RC-Background

The People of the Earth I Love

I suppose it all began on the Christmas of my fifth year. The house was all darkened at 4 AM as I descended the staircase to see what Santa had brought. The living room was all-aglow with the old bubbling Christmas candle lights on the tree shimmering off glittering ornaments. There under the tree was an Indian drum, painted blue with a Cheyenne buffalo dancer holding a bow in his right hand and an arrow in his left. It was an image of power and mystery. Power because the Cheyenne was dressed *like* a buffalo or was it that the Cheyenne was *really* a buffalo? The image struck me as my first encounter with the mysterious. Who was he?

Much later I explored this world with my father who had grown up on the panhandle of Oklahoma, also known as Indian Territory. The United States government decided the best way to extinguish Native American ways of life and traditions was to throw all of “them” together in the same reservation. Consequently, my father had Chocktaw, Chicashaw and Cheyenne boys and girls as his friends. As he grew up with them he realized that their world was different from the sod house world of his German immigrant father who would play the waltzes of Johann Strauss as reminders of his heritage on Sundays before he rode the range looking for stray cattle and mending fences the rest of the week.

As my father grew up intimate with his Cheyenne friends when he was about twelve he was invited to join in the Sundance. The local Baptist church or Holy Rollers would tell of Jesus, the first martyr to the faith, and then after having atoned for the sins of Man he ascended to heaven. So in the Eucharist everyone was supposed to drink of his blood and eat of his flesh to become spotless like him the rest of the week. Of course there was always the saloon at Slapout down the range where this promise could easily be undone for two-bits! The Cheyenne boys had another story of atonement that was much more direct and visceral. They told my father that they were on this reservation because of some thing they had done to anger the Great Spirit. In order to directly atone for their transgressions they had the Sundance. The federal government didn’t like them to do this. The Cheyenne reasoned that the federal government felt that if they properly atoned then the Great Spirit would smile on them and bring back the buffalo and their old ways of life and undo the federals.

So my father became a blood-brother to his Cheyenne friends and agreed to participate as a had been at their peak, a time when all the nomadic hunting bands could gather. It is not thought that the timing of the Sundance correlated with any specific astronomical or calendrical event.

The Sun was thought to be an agent of the Great Mystery (*wakan tanka*), and was known as a *wakan akanta* (superior divinity) whose name was *Wi.* The "probationer" or dancer volunteered to partake in the ritual in order to help put himself and his band in harmony with the cosmos. (Lincoln, 1994.) It was a case of putting the microcosm in accord with the macrocosm.

Central to this cosmology is a vertical *axis mundi*, connecting the microcosm (the probationers, the dancers) and the macrocosm the Sun, the cosmos. This microcosmic-macrocosmic axis is symbolized by a large cottonwood pole erected at the center of the circular dance ground. The pole is adorned with flags and artifacts of six colors, representing the six cardinal directions (east, west, north, south, above, below.) The dancing ground is surrounded by an arbor covered with boughs with an opening to the east, where the dancers and the Sun enter each day. (Crummett, 1993.)

Each dancer’s chest is pierced with bone pegs connected to a rawhide rope that is tied to the pole. After ceremonially dancing, the dancer runs from the periphery of the circle to the center and back three times, building up speed. After the third flight, the dancer runs with such force that the pegs are torn out of his chest, ripping free from his flesh. This part of the ritual symbolizes that at birth, people are "torn" from the Great Mystery and from their connection to the cosmos: “the people” are dependent on the Sun for the heat and light that it gives. Their physical action is in recognition of this visceral fact that they have sacrificed for the Sun and they hope to have atoned for any injustices they and “the people” have committed (Farrer, 1992).

This experience heard from my father put me in accord to try to understand the Native American’s way of life. I studied Cheyenne tales from George Bird Grinnell and the Cheyenne Dictionary by Presbyterian minister Rudolf Petter housed in the Newberry library and now on microfilm and copied in facsimile: both were my companions in studying the Cheyenne ways of life. Then I happened to meet Frank Vizralick, a native of Bismarck North Dakota who learned of my interest in Indian lifeways. He introduced me to Alan Woolworth who was a world expert of the Sioux of the upper Middle West and chief archaeologist of the Minnesota Historical Society. We became fast friends and I stayed with Alan at his home each year for a month for ten years. We explored all the nooks and crannies of Sioux life and trails and complied an extensive report on the subject, which is still ongoing despite Alan’s passing in 2014.

The result was that I expanded our original research to cover selected indigenous peoples of North, Central and South America in my studies and travels, uncovering unexpected connections at every turn. This was the source of my developing over a decade a collection of selected Native American artifacts with detailed descriptions of each on the way.

In quite a similar way I found Don Marshall at the Peabody Essex Museum. I had an interest in Hawaii and the Pacific Islands from studying their cultures from their connection they had with Andover Newton Theological School from which I graduated with the old B.D. degree. Andover Newton was one of those divinity schools which provided ministers to the Islands in the early nineteenth century. In fact the Congregational church in Kailua had an Andover Newton graduate as its minister and they sing in Hawaiian from the translated version of the Congregational Hymns that we have in the States.

Don was inspiring in the way that he suggested that my research should take. He said “Follow the trail of the adzes these people use and you will learn a lot.” In my research I discovered the quadrilateral adzes of the Hawai’ian Islands and their predecessors on Samoa and Tonga but I also discovered the trilateral adzes from Nuku Hiva in the Marquesas. And then I discovered a trilateral adze in Kohal district on the big Island, perhaps a clue f the first settlement of the Marquesans in their voyage to Hawaii! This was my beginning to explore the Pacific and its cultures and the routes of migration to distant island from Southeast Asia.

Then I so happened that my wife, Susan, was the chairperson of the annual lecture at MIT and its subject was Big Dams. In the turmoil of the Chinese decision to build the Three Gorges Dam on the Yangtze voices pro and con were mounting. As a representative of the con position she invited Dai Qing who was an internationally known advocate of small dams. As we grew to know Dai Qing we explored my interest in archaeology, and she suggested that we visit China. I had participated in a summer seminar at Princeton where we had studied the Silk Road, and I knew that this was the trail I wanted to follow. So I suggested to Dai Qing an itinerary that would explore the ancient track in Zinxiang Autonomous Province. She was excited and we flew to meet her in Beijing. At a dinner party after I had shown he my research she reached for her cell phone and called te head of Chinese Archaeology Department Gai Shanlin who said that we should fly to Urumqi where he would take care of all the introductions. The die had been cast and throughout the summer in Mr. Ran’s car and staying at the military hospital in Urumqi (where they had a lockdown every evening) we ventured forth into the Xinjiang countryside in search of ancient sites and petroglyphs with the help of Dodo, our guide, and Su Bayhai’s book on Xinjiang Rock Art and Gai Shanlin’s introductions.

This was another thread that has led me to the exploration of Chinese history from the most ancient times and to the development of a collection of Chinese bronzes and mirrors and ceramics that encapsulate the vast changes that have taken place from the eras of China being open to the outside world to its being closed.