

SOUTHEASTERN INDIAN ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA

In cooperation with The Seminole Tribe of Florida

ROBERT F. GREENLEE LECTURE

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[The following is a transcript of a lecture which accompanies a recording of Seminole Indian chants, medicine songs, etc. The original recording, on a 78 rpm record, was recorded in the field in 1939 by an anthropologist identified as Robert F. Greenlee. Although professionally trained, Mr. Greenlee probably never worked as an anthropologist.

The recordings were obtained by Marjorie Stoneman Douglas and given by her to John Goggin, former physical anthropologist and archaeologist at the University of Florida.]

The Florida Seminoles are descendants of the Indians who remained in the Everglades after the close of the Seminole War in 1840. One hundred years later we find the people radically transformed both in material aspects of life and in their ideas and religious customs. This morning we are concerned with ceremonial and medicinal practices--vestiges of a much richer life which has vanished due to the coming of whites in ever-increasing numbers to what was formerly a cloistered Indian world. To discover and record these remnants of the Seminoles' former life before it disappeared forever from the minds of the older generation was one of the chief objects of the 1939 study.

A medicine man of the Big Cypress swamp settlements was my chief informant. He consented to interpret many phases of ceremonial life, especially those connected with the annual Green Corn Dance and his own specialty, medicine. A number of chants from the old medicinal formulas --many of them rendered in the special medicine man's language with its archaic words and phrases--were recorded on phonograph records. A similar study was made by Miss Frances Densmore, which was published in 1932. She used the same informant I did, and was able to record seventy-five songs of the corn and hunting dances as well as the alligator, catfish, quail, screech owl and other dances. The songs sung for me include several from the Green Corn Dance, the Horned Owl chant from the Hunting Dance, several of the Seminole mourning chants, as well as a number of medicinal formulas. I will play some of these records shortly, but before doing so will give a few of the general features of the Seminoles' social organization, ceremonial and medicinal practice in order that the chants and songs will be more intelligible.

In the Seminole social organization descent is counted only on the mother's side, and with clans as a basis. A child belongs solely to the clan of his mother. Nine clans are found among the Big Cypress people, all but one of them being named after some animal; Panther, Wildcat, Tiger, Bird, Otter, Wind, Wolf, Snake, and City or Town clan are the chief active clans. A Deer clan also exists, but it is dying out due to

the fact that there are only three men left and no women. Since the children follow the clan of the mother, the Deer clan will be extinct in the next generation. A similar fate was in store for the Alligator clan noted by Clay McCauley in 1880, and now it has disappeared completely.

Each one of these nine clans is exogamous--that is, a man must marry outside of his mother's clan. Among the Seminoles a third provision is made whereby certain groups of the nine clans are linked together, which restricts a man's choice of a mate even further. The Tiger, Panther, and Wildcat clans are linked. The Otter and Town clans are similarly joined, as also are the Bird and Wind. Under this marriage restriction a member of the Bird clan would be obliged to avoid marriage to a girl of the Wind clan, but he would be permitted to choose one from any other clan. A study of the marriages recorded by the United States government Seminole census shows that extremely few marriages occur which do not correspond to this usual pattern. But so few clans survive from the much larger number once in Florida, it has now become allowable for a man to marry a woman of his father's clan, though I was told that in the old days this clan was prohibited to him also. As an example we can note Ingraham Billie's family, where Wilson Billie, Ingraham's brother, married Ingraham's daughter though she would be considered his niece by our system of classing kin. She was a member of her mother's clan, the Wind clan; hence a proper bride for a Panther man. Another instance in the same family is where Annie Billie, Panther, Ingraham's sister, married Charlie Billie, Ingraham's son, her nephew by our system, but outside of the clan by Seminole custom and hence a fit mate.

Of special interest is the clan known as the City or Town clan, which my informant maintains is composed largely of Indians and mixed blood. He indicated that when the Seminoles started St. Augustine they found two white girls wandering in the woods, lost, tired and hungry. He thought perhaps that they were Spaniards. Some of the tribe wanted to kill them, but the chief said, no; as they were women, they should be kept and made to work. Eventually they married Seminole men. Since these women were not Indian, they belonged to no clan, and consequently had no clan affiliations. To solve this problem, the City clan was created, its original members being the children of those two marriages. He says that this clan is composed of descendants of captives and marriages outside the clan, such as Seminole-Spanish or Seminole-white; anything but Seminole-Negro. Members of the City clan today include influential members of the tribe. The clan has its counterpart among the Cow Creek Seminoles north of Lake Okeechobee, who have a clan known as Big Town clan.

Two classes of medical practitioners exist among the Florida Seminoles. The most important are the medicine men, who are not only in charge of the entire ceremonial life of these people, but hold a good deal of political power as well. A medicine man is responsible for curing sickness, and must undergo a period of instruction and training to fit him for his duty. The main distinction between the medicine men and the

doctors, or second-class practitioners, lies in the possession of a fragment of war medicine by the former. My informant said that he inherited his medicine from Old Billy Motlow, and that his brother obtained his from his brother's mother. My informant said that when he died, his medicine would go to his brother, who would in turn present it to a suitable member of the Panther clan. Thus we see that the passing down of the medicine, which is the source to each practitioner, is a matter of inheritance within the same clan.

The passing down of the medicine is so supernaturally powerful that it cannot be kept at the settlement, but is hidden away at the ceremonial grounds where the annual Green Corn Dance is held. The medicine is composed of a silver-colored powder, and is kept in small buckskin bags. This war medicine is taboo to women. They may not approach too near it, since its great power would knock them down. When I asked about the origin of the war medicine, I was told that it was derived from thunder and snake--thunder in the sky and snake in the water. Thunder went way up to the sky, got the medicine, and then made it rain. The rain brought the medicine to earth, to water, where the snake got it. The man went to the creek and obtained a small bundle of medicine from snake. This bundle was brought to king, or chief, who kept it.

Once there was a big war, and the king didn't want to go. He gave some of the medicine to a man who went for him. They called the man the "war chief." His medicine kept the war chief very strong. When he died, he gave the medicine to the clan. A part of the medicine went to his son. Finally, the medicine of supernatural power became divided into seven parts as it is today. When this powerful medicine passes to new hands, the old buckskin bags are destroyed and the medicine is transferred to new ones.

The tribal lore, ceremonial practices, and healings are not taught indiscriminately to all the young men, but only to those who show that they are willing to pursue the needed preparation. Not all boys are interested, and similarly not all are considered as possessing a suitable temperament. A medicine man need not confine his instructions to members of his own clan, but may teach anyone whom he considers deserving. However, the inheritance of the sacred medicine bundles is strictly a clan affair.

The preparation of medicine men advances by degrees. The respective degrees or grades are named after the months in the Indian lunar calendar. Thus, during the first month, Wind Moon, of his preparation, a prospective medicine man is given the black drink which acts as a purgative. Herbs and medicine are then given

him for eight additional days. After this, the medicinal student is allowed to study on his own, but he is expected to return to the medicine man who is in charge of his teaching on the first month of the ensuing year for further instruction and to ask questions. In order to cure, one must learn the proper magical chants of formulas. Hence, the teaching of the songs in connection with each one of the various types of diseases undoubtedly forms a significant part of the training of the new medicine man. A Seminole has a decidedly different notion about medicine from that held by whites. Whereas we think in terms of drugs, ointments, stimulants or cathartics which will benefit the body in predictable fashion, the Seminole relies on the actions of the medicine man. These people have confidence in his power to cure diseases or to alleviate mental suffering. The Indian medical doctor must also have his patients consider life as supernaturally dangerous as possible. The more fraught with danger he can make the affairs of everyday life, the more clients he has and the more secure his position.

A common cause of disease is the loss of a ghost or soul. The Seminole believes in the existence of a double soul. One soul may leave the body in sleep and wander far afield, while the other leaves the body only at death. The nightly adventures of the first soul are revealed in dreams. To discover the cause of sickness, a medicine man must analyze the dreams.

In order to explain the diagnosis through loss of a soul, my informant drew a diagram on the ground to illustrate his conception of the subject. He was trying graphically to show me the Seminole theory of well-being, of disease, until the final death and destruction of the soul. The world is considered as divided into four cardinal directions: North, South, East, and West. West is believed to be a ritually dangerous direction, since the dead are thought to travel over the Milky Way--spirit or ghost road--to the West. The designation of the Milky Way as the path of the dead to the afterworld is an Indian idea which was found among most of the Southeastern tribes, and even among some tribes on the Great Plains.

First let us consider the situation at death. One soul or ghost goes to the North and then continues around to the East. If, when it gets to the East, the medicine man is not able to call it back to its proper position--central--the ghost will go over the Milky Way to the West, as the city of the dead is located in the West. This happening indicates the death of a person. Four days after death, the second soul or ghost follows the first at nightfall. This accounts for the four day mourning period in which all relatives of the deceased must stay in their camps to wait for the

final passing of the second soul to the afterworld. At this time, also, mourning chants are sung for the bereaved so that they may be permitted to forget their loss and have life in the community restored to normalcy as soon as possible.

B. If the soul simply wanders at night, goes to the North, and then returns at dawn, the person has merely been dreaming. This is in no sense an abnormal ghostly episode.

C. My informant explained that sometimes the ghost enjoyed his nocturnal adventure so much that it refused to come back at dawn. When this happened, the person who had dreamed suddenly found his body become sick. Hence, the medicine man always asked his patient first about his dreams. Upon learning from the dream how the soul had been detained, the medicine man obtains the proper herbs, mixes them in a pot, sings the proper chants beseeching the soul to return. It is also important to blow his breath through the medicine pipe--his "ammunition"--as the power of breath is quaintly called. The medicine man believes that certain magical power comes from himself through the pipe, and that this power is sufficient in most cases to retrieve the wandering soul.

Dreaming about fire may cause fever, to their way of thinking. To illustrate this: I once saw our medicine man friend sauntering down the Tamiami Trail with his blowing pipe in his hand, gathering herbs. When asked what he would use them for, he replied that his wife had told him that she had dreamed of fire. He accordingly was afraid that she might contract a bad fever. Medicine was necessary to prevent this contingency from occurring.

Aside from diagnosis by dreams, there are many examples of diagnosis through observing body symptoms. In these cases, the type of disease is named after an animal. For instances, if the baby cries and scratches and never stops, similar to the actions of a monkey, he is thought to have the monkey disease. The treatment is to sing a particular chant to the monkey, and supposedly the child will be cured. The dog disease is considered to be caused by both the dog and the buzzard; hence, the chants are sung till both these creatures desist. The symptoms of this malady are stomach ache, loss of appetite, vomiting and bad dreams. Along with the medicinal chants, herbs are mixed and medicine prepared. Both together should produce a cure. The phonograph records to be played shortly contain examples of chants for deer sickness, sun sickness, brought about largely through the recitation of certain formulas, by the performance rites, and by the concoction of certain herbal medicines in a specific manner. The cure is magical--not strictly medicinal, as among ourselves--though the Seminole herbal medicine is, in itself, efficacious in some instances. The Seminole doctor's

theory of medicine springs from the belief that medicine man in particular controls the harmful forces of disease, and can dispell them if only the diagnosis of the disorder can be ascertained. Some of the herbs used to effect a cure are sweet bay leaves, toolee, willow, palanathee, cedar leaf and sassafras.

Recent innovations, due to the closer contact with whites, have changed the Seminole idea of medicine and curing. The medicine man now imitates the white doctors, and I have definitely known of an instance where the prepared drugs have been ordered from a wholesale drug company. These additions consist of herbs, barks and roots which white pharmacists had on their shelves at the turn of the century. Epsom salts have become quite a favorite, and a store of bottles can be seen on the platform of a medicine man's chickee, or dwelling. A greenish concoction for the relief of lumbago, dispensed by a Dr. Pinder of Everglades, also has had a wide following in the Indian world. Rubbing alcohol also was a favorite external--but mostly internal--medicine at one time. And the unwary white person still hears with monotonous regularity the Seminole plaint, "you got 'em lubbing alcohol?", or, "You got 'em epsom salt?".

Magical practices still have a following among the Seminole. There is a ceremony which they believe will produce rain by putting a pot in the ground and filling it with water, and blowing the breath upon the water. Then the rain is called through chants--one must not eat all day long until the rain comes. To make the rain stop, it is merely necessary to light a tobacco pipe and blow smoke against the rain for ten or twenty minutes. The rain procuring ceremony is not confined to medicine men, but can be produced by anyone, even women. Tobacco is frequently used for magical purposes among the American Indians. The Seminoles are no exception to this general rule.

Tobacco is employed to ward off evil influences. For instance some Indians once came to the camp of our medicine man friend from Miami, and told him that the fever raged in that city. He decided to make medicine in his camp. To accomplish this, he took two tablespoons full of dried tobacco, which he kept wrapped up in a rag. He proudly got this rag and tobacco out and showed it to me. He said that this medicine was used on the occasion just mentioned; when he made this sort of medicine, he did not sleep all night. He sang a song, and then blew on the tobacco. Then he wrapped up the tobacco for a while and held it. This process was repeated four times during the course of the night. At daybreak, some tobacco was placed in a pipe and smoked. Then he declared that fever had never

come to his camp. A tobacco pipe is also smoked, or was formerly smoked, to blow away hurricanes, so that they would go around the Indian camps and hit somewhere else. This is a striking instance of belief in the potency of a supernatural power. While my wife and I were watching this recital on the platform of a dwelling, he took out a splinter which he kept hidden in his bag. After looking all around before talking, he said in a guarded tone that this was strong thunder medicine which he had taken from a tree just after it had been split by lightning. A splinter taken under such circumstances is sure to be very powerful, and its proximity to the tobacco will further enhance the supernatural potency of the plant.

Although black magic or sorcery is not employed by the modern Seminole medicine man to my knowledge, it is altogether likely that it was in full bloom at one time in their history. My informant indicated that he knew of a medicine which would make a person sick. This sorcery is devised to make a person contract a fever. To produce this effect, the medicine man retires about half a mile from his camp. There he makes a fire at night, and then sings songs. This is done when the person to be injured is asleep. The purpose of the songs is to call the intended victim's soul to the medicine man. When he gets the soul, he puts it in the fire, and burns it up. This severe treatment can be given anyone in any camp, no matter how far away the camp may be from the one where the medicine man is preparing his malevolent spell. On the following day, the person will have a fever, which he cannot dispel, and pretty soon he will die. The counter-magic to rid the patient of this mischief consists of songs intended to bring back the burnt soul. Frequent applications of cold water are given to calm the fever and re-animate the burnt soul. As soon as the soul has been revived, the fever will vanish.

Aside from rituals dealing with curing, one discovers certain rites which are used on occasion to produce definite, desired results. For example, to keep from losing a newborn baby, if the mother has already lost children before they reach maturity, the following rite is performed: When the baby is four or five weeks old, a doctor makes a medicine fire, with the logs pointing outwards in the four cardinal directions. Corn is then put in a pot, which in turn is placed on the fire. One ear of corn is set on the end of each log, at north, east, south, and west points. When the corn is moved from the north to the west position, the ear is turned over, and the baby's name is called out. Then one must slide the west corn to

the south, turn the ear over, and again call out the child's name. Then move the south corn ear to the east, turn the ear over and repeat the baby's name. Then the corn must be slid from the east position to the north again. It must be turned over, and the baby's name repeated for a final time. Then the baby is placed on the ground, and the doctor must pretend that he is looking everywhere for the child till at last it is found. This little rite is supposed to bind the baby to its' mother's clan, as well as to aid in bringing it to maturity.

At first I thought that these little rites might well be derived from the imagination of the medicine man. But one morning when my wife and I went to a camp to take my informant and his wife to Fort Myers, we saw one of the so-called doctors, or minor practitioners, holding a newborn baby over the coals of the fire in the cookshed. A small vial of bayleaves had been placed in the coals, and the baby was being immersed in the smoke from the bayleaves when we arrived. We asked for the meaning of this rite, and were told that it was to keep the child from being lost when it left the camp for the first time.

An interesting evidence occurs in connection with the mentioning of recently widowed people of both sexes. Speaking of widows is dangerous. The belief is that if you talk too much about widows, your own wife will die. Widows are obliged to eat by themselves. At the annual Green Corn Dance, a widower strips the clothes from a recently made widow, or at least most of her clothes, throws them away, and she then obtains new ones. Our friend had a widow staying at his camp--his wife's sister. He would neither make medicine for her, or for her infant child. He would speak to her only sparingly, as necessity demanded. A widow remains in a ritually unclean state for a certain length of time. Her hair is let down and her beads removed. She becomes an active member of her group again after being ceremonially re-admitted at the Green Corn Dance.

The Green Corn Dance or world renewal ceremony, is well known in outline to most people who know anything about Seminole life. This dance is performed as a New Year festival, in the same manner as did the Creek Indians from whom they are descended. For this dance, new clothes are made by the women for their whole family. Old fires in the camp are allowed to die out and a new fire is kindled by resort to the ancient fire drill instead of matches. Then again the new corn crop cannot be eaten by the men until they have been made ritually pure for its inception. Another striking feature is the scratching of the men and boys with an instrument made of bone, in which a rattlesnake fang has been inserted. This

allows the blood to flow freely, and supposedly cleanses the blood and the men who partake of this rite. Likewise, taking a concoction of herbs, which induces vomiting, is supposed to cleanse the stomach for the reception of the green corn. A ball game is played between the boys and the girls, stomp dances are held, and a feast of beef looms prominently in the festivities. Unfortunately, the Green Corn Dance which I attended was a degenerate variety of the original Creek ceremonial. But the essential features are still present, just as they have been as long as we have any record of the Seminoles in Florida.

A revolution in the ceremonial life of the Seminoles is now in progress. Just as surely as increased Indian-white contact continues, their old values will gradually sink into impotence and allure. The older generation will find it increasingly difficult to instill you with the zest and fire of the old Seminole life which has lingered on since the time when these people were left to fend for themselves after the first...

Each death of a Seminole elder brings a fresh, irretrievable loss of priceless lore. Or the knowledge of old ceremonies now in the process of change and distortion. The need of penetrating linguistic studies and further data on Seminole customs is passing and very pressing. Before long, the old civilization of the Seminole with all its colorful contrasts will be, to all intents and purposes, as dead as the proverbial dodo.