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Marie Norris's Interpretations of Fifty of Gatschet's Klamath Chants and Incantations

ROGER WEAVER

The "Incantation Songs of the Klamath Lake People,"¹ recorded by Albert S. Gatschet, are a particular challenge to anyone who would understand them, for they generally do not exceed one line and often seem obscure in their references. Moreover, as Gatschet presents them, there is little to suggest why they were important to the Klamaths.

Over and over in reading Gatschet's transcriptions of these chants we face a mystery. How were they used? Are they fragments of longer incantations, or were they uttered as folk-wisdom in everyday conversation? Who spoke them, under what conditions and what were they referring to? The fact that the answers to these questions are forgotten (or unlearned) by the majority of the descendants whose ancestors used them forces one to alternative methods of understanding the sayings. The method I chose was to find someone with years of thoughtful learning and living in the Klamath area, an intelligent person sensitive to the cultural elements and interested in preserving them.

I enlisted the help of Marie Norris, Klamath, whose age, experience and knowledge of the language made her particularly suited to the interpretation.² Since I was working not far from her home in the summer of 1979, I drove to see her and to ask if my interpretations of the chants were correct. She asked for my copies of Gatschet's transcriptions, and after several months she sent me her interpretations of the chants.

While the interpretations do not reflect the original speakers, or the conditions under which the chants were uttered, they are

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valuable for their contributions to our knowledge of the Klamaths. Some unlock geographical references and afford glimpses of rich metaphoric imagination. Furthermore these interpretations were acceptable to someone with a lifetime in the Klamath culture. She stressed that other interpretations were possible, and this coincides with the insistence of the child "Mary," Gatschet's original informant.³ Marie was conscientious because I had promised to pass on what she gave me and to teach others. I offer them in that spirit, and out of respect for who she was, knowing they reflect her gifts for concision, directness, insight and humor.

I present the first fifty of her interpretations, along with her accompanying notes when she sent them. The English translation from Gatschet is followed by Marie's interpretation. The Klamath language (which she knew how to speak) originals, as transcribed by Gatschet, can be found in his volume.

10/31/79

Roger:

Here are the songs. I hope you will understand that these are my own interpretations of the songs. As I mentioned somewhere in my notes that we all think different. I came to my conclusions by thinking back about some of the things I had heard during my lifetime.

The songs without words I am sending back to you as there is nothing we can make out of them, they are nothing more than chanting. There were one or two that I could recognize the chant. Sometime when we are together I will sing one for you. . . .

1. Introductory song:

I sing, I sing, I sing (in chorus).

2. Song, reference unknown:

Blown off! the plume-crest has disappeared from me!

I walk in shame, which leaves no room for pride.

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3. Song of the wind:
Who, I wonder, is blowing out of my mouth?
The disease is emanating from my mouth.
 Do the words I speak come from within my heart, or are they the words of the idle gossip of others?
4. The conjurer's song:
What do I remove from my mouth?
The disease I extract from my mouth.
What is the thing I take out?
It is the disease I am taking out.
 When the words I speak come from within my heart, they remove the disease of idle gossip from my mouth.
5. Song of the woodchuck:
I am descending into the ground.
 Slowly I am dying, going back to the earth from whence I come.
6. Little girl's song:
In quill-fringed buckskin dressed,
In porcupine-fringed buckskin dressed.
 Proudly I sing of my fine dress.
7. Song of the *washpálaks*-fox:
Long and slim I am, long and slim I am.
 I have kept my body well.
8. Song of the fire-mantle:
In fire-flames I am enveloped.
 I am very angry.
9. Song of the *tuákish*-crane
I stand upon the rim of my nest.
 I am ever aware of all things that surround me, and of my commitments and of my values.
10. Song of the blind medicine-girl:
I search the ground with hands, find there the feathers of the yellow hammer and devour them.

I look for wisdom and through my power spirit the yellow-hammer I find it. Note: Be aware that she is not blind of sight but rather of wisdom as a medicine girl she will need this wisdom to help her people. [sic]

11. Another song of the same:

*Quick! make ye eyes for me!
Give me that wisdom now.*

12. Bird's song:

As a head only, I roll around.

My heart and my head set the values that lead me through life.

13. Song, reference unknown:

What am I? What am I?

What is the purpose of my being on this earth?

14. Song, reference unknown:

This round thing I hold in my hand.

This could be a handgame song as sung by a gambler who has been successful in his gambling. Because of his winning streak he is making fun of his opponents by singing praise to the bones that he holds. He could be saying, "Why are the bones working so well for me and not for you?"

15. Song of the long-tailed black marten:

I the black marten, I travel around this land.

Could be the marten speaking as the younger brother of *Gmukumps*, the Creator, saying: "I am everywhere and ever watchful."

16. Song of the skunk:

*In the north wind I dance around, tail spread, festive
and gay*

In a troubled land I walk in happiness.

17. Chorus song:

What do I suck out? The disease I am sucking out.

Through my mouth my power spirit will take sickness from your body.

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18. Song of the boards:
Lumber-boards are rattling.
The shaking of the trees tells of the coming storm.
19. Song of the lizard:
Lo! thus I the lizard stick my head out.
Ho, I am daring and brave, afraid of nothing.
20. Song, reference unknown:
The north wind has followed me.
I am very cold inside there is no warmth within my heart.
[sic]
21. Song of the black mouse:
*Through what do I pass with my paws?
My paws glide over the hair of the disease.*
Working through my hands my power spirit will take away
all of the disease.
22. Song of the washpálaks-fox:
Crazed I am wandering
I walk about in anger. I cannot think right.
23. Song of the weasel:
I am squealing, I am squalling.
Hear my cry for help.
24. Song of the dog:
*I the dog am straying,
In the north wind I am straying.*
Ashamed and in sadness I wander like a dog cold and alone.
25. Song, reference unknown:
The storm gust dashes right on me.
There is a coldness within my heart and soul. I walk in fear.
26. Song, reference unknown:
Heavy hailstones I possess.
The power spirit that I possess is strong (heavy).

27. Song, reference unknown:

I am shivering! The wind blows down on me!

I am afraid, a coldness that I do not understand surrounds me.[sic]

28. Song of the bug:

I the bug, I bite and suck.

This song could be in reference to a spring near Rocky Point where the Klamaths went to lie in the water for the cure of skin blemishes such as scabs from the chicken pox and other skin ailments. In the spring lived the small black water bugs who would eat into the blemishes and it was believed that they would suck out the poison from the sores. Hence: "I the bug will heal you."

29. Song of the mink:

I am swimming out while the south wind blows.

I go to prepare for the coming of the heavy snows.

30. Song of the young silver-fox:

The young red fox I follow up.

I want that woman.

31. The incantation sings:

I the song I am walking here.

I am the song of your spirit power and I am here with you.

32. Fox's song:

I am blowing air from my flanks.

I am travelling swiftly.

33. Song of the *tuákish*-crane:

Tuánxî, tuánxî, tuánxî . . . nû. (untranslated)

I cry out in sadness.

34. Songs, forming refrains to song No. 33: (untranslated chants)

This is nothing other than a chant which has no meaning. In Indian songs they are used in between [sic] the words much as in the refrain of the Whiteman's songs.

35. Song of the disease:

*What thing do I blow around?
The disease I am blowing around in the air.*

I am blowing you away and out from the air where you have caused much sickness.

36. Song of the grizzly bear's cub:

*On the mountain top I am peeping out,
Of the grizzly bear I am the child.*

"The grizzly bear is my power spirit and from his home on the mountain top he protects me." Note: I have treated #36 as a song used by the Indian doctors. The grizzly bear was long ago considered to be the most powerful of all animals. I hear the Indian doctor singing about the power of his medicine spirit, and the safety. [He] feels protected by that spirit.

37. Song of the female wolf:

I, the she-wolf, am rolling against (a tree?)

I have corrected my wrongdoings and I am happy.

38. Spoken by the conjurer while manipulating: (untranslated chant)

There is no meaning to these words that make any sense. In fact they are not words, only chants that are used by the medicine men as they work on a sick person. [sic]

39. Song of the *tchiwitiitikaga*-bird:

Fearfully the wind blows underneath here.

I feel that I am being threatened and I do not feel safe in my own home.

40. Song of the blind girl:

*In the fog I am straying blind,
All over the earth I am wandering.*

I lack the wisdom to find my true self.

41. Song of the water-bug: (untranslated chant)

Since there is no interpretation of this song, and (as I have remarked) the spelling of the Klamath words by S. Gatschet were very confusing, again I believe that this song refers to the water bug that I talked about in song 28. The words as

written are similar to the Klamath words *ut ni tchya* which means "Now I am split open." So the song could be saying, "I have sucked the poison of your sickness from your body into mine and now I am split open to render it harmless and release it."

42. Song of the grizzly bear:

I am scratching up the ground.

I walk in anger tearing up whatever gets in my way.

43. Song of the little gray *tchikass*-bird:

I am wafted off from the mountain.

Because of past actions I can no longer sit proudly among my people.

44. Song of the *sko'ks* or spirit:

Reduced to mere bones, I rattle through the air.

I am no longer among the living. Note: *skoks*, meaning ghost in Klamath.

45. Sung by the disease, found to live in water:

Breath I am emitting.

From under the water I send the sickness by putting my germs in the spring.

46. Song of the grizzly bear:

I have five water springs and [all] my springs are dry.

As a young man my senses were keen, now in my old age I have become feeble.

47. Song of the black snake:

I the black-spotted snake am hanging here.

I as a dark cloud hang over you. [sic]

48. Conjuror's own song:

I, the earth, am resounding like the roll of thunder.

My power is strong and I am known by all people.

49. Bird's song:

I flutter along the ground (while walking).

I walk through life trying to live a good life but sometimes when I disobey my teachings I stumble.

50. Song of the grizzly bear:

Yaínalam shulúyualsh (untranslated)

If you are to follow Gatschet's note found on p. 161, treating this as another rock where the Klamaths went to pray for healing, the song says, "Go there to my home on top of the Mountain to seek healing."

On April 17, 1982 Marie Norris was honored with seven other women for their contributions to Oregon history by the Women on the Oregon History Committee of the Oregon Lung Association at a banquet in Portland. Since only one of the recipients was living—the time-span covered approximately 100 years prior to statehood to 1920, the year of Marie's birth—we were proud to be asked to be among those who witnessed this long-overdue honor. Unfortunately for us, she died in August 1981.

NOTES

1. Gatschet, Albert S., *Contributions to North American Ethnology, Vol. II, Part 1, The Klamath Indians of Southwestern Oregon*. Washington, D.C., 1890, pp. 153-197 ff.
2. Norris, Marie, *Along Klamath Waters*, (unpublished MS. at the time of her death in August 1981. An autobiography, it records much cultural information and is interwoven with legends, one of which, according to Theodore Stern, has yet to be published. It is a tale of a man who quarrels with an owl and who is punished).
3. Gatschet, pp. 159-160.