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Indian Traditions

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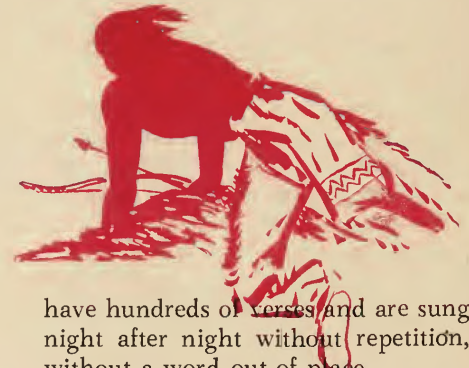
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Abstract: A number of ancient religious Indian traditions are rehearsed, including accounts of the creation, the great deluge, a large tower, the scattering of nations, ancient writings, sacred stones, transoceanic crossings, good brothers against evil brothers, darkness and destruction on the American continent, and the visit of a “great white spirit.” The author suggests that a “core of truth” is preserved within these traditions.

INDIAN TRADITIONS

by *Golden R. Buchanan*

PRESIDENT, SOUTHWEST INDIAN MISSION



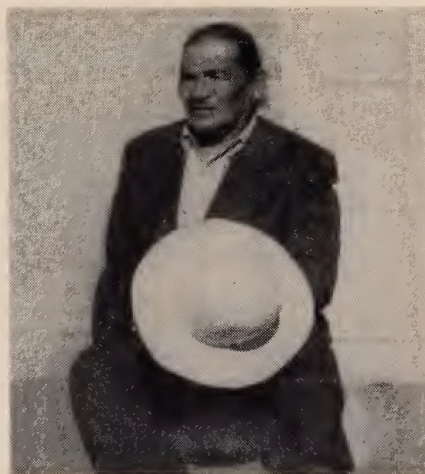
AS I HAVE lived and worked among the Indian people, I have about come to the conclusion that the story of the race, as we know it from the Bible and the Book of Mormon, can be found in their legends. This story would have to be pieced together—a little from one tribe, a little from another. Tradition has a way of becoming garbled and mixed, but, running through most of their stories is a silver thread of truth. A wise Hopi once told me, "We have our stories and our traditions. They follow down a trail, but every little way, we in our traditions have gone out around a rock. But, we always get back to the trail and manage to go down it."

This seems to be pretty largely true with most Indian legends. But by careful sorting, eliminating, and piecing together, many stories from Adam to the destruction of the Nephites on this continent can be found among them.

Even today the old men of the tribes get together on long winter nights and spend much time telling and retelling stories. It is the privilege of all the listeners to speak out if they think the "singer" has made a mistake. Thus these traditions have come down through the years with a core of truth in them, though they may be modified in part by the individual storytellers.

There are many people who do not understand the term, "medicine man." Many think he is a fake

healer. But the true medicine man is a great, gifted individual. He has a knowledge of the herbs and plants indigenous to the area, and he knows how to use them to cure certain ills. These he uses in his "sings." But the main purpose of a "singer," as he paints his sand painting, or goes through the various rituals pertaining to healing ordinances, is to offer a prayer. The white people speak their prayers—the Indians sing theirs. Great good comes to the people. It is true that there are fakcs among them. There is a certain amount of "black magic." But by and large, the old healer is a great man. He has a prodigious memory. His "sings" last at least one night, many of them for nine nights. Many of his songs



—An IMPROVEMENT ERA photo
John Galino of Wide Ruins, Arizona, ninety miles from Gallup. Brother Galino is a medicine man of the tribe and a faithful Latter-day Saint.

have hundreds of verses and are sung night after night without repetition, without a word out of place.

I have heard medicine men sing by the hour with scarcely a pause. The story goes on, unfolding from verse to verse and from song to song: prayers of thanksgiving, prayers of praise, stories of the people, and finally the asking of great blessings upon the sick or upon the tribe. If we would remember the purpose of these ceremonials and sings, it would help us to understand our neighbor, the Indian. He is not without his prayers and his thanksgiving. He believes in a personal God.

In this article, I shall not go into great detail. Neither shall I try to be complete. But the few stories that I shall tell will be accurate and authentic as I have received them from the various tribes. Much of what I have received has been given to me by old medicine men in strict confidence, telling me things that few white people know, with the promise that they would not be divulged, and I shall not violate that confidence.

In some of the old Navajo stories there is made mention of "The First Man," and "The First Woman." The Navajos have special names for them. They believe that these individuals were brought to the world from another sphere. They do not think they "just happened" but that they came here in consequence of a pattern or purpose of a divine Creator.

Behind the story of "The First Man" and "The First Woman" is the story of an all-wise Personage, generally spoken of as a "man," who

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is supreme. Working with him is his Son, who is consistently spoken of as "the man who never died." Associated with these two individuals is a messenger, "Someone who is able to talk to the people." The evil one is present always in opposition to the will of the Great One. It is not hard to teach the Indian people the truths of the Godhead.

The story of the flood is common among many tribes. Men and women, these stories tell, were destroyed because of wickedness. Water covered the land. Men, beasts, and the fowls fled to the tops of the highest mountains to escape the wrath of an angry sea. According to one legend, the turkey got the white tips on his tail feathers because in his exhaustion as he climbed the San Francisco Peaks near Flagstaff, Arizona, his tail was continually in the frothy water as the water rose and finally enveloped the land. They believe that a few men and animals escaped the flood.

The story of the confusion of tongues, the breaking up into tribes, the scattering of the people upon the earth, are common among many tribes. They believe the people were scattered and their tongues confused because of the wrath of the Supreme Being.

I have never met an old Indian who believed that he came from the north. They disagree with the books and students of racial history. They say, "We came from the south."

Several years ago, I was on the Umatilla Reservation near Pendleton, Oregon, talking with a young Indian some twenty-four or twenty-five years of age. He had just completed his tour of military service in the Pacific. He had been the private orderly of a prominent general.

The general had encouraged this young man to go on to school. And, upon his return from the army, he enrolled in a university, planning to study anthropology. He wanted to know more of the history of his people. He said, "As I went into the classes and heard them teaching that my people migrated across the Bering Straits and came from the north, I knew that there was no need of my spending more time in that university. They didn't have the truth—they didn't know.

"I stood up in a class and told the professor that what he was teaching was false. That we had migrated

from the south. We had gone north—we knew how far north we had gone because the marks and our records are still to be found on the rocks and the ledges. Our people went up into southern Canada and then turned around and came back to the Columbia River, where we have made our home for generations."

He said, "The professor laughed at me and called me foolish. But I left the school and enrolled in another thinking still to pursue my quest of knowledge of the origin of the Indian people. There again I found the same information being taught to the students. I only stayed a few months. It seemed so hopeless because they wouldn't listen to me—they thought they knew it all. But we know we did not come from the north."

The Hopis say that they came across the ocean. The Navajos believe they came up from the other side of the earth through a tube. The Papagos believe they were guided to this land by divine means.

Recently I was on the Papago Reservation. One of our new converts to the Church there told me this story:

"I had never joined any church

because the ministers and the priests did not teach the Bible as I read it. I couldn't read it and make it say the same things the other churches said it did. I speak the Papago language. I have lived among them all my life. I know their story and their traditions. And as I read the Book of Mormon that was placed in my hands by missionaries, I recognized the stories of the Papagos, and I knew the book was true. Your missionaries read the Bible the same way I did. These are the reasons I joined the Church. The Papagos believed they crossed the ocean and came to this land, that in the ships and on the trails they were guided by a ball. In this ball was a needle that pointed the direction they were to go. In the Papago language yet today, the name of this ball is 'Liahona.'"

Navajo tradition tells that a man and his wife and four sons came to this land a long time ago. They have, in their native language, the names of these four sons, but I cannot write them. The oldest two of these sons rebelled against the youngest two who were the appointed leaders. The older sons and their children lived in the forest. They made their living by hunting and by the use of the weapons of warfare. They warred and preyed upon their two younger brothers. They covered their bodies with mud and thus became a dark people. The two younger sons became builders and built cities and houses of stone. They planted gardens and fields. They did not place mud upon themselves and thus remained white. For generations there were fighting, wars, and difficulties, the children of the older sons being the aggressors.

Then came a night in which the sun didn't go down, and it was light all night, and the people were much disturbed and distressed. But still there were troubles. Some years after this, came an extended period of darkness.

In Hopi tradition, this same story is given, but more in detail as to the period of darkness. During these days great destruction came upon the land; the face of the earth was changed. Towns and cities were carried away by whirlwinds. Great fear and death reigned. Even today Hopis have a dread of whirlwinds. Should one come towards them as they work in the fields, they will run and hide.

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—Photograph by J. H. McGibbeny

Navajo woman with her baby. The picture was used by permission of Lucy G. Bloomfield.

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Should they be caught in one, they stand upright with their right hand on their breast, the left hand on their head. They do not want to be carried away as were the people many years ago.

The Navajos believe that shortly after these days of darkness and destructions, a great white personage appeared to the people and taught them and lived among them and brought them much good.

The tradition of the "Great White God" is prevalent among most of the tribes, in fact, among all of the tribes that I know. It is in the Mayan and Aztec traditions. After the visit of the "Great White God" there were many years of peace. The people joined together and lived as one. And for many, many years there were no wars, no bloodshed, and all the good things of life were enjoyed. Then came a period of time in which they began to fight again. Wars and contentions broke loose, at the end of which the white people were destroyed. Only the Indians were left.



Again they had a period of fighting and dissension, and they broke up into many tribes with different languages.

The people lost their records and their "books." But as the Hopis say, "We were not left without hope; we were told that some day young white men, with blue eyes, would come knocking at Hopi doors and would bring back to us our records and our true story. They would come from the east, and we would know them by their outstretched hand, and they would call us 'my brother' and 'my sister.'"

They, too, are expecting the return of the "Great White Spirit." They are expecting the return of their true church which will come in the days when there is much confusion upon

(Concluded on following page)

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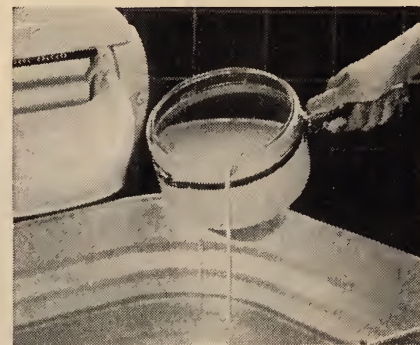


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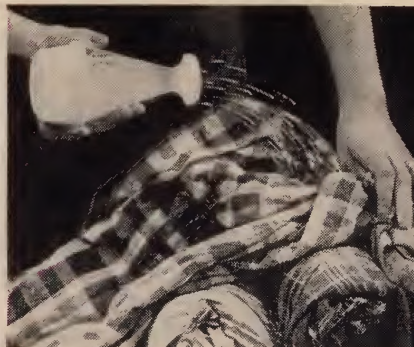
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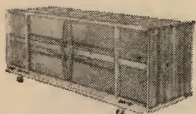


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(Continued from preceding page)

the land. There will be many churches, each claiming to be right. They are to join none of these churches but are to worship in the kivas until the time comes that the proper messengers with the proper signs are found. One does not have to delve deeply into history to learn of the genuine welcome that was given to Cortez and Pizarro by the tribes of Mexico and Peru.

Among the Hopis, too, at the present time, is a "stone book." I have seen it, but only a few white men have had that privilege. I cannot describe it because I have promised not to speak of it. I can only say that at a distance of four or five feet anyone would easily take it for a modern book. Their stories say that the mate to this book will be brought back to them. The books will be opened, and someone will be able to read the message in them.

The principle of eternal marriage is not new to many of the tribes. The Hopi wedding, a beautiful ceremony, with the bride dressed in a lovely white garment woven by the hands of her fiancé, is a sacred affair, and is meant to last for the eternities. It is not until "death do you part." Children are pure, they believe, and need no baptism or ordinances. When they die, they return immediately unto the God who created them. For that reason, children are never buried. They are taken to the cracks of the rocks in the cliffs where the spirit may pick up the bodies easily.

Indian tribes have their own ceremonies. They have their own religions. This was particularly true before the advent of the so-called Christian churches among them. Even today the faithful still cling to their native tradition. Some of them profess Christianity and give token obedience to the so-called Christian churches, but deep in their hearts they still are waiting for the return of the Great White Spirit and the truth.

In many dances, which are largely prayers, significant handclaps are sometimes given. Connected with some of these kiva ceremonies is the wearing of certain types of clothing, and in these clothing are certain marks sacred to the people. I have been told that only the faithful may wear these marks in their clothing,

and that only the very good and true may receive these ordinances.

Certain washings and anointings are common in many tribes. Usually these are done with water and corn pollen or corn meal, all of which are sacred to the Indian. If it were not for violating confidences I could take you among the Utes and Piutes, and tell of certain "ordinances for the dead." Among many of the tribes there is a tradition that some day the people will lose their dark color and become white.

Some months ago I spent a few days in the hinterlands of the reservation. Among others that I visited was an old medicine man. His home was so remote that up to this time he had never heard the gospel. As we sat in his home, I began the story of the gospel, using his lovely daughter as an interpreter. As the story progressed, I could see his interest rising, and by the time our story reached the part of the visit of the Savior to this continent and his choosing of the Twelve, he could contain his eagerness no longer.

In his native tongue, for he could speak no English, he said, "I know of that," and putting up his hands he named the Twelve disciples chosen by the Savior. He gave them all names and in order. As the story continued, more and more he entered into the discussion, supplying parts of it. He was so completely enthralled that he seemed not to notice that we were white people. He fitted in the stories of the people with the message of the restoration.

Later on in the day, as we sat in the shade visiting, I asked him if he would let me have and write the names of the Twelve as he had given them. He thought a while and then cautioned that should I write, I must never give them to the world. They were sacred, and not to be used lightly. But, since I was his friend and knew the story anyway, he would give them to me and I might write them if I would keep them to myself. He then named them one by one, each in its place; there could be no variation.

As we sat there visiting, I thought to try him on another point. "Which of these Twelve are the three that did not die?" I asked. His eyes flashed, he looked at me searchingly. I seemed to read the thoughts in his

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mind, which were something like this. "How could you white men know about such things?"

I said further to him, "Yes, I know about it. It is here in your book, the Book of Mormon. It is no secret. Your forefathers wrote it, and we have it here. I just wanted to see if you could give me the names of the three."

He sat for some time with his head bowed, and then finally looked up and said, "The names of the Twelve I have just given you, are not the Twelve that he chose on this continent, they are the Twelve that were with him across the waters before he came here. Their names are sacred and must not be used lightly." After some little time I asked him if he would give me the names of the Twelve chosen here. He looked up at me with a twinkle in his eye and said, "My friend, you have had enough for one time. Come again some other time." He got up from the log and hurried away and busied himself with some sheep that were in the pen. As I sat there pondering, his wife came over and warned me again of the sacredness of what I had learned and suggested that they should only be used on rare occasions.

On other occasions I have been told the story of the three who never died. Some of the old patriarchs claim that they have seen the three, that they have sat with them in conference and have discussed the program of the Navajo people. But, said one, "They are not just like us although they look like it. They are not dead, but something has happened to their bodies because they can sit with us in council and then, quick as a flash, they are clear across the reservation with another group of Navajos. I do not know how they do it, but I know them and have talked with them many times."

I have scarcely scratched the surface of even the few things that I know, and I am sure that there are countless items of interest and information that have not come to my attention.

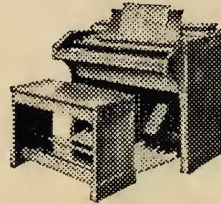
It is interesting to note, in closing, that I know of no Indian language in which one can take the name of the Lord in vain. Indeed, I do not know of an Indian language in which they can even swear. They have to learn English or some white man's language before they can defile the name of Deity.

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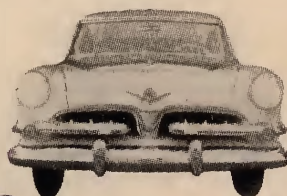
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