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PRELIMINARY DESCRIPTION OF THE BLUE SNAKE SOCIETY*

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The Blue Snake Society is a spiritualist group now centered in Oklahoma. They are attempting through a new revivalistic religion to restore the Indian way of life. There are about 250 members scattered around the country. The Oklahoma group, led by Dr. (Chief) Davis, now numbers around thirty. Most of the Oklahoma group formerly lived in Los Angeles and as a result of their peyote prophesies they came "to put down their fire" in Oklahoma. They are in the process of buying land, as a community, on which at some future time they will live and work communally. This will leave them freer to practice their religion which they see as their whole way of life. Their emphasis is on anything Indian (which is by definition good). They are completely pan-tribal, but, in actuality, aside from their religion, they have a Cherokee base. The majority of persons involved are Cherokee and all have adopted such things as the Cherokee kinship system of clans. The idea of community is central to them and they feel an affinity with the recent hippie movement because of its emphasis on spiritualism and communal life. They feel that their group has been together as a community in four former lifetimes. Their goal is to reach the end of the reincarnation cycle together. One way of doing this is to keep members who are ready to return to the Great Spirit on earth, this Shadow World, as a sacred bundle until all have reached the same high spiritual level and are ready to return to the Great Spirit.

They have their own view of history. Dr. Davis (who holds two post-graduate degrees) has told me that the Aztecs may be ancestral to the Blue Snake Society. He sees them as a people who reached a high level of spirituality. They deviated when they began human sacrifice, even though he sees those sacrificed as being on a high spiritual plain and ready to return to the Great Spirit. The Aztecs own spiritual power had reached the point where even though their gods weren't real, they could move and talk by force of the spiritual power of the people. They were destroyed for their deviation.

The Society has a rich ceremonial life, selected from many tribes. Most are animal and plant ceremonies where men, through their dancing, try to imitate a certain life form in order to understand it. Animals are considered a higher form of life than man because they are closer to the Great Spirit. I was told that when a man does the eagle dance he tries to attain the level of wisdom of the eagle.

*All names and place names have been changed to protect the informants and future research.

Their ceremonial grounds are located east of Indian City on the land where they will some day live. The center of all activity is the fire which is kindled and tended by the warriors. Women are forbidden any contact with it. When in the vicinity of the fireplace one always must walk counterclockwise (countersunwise) around it.

Every ceremony begins with the sweat bath or Asi, which is used to purify. Participation is a matter of free choice and proper spiritual attitude. It helps to release the spirit so it can travel in the Spirit World. All evil and evil thoughts are burned out. The Asi I participated in (April 6, 1968) is fairly typical. It always begins with everyone smoking tobacco. Tobacco is considered a gift of the Great Spirit and the rising smoke symbolizes the rising to meet Him. The sweat house is a small hogan-like building, about ten feet in diameter with a pit about two feet in diameter and four feet deep in the center and a low crawl entrance. All movement was countersun, even if this meant crawling over someone. After taking places around the central pit, shoes, glasses, towels, whatever was brought in (especially metal jewelry which would heat and blister the skin) was passed out countersun. Buffalo acted as leader (although they do not like to acknowledge chiefs or leaders), pouring water on glowing hot rocks that were brought in after everyone was seated. He began with comforting words about the Great Spirit, the Old Indian way of life, and the beauty of the human body. Three times prayer was offered, once in Cherokee by a Cherokee boy. Between prayers the flap over the door was opened and Buffalo passed around a bowl of water (symbol of gift of life from the Great Spirit), first sunwise, then countersun. The temperature was about 170°; it was almost impossible to breathe and the steam painfully burned the skin. There was a thin layer of cool air next to the ground but it wasn't satisfying to breathe. It ended with Buffalo very eloquently saying he would be proud to be associated with any person there. We were free to leave at any time. Upon crawling out we received towels and had to walk around the sweat house seven times (the number of prayers). Then we splashed cool water over our bodies at least seven times, more if one wanted. We were free to dress and join the others. This Asi, because of a late start, lasted only about forty-five minutes; the usual time is about two hours. The Asi does its job well. One comes out of it highly elated, all the senses tingling and with an overall feeling of clarity. The world and sky are perceived very sharply and the mind has a free feeling of total alertness.

The Society sees the Great Spirit as a community of being, the Everywhere Spirit, yet he can take any form he likes and come to earth, the Shadow World. Each person is seen as having a spiritual umbilical cord from a soft spot on his head to the Great Spirit. The soul comes from the Great Spirit and will return to Him and yet it is an entity in itself.

Preliminary Description of Blue Snake Society

Their knowledge of the Great Spirit comes to them through the use of peyote. It is used as a means of speeding up the learning process. With it they can cross over to the spirit world to be enlightened, not for healing or miracles in the manner of the Native American Church. It is a way to understanding, of feeling affinity with all other life. Man strives to realize he is an integral part of a union of all life.

Peyote is used only about four times a year whenever the need is felt. It isn't used more frequently because time is needed to understand the things that happen on the trips. The Society sees the body as a limitation on the soul. Peyote helps break down the barriers between the Shadow World and the Spirit World, freeing the soul to wander through space and time.

A basic element of their religion is reincarnation. A soul is created by the Great Spirit and will return to Him. It is given about seven lives to face certain decisions and if it chooses evil it will continue to come back until it chooses right. If it chooses wrong it must begin the cycle all over again. All violence is considered wrong except in the case of defensive violence. There is no transmigration involved. If a soul consistently chooses wrong, about the fifth or sixth lifetime the spirit will be dispersed back into the Everywhere Spirit. Sometimes on this path to the Great Spirit a man must go through a period of being a witch, a state of thinking evil. But this is rare. Since the time of reckoning is coming shortly, no new souls have been created since around 1940.

The age of the soul determines a man's wisdom. Ancient souls have acquired more wisdom through experience than younger ones and so are better equipped to make decisions. They have come further back to the Great Spirit. A person learns of his former lives through the peyote experience. Children who die are sometimes explained as holy persons who had only a few right choices left to make so were quickly returned to the Great Spirit. Children and old people are considered closer to the Great Spirit because they aren't involved with the physical aspects of living as are those in their prime.

The spirit can will itself to die if its lot in life is unhappy. In a certain case an unhappy child died. The soul was so anxious to return that it came quickly back as another child and this child would cry in the night because it remembered the bad things from its former life. But there is usually some time between a soul's earthly lives. Sometimes a soul can be in such a hurry to get back that it will force the soul from another's body and take over.

The spiritual leader of the Blue Snake Society, Dr. Davis, is the prophet of the future for the group. In peyote visions he has

seen the black, white and yellow snakes rise out of the volcano and devour each other while the red snake watched. He sees this country devastated by civil war and natural catastrophe. The west coast will fall into the sea and one of our major cities will be burned to the ground. He sees the entire country as a sea of flame with Oklahoma as the only oasis. That is why the Society members are moving to Oklahoma. During this upheaval, stragglers will come into Indian City where they will have to remain in quarantine for forty days. Dr. Davis assures me this will all be over by the year 2000. Then the Indians will reclaim their land and return to the idyllic purity of the old days. These prophecies are essential in the Blue Snake view of life; they quietly go about making preparation for returning to the old way of life. Yet they are not evangelistic. People come to them first and are taken in by gradual exposure to more and more sacred ritual.

The value of this group in respect to individual is tremendous. An excellent example of this was my informant. He is a young Souix who in his childhood on the Souix reservation grew up intensely hating white men. As he told me, this hatred dominated his life, twisting everything he touched. With the Blue Snake he found more people like himself who were struggling to remain Indian in white man's society. The Blue Snake encourage him to be as Indian as possible teaching that the Indian is pure as opposed to the moral decadence of the white man. He even has developed a very subtle sense of superiority in the confidence that the Indian will once again own the land by the year 2000. He has subdued a great inferiority complex and finds much pleasure and satisfaction in his family and the rich ceremonial life of the Blue Snake Society.