

Love Songs Among the Omaha Indians

by Alice C. Fletcher (1838-1923)

This PDF is provided by www.Flutopedia.com as part of a collection of resources for the Native American flute. The full citation for this digital copy of the original source material is provided below, as well as the specific details of the source of this reference and how it was digitized (if known).

As part of the Flutopedia effort, extensive metadata (title, author, citation, etc.) has been encoded into this file. Select File/Properties in any Adobe product to view this information. You also can use text search on this document, based either on the OCR encoding done during the original digitization or during Flutopedia document preparation using the OCR facility of Adobe Acrobat 9 Pro.

Based on our best efforts, we believe that providing this material from www.Flutopedia.com to users in the United States does not violate any legal rights. However, please do not assume that it is legal to use this material outside the United States or for any use other than your own personal research and self-enrichment. Also, we cannot offer guidance as to whether any specific use of this material is allowed.

If you have any questions about this document or issues with its distribution, please visit <http://www.Flutopedia.com/> for information on how to contact us.

Citation

[Fletcher 1894b] Alice C. Fletcher (1838-1923). "Love Songs Among the Omaha Indians", contained in [Wake 1894], 1894, pages 153-157.

[Wake 1894] C. Staniland Wake (editor). *Memoirs of the International Congress of Anthropology*, published by The Schulte Publishing Company, Chicago, 1894, 357 pages, hardcover.

Contributing source: Harvard University

Digitizing sponsor: Google, Inc.

Digitized by: Google Books on December 11, 2007



MEMOIRS
OF THE
INTERNATIONAL CONGRESS
OF ANTHROPOLOGY.

EDITED BY
C. STANILAND WAKE,

ON BEHALF OF
THE PUBLICATION COMMITTEE.

2

CHICAGO:
THE SCHULTE PUBLISHING COMPANY.
1894



LOVE SONGS AMONG THE OMAHA INDIANS.

BY ALICE C. FLETCHER.

IT is well known that Indian ceremonies, both religious and secular, are enveloped in song. Public ceremonies and all ordinary avocations can be observed without difficulty, but many obstacles arise when a student would penetrate into the mysteries of secret societies and ceremonials, and these obstacles increase as he approaches the Indian's personal habits and experiences. As a result of these obstacles, which are enhanced by the Indian's shyness and reserve upon all personal matters, the statement has gone abroad that he, whose every act is set to music, so to speak, is silent when moved by the emotion of love, and that he knows no wooing such as is recognized among more advanced races.

Mr. Herbert Spencer, in the postscript to his essay on the Origin of Music, published less than three years ago, writes: "Out of all the testimonies" (and these testimonies include statements concerning the North American Indians) "there is not one which tells of a love-song spontaneously commenced by a man to charm a woman."

During the last dozen years I have spent much time in the patient study of Indian music in a number of tribes belonging to different linguistic stocks, and have transcribed hundreds of their songs. These cover a wide range of ceremonial and personal experiences, and include courting or love songs.

My present illustrations will be drawn from the Omaha tribe, for the reason that a number of Omaha songs have recently been published by the Peabody Museum of Harvard University, and are available for reference.

A study of the songs of the various Indian tribes of this country gives glimpses of the unfolding of the emotional nature of the race, and reveals evidences of growth in the power of expression. In these songs we come near to the beginnings of the kindred arts of music and poetry, and note how apparently the early metrical expression of emotion was in music rather than in verse, and that it was the rhythm of the song that moulded the words into metrical numbers.

In all primitive music rhythm is strongly developed. The pulsations of the drum and the sharp crash of the rattles are thrown against

each other and against the voice, so that it would seem that the pleasure derived by the performers lay not so much in the tonality of the song as in the measured sounds arrayed in contesting rhythms, which by their clash start the nerves and spur the body to action, for the voice, which alone carries the tone, is often subordinated, and treated as an additional instrument. Our Indian songs partake somewhat of this primitive character. In them rhythm is strongly marked, and often we find two or more rhythms contesting with each other through all the intricacies of syncopation. The skill the Indian displays singing in one rhythm and drumming in another is not a mark of highly developed musical sense, but, on the contrary, belongs to its earlier manifestations. Much practice would be required to enable us to imitate his surprising performance, our ears having been trained more especially in tonality and simple rhythms. It seems to be as true of the race as of the child, that in the development of the musical sense delight in rhythm precedes tone perception.

There are many Indian songs, however, in which tonality rises into prominence and rhythm is felt in the musical phrase rather than merely in the drum-beat. Such songs evince an advance in power of expression, the growth of higher emotions and sentiments having demanded a higher type of utterance.

The general idea associated with song is that the musical tones act as a vehicle to the words, bearing them above their literal meaning, and even the ancient Greeks held that music without words was hardly worth consideration, save as a curiosity, but as we trace our way back to early song we find that the importance of words in the explanation of tones and cadences diminishes as we proceed. Indian songs that are fully supplied with words are the exception. Musical syllables from which the sibilants and gutturals are eliminated, leaving only the flowing vowel sounds, are used to float the voice. These musical syllables, once fastened to a song, are preserved as faithfully as though they were text. There are many songs having a few words only, musical syllables filling out the measures. There are other songs in which the few words used have their accents changed, or are taken apart and stretched by the interposition of musical syllables, and the phrase made elliptical to suit the rhythm of the music, which in its turn voices the rhythm of the emotion. Such songs are interesting as affording a study of the beginnings of poetry, of the bending of words to form a metrical setting to the thought.

We do not easily understand how vocal music without words can convey any definite meaning, and it may be suggested that such songs find their interpretation in the acts of the ceremony of which they form a part. An instance to the contrary can be found in the Omaha funeral song, No. 57 in the monograph. This blythe major melody is furnished with musical syllables only. There are no words to explain the startling contrast of the song with the bloody ceremony of which it forms a part. To understand what this song conveys to the Omaha Indian, one must be familiar with his belief concerning the future life of the soul. The absence of words, therefore, does not prevent the Indian's apprehension of a certain definiteness of expression in musical tones.

It is impossible to understand any act of an Indian without considering the all-pervasive power of his tribal organization, an organization that took no account of the individual, permitted no personal responsibility or personal freedom, and which bound his mind in the meshes of religious, ritual and gentile obligation. Marriage was therefore an affair of the gentes and not the free union of a man and woman as we understand the relation. The laws of the gens held them apart, and their children never became the inheritors of both parents. The ceremony of marriage was often a formal affair, affording little chance for the play of love's young dream; but side by side with these restrictive ceremonies grew up the custom of secret courtship and elopement. So they say: "An old man buys his wife; a young man steals his."

The Indian mode of life was such that the morning and evening visit to the spring, to dip up water for the family use, gave the only opportunity for lovers to meet. It is true that the daughter seldom or never went alone to the spring, but it holds as good in the Indian country as elsewhere, that all the world loves a lover, and the chaperoning elder woman often devised friendly little absences, that the youth who had made his presence known by his song might gain a few words with his sweetheart. The scene was simple: the birds and flowers, the morning glow and stirring breeze were the only witnesses, and they would not betray the lovers. These honorable secret courtships were never talked of or sung about. The veil of silence was never withdrawn from these morning moments at the spring, not even if the marriage proved disastrous and the tie was broken.

But there are songs that deal with what are lightly called love-affairs, intrigues which were more or less contrary to established so-

cial order. The Omahas called these songs *Wa-oo-wa-an*, or woman songs, not that they originated with women, or were ever sung by them, but because they described experiences in which women had played a part. A song of this class was frequently composed by the very man who in it recounted his own adventures, but he tells the story as though it was the woman who spoke. Although the young men and old beaux who affected these songs never sang them in the presence of women, they were dreaded by the sex as a sort of derisive scourge. These songs were seldom ribald, and sometimes the violation of the social code implied in the narrative would have passed unobserved in any other society than tribal.

There are humorous bits in some of these songs, as in one which, freely translated, gives the picture of the gay youth sitting upon a hill overlooking the village that is buzzing over his escapades. As the murmurs are wafted up to him, he complacently throws all responsibility upon the gods who made him as he was—irresistible!

The *Wa-oo-wa-an*, woman songs, were more fully supplied with words than the songs of any other class, and are interesting as a study of the beginnings of ballad-making. They are in no sense love-songs; they have nothing to do with courtship and are reserved for the exclusive audience of men.

The true love-song, called by the Omahas *Bethae wa-an*, an old designation and not a descriptive name, is sung generally in the early morning, when the lover is keeping his tryst and watching for the maiden to emerge from the tent and go to the spring. They belong to the secret courtship and are sometimes called *Me-the-g'tibun wa-an*—courting songs. *Me-the-g'tibun* signifies the act of courting or wooing a woman to wed. They were sung without drum, bell or rattle, to accent the rhythm, which in these songs is subordinated to tonality and is felt only in the musical phrases. The singer used much liberty in rendering the music, the time was not strict, and the voice lingered and died away in the long notes. Vibrations for the purpose of giving greater expression were not only effected by the tremolo of the voice, but they were enhanced by waving the hand, or a spray of artemesia before the lips, while the body often swayed gently to the rhythm of the song. This mode of rendering love-songs was in strong contrast to the usual habit of singing in exact time to sharply accented rhythmic beats.

As the tribal organization reduced the personality of a man to the minimum, any evidence of the activity of the vital principle of

individuality becomes exceedingly valuable wherever found, and these love-songs present such evidence. In them we discern the freer use of tonality, for tonality permitted a greater play of personal feeling than could be obtained through strong rhythms, however complicated; their flowing cadences voiced a longing that had made the youth conscious of his individuality, of his distinctness from the mass of men in his gens. This dawning consciousness of his individuality in the longing for something not his own—an ideal, if you will—vindicated the stirring of the principle of personal freedom to choose and to act.

Although there is a marked subjectivity in the music, there is also a concentration of feeling and purpose, and at the same time a reaching-out toward nature, a taking into his confidence of the woods, the birds and the sunlight, in the joy of his own experience. The few words in these songs convey the one poetic sentiment: "With the day I come to you;" or, "Behold me, as the day dawns."

Few unprejudiced listeners will fail to recognize in these *Betbae-wa-an*, or love-songs, the emotion and the sentiment that prompts a man to woo the woman of his choice.