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NORTHERN SHOSHONI FAMILY ORGANIZATION AND CULTURE

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Because their population was scattered over a vast terrain, with considerable peril to individual survival, the early Shoshoni lived in expanded families. That way, a modest-sized group of closely-related interdependent people could take care of each other's needs. In each generation, only four relationships were recognized: older brother, older sister, younger brother and younger sister. Cousins were regarded as brothers or sisters, with no distinction at all between what the whites called cousins and brothers. In the most notable case of this kind of relationship among the Northern Shoshoni, Sacajawea told Lewis and Clark that the band leader they met on the Lemhi--Cameahwait--was her brother. But whether, in English terms, this meant brother or cousin cannot be determined. For the Shoshoni, the difference between brother or cousin did not matter. In their families, a man often had two wives who were sisters. And, somewhat less often, two brothers would share the same wife. In that kind of situation, the English relationships of brother, half-brother, and cousin began to merge. On that account, the Shoshoni saw no point in keeping track of the complexities that arose in their more expansive family relationships. Although monogamy was the most common system of Shoshoni marriage, these other forms neither were excluded nor disallowed. And Shoshoni expanded families, assembled on the basis of siblings who lived together, often developed into these other arrangements--such as a brother with two sisters for wives--when only part of an expanded family survived.

Partly because many of the Shoshoni would have had to go a long way to find a marriage partner who was not a fairly close relative anyway--on account of the sparse, widely-dispersed population--all kinds of complex, multiple relationships developed within families. And with frequent loss of one or both parents, children often were cared for by grandparents, if they proved to be the survivors. Shoshoni expanded families included grandparents, parents (often with more than one husband or wife, with the extra partners' brothers or sisters), and children who might be siblings or cousins. With grandparents often responsible for grandchildren, Shoshoni families tended to follow the old ways and to resist change. Cultural conservatism of this kind showed up particularly among the Mountain Shoshoni or Sheepeaters. In any event, these expanded families that formed the basis for Shoshoni society (and for cultural preservation) also provided in the best way possible for individual survival of family members. Any adults who happened to survive looked out for all the children.

Even for those Shoshoni who formed into mounted bands in order to range more widely over the country, traditional expanded families retained their importance. Particularly among the Lemhi, a talented expanded family provided the leadership which brought the band together and preserved it as one generation succeeded another. In the

case of the Fort Hall band, a Bannock family often provided leadership essential to preservation of an important mounted group of traveling families. For several generations, Peiem and his family led the mounted Boise Shoshoni, and when a group of mounted bands decided to travel together around 1810 and 1820, Peiem's family provided leadership for 1,500 to 2,000 traveling Shoshoni. In Shoshoni culture, expanded families formed the basic units as bands were developed among those Shoshoni who organized into bands. And for the Shoshoni who never adopted a mounted way of life, and who never joined into loosely organized bands, expanded families were the only social unit familiar to them. Eventual Shoshoni adjustment to problems brought by white settlement had to be made in the context of this system of expanded families.

Shoshoni religious practices featured individual guardian spirits. In contrast to the whites the Shoshoni had no organized religion, no dogma, and no dependence upon theocratic principles. Shoshoni religious belief provided personal help from nature that provided individual self reliance and skill, courage, and wisdom to meet life's problems in an often difficult environment. A Shoshoni child, at about the age of twelve, was supposed to go out to a butte or mountain to have a major religious experience. With luck, the result would be a dream or vision that would provide, from nature, a personal guardian spirit: an animal, plant, the sun or moon, or almost any natural phenomenon that would offer help and protection from then on. They were close to nature, and almost anything might serve this purpose. With the guardian spirit came a personal song. (Sometimes in literature dealing with Indians of this kind of religious persuasion--and that includes many aside from the Shoshoni--this song is misidentified as a death song. Such misinterpretation would arise because in any crisis--sometimes including a fatal one--the guardian spirit's song would be sung to invoke help.) These songs and the guardian spirits associated with them varied in merit or power. But a child fortunate enough to come back after a dream or vision would be equipped with a personal guardian spirit that would serve for a lifetime. Some children, less fortunate in their search for a guardian spirit, would not be favored with an essential dream or vision. In that event, a necessary song and guardian spirit could be acquired through purchase. Or a particularly potent song could be taught to others. Commercial traffic in guardian spirits and songs was not encouraged, but especially powerful songs could be preserved that way over more than one generation. Some Shoshoni, as in white society, were free thinkers who dispensed with guardian spirits and songs. In contrast to the Nez Perce, who felt they just about had to have a guardian spirit, the Shoshoni were more practical and were under less social pressure to have one. However, most of the early Shoshoni adhered to these religious values throughout their lives.

In Shoshoni religion, anyone favored with an exceptionally potent guardian spirit had an obligation to use a powerful song to help others also. An eagle or a buffalo, a wolf or a bear, a beaver, or a rattlesnake stood high in the scale of guardian spirits. And the songs themselves, through their impact on listeners, had variable power. Anyone with a powerful enough guardian spirit could become a shaman who might help others in need of healing.

Shamanism involved belief, vision, and an art of manipulation: an ordinary person got by somehow with help from his guardian spirit, but in a crisis, medical help could be obtained through intervention of a shaman. The Shoshoni thus had a system of socialized medicine, and practitioners had special privileges appropriate for their important humanitarian contributions to society. Sometimes a shaman, although obligated to offer service--in singing a song--in a time of need, also was rewarded in food or clothing if the

song produced a cure. a shaman was not supposed to use his powers for personal gain, though no doubt some of them did. But those who did their duty could get into trouble if a song yielded unsatisfactory results. An unsuccessful shaman invited death in the event of failure, and the Shoshoni lacked a less drastic system of malpractice insurance. Anyone with an unusually powerful guardian spirit, knowing of this advantage, could go out and accomplish exceptional personal feats. This kind of Shoshoni religious practice has antecedents far into the prehistoric past and continues uninterrupted after close to two centuries of white contact.

Shoshoni culture also was enriched with a tradition of legends to explain the distant past. a variety of complex mythological tales of creation make up an important part of the Shoshoni heritage. Ordinarily these portray two participants: wolf and coyote. Wolf usually starts as creator, while his younger brother, coyote, enters as a trickster responsible for disease, pain, and death. Coyote brings ill to the world normally through carelessness, laziness, or error: his mistakes confuse and disrupt the original perfection of wolf's creation and result in a world less good which replaced the perfection of the original world. As an example, in one of these creation stories, wolf (who was and knew what was needed for an ideal earth), told coyote to lay soil on the original water on which their land was formed. Following wolf's instructions, coyote ran over the area in all four directions placing land on the water as was required. But coyote was too lazy to keep running long enough to make territory sufficient for everyone who would need living space. Because of coyote's lack of industry, the earth got overcrowded. Yet coyote also appears as a culture hero who saved fire for people to use and who introduced technical perfection as a by-product of his lazy ways. In their accounts of creation, which also have stories of destruction of the earth's original people by fire or by flood, the Shoshoni share ancient legends with early peoples of California, among other places. With earlier antecedents in traditional creation accounts of Asian derivation, these explanations--notable for their variety within a general structural framework--continue to form an essential element in Shoshoni tradition.

Ceremonial dancing, as well as ancient mythology, has provided the Shoshoni with an important form of religious and social expression. Four indigenous dances come from ancient Shoshoni tradition. a circle dance, performed each spring as a grass dance, had the greatest importance of all. Limited to the Northern Shoshoni and the people of the Great Basin, this dance did not gain acceptance in plateau culture. Songs with words--as poems--accompanied this native dance, which introduced hunting season or salmon season in forms such as a salmon dance. Other variants of this circle dance applied to other seasons, and in ancient times, a fathers' dance appeared as a reinterpretation of the spring or grass dance.

Next in importance to the circle dance, a bear dance developed as a back and forth dance in which men and women faced each other in two long lines that advanced and retired. Originally a hunting dance, this ceremony had nothing to do with bears (except possibly to ward them off): because its antecedents long since had been forgotten, this dance finally was explained as the contribution of a half man-half bear creature, who, in an old legend, taught the dance to an ancient Shoshoni people. Used only by the Shoshoni and the Utes, this dance took two forms: in one musical accompaniment was provided by a drum; in the other, an upside down basket, scraped by a rasp stick, issued a fantastic sound to inspire the dancers.

In addition to their circle dance and their bear dance, the early Northern Shoshoni had a rabbit dance and a scalp dance. Unlike the others, the rabbit dance excluded

women. Men (who dressed up like rabbits and acted like game) did the rabbit dance by themselves, as individual performers. But the scalp dance was done primarily by women. Men beat hand drums, while women with eagle feathers or beaded costumes danced around a scalp pole. Successful scalp hunting against the Blackfeet or Nez Perce was highly regarded, and scalp dance songs were composed specifically for the occasion. This ceremony had many variations suited to the particular occasion which evoked the dance.

Sometime before white contact, the Northern Shoshoni acquired a plateau spirit dance from the north. Performed in the winter (more recently between Christmas and New Year's) this three-night dance had special religious significance. In addition, four other dances reached the Shoshoni in later years. These included a Walker Lake (Pyramid?) Northern Paiute reinterpretation of the spring dance as a ghost dance in 1889. With the ghost dance, the Indians were supposed to regain their country from the whites. When that did not quite work out, the ghost dance was abandoned at Fort Hall. But around 1890, the Fort Hall Shoshoni became interested in the traditional plains war dance, and a decade later, they began to take up the plains sun dance as well. Finally, in more recent times, the plains owl dance--a social dance--gained currency at Fort Hall. But these dances are not to be confused with the old traditional ceremonies of the Northern Shoshoni.

Ceremonial games and songs also added to the variety of the Shoshoni way of life. Prior to white contact, they had a gambling game (in which one guessed which hand an opposing player held a particular bone) known as a stick game for the tally sticks. Accompanied by songs audible a half-mile away, stick games could go on all night, and get wild and uncontrollable. Melodies and words for these songs varied with the location of the performers. These ceremonies served as a device to release tension and eventually as a substitute for intertribal warfare. In their songs, the Northern Shoshoni used melodious Great Basin music (complete with words and poems) along with harsh, wordless chants from the Great Plains. This combination of cultural elements from different neighboring peoples came naturally to the Northern Shoshoni, who occupied a territory geographically adapted for that kind of interchange.

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