

# *The Journal of Religion and Theatre*

<http://www.rtjournal.org>

**Published by the Religion and Theatre Focus Group of the  
Association for Theatre in Higher Education**

*The Journal of Religion and Theatre* is a peer-reviewed online journal. The journal aims to provide descriptive and analytical articles examining the spirituality of world cultures in all disciplines of the theatre, performance studies in sacred rituals of all cultures, themes of transcendence in text, on stage, in theatre history, the analysis of dramatic literature, and other topics relating to the relationship between religion and theatre. The journal also aims to facilitate the exchange of knowledge throughout the theatrical community concerning the relationship between theatre and religion and as an academic research resource for the benefit of all interested scholars and artists.

All rights reserved. Each author retains the copyright of his or her article. Acquiring an article in this pdf format may be used for research or teaching purposes only. No other type of reproduction by any process or technique may be made without the formal, written consent of the author.

## **Submission Guidelines**

- Submit your article in Microsoft Word 1998 format via the internet
- Include a separate title page with the title of the article, your name, address, e-mail address, and phone number, with a 70 to 100 word abstract and a 25 to 50 word biography
- Do not type your name on any page of the article
- MLA style endnotes -- Appendix A.1. (Do not use parenthetical references in the body of the paper/ list of works cited.)
- E-Mail the article and title page via an attachment in Microsoft Word 1998 to Debra Bruch: dlbruch -at- mtu.edu. (Please replace the -at- with @.)
- Or send by regular post with the article on a zip disk, Mac format, in Microsoft Word to:

Debra Bruch, Ph.D.  
General Editor, *The Journal of Religion and Theatre*  
Department of Fine Arts  
Michigan Technological University  
1400 Townsend Drive  
Houghton, MI 49931

DEADLINE: May 1st of each year

# Returning to the Sacred: An Eliadean Interpretation of Speck's Account of the Cherokee Booger Dance

Written by  
**William Douglas Powers**

In 1935 and 1936, eminent anthropologist, ethnologist, and linguist Dr. Frank Gouldsmith Speck observed performances of the Booger Dance of the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians on their reservation in the Great Smoky Mountains of western North Carolina. Undoubtedly influenced by theories of cultural evolutionism as a student of the empiricist Franz Boas, Speck asserted that the Booger Dance contained no religious symbolism and only obscured religious motives. The religious ritualistic aspects merely contributed to the dance's aesthetic and dramatic elements and did not influence the actions of the performers or spectators.<sup>1</sup> Speck believed that the dance functioned as a

record of the anxieties of a people, their reactions against the symbol of the invader, and their insecurity in their dealings with the white man. In general, [Cherokee] dances reveal an equilibrium between the Cherokee and their environment, both animate and inanimate. In the Booger Dance the equilibrium is precarious.<sup>2</sup>

According to Speck's Cherokee informant Will West Long, however, the Booger Dance, indeed all dances, emanated "from one source [the monster Stone Coat], [and they were] bequeathed to the Cherokee as spiritualistic aids in their struggle for life against an adverse animal kingdom, the agency of disease, and a menacing world of mankind".<sup>3</sup> Yet Speck disavowed an authenticity and autonomy of religion, and he reduced the Booger Dance, a religious ritual, to merely a manifestation of psychology or sociology. Such reductionism is problematic; it skirts the possibility that religion might function as a cause rather than an effect.

---

<sup>1</sup> Frank G. Speck and Leonard Broom, in collaboration with Will West Long, *Cherokee Dance and Drama*, 1983 (Norman, OK: U of OK Press, 1993), 30, 2

<sup>2</sup> Speck, 3.

<sup>3</sup> Speck, 5.

---

In 1949, Romanian-born twentieth-century historian of religions Mircea Eliade wrote in his monograph *Patterns of Comparative Religions* that:

a religious phenomenon will only be recognized as such if it is grasped at its own level, that is to say, if it is studied *as* something religious. To try to grasp the essence of such a phenomenon by means of physiology, psychology, sociology, economics, linguistics, art or any other study is false; it misses the one unique and irreducible element in it—the element of the sacred.<sup>4</sup>

By scouring Speck's data for patterns defining the sacred and profane, myth and symbols, and time and history (patterns which Eliade believed existed in all religious traditions), I hope to illuminate the Booger Dance's religious role. Viewed through the lens of Eliade's theory (which he unraveled throughout his writings rather than stated in an elegant, neat theorem), the Booger Dance stands as a religious phenomenon, and a true understanding of the ritual emanates.

The Booger Dance contains four distinct components, or "acts." In the first act, according to Speck, after about thirty minutes of social dancing, four to ten or more masked men stamp into the performance area, a room in a private residence, in a state of general mayhem.<sup>5</sup> They wear simple costumes of ragged European-style garb, sheets, and bed quilts, draped over their bodies and shoulders, and sometimes over the head.<sup>6</sup> Some of the Boogers fall to the floor in feigned convulsive seizures; others mockingly strike and push at the spectators in hopes of clumsily manhandling the women and girls.<sup>7</sup> The Boogers chase the screaming and giggling females throughout the room, obscenely gesturing by thrusting their buttocks to display gourd phalluses.<sup>8</sup> Speck notes that these phalluses sometimes contain water, which when released obviously imply ejaculation.<sup>9</sup> After completing this first sequence, all the while underscored with music, the Boogers compose themselves and take seats on a board or bench near the wall.<sup>10</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> Mircea Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, trans. Rosemary Sheed (Cleveland: The World Publishing Company, 1963), xiii.

<sup>5</sup> Speck, 28.

<sup>6</sup> Speck, 25.

<sup>7</sup> Speck, 31.

<sup>8</sup> Speck, 31.

<sup>9</sup> Speck, 29.

---

The brief second act begins when the host ("the Driver," since he drives the action of the evening) heralds the strangers' arrival. In whispered Cherokee, the Driver asks the Boogers' leader his group's identity; the leader tells the Driver that they are from a "distant land and going 'north' or 'south'".<sup>11</sup> The Driver loudly broadcasts the leader's response and then asks what the Boogers want, to which they unanimously reply, "Girls!" More fumbling girl-chasing follows and the women respond with more squealing and giggling.<sup>12</sup> The Boogers then impulsively demand a fight, but in their broken Cherokee they announce they want to dance, unwittingly punning the words "dance" and "fight," which differ in the Cherokee language only in the placement of accent.<sup>13</sup>

Undoubtedly the most striking components of the Boogers' costumes are their masks. These masks, although simplistic and crude, terrorize and yet delight the spectators. Crafted from large gourds or carved from buckeye wood, the masks represent faces of foreigners, such as Africans, Germans, French, Chinese, or other Indian tribesmen.<sup>14</sup> The Cherokee also make masks of hollowed-out hornet or wasp nests to personify mean or evil whites, or whites consumed by a disfiguring illness such as smallpox.<sup>15</sup> Dyed with vegetable pigments and decorated with bits of fur to suggest eyebrows, beards, and mustaches, the masks also have decidedly sexual connotations. For example, a mask might feature a large pendulous gourd for a penis-like nose, surrounded by a base of opossum fur to represent pubic hair.<sup>16</sup> These caricatures of genitalia represent a Cherokee belief in outsiders' obsession with sex.<sup>17</sup>

Speck concludes that the Boogers symbolize invaders into Cherokee territory, arguing that they are enervated metaphors for white intruders. Clearly the Boogers *are* invaders; they

---

<sup>10</sup> Speck, 29.

<sup>11</sup> Speck, 19.

<sup>12</sup> Speck, 19.

<sup>13</sup> Speck, 19.

<sup>14</sup> Speck, 19.

<sup>15</sup> Speck, 19.

<sup>16</sup> Charles Hudson, *The Southeastern Indians* (Knoxville, TN: U of TN Press, 1976), 406.

<sup>17</sup> Speck, 27.

"crash" the party uninvited and in the second action they reveal that they are not Cherokee and not from the locale. Undoubtedly, too, they also represent whites (as well as blacks, Asians, and other American Indians). However, in Eliadean terms the Boogers are not merely "mythical animals and frivolous demimen"<sup>18</sup> that are symbolic threats to Cherokee culture. Whereas for Speck the Boogers are ridiculous caricatures of the oppressor created by the Cherokee to psychologically deal with their suffering (by mocking and ridiculing the invader), for Eliade, the Boogers' depiction as ridiculous is not a psychological sublimation. The Boogers' lack of decorum, overt sexuality, and monstrousness suggests Chaos; they are therefore not merely political or cultural threats, but hazardous to the order of the Cherokee cosmology: the Upper World, the realm of benevolent spirits and gods; the Middle World, the realm of humankind and animals; and the Lower World, the realm of snakes, witches, monsters, and the Boogers.

The highly sexual nature of the Boogers and their insatiable appetite for Cherokee women suggests that the dance might have evolved from ancient orgiastic rites related to agricultural fertility. Yet, the Booger Dance occurs only in the winter, after the first frost, a fallow period in the agricultural calendar. Eliade, however, believes that these, the darkest days of the solar year, can be identified with the pre-Creation chaos because of sexual excesses that commonly mark the season and also the abolition of all norms. Such excesses also reveal an overturning of values as well as a general license, an orgiastic modality of society, essentially a reversion of all forms to a unified state of formlessness.<sup>19</sup> Eliade suggests that, as vegetation in the winter season lies dormant beneath the ground, this "dissolution of Form" is mirrored in the dissolution of "social forms" in the orgiastic chaos. The human plane mirrors the vegetable plane, as there is a return to primordial unity of chaos, in which limits, contours, and distances are imperceptible.<sup>20</sup>

The sexual acts of the orgy, however, have been replaced with a bawdy revel shared by the Boogers and the Cherokee participants. This disregard for decorum is seen also in more commonly known orgiastic rites such as Carnival and Mardi Gras. The function of such

---

<sup>18</sup> Speck, 3.

<sup>19</sup> Mircea Eliade, *Myths, Dreams, and Mysteries: The Encounter Between Contemporary Faiths and Archaic Realities*, trans. Phillip Mairet (New York: Harper Colophon Books [1957 French], 1975), 68.

<sup>20</sup> Eliade, *Myths*, 68-69.

---

gaities, according to Eliade, corresponds to that of the orgy, which is to return to the pre-creation chaos that holds the potentiality for regeneration and renewal. In orgiastic rites, man returns to the chaos before creation in order to be reborn, reinvigorated, not unlike emergence from water in Christian baptism or in the Cherokee rite of "going to water." The orgy, like the act of ablution, destroys creation while at the same time regenerates it and restores order. Eliade notes that in the pattern of everyday life broken up periodically by orgies (Saturnalia, carnivals, etc.), life is revealed to be a continuum of activity and sleep, of birth and death. The cosmos is made up of cycles, born out of chaos and returning to it through the dissolution of the cosmos. Eliade further maintains that all monstrous forms are degradations of this basic idea of the cyclical rhythm of the universe, and its thirst for regeneration and renewal.<sup>21</sup>

Importantly, as suggested earlier, a universal symbol of pre-creation chaos is water, and in many cosmogonies or creation stories, the separation of the Lower World (water) from the Middle World (earth) is the act that most defines creation. In the Cherokee cosmogony, the bringing up of mud by Water Beetle to create land, thereby separating it from the watery void, attests to this division of Chaos and Order. Many of the creatures of the chaotic Lower World are naturally water beings. For example, a local symbol for the Cherokee is the Uktena, a monstrous conglomeration of bird, deer, and serpent that swims in the rivers and streams of the Cherokee homelands and corresponds to the universal symbol of water for Chaos. As well, the paths to the Lower World are rivers and streams whose springs lie hidden in the Great Smoky Mountains. It follows that the Boogers, while not technically water beings, are relegated to the Lower World by process of elimination: their sinister nature precludes them from being inhabitants of the Upper World, just as their hyper-sexuality and irreverence excludes them from citizenship in the Middle World. The Boogers are out of place in the Middle World, and their infiltration into a realm not their own jeopardizes order and must be combated. The banishment of the Boogers, the separation of the Lower and Middle Worlds, and the simultaneous allegorical and truthful reenactment of the cosmogony occur later in the ritual.

At the beginning of the third act, and before the Boogers dance, the Booger leader whispers his mask name to the Driver, who loudly "translates" it. The Booger name follows one of two themes: names of foreigners, such as German, Frenchman, Black or Chinese; or descriptive and obscene names of private parts of the body, such as Black Buttocks, Sooty Anus,

---

<sup>21</sup> Eliade, *Patterns*, 359.

---

Rusty Anus, Big Phallus, and Her [Vagina] Has Long Hairs.<sup>22</sup> Speck writes that the Boogers then each dance a personal clown dance of "awkward and grotesque steps" resembling "a clumsy white man trying to imitate Indian dancing".<sup>23</sup> Speck again infuses his description of the dance with his assumptions regarding the symbol of the Booger to the Cherokee psyche. By suggesting that the Booger's movements are perceived by the Cherokee as the dancing of a "clumsy white man," he reduces the function of the ritual to one of psychology, supporting his assertion that the Booger is a metaphor substituted by the Cherokee for an authentic peril. Again, in terms of Eliade's theory, however, the Booger is a very real threat and not a diluted caricature for the Cherokee to digest more easily. The Booger is, for the Cherokee, a local symbol, corresponding to the universal symbol or archetype water, and it represents Chaos, Chaos capable of annihilating order but also of restoring order.

The Booger's name is taken for the first word of the song and each time the name is chanted, the audience erupts in applause and shouting.<sup>24</sup> After the clown-dances, the Driver invites the Booger leader and his troupe to dance the Eagle or Bear Dance, dances of peace and honor.<sup>25</sup> The leader whispers his decision (the Eagle Dance, the usual choice) to the Driver and an intermission of five-to-ten minutes follows to prepare for the subsequent dance.<sup>26</sup> The Boogers remain seated on their bench or rush outside for a break.<sup>27</sup>

After the intermission, and before the peace dance, the singers chant a song demanding tobacco for their services. The Driver then fills and lights a pipe, taking a puff for himself. He offers the pipe to the drummer and the singers, who each take a puff. Once all of the musicians have partaken in the smoking ritual, the Driver puts the pipe away.

The Driver then places a deerskin on the floor before the Eagle Killer, whom Speck calls the dramatic star of the evening, indicating the importance of the Eagle Dance and of the eagle

---

<sup>22</sup> Hudson, 406.

<sup>23</sup> Speck, 32.

<sup>24</sup> Speck, 32.

<sup>25</sup> Speck, 33.

<sup>26</sup> Speck, 33.

<sup>27</sup> Speck, 33.

itself.<sup>28</sup> The Eagle Killer, as his name denotes, killed the eagle to obtain the feathers essential for the Eagle Dance. The Driver presents the Eagle Killer with symbolic gifts in honor of his deed. These gifts traditionally included a deerskin (for moccasins), tobacco (to calm the nerves), a knife, lead and powder (for livelihood), and buttons and pins (for the Eagle Killer's female relations).<sup>29</sup> According to Speck, however, by 1936 five cents had supplanted the traditional gifts.<sup>30</sup>

Speck's description of the intermission, the tobacco ritual, and the acknowledgment of the Eagle Killer warrants further scrutiny. Speck makes no effort to determine the purpose of these components other than on a superficial level, thereby ignoring their cosmological function. In Eliadean terms, however, these activities serve to facilitate the climax of the Booger Dance, the dispersal of the Boogers and, therefore, the recreation of the cosmos out of the chaotic space and action the Boogers symbolized. These activities make sacred the space and the participants of the ritual. Surveying the sacred and the profane (very much a reenactment of the cosmogony, too, but not the focus of this investigation) is accomplished by, as shall be revealed, "ascending to heaven."

Ritualized use of tobacco of course prevails among American Indian tribes, and tobacco is given and received as an appropriate and respectful gift between humans and between humans and spirits. For example, among the Anishnaabeg, tobacco is offered loose or in the form of cigarettes to Elders within the tribe and is also offered in supplication or as a gift of thanks to a number of manitouk, including Kitche Manitou [the Supreme Spirit] and the Thunderbirds. Anishnaabeg often burn tobacco during a thunderstorm to request that the thunderbirds pass benignly over their homes and to thank them for rain as well as for hunting and killing malevolent Underwater manitouk.<sup>31</sup>

Traditionally, for the Cherokee, the tobacco smoked for ritual purposes was not *Nicotiana tabacum* L., the tobacco found in cigars and cigarettes, but rather *Nicotiana rustica* L., or "ancient

---

<sup>28</sup> Speck, 34.

<sup>29</sup> Speck, 34.

<sup>30</sup> Speck, 34.

<sup>31</sup> Theresa S. Smith, *The Island of the Anishnaabeg: Thunderers and Water Monsters in the Traditional Ojibwe Life World* (Moscow, ID: U of ID Press, 1995), 33.



tobacco".<sup>32</sup> The Iroquois call this tobacco, "real tobacco".<sup>33</sup> The Cherokee smoked this tobacco not only before rituals and ceremonies, but also to suppress hunger, as medicine, and as a "kind of spiritual facilitator" before councils of war and peace.<sup>34</sup> There seems to be a very important reason for the use of this type of tobacco rather than the more accessible *Nicotiana tabacum* L.: *Nicotiana rustica* L. allowed for mind-altering effects, far more than experienced by smoking the commercial *Nicotiana tabacum* L.<sup>35</sup> The "ancient tobacco" may contain more nicotine, the Indians may have held the smoke longer in the lungs (therefore absorbing more nicotine), or they may have cut "ancient tobacco" with a hallucinogenic such as the bright red leaves of dried sumac (*Rhus glabra* L.).<sup>36</sup>

"Ancient tobacco" was fit for ceremonial purposes when it was "remade" into a sacred symbol (in Eliadean terms, into a hierophany) through a ritualization process that began at its planting. The seeds of *Nicotiana rustica* L. were planted on ground first made sacred by the burning of wood that had been struck by lightning. In the fall, the Cherokee harvested the tobacco, which was then taken to running water. Prayers and formulae were said over the tobacco leaves, and they were infused with sunlight, human breath and saliva for extra power.<sup>37</sup>

It is not the tobacco leaf, however, that is most powerful, but the smoke that issues from it when burned. Smoke is considered by the Cherokee to be closely associated with the sun, fire's progenitor,<sup>38</sup> and therefore has the sun's life-giving properties. In Cherokee tradition, smoke was often blown into the nostrils of the ill to infuse them with life.<sup>39</sup> In Eliadean designations, smoke then is a bridge from the smoker to the sun, a universal symbol or

---

<sup>32</sup> Hudson, 353.

<sup>33</sup> James Mooney, "Myths of the Cherokee." Nineteenth Annual Report of the Bureau of American Ethnology, 1897-1898 (1900): 1-576, 439.

<sup>34</sup> Hudson, 353.

<sup>35</sup> Hudson, 353.

<sup>36</sup> John R. Swanton, *Indian Tribes of the Lower Mississippi Valley and Adjacent Coast of the Gulf of Mexico* (Washington, D.C.: Bureau of American Ethnology Bulletin, no. 43, 1911), 29.

<sup>37</sup> Thomas Mails, *Secret Native American Pathways: A Guide to Inner Peace* (Tulsa, OK: Council Oaks Books, 1988), 133.

<sup>38</sup> Hudson, 318.

<sup>39</sup> Mooney, 255, 439.

archetype for the Supreme Being, the ultimate Sky God. As the smoke facilitates a connection between the Middle and Upper Worlds, so too does smoking the mind-altering *Nicotiana rustica* L., the vehicle that allows the smoker's spirit to soar to the Upper World and "ascend to Heaven." Such spans, including the preeminent vehicle of ascension in the Booger Dance, the sacrificed eagle, whose plumage is utilized in the next "act," are conduits traversed to redress the transgression committed by man in his "fall," when ties between the Upper and Middle Worlds were severed.

Ascension rites, according to Eliade, are consecrating and determining activities that sublimate a profane space into a sacred one;<sup>40</sup> smoking tobacco and dancing the Eagle Dance in the Booger Dance seems to serve these same purposes, thus I will refer to them as ascension rites.

Moreover, Speck does not address the importance of setting. The private Cherokee home where the Booger Dance is held may be considered in Eliadean terminology to be an *axis mundi*, or center of the world, a common pattern in world religions. In ancient times, before the invasion of other races, the Booger Dance would have been held in the village's council house, a centrally located and raised structure with seven sides (one for each clan) that could seat many Cherokee.<sup>41</sup> The nearly circular structure contained benches arranged in a circular pattern, facing center, in which there was a pit for fire.<sup>42</sup>

Eliade deduces the symbolism of such a structure to be a metaphor for the "sacred mountain" standing at the Center of the World, where heaven and earth meet. This Center of the World, for it lies in the middle or navel of the earth, constitutes a break in the homogeneity of space, a break that serves as a passage and means of communication from one cosmic region to another. One or another of certain images, such as, for example, a mountain, tree, or pillar may represent the *axis mundi*.<sup>43</sup> Every temple (this designation certainly includes the Cherokee council house and thus, in the absence of a council house, the Cherokee home), every palace,

---

<sup>40</sup> Eliade, *Patterns*, 104.

<sup>41</sup> Olivia Skipper Rivers, "The Changes in Composition, Function, and Aesthetic Criteria as a Result of Acculturation Found in Five Traditional Dances of the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians in North Carolina." (Diss. U of WI-Madison, 1990), 59.

<sup>42</sup> Rivers, 59.

<sup>43</sup> Eliade, *Patterns*, 39.

---

every sacred town and royal residence is a local symbol that corresponds to the archetypal "sacred mountain." Therefore, like the "Sacred Mountain," the temple or sacred city (for our purposes, the Cherokee home serving as the setting for Booger Dance), is a place through which the *axis mundi* passes and is thus a junction between the Upper, Middle and Lower Worlds.<sup>44</sup>

This creation of a sacred space, and acknowledgment of its location at the Center of the World, is indicative of the Cherokee belief that their land, their world, was at the midpoint of the earth. The valorization of Cherokee territory then, as not only the land of the ancestors but also as the navel of the earth, the location where Creation occurred and from whence Creation spread, gives insight to the anguish that the Cherokee must have experienced at their forced removal from this homeland in 1838-1839. Not only did the Cherokee lose claim to a physical place, the more traditional-minded Cherokee's sense of loss must have surpassed merely the loss of material property. Eliade might maintain that for the traditional Cherokee, her displacement from her inhabited world would incite in her feelings of nothingness, as she is flung into the chaos surrounding her world. This unknown space extending beyond her world, uncosmicized because unconsecrated, represents absolute nonbeing for the religious person. Eliade asserts that, "If, by some evil chance; [she] strays into it, [she] feels emptied of [her] ontic substance, as if [she] were dissolving in Chaos, and [she] finally dies".<sup>45</sup>

Ascension rites also create a ladder between the Middle and Upper Worlds. Eliade writes

In whatever religious context you find them, whatever sort of value is placed upon them—shamanist rite or initiation rite, mystical ecstasy or oniric [dream-like] vision, eschatological myth or heroic legend—ascents, the climbing of mountains or stairs, flights into the air, and so on, all these things always signify a transcending of the human and a penetration into higher cosmic levels.<sup>46</sup>

These rites of the third "act" therefore prepare the participants for the reenactment of the cosmogony by taking them back to the true place of origins, the Upper World, readying them for the journey to the Middle World and the reestablishment of the cosmological configuration.

---

<sup>44</sup> Eliade, *Patterns*, 375.

<sup>45</sup> Eliade, *Patterns*, 64.

<sup>46</sup> Eliade, *Patterns*, 108.

---

The fourth and, according to Speck, most important act of the Booger Dance proper then begins. The singers chant the song of the Eagle Dance and the Boogers move onto the floor with the Cherokee men who begin to dance the peace dance. The dancers, impersonating eagles flying higher and higher to escape the hunter's arrows, circle gracefully with their arms outstretched, right hands clutching wands of seven eagle feathers, gourd rattles in the left. In ancient times, the Cherokee carried entire eagle tails, but as the birds became scarce they substituted wands of sourwood (believed to hold power against witches) holding feathers of the sacred number seven.<sup>47</sup> Like the Booger Dance, the Eagle Dance is also a winter dance. The eagle is the nemesis of the snake; as the snakes hibernate underground in the colder months, the Cherokee can summon the power of the eagle without fear of rousing the sleeping serpents.<sup>48</sup>

Cherokee women then join the Boogers in the Eagle Dance, one woman for each masked figure. As the women serenely dance, each carrying an eagle-feather wand in her left hand and nothing in the right, the Boogers advance upon them sexually. They desecrate the purity of the dance, mocking the hospitality of the Indians, and, for Speck, symbolically mime the cultural "rape" of the Cherokee. They exhibit their gourd phalluses, obscenely bumping and grinding. Unperturbed, the women continue to dance with great dignity.

At the close of the dance, the Boogers boisterously bound for the door. The Boogers make one last grab for an unwary female, but fail to drag off their struggling victim. They run into the night, leaving the spectators in side-splitting laughter. The Boogers then return, *sans* masks and costumes, as well-behaved Cherokee men and the social dancing and party continue.<sup>49</sup>

For Speck, the psycho-social function of the dance is made explicit in this fourth action: the Cherokee symbolically deal with the psychological trauma of their encounters with the oppressor by standing steadfast and morally upright in the face of their enemies. He proposes that this play-acting may therefore satisfy the need for the Cherokee to see their foes

---

<sup>47</sup> Mooney, 469.

<sup>48</sup> Reginald and Gladys Laubin, *Indian Dances of North America and their Importance to Indian Life* (Norman, OK: U of OK Press, 1977), 241.

<sup>49</sup> Hudson, 408.

vanquished, in a kind of "sympathetic magic" in which "like affects like".<sup>50</sup> In the Booger Dance, the Cherokee drive the buffoon-like, seemingly impotent invaders away; such an outcome is hoped for in a world in which the invaders are truly terrifying, thus the dance is performed as a medicinal tonic to ensure that the desired effects come to fruition.

Speck, too, intimates that the Cherokee find empowerment by impersonating those they fear. Perhaps by impersonating the forbidden outsider (undoubtedly the forbidden *male* outsider), the Cherokee can vicariously live out their fantasies, normally off-limits according to strictures of Cherokee social decorum, but perceived by them to be *de rigueur* for non-Cherokee (and the cause of all of their social ills.) In the Booger Dance, the performers and the audience can safely experience what is off-limits to them.

While these perceptions of the dance may have credence, and they are worthy of further examination, to accept them as denotative of the dance's only function (a societal or psychological one) diminishes its sacred and cosmic capacity. In Eliadean terms, the Booger Dance is not imitative: it truly *reenacts* the creation of the Cherokee cosmos. The fourth action is clearly the most important, as Speck says. But Speck's rationale that this act is important because the audience experiences a catharsis by watching the defeat of representations of their foes does not hold when Eliade's theory illuminates it. Rather, in this "act" the world is destroyed and created anew.

The juxtaposition of the highly sacred Eagle Dance with the comic and lecherous machinations of the Boogers is unnatural, symbolizing a Middle World enveloped by chaos, a Middle World that has lost form. The Middle World therefore must be destroyed in order to be reformed. Before the regenerative process is set into motion, and before the world is completely destroyed by the actions of the Boogers, the Eagle Dance asks the Upper World for strength and power.

The eagle, as stated above, is an emissary of the Upper World. Its plumage, which plays a central role in the performance of the Eagle Dance, serves as a mode of transcendence to a higher level of consciousness, the means by which to go "above and beyond" the human condition. The Eagle Dance was the highest dance of honor in the entire canon of Cherokee ritual dance. James Adair wrote in the eighteenth century:

---

<sup>50</sup> James George Frazer, *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. 12 volumes (London: The Macmillan Company, 1911-1915), 11-48.

---

The Indians cannot shew greater honour to the greatest potentate on earth, than to ... dance before him with the eagles tails.<sup>51</sup>

The notion of the bird as a symbol for the soul and its ecstatic flight permeates history and is universal. Eliade asserts that "flight" and all of its related symbolism signifies a break with the universe of everyday experience. Rupturing the bond between mankind and profane existence (obtained through "flight") further symbolizes *transcendence* as well as *freedom*. Eliade maintains that the desire for freedom (for reality defined by sacrality) is a universal human condition rooted in the psyche, not brought about by certain historical moments or as the result of cosmic pressures or economic insecurity. The desire for absolute freedom is an essential longing of mankind irrespective of culture or society; it is quintessential of man. The wish to free himself from his limitations, viewed as a kind of degradation, and to regain freedom is a uniquely human characteristic.<sup>52</sup>

As the Cherokee dance the Eagle Dance and manipulate the feathered sourwood wands (ersatz wings), they reveal the human need for transcendence and freedom. These states define the universal human condition only once: in Paradise, before the fall from grace and unconstrained intercourse between the Upper and Middle Worlds ceased. To the Cherokee, the Eagle Dance, therefore, most importantly speaks of a human desire to return to Paradise.

The Eagle Dance, like the Booger Dance, also typically contains four distinct components.<sup>53</sup> However, the Booger Dance observed by Speck employs only the first part of the Eagle Dance: the defeat of the enemy. This sequence abolishes the Boogers from the Middle World, after they intruded upon it and ultimately destroyed it through the defilement of the Eagle Dance. The Boogers wreak havoc throughout the performance, but their blasphemous disregard for the sacredness of the Eagle Dance reveals their true nature as chaotic destroyers of the cosmos.

Speck records that the women's entrance into the dance is symbolic of the Cherokee's submission to the will of their invaders, including their sexual demands, as the Boogers indulge

---

<sup>51</sup> James Adair, *The History of the American Indians*, 1775 (New York: Johnson Reprint Corporation, 1968), 176-177.

<sup>52</sup> Eliade, *Myths*, 105.

<sup>53</sup> Rivers, 168.

in a highly suggestive and erotic pantomime, standing behind the women and thrusting their gourd phalli in pseudo-intercourse.<sup>54</sup> As suggested earlier, however, when viewed in the context of Eliade's theories, the sexual nature of the dance is indicative of chaos, "the beginning" before Creation, and indicates from a religious perspective the Cherokee desire to achieve a complete regeneration of time.

For Eliade, an orgy is the regression into the primeval chaos that precedes all creation, the manifestation of ordered form. The presence of the orgy among the ceremonials of the calendar shows the desire to abolish the past by abolishing all creation. Forms merge by the conquering of social conditions, by combining opposites, and by the suspension of all norms. To effect the dissolution of the world, of which the community is in microcosm, license is let loose, commandments are violated, and all opposites are brought together. Time is therefore restored to the mythical moment of the *beginning* (chaos), and is also the end (flood or *ekpyrosis*, apocalypse). As all forms fuse into one single, vast, undifferentiated unity, on a cosmological level, the "orgy" represents chaos or the ultimate disappearance of limits and will soon inaugurate the moment of creation.<sup>55</sup>

Eliade maintains that chaos is always followed by a new creation of the cosmos;<sup>56</sup> I propose that the critical moment of creation occurs when chaos intersects with the sacred symbols or hierophanies of the Upper World. This is the apparent case in the Booger Dance, for the Boogers, upon encountering the spirits of the Upper World in the Eagle Dance, abandon their intrigues and retreat to their proper place in the cosmos.

The Booger Dance therefore destroys the time of the past and brings about a "new time;" time is shattered by destroying the cosmos and returning it to the moments before the Creation. For the Cherokee, the regeneration of time demonstrated by the Booger Dance occurs seasonally, at the end of the calendar year, in the dark days after the harvest and before the sowing of fields. Many of the qualities identified by Eliade in "end of year/beginning of year" rites are easily discernible in the Booger Dance, including the driving out of "demons" and the expulsion of evil from a village; masked processions, with masks representing the dead or some

---

<sup>54</sup> Speck, 34.

<sup>55</sup> Eliade, *Patterns*, 399-400.

<sup>56</sup> Eliade, *Patterns*, 400.

---

other entity from the Lower World (therefore representative of chaos) and the entertainment of these creatures and their eventual dispersion from the midst of the living; fights between two opposite forces; and a reversal of the normal order or "orgy".<sup>57</sup>

After the Boogers leave the dance floor and exit the room, the Driver, the host completes the ceremony and the act of Creation by collecting and putting away the rattles and drums. They will be brought out again periodically throughout the year, before the next Booger Dance the following fall, for other rituals that regenerate time. Such a ritual is the First New Moon of Spring, in which the old fires of the village are extinguished and the new ones ignited from Sacred Fire in the center of the Council House. Another is the Green Corn Ceremony, commemorating the ripening of the corn crop. Yet another is the Ripe Corn Feast, celebrating the fall harvest. There is also the Great New Moon Ceremony, held in October, the time that the earth had been created according to Cherokee folklore.<sup>58</sup> The Cherokee also have the capacity to abolish history daily, destroying the cosmos and recreating it in the ritual of "going to water."

A longing to annihilate profane time and dwell in sacred time (due to the terror of history) is found, according to Eliade, worldwide:

we see the desire and hope of regenerating time as a whole, of being able to live—"humanly", "historically"—in eternity, by transforming successive time into a single eternal moment. . . . The repetition of archetypes shows the paradoxical wish to achieve an ideal form (the archetype) in the very framework of human existence, to be in time without reaping its disadvantages, without the inability to "put back the clock".<sup>59</sup>

Eliade qualifies this assertion by interjecting that the desire to regenerate time does not depreciate life on earth and all of its qualities in favor of a spiritual detachment from the world. This "nostalgia for eternity," he affirms, speaks of man's longing for a paradise here on earth:

In this sense, it would seem that the ancient myths and rites connected with sacred time and space may be traceable back to so many nostalgic memories of an

---

<sup>57</sup> Eliade, *Patterns*, 398.

<sup>58</sup> Rivers, 152-163.

<sup>59</sup> Eliade, *Patterns*, 407-408.



---

"earthly paradise", and some sort of "realizable" eternity to which man still thinks he may have access.<sup>60</sup>

Eliade is careful to say in *Patterns of Comparative Religion* that:

Obviously there are no *purely* religious phenomena; no phenomenon can be solely and exclusively religious. Because religion is human it must for that very reason be something social, something linguistic, something economic—you cannot think of man apart from language and society. But it would be hopeless to try and explain religion in terms of any one of those basic functions which are really no more than another way of saying what man is.<sup>61</sup>

There is no question that the Booger Dance is informed by historical events, as the Boogers carry the names of the strangers that have raped Cherokee women, stolen Cherokee land, and removed the Cherokee from their traditional homes. The sexual names of the Boogers are probably the oldest, remnants from before contact with whites and other outsiders, when the monsters were representative of the chaos ascribed to agricultural dormancy and revealed in orgiastic rites of reversal. Further research in the field may reveal that the Boogers personified in contemporary performances are caricatures of modern representatives of chaos, personages that today threaten Cherokee survival, such as agents from the Bureau of Indian Affairs or politicians.

To acknowledge the Booger Dance as only a palatable way for the Cherokee to deal psychologically with tragic historical situations, as a way of laughing at pain rather than weeping over it, however, diminishes its significance as a religious phenomenon. Such narrow admission also diminishes the ritual's practitioners who claim the ritual as a religious rite. To reduce the Booger Dance to a function that serves, as van Gennep might conjecture, merely as a rite of passage from one social state to another, or, as Victor Turner might posit, a social drama struggling with tears in the social fabric, egotistically asserts that those who practice a ritual do so ignorantly, without knowledge of the ritual's true meaning. Theories of reductionism therefore insinuate that the ritual's practitioners are naïve or perhaps dishonest; they also denigrate religion as the unscientific superstitions of primitives. Reductionism implies

---

<sup>60</sup> Eliade, *Patterns*, 408.

<sup>61</sup> Eliade, *Patterns*, xiii.

appropriation, too, in that by fully explaining religion (in the words of Daniel Pals, "by reducing it to the dynamics of class struggle or a personality disorder"),<sup>62</sup> the theorist exerts an intellectual ownership over the religion by claim of "understanding" it. To reduce as such, refuting the beliefs of those studied (or at the very least, acknowledging yet circumnavigating them), is bigoted and unethical.

Viewing Speck's account of the Booger Dance through the lens of Eliade's theory, however, identifies it as one of the myriad rituals performed by humankind in a desire to transcend a meaningless existence by realigning with the sacred. The ritual allows the Cherokee to metaphysically journey back to their sacred origins, thus restoring to them their existentially real status in the cosmos. The Booger Dance is therefore not simplistic posturing or an archaism of actions practiced in a more primitive time conjectured by Speck: illuminated by Eliade's theory, the ritual serves to actually move heaven and earth, a potentiality that is at least harmonious with the sentiments of the ritual's practitioners.

Dr. William Douglas Powers  
133 Degenstein  
Susquehanna University  
Selinsgrove, PA 17870

---

<sup>62</sup> Daniel L. Pals, *Seven Theories of Religion* (Oxford: Oxford U Press, 1996), 281.

---

## Works Cited

- Adair, James. *The History of the American Indians*. 1775. New York: Johnson Reprint Corporation, 1968.
- Eliade, Mircea. *Cosmos and History: The Myth of the Eternal Return*. Trans. Willard R. Trask. 1954. New York: Harper and Row, 1959.
- . *Myths, Dreams, and Mysteries: The Encounter Between Contemporary Faiths and Archaic Realities*. Trans. Phillip Mairet. New York: Harper Colophon Books [1957 French], 1975.
- . *Patterns in Comparative Religion*. Trans. Rosemary Sheed. Cleveland: The World Publishing Company, 1963.
- Frazer, James George. *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion*. 3<sup>rd</sup> Ed. 12 volumes. London: The Macmillan Company, 1911-1915.
- Hudson, Charles. *The Southeastern Indians*. Knoxville, TN: U of TN Press, 1976.
- Laubin, Reginald and Gladys. *Indian Dances of North America and their Importance to Indian Life*. Norman, OK: U of OK Press, 1977.
- Lott, Eric. *Love and Theft*. Oxford: Oxford U Press, 1993.
- Mails, Thomas. *Secret Native American Pathways: A Guide to Inner Peace*. Tulsa, OK: Council Oaks Books, 1988.
- Mooney, James. "Myths of the Cherokee." *Nineteenth Annual Report of the Bureau of American Ethnology, 1897-1898*. (1900): 1-576.
- Pals, Daniel L. *Seven Theories of Religion*. Oxford: Oxford U Press, 1996.

Rivers, Olivia Skipper. "The Changes in Composition, Function, and Aesthetic Criteria as a Result of Acculturation Found in Five Traditional Dances of the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians in North Carolina." Diss. U of WI-Madison, 1990.

Smith, Theresa S. *The Island of the Anishnaabeg: Thunderers and Water Monsters in the Traditional Ojibwe Life World*. Moscow, ID: U of ID Press, 1995.

Speck, Frank G. and Leonard Broom, in collaboration with Will West Long. *Cherokee Dance and Drama*. 1983. Norman, OK: U of OK Press, 1993.

Swanton, John R. *Indian Tribes of the Lower Mississippi Valley and Adjacent Coast of the Gulf of Mexico*. Washington, D.C.: Bureau of American Ethnology Bulletin, no. 43, 1911.