

RELIGION IN MOHAVE SOCIAL STRUCTURE¹

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One of the most distinctive characteristics of the Lower Colorado River culture area is the existence of tribal organization and a strong sense of tribal unity. The Mohave tribe, one of the groups in this area, illustrates this characteristic clearly. Kroeber (1925) states that the Mohave think in tribal terms as distinguished from the village solidarity of most of the nearby Californian peoples. Devereux (1939, p. 100) also notes the "earnest and intense national feeling of the Mohave." The accounts of early explorers indicate that this tribal organization is not a recent phenomenon and provide justification for assuming that it existed prior to white contact. The existence of Mohave tribal organization is based upon a number of factors such as language, territory, mythology, ceremonial organization, clan beliefs, and external relations. The purpose of this paper, which is written in the ethnological present, is to describe the way religious beliefs contribute to the existence of a strong sense of tribal solidarity.

The Mohave consist of about 2,000 to 2,500 people living in the valley of the Colorado river near the intersection of the present-day boundaries of Nevada, Arizona, and California. The people are scattered throughout the valley according to a pattern similar to the open country neighborhoods found in modern United States rural areas. Subsistence is derived from agriculture, fishing, gathering, and hunting. Agriculture is made possible by the flooding of the river which inundates a narrow plain and provides ample moisture for raising crops in a manner reminiscent of the ancient Egyptians who depended upon the overflow of the Nile. Large annual harvests of mesquite and screw beans also form an important part of the Mohave diet. Fishing is important during several seasons; hunting is of minor importance during the entire year. According to the best possible evaluation of the aboriginal situation, Mohave subsistence is quite secure, probably more so than for almost all of the neighboring tribes not living in the valley.

The origin myth is one of the most important aspects of Mohave religion. The scientist recognizes mythology as *one* of the important sources of tribal morale but to a Mohave mythology furnishes *the* definitive statement of his position in the tribe and in the universe as a whole. The origin myth provides the answer to all questions concerning affiliation and orientation, far outweighing any other considerations in the minds of the Mohave themselves. Kroeber (1939, p. 42) states that the culture is characterized by "a religion which largely suppressed visible ritual and symbolism and substituted emphasis on song acquired by quasi-shamanistic dreaming, or pseudo-dreaming, within a highly conventionalized mythological pattern." When one asks a Mohave about almost any aspect of his culture, he says, "First you must understand how it happened in the beginning", and then he tells the origin myth with special emphasis upon the subject of inquiry.

Very briefly, the origin myth describes the way in which the Great Spirit, *matavily*, created the land and the people, who were identical with animals in the early history of the world. The first death and the first cremation occurred when the creator was bewitched by his daughter. Then *mastamxo*, the son of the Great Spirit, assumed leadership. He created the river and the plants for the people to use. Later he outlined the social organization of the tribe, giving certain powers to certain people—some were to be shamans, some warriors, some scalpers, and so on for all the statuses. When he had finished his work, he said, "This is all

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yours and it will always be yours as long as you are dreamers." *Mastamxo* then changed his name, went downstream, and transformed himself into a fish hawk.

The origin myth clearly is an expression of the basic philosophical premises of Mohave culture. It is a fatalistic belief that all behavior is determined by the patterns established by the creators. The emphasis upon dreaming is very strong, running through almost all aspects of Mohave life. All power is received by dreaming, and it is the identical power which was given by *mastamxo* in the beginning. This results in a static conception of the universe. In each generation certain individuals automatically occupy the statuses which make up the social structure, but the structure itself remains unchanged forever. A belief in this mythology is one of the important sources of tribal morale.

All of the important officials of the tribe are sacred specialists in the sense that they derive their power directly from the creators by means of dream experiences. The major statuses recognized are shaman, of which there are several specialized varieties, scalper, custodian of the scalps, war chief, counsellor, and chief. The latter is a status which probably appeared after white contact. The shamans are concerned with sickness, both as witches who produce illness and as curers. A shaman first experiences a power-dream while in the foetal stage. These dreams are considered to be important determinants of personality, and the parents and relatives watch the behavior of the child from birth in order to detect clues to his future temperament or occupation. During infancy and childhood power-dreams recur but they are not remembered until late adolescence. A shaman does not start to practice until adulthood when he demonstrates his power by causing a close relative to become ill. Then later he attempts to cure the first occurrence of the disease over which he has power, thus insuring final public recognition of his status.

Shamans frequently cause their loved ones to die by means of witchcraft. The reason for this unusual behavior is that those people bewitched by a shaman form his "flock" in the afterworld. When they die such people are segregated in a particular place in the afterworld to await the coming of their bewitcher. However, people undergo several metamorphoses in the afterworld, eventually winding up as charcoal on the desert. If the shaman lives too long the people he has bewitched may move on to another stage before he can join them. This appears to explain the fact that shamans frequently make no effort to conceal their witchcraft, boasting of their deeds to the relatives of their victims. These relatives sometimes attempt to kill the shaman, especially in epidemics, and he makes no attempt to flee even if warned. This attitude of indifference to death is probably related to the fact that a shaman cannot wait too long to die if he wishes to join his flock in the afterworld.

The war chiefs and counsellors also experience power-dreams during infancy and childhood, but they are not revealed until the time to assume their positions in late adolescence or adulthood. These functionaries are largely secular specialists although they receive their power from the creators through dreaming. The same pattern applies to the chief, although there is a hereditary element in this status.

The *axwe satumac* performs several functions, only one of which, scalper, is used as the English label for this status. This person is a specialized shaman. He is a major functionary in the mourning ceremony which is one of the main Mohave rituals. This ceremony consists chiefly of a ritual enactment of warfare held in honor of several dead warriors. The scalper, who directs the mourning ceremony, also goes on war expeditions. During the battle he removes the scalps of fallen enemies and takes charge of female prisoners if any are captured. While the expedition is homeward bound, the scalper "tames" the scalps and kneads them to make them pliable.

The function of the scalper in connection with warfare, the mourning ceremony, and the welfare of the tribe makes him an important religious official. The crux

of his position is his power over the "enemy sickness." The Mohave believe that contact with people outside of the tribe is dangerous since it may produce this disease. This danger pervades the scalps of slain enemies before they are tamed by the scalper, as well as the captive females brought back by a war party. It is a danger in any intimate contact such as sexual intercourse or eating with anyone outside the tribe. The scalper, being a shaman, has power over this disease and can cure people afflicted with it. The scalps, as will be described later, bring beneficial power to the tribe after they have been tamed. The scalper, then, contributes to tribal welfare by his power to tame the scalps and to cure the "enemy sickness." He also directs one of the most important Mohave ceremonies. Scalper is one of the most important religious statuses, but not the most important one because of the ambivalent attitude of the tribe resulting from the fact that the scalper is also a shaman, which means that he can practice witchcraft.

The concept of "enemy sickness" reveals much about Mohave feelings of tribal solidarity. Their beliefs concerning tribal affiliation express a kind of "racist" philosophy. All members of the tribe are "one folk" connected with the creators by biological descent. Purity of the blood has always been a primary consideration. They have an intense interest in "increasing the tribe" which is a manifestation of the desire to perpetuate the biological bonds with the creators and to insure the continued existence of a desirable way of life. The "enemy sickness" is phrased in physiological terms. As Devereux says (1935, p. 81), "The Mohave assume that every other tribe or race has a stronger blood than their own . . ." and that any intimate contact will produce the dreaded disease.

When the scalper returns with the war party he turns the scalps over to the *kwaxot*, or custodian of the scalps, who is the principal Mohave religious leader. The custodian of the scalps prepares a great celebration in honor of the returning warriors. The people come from all over the valley for the singing, dancing, feasting, and ritual that mark the return of a war party. The custodian places the scalps on a pole which is given to a woman who dances with them. At certain junctures in the dancing the scalps are raised high in the air and all the people shout and throw dust upon them. During the feasting some of the corn and beans is thrown to the scalps. After the feast the custodian of the scalps places them in large pottery ollas for safekeeping.

The custodian of the scalps then addresses the throng, urging the young people to marry and have "lots of children so that the tribe will grow." He urges them to enjoy themselves sexually, which they have been doing since the first day of the ceremony and which they continue doing until the people return to their homes. During the victory celebration a family with a virgin daughter—virginity is rare even among very young girls—offers her to a young man who has achieved prestige by killing his first enemy. The female captives are given by the custodian of the scalps to some of the old men who need wives. Young men are afraid to take these women because of the "enemy sickness" but the old men are glad to have them since they have lived a long time and do not have long to live under any circumstances. The scalp ceremony, with the custodian of the scalps as the chief functionary, represents a close connection between patterns of warfare, religion, and tribal fertility and continuity. The custodian keeps the scalps, examining them periodically and washing their hair with mud when necessary. Each time they are washed the whole tribe gathers for a celebration similar to the one just described. These affairs serve to bring the people together and to reinforce their sense of tribal unity. The scalps are dramatic symbols of tribal power and their treatment and display calls forth a high degree of social euphoria. The young people are expected to establish sexual relationships at these events, and the custodian of the scalps constantly encourages them to increase the tribe by having children and lectures to them about marriage and their duties to the tribe. The symbolism of the scalps is not as yet completely clear. They apparently bring good luck and

power to the younger generation and seem to be connected with increase of the tribe. It is apparent that they are awesome symbols of tribal power and that the status of custodian of the scalps, the chief religious office, forms the nexus of two great themes of Mohave life, warfare and tribal fertility.

The occupants of the statuses described above are the people who have experienced major power-dreams. A number of men may simultaneously fill the position of shaman, counsellor, and war chief, but there is only one scalper and one custodian of the scalps in the entire valley. The occupants of these major statuses do not actively seek their power, as evidenced by the fact that some of the dreams occur prior to or immediately after birth. There is no idea that power can be achieved by asking for it or earning it or torturing oneself for it—it comes automatically to certain people. Almost all the members of the tribe have some minor-power dreams designed to give facility in agriculture or fishing or hunting, but these are in the nature of good luck dreams, and are not as specific as the major power-dreams. Mohave religion, as distinguished from most religions, does not contain rituals designed to increase the crops or insure the adequate flooding of the river. No attempt is made to enhance the food supply by religious or magical means. This fact may be connected with the relative adequacy of the food supply mentioned earlier.

The relationship of Mohave mythology and religion to tribal organization and morale may be summarized as follows: The origin myth defines the social structure of the tribe. The people are related to the creators by direct biological descent. They are also part of the tribe by virtue of their need for the services of certain people occupying the statuses originated by the creators. According to Mohave premises the individuals who fill these major statuses are indispensable to the welfare of the tribe as a whole. Through the occupants of these statuses the Mohave come into contact with the sacred in terms of a nationalistic religion. The Gods are tribal Gods, and the specialists are tribal representatives. If they do not dream, the duties which *mastamxo* prescribed cannot be carried out and the tribe is unable to function adequately. The people are dependent upon the individuals who have the power to fill the essential statuses. The average Mohave does not request the aid of the supernatural, nor does he give thanks for his success and happiness. There is no direct personal relationship with the supernatural for the average Mohave, but he is in contact with the sacred by virtue of his membership in the tribe. The tribal officials do those things which are essential for the welfare of all, thus forming, through their unsought dreams, a link with the creators. This relationship is explicitly recognized by informants who say that the "common people," meaning those who do not have important power-dreams, "do not try to do anything, but just depend on those who have good dreams." Religion and mythology, therefore, clearly reinforce the strong sense of tribal unity characteristic of the Mohave by channeling supernatural contacts through a series of indispensable tribal officials who automatically receive the power necessary for the existence of the people.

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