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We hope you enjoy reading the article. Nicholas Breeze Wood (editor)

Thunder Dreamers

The late John Fire Lane Deer on
Thunderbirds and Sacred Clowns
in the Lakota Medicine Ways

*If the heyoka sees
a sick person and says,
"He's going to die,"
that sick person will
be all smiles because he
knows he's going to live.*

*But if the heyoka says,
"You are going to get well,"
the poor thing, he might
as well start writing his will*

I am going to tell you a story about clowns, but it won't be a funny story.

For us Indians everything has a deeper meaning; whatever we do is somehow connected with our religion. To us a clown is somebody sacred, funny, powerful, ridiculous, holy, shameful, visionary. He is all this, and then some more.

A clown is really performing a spiritual ceremony. He has a power. It comes from the thunder-beings, not the animals or the earth. A clown has more power than the atom bomb. This power could blow off the dome of the Capitol. I once worked as a rodeo clown, this was almost like doing spiritual work. Being a clown, for me, came close to being a medicine man. It was in the same nature.

A clown in our language is called heyoka. He is an upside-down, backward-forward, yes-and-no man, a contrary-wise. Everybody can be made into a clown, from one day to another, whether he likes it or not. It is very simple to become a heyoka. All you have to do is dream about the lightning, the thunderbirds. You do this, and when you wake up in the morning you are a heyoka. There is nothing you can do about it.

Being a clown brings you honour, but also shame. It gives you a power, but you have to pay for it.

A heyoka does strange things. He says "yes" when he means "no." He rides his horse backward. He wears his moccasins or boots the wrong way. When he's coming, he's really going.

When it's real hot, during a heat wave, a heyoka will shiver with cold, put his mittens on and cover himself with blankets. He'll build a big fire and complain that he is freezing to death. In the wintertime, during a blizzard, when the temperature drops down to 40 degrees below, the heyoka will be in a sticky sweat. It's too hot for him. He's putting on a bathing suit and says he's going for a swim to cool off.

My grandma told me about one clown who used to wander around naked for hours in subzero weather, wearing only his breechcloth, complaining all the time about the heat. They called him Heyoka Osni - the cold fool.

Another clown was called the straighten-outener. He was always running around with a hammer trying to flatten round and curvy things, making them straight, things like soup dishes, eggs, balls, rings or cartwheels.

A heyoka is an upside-down, backward-forward, yes-and-no man, a contrary-wise. Everybody can be made into a clown, it is very simple to become a heyoka. All you have to do is dream about the lightning, the thunderbirds. You do this, and when you wake up in the morning you are a heyoka. There is nothing you can do about it.



Left: John Fire
Lame Deer

My grandma had one of those round glass chimneys which fits over a kerosene lamp, well, he straightened it out for her. It's not easy to be a heyoka. It is even harder to have one in the family.

The no-account people and winos make fun of the heyokas, but the wise old people know that the clowns are thunder-dreamers, that the thunder-beings commanded them to act in a silly way, each heyoka according to his dream.

They also know that a heyoka protects the people from lightning and storms and that his capers, which make people laugh, are holy. Laughter is something very sacred, especially for us Indians. For people who are as poor as us, who have lost everything, who had to endure so much death and sadness, laughter is a precious gift. When we were dying like flies from the white man's diseases, when we were driven into the reservations, when the Government rations did not arrive and we were starving, at such times watching the pranks of a heyoka must have been a blessing. We Indians like to laugh.

On cold and hungry nights heyoka stories could make us forget our miseries - like the sister who gave her brother a fine pair of moccasins. "Ohan," she says, "put them on." That brother is a heyoka, and pretty soon he comes back with a boiling pot of soup. Inside are the moccasins, all cut up. He is eating them.

"What are you doing with these moccasins?" cries the girl.

"You told me to woban - to cook - them," answers the fool.

Maybe you heard about the heyoka who goes to a store to buy canned goods. He can't read or write. He looks at the pictures on the

cans - beans, chickens, peas. Whatever he sees that he likes, he buys. He discovers a can of

dog food with the picture of a fat puppy on the label. He buys this and eats it.

"Boy, that puppy tastes good" he says.

Or we talk about the heyoka turtle and his friend the heyoka frog. They are sitting on a rock by a lake. It starts raining.

"Hurry, or we'll get wet," says the heyoka turtle to his buddy.

"Yes, let's get out of the rain," says the heyoka frog. So they jump in the lake.

Maybe these stories do not sound very funny to a white man, but they kept us laughing no matter how often we heard them.

THE SACRED THUNDERBIRDS

A clown gets his strange powers from the wakinyan, the sacred flying-ones, the thunderbirds.

Let me tell you about them. We believe that at the beginning of all things, when the earth was young, the thunderbirds were giants.

They dug out the riverbeds so that the streams could flow. They ruled over the waters. They fought with unktegila, the great water monster. It had red hair all over, one eye, and one horn in the middle of its forehead. It had a backbone like a saw. Those who saw it went blind for one day.

On the next day they went *witko*, crazy, and on the third day they died. You can find the bones of unktegila in the Badlands mixed with the remains of petrified sea shells and turtles. Whatever else you may think you

know that all this land around here was once a vast ocean, that everything started with the waters.

When the thunder-beings lived on earth they had no wings, and it rained without thunder. When they died their spirits went up into the sky, into the clouds. They turned into winged creatures, the wakinyan. Their earthly bodies turned into stones, like those of the sea monster unktegila.

Their remains, too, are scattered throughout the Badlands. There you also find many *kangi tame* - bolts of lightning which have turned into black stones shaped like spear points.

High above the clouds, at the end of the world where the sun goes down, is the mountain where the wakinyan dwell.

Four paths lead into that mountain. A butterfly guards the entrance at the east, a bear guards the west, a deer the north and a beaver the south.

The thunderbirds have a gigantic nest made up of dry bones. In it rests the great egg from which the little thunderbirds are hatched. This egg is huge, bigger than all of South Dakota.

There are four large, old thunderbirds. The great wakinyan of the west is the first and foremost among them.

He is clothed in clouds. His body has no form, but he has huge, four-jointed wings. He has

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no feet, but he has claws, enormous claws. He has no head, but he has a huge beak with rows of sharp teeth. His colour is black.

The second thunderbird is red. He has wings with eight joints. The third thunderbird is yellow. The fourth thunderbird is blue. This one has neither eyes nor ears.

***Below:
transvestite
rodeo clown***

When I try to describe the thunderbirds I can't really do it. A face without features, a shape

without form, claws without feet, eyes that are not eyes.

From time to time one of our ancient holy men got a glimpse of these beings in a vision, but only a part of them. No man ever saw the whole, even in his dreams.

Who knows what the great thunder-beings look like? Do you know what Spirit looks like? All we know is what the old ones told us, what our own visions tell us.

These thunderbirds, they are *wakan oyate* - the spirit nation. They are not like living beings. You might call them enormous gods. When they open their mouths they talk thunder, and all the little thunderbirds repeat it after them.

That's why you first hear the big thunder clap being followed by all those smaller rumblings.

When the wakinyan open their eyes, the lightning shoots out from there, even in the case of the thunderbird with no eyes. He has half moons there instead of eyes, and still the lightning is coming out.

These thunderbirds are part of the Great Spirit. Theirs is about the greatest power in the whole universe. It is the power of the hot and the cold, clashing way above the clouds. It is lightning, blue

lightning from the sun. It is like a colossal welding, like the making of another sun. It is like atomic power. The thunder power protects and destroys. It is good and bad, as Spirit is good and bad, as nature is good and bad, as you and I are good and bad.

It is the great winged power. When we draw the lightning we depict it like a zigzag line with a forked end. It has tufted feathers at the tips of the fork to denote the winged power. We believe that lightning branches out into a good and a bad part.

The good part is the light. It comes from the Great Spirit. It contains the first spark to illuminate the earth when there was nothing - no light, just darkness. And the Great Mystery, the light, the Great Mystery made this light.

Sometimes you see lightning coming down in just one streak with no fork at the end. This light blesses. It brightens up the earth; it makes a light in your mind. It gives us visions.

This lightning is still another link from the sky to the earth, like the stem and the smoke of our sacred pipe.



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Right: rawhide shield with thunderbird and moon designs Lakota, late C19th

That light gave the people their first fire; and the thunder, that was the first sound, the first word, maybe. Long before the first white man came, we had this vision of the light and knew what it represented.

The lightning power is awesome, fearful. We are afraid of its destructive aspect. That lightning from the south spells danger. It heads against the wind. If it collides with another lightning, that's like a worldwide car smash-up. That kills you.

A lawyer, a judge or preacher can't help you there. That flash from the south, that's *tonwan*, the thunderbolt - the arrow of a god. Sometimes it hits a horse, and you see all the veins burn up, like an X-Ray. Afterward you find one of these black stones embedded in the earth where the lightning struck.

The old people used to say that the damage caused by the lightning was done by the young, inexperienced thunderbirds. They did all the mischief. They were like pranksters, clowns. The old thunderbirds were wise. They never killed anybody. At least that's the story.



**Below: braid
of sweetgrass**

**Bottom: Lakota
sweatlodge
ceremony**

We swear by the thunder powers, by the wakinyan. You tell a story and somebody doesn't believe you, doubts your words.

Then you say, "Na ecel lila wakinyan agli - Wakinyan namahon," and that settles it, everyone knows then that you are telling nothing but the truth. Otherwise lightning would strike you dead. Likewise, if you swear by the sacred pipe, holding it in your hands, you cannot lie, or the thunder-beings will kill you.

LIGHTNING DREAMERS

If the thunder-beings want to put their power on the earth, among the people, they send a dream to a man, a vision about thunder and lightning.

By this dream they appoint him to work his power for them in a human way. This is what makes him a heyoka.

He doesn't even have to see the actual lightning, or hear the thunder in his dream. If he dreams about a certain kind of horse coming toward him, about certain riders with grass in their hair, or in their belts, he knows this comes from the wakinyan.

Every dream which has some symbol of the thunder powers in it will make you into a heyoka.

Suppose you have such a dream. What happens then? It is very unpleasant to talk about.

What I mean is that a man who has dreamed about the thunderbirds, right away, the next morning, he's got a fear in him, a fear to perform his act. He has to act out his dream in public.

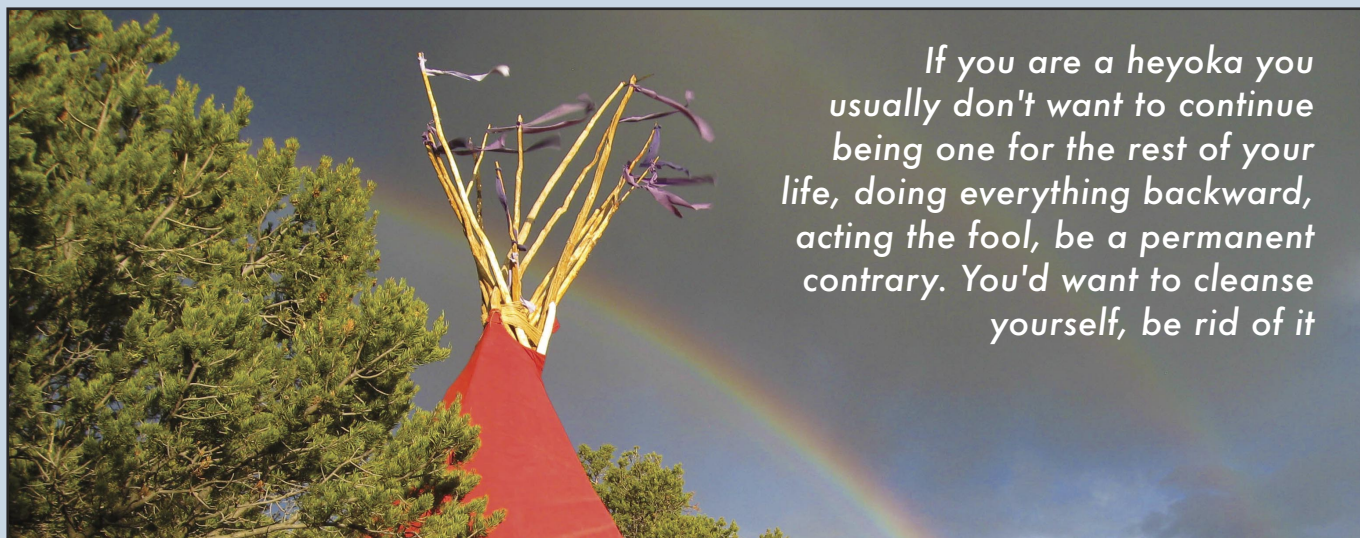
Let me tell you one aspect of it, why we fear it. Indians are modest. In the old days, to expose a leg to the knee, for a girl, this was improper. We are a bashful race, and the poor heyoka, in his dream he would probably be stark naked without even a G-string on him. And he would have to go before the people like this and it would not be easy for him.

Now we have come to an age when we don't have this shame anymore. Look around you, go to the movies, all that nakedness; you can do mostly anything now.

So we don't have these dreams about being nude anymore, because it wouldn't be such a terrific thing. I am joking, but if I had a heyoka dream now, which I would have to re-enact, the thunder-being would place something in that dream that I'd be ashamed of. Ashamed to do in

*First they have
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smoke of sweetgrass. The
Great Mystery wants a man
clean and purified for this
ceremony. It is the same as
with all our ceremonies which
start in the sweatlodge. The
steam bath is the same as
always, except that those
inside are singing
heyoka songs*





If you are a heyoka you usually don't want to continue being one for the rest of your life, doing everything backward, acting the fool, be a permanent contrary. You'd want to cleanse yourself, be rid of it

public, ashamed to own up to it. Something that's going to want me not to perform this act. And that is what's going to torment me.

Having had that dream, getting up in the morning, at once I would hear this noise in the ground, just under my feet, that rumble of thunder. I'd know that before the day ends that thunder will come through and hit me, unless I perform the dream. I'm scared,

I hide in the cellar, I cry, I ask for help, but there is no remedy until I have performed this act. Only this can free me. Maybe by doing it, I'll receive some power, but most people would just as soon forget about it.

Let me tell you a story of a heyoka who performed his act the way he dreamed it. It happened in Manderson, in South Dakota, back in the 1920's.

It happened on a Fourth of July, and this man was real lively the way he acted. He turned somersaults, and there was a bunch of young cowboys chasing him on horseback. They couldn't catch up to him. They were trying to lasso him, but they never came close. He was running in front of them, and sometimes he would turn somersaults. Sometimes he would turn around and run backward, and when they got near him he'd turn around once more and get away.

When he was through, when he took off the ragged sack cloth he had on him, with holes for the eyes to look out of, we saw him. He was an old man in his seventies.

What was his name? I can't recall it. An old, white-haired

grandfather, but the thunder-beings had given him the power to run fast.

A heyoka, if he follows his dream to the letter, has to dress up as he saw himself in his vision.

Now, here is something strange. The people he saw in his dream, if he saw you, you would be there, at the time and place where he would put on his act. You'd be there to witness it, regardless of whether you had planned to be there or not. You couldn't help being there. It's hard to believe.

Some people say it is fantastic; others say it is ridiculous, but it is so.

DANCING AWAY THE HEYOKA

If you are a heyoka you usually don't want to continue being one for the rest of your life, doing everything backward, acting the fool, be a permanent contrary. You'd want to cleanse yourself, be rid of it.

Acting out your dream, undergoing the shame, being humiliated so that you don't dare uncover your face, that is one part of freeing yourself from this, but it is not the whole part.

The ceremony which must be performed is awesome in some of its aspects.

The dreamer asks the medicine men and all heyokas for their help. A horse or a wolf dreamer will make the rounds and announce that a man has dreamed of the thunderbirds and must fulfill his vision.

The heyoka could also be a woman, but this does not happen often. The dreamer invites all who are, or have been, heyokas to join in the ceremony.

First they have a sweatlodge, make themselves holy with the smoke of sweetgrass.

The Great Mystery wants a man clean and purified for this ceremony. It is the same as with all our ceremonies which start in the sweatlodge. The steam bath is the same as always, except that those inside are singing heyoka songs. Also, a heyoka's sweat lodge is always sited facing east instead of west.

I know that all the books say that a sweat lodge always faces east. Whoever wrote this must have been describing a heyoka's place, or maybe he just got it wrong and everybody copied him afterward. All our sweat lodges face west toward the setting sun.

A heyoka ceremony starts with a dance. I want you to know that our dances are not just pow wows, having a good time, hopping from one foot to the other. All our dances

*Below:
Ghost Dance
Drum with
thunderbird
design
Pawnee Nation,
C1892*



Below:
Lakota 'Y' shape
dogmeat skewer

have their beginnings in our religion. They started out as spiritual gatherings. They were sacred.

Clowns are part of this. Many, many ages ago, before people knew how to dance, the thunder dreamers had a vision to run and jump around a buffalo stomach in which some meat was boiling. We had no iron pots in those days.

They call this the 'Around the Bucket' dance. It is performed in honour of the thunder-beings, the lightning spirits. This is our oldest

Three times the thunder dreamer dances toward the bucket, and each time that dog's head pops up by itself, as if it wanted to come out. The fourth time, the heyoka runs up and plunges his whole bare arm into that boiling water, searches around in there and comes up with the head, holding it up to the four winds



dance together with the sun dance. The bucket is there, all right, full of dog meat boiling over an open fire.

For this dance all the heyoka get together to help one another. You have to have four leaders and four assistants, men who know the heyoka songs. All these should be heyoka, but these days there are not enough of them, so we have to put somebody in there willing to fill the vacancy.

The real heyoka, those who are or have been thunder clowns, wear special bustles made of eagle feathers with a tail on them. They also wear crow belts made out of the feathers of all kinds of birds - eagles, owls, crows and woodpeckers. They also have some rattles made from rows of deer hoofs. We honour these things. They are 'wakan'.

The substitute dancers, who are not heyoka, don't wear these things. They put grass in their belts and in their hair.

From these men come our social dances - the grass dance, the Omaha dance, the good-time dances. They grew into our modern dances, which we do to enjoy ourselves, but all started in our religion.

Dancing and praying - it's the same thing. Even at our pow wows, with everybody laughing and kidding, we first introduce and honour the heyoka. We combine the pow wows with our give-aways, by which we honour our dead, with the consoling of those who mourn, with aiding each other. It is more than just hopping around.

Well, the heyoka dance around that steaming kettle, sing and act contrary. If the dreamer says, "A good day tomorrow," well, it will be a hell of a day next day. And if he says, "Tomorrow will be a bad day, thunderstorms from morning to night," why, you can leave your umbrella at home. You won't need it, because it will be beautiful.

And if the heyoka sees a sick person and says, "He's going to die," that sick person will be all smiles because he knows he's going to live. But if the heyoka says, "You are going to get well," the poor thing, he might as well start writing his will.

And all the time the water is boiling in that pot, which is red hot, glowing brightly. It's just bubbling up and down. The dog is in there, head, spine and tail

together in one piece, the rest in little chunks, swirling around, bobbing to the surface.

The medicine man is singing a special song which he has made up for this heyoka to dance to. Three times the thunder dreamer dances toward the bucket, and each time he comes near it, that dog's head pops up by itself, as if it wanted to come out.

The fourth time around, the heyoka runs up to the bucket, and at the precise moment plunges his whole bare arm into that boiling water, searches around in there and comes up with the head, holding it up to the four winds.

He will run with it - and he is guided in this by the spirits, by what he has dreamed - to who ever he has to give the dog's head to. So, he will give it to a certain sick man or sick woman. But the dog's head is still hot, and that person will be scalded, so he will quickly throw it to another man, and he will get burned too, and so he will throw it to the one next to him, and so on.

Five or six people will throw that head, because it is too hot for them to hold. And this comes from the thunder power; it is not a cheap magic trick.

After this the other heyoka charge towards that bucket, and they put their arms in and get the rest of the meat out. They don't care how hot it is. They give this meat to the poor and the sick. Their dreams told them whom to give it to.

That's a good medicine and a hundred times better than all your pills and antibiotics or whatever you call them, because it cures all their sicknesses right there, during the ceremony. This happens every year and I have witnessed it many times.

What is it that makes a heyoka not get scalded? You can go up to him and examine his hands and arms. There's not a blister on him. It wouldn't even show colour as when you dip your hand in really hot water and it gets red. It's not even pink. There is a special herb that I know of, a kind of grayish moss, the root of it, called heyoka *tapejuta*. When you chew that and smear your arms with it, the boiling water won't scald you. But you have to be a heyokas for that herb to do you any good. A man who isn't a heyokas could never stand that boiling water. He'd have no

The 'Mudhead' clowns in New Mexico, they have a big wooden male part and some grotesque dummy woman. All the clowns pretended to have intercourse with her, only none of them knew how to. And the whole village looked on and smiled, the old ladies and the young children, because this was holy, part of a sacred dance for the renewal of all green things, a prayer for rain

arm left. He hasn't got the dream and the power.

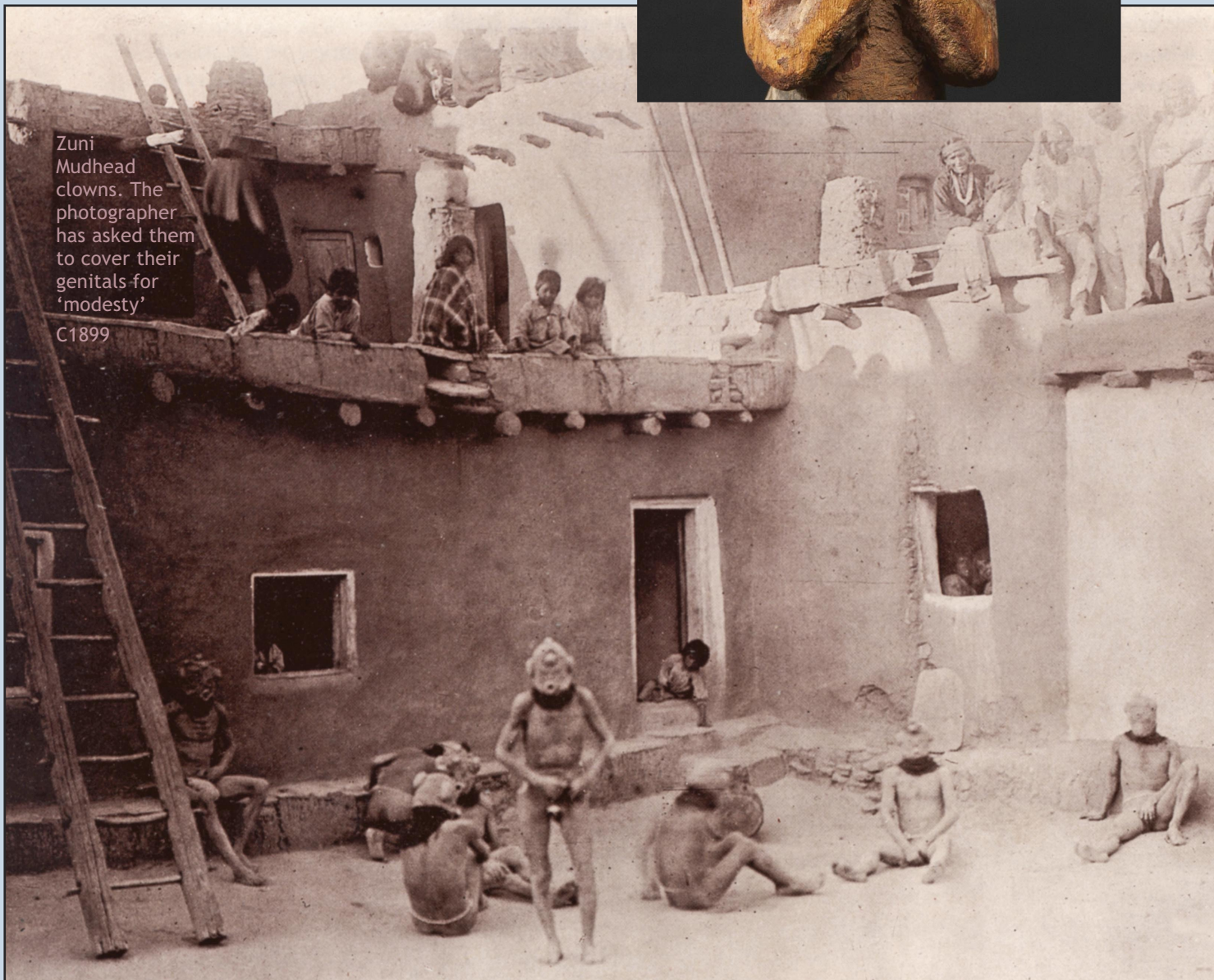
After the meat has been passed to the sick, a man with a special forked stick will get all the rest of the meat out and give it to anybody who wants it, and this ends the ceremony.

We call the heyoka a two-faced, backward-forward, upside-down, contrary fool, but he is an honest two-faced. He works backward openly. He says "god" when he means "dog" and "dog" when he means "god."



Hopi koyemsisquat - mudhead clown katchina doll
Cottonwood with natural pigments
C1890

Zuni 1899

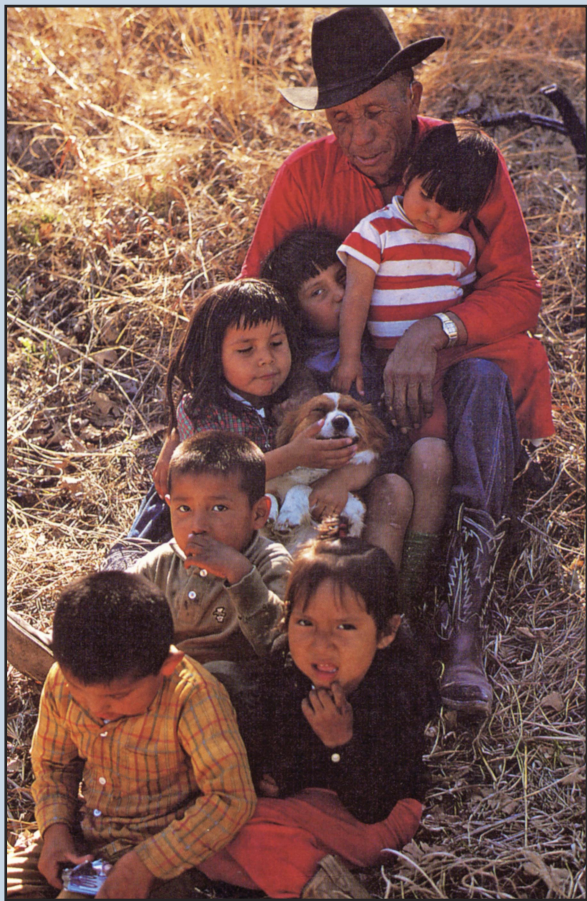


Zuni Mudhead clowns. The photographer has asked them to cover their genitals for 'modesty'

C1899

**Below: Lame Deer
and grandchildren**

You know what is in his mind. He doesn't say, "If I get elected to be a



congressman, I will do this or that." He makes no promises. He has the power. He has the honour. He has the shame. He pays for all of it.

I think clowns are holy to all Indians, not only to us Sioux. I have heard about the 'Mudhead' clowns in Zuni, way down in New Mexico. I was told they ran around with a big wooden male part and had some grotesque dummy of a woman, and all the clowns pretended to have intercourse with her. Only not one of them made it; none of them knew how to. And the whole village looked on and smiled, the old ladies and the young children, because this too was holy, part of a sacred dance for the renewal of all green things, a prayer for rain.

It is very different from us Sioux, yet it is the same. Different but the same - that is real heyoka business. I think when it comes right down to it, all the Indian religions somehow are part of the same belief, the same mystery. Our unity, it's in there.

Well, it's late, time to go to bed. Don't dream about the thunder-beings... the way your mind works, the stories you tell, if you had to act out your dreams in public it could be very embarrassing.

This article is an extract from 'Lame Deer, Seeker of Visions' by John Fire Lame Deer and Richard Erdoes. See a review of the book in this issue of Sacred Hoop.

John Fire Lame Deer was born on March 17 1903, to Sally Red Blanket and Silas Fire Let-Them-Have-Enough, in a log cabin between the Rosebud and Pine Ridge reservations. His father was a Hunkpapa Lakota, and his mother was a Minneconjou Lakota. John Fire was one of 10 children and was mostly raised by his maternal grandparents, Good Fox and Plenty White Buffalo.

After six years at a local Indian Bureau school, he attended boarding school for two years before running away. When John Fire was 16, he undertook a vision quest in which his great-grandfather, Minneconjou Lakota chief Lame Deer (Tahca Ushte), appeared before him and instructed him to become a medicine man and teacher.

John Fire took on the name Lame Deer, and eventually became an important religious teacher. For most of his youth, however, he led a wandering life. During his life he was a rodeo clown, a tribal policeman, and a bootlegger, and in 1930 he was convicted of car theft and jailed for nine months.

During World War Two he was drafted and served in the U.S. Army.

John Fire Lame Deer told his life story to the writer Richard Erdoes, and in 1972 'Lame Deer, Seeker of Visions' was published.

John Fire Lame Deer died on December 15, 1976. His son Archie Fire Lame Deer (April 10, 1935 - January 16, 2001) also became a famous and important Lakota medicine man, who spent much of his later life travelling the world, teaching the sacred Lakota ways to non Native people.



**Drawing made by
Black Hawk, a
heyoka Lakota
man, drawn on
a page from a
ledger book. It
represents his
dream of a
Thunderbeing.
C1880**