

## *The Belief of the Indian in a Connection between Song and the Supernatural*

by Frances Densmore (1867-1957)

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By FRANCES DENSMORE

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## THE BELIEF OF THE INDIAN IN A CONNECTION BETWEEN SONG AND THE SUPERNATURAL

By FRANCES DENSMORE

An important phase of Indian music is known as the dream song, which is common to many tribes. These songs are not composed but are said to come to the mind of the Indian when he has placed himself in a receptive attitude. To this extent the source of the song is not unlike the inspiration sometimes experienced by composers of our own race, but the use of the song is entirely different. Our composer regards the song as a possible source of applause or wealth while the Indian connects it with mysterious power. An old Indian said to the writer, "If a man is to do something beyond human power he must have more than human strength." Song is a means through which that strength is believed to come to him.

In this, as in all close study of Indians, the student is hampered by lack of an adequate vocabulary and a knowledge of the idioms of the Indian language. A careful interpreter is necessary, with many patient conferences between the interpreter and the Indian as well as with the student, but the result is worth the effort. For example, if the Indian uses a word meaning "spirit" and it is interpreted as "a spirit" the significance is changed and there enters the concept of a material form, so the presence of a spirit may be assumed when it is not in the mind of the Indian. On one occasion the writer was questioning Lone Man, a trusted Sioux informant and singer, concerning information received from a pipe. He was asked whether a spirit entered into the pipe and gave the information. He replied this was not the case, saying that under certain conditions a pipe might "become sacred" and speak to the Indian. Among the Sioux Indians the term "wa'kaŋ" is used in referring to any mystery. The term "Great Spirit" is commonly used as the English equivalent of the Sioux word "Wakaŋ'taŋka," which consists of two adjectives, wa'kaŋ, "mysterious" and taŋ'ka, "great." Throughout the writer's work the term "Wakaŋ'taŋka" is used.<sup>1</sup> In old times this word was not used in ordinary conversation, as it was held too sacred to be spoken except

<sup>1</sup> Densmore, Frances, Teton Sioux Music, Bur. Amer. Ethnol. Bull. 61, p. 85. 1918.

with reverence and at a proper time. That which remains unspoken must be considered in any study of Indian thought, together with the fact that a "sacred language" is sometimes used by which ideas can be conveyed between initiates without being understood by others.

To a white man the term "dream" is connected with unconsciousness, but the Indian term implies an acute awareness of something mysterious. Dreams and their songs may come to an Indian in natural sleep if his mind is conditioned to such an experience, but the first important dream comes to a young man in a fasting vigil. He is alone in some silent place, and his mind is passive, as he hopes for an impression to come to him from a mysterious source. The silence becomes vibrant, it becomes rhythmic, and a melody comes to his mind. This is his "dream song," his most individual possession. An aged man once recorded his dream song for the writer, then bowed his head and said tremulously that he thought he would not live long as he had parted with his most precious possession. The white musician composes songs addressed to his deity. The Indian waited and listened for the mysterious power pervading all nature to speak to him in song. The Indian realized that he was *part* of nature—not *akin* to it.

By means of his dream song and by performing certain acts a man might put himself again in contact with the mysterious powers seen in his dream. Others might know the song from hearing him sing it, but no results would follow if they had the temerity to sing it. Yet a man might share his song, its power and its benefits, if he so desired and if someone were willing to pay the price. A man once offered to record his song to bring rain, saying the writer could bring rain at any time by singing it and that he would still have power to do so. His price was \$50, and it is needless to say that his offer was declined. The dream songs of the warriors of former days are sometimes sung in the war dances, the name of the warrior being honored in this manner, and the dream songs of forgotten warriors may remain in use, the name of the warrior being lost and only the song remaining.

The bird or animal that appeared to the Indian in his dream was an embodiment, to some extent, of the power that he desired and, by his individual temperament, was best fitted to use. A dream of a bear was especially favored by those who treated the sick, as the bear has such good claws for digging herbs which it eats. With the song, a bear may reveal certain herbs to be used by the medicine man. The warrior may dream of a roving wolf, and the hunter may dream of a buffalo. The creature seen in the dream is often mentioned in the song and may be made known in the man's name. Brave Buffalo, a Sioux who recorded several songs for me, had his

first dream when 10 years old and in that dream he saw a buffalo. His Sioux name was Tatarŋ'ka-ohi'tika, meaning "brave buffalo bull," but he was commonly known as Brave Buffalo. Later he dreamed of elk and wolves, and he recorded the songs received in these dreams.

Dreams concerning forms of nature may be regarded as more primitive than dreams concerning birds or animals, and songs are received from such powers. Such was the dream of a young man who lived to be an old warrior of the Pawnee. His name was Eagle. As a young man he was afraid of the storm and wept when he heard the thunder, but in a dream the thunder spoke to him slowly and said, "Do not be afraid, your father is coming." He heard the thunder sing, learned the song, and sang it when he went to war.<sup>2</sup> The words are freely translated:

Beloved it is good,  
He, the thunder, is saying quietly,  
it is good.

The term "thunderbirds" is more familiar than the term that carries no implication of a material form. Two of the writer's Sioux singers had dreams in which the thunderbirds assumed the form of men riding on horses.<sup>3</sup>

Two Chippewa dream songs were concerning the wind. They were recorded by Ki'miwun, "Rainy," at the remote village of Waba'ciŋg, on Red Lake in Minnesota. They appear to be the dream songs of forgotten men, as no origin was ascribed to them.<sup>4</sup> The first was used in treating the sick and the words are evidently concerning the man's dream. They are translated:

As the wind is carrying me around the sky.

The use of the second song was not known, but it had come down from a former time and was still sung. The words are:

One wind, I am master of it.

A member of the Makah tribe, in northwest Washington, related a dream in which the Southwest Wind appeared to him in the form of a man and sang a song, which he learned. This man was a prominent member of the tribe whose name was Young Doctor. He said the words of this song are not Indian words—they are in no known language, and he called it the "wind language."<sup>5</sup>

Passing from songs of the thunder and the wind, we turn to a song of the Yaqui concerning a simpler manifestation of nature. The Yaqui songs were recorded at Guadalupe village, near Phoenix, Ariz.,

<sup>2</sup> Densmore, Frances, Pawnee Music, Bur. Amer. Ethnol. Bull. 93, pp. 61, 62. 1929.

<sup>3</sup> Densmore, Frances, Teton Sioux Music, Bur. Amer. Ethnol. Bull. 61, pp. 159, 170. 1918.

<sup>4</sup> Densmore, Frances, Chippewa Music—II, Bur. Amer. Ethnol. Bull. 53, pp. 263, 271. 1913.

<sup>5</sup> Densmore, Frances, Nootka and Quileute Music, Bur. Amer. Ethnol. Bull. 124, p. 256. 1939.



in 1922. These Indians were citizens of Mexico and preserved many of their tribal customs including the Deer Dance. The songs of this dance are concerning the actions of various birds and animals but one is of special interest. The words were translated, "The bush is sitting under the tree and singing." The interpreter explained that the last word was correctly translated as "singing," but that it referred to the putting forth of magic power. The bush, "sitting under the tree," shared in the power that pervades the universe.<sup>6</sup>

It is customary for a man to wear or carry some article connected with his dream which shows its general subject, though he may not reveal all its details. A song of the Sioux Sun Dance mentions the wearing of certain symbols as a requirement of a dream. This song was recorded by Red Bird on the Standing Rock Reservation in North Dakota, in 1912.<sup>7</sup> It was sung at a Sun Dance by the Intercessor, during one of the periods when the dancers rested, the people listening attentively. In explanation, Red Bird said that the Intercessor, in his dream, saw the rising sun with rays streaming out around it. He made an ornament which represented this and wore it. The ornament is a hoop with feathers fastened lightly to it. The hoop represents the sun and the feathers fastened to it are the feathers of the eagle, which is the bird of day; the crane, which is the bird of night; and the hawk, which is the bird of prey. The words were:

(*First rendition*)

The sun is my friend,  
a hoop it has made me wear,  
an eagle it has made me wear.

(*Second rendition*)

The moon is my friend,  
a crane it has made me wear,  
a hawk it has made me wear.

The use of music in the treatment of the sick has been a subject of special study by the writer in many tribes, and the songs used in such treatment have been recorded, together with the dreams in which they had their origin. The man who recorded the largest number of such healing songs was Eagle Shield, a Sioux who recorded nine songs that he used in his own practice. His specialty<sup>8</sup> was the treatment of fractures, and he recorded a song that he sang four times "while getting ready to apply the medicine." Most of his remedies for adults were received from a bear, and one song contained the words "bear told me about all these things." Certain procedures

<sup>6</sup> Densmore, Frances, Yuman and Yaqui Music, Bur. Amer. Ethnol. Bull. 110, p. 162. 1932.

<sup>7</sup> Densmore, Frances, Teton Sioux Music, Bur. Amer. Ethnol. Bull. 61, p. 139. 1918.

were often part of his treatment and one of his songs was sung only three times when administering a certain herb. His remedies for children were received from the badger and there were no songs with these remedies.<sup>8</sup>

A study of the dream song in many tribes reveals the place that song occupied in the life of the American Indians. They had their songs with games, dances, legends, and folk stories but those phases of their music were apart from its chief function—their communication with the supernatural, through which they believed that they could secure aid in every undertaking.

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<sup>8</sup> Op. cit., pp. 253-267.