

THE MOSQUITO DANCE

By Charlotte Heth*

The Mosquito Dance that survives today in northeastern Oklahoma may be one of the last reminders of Natchez Indian culture. John R. Swanton mentions the dance *ogiyiha obanga* in a list of Creek dances, and comments that "the women played jokes on the male dancers by pricking them with pins."¹ A newspaper interview conducted with Victor Riste, a linguist working in 1931 with the last two Natchez speakers in Oklahoma, Watt Sam and Nancy Raven, adds a few more insights:²

At the corn dances which often last two or three days, the elders have found out that the men often grow sleepy and cease to dance about 3 or 4 o'clock in the morning.

Each morning when the leader of the dance notices the ardor of the warriors to slacken, he softly calls the women of the tribe to him. All the women dance around the fire, humming softly for a short while, then with a wild, shrill ululation leave the fire and run through camp jabbing every sleeper they can find with a sharp pointed stick.

The sleepers instantly awaken and continue the dance.

Archie Sam, a Natchez-Cherokee and a nephew of Watt Sam, with whom both Swanton and Riste worked, provided the following description together with the song as learned from his father, White Tobacco Sam:³

One of the unique things that they did, when they would dance three or four nights straight, by the third or fourth night everybody is getting tired out. They have a tendency to take a nap, and some of them are laying out there asleep. So the ceremonial priest asks the singer to sing the Mosquito Dance. . . . When he sings, all the women have come to the grounds with their straight pins. Before the invention of the pin, they would come with thorn stickers. . . . All the women know what it, the Mosquito Dance, is, and they start dancing real light around the fire. When the singer gives a tap on the drum, the women punch whoever is sleeping with their pins. So that's how they turn out to be a mosquito, and they wake everybody up. Everyone stirs around, and they continue on the rest of the night till early in the morning. It serves a purpose. It has a meaning. The ability to stay

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¹ John R. Swanton, "Religious Beliefs and Medical Practices of the Creek Indians," *Bureau of American Ethnology Bulletin Number Forty-two* (1929), p. 534.

² *Muskogee Daily Phoenix* (Muskogee), October 18, 1931.

³ Interview, Archie Sam, September 7, 1973.

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PIANO DUO

The first system of the musical score consists of five staves. The top staff is the right-hand part, and the bottom staff is the left-hand part. The music is in 2/4 time and features a melodic line in the right hand and a rhythmic accompaniment in the left hand. The score includes various musical notations such as notes, rests, and dynamic markings.

The second system of the musical score consists of five staves. The top two staves continue the melodic and rhythmic lines from the first system. The bottom three staves are empty, indicating a section where the music is not written or a specific performance instruction.

awake and dance all night as an act of worship is considered beneficial to the individual and to the group.

The dance is done today at the *Tsalagi Abihka* ceremonial ground not solely to awaken people, but to keep the dance alive. Located near Braggs, Oklahoma, on land inherited by the Sam family, this ground was revived in 1969 under the name *Natchez Abihka* as a "practice ground." It has been called by other names in addition to the two given above: Medicine Spring, Sulphur Springs and *Nuwoti* the Cherokee word for medicine. Robert Thomas names Sulphur Springs as the Fire from which Cherokee ceremonial practices emanated during the Redbird Smith movement when the Cherokees were "under the Notchee rule."⁴ The members are devoted to keeping the old dances and traditions alive. Most are descendants of former members, and many have Natchez blood. When the ground is "strong enough," that is when there are enough men to hold offices, play ball, lead songs, make medicine and do the work they plan to reopen the "real ground," a quarter of a mile away.

William Smith, Cherokee leader of the ground named after his father, Stokes Smith, stated that the Mosquito Dance was sometimes performed at Stokes' after midnight during a stomp dance to "liven things up."

A possible variant of the Mosquito Dance was described and sung by Willie Jumper, a Cherokee-Natchez and a distant relative of the Sams, as the Horse Fly Dance. In his version, pins or stickers were used to simulate the bite of the horse fly. He also believed it to be functional as a device for women to awaken male laggards. He was somewhat unsure of the title; so it may indeed be another mosquito dance.

None of the published sources on music of the Southeastern tribes gives a mosquito dance, and only Swanton has a mosquito story from the Natchez speaker.⁵ Riste recorded the mosquito story as told by Watt Sam on a disc in 1931 and reported it to the *Muskogee Daily Phoenix* as follows:⁶

Watt told of a hunter who went into the woods and suddenly heard a noise. A mosquito suddenly dashed at the brave, and the Indian just had time to hurl himself behind a tree when the mosquito struck it, piercing the trunk with his sting.

The Indian then bent down the beak, so it could not be withdrawn then rounded the tree and killed the gigantic insect. He broke off the wings too, so that the old men would have something to fan themselves with and

⁴ Robert K. Thomas, "The Origin and Development of the Redbird Smith Movement," Master of Arts Thesis, University of Arizona, Tucson, Arizona, 1953, pp. 163-164.

⁵ Swanton, "Religious Belief and Medical Practices of the Creek Indians," *Bureau of American Ethnology Bulletin Number Forty-two*, pp. 1, 262.

⁶ *Muskogee Daily Phoenix*, December 6, 1931.

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started home. He gets home, tells the story and asked where the wings are. 'Oh, the sun came out and the wings fell to dust,' he said.

This he said 'expresses the whole contempt of the Indians for a liar and is the point of the entire story.'

This account agrees in content with Swanton's version. The ending comment on the Indians' contempt for liars was not given by Swanton. Most traditional Indians of the area today still put a high value on truth and the keeping of promises.

Whether the dance is connected with the story is subject to speculation. Both have a joking character and are didactic to some extent. Perhaps the dance is designed to remind a person of the story.

The transcription of the Mosquito Dance song was made from a personal recording taken September 7, 1973. To accompany his singing, Archie Sam used a water drum made from a crockery butter churn covered with rubber innertubing held down by a metal hoop. He encircled the drum with his left arm and beat it with a carved wooden drumstick held in his right hand.

There are three sections in the song, each ended by the shouted refrain, "he ho," or "hi ho," accented by the drum. It is in these phrases that the women stick the men with their pins. At other times the women are using a running step, dancing counter-clockwise around the sacred fire. The song is repeated four times as the dancers move counterclockwise awakening men in each of the four "beds" or clan houses. The form can be illustrated by labeling the phrases, as indicated by dotted lines in the transcription as follows:

$$\begin{array}{l} a^1 a^1 a^2 b^2 c^1 \\ a^2 b^3 b^4 c^2 \\ a^2 b^3 b^3 b^4 c^1 \end{array}$$

The variations within the phrases are limited to either the lengthening or shortening the final pitch, or to changing the pitch of the second and/or third syllable of a phrase to its lower neighbor. Without the ending variations, the isorhythmic figure



would completely dominate the piece. Because an unusual three pitch scale with a half step between "B^b" and "A" is used, changing the pitch of the second or third syllable is important for the sake of variety.

Although undulating and descending melodic patterns are common throughout Southeastern Indian songs, the patterns in this song may carry imitative connotations. Mosquitoes in flight make a humming sound at a

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high pitch which drops when they attempt to land. If they are scared away, their wings beat faster, and the high-pitched hum resumes. When they finally do bite, the humming has stopped altogether, as in the refrain when the women stick the men to awaken them. During the song the women are humming along with the singer in imitation of the mosquito; so perhaps this conjecture is not too far-fetched. Of course, the melodic tendencies described above occur in many pieces of music that are not imitative of insects.

The meter can be described as $\frac{4}{4} + \frac{x}{4}$ with x as variable. The $\frac{3}{4}$ of b^2 characterizes the third section.

The text slightly resembles the Muskogee words for "fat mosquito"—*okēyihā nehi*. No translation was given, and the text may indeed be Natchez. The treatment is monosyllabic—one pitch to one syllable.

The form of the Horse Fly Dance can be illustrated as:

$$a^1 b^1 c^1 b^2 a^2$$

Again, the variations are minimal: the lengthening or shortening the beginnings or ends of phrases or changing one pitch in a phrase. A different isorhythmic pattern prevails in this piece:

$$\frac{2}{4} \text{ ♪ } : \frac{6}{8} \text{ ♪ ♪ ♪ } : \frac{2}{4} \text{ ♪ } \cdot (\text{♪} = \text{♪})$$

Dotted bar lines in the transcription were imposed to indicate the metric shift. Phrases are transcribed one to a staff.

The musical score consists of six staves. The first staff is labeled 'VOICE FOR HARP' and contains a melodic line with notes and rests. The second staff is a piano accompaniment with chords and eighth notes. The third staff is another piano accompaniment with chords and eighth notes. The fourth staff is a piano accompaniment with chords and eighth notes. The fifth staff is a piano accompaniment with chords and eighth notes. The sixth staff is a piano accompaniment with chords and eighth notes. The score is written in a key signature of one flat and a time signature of 2/4, with a 6/8 section indicated by a dotted bar line.

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The scale used is anhemitonic, no half steps, tetra, common to many Southeastern Indian songs. The number of repetitions was not given.

The text does not use the Cherokee or Muskogee words for horse fly—*damaḳa*, or *ronolani*—or mosquito—*dosa*, or *oḳeyiha*. The syllables may be vocables. No translation could be elicited.

Whether the Mosquito Dance is Natchez is immaterial. The singer believed it to be so. The songs recorded by Riste in 1931 that were handed down in the Sam family have remained virtually unchanged. The integrity of this version is above suspicion.

The Horse Fly Dance has doubtful origins. The singer volunteered it in 1974 among a group of animal dance songs. It is reported here because the description matches that of the Mosquito Dance.

American Indian music, as these two songs illustrate, is still a valuable, viable tradition.