

HOPI BOYS' SNAKE DANCE / GAME

Native American

Background Notes

The Hopi people had no weapons. Their name means "peaceful" in their own language. Boastful people cannot live in the Hopi village. Only those who desire to live peacefully and harm no one are admitted in the religious order of village life. People do not disregard each other but rather have respect for each other. Religious teachings are based upon the proper care of the land and the people who live upon it.

The Snake dance is part of a nine-day ceremony that takes place in late August. The dance is a spiritual calling for successful crops and abundance of rain. This is one of the most involved religious rites of which we have record. The ancient myth on which the Snake Dance is based tells of a young Hopi who was curious to know where all of the waters disappeared to when they rushed down the washes during the rains. He set sail in a hollow log and journeyed down to the Colorado River at the mouth of which he found the Snake people living. Under the guidance of Spider Woman, the earth goddess, he learned the songs and procedure of the principle religious ceremony of these river people. Later he married the daughter of the chief and returned with her to his own land. The first children of their marriage were snakes that bit the Hopi and were so driven away. The next children they had were humans, who originated the snake clan.

This dance is performed by the children of the Hopi tribe. It is a game that is played to poke fun at the ritual snake dance of the Hopi elders. During the ritual, the men of the tribe dance with live, poisonous snakes. The dance is, needless to say, very dangerous. The children poke fun at their parents' disregard for this danger through the song that they sing. The words translate "Harmless snake - doesn't have any venom. And this turkey doesn't have any bones." In other words - "If you believe this is safe - you'll believe this turkey can live without any bones." Or in contemporary language: "If you believe that, I have some ocean-front property in Arizona to sell you."