

RAIN AND THE NATIVE AMERICANS



THE FIRST CLOUD BLOWER

There are many jokes, cartoons, and conversations about Native Americans and the way they dance to create rain. Whenever there is a drought or lack of rain someone always says, "We need those Indians to do a rain dance for us," and usually everyone laughs and makes fun of the Native Americans and dance around with their best impression an Indian dancing.

I lived on the Hopi reservation for four years in the early 70's, and I was just like everyone else with my thoughts about their ability to make it rain, until I lived with them. The rumor in Winslow, Arizona, where I grew up, was that the Hopi's called the weatherman to see when it was going to rain and then they did their famous Snake and Antelope Dance.

The Hopi have never relocated, changed their religion, or been forced to leave their homeland. Their land is so poor, with no running water, resources, or fertile ground, that no one has ever wanted it. They settled at this location because their Guardian instructed them to do so. They have been at this same location from the beginning of time although they have had the opportunity to choose any site that they wanted.

My first August on the reservation, when the Snake and Antelope ceremony was performed, a huge black cloud formed over the village and it rained. I thought, what a coincidence. Other clouds formed off to the south and randomly selected different fields of corn and poured rain on them as they passed by.

I asked one of my friends how the date of the dance was selected, and he said it was determined by observing the rising sun over the Munya-ovi cliffs, off to the east. The ceremony lasted for sixteen days and the main purpose was to bring rain for all four races of man and their crops. The dance was held on the last day, or the sixteenth day. So no weatherman was involved, just sixteen days of fasting, prayers, and preparation based on the location of the rising sun.

The second year, it was very hot in July. Many of my friends worried about their crops. There was no rain in sight. The corn had barely broken the surface of the ground. I thought, this will be the test. Two days after the dance it rained, and rained. The Hopi believe they have a four day window around the dance to receive their rain. If no rain comes in that time period then the dance was not performed properly or someone did not have a pure heart during the ceremony and everyone will suffer.

The third year, beside the Snake and Antelope Dancers, the male and female Salako appeared with their Cloud Kachina companions, and I don't think I have ever seen anything to compare. It rained so hard the plaza, where the dance was taking place, flooded and the crops prospered for everyone in the village. The Salako appear ever four years where the Snake and Antelope appear every year but rotate between two villages.

The fourth year I was a true believer. There was no doubt in my mind that it was going to rain, and it did.

The Hopi believe that the running Antelope make the sound of thunder and bring the clouds, the Snakes have the power to suck the rain out of the clouds and therefore the combination of the two.

In 1902, a Mennonite Minister and Missionary named Henry Voth forced his way into a Hopi Kiva at the small Hopi Village of Mishongnovi to record every detail of the Snake and Antelope ceremonies. In his book of the same name, on page 215 he states:
Fourth Song. Polihungwa now left the circle and turning around faced the fire, where he lighted the larger cloud blower. After the pipe had been well lighted he passed in a sinistral circuit to the rear of the sand mosaic, where he stooped down over the falling

rain symbols and placing the large end of the pipe in his mouth forced great clouds of smoke from the smaller end upon the symbols. He then squatted down on the west side of the picture, then on the south, and then on the east, forcing smoke upon the colored cloud symbols and then also into the medicine bowl. By a curious coincidence, rain clouds had been gathering in various directions over head, and while they were singing this song which related to the four colored clouds, and asking them to bring rain, the patter of rain was distinctly heard outside on the kiva hatchway.

1902, and everyone knows that the ceremonies were taking place long before the white man set foot on this land. Many people have witnessed the power of the Antelope and the Snake Dance for hundreds of years and have seen it bring rain. When will we listen to the Native Americans?

Today we have hugh Rattlesnake Round-ups (our ceremony) killing every snake for miles around. Thousands and thousands of snakes are captured and killed to make a few dollars. At Sweetwater, Texas in March of this year, over 30,000 visitors arrived to watch over 1,700 pounds (around 3,000 rattlesnakes) be rounded up, milked, killed, and eaten. Last year over 4,000 pounds of snake meat was collected and in 1982, there best year ever, over 17,986 pounds of rattlesnakes were taken. Organizers, rather than saying that they have just about killed every snake in the mid-west, blame the cold weather for the decline in the totals. "Next year will be better", they say, "just bring more money".

The best and the biggest Antelopes are taken just for their horns and to make a wall display. They have about as much meat as a domestic goat and it is very tough and dry. There are many better alternatives to bring meat into the household.

So it does not come as a surprise to me that these areas of the country are in the worst drought in their history. But still I hear them joke, "Lets get the Indians to do a rain dance". How right they just might be. They might also consider re-stocking the snakes and antelopes they have almost extinguished, cancel the rattlesnake round-ups, and saying a little prayer along with their red brothers for the rain, the snakes, and the antelope to return.

<http://droughtmonitor.unl.edu/>

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