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THE IMPORTANCE OF SONG IN THE FLATHEAD INDIAN VISION QUEST

Alan P. Merriam

All people, in no matter what culture, must be able to place their music firmly in the context of the totality of their beliefs, experiences and activities, for without such ties, music can not exist. This means that there must be a body of theory connected with any music system, not necessarily a theory of the structure of music sound, although that may be present as well, but rather a theory of what music is, what it does, and how it is coordinated with the total environment, both natural and cultural, in which man moves.

For the Flathead, the most important single fact about music and its relationship to the total world is its origin in the supernatural sphere. While it is clearly recognized that some songs are individually composed by human beings, and that some other songs are borrowed from neighboring peoples, all true and proper songs, particularly in the past, owe their origin to a variety of contacts experienced by humans with beings which, though a part of this world, are superhuman and the source of both individual and tribal powers and skills. Thus a sharp distinction is drawn by the Flathead between what they call "make-up" and all other songs. "Make-up" songs are those which are composed by individuals in a conscious process of creation, and those which are known to be borrowed from other peoples; these songs have no inherent power and, according to the Flathead, are "used for enjoyment." Non-make-up songs, on the other hand, are those which are taught or given to human beings by superhuman forces in a variety of situations. It is believed by the Flathead that in former times, all songs derived from such experiences, and that none were made up by individuals or borrowed from other tribes; today, music is a melange of all three sources, and it is a matter of regret and concern to older members of the society that the "real" Flathead songs are steadily decreasing in importance in the total repertoire.

Songs which derive from the supernatural lead to two types of power for the individual who receives them; in one case this is shamanistic power while in the other, power is scattered and of such a nature that the individual remains simply a person with special capabilities for doing or effecting special things. Thus while a person may have special powers in love, gambling, hunting, war, or other social situations, the shaman has a concentration of songs which center primarily about curing, although he may have obtained other skills through song as well.

The source of such songs is the supernatural experience which, traditionally at least, comes from the vision quest, a part of Flathead culture still practiced today but with increasing infrequency. The Plains vision quest in general, from which Flathead practice seems to have been borrowed, has been discussed by Benedict (1922, 1923), and for the Plateau by Ray (1939), and these general references apply broadly to Flathead practice. That the Flathead vision quest has been a part of normal Flathead experience for at least more than one hundred years is borne out by early references to it in the reports of explorers, missionaries, traders, and the like. Thus, Father Mengarini, speaking from

his experience with the Flathead in the 1840s, wrote:

The methods of obtaining medicine was the following: When an Indian has arrived at the age of manhood, he departed alone to the mountains, and there tasted neither food nor drink for six or eight days. Dancing was necessary for obtaining medicine. When all was over, his genius appeared to him under the form of some bird or beast, and taught him how to procure the medicine. Each Indian kept the nature of his medicine a profound secret, used it only for himself and family in sickness, and carried it about his person in battle, to charm away the arrows of his enemies. Medicine against sickness was oftentimes a real natural remedy, and such as a wise physician would have prescribed had he been there. But this apparent good served only as an excuse for the superstitious use of it against the evils and dangers of life. (Partoll 1938: 201).

Father de Smet, speaking of approximately the same period, quotes Governor Isaac Stevens as follows:

They were great believers in charms or medicine. . . . When a young man grew up, he was not yet considered a man until he had discovered his medicine. His father would send him to the top of a high mountain in the neighborhood of the present mission; here he was obliged to remain without food until he had dreamed of an animal; the first one so dreamed about becoming his medicine for life. Of course, anxiety, fatigue, cold, and fasting, would render his sleep troubled, and replete with dreams. In a short time he would have dreamed of what he wanted, and return to his home a man. (Smet 1863: 285-86).

The continuity of the practice is indicated by James Teit, who wrote some sixty years later that "young men fasted, prayed, exercised, and kept vigils until they acquired one or more guardian spirits. . . . For this purpose [they] went through a long course of training. Bathing in running water, fasting, praying, and keeping vigil in lonely places were prominent features" (Teit 1930:382, 384).

In more recent time, Turney-High has emphasized much the same set of practices, including the vigil in the wilderness, preparation by bathing and fasting, the choosing of a spot famous for medicine experiences, and the construction of a low wall of stone in which the suppliant lies down "to fast, pray, and wait for the guardian." However, Turney-High adds two major points to the previous discussions of the Flathead vision quest. The first concerns the nature of the guardians:

Most commonly the sumesh appears to the individual in theriomorphic form, the rattlesnake and bear being the most usual. Anthropomorphic guardians also occur; the dwarfs . . . being especially powerful. Peripatetic decomposed corpses and skeletons are also encountered. A common guardian is the spirit of some ancestor, or rarely of some famous person to whom the seeker is not related. (Turney-High 1937: 27).

His second point concerns the reliability of information obtainable from the Flathead on the vision quest experience.

A conscientious ethnographer cannot get a compendium of trustworthy sumesh dreams. Only the completely acculturized or untrustworthy will discuss the matter. Sumesh was, and among honest Indians still is, strictly a matter of personal property. . . . No Flathead who sincerely thinks he has sumesh is going to give this to an ethnographer except under circumstances of extraordinary friendship or filial relation. To ask a Flathead to describe his medicine experience is considered an unforgivable impertinence. Therefore, although the writer has heard several alleged sumesh songs and has been told of some purported medicine experiences, he considers them utterly unreliable (1937: 28).

In general, this pattern is probably true, but three elements bear upon Turney-High's reservations. The first is that times have changed for the Flathead in the thirty years since Turney-High did his work, and although true medicine experiences are still closely guarded secrets, some of the reluctance to disclose them has disappeared. Second, although medicine experiences are personal and guarded, the restrictions are lifted upon the death of the individual involved. That is, it is held that personal power obtained through the supernatural is specific to the individual and disappears with his death; thus both vision experiences and vision songs pass into the domain of public property, in some cases at least becoming part of the common song repertoire. The third point is that older people, at least at present, tend to be much less reserved about relating supernatural experiences than, apparently, were their ancestors; old age seems to bring a certain resignation, as though the power of the medicine begins to falter as does the body. It should be added, however, that the pattern of secrecy definitely does persist, particularly in respect to the content of medicine bundles; some songs and some vision experiences have been told the author and other ethnographers, and if these are not to be taken literally, they at least form a general pattern. Indeed, in certain ways to be discussed below, vision experiences are so clearly patterned and parallel that it would be difficult to challenge their general veracity.

At present, there is reason to believe that some young Flathead continue to pursue the vision quest, and a contemporary resume of the practice is given by Malouf:

Such spirits appeared to them in a dream, or they would suddenly appear to the person while walking in the mountains, or valleys, away from camp. They came in the form of an animal, such as a deer, bear, or elk, or they appeared as birds, monsters, dwarfs, trees, plants, insects, or even inanimate objects, such as stones. . . . In former times they were obtained at ages from five to adulthood, and could be obtained by both sexes.

If dreams were sought deliberately there were certain places where the spirits were known to dwell, such as hill tops, or in rock shelters. Often small circles of rocks were located on some of these hill tops and the suppliant remained there all night, inside the circle, in order to receive his spiritual visitor. There is one such hill near Stevensville, now called Chaffin Butte . . . Another well known circle was located above an unusually steep cliff, north of Elmo, Montana, on Flathead Lake (Malouf n.d. :52).

Contemporary accounts by older people tend to confirm this general vision quest pattern. In 1950, one older informant phrased the matter roughly as follows:

When children, both boys and girls, are about four to six, they are taken into the wilderness, maybe the high mountains, and left alone—"the parents sneak off and leave them." 'The child wanders around and finally something appears and talks' to them 'while they are in a trance.'

Another informant reported in 1958 that to her knowledge, some "boys of eight or nine" were being sent to McLeod Peak in the area "by their fathers. They make a little trench and lie there until something does come and talk to them. It tells them how to be, what to do. When they get there, they start drying; can't drink. You must always make a new place; you cannot lie in an old one." Still other similar bits of information could be added, but it seems reasonably clear that communication with the supernatural on special occasions, though probably less frequent now than in the past, is still practiced.

While the presence of such experiences is confirmed in the literature on the Flathead since the 1840s, the nature of the situations in which it can occur

is not so well known. It will be recalled that Mengarini, Stevens, Teit, Turney-High, and Malouf, all cited above, stress the "artificial" nature of the experience; that is, contact with the supernatural is something sought deliberately by the suppliant under non-normal conditions of self-denial in a place removed from human contact and an environment deliberately chosen for its remoteness. Such experiences are properly called "visions," and they may well account for the greatest part of Flathead supernatural contacts, but it is clear that other occasions may also provide the opportunity for obtaining power. Verne Ray (1939) draws distinctions between experiences obtained in visions and in dreams, and states that among the Flathead it is the vision which is found exclusively (p. 92). This statement does not seem to be borne out by the evidence of other investigators; for example, Malouf reports on "a traditional type of dream which gave an Indian such powers. He stated, 'I dreamt of a song one night while sleeping. I dreamt that if I sang this song I would not get hit or shot by a bullet. Even though the enemy was about five or ten yards away they would run from me' " (n.d.:27). In connection with the sweathouse complex, one of my own informants reported:

Sometimes in the old days the people would dream about the sweathouse. The dream would tell this person that 'tomorrow at such and such a time you build a sweathouse and take a sweat, and you'll be cured if you are sick. If anything comes your way, you'll get out of it.' Then certain songs are given in this dream, and you sing them while sweating. Also, if hunting is bad, you may dream that you must take a sweat.

It is equally clear that experiences with the superhuman may come on other types of occasions, although in all known cases it is a constant that the person, or occasionally a man and his wife, is alone at the time. Some of these occasions are "random" in the sense that they are unpredictable; at the same time, they seem always to be triggered by specific events. Thus, the following:

There was a man who was out hunting. He was sneaking up on the game by sitting at a spot on the game trail when he heard somebody singing. He thought, 'There must be people around.' So he stood there and waited to see who was coming. Pretty soon a spike bull elk came out from the brush and told him, 'This is your song. If you really need this song, sing it.' It was a love song. So he didn't kill the spike, and never killed an elk again.

.....

When I was about six years old, my father lost my horse in the stick game. The man who won the horse took it and led it away; I followed, crying. I saw a woman coming toward me in a buckskin dress singing this song. She told me to turn back, that I would have better horses. 'Don't cry over one horse.'

A situation in which learning appears to have taken place on no special occasion seems also to be possible; an informant described such a case as follows:

There's two little marriage birds; you see them way down in the meadows, in the hay fields, in the grain fields. That's where they hang around in the summer. They're nice little birds. They sound lonesome when the sun is going down. You can hear them in Grass Valley. The two birds are singing this song. I learned this from the birds.

Thus the occasions on which contact is made with the supernatural are more varied than is usually indicated in the literature on the Flathead. Such occasions include the formal vision quest, dreams in an otherwise normal

context, surprise encounters at unpredictable times though apparently always when the person or persons sharing the experience are isolated from others, and in what seems to be a relatively extended learning process. It may be noted in passing that although the Flathead report numerous experiences with ghosts, using the word in its Western sense, these are experiences of a clearly different nature, not involving the acquisition of power--they are unfortunate and unpleasant experiences not desired by the Flathead.

The acquisition of song in these contacts with the supernatural, particularly in connection with the vision quest, has often been commented upon, but its importance to the total experience has not received the stress it deserves. In many respects, song is the central concern in the quest; it is through the conferring of a song or songs that the experience is made meaningful and that the powers conferred by the guardian spirit are made operative. Indeed without song, many visions would cease to have a purpose. Speaking more or less generally for the pattern in the Plateau, but using the Kutenai as an example, Ray writes:

A song is invariably conferred. Indeed in some cases the spirit does not appear at all; only a song is heard. In this event the song conveys the nature of the power and the identity of the spirit. The spirit or song is conceived as actually entering the visionary's body at a particular spot . . . The song is all-important and all-sufficient to the experience (1939: 71).

Others have made similar points about the Flathead vision quest, including Teit (1930:384), Turney-High (1937:27), and Curtis (1911:82). It is interesting, and even significant, that Curtis, in a novel of Flathead Indian life uses the vision quest as the climax of his story and emphasizes the role song plays in the quest (1915:220-21). Most, but not all Flathead insist that a song is always conveyed by the guardian spirit, and almost all such experiences told to the writer do include learning a song or songs.

One of the most striking points which emerges in an examination of the connection between song and supernatural experience among the Flathead is the patterning of the experience itself. It has already been suggested that such experiences take place when the individual--or, in the case of a joint experience, individuals--is isolated from his fellows, whether the occasion be a formal vision quest or an unpredictable encounter. But an examination of these various encounters reveals other patterning, particularly in connection with song. Bearing in mind those experiences already cited, let us note a few others which deal in one way or another with supernatural contact:

There was a guy who was looking for power once, and he heard a guy coming from a long way off, singing a song. He finally met the guy, and the guy was singing a stick game song. He told the young feller, 'When you get to be a certain age, you can use that song for the stick game.' The young man remembered the song until the time came to use it.

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One time long ago EBS and her husband attended a war dance near where PP's cabin is now. They were coming home and crossed the creek below the present BS house. They decided to camp there for the night. It was just dawn and as they lay down to sleep they heard a flute playing from a long way off. It came closer and closer, but when they rose up to see who was playing, it went away again a long distance. They did not know who it was and never found out.

In speaking of lonesome songs, one informant generalized the kind of experience that might be met:

The father gets lonesome, and goes off into the hills alone. He lies down and he hears someone coming, singing; the spirit says to him, 'Sing this and you'll be happy; you'll see your child.'

Yet another informant generalized the entire type of experience:

When somebody is discouraged or he doesn't know what to do, he may be sitting around his tipi and a spirit comes to tell him what to do. Sometimes he can hear the singing from way far off, and hear it approaching. Before daylight he hears the spirit coming, always from the East. The tipi always faces east, with its ears up. [The ears refer to the open smoke flaps of the tipi.] The spirit comes from afar and hits the ears; then it comes down the ears and stands in front of the person. It tells him what to do, and it sings the song. As it comes toward the tipi it has been singing the same song many times as it comes.

There is one factor which is common to all these experiences, and indeed to almost all of those recounted to the writer; this is the element of distance which is gradually closed between the spirit and the novice. That is, the song which the individual will later learn is first heard from far away; the being who is singing it comes closer and closer, singing constantly, until it finally actually appears. This pattern is found again and again in Flathead stories which concern the supernatural and song.

The most reasonable explanation for this patterning seems to be that the distance factor is a symbolic reflection of the actual process of composition. In looking at the vision quest and attempting to assess the actual means whereby the songs are brought into being, we apparently have but two choices: first, we can assume that songs do come to the suppliant in a flash of supernatural, or other inspiration, and that the process is therefore practically instantaneous. The second and more likely possibility is that the weakened condition of the petitioner in the case of the formal quest, and the general conditions of expectation of this type of meeting with the supernatural in less formal situations, make the experiences "real" to the individual, but at the same time "force" him to be prepared to create songs. In other words, the expectation of the culturally conditioned situation makes it clear to the individual that he must be a composer of music in order to be a successful person in the society.

Given our Western assumption that the ability to compose varies from individual to individual, the question is two-fold; first, how is the process of composition actually effected in this situation; and second, what happens to the individual who is incapable of composition? In respect to the first, it is suggested that the distance factor does much to explain how songs are composed in the supernatural situation. That is, the song is dimly heard (dimly formulated) at first, and then becomes clearer and clearer as the supernatural being approaches (as the petitioner gains a stronger sense of the structure of the song he is, in fact, composing). There is almost no such experience involving the supernatural and song among the Flathead in which this pattern fails to appear, and while this interpretation would in no way seem reasonable to the Flathead themselves, it does seem likely that hallucination and cultural expectation are closely connected with composition in the manner suggested.

This is further borne out by other facts about music and the vision quest. Thus in the following quest report, it is significant to note that although the pattern of slow approach is not suggested, there is substituted a type of situation

in which the individual is subjected to a number of repetitions of the songs he will learn. The informant recalls that he was "eight or nine" years old at the time. His parents had left him and his sister alone in the wilderness while they were investigating some aspects of a placer mine. His sister looked up suddenly and saw a "great big grizzly bear" coming toward them; she caught her brother's attention and, he says:

I went out of my head. I was way up on top of a mountain. People were dancing, singing, playing stick game, cards. I looked around and it was me singing. Then I went out again. I was on another mountain and the same people were there doing the same thing. The grizzly bear took me back each time, and this happened on four mountains. The people all had otter skins around their heads. All the animals were singing and dancing in there. It was always me singing.

The magic number four is part of the pattern, but the significance of the story is that the boy, who later became an important shaman on the basis of this and other visions, "heard" the songs four times at least. It seems logical that given the expectation of success in obtaining a song or songs in the supernatural situation, four times is probably enough to fix a new song in the composer's mind.

A further part of the relationship of this kind of experience to composition is indicated by the differences of opinion among informants as to how the song is actually learned. Some informants insist that "a song is sung just once, and the person will learn that song from one hearing, providing that he believes in the thing which has appeared to him." Others say, however, that the being must sing the song many times before it is learned by the suppliant. This problem is noted in the literature on the Flathead; Turney-High, writing presumably from what he was told by informants, says that the guardian "teaches him at least one song, at times even more, and rehearses him until he can sing it. Ordinarily the seeker has never heard the song before. It is supposed to be new and individual" (1937:27). Teit is even more specific in discussing the source of songs:

Some songs were merely modifications and new variations of those already known to the people as a whole. The themes were usually suggested by something seen during the vigils or while training. A song might begin with the words, 'I saw a bear,' and so on. Sometimes songs expressed the desires or expectations of the person, and might begin with the words, 'May my friend the eagle come!' 'May such and such happen!' 'May I see such and such a thing!' 'May I do this or that!' (1930: 384)

Indeed, it is implied strongly by Teit in this passage that songs were perhaps consciously composed before the appearance of the supernatural being and thus before, and in hopeful anticipation of, a vision experience.

It is suggested here, then, that the different conditions of learning the song or songs on the part of different informants, reflect the individual's skill at composition. Those who are relatively quick "learn" the songs after but one hearing, i.e., are able to compose with relative ease; while those who had difficulty and "learned" the songs only after "rehearsal" by the new guardian, are those who have lesser skills at composing a new song. This interpretation suggests, in turn, the answer to the second question posed above, i.e., what happens to the individual who is incapable of composition? The answer seems most probably to be that such persons are those who fail to obtain a guardian spirit, and this is a known situation among the Flathead as well as among other tribes who stress the importance of the vision quest.

But failure can be circumvented by the deliberate and secret composition of songs. Teit says of the Flathead that "some [songs] were received directly

from the guardian spirit, others were heard in dreams or visions. When not obtainable in this way, songs were occasionally composed by the novice in secret" (1930:384). That this may have been a broad pattern in cultures which stress the vision quest is emphasized by a similar statement given for the Blackfoot by Wissler:

We are convinced that the deliberate composing of new songs is going on at the present time. One individual asked the writer to let him hear songs from the distant tribes. Having at hand such a phonographic record, his request was complied with. After several repetitions he was able to follow accurately and went away humming it over and over. Some time afterward he reluctantly admitted that he had now arranged words for this song and 'expected to dream something.' (1912: 104)

In his autobiography, *Crashing Thunder*, a Winnebago Indian, tells us that he falsely claimed a visitation from the supernatural during a vision quest (Radin 1926:26). Since he does not say so specifically, we can only speculate on whether he also composed a song or songs to go with the false vision, but if he did so, he apparently would not have been making a unique deception.

What is stressed here is that visitation from and communication with the supernatural is an expected experience in Flathead culture. Further, it is of enormous importance, for such experiences are intimately tied up with manhood, the "normal" situation in the culture, and the obtaining of vital powers which allow the individual to excel in certain spheres of activity and thus to hold his own with other members of the culture. These experiences, as well, are intimately connected with song, for it is song which provides the vehicle through which powers can be exercised. Indeed, song is so important that in most cases power cannot be exercised without it, and therefore a successful vision cannot be obtained if the individual is incapable of composing a song. If we assume that such capability differs from one individual to another, then we can also assume that inability to compose often means inability to obtain a guardian spirit, since the two apparently go hand in hand; thus the failures in the vision quest are failures because they cannot compose. The importance of song to the supernatural experience is further emphasized by the occasional citations we have to "cheating," that is, to deliberate composition of songs before the guardian spirit is sought; the implication is clearly that without song, there can be no vision.

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NOTES

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