

BOAS (F.)

The doctrine of souls and of  
disease among the Chinook  
Indians.

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BOAS (P.) Compliment of the author.

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THE DOCTRINE OF SOULS AND OF DISEASE AMONG THE CHINOOK INDIANS.<sup>1</sup>

WHEN visiting the Pacific coast in the summer of 1891, I obtained a series of texts from one of the last survivors of the Chinook tribe, setting forth the doctrine of souls as held by the Chinook Indians. I give here a translation of these texts, with a few slight abbreviations and a few additions which were added by the narrator when translating the texts : —

“When a person is sick, the seers go and visit the ghosts. Three or four are sent. One who has a powerful guardian spirit goes first; another one who has a powerful guardian spirit goes last; the less powerful ones go in the middle. They go to search for the soul of the sick chief. Their guardian spirits go to the country of the ghosts. When their road becomes dangerous, the first one sings his song. When danger approaches from the rear, the last one sings his song. They begin their ceremonies in the evening, and when the morning star rises they reach the soul of the sick person. They take it and return. Sometimes it takes them two nights to find the soul. As soon as they return it the patient recovers.

“Sometimes, when the guardian spirits of these seers pursue the soul, they see that it has taken the trail leading to the left hand, and they say he must die. If it has taken the trail to the right he will get well.

“Now the guardian spirits arrive at the hole where the ghosts use to drink. If the soul of the sick one has drunk of the water in that hole he cannot recover; even if all the conjurers attempt to heal him, they cannot do so. When they find a soul that has drunk of this water, they take it and return to the country of the living. At first the soul is large, but as they approach the country of the Indians it becomes smaller, and the people who know the art of healing say: ‘Perhaps he will die to-morrow.’ On the next day they try to give him his soul. It has become too small for his body and does not fill it. Then the patient dies.

“When the guardian spirits of the seers go to the country of the ghosts, and see that the soul of the patient is far from their town and that he has not taken any food, they say, ‘We shall heal him, because he has not partaken of any food.’ Then they take the soul and return with it. Even if the patient is very sick he will recover.

“When the ghosts take away a soul, its owner faints at once. Then the seers are paid and their guardian spirits pursue the ghosts. The soul which has been taken away sees the ghosts. Part of them

<sup>1</sup> Paper read at the Annual Meeting, Cambridge, December 29, 1892.



he knows, and part of them he does not know; only those who died a short time ago he recognizes. When the guardian spirits meet the soul, they turn it round and the patient recovers at once.

"When the ghosts carry away the soul of a person, and there are no seers to recover the soul, the sick one must die.

"When the guardian spirits of the seers pursue the soul and it has entered the house of the ghosts, they cannot recover it and the sick one must die; then the guardian spirits cry.

"When they see a horse in the country of the ghosts and they do not take it back, it must die; also if they see a man there who is apparently well, and they do not take back his soul, he must die. When they see a canoe and they do not bring it back, it will be broken.

"The conjurers in their incantations use a manikin made of wood and cedar bark. When a conjurer wants to make use of this manikin he gives it to a person who has no guardian spirit, who shakes it for him, and they two go to the country of the ghosts. Then the man who carries the manikin sees the country of the ghosts, the manikin carrying him.

"Each person has two souls, a large one and a small one. When a person falls sick the lesser soul leaves his body. When the conjurers catch it again and return it to him he will recover.

"The guardian spirits of the conjurers, when pursuing the souls, go toward sunset. When they return with the soul they go toward sunrise. If the face of the conjurer should be turned in the opposite direction, he must die.

"When a chief dies his soul goes to the beach; only the most powerful conjurers know where to find it and can bring it back.

"When a sick person is to die, it is always high water, and the guardian spirits move slowly. If he is to recover, it is always low water.

"When the guardian spirits find a soul it is visible, but after they have taken it nothing is to be seen, and they say that they have taken it away. When they try to take the soul of a person who is to die, the soul resembles fire, and sparks fall down. They try in vain to gather them up, and the conjurer says: 'You will die.'" When the patient will recover, the soul feels light; when he will die, it feels heavy.

"The ghosts watch the souls which they have taken away; then the conjurer sends off his guardian spirit in the shape of a deer. The ghosts pursue it and leave the soul alone. They forget it. Thus the conjurer deceives them and takes the soul away.

"When a person is angry with another, he engages a seer to watch for his enemy. If he finds him asleep he takes out his soul, which he hides in a graveyard, under the house, or in rotten wood.

Then the person falls sick. His friends pay a conjurer to look for his soul. He says: 'Somebody has taken it away.' He looks for it and finds it where it has been hidden. If the soul is still unhurt, the sick one will recover. If the conjurer's guardian spirit has eaten of it, he must die.

"Sometimes a conjurer is paid a high price secretly to take away the soul of a person. Sometimes he is given dentaria, sometimes he is given a woman; then indeed he takes away the soul. Sometimes he takes both souls of the person, who in this case cannot recover. When the relatives of the sick one learn about it they kill the conjurer. If they do not kill him he must pay a blood-fine.

"When a conjurer wants to kill a person, he shoots, in a supernatural way, diseases at his enemy. Sometimes he is paid secretly for doing so. When the relatives learn about it they kill the conjurer. When a supernatural disease is found in a sick person, a good conjurer is paid to take it out. He finds five such diseases and one rope. Then the sick one recovers. When the disease goes right through the conjurer's enemy he must die.

"As soon as it is discovered that a person is shot, his friends endeavor to take out the disease. The conjurer clasps his hands so that the thumb of the right hand is held by the fingers of the left. He catches the disease in his hands. It tries to escape, and when the thumb of the right hand comes out of the clasped hands the disease has escaped. While he holds the disease in his hands, five people take hold of him, two at his legs, two at his arms, and one at his back. They lift him; then a kettle is placed near the fire and filled with water. They try to bring the conjurer to the water, but the spirit of the disease resists. When he escapes, the men fall down, because the resisting spirit suddenly gives way. Sometimes they succeed in carrying the conjurer to the water. Then the disease-spirit is put into the water. When it gets cold it loses its power. Then they look at it. Sometimes they see that the spirit is made of claws of a wolf or of a bird; and sometimes of the bone of a dead person, which is carved in the form of a man. If the spirit has killed five people, then there are three cuts on one of its arms and two on the other. If it has killed eight persons, there are five cuts on one arm and three on the other. If it has killed ten people, there are five cuts on each arm. Sometimes, when they bring the conjurer to the kettle and he puts his hands into it, the kettle bursts, and they must get another one. When the conjurer gets tired, he asks another one to strike his hands with a rattle. Then the other one strikes the hands, in which the disease-spirit is held, with a rattle. He rubs the disease-spirit under water until it gets soft. While taking it out of the body of the sick person his

hands become very hot. As last he takes out the rope. Sometimes there is only one rope, sometimes there are several, in the sick person. Two conjurers take hold of it, one at each end. Then they ask somebody to cut it. If the person who cuts it has no guardian spirit, he cuts through between the hands, but does not strike anything. If, however, the person has a guardian spirit, he cuts between the hands of the conjurer with a small knife, and at once blood is seen to flow.

"When a long rope is put into a man, he will fall sick after a long time; if a short rope is taken he will fall sick after a short time."

The description of the fate of a soul after death is supplemented by a story relating the experiences of the soul of the grandfather of my informant, who apparently died of an epidemic disease, but recovered after a long swoon. After he had recovered, he told his experiences in the following way:—

"I went to the ghosts. After some time I saw two persons carrying a stick on their shoulders. When I came near I saw that they were not persons, but posts of a house which carried a crossbeam. After a while I reached a person who hauled his entrails after him. I saw that it was a rush mat. Then I came to a river. On the other side I saw a large town, and I heard the noise of people building canoes. A person came to meet me, and I recognized my mother's relative who had recently died. He said, 'We waited for you; have you come at last? We heard you were coming. We have bought the girl for you whom you wanted to marry.' (In explanation of this it must be added that a girl whom he had wanted to marry had died shortly before this.) The grass where I stood was three fingers wide and of man's height. It waved and sounded like bells. The grass told the people on the other side who was coming. Then I saw the girl whom the people had bought, and I thought, 'I do not like her now; she looks just as her mother used to do.' I recognized my uncle among the people who came to meet me; the latter said, 'I brought some seal for you.' He gave me something that looked just like soap, and said, 'Eat this.' It tasted bad, and I did not swallow it, and he said, 'What will you eat; why do you refuse what I give you?' I thought, 'I just came here, and already you scold me. I will return.' Then I turned round, and at once the sun struck my right side. Then I recovered my senses and found myself here."

From this tale it appears that the Chinooks believe inanimate objects, which are the work of man, to have souls.

Finally there exists a tale referring to Blue Jay and his sister, which throws considerable light upon ideas of the future state.

The ghosts wanted to buy a wife. They bought Blue Jay's sister, Ioi. They came in the evening, and on the following morning Ioi

had disappeared. After one year her brother said, "I am going to search for her." He asked all the trees, "Where do people go after death?" He asked all the birds, but they did not answer him. Finally he said to his wedge, "Where do people go after death?" The wedge said, "Pay me and I will tell you." He paid him and the wedge took him along. They arrived at a large town. The last house of the town was very large, and he saw smoke rising only from this house. There he found his elder sister, who, when she saw him, said, "Where did you come from; are you dead?" "No, I am not dead; the wedge brought me here." He opened all the houses, and saw that they were full of bones. He saw a skull and bones close to his sister, and he asked her, "What are you going to do with that skull?" She replied, "That is your brother-in-law." When it grew dark the bones became alive. He asked, "Where did these people come from?" She replied, "Do you think they are people? They are ghosts." After some time the sister said to him, "Go with these people fishing with a dip-net. He went with a young boy. The people always spoke in very low tones, and he did not understand them. His sister wanted him also to speak in low tones, but when they were going in their canoe he heard a canoe coming down the river and people singing. He joined their song, and at once the boy was transformed into a skeleton. He stopped singing and then the boy became alive again. Whenever Blue Jay spoke in loud tones, the boy became transformed into a skeleton. Then the story goes on to tell how they caught leaves and branches in the dip-net, which were the trout and salmon of the ghosts. Blue Jay amused himself by shouting repeatedly, and thus transforming the ghosts into skeletons, which revived as soon as he was quiet. At another time they went whaling, and the whale of the ghosts is described as a log with very thick bark. One day Blue Jay amused himself by putting skulls of adults on the skeletons of children, and *vice versa*. Therefore the ghosts began to dislike him, and asked his sister to send him back. Their canoes are described as full of holes and covered with moss.

Blue Jay is sent back by his sister, and in returning dies, because he does not follow her instructions. Then he is taken to the country of the ghosts, and now the ghosts, their canoes, their whales, and their fish, appear to him as real men, new canoes, and real fish.

This brings out the notion that, although to the living the belongings of the dead appear as decaying, they are still useful to the deceased. It is worth remarking that these ideas are apparently the same as those of the neighboring tribes between Columbia River and Cape Flattery, while on Puget Sound, in the interior, and south of Columbia River, we find entirely different ideas prevailing.

*Franz Boas.*



