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THE HUPA
WHITE DEERSKIN DANCE

BY

WALTER R. GOLDSCHMIDT AND HAROLD E. DRIVER

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THE HUPA WHITE DEERSKIN DANCE

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INTRODUCTION

THE WHITE DEERSKIN DANCE is a protracted ritualistic festivity engaged in by several tribes of northwestern California, and is peculiar to that region. It consists of a simple dance repeated frequently; the regalia utilized include most of the wealth objects of the society. The dancing takes place throughout an eight- to ten-day period of feasting during which the members of the tribe camp at the several successive dance grounds and are fed by those wealthy tribesmen who are initiating the dance. In the following pages we shall present the essential features of the ceremony, pointing out its ceremonial, religious, social, and socio-economic aspects.

A SUMMARY OF HUPA CULTURE

GEOGRAPHY AND ECONOMY

The Hupa Indians and their neighbors, the Yurok and Karok, possess a distinctive and well-developed culture. Hupa culture has typically Californian traits, yet it also has particular characteristics reminiscent of the Northwest Coast proper. The essential features of the culture in general are given by Kroeber in the first chapters of his *Handbook of the Indians of California*,¹ and a specific study of the Hupa is presented by Goddard in his *Life and Culture of the Hupa*.²

These Indians are an Athabascan-speaking people. They dwelt on the lower reaches of the Trinity River from near its confluence with the Klamath in the north to its confluence, farther upstream, with the South Fork of the Trinity. They are now concentrated on the Hupa Indian Reservation, which is roughly a ten-mile-square tract of land containing the major part of their original territory. It is essential to know that these people, though they roamed the hills for game and grass foods, were concentrated in the narrow, fertile valley of the Trinity River, separated from tribes to the east and west by mountain ranges passable only part of the year, and connected with the people below and above them on the river system by narrow gorges. These geographical circumstances brought about both concentration of population and geographical isolation; the latter was not so rigorous as to preclude cultural connections, but made the Hupa a nonwarring people. Concentration of population was made possible by the abundance of salmon in the Trinity and of tan oak in the neighboring flats; these adequately supplied the two staple foods. The most important part of the Hupa territory was about eight miles of valley bottom, and it is with the people of this area that the present paper deals.

¹ A. L. Kroeber, *Handbook of the Indians of California*, BAE-B 78, 1925.

² Pliny E. Goddard, *Life and Culture of the Hupa*, UC-PAAE 1:1-88, 1903.

The authors each saw one performance of the Deerskin dance. Driver in 1935 and Goldschmidt in 1937, while carrying out research projects for the University of California Department of Anthropology, and in the following account material will be drawn from both experiences as well as from informants' statements.³

The dance, which was briefly reviewed by Goddard,⁴ had first been reported by Dr. Chas. E. Woodruff (United States Army).⁵ It has never been described in detail, however, nor carefully analyzed. The present situation is such that if the dances are continued it will be only because they receive full commercial support, and hence their content will be somewhat changed. It therefore seems particularly pertinent to give an adequate description at this time.

HUPA SOCIAL ORGANIZATION

The Hupa have an amorphous society; there is no institutionalized governmental mechanism, nor are individuals linked to any sort of clearly demarcated functioning social group—neither clan nor class. For this reason the ceremonial life as a whole and the White Deerskin dance in particular are of major importance to an understanding of the social cohesion of the group, the character of which is so unusual as to be worthy of special consideration. Similarly, it is not possible to comprehend the organization of the Deerskin dance without an understanding of the social groupings as they exist.

Hupa territory is separated into an upper and a lower division, a geographical demarcation reminiscent of a moiety organization but entirely devoid of marital implications.⁶ Each half of the valley has one village of major and several of minor importance. The larger (towns) embrace about forty houses (and thus have a population of at least two hundred persons each); the smaller (villages) consist of approximately ten houses (at least fifty individuals). In each of these smaller assemblages there is usually one "sweat house" or semisubterranean men's lodge. This is "owned" by the most important personage in the village, but is used freely as sleeping quarters by the male population. The heads of the several dwelling houses are usually related to the sweat-house "proprietor," but the nature of the relationship varies, and includes brothers-in-law, nephews, nephews-in-law, sons, sons-in-law, and others more distantly related. We cannot assume that the village is simply an extended family, nor that the head is in any way the patriarch, but kinship is an important factor in the formation and cohesion of this basic village group. It is necessary to point out here that, although the Hupa are

³ Driver was in the Hupa valley in 1935 while on a field trip and witnessed the first four days of the ceremony. Goldschmidt spent the summer of 1937 making a study of Hupa economic life and witnessed this dance at the close of his stay. Musical notations are by Driver; details of the social aspects of the dance have been supplied by Goldschmidt; purely descriptive matter was done in collaboration. The final composition is by Goldschmidt, except for the section on historical speculations.

⁴ Goddard, *op. cit.*, 82.

⁵ Dances of the Hupa Indians, AA, o.s., 5:53 ff., 1892.

⁶ This division is reflected in group loyalties, and it was the line of demarcation between the two sides in the one major (postwhite) internecine war of the valley.

vaguely patrilineal and definitely patrilocal, a large proportion of the men have moved to their wives' houses because they were unable to pay the full bride price.

The towns are essentially four or five villages in juxtaposition, with separate sweat houses owned by individuals of importance and tenanted by men most of whom are in some way related to the owner. At Takimad η , the lower village, an additional factor is encountered; there is one house (a dwelling, not the men's lodge), known as Xonta nkyau, "Great House" (the only aboriginal dwelling still remaining on the reservation), which has particular ceremonial significance. It is often referred to with a measure of justification as the "church," and not only is it the pivotal point for most Hupa ceremonies, but also its heads were originally the leaders of the dances. Only one descendant from Xonta nkyau, S, now takes a leading ceremonial rôle, for which she is referred to as "the Queen." The younger men who are descendants of the Great House do not take particular interest in the religious affairs.

The leader of the dance is M, who took an interest in it from early childhood and who inherited property from his mother's father. This man had lived at the Metald η rancheria, and in addition to his inheritance from fairly well-to-do parents he acquired added ceremonial riches. He is now often referred to as "the Chief." To neither M nor S is accredited any lay control over modern Hupa by the Indians themselves, and there is no reason to believe that they have more than a somewhat augmented prestige which is as much a result as a cause of their rôle in the presentation of the ceremonials of the tribe.

There are other aspects of tribal life which must be briefly reviewed. The most important is the adherence of prestige to certain objects of wealth—a concept that is considered to be characteristic of the entire Northwest Coast culture area. Religious and economic activities are most obviously linked by the circumstance that the most valuable native goods were dance regalia, chiefly those specifically used in the White Deerskin ceremonial. The chief desire of any normal male Hupa was the possession of these objects, and this standard of values had a marked effect on his daily life as well as on his very personality. Wealth is definitely a correlate with social position and is more than a mere symbol of social distinctions, for in a society where its acquisition is a major social drive,⁷ where wealth buys specific privileges, it is an actual source of power and social status. Persons who possessed this native wealth were not simply in charge of the ceremonies, but actually presented them.

That wealth is actual power is shown more clearly by the Hupa legal code. There is no vested authority or tribunal; atonement for any infraction of justice is brought about at the instigation of the offended party or his family. There is no crime against the society, only against other members of the society. Settlements following acts of violence or insults are handled by a go-between. The Hupa is quick to take offense at an insult as well as to take action

⁷ Cf. Cora Du Bois, *The Wealth Concept as an Integrative Factor in Tolowa-Tututni Culture*, *Essays in Anthropology in Honor of Alfred Louis Kroeber*, p. 49 (U. C. Press, 1956).

for a major crime, and his demand is always expressed in terms of money or native wealth. Though theoretically every infraction of justice has its set price in native goods,⁴ actually a man demands as much as he can according to his status in the society. This status cannot be dependent upon established position or title, which do not exist in the society, and is therefore based on wealth and following. These are closely linked, as the following circumstance demonstrates. When a wealthy man has children, he can afford to pay a large bride price for the wives of his sons and can demand a large price for his daughters (since the price is always determined by the wealth of the woman's family). Also, it is possible for a man to marry honorably by paying half the price and moving into the bride's home ("walking into the house" in Hupa, equivalent to the Yurok "half-marriage"). It follows that the rich person's chances of augmenting his following through the marriages of his children are greater than a poor man's, because there is greater probability that his sons will pay the requisite price and his sons-in-law move into the family.

THE DEERSKIN DANCE

ORGANIZATION

The White Deerskin dance is organized in the same anarchic manner as the society; persons of prestige and wealth are in control because they give the dance (i.e., because they have the requisite wealth to outfit the dancers and to feed the guests). There are two sides or "camps," one the upper or *Metldm* half of the valley, the other the lower or *Takmldm* half. The entire ceremony consists of individual dances put on by each side alternately. In each of these two major towns, persons who are wealthy enough contribute to the camp and take over leadership. Thus there is no set number of persons in charge; in 1935 there were five leaders, in 1937 four. Each leader, besides providing all the dance paraphernalia he owns or can muster for the occasion, also establishes a fire (we would, no doubt, call it a "table") at which his wife cooks food for anyone, dancer or onlooker, who wishes to be his guest. We have, then, a ceremonial division into two groups, and subdivisions of these according to the number of responsible men of wealth interested in presenting the dance.

One of the dance leaders is always the descendant of the house called *Xonta nkyau*—in the 1935 and 1937 dances this was M. Formerly the single dance leader belonged to this family, but in recent years this has not always been the case. So far as there was one single leader, that office was held by M. Besides maintaining one fire for the *Takmldm* camp, he took the initiative in deciding on the dance and in setting the date. In 1935 he was medicine man or ceremonial leader for the dance, but in 1937, because he was too crippled, he appointed another to serve in his place.

"The Queen" also served in a ritual capacity; for it was she who ceremo-

⁴ Payments were made in some form of wealth, usually dentalia (but recently white man's money), which has the property of divisibility. But payments in wealth objects, especially woodpecker scalps and dints, were not infrequent.

nially leached and cooked acorns at the commencement of the dance. She maintained one fire, aided by a hired helper in the cooking and by a man in handling her dance paraphernalia. In 1935 another fire had been maintained by H and her son, but in 1937 H had died and her son was ill so that this fire did not function.

The leaders at the Metldiq camp were L and F. The former, though the younger of the two, seemed to have the greater authority, but there was no clear distinction. He had inherited his wealth from his paternal uncle, his mother being a Yurok woman. She was in charge of the preparation of food from his fire. The latter, on the other hand, was the son of a white man and had inherited his wealth through his mother. His oldest daughter cooked for him. This camp was more disorganized than the Takmu.diq one, and in some particulars adhered less rigorously to tradition. Leader L was rather irresponsible, and failed to appear for some of the dances, which, therefore, were not executed. His mother used tables in serving food, an innovation disapproved of by the more orthodox old people. F did not assume much responsibility. Formerly he had owned a great deal of property, but in the summer of 1937 he was working for wages and did not present meals at all the dances, nor appear for every performance.

The dancers themselves form no delimited social group; anyone with the desire and the skill entered the dances. In 1937 the leaders found it difficult to get the requisite number of persons and had to beg the men to take part in the earlier and less dramatic performances. To be sure, only those who knew songs enough could be singers, and at present only old men are capable of leading the songs, though some of the young ones act as side singers. Then, too, the "flint carriers" are usually persons who have specialized more or less in that phase of the dance—usually young men, who perform this act with a swagger. It was said that not everyone would carry flints, because it is dangerous, "one has to know how to hold them or they might hit together or drop, and that would cost a lot of money."⁹ There was no evidence that the privilege now adhered only to the wealthy, nor was there any hint other than the statement just given that formerly this had been so.¹⁰

At the present time, various persons interested in the dance contribute some food, but the leaders bear the brunt of the expense, which is partly defrayed by a collection subscribed to by persons willing to donate to a common larder. The Hupa recognize that storekeepers in the valley profit from the presentation of the dance and expect them to contribute. White persons who vend food at the dance grounds either paid cash for the privilege or donated some of their goods to various fires. In 1935 no vendors were allowed, and one person who attempted a sale was sent away when the dance leader heard of the transaction.

During the first morning of the 1935 ceremony several men were construct-

⁹ Statement of informant Sam Brown.

¹⁰ Bastards were not allowed to dance, but no further statement of any choice of performers on the basis of such a distinction was made. Goddard (*op. cit.*, §2) mentions that only wellborn could enter Xonta nikyau, but does not define whom that includes. Undoubtedly some persons were excluded from certain of these ceremonial activities.

ing the annual fish dam below Xowonkut, but it had no connection with the dance. The workers watched the performance and ate some of the food. The construction of the dam had not been begun at the time of the 1937 performance.

All Hupa are supposed to attend the dance; to stay away would cause sickness. It is said that formerly no gathering or hunting was engaged in during this period, though fishing was permissible, but now the men must continue to work at their regular jobs. Yurok people who were at the dance said that one who sees the first day of it must also see the last; otherwise ill luck will befall him.

THE INDIVIDUAL DANCE

We are now ready to examine the Deerskin dance itself. The plan of the dance ground at Xowonkut is presented in figure 1, and shows the general relation-

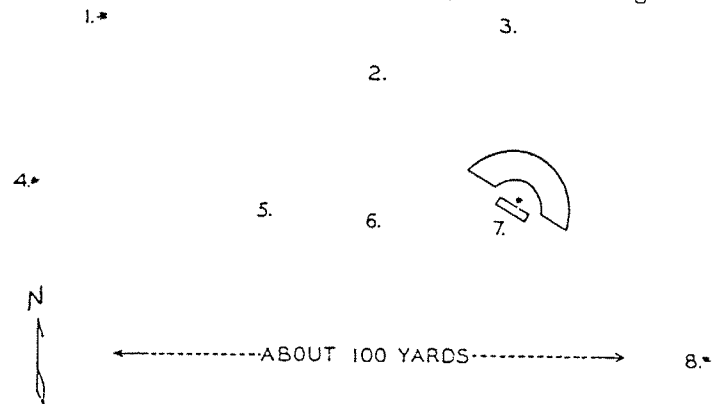


Fig. 1. Plan of the dance ground at Xowonkut, drawn freehand from observations on the spot: 1, Takamaldɛ daytime dressing place; 2, Takamaldɛ camping and eating place; 3, Takamaldɛ undressing place; 4, Metaldɛ dressing place; 5, Metaldɛ camping and eating place; 6, Metaldɛ undressing place; 7, dance ground (rectangle indicates dancing place, the arc the spectators); 8, Takamaldɛ night dressing place. Stars indicate positions of ritual fires.

ship between the several places of importance. Each of the two camps puts on a dance alternately, starting and ending with the Takamaldɛ side. A dance is made up of: (1) the medicine man, who sits by a fire in front of the line of dancers and burns angelica root to the accompaniment of incantations; (2) the singer, *kita'an*, who leads the song from the center of the line of dancers; (3) two side singers, who accompany the leader in chorus; (4) the four or more side dancers, *ya'di'lye* or *talkt djidi'lye*, who carry the beat by rhythmic stamping; and (5) the four flint carriers, *hadje'wana'wai*, who do a special dance in front of the line. At the beginning of each dance these performers are arranged as shown in figure 2, A.

The dancers are dressed by the dance leader and his helpers somewhere near the rack where the costumes have been placed. Then they line up before the medicine man in the order in which the leaders want them, and they receive their deerskins and the final touches to their costumes (dressing place illustrated in pl. 2, a). When everything is in order, they go through a short

rehearsal and then file to the dance ground. The rehearsal consists of two abbreviated songs, each lasting long enough for one pair of the flint carriers to cross in front of the line once. The medicine man led the Takmud^o dancers to the ground; L led those from the Metdd^o camp. After encircling the dance ground, the dancers take the positions shown in figure 2, A. After a brief interval the song leader begins. He is standing, stooped slightly forward and clutching the pole, on which is hung a deerskin. He starts patting time with one foot, usually the right, and when all the men in the line are apparently in time with him, he starts his high, thin, somewhat plaintive melody. The two men flanking him sing in chorus (though frequently they appeared not to know the leader's song well enough to do so) while the others in the line stamp one foot, which they may alternate *ad lib.* They also emit a deep he' he', sucking a long breath audibly through their teeth between each two grunts.

After a few bars the dancers on one side raise their voices to a high whoop, which may be written ge'ge'u, the last syllable being drawn out and diminishing. The dancers of the opposite side repeat this call two beats later (see fig. 4), giving the effect of an echo. These calls are repeated throughout the song, their frequency apparently being determined by the attitudes of the dancers who may initiate them.²⁴ The first call of this type is the signal for two

flint carriers, one from either side, to arise and begin to dance back and forth in front of the line (fig. 2, A; see also pl. I, a). They have whistles in their mouths, on which they blow a sustained monotonous note which lasts almost through three beats, interrupted by a short pause. Taking pains to remain in time with each other, with long gliding steps but keeping the torso quite erect they walk in time with the beats of the dancers. The ceremonial flints are held at arm's length in front of the eyes. In this way the two walk as close as possible to the dancers, passing each other on the left so close that the stones almost touch. As they turn to go back past the line of singers, their steps become short and jerky but without change in time, and they kick back the loose

²⁴ Some of the boys were shy, others seemed to delight in taking an active part.

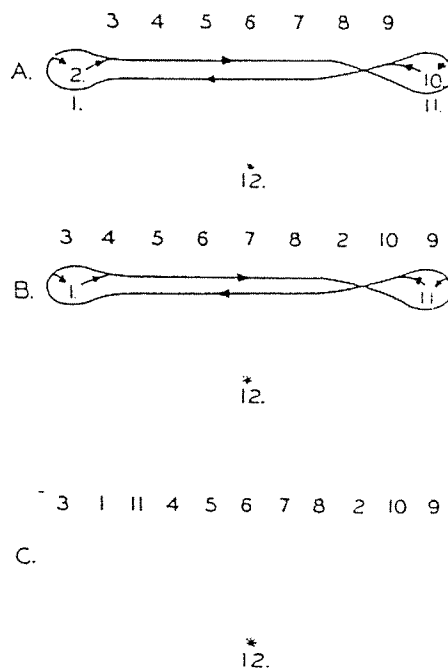


Fig. 2. Position of dancers at various phases in the dance: A, position at beginning of the performance and circuit described by flint carriers; B, positions during the fourth, fifth, and sixth dances and the circuit of the other two flint carriers; C, position of dancers during the last two songs. Stars indicate positions of ritual fires.

