

Warburg, Aby. "Images from the Region of the Pueblo Indians of North America."  
*The Art of Art History: A Critical Anthology*. New York: Oxford Press, 1998

## Images from the Region of the Pueblo Indians of North America

Es ist ein altes Buch zu blättern, Athen-Oraibi, alles Vettern.  
It is a lesson from an old book: the kinship of Athens and Oraibi.

If I am to show you images, most of which I photographed myself, from a journey undertaken some twenty-seven years in the past, and to accompany them with words, then it behooves me to preface my attempt with an explanation. The few weeks I have had at my disposal have not given me the chance to revive and to work through my old memories in such a way that I might offer you a solid introduction into the psychic life of the Indians. Moreover, even at the time, I was unable to give depth to my impressions, as I had not mastered the Indian language. And here in fact is the reason why it is so difficult to work on these pueblos: Nearby as they live to each other, the Pueblo Indians speak so many and such varied languages that even American scholars have the greatest difficulty penetrating even one of them. In addition, a journey limited to several weeks could not impart truly profound impressions. If these impressions are now more blurred than they were, I can only assure you that, in sharing my distant memories, aided by the immediacy of the photographs, what I have to say will offer an impression both of a world whose culture is dying out and of a problem of decisive importance in the general writing of cultural history: In what ways can we perceive essential character traits of primitive pagan humanity?

The Pueblo Indians derive their name from their sedentary lives in villages (Spanish: *pueblos*) as opposed to the nomadic lives of the tribes who until several decades ago warred and hunted in the same areas of New Mexico and Arizona where the Pueblos now live.

What interested me as a cultural historian was that in the midst of a country that had made technological culture into an admirable precision weapon in the hands of intellectual man, an enclave of primitive pagan humanity was able to maintain itself and—an entirely sober struggle for existence notwithstanding—to engage in hunting and agriculture with an unshakable adherence to magical practices that we are accustomed to condemning as a mere symptom of a completely backward humanity. Here, however, what we would call superstition



goes hand in hand with livelihood. It consists of a religious devotion to natural phenomena, to animals and plants, to which the Indians attribute active souls, which they believe they can influence primarily through their masked dances. To us, this synchrony of fantastic magic and sober purposiveness appears as a symptom of a cleavage; for the Indian this is not schizoid but, rather, a liberating experience of the boundless communicability between man and environment.

At the same time, one aspect of the Pueblo Indians' religious psychology requires that our analysis proceed with the greatest caution. The material is contaminated: it has been layered over twice. From the end of the sixteenth century, the Native American foundation was overlaid by a stratum of Spanish Catholic Church education, which suffered a violent setback at the end of the seventeenth century, to return thereafter but never officially to reinstate itself in the Moki villages. And then came the third stratum: North American education.

Yet closer study of Pueblo pagan religious formation and practice reveals an objective geographic constant, and that is the scarcity of water. For so long as the railways remained unable to reach the settlements, drought and desire for water led to the same magical practices toward the binding of hostile natural forces as they did in primitive,

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Interior of a house in Oraibi  
with dolls and broom



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Laguna. Young woman  
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pretechnological cultures all over the world. Drought teaches magic and prayer.

The specific issue of religious symbolism is revealed in the ornamentation of pottery. A drawing I obtained personally from an Indian will show how apparently purely decorative ornaments must in fact be interpreted symbolically and cosmologically and how alongside one basic element in cosmologic imagery—the universe conceived in the form of a house—an irrational animal figure appears as a mysterious and fearsome demon: the serpent. But the most drastic form of the animistic (i.e., nature-inspiring) Indian cult is the masked dance, which I shall show first in the form of a pure animal dance, second in the form of a tree-worshipping dance, and finally as a dance with live serpents. A glance at similar phenomena in pagan Europe will bring us, finally, to the following question: To what extent does this pagan world view, as it persists among the Indians, give us a yardstick for



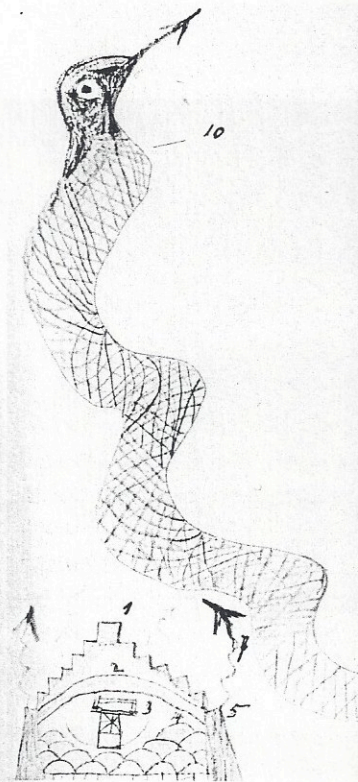
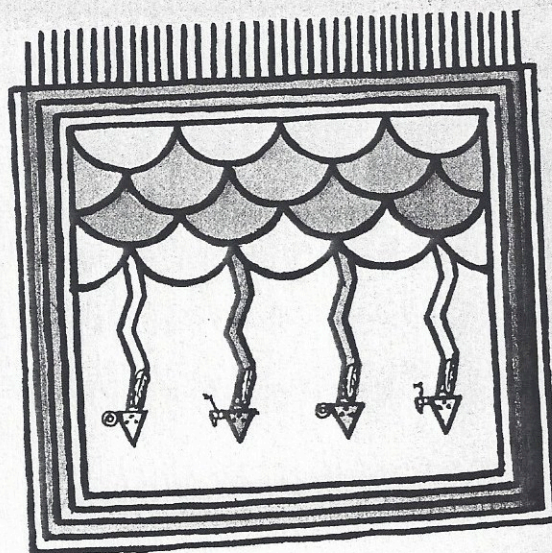
the development from primitive paganism, through the paganism of classical antiquity, to modern man?

All in all it is a piece of earth only barely equipped by nature, which the prehistoric and historic inhabitants of the region have chosen to call their home. Apart from the narrow, furrowing valley in the northeast, through which the Rio Grande del Norte flows to the Gulf of Mexico, the landscape here consists essentially of plateaus: extensive, horizontally situated masses of limestone and tertiary rock, which soon form higher plateaus with steep edges and smooth surfaces. (The term *mesa* compares them with tables.) These are often pierced by flowing waters, ... by ravines and canyons sometimes a thousand feet deep and more, with walls that from their highest points plummet almost vertically, as if they had been sliced with a saw... For the greater part of the year the plateau landscape remains entirely without precipitation and the vast majority of the canyons are completely dried up; only at the time that snow melts and during the brief rainy periods do powerful water masses roar through the bald ravines.<sup>1</sup>

In this region of the Colorado plateau of the Rocky Mountains, where the states of Colorado, Utah, New Mexico, and Arizona meet, the ruined sites of prehistoric communities survive alongside the currently inhabited Indian villages. In the northwestern part of the plateau, in the state of Colorado, are the now abandoned cliff-dwellings: houses built into clefts of rock. The eastern group consists of approximately eighteen villages, all relatively accessible from Santa

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Serpent as lightning.  
Reproduction of an altar floor,  
kiva ornamentation



8 Cleo Jurino

Drawing of serpent and  
'worldhouse' with Warburg's  
annotations

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Fe and Albuquerque. The especially important villages of the Zuñi lie more to the southwest and can be reached in a day's journey from Fort Wingate. The hardest to reach—and therefore the most undisturbed in the preservation of ancient ways—are the villages of the Moki (Hopi), six in all, rising out of three parallel ridges of rock.

In the midst, in the plains, lies the Mexican settlement of Santa Fe, now the capital of New Mexico, having come under the dominion of the United States after a hard struggle, which lasted into the last century. From here, and from the neighboring town of Albuquerque, one can reach the majority of the eastern Pueblo villages without great difficulty.

Near Albuquerque is the village of Laguna, which, though it does not lie quite so high as the others, provides a very good example of a Pueblo settlement. The actual village lies on the far side of the Atchison-Topeka-Santa Fe railway line. The European settlement, below in the plain, abuts on the station. The indigenous village consists of two-storied houses. The entrance is from the top: one climbs up a ladder, as there is no door at the bottom. The original reason for this type of house was its superior defensibility against enemy attack. In this way the Pueblo Indians developed a cross between a house and a fortification which is characteristic of their civilization and probably reminiscent of prehistoric American times. It is a terraced structure of



houses whose ground floors sit on second houses which can sit on yet third ones and thus form a conglomeration of rectangular living quarters.

In the interior of such a house, small dolls are suspended from the ceiling—not mere toy dolls but rather like the figures of saints that hang in Catholic farmhouses [5]. They are the so-called kachina dolls: faithful representations of the masked dancers, the demoniac mediators between man and nature at the periodic festivals that accompany the annual harvest cycle and who constitute some of the most remarkable and unique expressions of this farmers' and hunters' religion. On the wall, in contradistinction to these dolls, hangs the symbol of intruding American culture: the broom.

But the most essential product of the applied arts, with both practical and religious purposes, is the earthenware pot, in which water is carried in all its urgency and scarcity. The characteristic style for the drawings on these pots is a skeletal heraldic image. A bird, for example, may be dissected into its essential component parts to form a heraldic abstraction. It becomes a hieroglyph, not simply to be looked at but, rather, to be read [6]. We have here an intermediary stage between a naturalistic image and a sign, between a realistic mirror image and writing. From the ornamental treatment of such animals, one can immediately see how this manner of seeing and thinking can lead to symbolic pictographic writing.

The bird plays an important part in Indian mythical perception, as anyone familiar with the *Leatherstocking Tales* knows. Apart from the devotion it receives, like every other animal, as a totem, as an imaginary ancestor, the bird commands a special devotion in the context of the burial cult. It seems even that a thieving bird-spirit belonged to the fundamental representations of the mythical fantasies of the prehistoric Sikyatki. The bird has a place in idolatrous cults for its feathers. The Indians have made a special prayer instrument out of small sticks—*bahos*; tied with feathers, they are placed on fetish altars and planted on graves. According to the authoritative explanations of the Indians, the feathers act as winged entities bearing the Indians' wishes and prayers to their demoniac essences in nature.

There is no doubt that contemporary Pueblo pottery shows the influence of medieval Spanish technique, as it was brought to the Indians by the Jesuits in the eighteenth century. The excavations of Fewkes have established incontrovertibly, however, that an older potting technique existed, autonomous from the Spanish.<sup>2</sup> It bears the same heraldic bird motives together with the *serpent*, which for the Mokis—as in all pagan religious practice—commands cultic devotion as the most vital symbol. This serpent still appears on the base of contemporary vessels exactly as Fewkes found it on prehistoric ones: coiled, with a feathered head. On the rims, four terrace-shaped attach-



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The kiva at Sia.

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ments carry small representations of animals. We know from work on Indian mysteries that these animals—for example, the frog and the spider—represent the points of the compass and that these vessels are placed in front of the fetishes in the subterranean prayer room known as the *kiva*. In the kiva, at the core of devotional practice, the serpent appears as the symbol of lightning [7].

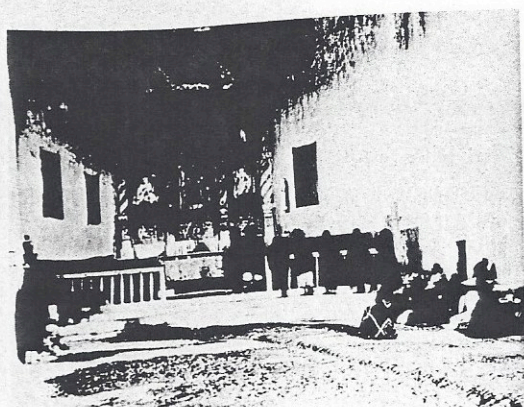
In my hotel in Santa Fe, I received from an Indian, Cleo Jurino, and his son, Anacleto Jurino, original drawings that, after some resistance, they made before my eyes and in which they outlined their cosmologic world view with colored pencils [8]. The father, Cleo, was one of the priests and painter of the kiva in Cochiti. The drawing showed the serpent as a weather deity, as it happens, unfeathered but otherwise portrayed exactly as it appears in the image on the vase, with an arrow-pointed tongue. The roof of the worldhouse bears a stair-shaped gable. Above the walls spans a rainbow, and from massed clouds below flows the rain, represented by short strokes. In the middle, as the true master of the stormy worldhouse, appears the fetish (not a serpent figure): Yaya or Yerrick.

In the presence of such paintings the pious Indian invokes the storm with all its blessings through magical practices, of which to us the most astonishing is the handling of live, poisonous serpents. As we saw in Jurino's drawing, the serpent in its lightning shape is magically linked to lightning.

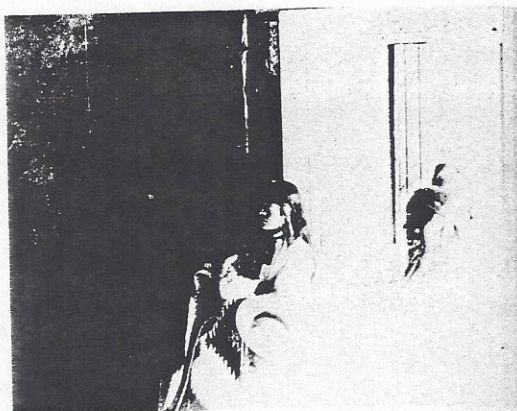
The stair-shaped roof of the worldhouse and the serpent-arrow-head, along with the serpent itself, are constitutive elements in the Indians' symbolic language of images. I would suggest without any doubt that the stairs contain at least a Pan-American and perhaps a worldwide symbol of the cosmos.

A photograph of the underground kiva of Sia, after Mrs. Stevenson, shows the organization of a carved lightning altar as the focal point of sacrificial ceremony, with the lightning serpent in the company of other sky-oriented symbols. It is an altar for lightning





11  
Interior of the church of  
Acoma



12  
Acoma. Stair-shaped roof  
ornamenting

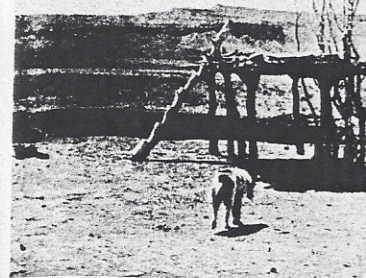
from all points of the compass. The Indians crouching before it have placed their sacrificial offerings on the altar and hold in their hand the symbol of mediating prayer: the feather [9].

My wish to observe the Indians directly under the influence of official Catholicism was favored by circumstance. I was able to accompany the Catholic priest Père Juillard, whom I had met on New Year's Day 1895 [*sic*] while watching a Mexican Matachina dance, on an inspection tour that took him to the romantically situated village of Acoma.

We traveled through this gorse-grown wilderness for about six hours, until we could see the village emerging from the sea of rock, like a Heligoland in a sea of sand. Before we had reached the foot of the rock, bells began to ring in honor of the priest. A squad of brightly clad redskins [*Rothäute*] came running with lightning speed down the path to carry up our luggage. The carriages remained below, a necessity that proved ill fated: the Indians stole a cask of wine the priest had received as a gift from the nuns of Bernalillo. Once on top, we were immediately received with all the trappings of honor by the Gobernador—Spanish names for the ruling village chiefs are still in use. He put the priest's hand to his lips with a slurping noise, inhaling, as it were, the greeted person's aura in a gesture of reverential welcome. We were housed in his large main room together with the coachmen, and on the priest's request, I promised him that I would attend mass the following morning.

Indians are standing before the church door [10]. They are not easily led inside. This requires a loud call by the chief from the three parallel village streets. At last they assembled in the church. They are wrapped in colorful woolen cloths, woven in the open by nomadic Navajo women but produced also by the Pueblos themselves. They are ornamented in white, red, or blue and make a most picturesque impression.

The interior of the church has a genuine little baroque altar with figures of saints [11]. The priest, who understood not a word of the



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Stair ornament carved from  
a tree

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Antelope dance at San  
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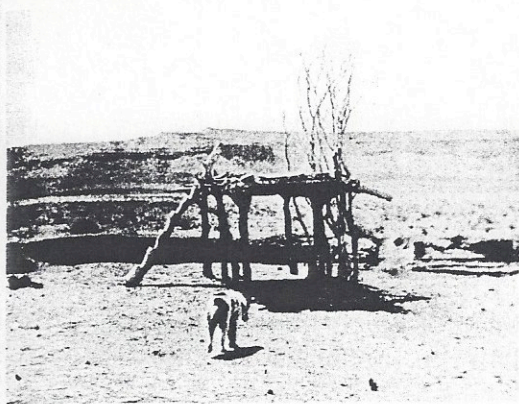
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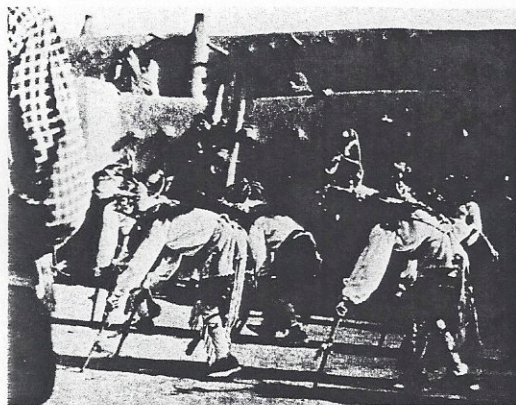
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Antelope dance at San  
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Indian language, had to employ an interpreter who translated the mass sentence by sentence and may well have said whatever he pleased.

It occurred to me during the service that the wall was covered with pagan cosmologic symbols, exactly in the style drawn for me by Cleo Jurino. The church of Laguna is also covered with such painting, symbolizing the cosmos with a stair-shaped roof [12]. The jagged ornament symbolizes a stair, and indeed not a perpendicular, square stair but rather a much more primitive form of a stair, carved from a tree, which still exists among the Pueblos [13].

In the representation of the evolution, ascents, and descents of nature, steps and ladders embody the primal experiences of humanity. They are the symbol for upward and downward struggle in space, just as the circle—the coiled serpent—is the symbol for the rhythm of time. Man, who no longer moves on four limbs but walks upright and is therefore in need of a prop in order to overcome gravity as he looks upward, invented the stair as a means to dignify what in relation to animals are his inferior gifts. Man, who learns to stand upright in his second year, perceives the felicity of the step because, as a creature that has to learn how to walk, he thereby receives the grace of holding his head aloft. Standing upright is the human act par excellence, the striving of the earthbound toward heaven, the uniquely symbolic act that gives to walking man the nobility of the erect and upward-turned head.

Contemplation of the sky is the grace and curse of humanity.

Thus the Indian creates the rational element in his cosmology through his equation of the worldhouse with his own staired house, which is entered by way of a ladder. But we must be careful not to regard this worldhouse as a simple expression of a spiritually tranquil cosmology; for the mistress of the worldhouse remains the uncanniest of creatures: the serpent.

The Pueblo Indian is a hunter as well as a tiller of the soil—if not to the same extent as the savage tribes that once lived in the region. He depends for his subsistence on meat as well as on corn. The masked dances, which at first seem to us like festive accessories to everyday life,



are in fact magical practices for the social provision of food. The masked dance, upon which we might ordinarily look as a form of play, is in its essence an earnest, indeed warlike, measure in the fight for existence. Although the exclusion of bloody and sadistic practices makes these dances fundamentally different from the war dances of the nomadic Indians, the Pueblos' worst enemies, we must not forget that these remain, in their origin and inner tendency, dances of plunder and sacrifice. When the hunter or tiller of the soil masks himself, transforms himself into an imitation of his booty—be that animal or corn—he believes that through mysterious, mimic transformation he will be able to procure in advance what he coterminously strives to achieve through his sober, vigilant work as tiller and hunter. The dances are expressions of applied magic. The social provision of food is schizoid: magic and technology work together.

The synchrony [*Nebeneinander*] of logical civilization and fantastic, magical causation shows the Pueblo Indians' peculiar condition of hybridity and transition. They are clearly no longer primitives dependent on their senses, for whom no action directed toward the future can exist; but neither are they technologically secure Europeans, for whom future events are expected to be organically or mechanically determined. They stand on middle ground between magic and logos, and their instrument of orientation is the symbol. Between a culture of touch and a culture of thought is the culture of symbolic connection. And for this stage of symbolic thought and conduct, the dances of the Pueblo Indians are exemplary.

When I first saw the antelope dance in San Ildefonso, it struck me as quite harmless and almost comical. But for the folklorist interested in a biologic understanding of the roots of human cultural expression, there is no moment more dangerous than when he is moved to laugh at popular practices that strike him as comical. To laugh at the comical element in ethnology is wrong, because it instantly shuts off insight into the tragic element.

At San Ildefonso—a pueblo near Santa Fe which has long been under American influence—the Indians assembled for the dance. The musicians gathered first, armed with a large drum. (You can see them standing, in 14, in front of the Mexicans on horseback.) Then the dancers arranged themselves into two parallel rows and assumed the character of the antelope in mask and posture. The two rows moved in two different ways. Either they imitated the animal's way of walking, or they supported themselves on their front legs—small stilts wound with feathers—making movements with them while standing in place. At the head of each row stood a female figure and a hunter. With regard to the female figure, I was able to learn only that she was called the 'mother of all animals'.<sup>3</sup> To her the animal mime addresses his invocations.

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The insinuation into the animal mask allows the hunting dance to simulate the actual hunt through an anticipatory capture of the animal. This measure is not to be regarded as mere play. In their bonding with the extrapersonal, the masked dances signify for primitive man the most thorough subordination to some alien being. When the Indian in his mimetic costume imitates, for instance, the expressions and movements of an animal, he insinuates himself into an animal form not out of fun but, rather, to wrest something magical from nature through the transformation of his person, something he cannot attain by means of his unextended and unchanged personality.

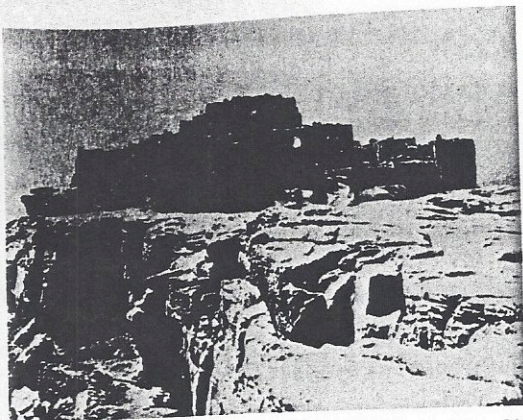
The simulated pantomimic animal dance is thus a cultic act of the highest devotion and self-abandon to an alien being. The masked dance of so-called primitive peoples is in its original essence a document of social piety. The Indian's inner attitude to the animal is entirely different from that of the European. He regards the animal as a higher being, as the integrity of its animal nature makes it a much more gifted creature than man, its weaker counterpart.

My initiation into the psychology of the will to animal metamorphosis came, just before my departure, from Frank Hamilton Cushing, the pioneering and veteran explorer of the Indian psyche. I found his insights personally overwhelming. This pockmarked man with sparse reddish hair and of inscrutable age, smoking a cigarette, said to me that an Indian had once told him, why should man stand taller than animals? 'Take a good look at the antelope, she is all running, and runs so much better than man—or the bear, who is all strength. Men can only *do* in part what the animal *is*, totally.' This fairy-tale way of thinking, no matter how odd it may sound, is the preliminary to our scientific, genetic explanation of the world. These Indian pagans, like pagans all over the world, form an attachment out of reverential awe—what is known as totemism—to the animal world, by believing in animals of all kinds as the mythical ancestors of their tribes. Their explanation of the world as inorganically coherent is not so far removed from Darwinism; for whereas we impute natural law to the autonomous process of evolution in nature, the pagans attempt to explain it through arbitrary identification with the animal world. It is, one might say, a Darwinism of mythical elective affinity which determines the lives of these so-called primitive people.

The formal survival of the hunting dance in San Ildefonso is obvious. But when we consider that the antelope has been extinct there for more than three generations, then it may well be that we have in the antelope dance a transition to the purely demoniac kachina dances, the chief task of which is to pray for a good crop harvest. In Oraibi, for example, there exists still today an antelope clan, whose chief task is weather magic.

Whereas the imitative animal dance must be understood in terms of



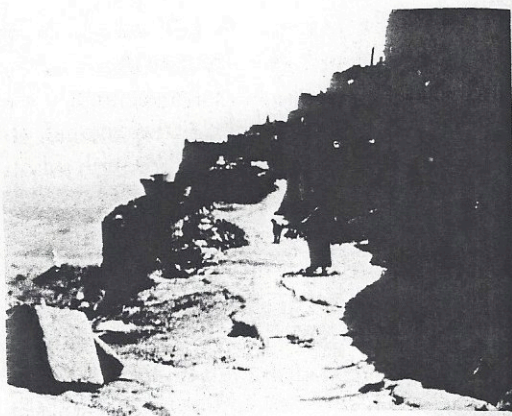


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Walpi

16

Walpi village street



the mimic magic of hunting culture, the kachina dances, corresponding to cyclic peasant festivals, have a character entirely of their own which, however, is revealed only at sites far removed from European culture. This cultic, magical masked dance, with its entreaties focused on inanimate nature, can be observed in its more or less original form only where the railroads have yet to penetrate and where—as in the Moki villages—even the veneer of official Catholicism no longer exists.

The children are taught to regard the kachinas with a deep religious awe. Every child takes the kachinas for supernatural, terrifying creatures, and the moment of the child's initiation into the nature of the kachinas, into the society of masked dancers itself, represents the most important turning point in the education of the Indian child.

On the market square of the rock village of Oraibi, the most remote westerly point, I was lucky enough to observe a so-called humiskachina dance. Here I saw the living originals of the masked dancers I had already seen in puppet form in a room of this same village of Oraibi.

To reach Oraibi, I had to travel for two days from the railway station of Holbrook in a small carriage. This is a so-called buggy with four light wheels, capable of advancing through desert sands where only gorse can grow. The driver throughout my stay in the region was Frank Allen, a Mormon. We experienced a very strong sandstorm, which completely obliterated the wagon tracks—the only navigational aid in this roadless steppe. We had the good luck nevertheless to arrive after our two days' journey in Keams Canyon, where we were greeted by Mr Keam, a most hospitable Irishman.

From this spot I was able to make the actual excursions to the cliff villages, which extend from north to south on three parallel rock formations. I arrived first at the remarkable village of Walpi. It is romantically perched on the rock crest, its stair-shaped houses rising in stone masses like towers from the rock. A narrow path on the high rock leads past the masses of houses. The illustration shows the desolation and severity of this rock and its houses, as they project themselves into the world [15, 16].

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Blind man at dancing area,  
Oraibi

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Humiskachina dancers, Oraibi

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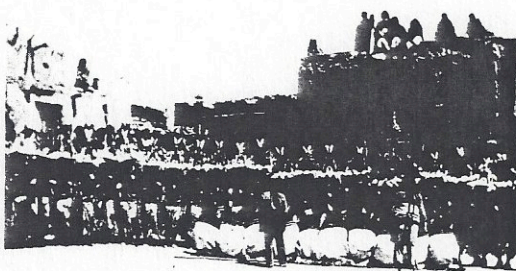
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Blind man at dancing area,  
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Humiskachina dancers, Oraibi

Very similar in its overall impression to Walpi is Oraibi, where I was able to observe the humiskachina dance. Up on top, on the marketplace of the cliff village, where an old blind man sits with his goat, a dancing area was being prepared [17]. This humiskachina dance is the dance of the growing corn. On the evening before the actual dance, I was inside the kiva, where secret ceremonies take place. It contained no fetish altar. The Indians simply sat and smoked ceremonially. Every now and then a pair of brown legs descended from above on the ladder, followed by the whole man attached to them.

The young men were busy painting their masks for the following day. They use their big leather helmets again and again, as new ones would be too costly. The painting process involves taking water into the mouth and then spraying it onto the leather mask as the colors are rubbed in.

By the following morning, the entire audience, including two groups of children, had assembled on the wall [18]. The Indians' relationship to their children is extraordinarily appealing. Children are brought up gently but with discipline and are very obliging, once one has earned their trust. Now the children had assembled, with earnest anticipation, on the marketplace. These humiskachina figures with artificial heads move them to real terror, all the more so as they have learned from the kachina dolls of the inflexible and fearsome qualities of the masks. Who knows whether our dolls did not also originate as such demons?

The dance was performed by about twenty-to-thirty male and about ten female dancers—the latter meaning men representing female figures. Five men form the vanguard of the two-row dance configuration. Although the dance is performed on the market square, the dancers have an architectonic focus, and that is the stone structure in which a small dwarf pine has been placed, adorned with feathers. This is a small temple where the prayers and chants accompanying the masked dances are offered. Devotion flows from this little temple in the most striking manner.



The dancers' masks are green and red, traversed diagonally by a white stripe punctuated by three dots [19, 20]. These, I was told, are raindrops, and the symbolic representations on the helmet also show the stair-shaped cosmos with the source of rain identified again by semicircular clouds and short strokes emanating from them. These symbols appear as well on the woven wraps the dancers wind around their bodies: red and green ornaments gracefully woven on a white background [21]. In one hand, each male dancer holds a rattle carved from a hollow gourd and filled with stones. And at each knee he wears a tortoise shell hung with pebbles, so that the rattle noises issue from the knees as well [22].

The chorus performs two different acts. Either the girls sit in front of the men and make music with a rattle and a piece of wood, while the men's dance configuration consists of one after another turning, in solitary rotation; or, alternately, the women rise and accompany the rotating movements of the men. Throughout the dance, two priests sprinkle consecrated flour on the dancers [23].

The women's dance costume consists of a cloth covering the entire body, so as not to show that these are, in fact, men. The mask is adorned, on either side at the top, with the curious anemone-like hairdo that is the specific hair adornment of the Pueblo girls [24, 25]. Red-dyed horsehair hanging from the masks symbolizes rain, and rain ornamentation appears as well on the shawls and other wrappings.

During the dance, the dancers are sprinkled by a priest with holy flour, and all the while the dance configuration remains connected at the head of the line to the little temple. The dance lasts from morning till evening. In the intervals the Indians leave the village and go to a rocky ledge to rest for a moment [26]. Whoever sees a dancer without his mask, will die.

The little temple is the actual focal point of the dance configuration. It is a little tree, adorned with feathers. These are the so-called *Nakwakwocis*. I was struck by the fact that the tree was so small. I went to the old chief, who was sitting at the edge of the square, and asked him why the tree was so small. He answered: we once had a large tree, but now we have chosen a small one, because the soul of a child is small.

We are here in the realm of the perfect animistic and tree cult, which the work of Mannhardt has shown to belong to the universal religious patrimony of primitive peoples, and it has survived from European paganism down to the harvest customs of the present day. It is here a question of establishing a bond between natural forces and man, of creating a symbol as the connecting agent, indeed as the magical rite that achieves integration by sending out a mediator, in this case a tree, more closely bound to the earth than man, because it grows from the earth. This tree is the nature-given mediator, opening the way to the subterranean element.

The valley are to p and hea Late ceremon ments. ishing solemn very dep the spir one-side Six fi with yel in loin ch chorus a disturbe thorough And no mockery lers, in th cient trag 'grafted c anthropo magical d The es superhum Mexican forty days into the sh and frenzi the Pueblo guarantee soaked cul also witnes atrocities c The mo with natur Indians, in myself obs this most p animal dan animal dan Oraibi hum For in Augu



The next day the feathers are carried down to a certain spring in the valley and either planted there or else hung as votive offerings. These are to put into effect the prayer for fertilization, resulting in a plentiful and healthy crop of corn.

Late in the afternoon the dancers resume their indefatigable, earnest ceremonial and continue to perform their unchanging dance movements. As the sun was about to sink, we were presented with an astonishing spectacle, one which showed with overwhelming clarity how solemn and silent composure draws its magical religious forms from the very depths of elemental humanity. In this light, our tendency to view the spiritual element alone in such ceremonies must be rejected as a one-sided and paltry mode of explanation.

Six figures appeared. Three almost completely naked men smeared with yellow clay, their hair wound into horn shapes, were dressed only in loin cloths. Then came three men in women's clothes. And while the chorus and its priests proceeded with their dance movements, undisturbed and with unbroken devotion, these figures launched into a thoroughly vulgar and disrespectful parody of the chorus movements. And no one laughed. The vulgar parody was regarded not as comic mockery but, rather, as a kind of peripheral contribution by the revelers, in the effort to ensure a fruitful corn year. Anyone familiar with ancient tragedy will see here the duality of tragic chorus and satyr play, 'grafted onto a single stem'. The ebb and flow of nature appears in anthropomorphic symbols: not in a drawing but in the dramatic magical dance, actually returned to life.

The essence of magical insinuation into the divine, into a share of its superhuman power, is revealed in the terrifyingly dramatic aspect of Mexican religious devotion. In one festival a woman is worshipped for forty days as a corn goddess and then sacrificed, and then the priest slips into the skin of the poor creature. Compared to this most elementary and frenzied attempt to approach the divinity, what we observed among the Pueblos is indeed related but infinitely more refined. Yet there is no guarantee that the sap does not still rise in secret from such blood-soaked cultic roots. After all, the same soil that bears the Pueblos has also witnessed the war dances of the wild, nomadic Indians, with their atrocities culminating in the martyrdom of the enemy.

The most extreme approximation of this magical desire for unity with nature via the animal world can be observed among the Moki Indians, in their dance with live serpents at Oraibi and Walpi. I did not myself observe this dance, but a few photographs will give an idea of this most pagan of all the ceremonies of Walpi. This dance is at once an animal dance and a religious, seasonal dance. In it, the individual animal dance of San Ildefonso and the individual fertility ritual of the Oraibi humiskachina dance converge in an intense expressive effort. For in August, when the critical moment in the tilling of the soil arrives





19-22  
Humiskachina dancers, Oraibi

to render the entire crop harvest contingent on rainstorms, these redemptive storms are invoked through a dance with live serpents, celebrated alternately in Oraibi and Walpi. Whereas in San Ildefonso only a simulated version of antelope is visible—at least to the uninitiated—and the corn dance achieves the demoniac representation of corn demons only with masks, we find here in Walpi a far more primeval aspect of the magic dance.

Here the dancers and the live animal form a magical unity, and the surprising thing is that the Indians have found in these dance ceremonies a way of handling the most dangerous of all animals, the rattlesnake, so that it can be tamed without violence, so that the creature will participate willingly—or at least without making use of its aggressive abilities, unless provoked—in ceremonies lasting for days. This would surely lead to catastrophe in the hands of Europeans.

23  
Humiskachina dancers, Oraibi

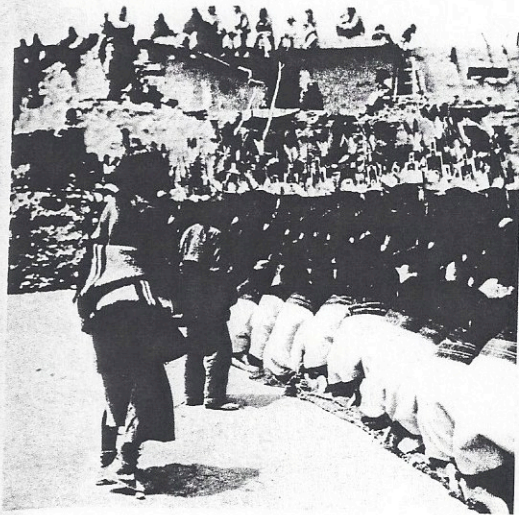
24-25  
'Anemone' hairdos

26  
Dancers at rest, Oraibi



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Humiskachina dancers, Oraibi

24-25  
'Anemone' hairdos

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Dancers at rest, Oraibi

Two Moki clans provide the participants in the serpent ceremony: the antelope and the serpent clans, both of whom are folklorically and totemistically linked with the two animals. That totemism can be taken seriously even today is proved here, as humans not only appear masked as animals but enter into cultic exchange with the most dangerous beast, the live serpent. The serpent ceremony at Walpi thus stands between simulated, mimic empathy and bloody sacrifice. It involves not the imitation of the animal but the bluntest engagement with it as a ritual participant—and that not as sacrificial victim but, like the *baho*, as fellow rainmaker.

For the snakes themselves, the serpent dance at Walpi is an enforced entreaty. They are caught live in the desert in August, when the storms are imminent, and in a sixteen-day ceremony in Walpi they are attended to in the underground kiva by the chiefs of the serpent and



antelope clans in a series of unique ceremonies, of which the most significant and the most astonishing for white observers is the washing of the snakes. The snake is treated like a novice of the mysteries, and notwithstanding its resistance, its head is dipped in consecrated, medicated water. Then it is thrown onto a sand painting done on the kiva floor and representing four lightning snakes with a quadruped in the middle. In another kiva a sand painting depicts a mass of clouds from which emerge four differently colored lightning streaks, corresponding to the points of the compass, in the form of serpents. Onto the first sand painting, each snake is hurled with great force, so that the drawing is obliterated and the serpent is absorbed into the sand. I am convinced that this magic throw is intended to force the serpent to invoke lightning or produce rain. That is clearly the significance of the entire ceremony, and the ceremonies that follow prove that these consecrated serpents join the Indians in the starkest manner as provokers and petitioners of rain. They are living rain serpent-saints in animal form.

The serpents—numbering about a hundred and including a distinct number of genuine rattlesnakes with, as has been ascertained, their poisonous fangs left intact—are guarded in the kiva, and on the festival's final day they are imprisoned in a bush with a band wound around it. The ceremony culminates as follows: approach to the bush, seizing and carrying of the live serpents, dispatching of the snakes to the plains as messengers. American researchers describe the clutching of the snake as an unbelievably exciting act. It is carried out in the following way.

A group of three approaches the serpent bush. The high priest of the serpent clan pulls a snake from the bush as another Indian with painted face and tattoos, wearing a fox skin on his back, clutches the snake and places it in his mouth. A companion, holding him by the shoulders, distracts the attention of the serpent by waving a feathered stick. The third figure is the guard and the snake catcher, in case the serpent should slip out of the second man's mouth. The dance is played out in just over half an hour on the small square at Walpi. When all the snakes have thus been carried for a while to the sound of rattles—produced by the Indians who wear rattles and stone-filled tortoise shells on their knees—they are borne by the dancers with lightning speed into the plain, where they disappear.

From what we know of Walpi mythology, this form of devotion certainly goes back to ancestral, cosmologic legend. One saga tells the story of the hero Ti-yo, who undertakes a subterranean journey to discover the source of the longed-for water. He passes the various kivas of the princes of the underworld, always accompanied by a female spider who sits invisibly on his right ear—an Indian Virgil, Dante's guide to the underworld—and eventually guides him past the two sun houses of

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the West and East into the great serpent kiva, where he receives the magic *baho* that will invoke the weather. According to the saga, Ti-yo returns from the underworld with the *baho* and two serpent-maidens, who bear him serpentine children—very dangerous creatures who ultimately force the tribes to change their dwelling place. The serpents are woven into this myth both as weather deities and as totems that bring about the migration of the clans.

In this snake dance the serpent is therefore not sacrificed but rather, through consecration and suggestive dance mimicry, transformed into a messenger and dispatched, so that, returned to the souls of the dead, it may in the form of lightning produce storms from the heavens. We have here an insight into the pervasiveness of myth and magical practice among primitive humanity.

The elementary form of emotional release through Indian magical practice may strike the layman as a characteristic unique to primitive wildness, of which Europe knows nothing. And yet two thousand years ago in the very cradle of our own European culture, in Greece, cultic habits were in vogue which in crudeness and perversity far surpass what we have seen among the Indians.

In the orgiastic cult of Dionysus, for example, the Maenads danced with snakes in one hand and wore live serpents as diadems in their hair, holding in the other hand the animal that was to be ripped to pieces in the ascetic sacrificial dance in honor of the god. In contrast to the dance of the Moki Indians of today, blood sacrifice in a state of frenzy is the culmination and fundamental significance of this religious dance [27].

The deliverance from blood sacrifice as the innermost ideal of



purification pervades the history of religious evolution from east to west. The serpent shares in this process of religious sublimation. Its role can be considered a yardstick for the changing nature of faith from fetishism to the pure religion of redemption. In the Old Testament, as in the case of the primal serpent Tiamat in Babylon, the serpent is the spirit of evil and of temptation. In Greece, as well, it is the merciless, devouring creature of the underworld: the Erinyes are encircled by snakes, and when the gods mete out punishment they send a serpent as their executioner.

This idea of the serpent as a destroying force from the underworld has found its most powerful and tragic symbol in the myth and in the sculpted group of Laocoon. The vengeance of the gods, wrought on their priest and on his two sons by means of a strangler serpent, becomes in this renowned sculpture of antiquity the manifest incarnation of extreme human suffering. The soothsaying priest who wanted to come to the aid of his people by warning them of the wiles of the Greeks falls victim to the revenge of the partial gods. Thus the death of the father and his sons becomes a symbol of ancient suffering: death at the hands of vengeful demons, without justice and without hope of redemption. That is the hopeless, tragic pessimism of antiquity (see [3]).

The serpent as the demon in the pessimistic world view of antiquity has a counterpart in a serpent-deity in which we can at last recognize the humane, transfigured beauty of the classical age. Asclepius, the ancient god of healing, carries a serpent coiling around his healing staff as a symbol [28]. His features are the features carried by the world savior in the plastic art of antiquity. And this most exalted and serene god of departed souls has his roots in the subterranean realm, where the serpent makes its home. It is in the form of a serpent that he is accorded his earliest devotion. It is he himself who winds around his staff: namely, the departed soul of the deceased, which survives and reappears in the form of the serpent. For the snake is not only, as Cushing's Indians would say, the fatal bite in readiness or fulfillment, destroying without mercy; the snake also reveals by its own ability to cast off its slough, slipping, as it were, out of its own mortal remains, how a body can leave its skin and yet continue to live. It can slither into the earth and re-emerge. The return from within the earth, from where the dead rest, along with the capacity for bodily renewal, makes the snake the most natural symbol of immortality and of rebirth from sickness and mortal anguish.<sup>4</sup>

In the temple of Asclepius at Kos in Asia Minor the god stood transfigured in human form, a statue holding in his hand the staff with the serpent coiled around it. But his truest and most powerful essence was not revealed in this lifeless mask of stone but lived instead in the form of a serpent in the temple's innermost sanctum: fed, cared for, and attended in cultic devotion as only the Mokeles are able to care for their







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serpents.

On a Spanish calendar leaf from the thirteenth century, which I found in a Vatican manuscript, representing Asclepius as the ruler of the month in the sign of Scorpio, significant aspects of the Asclepian serpent cult are revealed in their coarseness as well as their refinement [29]. We can see here, hieroglyphically indicated, ritual acts from the cult of Kos in thirty sections, all identical to the crude, magical desire of the Indians to enter the realm of the serpent. We see the rite of incubation and the serpent as it is carried by human hands and worshipped as a deity of the springs.

This medieval manuscript is astrological. In other words, it shows these ritual forms not as prescriptions for devotional practices, as had previously been the case; rather, these figures have become hieroglyphs for those born under the heavenly sign of Asclepius. For Asclepius has become precisely a star-deity, undergoing a transformation through an act of cosmologic imagination which has completely deprived him of the real, the direct susceptibility to influence, the subterranean, the

### 30 Giulio Romano

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lowly. As a fixed star he stands over Scorpio in the zodiac. He is surrounded by serpents and is now regarded only as a heavenly body under whose influence prophets and physicians are born. Through this elevation to the stars, the serpent-god becomes a transfigured totem. He is the cosmic father of those born in the month when his visibility is highest. In ancient astrology, mathematics and magic converge. The serpent figure in the heavens, found also in the constellation of the Great Serpent, is used as a mathematical outline; the points of luminosity are linked together by way of an earthly image, in order to render comprehensible an infinity we cannot comprehend at all without some such outline of orientation. So Asclepius is at once a mathematical border sign and a fetish bearer. The evolution of culture toward the age of reason is marked in the same measure as the tangible, coarse texture of life, fading into mathematical abstraction.

About twenty years ago in the north of Germany, on the Elbe, I found a strange example of the elementary indestructibility of the memory of the serpent cult, despite all efforts of religious enlighten-

30 Giulio Romano

*Vendor of Antidote against  
Snake Bites*



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ment; an example that shows the path on which the pagan serpent wanders, linking us to the past. On an excursion to the Vierlande [near Hamburg], in a Protestant church in Lüdingworth, I discovered, adorning the so-called rood screen, Bible illustrations that clearly originated in an Italian illustrated Bible and that had found their way here through the hands of a strolling painter.

And here I suddenly spotted Laocoon with his two sons in the terrible grasp of the serpent. How did he come to be in this church? But this Laocoon found his salvation. How? Looming in front of him was the staff of Asclepius and on it a holy serpent, corresponding to what we read in the fourth book of the Pentateuch: that Moses had commanded the Israelites in the wilderness to heal snakebites by setting up a brazen serpent for devotion.

We have here a remnant of idolatry in the Old Testament. We know, however, that this can only be a subsequent insertion, intended to account retroactively for the existence of such an idol in Jerusalem. For the principal fact remains that a brazen serpent idol was destroyed by King Hezekiah under the influence of the prophet Isaiah. The prophets fought most bitterly against idolatrous cults that engaged in human sacrifice and worshipped animals, and this struggle forms the



crux of Oriental and of Christian reform movements down to the most recent times. Clearly the setting up of the serpent is in starkest contradiction to the Ten Commandments, in sharpest opposition to the hostility to images that essentially motivates the reforming prophets.

But there is another reason why every student of the Bible should consider the serpent the most provocative symbol of hostility: the serpent on the tree in Paradise dominates the biblical narrative of the order of the world as the cause of evil and of sin. In the Old and New Testaments alike, the serpent clutches the tree of Paradise as the satanic power that summons the entire tragedy of sinning humanity as well as its hope for redemption.

In the battle against pagan idolatry, early Christianity was more uncompromising in its view of the serpent cult. In the eyes of the pagans, Paul was an impervious emissary when he hurled the viper that had bitten him into the fire without dying of the bite. (The poisonous viper belongs in the fire!) So durable was the impression of Paul's invulnerability to the vipers of Malta that as late as the sixteenth century, jugglers wound snakes around themselves at festivals and fairgrounds, representing themselves as men of the house of Saint Paul and selling soil from Malta as an antidote to snakebites. Here the principle of the immunity of the strong in faith ends up again in superstitious magical practice [30].

In medieval theology we find the miracle of the brazen serpent curiously retained as a part of legitimate religious devotion. Nothing attests to the indestructibility of the animal cult as does the survival of the miracle of the brazen serpent into the medieval Christian world view. So lasting in medieval theological memory was the serpent cult and the need to overcome it that, on the basis of a completely isolated passage inconsistent with the spirit and the theology of the Old Testament, the image of serpent devotion became paradigmatic in typological representations for the Crucifixion itself [31]. The animal image and the staff of Asclepius as reverential objects for the kneeling multitude are treated and represented as a stage, albeit to be overcome, in humanity's quest for salvation. In the attempt at a tripartite scheme of evolution and of the ages—that is, of Nature, Ancient Law, and Grace—an even earlier stage in this process is the representation of the impeded sacrifice of Isaac as an analogue to the Crucifixion. This tripartite scheme is still evident in the imagery adorning the minster of Salem.

In the church of Kreuzlingen itself, this evolutionary idea has generated an astonishing parallelism, which cannot make ready sense to the theologically uninitiated. Here, on the ceiling of the famous Mount of Olives chapel, immediately above the Crucifixion, we find an adoration of this most pagan idol with a degree of pathos that does not suffer in comparison with the Laocoon group. And under the



reference to the Tables of the Law, which, as the Bible recounts, Moses destroyed because of the worship of the golden calf, we find Moses himself, forced into service as shield bearer to the serpent.

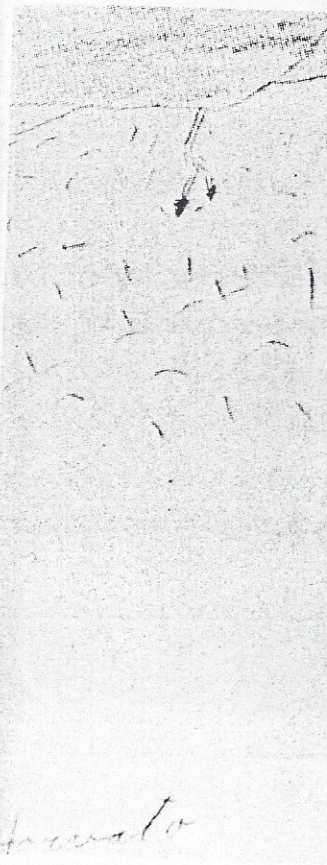
I shall be satisfied if these images from the everyday and festive lives of the Pueblo Indians have convinced you that their masked dances are not child's play, but rather the primary pagan mode of answering the largest and most pressing questions of the Why of things. In this way the Indian confronts the incomprehensibility of natural processes with his will to comprehension, transforming himself personally into a prime causal agent in the order of things. For the unexplained effect, he instinctively substitutes the cause in its most tangible and visible form. The masked dance is danced causality.

If religion signifies bonding,<sup>5</sup> then the symptom of evolution away from this primal state is the spiritualization of the bond between humans and alien beings, so that man no longer identifies directly with the masked symbol but, rather, generates that bond through thought alone, progressing to a systematic linguistic mythology. The will to devotional zeal is an ennobled form of the donning of a mask. In the process that we call cultural progress, the being exacting this devotion gradually loses its monstrous concreteness and, in the end, becomes a spiritualized, invisible symbol.

What does this mean? In the realm of mythology the law of the smallest unit does not hold; there is no search for the smallest agent of rationality in the course of natural phenomena; rather, a being saturated with as much demoniac power as possible is postulated for the sake of a true grasp of the causes of mysterious occurrences. What we have seen this evening of the symbolism of the serpent should give us at least a cursory indication of the passage from a symbolism whose efficacy proceeds directly from the body and the hand to one that unfolds only in thought. The Indians actually clutch their serpents and treat them as living agents that generate lightning at the same time that they represent lightning. The Indian takes the serpent in his mouth to bring about an actual union of the serpent with the masked figure, or at least with the figure painted as a serpent.

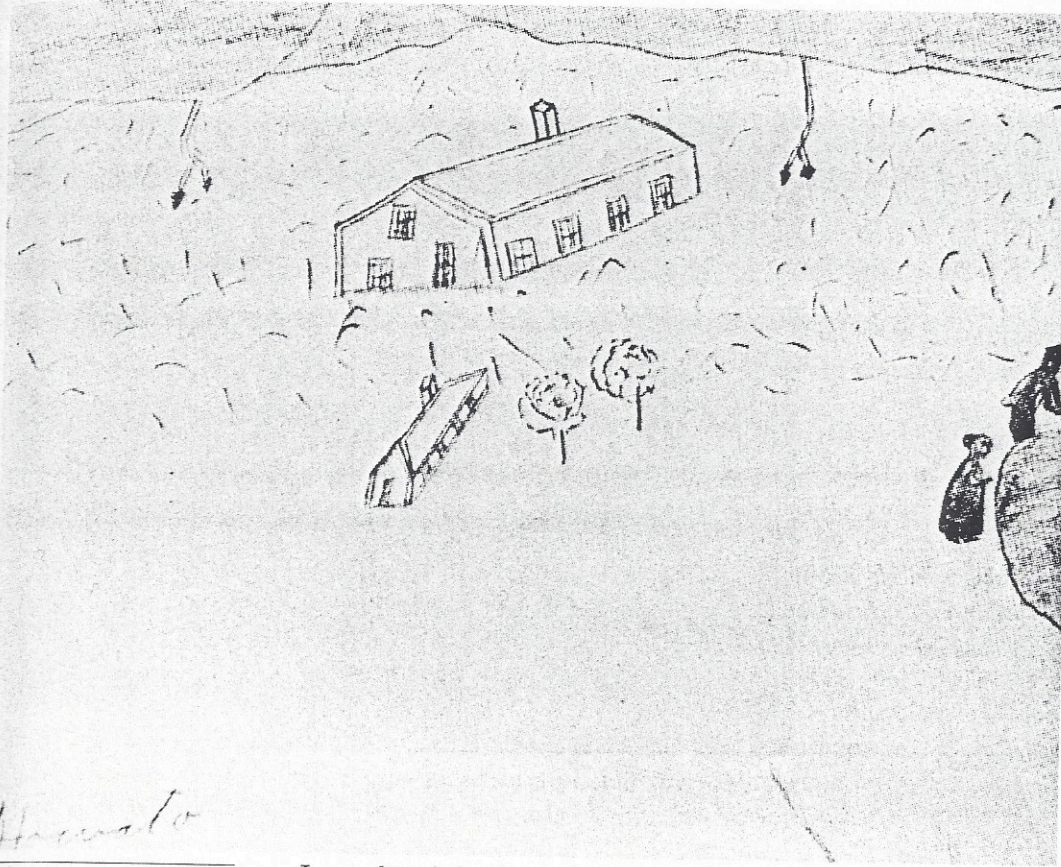
In the Bible the serpent is the cause of all evil and as such is punished with banishment from Paradise. Nevertheless, the serpent slithers back into a chapter of the Bible itself as an indestructible pagan symbol—as a god of healing.

In antiquity the serpent likewise represents the quintessence of the most profound suffering in the death of Laocoon. But antiquity is capable also of transmuting the inconceivable fertility of the serpent-deity, representing Asclepius as a savior and as the lord of the serpent, ultimately placing him—the serpent-god with the tamed serpent in his hand—as a starry divinity in the heavens.



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Hopi schoolboy's drawing of a house in a storm with lightning

In medieval theology, the serpent draws from this passage in the Bible the ability to reappear as a symbol of fate. Its elevation—though expressly considered as an evolutionary stage that has been surpassed—posits it on par with the Crucifixion.

In the end the serpent is an international symbolic answer to the question, Whence come elementary destruction, death, and suffering into the world? We saw in Lüdingworth how christological thought makes use of pagan serpent imagery to express symbolically the quintessence of suffering and redemption. We might say that where helpless human suffering searches for redemption, the serpent as an image and explanation of causality cannot be far away. The serpent deserves its own chapter in the philosophy of 'as if'.

How does humanity free itself from this enforced bonding with a poisonous reptile to which it attributes a power of agency? Our own technological age has no need of the serpent in order to understand and control lightning. Lightning no longer terrifies the city dweller, who no longer craves a benign storm as the only source of water. He has his water supply, and the lightning serpent is diverted straight to the ground by a lightning conductor. Scientific explanation has disposed of mythological causation. We know that the serpent is an animal that





must succumb, if humanity wills it to. The replacement of mythological causation by the technological removes the fears felt by primitive humanity. Whether this liberation from the mythological world view is of genuine help in providing adequate answers to the enigmas of existence is quite another matter.

The American government, like the Catholic Church before it, has brought modern schooling to the Indians with remarkable energy. Its intellectual optimism has resulted in the fact that the Indian children go to school in comely suits and pinafores and no longer believe in pagan demons. That also applies to the majority of educational goals. It may well denote progress. But I would be loath to assert that it does justice to the Indians who think in images and to their, let us say, mythologically anchored souls.

I once invited the children of such a school to illustrate the German fairy tale of 'Johnny-Head-in-the-Air' (*Hans-Guck-in-die-Luft*), which they did not know, because a storm is referred to and I wanted to see if the children would draw the lightning realistically or in the form of the serpent. Of the fourteen drawings, all very lively but also under the influence of the American school, twelve were drawn realistically. But two of them depicted indeed the indestructible symbol of the arrow-tongued serpent, as it is found in the kiva [32].

We, however, do not want our imagination to fall under the spell of the serpent image, which leads to the primitive beings of the under-





world. We want to ascend to the roof of the worldhouse, our heads perched upwards in recollection of the words of Goethe:

Wär nicht das Auge sonnenhaft—  
Die Sonne könnt' es nie erblicken.  
If the eye were not of the sun,  
It could not behold the sun.

All humanity stands in devotion to the sun. To claim it as the symbol that guides us upward from nocturnal depths is the right of the savage and the cultivated person alike. Children stand before a cave [33]. To lift them up to the light is the task not only of American schools but of humanity in general.

The relation of the seeker of redemption to the serpent develops, in the cycle of cultic devotion, from coarse, sense-based interaction to its transcendence. It is and has always been, as the cult of the Pueblo Indians has shown, a significant criterion in the evolution from instinctual, magical interaction to a spiritualized taking of distance. The poisonous reptile symbolizes the inner and outer demoniac forces that humanity must overcome. This evening I was able to show you all too cursorily an actual survival of the magical serpent cult, as an example of that primordial condition of which the refinement, transcendence, and replacement are the work of modern culture.





The conqueror of the serpent cult and of the fear of lightning, the inheritor of the indigenous peoples and of the gold seeker who ousted them, is captured in a photograph I took on a street in San Francisco. He is Uncle Sam in a stovepipe hat, strolling in his pride past a neo-classical rotunda. Above his top hat runs an electric wire. In this copper serpent of Edison's, he has wrested lightning from nature [34].

The American of today is no longer afraid of the rattlesnake. He kills it; in any case, he does not worship it. It now faces extermination. The lightning imprisoned in wire—captured electricity—has produced a culture with no use for paganism. What has replaced it? Natural forces are no longer seen in anthropomorphic or biomorphic guise, but rather as infinite waves obedient to the human touch. With these waves, the culture of the machine age destroys what the natural sciences, born of myth, so arduously achieved: the space for devotion, which evolved in turn into the space required for reflection.

The modern Prometheus and the modern Icarus, Franklin and the Wright brothers, who invented the dirigible airplane, are precisely those ominous destroyers of the sense of distance, who threaten to lead the planet back into chaos.

Telegram and telephone destroy the cosmos. Mythical and symbolic thinking strive to form spiritual bonds between humanity and the surrounding world, shaping distance into the space required for devotion and reflection: the distance undone by the instantaneous electric connection.

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