf, Snake, and City or Town clan are the chief active clans. A Deer clan also exists but it is dying out due to the fact that there are only three men left and no women. Since the children follow the clan of the mother the Deer clan will be extinct in the next generation. A similar fate was in store for the Alligator clan noted by Clay MacCauley in 1880. Now it has disappeared completely. Each one of these nine clans is exogamous, that is, a man must marry outside of his mother's clan. Among the Seminoles a further provision is made whereby certain groups of the nine clans are linked together which restricts a man's choice of a mate even further. Thus the Tiger, Panther, and Wildcat clans are linked; the Otter and Town clans are similarly joined; as also are the Bird and Wind. Under this marriage restriction a member of the Bird clan would be obliged to avoid marriage with a girl of the Wind clan but he would be permitted to choose one from any other clan. A study of the marriages recorded by the U. S. government Seminole census shows that extremely few marriages occur which do not correspond to this usual pattern. Due to the fact that so few clans survive from the much larger number once in Florida, it has now become allowable for a man to marry a woman of his father's clan though I was told that in the old days this clan was prohibited to him also. As an example we can note Ingram Billie's family where Wilson Billie, Ingram's brother married Ingram's daughter. Though she would be considered his niece by our system of reckoning kin, she was a member of her mother's clan, the Wind clan, hence a proper bride for a Panther man. Another instance in the same family is where Annie Billie, Panther clan, Ingram's sister married Charlie Billie, Ingram's son — her nephew by our system but outside of the clan by Seminole custom and hence a fit mate.

Of special interest is the clan known as the City or Town clan which my informant maintains is composed largely of Indians of mixed blood. He indicated that when the Seminoles fought at St. Augustine they found two white girls wandering in the woods, lost, tired, and hungry. He thought perhaps they were Spaniards. Some of the tribe wanted to kill them, but the chief said no, as they were women they should be kept and made to work. Eventually they married Seminole men. Since these women were not Indian they belonged to no clan, and consequently their children had no clan affiliations. To solve this problem the City clan was created, its original members being the children of those two marriages. He says that this clan is composed of descendants of captives and marriages outside the tribe such as Seminole-Spanish or Seminole-White,

anything but Seminole-Negro. Members of the City clan now include influential members of the tribe.

Two classes of medical practitioners exist among the Florida Seminoles. The most important are the medicine men who are not only in charge of the entire ceremonial life of these people, but hold a good deal of political power as well. A medicine man is responsible for curing sickness and must undergo a period of instruction and training to fit him for this duty. The main distinction between the medicine man and the "doctors," or second class practitioners, lies in the possession of a fragment of war medicine by the former. My informant said that he inherited his medicine from Old Billie Motlo, and that his brother obtained his from his mother's brother. He further said that when he died his medicine would go to his brother who in turn would present it to a suitable member of the Panther clan. Thus we see that the passing down of the medicine, which is the source of power to each practitioner, is a matter of inheritance within the same clan. This medicine is so supernaturally powerful that it cannot be kept at the settlements but is hidden away at the ceremonial grounds where the annual Green Corn Dance is held. The medicine is composed of a silver-colored powder and is kept in small buckskin bags. This war medicine is taboo to women. They may not approach too near it since its great power would knock them down, according to Seminole belief. When I asked about the origin of the war medicine I was told that it was derived from thunder and snake—thunder in the sky and snake in the water. Thunder went way up to the sky got the medicine and then made it rain. The rain brought the medicine to earth to water where the snake got it. One man went over to the creek and obtained a small bundle of medicine from snake. This bundle was brought to the king or chief who kept it. Once there was a big war and the king didn't want to go. He gave some of the medicine to a man who went for him. They called the man war chief. This medicine kept the war chief very strong. When he died he gave the medicine to his clansmen. A part of the medicine went to his son. Finally the medicine of supernatural power became divided into seven parts as it is today. When this powerful medicine passes to new hands the old buckskin bags are destroyed and the medicine is transferred to new ones.

The tribal lore, ceremonial practices, and healing are not taught indiscriminately to all the young men but only to those who show that they are willing to pursue the requisite preparation. Not all boys are interested and similarly not all boys are considered as possessing the suitable temperament. A medicine man need not confine his instruction

to members of his own clan, but may teach anyone whom he considers deserving. However, the inheritance of the sacred medicine is strictly a clan affair.

The preparation of the medicine man advances by degrees. The respective degrees are named after the months in the Indian lunar calendar. Thus during the first month (fubli hasi) "wind moon" of his preparation a prospective medicine man is given the "black drink" which acts as a purgative. Herbs and medicine are then given him for eight additional days. After this the "medical student" is allowed to study on his own but he is expected to return to the medicine man who is in charge of his teaching on the first month of the ensuing year for further instruction and to ask questions. In order to cure one must learn the proper magical chants and formulas. Hence the teaching of the songs in connection with each one of the various types of disease undoubtedly forms a significant part of the training of a new medicine man.

A Seminole has a decidedly different notion about medicine from that held by white people. Whereas we think in terms of drugs, ointments, stimulants, or cathartics which will benefit the body in a predictable fashion, the Seminole relies on the actions of the medicine man. These people have confidence in his power to cure disease or to alleviate mental suffering. The Indian medical doctor must also have his patients consider life as supernaturally dangerous as possible. The more fraught with danger he makes the affairs of everyday life, the more clients he has, and the more secure his position.

A most common cause of disease is the loss of the ghost or soul. The Seminoles believe in the existence of a double soul. One soul may leave the body in sleep and wander far afield while the other leaves the body only at death. The nightly adventures of the first soul are revealed in dreams. To discover the cause of sickness a medicine man must analyse dreams.

In order to explain the diagnosis through loss of the soul my informant drew a diagram on the ground to illustrate his conception of the subject. He was trying to show me graphically the Seminole theory of well-being, of disease, and of the final death and destruction of the soul. The world is considered as divided into four cardinal directions, north, south, east, and west. West is believed to be a ritually dangerous direction since the dead are thought to travel over the Milky Way (solopi heni—spirit or ghost road) to the west. The designation of the Milky Way as the path of the dead to the afterworld is an Indian idea which was found among most of the Southeastern tribes and even among some tribes of the Great Plains.

A.—First let us consider the situation at death. One soul or ghost goes up north and likes it there. The soul goes to the north and then continues around to the east. If, when it gets to the east, the medicine man is not able to call it back to its proper position (central) the ghost will go over the Milky Way to the west. As the city of the dead is located in the west this happening indicates the death of a person. Four days after death the second soul or ghost follows the first at night fall. This accounts for the four day mourning period in which all the relatives of the deceased must stay in their camps to wait for the final passing of the second soul to the afterworld. At this time, also, mourning chants are sung for the bereaved so that they may be permitted to forget their loss and to have life in the community restored to normalcy as soon as possible.

B.—If the soul wanders at night, goes to the north and then returns at dawn the person has merely been dreaming. This is in no sense an abnormal ghostly episode.

C.—My informant explained that sometimes the ghost enjoyed his nocturnal adventures so much that it refused to come back at dawn. When this happened the person who had dreamed suddenly found that his body became sick. Hence a medicine man always asks his patients first about their dreams. Upon learning from the dreams how the soul has been detained the medicine man obtains the proper herbs, mixes them in a pot, and sings the proper chants beseeching the soul to return. It is also important to blow his breath through the "medicine pipe," his "ammunition" as this power of breath is quaintly called. The medicine man believes that certain magical power comes from himself through the pipe and that this power is sufficient in most cases to retrieve the wandering soul.

Dreaming about fire may cause fever to their way of thinking. To illustrate this my wife and I once saw our medicine man friend sauntering down the Tamiami Trail with his blowing tube in his hand on the way to obtain some herbs. When asked what he would use them for he replied that his wife had told him that she had dreamed of fire. He accordingly was afraid that she might contract a bad fever. Medicine was necessary to prevent this contingency from occurring.

Aside from diagnosis by dreams there are many examples of diagnosis through observing bodily symptoms. In these cases the type of disease is often named after an animal. For instance, if a baby cries and scratches and never stops—similar to the actions of a monkey, he is thought to have monkey disease. The treatment is to sing a particular chant to the monkey and supposedly the child will be cured.

The dog disease is considered to be caused by both the dog and the buzzard, hence the chants are sung to make these creatures desist. The symptoms of this malady are stomach ache, loss of appetite, vomiting, and bad dreams. Along with the medicinal chants herbs are mixed and medicine prepared. Both together should produce a cure.

The actual curing of disease is brought about largely through the recitation of certain formulas, by the performance of certain rites, and by the concoction of herbal medicines in a specific manner. The cure is magical not strictly medicinal as among ourselves though Seminole herbal medicine is efficacious by itself in some instances. The Seminole doctor's theory of medicine springs from the belief that Man, the medicine man in particular, can control the baneful forces of disease and dispel them if only the diagnosis of the disorder can be ascertained. Some of the herbs used to effect a cure are sweet bay leaves (*otli*), willow (*hoaniči*), cedar leaf (*acini*), and sassafras.

Recent innovations due to closer contact with white people have changed the Seminole idea of medicine and curing. The medicine man now imitates the white doctors and I know of an instance where prepared drugs have been ordered from a wholesale drug company. These additions consist of herbs, barks, and roots, which white pharmacists had on their shelves at the turn of the century. Epsom salts have become quite a favorite and a store of bottles can be seen on the platform of the medicine man's chekee or dwelling. A greenish concoction for the relief of lumbago and dispensed by Dr. Pender of Everglades, also has had a wide following in the Indian world. Rubbing alcohol was also a favorite external but mostly internal medicine at one time, and the unwary white person still hears with monotonous regularity the Seminole plaint, "You got 'em lubbing alcohol," or, "You got 'em Epsom salts."

Magical practices still have a following among the Seminoles. There is a ceremony which they believe will produce rain by putting a pot in the ground and filling it with water and blowing the breath upon the water. Then the rain is called through chants. One must not eat all day long till the rain comes. To make the rain stop it is merely necessary to light tobacco pipes and blow smoke against the rain for ten or twenty minutes. The rain procuring ceremony is not confined to medicine men but can be produced by anyone, even the women, I was told.

Tobacco is frequently used for magical purposes among the American Indians. The Seminoles are no exception to the general rule. Tobacco is employed to ward off evil influences. For instance, some Indians once came to the camp of our medicine man friend from Miami and told him

that lots of fever raged in that city. He decided to make medicine in his camp to ward off the fever. To accomplish this he took two tablespoons of dried tobacco which he kept wrapped up in a rag. He proudly brought this rag and tobacco out and showed them to me. He said that this medicine was used on the occasion just mentioned. When he made this sort of medicine he did not sleep all night. He sang a song and then blew on the tobacco. Then he wrapped up the tobacco for a while and held it. This process was repeated four times during the course of the night. At daybreak some tobacco was placed in the pipe and smoked. Then he declared that fever had never come to his camp. A tobacco pipe is smoked, or was formerly smoked, to blow away hurricanes so that they would go around the Indian camps and hit somewhere else. This is a striking instance of the belief in the potency of supernatural power.

While my wife and I were watching the recital on the platform of his dwelling, he took out a splinter which he kept hid in the bag. After looking all around before talking, he said in a guarded tone that this was the strong thunder medicine which he had taken from a tree just after it had been split by lightning. A splinter taken under such circumstances is sure to be very powerful and its proximity to the tobacco further enhanced the potency of the plant.

Although black magic or sorcery is not employed by the modern Seminole medicine men to my knowledge, it is likely that at one time it was in full bloom. My informant indicated that he knew a medicine which would make a person sick. This sorcery is devised to make one contract a fever. To produce this effect the medicine man retires about half a mile from his camp. There he makes a fire at night and then sings songs. This is done when the person to be injured is asleep. The purpose of the songs is to call the intended victim's soul to the medicine man. When he gets the soul he puts it into the fire and burns it up. This severe treatment can be given to anyone in any camp no matter how far away the camp may be from the one where the medicine man is preparing his malevolent spell. On the following day the person cursed will have a fever which he cannot dispel and pretty soon he will die. The counter-magic to rid the patient of this mischief consists of songs intended to bring back the burnt soul. Frequent applications of cold water are given to calm the fever and reanimate the burnt soul. As soon as the soul has been revived the fever will vanish.

Aside from rituals dealing with curing one discovers certain rites which are used on occasion to produce definite desired results. For example, to keep from losing a new born baby if the mother has already lost children

before they reach maturity, the following rite is performed. When the baby is four or five weeks old a "doctor" makes a medicine fire with the logs pointing outwards in the four cardinal directions. Corn is then put in a pot which in turn is placed on the fire. One ear of corn is set on the end of each log at N, E, S, and W points. Then the corn is moved from the north to the west position. The ear is turned over and the baby's name is called out. Then one must slide the west corn to the south, turn the ear over and again call out the child's name. Then move the south corn ear to the east, turn the ear over and repeat the baby's name. Then the corn must be slid from the east position to the north again, it must be turned over and the baby's name repeated a final time. Then the child is placed on the ground and the doctor must pretend that he is looking everywhere for the child till at last it is found. This little rite is supposed to bind the baby to the mother's clan as well as to aid in bringing it to maturity.

At first I thought that these small rites might well be derived from the imagination of the medicine man but one morning when my wife and I went to a camp to take my informant and his wife to Ft. Myers, we saw one of the so-called "doctors" or minor practitioners holding a new born baby over the coals of the fire in the cook shed. A small bower of bay leaves had been placed in the coals and the baby was being immersed in the smoke from the bay leaves when we arrived. We asked for the meaning of this rite and were told that it was to keep the child from being lost when it left the camp for the first time.

An interesting avoidance occurs in connection with mentioning of recently widowed people of both sexes. Speaking of widows is dangerous. The belief is that if you talk too much about widows your wife will die. Widows are obliged to eat by themselves. At the annual Green Corn Dance a widower strips the clothes from a recently made widow, or at least most of her clothes, throws them away and then she obtains new ones. Our friend had a widow staying at his camp, his wife's sister. He would neither make medicine for her or for her infant child. He would speak to her only sparingly as necessity demanded. A widow remains in a ritually unclean state for a certain length of time, her hair is let down, and her beads are removed. She becomes an active member of her group again after being ceremonially readmitted at the Green Corn Dance.

The Green Corn Dance or world renewal ceremony is well known in outline to most people who know anything about Seminole life. The dance is performed as a new year festival much in the same manner as did the Creek Indians from whom they are descended. For this dance

new clothes are made by the women for their entire family. Old fires in the camps are allowed to die out and a new fire is kindled by resort to the ancient fire drill instead of using matches. Then again, the new corn crop cannot be eaten by the men till they have been made ritually pure for its reception.

Another striking feature is the scratching of the men and boys with an instrument made of bone in which teeth of the gar fish have been inserted. This allows the blood to flow freely and supposedly cleanses the blood and the men who partake of the rite. Likewise, taking a concoction of herbs which induces vomiting is supposed to cleanse the stomach for the reception of the green corn. A ball game is played between the girls and boys, stomp dances are held, and a feast of beef looms prominently in the festivities.

Unfortunately the Green Corn Dance which I attended was a degenerate variety of the original Creek ceremonial but the essential features were still present.

A revolution in the ceremonial life of the Seminoles is now in progress. Just as surely as increased Indian-White contact continues, their old values will gradually sink in importance and allure. The older generation will find it increasingly difficult to instill youth with the zest and fire of the old Seminole life which has lingered on since the time when these people were left to fend for themselves after the close of the Seminole wars. Each death of a Seminole elder brings a fresh irretrievable loss of lore and the knowledge of old ceremonies now in the process of change and distortion. The need for penetrating linguistic studies and further data on Seminole customs is pressing. Before long the old civilization of the Seminole with all of its colorful contrasts will be, to all intents and purposes, as dead as the proverbial dodo.