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**The Orpheus Motif in North America: The Comanche tradition**



To give the reader a general idea of the form taken by the Orpheus tradition in North America, I reproduce the version of the Comanche Indians, here published for the first time. It was communicated to me orally by the late Dr Ralph Linton, who noted it down in the course of his field-studies among the Comanche (1933). Particular interest attaches to the Comanche narrative, for it is the first recorded Orpheus tradition from the more easterly Shoshonean groups. No account is given of it in Wallace and Hoebel’s Comanche monograph, which is otherwise a valuable source for the religion and folklore of this tribe.

**1. The Comanche tradition runs as follows.**

A young man loved his wife dearly. When she died, he therefore resolved to follow her, and got ready his horse and suitable equipment. Then he set out westwards, and rode thus for months. He journeyed over the mountains, but all he had with him was worn out there, finally even his horse, and he arrived on foot in the realm of the dead. The children there skipped around him and shouted: “Look, there is a raw one!” He soon found the lodge of his father-in-law, where his deceased wife also lived. She was now torn with conflicting feelings: she did not wish to return, for she was happy where she was, but at the same time she loved her husband dearly. At last her father settled the matter. He said to the husband: “Well, go back with her. But remember this: when you leave the camp you must go eastward. And you must not touch her before you come to the place where the buffalo is. You must give her a buffalo’s kidney to eat. When she eats this she will become flesh, and after that she can live with you as your wife. But you must never strike her. If you strike her she will come back to us.”

So they set off. After a time they came to the buffalo plains. The husband slew a young buffalo and gave the kidney to his wife, who now became a living human being. They both kissed and embraced each other, and they forgot all about the life in the world of the dead. Then they went on, and soon reached the camp of the living.

This happened in the spring. When autumn came round all was still well between the two. One day they lay together in their lodge, and the man grasped the buffalo hide and wanted to draw it over himself and his wife to warm their bodies. But his hand slipped and hit his wife hard. She shrieked: “You struck me on the head, now I must return to the dead!” The unhappy husband heard his wife’s voice fading and finally dying away altogether.

**2. Definition**

No North American Indian folktale is more attractive than the story of the Indian Orpheus, the Orpheus tradition (F 81.1 according to Thompson’s motif-index). The version from the Comanche communicated in the foregoing gives a good idea of the fascinating, suggestive force of the narrative. It has all the attributes, it would seem, that are required to form a well-shaped whole which may be easily transferred from tribe to tribe, from culture to culture. And one does, certainly, find it scattered over the greater part of North America. But it has been doubted that it has constituted a clearly delimited tradition that has been disseminated in the way indicated above. It has been suggested that it is as a type too general and undecided; it does not contain any definitive properties over and above the actual main motif, the bringing back of a loved deceased person, a motif that easily arises in every culture; and the dividing line between this and other stories of experiences among the dead is so extremely floating.

These objections are still raised, although Dr Gayton tried to show twenty years ago that the Orpheus tradition is cast in a relatively fixed mould about a dominating motif, and a rather regularly recurring pattern of action. My own investigations confirm Gayton’s conclusions, even if her analysis of the pattern of action does not hold good in every detail. In the light of the eschatological material I have collected, moreover, it is difficult for me to endorse her pronouncement that “stories of a visit to the world of the dead without the Orpheus motivation are relatively less frequent in North America.” The stories of living persons who in dreams, trance or coma have journeyed to the other world and succeeded in returning to the living are as a matter of fact numerous in North America.

In order to create a stable basis for our investigations in the sequel, we shall here define the main motifs and leading pattern of action of the Orpheus tradition, indicate the variations that may occur in the central theme, and draw attention to those narratives which come close to this type of tradition, though without its being possible to refer to them as Orpheus traditions.

A. H. Gayton does not give any direct definition of the Orpheus tradition, but she delimits it by referring it to the group “tales of the recovery of a beloved person from the land of the dead.” A more detailed, descriptive definition has been given by Thompson: “A man’s wife or close relative dies. He follows her to the world of the dead, and gets permission to bring her back. But there is nearly always some condition attached to this unusual favor by the rulers of the dead. This condition may be, like the classical myth, not to look at the wife, not to touch her, not to let her out of a bag, or not to be too hasty.” Thompson adds that the taboo is generally broken, so that the reunion fails. A detailed list of the different elements in the Orpheus tradition has been drawn up by Gayton, and (after her) by Hatt and Voegelin.

What distinguishes the Orpheus tradition from all other narratives of visits to the land of the dead is in the first place that the living person tries to bring the deceased back with him to the land of the living— otherwise it is generally the case that the living person is aiming to free himself from the grip of the ghosts—and, in the second place, that the living person is a close relative or friend of the deceased, in which point he differs from the shaman, who of course visits the realm of the dead on the same errand. Even this vague delimitation of the content of the Orpheus narrative is sufficient to show that the parallel with the ecstatic shaman seance and the shaman’s capturing of an escaped soul is very close. In the majority of Orpheus narratives the living person is a man, the deceased his wife, and her restoration to life fails in consequence of an infringed taboo. One may therefore define the North American Orpheus tradition as the narrative of a man who, driven by love for his deceased wife, seeks her out in the realm of the dead and tries in vain to restore her to life.

As I have already pointed out, this is the commonest, but by no means the only, version. In a number of cases it is the woman who seeks her lover, or the sons who seek their mother, and so on. Similarly, the story not infrequently has a happy ending. But such variants must be regarded as divergences from the central theme of the narrative. The psychological presumptions of the story are such that the main version appears the most natural. As the narrators are generally men, and the narrative is of such a kind as to engage emotively the person who is telling it—it is a “tale of family love” —the motif with the man who seeks his deceased, beloved woman is a natural form for the narrator’s histrionic imagination and pity. The unhappy ending underlines still more the emotional force of the story: it becomes a gripping, tragic romance. At the same time it assumes a chilling element of reality; the dream of the return of the dead cannot be realized. When the Orpheus narrative finally becomes an aition for the origin of death, this tragical tendency has reached its climax. It is created in a milieu of listeners, a literary product, far removed from the reality which in my opinion gave life to the Orpheus tradition itself.

The careful inventory of the elements composing the Orpheus tradition given by Dr Gayton shows what in a great number of cases may be included in the tradition, but from this it is a big step to allow them to characterize the tradition. Such motifs as the westward direction of the journey, the meeting of certain types of obstacles on the way, and special attributes of the dead and their world do, certainly, frequently recur, but these have probably been woven into the narrative because they constitute parts of the general popular belief concerning the realm of the dead and the journey thither. The data of the Orpheus tradition must of course in reason be in accordance with this popular belief. It would at the same time be too frivolous to assume that it was the Orpheus tale that originally introduced the eschatological conceptions—even if it sanctions them, invests them with authority and value, there are many other traditions of visits to the realm of the dead which have the same function. The Orpheus story has in my opinion adopted and fused with itself the popular local conceptions which already existed, and which in large parts of North America have not been all too divergent from one another. In a later chapter a closer analysis will be given of the connection between the conceptions of popular belief and the content of the Orpheus tradition.

The argument developed here does not imply that the motifs of the realm of the dead and the journey to this realm are as such inessential for the Orpheus tradition. On the contrary, they are among its inalienable elements, but the form assumed by them varies, and must therefore be regarded as secondary. The features essential for the Orpheus tradition in the accounts of the journey to the dead and the stay in the realm of the dead will be treated in the following.

An index that includes all the varying—and often enough mutually conflicting—elements entering in the variants of the tradition gives no clear picture of the main line of the narrative as this is consistently represented in the majority of versions. Instead of giving such an exhaustive list I shall therefore content myself here with a short resume of the pattern followed by the majority of the North American Orpheus narratives: A young man has lost his wife, and in his grief he resolves to follow her to the land of the dead and bring her home again. She is at first unwilling to let him accompany her on the journey, but finally yields. As a living person he finds it difficult to keep up with her, but with her help he at last reaches the realm of the dead. Here he is met with sympathy by the chief of the dead (or other higher being), and with the latter’s direct help or good will Orpheus is permitted to return with his wife. The dead are active at night-time when they devote themselves above all to dancing. The wife is seized during the dance and conducted to the land of the living, although she is reluctant and unwilling. A taboo, however, has been imposed on her husband which is valid during the journey home or for the period immediately thereafter. He unintentionally breaks the taboo and loses his wife, who must once more set out for the realm of shades.

The variations on the Orpheus motif are many, and not least a number of so-called oikotypes have been developed. Many of these oikotypes are so individual in character that they lead the narrative away, as it were, from its central theme. One is sometimes almost tempted to refer to the category of the Orpheus traditions narratives which, although they are strikingly reminiscent of the Orpheus story, do not quite conform with it; in one way or another they prove to be outside the Orpheus tradition as we have defined this here. Either these stories are constructed after the pattern of the Orpheus tradition (or after a similar pattern), but without containing its characteristic motifs (or its most characteristic motifs), or else they diverge in their structure from the Orpheus tradition but show one or some of its essential elements. To the former type belong a rather large number of stories concerning the journeys of legendary or historically known personages to the other world (the realm of the dead, the kingdom of heaven, etc.); to the latter may be referred, amongst others, various narratives concerning a seeking for lost relatives and friends concerning the restoration to life of deceased persons.

In some subsequent sections these narratives diverging from the Orpheus tradition will be presented in greater detail. A few words, however, must in this connection first be devoted to the types of narrative most nearly bordering on the Orpheus motif, viz, in the first place the stories of visits to the realm of the dead without the motif of the return to life of the deceased (Gayton: ‘Visits to the afterworld”), and in the second place the “revival stories” whose action does not in part take place in the realm of the dead.

As has already been mentioned, there are in North America numerous narratives concerning persons who have sojourned in the realm of the dead and succeeded in returning therefrom. Especially in north-western North America, where, as Gayton rightly remarks, “tales which deal with pursuit or resuscitation of the dead are common,” does one find a large number of oral traditions strikingly reminiscent of the Orpheus narrative —without being identical with this. There are always one or several of the main features of the Orpheus tradition which are missing. But also outside the Northwest culture one finds such stories reminding one of the Orpheus tradition. As an instance I will mention the classical account reproduced by Kohl of the Ojibway hunter who during a severe illness visited the realm of the dead. After many trials on his journey thither he arrived, and was happy at meeting his parents, especially his mother. But immediately thereafter he returned to the living, and one searches in vain for any desire to bring his beloved mother back to the land of the living.

In a way, the Orpheus story may be designated as a “revival story”. But it is here not a matter of an immediate, direct resuscitation of a dead person, a magical rebirth on the spot. No, the restoration of life takes the form of a slow process, which requires, inter alia, the journey of a living person to the world of the dead and his activity there. (This, as we shall discover later, is of importance for the psychological understanding of the origin of the tradition.) One should thus not refer to the category of the Orpheus narratives such “revival stories” as lack the important motif-complex of the journey to and the stay in the realm of the dead—however romantic the relation between the living person and the deceased who is resuscitated may otherwise be. Such tales as for example the story of the youth who was reunited with his deceased beloved in her burial tipi thus fall outside the frame of the Orpheus tradition, although they contain two of its most important motifs: the longing for a dear deceased and the restoration of the latter to life. “Revival stories” which do not contain the first-mentioned motif are of course without any interest in this connection.

Even with the firm delimitation of the Orpheus tradition undertaken here it may sometimes be difficult to decide whether a certain narrative should be referred to the Orpheus tradition or not; in some cases it may be necessary to speak of a narrative of Orpheus type. Thus the Mohave know, as Devereux expresses it, “a novelistic tale of the Orpheus type.” It contains—possibly—all the particular features which together form the Orpheus tradition; but it strikes us, when considered as a whole, as only a dull replica of the Orpheus narrative.

The story describes how a young woman, Young Virgin, abandons a much older husband and marries Snake-Soul, an attractive young man. Their marital happiness, however, is of short duration: two wizards, hired by the woman’s former husband, kill her with their evil eye. Snake- Soul is inconsolable. One morning he goes aboard his raft and floats down the Colorado River. He sees his deceased wife walking along on the shore abreast of the raft. Finally he falls into the water, checked by the pendant branch of a tree, and drowns. But much later a girl dwelling by the river finds his decayed corpse and salvages it, and from these remains there quickly grows up a youth. The girl takes him to the winter house and tells him to lie down there and not leave the place for four days, and further, in the event of his dead wife’s coming to summon him, not to touch her for four days. Snake-Soul lies down in the house as he has been bidden. He hears his wife making merry in a dance in the land of the dead, and longs to be reunited with her. Then at last he sees her visiting him, she begs him to come, but he resists her. On the third day, however, his resistance is broken. He tries to embrace her, but his arms pass right through her. She wishes to take him to the land of the dead (they are evidently both dead now). But a whirlwind separates them, and Snake- Soul is later turned into a snake (gopher snake).

Devereux seems to be right when of this tale he says that “it is probably a romanticized version of some concrete event, which, through a process of elaboration, eventually became blended with the Orpheus plot.” But has the transformation of the tale proceeded to the point at which it has become a real Orpheus legend? As I have remarked already, we have here all the constituent motifs, although in a weakened form: the man longs for his wife; he undertakes a journey which tends to be a seeking for the deceased (although perhaps the aim of the journey is not yet quite apparent to his conscious personality); he is reunited with his beloved in a land which in its character is identical with the realm of the dead (the world of psychic absence—Snake-Soul lies isolated for several days, it will be remembered, in a house, and presumably has visions there); he has been promised that she will be restored to him in life, but the breach of a taboo renders this impossible. There is no doubt but that the tale is of Orpheus type. Devereux even wants to refer to it as an Orpheus myth. And it is probably, in spite of all, most reasonable to classify it among the Orpheus narratives.

There are certain other tales which only in part manifest the features of the Orpheus tradition, but which will in the following nevertheless be referred to this. In the light of the careful delimitations undertaken in the foregoing such a disposition may appear strange. The reason for its adoption, however, is that the narratives in question seem in their fundamental structure to fall within the scope of the Orpheus tradition. They have, in other words, grown out of the same conditions as the more regular Orpheus tales, and they have developed in approximately the same direction as these. It is not impossible that some of them—e.g. the narratives on the Plateau and at Puget Sound concerning the culture hero’s wooing in the realm of the dead—have been developed from more complete Orpheus tales. They may at all events be regarded as rudimentary Orpheus traditions.

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