

The Role of the Dance Societies in the Easter Ceremonies of the Yaquis at Pascua

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In the southwest of Arizona, about one and one-half miles northwest of Tucson, is an Indian settlement named Pascua, meaning Easter. It is here that the Yaqui Indians from all over the southwestern United States and parts of Mexico, gather for their annual reunion during Holy Week, the week immediately preceding Easter Sunday.

Originally from Sonora Mexico, the Yaquis began to migrate to the United States to escape persecution from Diez, when Mexico became a Republic. This migration is still occurring, although now it is for economic rather than political reasons.

In making adjustments to the new surroundings and customs in a different culture, the Yaquis have not lost their Spanish-Indian ceremonies and customs. They have successfully blended these indigenous customs with those of Roman Catholicism, which were brought to them by missionaries in the nineteenth century.

One of the most intriguing features in the Yaqui society is the fundamental relationship between man, woman and the diety. This relationship "through its lateral integration of persons, forms the village into a single social unit. It provides means whereby all may interact at different times for a common purpose."¹ (Spicer, 1940). This ceremonial society system evolves around the two unique personages of Jesus and Mary. Mary is a member of the Matachine society while Jesus is a member of the Fariseo society. Both societies act as intermediaries between God and man, whereas the ceremonies, (such as the one performed at Easter) are the ritual forms of that interaction.

The Matachines and Fariseos are two of four societies within the framework of dance. These societies have a strict form and structure and are responsible for the four main yearly fiestas. The Fariseos preside over the winter ceremonial season, the Matachines preside over the Spring-Summer season and there are Coyotes and Caballeros. These societies are all male, as women have a very minor role to play in the Yaqui ceremonies.

Dancing is the ritual activity of the Matachines. They usually perform in two parallel rows, dancing a standardized set of patterns. The hosana, or chief, guides and controls the lines as they perform the often complicated patterns of the dance.

In contrast to the Matachine society is the Fariseo society representing the forces of Evil. They appear only during the Easter ceremony, of which they are in charge. They have a number of functions to perform apart from the dance. The Fariseos may be divided into two groups, the masked, (Chapayekas) and the unmasked (Soldiers of Rome).

The Chapayekas fill a roll which reminds one of the mummies of the Ancient Celtic societies. They perform completely mute, wear masks, and provide comic relief to otherwise sombre proceedings. Through their comic actions they try to distract the faithful from their prayers. They slink about, weaving in and out of the audience, jiggling their hips and hitting their swords in an effort to accomplish their purpose.

The Chapayekas are not totally unbelievers, however, for throughout their participation, each of them carries a small wooden cross in his mouth. If he has to remove the cross from his mouth at any time, he will slip his mask to one side of his face and prostrate himself on the ground keeping his face from view.

The soldiers of Rome, wear street clothes, with Yaqui sandals. Headed by a man called Pilato, they are organized into groups of soldiers with a captain who directs all preparations for the ceremony. Among their members they also have a drummer, a flutist and two flag bearers who carry the official red banner of the Fariseo society. They join the Chapayekas at various times throughout the ceremonies.

The Yaquis do not hunt, practice agriculture, or interact intimately with their immediate environment; yet one of the most colorful characters to participate in the Easter ceremonies is the Deer Dancer. The skill of the Deer Dancer is highly praised by the Yaquis, yet he does not perform a necessary function in the Paster ceremonies. That he once may have been intimately associated with the Pascola dancers (who will be discussed later) is quite possible. Spicer² (1940) states that the Deer dancer formerly went through an elaborate mock deer hunt with the Pascolas at the close of every ceremony in which he appeared. The decreased importance of the deer dance ritual may be indicative of the lessened effect of environment on Yaqui culture. Whereas in Mexico, the deer was probably important as a source of food or clothing, to-day in Arizona, the Yaquis patronize American stores, According to many anthropologists a ceremonial dance which has no functional value tends to disappear altogether. Once again we may see an instance where the beliefs of Western religion have killed a colorful aboriginal ritual.

The ceremonial hosts at fiestas, the Pascolas, have the responsibility of making sure that every member of the village enjoys himself. He imitates the Deer Dancer, trying hard to make him laugh while the deer dancer must try equally as hard not to be distracted. This mock conflict occurs at varying intervals throughout the Easter Sunday eve and provides a source of amusement for the fiesta crowd.

Dance in Yaqui society fulfills many functions. The religious-dance societies not only serve a ceremonial purpose, but provide the very binding ingredient which holds the community together. The dance societies act as intermediaries between man, woman and the diety. It is this cohesiveness which helps to make the dance during the Yaqui Paster ceremonies so fascinating.

^{1 2} Spicer, Edward. *Pascua: A Yaqui Village in Arizona*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1940.



Luncheon gathering for the John Betts Address