

The Shawnee

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The Shawnee were the first of the eastern North American tribes loosed from colonial grip. Tribes which had preceded them through the fire of expulsion and extinction in the coastal regions had either not survived or their remnants had been partly absorbed into European culture. Tribes who would later pass through similar crises came to acquire similar patterns of lifestyle, but never with the spirit of the Shawnee.¹ This paper will address the tribe through a focus on their origin, name groups, lifestyle, religion, political leadership, and the tribes most noted individuals: The Prophet and Tecumseh.

Origins and early movements are of significance in the archeology and ethnology of eastern North America.² The earliest references of the Shawnee pertain to single captives brought from beyond the frontier. Captives came to the Huron and Seneca from the southeast, to Virginia from the west, and to the southeast from the northwest. By captive triangulation, the Shawnee are determined to have come from, and reside in, the Ohio River Valley. Similar references of location also appear in the records of the Jesuits³ and the colony of Virginia.⁴

The Shawnee are an Algonkin-speaking tribe that is composed of five major divisions. These divisions possess a type of social organization that embraces many of the features characteristic of a sib system, but lacking in the usual sib units. In the place of either clans or gentes within each division, the Shawnee have six name groups. These are the turkey name group, which represent bird life, the turtle group that represents aquatic life, the rounded-feet name group representing carnivorous animals, and the horse group portraying the herbivorous

¹ John Witthoft and William A Hunter, "The Seventeenth Century Origins of the Shawnee," In *The American Society for Ethnohistory* Vol. 2, No. 1 (1955): 43. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/480687> (Accessed August 23, 2012).

² Ibid., 42.

³ A Jesuit was a member of the Society of Jesus, a Roman Catholic religious order engaged in missionary and educational work worldwide.

⁴ Ibid., 42-43.

animals. There is also a raccoon name group that represents pawed animals and the rabbit, which demonstrate a gentle peaceful nature. These groups are common to all divisions and each Shawnee belongs to a sect. Names given shortly after birth determine the sect.⁵

The consideration of personal names provides specific insight into the Shawnee cultural practice of the naming ceremony. Between one to nine days after a child is born, the father of the child asks two old men or two old women to come to his house on the evening of the baby's ninth day. These "name givers" may be related to the child or they may merely be family friends. It makes no difference in which name groups the givers belong. The father will ask them to consider the animals. How they act, how they move, etc. When they go to sleep the father asks them to dream about the name in some manner. The two individuals retire and offer prayers to the Creator during the night, because he owns all of the people and the names.⁶

On the morning of the tenth day, the women relatives of the child rise before daylight and prepare the naming breakfast. If the name givers are women they wash the child, but if they are men the mother cleans the newly born. With those actions, the naming ceremony is enacted. The mother sits holding the child and the two "name givers" stand. One of the name givers then speaks, presenting his or her name choice and the habits of the name group animal involved. Having finished, the second name giver does the same. Having heard both of the names offered the parents must choose the one that sounds the best. If the parents do not agree in the choice, the mother's opinion is the deciding factor. After careful deliberation, the father gives the name chosen. The mother gives the child to that name giver and the father hands the giver a short string of white, finely cut beads. The name giver addresses the Creator and presents him with the

⁵ C. F. Voegelin and E. W. Voegelin, "Shawnee Name Groups," In *American Anthropologist* Vol. 37, No. 4 (1935): 617. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/662645> (Accessed August 23, 2012).

⁶ *Ibid.*, 622-623.

name of the child. The giver repeats the name four times and ties the beads around the baby's neck. These are worn constantly until the string breaks, at which point they are picked up and saved. The parents thank the name giver and they all eat breakfast. It is important to note here that the ceremony is the same for both legitimate and illegitimate children.⁷

Information of the lifestyle of the Shawnee is attributed to the captives taken in by the Shawnee. The same portion of people that gave us their location reveals the intimate routines propelling day-to-day interactions. Dress is divided among the women and the men. The women dress wearing a calico shirt that extend a few inches below the waist and fasten at the bosom with a silver broach. A petticoat or a stroud was wrapped around the waist with a girdle that extended below the knees. Leggings of the same material were sewed up to fit the leg and left a border of two inches. Their outfit was completed with moccasins. Elaborate decoration were found throughout their dress wherever possible. Beads, ribbons and quills were favorite moccasin ornaments with ribbons and beads adorning the borders of leggings and petticoats. In addition, small tufts of deer hair were dyed red and frequently fastened on the leggings and moccasins themselves. Silver bracelets were favorite decorations of the wrists and arms.⁸

The dress of the Shawnee men was similar to that of the women. Added were a breechcloth and possibly a small round hat, with a smaller size being more fashionable. The need to show off their fashion was stronger in the men than it was in the women. Alongside the ornaments similar to those worn by the women, men wore large gorgets and silver medals on their chests. They also placed heavy silver pieces in their ears.⁹

⁷ Ibid., 625-626.

⁸ Dwight L. Smith, "Shawnee Captivity Ethnography," In *Ethnohistory* Vol. 2, No. 1 (1995): 32-33. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/480686> (Accessed August 23, 2012).

⁹ Ibid., 33.

Towns held various structures including huts, cabins, and council houses. Bark cabins were the permanent abodes of the Shawnee. Descriptions suggest that these cabins were twenty feet long and fourteen feet wide, with the sides and roof made of small poles covered with bark. The entrance was at the end of the cabin and a blanket hung in use as a door. Council houses were constructed in the same basic manner, with the only primary difference being size. It was described as fifty yards in length, twenty-five yards wide, and approximately sixteen feet high.¹⁰

All major decisions were made usually agreed upon in the council house. Length varied from issue to issue with any and all warriors being granted permission to attend. However, it was only the chiefs or head warriors, whose status was determined by the number of scalps and prisoners they had taken, could participate in the deliberations.¹¹

If the decision was reached to go to war, a dance was held for luck as well as to get the warriors participating in the mood and spirit. To prepare, a war pole was cut and its bark stripped. It was painted black with diagonal red strips. One end was then sharpened and placed into the ground, while the top end was adorned with scalps. Some of the warriors painted their faces black with red highlights around their eyes. Others reversed the color scheme. All warriors wore feathers in their hair. Appropriately adorned, the dance began with a “fell war-whoop”. They danced around the pole while they sang or chanted. By repeating these actions over and over, the warriors were able to work themselves into frenzy. Sometimes this ceremony was held over several nights in succession and lasted until daybreak.¹²

Complimenting Shawnee lifestyle were their religious practices. The characteristics, accomplishments, and position of the Shawnee creator as seen today are said to be a woman.

¹⁰ Ibid., 33.

¹¹ Ibid., 34.

¹² Ibid., 34.

She is known by various names but is simply referred to by most as “Our Grandmother.” She is credited with the first creation of the world, residing here while she created it, giving “birth” to the first population, an escape to an upper region during the time of the flood, and the creation of a new world after the flood waters descended. “Our Grandmother” is also known for the creation of the first man and woman of the new earth, the gifts of fire, tobacco, food, and other cultural items of the first couple, and residing in a world above the earth after her work of creation was finished.¹³

“Our Grandmother” is described as an anthropomorphic female with gray hair. At times, she is thought of as a giant that can pick up adult men. Her name is mostly frequently given as Papoothkwe, of Cloud Woman. She is said to speak in her own language, along with the language of the Shawnee. Her special language is said to only be intelligible to children who are four years of age or younger. However, as soon as the children learn to speak the Shawnee tongue, are unable to communicate with her. She resides in a large lodge house in heaven that is described as that of a typical Shawnee bark home. It is situated high above the Earth wherein “Our Grandmother” has a sky window that allows her to observe her earthly children. Heavenly bodies are comparable to suburbs around her home and the moon is considered close enough to her home to reflect her image on the night of a full moon.¹⁴

The Shawnee, within the confines of their religious beliefs, have various religious ceremonies. One of the most recognizable is the Green Corn Dance. The ceremony takes place sometime between mid-July and late August. The activities begin in the afternoon. The dance

¹³ C. F. and E. W. Voegelin, “The Shawnee Female Deity in Historical Perspective,” *In American Anthropologist* Vol. 46, No. 3 (July – September, 1944): 370. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/663434> (Accessed August 23, 2012).

¹⁴ James H. Howard, *Shawnee: The Ceremonialism of a Native American Tribe and Its Cultural Background* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1981), 165-166.

ground is swept clean, in a cross and quadrant fashion, by three women. Twelve men and women are then chosen to dance. Various melons and vegetables were placed in the center of the dance are alongside a large kettle of corn soup. With all of the food in place, the twelve women dancers take a seat. A priest then rises and delivers a long prayer. Six sets or episodes of dancing then follow. The women dance first, then the men and women dance together, then women alone, and so on. When the dancing ends, the melons, vegetables, and the large pot of soup are distributed. All of the Shawnee then retire to feast.¹⁵

Another noted religious ritual is the Buffalo Dance. The dance is the only major ceremony that is not attributed, in terms of origin, to “Our Grandmother”. The dance was held on a flat grassy spot just south of ceremonial ground used for dances such as the Green Corn Dance. In the center of the area, a fire crane made of a strong horizontal pole supported at either end by forked posts is erected. From this, two large kettles of corn mush are suspended. Cloth covers were tied over the openings of the kettles to keep out any dust that might be raised. West of this fire a canvas was spread on the ground to serve as seating for the “Buffaloes” or costumed male dancers. As the singers began the first set of songs, the “Buffaloes” were led to the canvas. After a while, they stood and walked in a single file around the fire crane and came to a stop facing the singers. The head “Buffalo” whooped four times and then the others followed suit. The “Buffalos” then began to dance behind their leader, stomping to imitate bison. About halfway around the grounds they male dancers joined a group of females that represented the bison cows. At the end of the song, they contingent walked around the fire crane one last time and yelled “N’yaweh” or Thanks. They were then seated. This was repeated three more times.¹⁶

¹⁵ Ibid., 267-269.

¹⁶ Ibid., 288-294.

One of the most interesting religious efforts of the Shawnee is the Football Game. The Shawnee hold many religious ceremonies including the Spring Bread Dance, Green Corn Dance, the Death Feast, and the Buffalo Dance. The most interesting of those practiced is Football. This was a ceremony to that pitted men against women. It assembled the faithful to prepare the field. The workers who prepare the field are the only ones permitted to play in the game. A selection of twelve cooks and twelve warriors are taken. White oak is then cut and bent into a circle. The football is then placed inside the hoop. It is taken into a tent where it is placed in the center and the women tie small buckskin packets representative of their crops to it. The women leave and the men then enter. They fasten packets with animal fur around the hoop. The hoop is then hung on an elm tree located west of the ceremonial ground. The hoop represents the earth with all of the necessities for substance located on it. The ball is representative of the Supreme Being. This is a way of ensuring a good year.¹⁷

Political leadership among the Shawnee was a social process through which individuals in the tribe were polarized. Their leadership “represented the process of focusing on individuals responding in a social situation”.¹⁸ Leaders possessed various qualities. The first is striking physical “personality”. This is to say that the individuals in charge were of a large stature and extremely strong. This was important for these leaders would be interacting with people who would be compelled to respond to such an overwhelming presence. The leaders of the Shawnee also had to possess not only bravery and patience but also the ability to control the fortunes and command the respect of the “community” that is governed. Another interesting point of leadership is the dominance of positive emotional attitudes. These included kindness, generosity,

¹⁷ Ibid., 241-245.

¹⁸ Jessie Bernard, “Political Leadership Among North American Indians,” In *American Journal of Sociology* Vol. 34, No. 2 (1928): 298, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2765603> (Accessed August 23, 2012).

humanity, hospitality, and magnanimity. Dignity is attributed to the characteristics as well, for it is closely linked to the leaders striking physical appearance.¹⁹

Among the history and the peoples grouped among the Shawnee, two individuals stand apart. These two men are the Prophet and his Brother Tecumseh. The brothers emerged to positions of leadership during a period of great stress, not only for the Shawnee but also for Eastern Native Americans in general. White hunters were trespassing onto Native lands to take game that was by the tribes, for in this, in early half of the nineteenth century, game in the eastern woodlands was becoming scarce. In addition, the fur trade had declined leaving many warriors hard-pressed to provide for their families in a manner and quality that they had done in the past. Losses were extremely large on the Native side of “American” society. Frustrated by this, many Shawnee turned to frontier whiskey to elevate their problems and sorrows. Once proud warriors fought and quarreled with kin, while others sat in their lodges, unaware of the changes consuming the world around them. Overwhelmed by this chaos, the Shawnee pondered the cause of their issues. This produced a man known as Lalawethika.²⁰

He had been born in 1775 on the Mad River in Eastern Ohio. He was abandoned at four years of age and was raised by his sister. He had two older brothers, Chikaskia and Tecumseh. Lalawethika was never an excellent hunter or warrior. During his adolescence, he became an alcoholic. In this stupor, he experienced a vision that forever changed his life. He claimed that the Master of Life had shown him both an Indian paradise and a hell that awaited for sinful tribes members. From that point forward, he was no longer known by his Lalawethika, but by

¹⁹ Ibid., 303-305.

²⁰ R. David Edmunds, “Tecumseh, The Shawnee Prophet, and American History: A Reassessment,” In *The Western Historical Quarterly* Vol. 14, No. 3 (1983):262-265, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/969620> (Accessed August 23, 2012).

Tenskwatawa. The name translated to the “Open Door”, symbolizing his new role as a holy man destined to lead his people to paradise.²¹

In the following months, he received many other visions and expanded his teachings of deliverance. He claimed he was appointed by the Great Spirit to reclaim the Indians from bad habits and teach them to live in peace with all of mankind. Newly named, The Prophet tried to revitalize some portions of traditional tribal culture. He asked followers to return to communal lifestyles and to only use the food, implements, and dress of their forefathers. The Prophet was particularly suspicious of tribesmen who held religious beliefs different from his own. These men were suspected of witchcraft. He preached that unless they repented, they would be destroyed.²²

The new faith soon spread to tribes outside of the Shawnee culture, who were unable to adjust to new social changes. Warriors from the Delaware and Wyandot tribe were traveling to Ohio to the Prophet’s new village in Greenville. There the Prophet converted the visitors and sent them back to their homes to spread their new ideologies. Unable to understand this movement, Americans believed that Tenskwatawa was merely a figurehead controlled by Shawnee chiefs. Several groups of Americans visited the Prophet’s village and determined that he was the leader of the new movement. He was charged with being a British agent operating in American territory, intent upon raising tribes against the United States.²³

The large numbers of Indians who went to see the Prophet alarmed settlers. This pressed The Prophet to establish a new village on the Tippecanoe River in Indiana, which would come to

²¹ Ibid., 265-266.

²² Ibid., 267-268.

²³ Ibid., 268-271.

be known as Prophetstown. Tenskwatawa finally convinced the United States that he and his followers were friends. However, the friendship was too fragile to last. The Treaty of Fort Wayne was signed in September of 1809 and ended any presence of cooperation. Tenskwatawa and his now stood opposed to American expansion. Here Tecumseh entered the annals of history.²⁴

Tecumseh saw that the religious emphasis of this brother could no longer strengthen the Native coalition. Therefore, during the summer, he visited various villages in Illinois and then began a larger initiative to travel and emphasize a political and military solution to the Indian's problems. He preached that all tribesmen should adhere to his brother's religion, abandon their chiefs who remained friendly to the United States and unite under him. Therefore, for two years, 1810 and 1811, Tecumseh traveled extensively among Natives.²⁵

During this time, Tecumseh became the "efficient man". He slowly eclipsed his brother's leadership and took the position as his own. Parties of warriors recruited by Tecumseh temporarily joined the village at Prophetstown. Tecumseh used this as a base to unite the tribes. The Prophet no longer remained dominant, but he continued to exercise considerable influence. Tecumseh's efforts were completely unraveled at the Battle of Tippecanoe in 1811, where American forces led by William Henry Harrison defeated the Native force. Tecumseh tried to revive his efforts, but his attempt was short lived. He was killed on October 5, 1813 at the Battle of the Thames.²⁶

²⁴ Ibid., 271-273.

²⁵ Ibid., 274.

²⁶ Ibid., 274-275.

The Prophet survived the war. He was exiled to Canada in response to both his and his brother's actions. He did however return to the United States, but was removed to the west with the remaining eastern tribes. In 1836, he died an inglorious death in Kansas.²⁷

Proceeded by those who were fed to the fire in the coastal regions, many of whom did not survive or were scattered and overwhelmed by European culture, and followed by those who would pass through similar lifestyle changes, the Shawnee charged gallantly forward into an advancing sea of Americans that forever immortalized their spirit. The tribe is remembered and revered for various reasons. This paper has attempted to address their origins, lifestyle, religion and political leadership. The Prophet Tenskwatawa, and his brother Tecumseh, have been briefly examined as well. Today, the Shawnee are divided among three sects: the Absentee-Shawnee, the Eastern Shawnee Tribe of Oklahoma and the Shawnee Tribe, those of which were formally categorized as part of the Cherokee nation. The tribe boasts approximately 7,500 members and their spirit still thrives.

²⁷ Ibid., 275.

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