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THE HOPI SNAKE DANCE

REMARKABLE ARTICLE BY THEODORE ROOSEVELT

[The following interesting article was written for THE OUTLOOK and appeared in the number of that magazine published on October 18, 1913. By special permission of the publishers we are allowed to publish it, a courtesy for which we are very grateful. It relates to Col. Roosevelt's visit in Arizona last Summer.—Ed.]



I CANNOT so much as touch on the absorbingly interesting questions of the Hopis' spiritual and religious life, and the amount of deference that can probably be paid to one side of his life. The snake dance and antelope dance, which we had come to see, are not only interesting as relics of an almost inconceivably remote and savage past—analogous to the past wherein our own ancestors once delt—but also represent a mystic symbolism which has in it elements that are enobling and not debasing. These dances are prayers of invocation for rain, the crowning blessing in this dry land. The rain is adored and invoked both as male and female; the gentle steady downpour is the female, the storm with lightning the male. The lightning stick is "strong medicine," and is used in all the religious ceremonies. The snakes, the brothers of men, as are all living things in the Hopi creed, are besought to tell the beings of the underworld men's need of water.

As a former great chief at Washington I was admitted to the sacred room, or one-roomed house, the kiva, in which the chosen snake priests had for a fortnight been getting ready for a sacred dance. Very few white men have been thus admitted and never unless it is known that they will treat with courtesy and respect what the Indians revere. Entrance to the house, which was sunk in the rock, was through a hole in the roof, down a ladder across whose top hung a cord from which fluttered three eagle plumes and dangled three small animal skins. Below was a room perhaps fifteen by twenty-five. One end of it occupying perhaps a third of its length, was raised a foot above the rest, and the ladder led down to this raised part. Against the rear wall of this raised part or dais lay thirty-odd rattlesnakes, most of them in a twined heap in one corner, but