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# CHILD SACRIFICE IN NORTH AMERICA, WITH A NOTE ON SUTTEE,

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## 1. *The Taensa.*

Among this tribe there is noted the propitiation of offended deities. The mothers of infants handed their babes to the high priest ; he strangled them and then threw them into a fire. Penicaut, in describing what happened after a thunderbolt had struck and destroyed by fire the temple of the Taensa in which was sheltered the sacred perpetual fire and other things sacred, writes :

Immediately these savages ran toward their temple, making terrible howls, tearing their hair, and elevating their arms. With faces turned toward their temple they invoked their great spirit crying like people possessed for him to extinguish the fire ; then they took earth with which they rubbed their bodies and faces. The fathers and mothers brought their children, and after having strangled them, they threw them into the fire.

Iberville describes the same scene :

These savages, to appease the spirit, who they said was angry, threw five little children in swaddling clothes into the fire of the (burning) temple. They would have thrown in many more had not three Frenchmen run thither and prevented them. An old man of about sixty-five years of age, who appeared to be the principal priest was near the fire crying in a loud voice : ‘ Women, bring your children to sacrifice them to the Spirit in order to appease him.’ — a thing which five of these women did, bringing to him their children, whom he took and threw into the flames.

These five women were then put through an eight day ceremony in which they wore white robes, — such as, apparently, the noble or honored groups of the tribe wore ceremonially, — and each wore a large feather in her hair. In the ceremony they made much use of Spa-

nish moss. Conceivably these women rose in social rank as a result of their sacrifice, comparably to the facts among the Natchez<sup>1</sup>.

## 2. Natchez.

St Cosme, speaking of the kings of the Natchez, writes : 'If they fell ill, infants were usually immolated to appease the spirit'<sup>2</sup>

Besides such propitiatory sacrifice among the Natchez, babes were sacrificed at the death of a king or of one of his close relatives among royalty. Dumont writes that if at the time of the death of a king any commoner (Stinkard)

has a child at the breast, or at any rate one of very tender years, he repairs with his wife and his child to the cabin where his chief (King) is laid out. As soon as they have arrived there the father and mother wring the neck of their infant, which they throw at the feet of the body as a victim whom they immolate to the manes of their chief. After this barbarous sacrifice they roll between their hands some twists of Spanish beard which they put under their feet, as if they would signify by that that they are not worthy to walk on the earth ; and in this condition they both remain standing before the corpse of the great chief without changing their positions or taking nourishment all day..... Finally, when the sun has set the man and the woman come out of the cabin and receive the compliments of all the warriors and Honored Men, to the number of whom they have been added by this strange and cruel ceremony.

Being raised now to the rank of the Honored Class the father and mother now both acquire the right to tattoo themselves and so distinguish themselves from the Commoners or Stinkards<sup>3</sup>.

In the funeral procession in which the body of the king is escorted to the temple for burial, the bodies of the strangled infants are man-

1. See the original sources reprinted in Swanton, 1911, pp. 93, 268. Iberville's account bears evidence of being the most accurate.

The nature of priesthood in the Southeast is explained in my paper *Temples and Temple Ceremonies*, 1926.

2. In Swanton, 1911, pp. 266-267.

3. Dumont, in Swanton, 1911, p. 105. Penicaut, p. 142 notes: "The French not being able to hinder this barbarity have often obtained leave to baptize the young children that were strangled, and who, in consequence, did not accompany those in whose honor they were to be sacrificed into their pretended paradise".

gled; the parents throw the infants again under the feet of the pallbearers, — a sort of juggernaut affair<sup>1</sup>.

There is no note of burnt sacrifice among the Natchez<sup>2</sup>.

### 3. *Timucua*.

For the Timucua of northeastern Florida we have note of the sacrifice of the first-born. According to Le Moyne, who once witnessed the ceremony, the first born son is sacrificed to the tribal chief. The initial part of the sacrificial ceremony is sacrificed to the tribal chief. The initial part of the sacrificial ceremony is carried out by the mother and her female relatives. The altar is a tree stump about two feet high and two thick. The mother merely squats before the altar, weeping. The female relatives dance about it, rejoicing. She who holds the child dances in the centre, singing praise to the chief. Meantime, six "Indians", — apparently men being meant, — stand to one side. One of these six one is the "sacrificing officer", and he "is decorated with some magnificence". The ceremony is ended when this officer steps to the altar, "holds a club" and sacrifices the child. The method of sacrifice is not mentioned. The implication is that the child's brains are dashed out.

### *The Creeks*.

A migration legend of the Creek Indians has reference to (1) an instance where a child is dashed to death against a pole, which pole apparently is the legendary first calumet; (2) of throwing a child to a lion to temporarily prevent the lion's devouring other people while it eats the child; (3) throwing a clay figurine of a woman to a bird-like monster. But in none of these cases, except perhaps the first, is even vestigial human sacrifice really definitely attested<sup>3</sup>.

1. Gravier, and Charlevoix, pp. 140, 141, in Swanton, 1911, describe such sacrifice, indicating that the heir of the king had the right to order parents to sacrifice their children when desired; but this, I think, may be doubted.

2. For further on Natchez infant immolation see Gravier, p. 140; descriptions of actual ceremonies in Dumont, p. 156, and in Du Pratz, p. 148; also Dumont, p. 104; Penicaut, 140-141. Concerning Spanish moss further see Dumont, p. 85, noting its use in the sweat bath. The original sources are reprinted in Swanton, 1911.

3. On the Timucua see Le Moyne, in Swanton: *Creek History*, p. 352. On the Creeks see Gatschet, pp. 246-248.

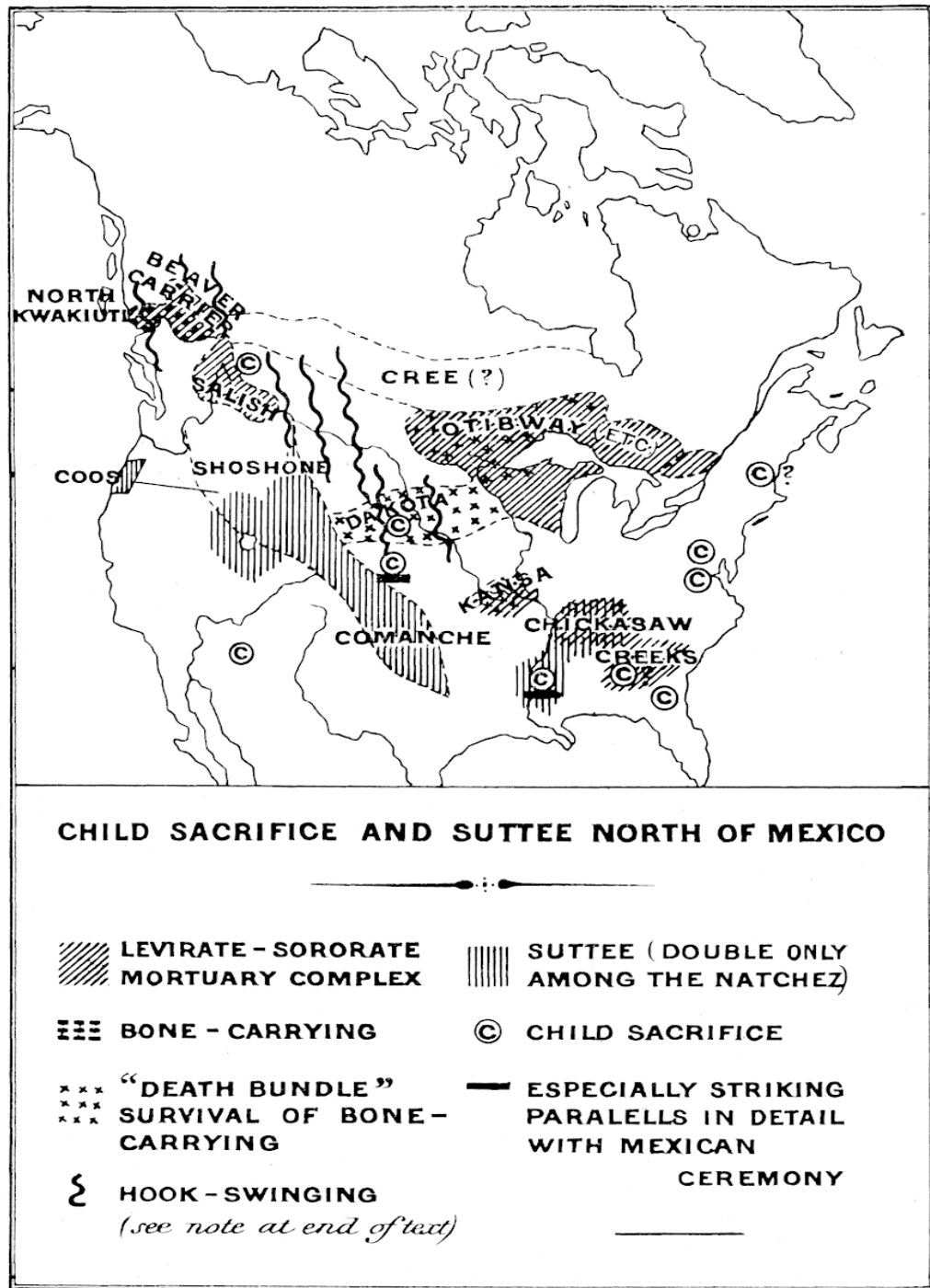


Fig. 1. — Map of child sacrifice and suttee North of Mexico.

#### 4. *Potomacs.*

Of the Potomacs<sup>1</sup>, Spelman says that once a year they sacrifice two or three children to their god, of which god they keep an image, and who is called "Quiocasoughs". He writes that :

Once in the year their priests who are their conjurors, with the men, women, and children, go into the woods, where the priests make a great circle of fire; in which circle, after many observances and many other conjurations, they make offer of two or three children to be given up to their god if he will appear unto them and show his mind as to whom he desires. Upon which offer they hear a noise out of the circle nominating such as he will have, whom they presently take and cast into the circle of fire, for if it be even the King's son, he must be given if once named by their god. After *the bodies which are offered are consumed by the fire* and their ceremonies performed, the men depart merrily, the women weeping<sup>2</sup>.

Strachey helps us here by telling us that in the tidewater region of Virginia every tribe had its particular, tribal deity, and an image of this deity. Beyond and above these particular, local deities, there was the Great Spirit. He was called "Ahone". He required no sacrifices. The particular tribal deities were the "Okees". An "okeus" is likely to be malignant if not propitiated with child and other human sacrifices, he says<sup>3</sup>.

Strachey's observations taken together with Spelman's I think indicate that child sacrifice was probably general in tidewater Virginia.

Spelman writes "Quiocasough" for "okee", apparently an error. The first word is of the same root as "okee", but means priest.

The ritual language of tidewater Virginia was Occaneechi Siouxan<sup>4</sup>. Much of the religious culture of the tidewater Algonkian no doubt came to them from the Sioux of the piedmont. It is very likely that child sacrifice obtained on the piedmont and to the west.

Lederer for the Sioux of the Piedmont speaks of their Great Spirit as "Okaec" or "Mannith". The "Okaec" I judge to be perhaps a misprint

1. A tribe next to the Piscataway, in the region of the present city of Washington D. C., on the Potomac River. On the Potomac River tribes see Mac Leod : *Piscataway*.

2. Spelman, 1608.

3. Strachey, p. 82.

4. See Mac Leod : *Temples*, etc.

for Okee. And Mannith is perhaps a misprint for Mannito. To the Great Spirit alone does the High-Priest make sacrifices. It is only the lesser deities however who interest themselves in human affairs ; and to these the lesser priests make sacrifices. There is no specific mention of human sacrifice <sup>1</sup>.

John Smith affords us the most striking of all descriptions of the use of an okee's image. In 1607, at the very beginning of the settlement of Jamestown, Virginia, the warriors of Kecoughtan came out of the woods to attack the fort. They come :

With a most hideous noise, sixty or seventy of them, some black, some white, some parti-colored ; came in a square order, singing and dancing out of the woods with their okee (which was an idol made of skins stuffed with moss, all painted and hung with chains and copper) born before them ; and in this manner, being well-armed with clubs, targets, bows and arrows, they charged the English, who so kindly received them with their muskets loaded with pistol shot that soon fell the god and divers lay sprawling on the ground. The rest fled again to the woods, and ere long sent one of the quio-casoughs to offer peace and to redeem their okee <sup>2</sup>.

### 5. *Susquehannocks.*

The note on the Susquehannocks is of date 1666, from Alsop, who merely writes that "Once in four years they sacrifice a child to the devil", — that is, — to a god <sup>3</sup>. In view of the facts concerning the neighboring Potomacs and the probabilities concerning the Piedmont and the Virginia tidewater, this statement deserves credence.

### 6. *Dakota and Menominee.*

A writer in Schoolcraft's compilation mentioned human sacrifice among the Dakota Sioux of the Plains. In a subsequent letter to the traveller Brine he amplified his statement. It refers to the Dakota of the Minnesota River about the year 1852 : —

There came up a terrible thunderstorm. The lightning was flashing and falling in every direction about the Indian's lodge and the

1. Lederer, p. 8. I am not at all confident about the misprints ; but note that Lederer had with him only Algonkian interpreters.

2. SMITH, *Travels*.

3. ALSOP, p. 369.

Indian thought the lightning or thunder was angry with him ; so the Indian took his gun and shot his own son and offered him as a sacrifice to the thunder to save his own life.

Brine gives other data from a dependable first-hand source regarding the Sisseton Dakota, of about the same date, for the band on the west shore of Lake Pepin : —

They had come to the conclusion that for some reason which they did not comprehend a curse was on them. Everything seemed to go wrong. Fastings and the usual sacrifices seemed to be of no avail and nothing removed the evil influences which surrounded them. Finally an Indian who was not a chief but a man who was an orator and a prophet had it made known to him by a dream what propitiation was required. This man had three daughters. The youngest of them was twelve years old. She was a beautiful child and her father's favorite. He dreamt that to appease the great spirit it was necessary to sacrifice this child.

In the morning before sunrise he awoke the girl and told her to go out of the tent, wash herself and put on her best dress and all her ornaments. He then called the tribe together and told them his dream. When they had heard what he declared they removed the tents to an adjoining camping ground and remained there until he joined them. He was then left alone with his daughter. He told her that in his dream he had seen the great spirit who had commanded him to sacrifice her. His daughter accordingly stood up, and facing the sun began to sing her death song, which was a kind of hymn. At noon, when the sun had risen to its highest point in the sky he killed her.

After this the tribe prospered.

Skinner reports a Menominee tale which tells of the fact that a Menominee boy, unfortunate in his spirit guardian quest, came by the malevolent black, hairy, horned snake as a personal tutelary, a spirit useful for black magic only. The boy was commanded to wait until he was forty years old before using his evil genius, and then to begin sacrificing his children to his tutelary. When forty, the unfortunate man drowned his two daughters as a sacrifice to the snake, preliminary to fully acquiring his guardian spirit <sup>1</sup>.

1. The first Sioux note is from a letter by a Mr. Prescott sent to Schoolcraft ; see Schoolcraft, v. 4, p. 51. The fuller statement is from BRINE, pp. 171-172. The story of the sacrifice of the daughter is from an informant in Brine, p. 172.

The Menominee note is from SKINNER, p. 185.



7. *New England.*

Winslow, one of the Pilgrims of Plymouth, writing in 1625, says that formerly there had been child sacrifice among the New England Indian tribes; but that the aboriginal religious practices were in decline and this practice had already been discontinued. This is all he has to say regarding human sacrifice; but another note is of comparative interest. He describes at considerable length a sacrificial ceremony of the Narragansett tribe, — one in which, however, there is no animal or human sacrifice. The Wamponoags north of the Narragansetts did not have this ceremonial but told Winslow that they wished their own chiefs would introduce it among them too. They noted, for example, that the Narragansetts, who had the ceremony, had escaped the ravages of the plague of 1616-1619 which had fallen so heavily on the northern tribes; and this they ascribed to the superiority of Narragansett sacrificial ceremony<sup>1</sup>.

There may be something in Winslow's note. So I add the note that Occum in 1761 writing of the "ancient" customs of the Montauk of Long Island mentions some valuable facts concerning their sacrifices, *facts which recall vividly Strachey's observations on the idols and sacrifices of the Virginia Algonkian, and Spelman's account of the oracular consultation of the Potomac god*<sup>2</sup>. Occum says the Montauk had many gods and made images of these gods:

And to these gods they call for help under every difficulty, and to them they offered their sacrifices of various kinds.

Then :

As for these images, they keep them as oracles. The powwows consult these images to know the minds of the gods; for they pretend that these images tell what the people should do to the gods, either to make a dance or a feast, or give something to the old people, *or sacrifice to the gods*<sup>3</sup>.

8. *Kootenay.*

It was noted for the Kootenay of the northwest plateau that they sacrificed first-born children to the sun<sup>4</sup>. This very meagre statement is all we have.

1. WINSLOW : *Good News*.

2. Ibid.

3. OCCUM, 1761.

4. BOAS, p. 848.

### 9. *The Pawnee.*

The sacrifice of a girl captive among the Pawnee has been amply considered by others, so I will merely mention it here to recall it to the reader's attention. In the cardiac feature of the sacrifice, the scaffold, the shooting of the victim with a flight of arrows, and in other significant traits, the Pawnee sacrifice strongly parallels certain human sacrifices in Central American culture. The Pawnee sacrifice was made only in years when Mars was the morning star; and the Pawnee therefore exhibit the only human human sacrifice north of Mexico (so far as we definitely know) which is anything in the nature of a celebration of a celebration of a stated feast.

### 10. *The Southwest.*

The mythology of the Yuman, Piman, and of some of the Pueblo tribes in the Southwest indicate familiarity with former sacrifice of children made by way of propitiation to a god who is causing a devastating flood. In the opinion of Alexander this may perhaps be considered as related to the Aztec offering of children to the Tlaloc or water-gods.

In comparison with the morning star cult and the heart sacrifice of the Pawnee it may be noted that Puebloan myth also has note of traces of both a morning star cult and of heart sacrifice<sup>1</sup>.

## SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS.

Child sacrifice in North America except in the case of the Pawnee (although possibly also in the case of the Potomacs and Susquehannocks) appears not as part of a stated feast but as a propitiation to persuade the gods to put an end to flood or other devastating occurrence. Natchez and Timucuan sacrifice to the king appears to be exceptional; possibly it had something to do with such concepts as that of renewing the king's mystical powers.

Burnt sacrifice is noted only for the Potomacs. In the case of the Taensa the infants were thrown into a fire, but the children had been

1. On the Pawnee see LINTON for summary and bibliography; on the Pueblo myth of child sacrifice see PARSONS: Pima, and ALEXANDER; on Puebloan beliefs regarding the morning star see AIKEN; and on Puebloan traces of heart sacrifice see STEVENSON, pp. 34, 39, 45, 47.

previously strangled, and the fire was purely accidental; the burning was probably not a formal part of the ceremony. Conceivably, were our data fuller, we might learn that the children among the Potomacs were put to death before being burned. But in this connection it is worth recalling the fact that in eastern North America adult captives were often made human sacrifices by being burnt at the stake.

In the sacrifice of the Timucua the part played in the ceremony by the parent and relatives bears comparison to similar facts among the Natchez. The Timucuan clubbing to death of the victim is in contrast to Natchez strangling, but recalls the Creek myth of sacrificing (?) a child to the first calumet.

To judge from the data, it may be presumed that child sacrifice was once general in the Southeast, including Virginia and Maryland, practiced among the Susquehanna, and possibly in New England. The practice among the Dakota and Menominee may be presumed to be the survival of a practice of the "Moundbuilders" of the upper Mississippi Valley. The Kootenay practice suggests that the Shoshoneans below may have had such practice.

Linton and others have shown the Mexican affinity of the institution of human sacrifice among the Pawnee. The Ozark Bluff Dweller culture of Arkansas, with its sandals, atlatls, metates, tubular pipes, and such, shows Mexican affinities. Elsewhere I have shown the close Mexican relationship of Natchez culture. So, child sacrifice, so widely distributed in North America, may be presumed to be ultimately derivable from Central American cultural radiation<sup>1</sup>.

#### A NOTE ON SUTTEE.

The distribution of child sacrifice may be compared with that of suttee shown on the accompanying map. Elsewhere I have discussed the distribution and origin of suttee in America and the Old World. Subsequent study has convinced me further that both in America and the Old World suttee has developed from the linkage of the sororate-levirate with marriage and widowhood. The connection is very evident even in the data from India.

1. On infant sacrifice among the Aztecs in the month Atlcahualles, see SAHAGUN : *Historia General*, v. 1, book 2 (two notes); and TORQUEMADA : *Monarquia*, v. 2 : both cited in BANCROFT, v. 2, p. 305. On Peruvian child sacrifice see SARMIENTO, p. 102; and ACOSTA, in Purchas, v. 15, pp. 309, 331, 346, which notes include mortuary sacrifice of children, the burying alive or drowning of child victims, and such. See also TELLA, and SPENCE. On Natchez culture see MAC LEOD : *Origins*.

It is important to add a subsequently acquired note of the existence of suttee among the Chickasaw whose home was not far from that of the Natchez on the lower Mississippi river. Milfort, a usually dependable nineteenth century source states that Chickasaw widows were buried alive with their deceased husbands <sup>1</sup>. In De Soto's day, burying alive (in contrast with the strangling of the Natchez as known to us in the eighteenth century) was a method used in immolating retainers with a deceased chief <sup>2</sup>. Other authorities on the Chickasaw note that widows mourned for three years under the supervision of the deceased husband's relatives. And for the Creeks we read that similar mourning under relative supervision lasts for four years (reduced to several months in the nineteenth century), but that the widow might be released from mourning by the brother of the deceased husband having intercourse with her <sup>3</sup>. There is every reason to credit (Milfort) on the Chickasaw ; and to suspect that before the day of much European influence the Creeks also may have had suttee.

#### NOTE ON THE MAP.

I show the distribution of hook-swinging (on which see my paper on the same), to help indicate the likelihood of historical linkage between the northwest coast and the Lakes and Plains areas of the levirate-sororate mortuary complex.

In Natchez double suttee the widower is immolated at the death of his wife as well as the widow being immolated at her husband's death if she is the first to die. In *Suttee : its antecedents and origins*, I have shown the presence of an incipient double suttee in the eastern Great Lakes region.

Natchez stupefaction of mortuary victims indicates clearly linkage of Natchez rites with similar rites in Central American culture, The Pawnee child sacrifice indicate similarly close linkage.

The blank area on the map does not indicate positive absence of the traits considered. There can be little doubt, for example, of former continuity of child sacrifice in distribution in the eastern woodlands and the Mississippi valley.

1. SWANTON : *Creek Social Organisation*, p. 384.

2. GARCILASSO, Pt. 2, Book 3, cap. II.

3. SWANTON, *op. cit.*, pp. 334, 382, 384.

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