

Culture Parallels to the Delaware Walam Olum

ERMINIE W. VOEGELIN, Greencastle

Recent analysis of the mortuary customs of the Shawnee and other eastern North American tribes served to illustrate the fact that very few traits are likely to be found unique to a single tribe within a given culture area. From a total of several hundred Shawnee burial traits, only 14 traits could be isolated as diagnostic or unique to the Shawnee alone. Moreover, six of these 14 traits occurred in slightly recast form or entirely apart from burial customs in the cultures of eastern North American tribes other than the Shawnee (1).

The uniqueness of the Shawnee burial complex or, I dare say, any other large Shawnee complex lies not in its having an impressive total of traits which are peculiar to this one tribe alone but rather in the fact that the complex as a whole follows a pattern which is distinctive for this tribe.

This fact, that the cultures of various groups within a relatively homogeneous region are apt to show few original traits and are chiefly distinguishable one from the other on the basis of selection and arrangement of elements which have a wider distribution, has received attention from several present-day anthropologists. In a recent noteworthy study Spier (2) has shown that the Ghost Dance, which caused such disturbances among certain Plains tribes at the end of the nineteenth century, was not, as Mooney had held, a new cultural phenomenon developed by the Paviotso to answer spiritual needs of the moment. Rather, the ultimate origin of the Ghost Dance lay in a much older dance form which paralleled the Ghost Dance, for which Spier has coined the name Prophet Dance. This earlier dance form which preceded the Ghost Dance "was known to all the tribes of the northwestern interior, without exception, from the Babine and Sekani on the north to the Paviotso of western Nevada far to the south." In post-white times the Prophet Dance was the source not only of the Ghost Dances of 1870 and 1890 but of several other religious movements among Plateau tribes.

Du Bois (3), working concurrently but independently of Spier on the Feather cult, one of the other religious movements which sprang from the Prophet Dance, also arrived at the conclusion that the Feather cult of the Middle Columbia River tribes was largely derivative of older practices. In her study Du Bois says, "The striking characteristic of the Feather cult was its lack of originality. With the exception of spinning [whirling] and vomiting in the initiation rites, every feature can be traced to some definite and prior source." Ray (4), in a review of Du Bois' study, points out that even the two traits Du Bois mentions are "of doubtful originality" in the Middle Columbia region. "Vomiting is found...as a ritual and curative practice. The whirling is easily associated with the traditional winter dance demonstrations of...persons with whirlwind as a guardian spirit."

What holds for particular complexes also holds true for the culture

of a group as a whole. Webb (5), in searching for distinctive Cherokee traits, found that "it is not easy to determine what traits are definitely diagnostic of Cherokee material culture" since so many traits attributable to the Cherokee have distributions far beyond this particular group. Likewise, in my own study of the comparatively simple culture of the Tübatulabal, a California group, I was able to isolate only three features of Tübatulabal culture which seemed unique to that group alone (6). Since the study was made, one of these three traits has been found among the Kawaiisu (7), southern neighbors of the Tübatulabal, and it seems not only possible, but probable, that the other two features will also eventually be recorded among some of the Great Basin or California groups.

At first glance, the Delaware Walam Olum appears to be a cultural complex unique to a single eastern North American tribe and lacking in antecedents among the Delaware or any other eastern group. As such, we would have valid grounds for questioning its authenticity as a native production. Is its uniqueness, however, due to the fact that no parallels can be found for the various elements or traits which enter into the Walam Olum or rather to the fact that certain elements, common to several Eastern Woodlands groups, occur in unique juxtaposition in the Delaware document?

If we analyze the Walum Olum in respect to its major elements, we find that the production as a whole is the sum of several items, as follows:

1. Pictographs—painted on sticks, used as mnemonic devices, for songs, songs esoteric (?);
2. Primeval water—deluge motives;
3. Genealogy of chiefs—wanderings of bands under chiefs.

Our problem is to see whether any or several of the above traits can be found among eastern North American tribes other than the Delaware. Regarding the first point in the analysis, the use of pictographs, Schoolcraft (8, p. 32) notes in Oneóta that pictographs were used by the Menomini, the Winnebago, the Potawatomi, the Chippewa, and the Ottawa, as well as among the Dakota and Plains tribes to the west and south. Pictographs painted on sticks or tablets of hard wood, in contrast to pictographs painted on birch bark or buffalo skins, have a more restricted distribution; to date we have found specific mention of such only among the Chippewa, Kickapoo, and Delaware. The use of such tablets or sticks for remembering songs, especially songs of a religious or esoteric nature, is found not only among the Delaware but also among the Chippewa and Kickapoo. The manner in which the Chippewa used engraved wooden mnemonic tablets is described in some detail by Kohl (9) and Schoolcraft (8, pp. 27-35); I wish here only to mention certain interesting facts concerning the presence of engraved and painted sticks among the Delaware and Kickapoo.

The use of prayer sticks engraved with mnemonic symbols is first noted for the Delaware *ca.* 1762. At this date a prophet appeared among the Delaware. This prophet, according to Pontiac, the Ottawa chief, had talked with the Great Spirit, received instructions from the divinity concerning the course of life the Delaware should follow, and then had

been given "a prayer, embodying the substance of all that [the Prophet] had heard. . . . [This prayer] was cut in hieroglyphics upon a wooden stick, after the custom of his [the Prophet's] people; and he was directed to send copies of it to all the Indian villages" (10).

Painted sticks graven with "hieroglyphic" or mnemonic characters were also carved by the Kickapoo prophet, Kanakuk, and sold to his followers around 1827-34 (11). None of the Delaware Prophet's prayer sticks seem to have been preserved, but at least one of the Kickapoo prophet's has found its way into the U. S. National Museum, as a gift from Mr. C. H. Bartlett of South Bend, Indiana; Mr. Bartlett obtained the stick from a Methodist missionary of Mill Creek, Indiana (12, pp. 641-1110). This prayer stick tallies with descriptions of Kickapoo prayer sticks given by Catlin (11, pp. 136-137), being made of maple, a little more than 12 inches long, 2 and 9/16 inches wide, and 3/8 of an inch thick. Originally, it was painted a bright red on one side and green on the other. One side is smooth, the other carved with mnemonic figures, many of which "bear some resemblance to the old black-letter type of a missal," and there are traces of Catholic influence in the manner in which the characters are grouped together (12, 698-699). When using the stick, the right index finger was put first under the upper character while repeating the short prayer which it suggested, then under the next, and the next character, and so on to the bottom, the whole prayer being sung as a sort of chant (11, p. 137).

Turning to our second major point, the primeval water-deluge motives which comprise Songs I and II of the *Walam Olum*, we know that these motives are widespread in eastern North America and also occur in other parts of the continent (13). The version of the deluge myth given in the *Walam Olum* parallels in structure and in many details versions found among tribes neighboring to the Delaware, such as the Shawnee.

Parallels for our third point are not so easily found among the tribes of eastern North America and will require further research before documented proof that long genealogies of chiefs were preserved in this area. Any references bearing on this point would be extremely valuable; with the aid of mnemonic devices, it does not seem improbable that genealogies of chiefs could have been kept with comparative ease.

At this point in our investigation of culture parallels to the *Walam Olum*, it does not appear that the document is so aberrant as to be open to suspicion regarding its authenticity as a native production. Rather, distributional evidence seems to show that many of its elements were not limited to the Delaware alone but were fairly widely distributed among Eastern Woodlands tribes. The combination of these elements in the *Walam Olum* is, so far as we know now, unique to the Delaware. However, this is as we would expect and is consonant with conclusions reached from studies of other cultural complexes to which references were made in the first part of this paper.

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