

Tah-koo Wah-kan or, The Gospel Among the Dakotas (Excerpt)

by Stephen R. Riggs (1812-1883)

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TAH-KOO WAH-KAH;

OR,

THE GOSPEL AMONG THE DAKOTAS.

BY

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AND DICTIONARY.

With an Introduction,

BY

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*Written for the Congregational Sabbath-School and Publishing
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DAKOTA SONGS AND MUSIC.

BY REV. A. L. RIGGS.

A people's songs the key to their life. — War songs. — Love songs. — Giving the ring. — Songs of medicine and magic. — Songs of sacred mysteries. — Song of "Sounding Cloud." — Its interpretation. — Song of Oon-ktay'-he. — Social songs. — Dakota poetry. — The sacred language. — Dakota music. — The minor key the favorite. — Two Dakota melodies. — Musical instruments. — The drum. — The rattle. — The Cho'-tan-ka. — How made. — Power of savage song. — Christian hymns. — Dakotas love to sing. — The Dakota hymn-book.

THE songs of a people furnish an entrance to their inner life, which, if we would understand them, we cannot neglect. This is especially true of a barbarous people, whose outward life is rough and forbidding. It is not enough for us to note their uncouth dress and rude ways. Such curiosity-shop knowledge is neither complete nor just, because it is not sympathetic; being content with ob-

serving the life of habit, it does not reach the real life, the life of feeling. Taking the truer method, we find the Dakotas to be men and women of like passions with ourselves. And they in like manner find in music and song their greatest means of emotional expression; either in the stirring songs of the chase or of war, or the plaintive melodies of love, or the weird chants of their sacred mysteries.

The first class from which we will draw examples is that of their

WAR SONGS.

I.

I have cast in here a soul,
I have cast in here a soul,
I have cast in here a buffalo soul;
I have cast in here a soul.

One characteristic of Dakota poetry must be mentioned here by way of explanation. It is, never to call things by their common names, if it can be avoided. Thus, "buffalo"

is here the poetic term for man. This is a song of the "circle dance," and is a war incantation. It is sung by the officiating priest, as he concocts his war magic in a hole in the earth, while the chorus dances in circle around him.

II.

I make my way with my face covered,
I make my way with my face covered;
The people are buffaloes;
I make my way with my face covered.

This, like the preceding one, is a song of preparation for war. It is a vision of the night. The four black spirits have come to the aspiring war-leader, and he dreams. He sees the enemy an easy prey, like herded buffaloes, while he, with "covered face," goes disguised and protected. This and the next two are called "armor songs."

III.

Night now passes along,
Night now passes along;
It passes along with a thunder bird;
Night now passes along.

Another vision of the war-leader, by which he attests his divine commission to lead on the war-path. To us it means but little; but to the Dakota it presents a terrible vision. The four black spirits have come up, and black Night appears with a thunder bird in her mouth.

IV.

Whose sacred road lies plainly,
Whose sacred road lies plainly;
The sacred road of day lies plainly.

The war-leader has another revelation, and sees the mysterious or wakan' war-path as plain as day before him; and, with such credentials, he goes forth to gather recruits. The war-drum goes day and night, and the dancers go circling round, while the young braves are brought to the enlisting point by such recruiting songs as these, which, if not very excellent, are as good as our own, and answer their purpose as well.

V.

Ojibwa, hurry along!
Ojibwa, get out of the way!
We're coming there again.

VI.

Ojibwa, hallo!
Tell your older brother
You're too slow.

The line, "Tell your older brother," conveys something of the same idea as the phrase, "Does your mother know you're out?"

In the next song, we may suppose the warrior prepared for his campaign, and, as it were, mustering and parading his forces, physical and spiritual.

VII.

Terrifying all I journey,
Terrifying all I journey;
By the *Toon-kan'* at the North,
Terrifying all I journey.

He goes forth invested with supernatural power from the great lingam, or stone god of the North.

Now the war party returns, having been successful ; and this is the warrior's song :—

VIII.

Something I've killed, and I lift up my voice,
Something I've killed, and I lift up my voice ;
The northern buffalo I've killed, and I lift up my
voice ;
Something I've killed, and I lift up my voice.

Here we have a double metaphor ; for the "northern buffalo" means a black bear, but "black bear" means a man. The "lifting up the voice" is a mourning for the slain enemy ; for the successful warriors must paint themselves black, and go dressed as though they had lost their best friend. Another version of this song, in place of "the northern buffalo," etc., has the line,

An Eastern two-legged one I've killed, etc.

In all these songs, the words form but a small part of the song, as it is sung. By the use of meaningless syllables, such as

hay, kay, hay, hay, he, he, he, he, ah, ah, ah, ah, any couplet may occupy an indefinite time. The same is true of their religious chants; while, on the contrary, their love songs have little of this, and are quite regular.

LOVE SONGS.

I.

Cling fast to me, and you'll ever have a plenty;
Cling fast to me, and you'll ever have a plenty;
Cling fast to me.

We may imagine that the suitor, in this case, has little to recommend him, in the way of worldly wealth, except his good right arm and bow or gun. The plenty he promises is a plenty to eat, which, in a hunter life, is the highest good that can be named. If all goes well, we may suppose the maiden saying, —

II.

Whenever we choose,
Together we'll dwell;

Mother so says.
This finger ring
Put on and wear.

She is supposed to say this, but really does not. Her young brave sings to her what he believes or hopes she would say. And so it is in most of these songs. The reference to the ring may seem to contradict this; but the ring is generally given by the woman, and is put on the right little finger of the man; though the women also receive rings, and wear them, as we shall see.

III.

Wear this, I say;
Wear this, I say;
Wear this, I say;
This little finger ring,
Wear this, I say.

IV.

Stealthily, secretly see me,
Stealthily, secretly see me,
Stealthily, secretly see me.
Lo, thee I tenderly regard;
Stealthily, secretly see me.

By which we may judge that the course of true love is not sure to run smooth, even on the prairies. All difficulties, however, may seem to be overcome, and love is triumphant. The hunter goes off with light heart to the chase; but time drags heavily with the heart left behind. And here the feelings of the lonely maiden find expression: —

V.

I cried, but now —

I cried, but now —

I cried, but now —

My little cousin, a prairie fire appears!

And I cried, but now —

She is disconsolate until a smoke rises in the distance, which she hopes is the sign of the hunter's returning. "My little cousin" is the younger brother of her betrothed. Or, it may be, she sings, —

VI.

Come again, come again, come again, come again,

Come again, come again, come again;

I look upon my finger ring, and my heart is sad.
Come again, come again, come again.

In this case, the woman has received a ring as well as the man. There may, however, be rivals in the field. Mercenary relations may be favoring another suitor; and while her chosen brave is absent, his absence is held up as the sign of waning affection. But the still faithful maid replies, —

VII.

Stay there, I say!
Stay there, I say!
Come he will;
He'll come; he said so.
Scarlet Eagle, he will come,
He'll come; he said so.

Or perhaps the passion of the rejected suitor is held in terror over her head, and she makes light of it.

VIII.

Who would of such an one be afraid!
Be afraid, indeed!
Who would of such an one be afraid!
Be afraid, indeed!

It may, however, to tell the whole truth, be the supposed utterance of one already wedded, and whose unfaithfulness would lawfully entitle her husband to clip off her nose with his scalping knife. But, on the ground of the cowardice of her lawful lord, she willingly takes all such risks.

Now we come to one more like a dirge than a love song; and it is fittingly set to most plaintive music.

IX.

Lo, greatly I am distressed;

Lo, greatly I am distressed.

My child's father!

My child's father!

My child's father!

My child's father!

Lo, greatly I am distressed.

This song is appropriate to the courtship of a widow. Her heart is besieged through sympathy with her grief, while the meaning is, that the place of so good a father to her child ought to be filled by another.

The case may be more desperate yet; for there is that which is harder to endure than bereavement or death. Two may be unhappily mated, and the wife, enduring it no longer, resolves to risk all and elope with another. This is her song:—

X.

Sorely I am distressed;
Sorely I am distressed;
Sorely I am distressed.
The earth alone continues long;
I speak as one not expecting to live.
Sorely I am distressed;
The earth alone continues long.

Does not the last line reveal a depth of heart-weariness and desperation which cannot be told in words?

SONGS OF MEDICINE AND MAGIC.

I.

This mysterious medicine take!
This mysterious medicine take!
May this man mysteriously recover.

The physician sings this, as he concocts a

medicine for the sick, to give it efficacy. It should be borne in mind, that the Dakota word *wakan'* and its derivations, here and elsewhere translated *mystery*, *mysterious*, *mysteriously*, carries with it an idea of the supernatural, and hence of the sacred and divine. It is sometimes appropriately rendered magic. Here some potion is the medium of the *wakan'* power; but in the next the physician or conjurer acts directly by his own indwelling power, without the aid of any material medium.

II.

Something have I in my breast;
Something have I in my breast!
A snake have I in my breast;
Something have I in my breast.

With the consciousness of great power in his own snake, he approaches his patient to cast out the snake in him which has caused his sickness. In other cases it may be some other animal or spirit.

III.

He whose face I admire;
He whose face I admire;
In his face may I shoot him.

Another version of which runs thus : —

The two-legged one whose face I admire;
The two-legged one whose face I admire;
In his face may I shoot him.

The "two-legged one" is a man. And this is the song of the old wizard or conjurer who is raising enchantments for a war-party against their enemy. By his enchantment, he is supposed to be able to bring death to one whose goodly countenance shows him to be a man of rank and authority among his people.

SONGS OF THE SACRED MYSTERIES.

The whole ritual of their worship is chanted, whether engaged in by the single devotee or the sacred assembly. Thus, the seeker after a divine inspiration, having

hung up in his tepee something embodying wakan' or mysterious power, utters his prayer in this song:—

I.

In the home of mysterious life I lie;
In the home of mysterious life I lie;
In the home of mystery, may I grow into mystery;
In the home of mysterious life I lie.

Or he goes forth in the fields with a prayer to *Tah'-koo-skan-skan'*, the *motion god*, whom he calls father.

II.

Shooting an arrow, I come;
Shooting an arrow, I come;
In the east my father sings for me:—I come,
Shooting an arrow, I come.

This is a morning song; but if it is evening, he sings instead:—

In the *west* my father sings for me, etc.,
and it is an evening song.

The next is a song of the sun-dance.
Whoever dances to the sun is expected

to make a song which embodies the god-communication to him. This is the song of Sounding Cloud.

III.

1. Having those, may I come ;
Having those four souls, may I make my camp-fires.
2. The day that is determined for me ;
May it come earthward.
3. I have four souls ;
Holy boy ! I give them to thee.
4. Sun-gazer (a bird), where have you gone ?
Behold your friend !
5. The day to see thee ;
May it come.
6. Encrowned with glory,
I come forth resplendent.
7. Sounding Cloud, my friend !
Do you want water ?

The dance to the sun begins with the day.* The dancer fixes his eyes on the sun, and follows it with unaverted gaze

* For fuller particulars, see Chapter VI, on "Dakota Worship."

while above the horizon, and then turns to the moon, now usually at the full, which shares the divine honors of the sun. He dances continuously, with but short intervals of rest, through the day, and through the night, and on in the next day, as long as flesh and will can endure. All this time, he goes without food or drink, and is further tortured with great weights hanging by thongs fastened into his living flesh. A chorus of singers attends, with the drum and deer-hoof rattle, encouraging the dancer, accompanying his song, or at times responding to it.

Of this song, verses 1 and 2 are his prayer to his god. He prays (verse 1) that he may take four scalps, and return safely; and (verse 2) that the appointed day may soon be revealed to him. The sun-god now looks down in favor upon his suppliant, and rewards his devotion. He

promises (verse 3) to give four of the enemy into his hand, and recognizes him as now wakan', (Holy boy!) and as henceforth belonging to the mystic circle of the gods. With this assurance of divine acceptance, the devotee claims (verse 4) relationship with the sun-bird himself. Like him, he is henceforth the companion of his god. He, too, has looked upon his face, and lives. Now the night comes on, and its weary, painful hours wear by. Hardly can the dancer, fevered and faint, keep time with the hollow-sounding drum and shrill rattles. But dawn begins to break, and the chorus utter, as their prayer in his behalf, verse 5,—that the god may again look upon him in favor. The sun hears the prayer of the watchers, and now (verse 6) bursts forth, crowned with mysterious splendors, re-animating the flagging powers of his servant. However, as the

midday beams again beat down upon the wretched dancer, his sufferings are inexpressible. But now the chorus, instead of cheering him up, in order to make the final test of his fortitude, calls out to him, faint with fasting and dancing, and all on fire with a burning thirst and his torturing wounds, —

Sounding Cloud, my friend!
Do you want water?

Following the rounds of their Pantheon, we come now to the liturgy of *Wah-kin'-yan*, or the thunder-god. Here are two specimens: —

IV.

I sing to a Spirit;
This is the Thunder.

This is properly a war song. The warrior has commenced with the thunder, and the four black spirits of the night have told him that he will kill an enemy. For this he sings this song of praise.

V.

Lo! a cloud is let down from above!
Father! shall I fly upon it?

In this it would seem that, as the god rolls his cloud-chariot across the sky, almost touching the earth, the enthusiast deems it a messenger of the Deity to himself, and perhaps sent to bear him into the high realm of mystery.

The next four songs belong to the ritual of the society of the sacred dance, of which order *Oon-ktay'-he*, god of water and earth, is the patron god. The god sings thus:—

VI.

Across the lake mysteriously I lie;
Across the lake mysteriously I lie;
That, decoying some soul, I may eat him alive.
So may it be.

Again he sings out of the whirlwind and thunder storm:

VII.

This wakan' I whirled,
This wakan' I whirled,
This house I levelled.

This wakan' I whirled,
This house I levelled,
This wakan' I whirled.

In praise of their "mystery sack," improperly called "medicine sack," the members of the order sing:—

VIII.

Grandfather made me mysterious medicine;
That is true.
Being of mystery, grown in the water,
He gave it me.
To grandfather's face wave the imploring hand;
Holding a quadruped, wave the imploring hand.

The god is addressed as grandfather. "Wave the imploring hand" is not the literal rendering of the Dakota words here used, which are "Stroke the face of my grandfather;" but, used with reference to the Deity, it signifies a stroking motion of the hand towards the face of the god, expressive of adoration and entreaty. The "quadruped" is the wakan' or mystery "sack," often made of the skin of some

four-footed animal, with the head and claws retained. In its praise, they sing again : —

IX.

In red down he made it for me ;
In red down he made it for me ;
He of the water, he of mysterious countenance,
Gave it to me,
Grandfather !

Swan's-down, dyed red, is a sacred article, and used continually in their worship as an offering to the gods, and as an ornament of consecrated articles, such as the weapons and feathers of the warrior. It is much delighted in by the gods, who are said to wear it largely. It may be because of this that it is employed in the "mystery sack," to embody the supposed spiritual presence.

SOCIAL SONGS.

The Dakotas have many societies for social intercourse, which are called "friendship leagues," and bear such names as "the buffaloes," "little foxes," "northmen," and

"owl feather caps." There are separate societies for men and women. There are also dancing companies, including both sexes, under such appropriate names as "leg-shakers," "grasshoppers," etc. These all have their songs, of which, however, no specimens are at hand.

DAKOTA POETRY.

Some idea of the character of their poetry may be had even from the foregoing versions. A prominent feature in its structure is the repetition of some line, usually the first, of the stanza, one, two, and even four times. Alliteration is much employed. The rythmical flow is even and pleasant. Rhymes are used; but this is too easy to be noteworthy. In connection with the more regular rythmical forms, such as have been given, the recitative is introduced in their dances, for narrative and description.

The language of their poetry, like that of their oratory, is highly figurative. In addition to the common figures of speech, a sacred language is often employed, in which common words are used in a sense totally different from that which they ordinarily bear. This makes the true interpretation of their poetry very difficult, and, indeed, impossible to one who has not the key.

DAKOTA MUSIC.

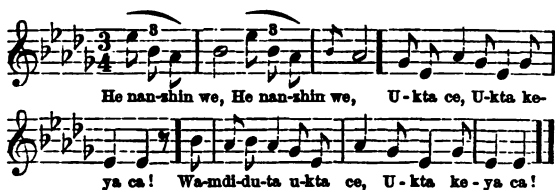
Their native music is of the simplest kind. It has only a melody, with rude vocal and instrumental accompaniments. These accompaniments are more for marking time than for harmonic effect. In their dances, the chant or melody is sung by the men, while the chorus of women utter a single shrill falsetto note, — an “ai,” “ai,” “ai,” — given with an explosive shriek, and keeping time with the drums. The appreciation of

harmony is said to be an acquired taste, born of civilized society. This is, at least, the case among the Dakotas. When a melodeon was first introduced into the mission chapel, Eagle Helper, an old Indian, said: "It sings well at one end; but why do you have it grumble away at the other, like so many bull-frogs?"

The minor key is the favorite one. It is universally used in their love songs, and generally in other songs. The major key is, however, recognizable in some of their war songs and in the songs of the "friendship leagues."

Here are two love-song melodies. The first of them belongs to No. VII, and the second to No. VIII, of the foregoing selections. In reading the Dakota words, give the European sounds to the vowels, and pronounce *c* as *ch* soft, and final *n* as a nasal.

No. I.



No. II.



MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS.

Their musical instruments are the drum, the rattle, and the pipe or flute. The *drum* is called *chan'-chay-ga*, or "wood-kettle." The hoop of the drum is usually from a foot to eighteen inches in diameter, and three or four inches deep. Sometimes it is as much as ten inches deep. The skin covering is stretched over only one side

of the hoop, making a drum with one end. A single drumstick is used.

The rattle is made by hanging the hard segments of deer-hoofs to a wooden rod a foot long, and three fourths of an inch in diameter at the handle end, tapering to a point at the other. The part to which the rattles are hung is first covered with a sheath of skin, and into this the short strings which suspend them are fastened. The clashing of these hard, horny bits makes a sharp, shrill sound, somewhat like that of a string of sleigh-bells at a distance. The Dakota name, *tah-shah'-kay*, means literally, "deer-hoofs." The conjurers sometimes use, in their incantations over the sick, a rattle made in another way. A gourd-shell is emptied of its contents through a small hole; smooth pebbles or plum-stones are put in, and the opening plugged up. This gives a more hollow sound.

The pipe or flute is called *cho'-tan-ka*, which means literally, "big-pith." It has two varieties; one made of wood, and the other of bone. The first is the most common, and much resembles the flageolet. It is made by taking of the sumac—a wood which has the requisite "big-pith"—a straight piece nineteen or twenty inches long, and, when barked and smoothed down, an inch and a quarter in diameter. This is split open in the middle, and the pith and inner wood carefully hollowed out to make a bore of five eighths of an inch diameter, extending through the whole length, except that it grows smaller at the mouth-piece, and, at a point four inches below that, it is interrupted entirely by a partition three eighths of an inch thick, which is left to form the whistle. The halves are glued together. Finger-holes, one quarter of an inch in diameter, and

usually six in number, are burnt along the upper face. On the same face the whistle is made by cutting a hole three eighths of an inch square each side of the partition. Then, over these, and connecting them, is laid a thin plate of lead, with a slit cut in it, a little more than an inch long and three eighths of an inch wide. On top of this is a block of wood, two inches long and three fourths of an inch wide, flat on the bottom, and carved above into the rough likeness of a horse; and a deer-skin string binds the whole down tight. A brass thimble for a mouth-piece, some ribbon streamers, a few lines of grotesque carving, and a little red and yellow paint, and the instrument is complete.

The pitch of the particular pipe to which this description mainly refers, seems to have been originally A prime, and changed to G prime by boring a seventh hole. One

formerly in my possession was pitched on Eb prime; and from it the airs which are here given were taken down.

The second variety of the *cho'-tan-ka* is made of the long bone of the wing or thigh of the swan and crane. To distinguish the first from the second, they call the first the *murmuring* (literally "bubbling") *cho'-tan-ka*, from the tremulous note it gives when blown with all the holes stopped.

POWER OF SAVAGE SONG.

The power of Dakota music is not to be measured by its rudeness or undeveloped character, judged according to our standards. But, if rightly considered, it will be found that just here lies the secret of its power. Its wild and plaintive tones being in perfect harmony with the savage wilderness and the more savage life inhabiting it, they wake deeper chords than more artistic

notes could do, or than they themselves can give. That it has great power over the Dakota himself, no one can doubt who sees the dancers keep their monotonous round for hours, while the wild chant moves on. Of course, it is the emotion within, which thus finds expression; that is the ultimate motive power; but the music is not its unfit embodiment, whether it be the revenge of the breathless ambush or the shrieking onset, pantomimed in the scalp-dance, or, again, tender love thoughts droned out by the flute of some wandering serenader.

And would the white stranger realize its power for himself, it will not be by curiously inspecting the lifeless specimens here given, or by humming over these poor melodies, but by placing himself in the midst of savage life, where, under misty moonbeams, the night air bears the wavering chant of the fierce dancers, now high and clear, then a

low murmur, with the incessant hollow drum beat and the heartless clash of the rattles rising and falling on the breeze. As the note of the whip-poor-will at noonday would stir no heart, yet in the edge of night thrills the hearer with its now touching note, so these wild notes of savage life, to be felt in their power, must be heard on the border, where scalps are fresh, and one's life is at the mercy of the foe each bush may cover. In such an atmosphere, palpitating with possible war-whoops, the sound of chant and rattle and drum have a depth of meaning elsewhere inexpressible.

CHRISTIAN HYMNS.

However, for all that part of the Dakota nation known as the Mississippi and Minnesota Sioux, all this belongs to the past. Christian hymns have taken the place of the heathen mystic chants. Jehovah is praised

instead of *Oon-ktay'-he*. The young braves now hold the axe and hoe with their own hands, and cannot strut in greasy ribbons through the cornfields which the maidens are tending, nor bewitch them with the love melodies of the light-fingered flute. But a purer love rears homes of virtue and of peace, and, when it needs them, will bring forth songs better than these. The war-songs, also, live only in the echoes of the past; while the once famous warriors go forth on a better war-path, armed with psalms and gospel for the conquest of their still savage brothers of the western plains.

The Dakotas love to sing, as the song-worship of their Christian assemblies will prove. All voices uniting on the melody of some world-known tune like *Silver Street*, *Ortonville*, *Martyn*, *Olivet*, or again on one of their own irregular but impressive native airs, they raise a song which, in heartiness,

power, and worshipfulness, one may go far to parallel.

Among the earliest labors of the missionaries, on gaining some knowledge of the language, was the translation of a few hymns, which even now could hardly be improved—a fact which seems a special providence, or as though there had been a gift of inspiration. The number of these hymns has been continually increased by new compositions and versions of English hymns, until they have reached one hundred and fifty or over. Some of the best of these are from the pens of native Christians. During this while, four different hymn-books have been published, each passing through several editions. Thus “the song of the redeemed” has been gathering power among the Dakotas. May its notes soon ring forth from the united voices of their whole nation !