

CONFRONTATION AND THE CREATION
OF BALANCE:
RITUAL CLOWNING AMONG THE ZUNI

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The Koyemshi, ritual clowns of the Zuni Indians, fly in the face of all our facile conceptions of culture. Their existence is irritatingly enigmatic. Scholars have customarily presented a brief sketch of the clowns and their behavior followed by lengthy theoretical interpretation. This is inevitable, for the actions of the clowns seem to loudly demand an explanation. The Koyemshi raise such questions as "Why does clowning occur?", "Why is it tolerated?", and "Why would anyone participate?" These questions have not been satisfactorily answered.

Scholars either have been appalled and recoiled from the subject or have tried to squeeze clowning into a limited preconceived framework. This cannot be effectively done. Integrally woven into the fabric of Zuni society, the multifaceted and multidimensional act of ritual clowning resists easy classification. Furthermore, clowning is anti-rational; it defies our normal processes of compartmentalized thought. This article will attempt to bridge the scattered theoretical works which concern this clowning and the few ethnographic details available. It will suggest a couple of new theoretical approaches to the material in an attempt to place what we know of the ritual within the context of important elements of Zuni world view such as the conceptions

of balance and centrality. Unfortunately, I must draw my conclusions from the rather unsatisfactory ethnographic material currently available.

Zuni clowning is not an isolated phenomenon. Lucille Charles investigated ritual clowning in the "primitive world" and noted that "...so widespread is the phenomenon that one feels justified in inquiring what aspect may exist in cultures where it is not recorded; whether it may not have escaped the notice of some observers?" (Charles 1945:32). I have decided to concentrate on the Zuni clowns known as the Koyemshi. The Koyemshi appear more often, for longer periods of time, and have a greater role in ceremony than most other ritual clowning groups (Makarius 1970:54).

The Koyemshi are one of two ritual clowning groups of the Zuni. Each of the ten members portrays an individual clown character who differs from the others in both personality and appearance. They take what Cushing calls the "names of misleading." Each clown enacts characteristics opposite of those which his name would imply. Therefore, the clown called "Bow Priest Warrior," in imitation of the Zuni warrior society, acts cowardly. The inversion of some of these names parodies Zuni social structures; others burlesque emotional or physical types. The clowns themselves exhibit reversals of social norms in their speech. Stevenson records the announcement by the clowns of the upcoming Shalako ceremonies, and Hieb comments as follows:

Eight days everyone must go to the Navaho country and fight. [The Navajo are the traditional

enemies of all the Pueblos, but the Zuni rarely took the offensive, and this time would be most inappropriate.] In eight days my people come. You boys must look around for nice girls and stay with them. [Parsons states that at the summer and winter solstice ceremonials all the men and women remain continent for four days (1917:241).] Tonight these men dragged me from my house, and I am lonesome without my wife. [Sexual continence is even stricter for the Koyemshi who observe a total of twenty-two days (Parsons 1917:240).] Tonight this man [referring to the Great Father Koyemshi] picked out nine men; pretty soon they will fight....In eight days we will have a big dance; then you will have plenty to eat....Tonight I come; all of you come to see me: all of you boys have a good time and do not be angry....I come to tell you tonight that in eight days everyone will be happy and have a good time; men should trade wives. (Hieb 1972:183-4)

This speech perfectly illustrates the speech reversals of the Koyemshi. If one actually followed the advice given, he would find himself in serious opposition to the actions required by this special ritual time.

The Koyemshi play an important role in Zuni ceremony. The ten men who portray the clowns hold the position for a year. Four groups of ten men rotate so that each group fills this role once every four years. Although members volunteer for the prestigious clowning group positions, the job demands a lot of time and attention. Frequently a man will be unable to work during the year that he portrays a clown. The Koyemshi appear at all of the major ceremonies of the Zuni. Although they may miss some of the dances of the late winter, they attend all dances, ceremonies,

and rituals between summer solstice and winter solstice. The job is also demanding physically. It requires great stamina for dancing, the ability to fast for several days at a time, and a willingness to suffer ridicule and engage in scatological rites.

The Mudheads, as the Koyemshi are affectionately known, are wise fools; they are powerful and sacred idiot children. The regulations of Zuni life seem not to apply to them. They appear at solemn and serious religious ceremonials and do everything in their power to create pandemonium. The clowns burlesque everyone in sight. This applies especially to anything that has any unusual quality or that attracts attention. They can ridicule anything without fear or reprisal, and they have at times mocked white visitors, the Catholic church, and their own chiefs. They also play games, engage in sexual punning, and give away toys to children. Occasionally the Koyemshi engage the other clowning society, the Neweke, in mock ritual battle. The clowns sometimes wear false genitalia and perform humorous parodies of sexual intercourse. Frequently the clowns, especially the Neweke clown society, have ingested unusual foods. They favor feces or urine but will eat almost anything.

The Koyemshi also adopt the role of the chorus for the sacred dance. They arrive first for Shalako, the most important of the Zuni ceremonies, and as we have seen, they announce the coming of the Katchinas. Originally beautiful children, the Katchinas somehow got lost and went to live at the bottom

of a lake. Since that time their number has swelled. When a Zuni with membership in a ceremonial society dies, he goes to join the Katchinas. The Katchinas mediate with the gods and ask them for rain. The Koyemshi have a great deal of control over the extremely sacred dances of these Katchinas. They shout instructions to the dancers, both encouragement and derision. If the Koyemshi do not believe the dance is going well enough, they will stop it and make the dancers begin again. They interpret the sacred dance, acting it out so that the audience can understand.

In addition to their humorous public performances the Koyemshi undergo frequent private fasting and retreat. They gain power over crops, rainfall, and love. Zunis view the clowns as sacred and powerful, even dangerous. One who denies a Koyemshi anything takes a great risk. Many legends exist which tell of houses burning down or children having accidents after someone refused the Koyemshi a gift. It is also considered highly dangerous to touch a clown (Bunzel 1929-1930:946-58).

The Koyemshi bring great joy to the Zuni people by being very funny. "To merely see these clowns, without understanding a word of their incessant and really most humorous jabber, is to laugh immoderately. To understand everything, withal, is to sometimes wish from sheer excess of laughing, that the dancers would file in and thus put an end to their jibes and antics" (Cushing 1979:316-7). The Zuni express gratitude to the clown impersonators by lavishing great piles of gifts on them at the end of the ceremonial year. This would indicate that the Zuni have

a fondness for their clowns.

The clowns wear large rounded masks made from cotton cloth. Large bulges protrude over the ears, eyes, and mouth.

They have no nose. The masks and their bodies are covered with a pinkish clay, and they wear only a black kilt or rags. The clown impersonators tie a cotton cloth around their penises which makes erection impossible and represents their innocent impotence (Bunzel 1929-30:946).

The mythological origins of the Koyemshi explain much of their character and appearance. After the Zuni emerged from the four underworlds, it became necessary for them to find the center of the earth so that they could settle. With this end in mind, their priest sent his children off to look for the all embracing waters in each of the four directions. He sent his youngest son and his daughter to the East. After traveling a distance this son suddenly went mad with lust for his sister. He chased her and at the same time tore at his face and head forming great welts. Then he fell in the mud and rolled in it. Cushing's account of the myth states that "When he staggered to his feet, the red soil adhered to him as skin cleaves to flesh, and his ugliness hardened." His sister took pity on him then and they lived together in a cave. They had nine sons who looked like their father. Cushing continues by saying that the children are impotent "from the mingling of too much seed in one kind...simpletons and the crazed speak from the things seen of the instant, uttering belike wise words and prophecy, so spake they, and became

the attendants and fosterers, yet the sages and interpreters of the ancient dance-dramas" (Cushing 1896: 400-1).

The Zuni have a very intricate and tightly structured cosmology which echoes their mythology and social organization. They begin by dividing everything into six areas: the four cardinal directions, up, and down. These directions become categories for defining the rest of the world (Tedlock 1979: 499-508). Balance and harmony are the most important goals of the Zuni religion. Power diffuses itself throughout a totally interconnected universe and is within everything. If one properly uses his power, he can maintain the balance, and the six directions will come into harmony (Vogt and Albert 1966: 230). Out of these basic tenets of the Zuni religious system emerges the tremendous Zuni concern with the middle. The middle is, after all, the point of balance or harmony between the six directions.

The Koyemshi were born in opposition to the natural harmony sought by Zuni religion. Sexual union of brother and sister strongly violates social strata in an exogamous matrilineal clan society like the Zuni. It creates an overbalance in one direction. Living in a cave also opposes Zuni belief. Earlier in the creation myth, the Zuni had emerged from the earth searching for the middle. Moving back into a cave is a regressive and centripetal movement. Down is the one direction in which the middle will not be found. The father of the Koyemshi originally traveled with the goal of searching for the middle. The people

had come from below, and so they had already searched that direction.

Nevertheless, the Koyemshi serve to create harmony for the Zuni in two ways. First, they create laughter. Everything interrelates in Zuni thought, and a negative frame of mind displeases the gods. The Katchinas particularly like to see their descendants happy. Laughter helps accomplish this, and so laughter is a form of prayer. Secondly, the Koyemshi provide a balance by opposing the Katchina, the ceremony, and the seriousness of Zuni ritual. An imbalance of any kind equates with disease. The Koyemshi are medicine.

In talking of clowns, Makarius states that "it is only to the violation of taboo that they owe their existence as ritual figures" (1970: 53). I do not agree that by itself this violation creates the need for clowning, but it is an important concern. When society makes an action or item taboo, it becomes a vortex of focus. The taboo draws attention and tension. It mesmerizes and frustrates at the same time. The taboo voices the notion that the individual doesn't have enough strength to cope with the tabooed item. If the tension grows great enough, institutions such as clowning arise to reduce the tabooed item to the level of manageable experience. This is a major function of humor (Honigmann 1941-1942: 225-6). It mediates between the needs of the individual and the society.

Metaphysical power or medicine can be acquired through the violation of taboo. This power may be seen as necessary for the survival of the tribe.

The Neweke because of their scatological rites claim the ability to cure any stomach ailment. The violation of incest taboos as expressed in the being of the Koyemshi also creates power. Capable of doing good or ill, the power is ambivalent. Consequently, Zunis see the Koyemshi as polluting and dangerous (Makarius 1970: 53-60). The society needs them because of the access to power which they provide.

The clown negates the negatives of society; he rebels against the rules his society establishes to say "no." In so doing he reverses the "natural" order and produces a small liberation. A magical moment occurs when he violates the rules. His audience briefly realizes that the rigid structure of society and of the world is not absolute. Another possible viewpoint emerges in a radical expansion of conceptual options. Within this moment, an infusion of new ideas and a fresh perspective occurs as the society is allowed to comment on itself. The fixed mental framework has temporarily been suspended (Babcock 1978: 18-21).

We have seen that clowning functions to provide a balance, relieve tension, generate metaphysical power, and provide a conceptual liberation. Commonly, scholars view clowning as serving to solidify social norms. This view sees clowning as a social control mechanism. The clowns ridicule aberrant behavior and are themselves ridiculed for their behavior. The Zuni's fear of humiliation enforces societal values. Although there may be some truth to these assertions, they also present difficulties. The clowns may not consider themselves abused;

fieldworkers indicate that the Zuni love their clowns.

This theory faces another difficulty in the clowns' choice of targets for ridicule. The Koyemshi seem to particularly delight in making fun of their most sacrosanct institutions and prestigious citizens. Certainly these do not require remolding into the pattern of Zuni culture. The anti-structural nature of clowning seems to more closely resemble a release valve for intra-societal aggression and frustration than a mechanism for the control of deviance. The social id momentarily expresses itself in rebellion against the structural superego. Levine notes that "the obscene ceremonials and clownishness are in part a vicarious outlet for a rather emotionally inhibited community" (1961: 77).

As a parallel theoretical attack, many hold that humor defies conventional patterning momentarily and then collapses under its own illogical absurdity. This supposedly strengthens the original pattern. I do not clearly see how. This explanation of humor seems specious. Is it not equally possible that the repeated attacks of humor weaken the structure which only survives because of the brief temporal duration of the joke? Mary Douglas claims that a joke is basically anti-rite and in attacking one thing it must celebrate something else, "or it could be saying something about different levels of social structure; the irrelevance of one obvious level and the relevance of a submerged and unappreciated one" (1968: 370). If a joke is essentially anti-rite, why do we continue to insist on forcing it into a position of supporting the social power hierarchy?

Ruth Benedict has characterized Zuni society as Apollonian in the extreme; the individual is sublimated to the needs of the group (1934: 79-93). While Benedict has seen this as a natural state, others have viewed this social harmony as the result of severe repression of the individual through intense pressure and psychic bludgeoning (Bennett 1946). Nobody has challenged the basic premise that Zuni is an organized, efficient, and highly structured society. Whether this occurs organically or is the result of repression is the locus of a debate.

Within any society a struggle takes place between socialization and the need for individual expression. Possibly we tend to oversimplify alien societies, to view them from a too linear perspective. Abrahams and Bauman have studied activities closely related to clowning in the West Indies and in Nova Scotia. They discovered that deviance is much more widely tolerated than they first had believed. They decided that carnival gave the more and the less conservative members of a culture an opportunity to participate together in a communal entertainment. The clowns were usually people who exhibited a greater deviance from social ideals than others in their non-clowning life as well as their ritual life. The deviant element has the opportunity in carnival to burlesque but simultaneously to entertain the more socialized element of the community. The carnival brings the two social strata together (Abrahams and Bauman 1978). Paralleling this, clowning may be viewed as a means for a repressed deviant element to express themselves in a way which produces social cohesion rather than rebellion.

"There is no intrinsic necessity for the fool to become a fixed social role filled by a specific person.... However, this role does seem to make itself felt in the normal life of a social group and then to get filled by a single person. This may be seen in any school class" (Willeford 1969: 83). Bruce Jackson has proffered a possible explanation for this. Jackson examined convicts who had repeatedly returned to prison. He claims that for many of them the label of convict is less distressing than that of homosexual, and he uses this as an explanation of their recurrent incarceration. In prison the men feel forced to be homosexual by their circumstances, and they don't have to face the concept that they may be homosexual by nature (Jackson 1978). This model may go a long way towards explaining the choice a person makes in becoming a clown. It may be better or at least psychologically more tolerable to be an excellent clown than a social deviant. This would prove especially true in a repressive society based strongly on the fulfillment of social roles.

The mental state of the clown has been viewed as a precarious balance. Not only does he allow his suppressed desires to surface, but also he enacts the role of the societal conscience. He contains liberator and oppressor in one being. The clown enacts the entire battlefield which pits societal values against the individual. The clown impersonator himself disassociates from the clown and becomes its persecutor.

The grotesque play cannot be understood as a more

or less disguised breakthrough of instincts. Here the repressing forces as well as the repressed ones are condensed, just as in the true conversion-hysteric symptom. At the same time the grotesque-comic performance has the meaning of confession, self humiliation and punishment. (Levine 1961: 79)

The performer makes a great sacrifice for the benefit of the group. Violation of taboo benefits the society, but still isolates the individual violator and makes him dangerous and a pollutant. "It is necessary that he should be conceived of as 'the other' in opposition to the group, even though he acts on their behalf" (Makarius 1970: 54). This carnality or dangerous action of bringing power down to earth led Miller to draw parallels between clown and Christ (1981: 58).

Certainly the Koyemshi acquire a priestly quality. The fasting, retreats, excessive dancing, and scatological customs they enact can not be lightly undertaken. At the end of a ritual year, the father of the Koyemshi addresses the priests and the women of Zuni villages. "All year we have been praying for you and now we have finished our year. We have worked hard for our people that their crops may grow. We will never forget, our fathers, that you have picked us out for this" (Bunzel 1929-1930: 955).

Although the psychological motivations which we have already discussed would induce some to undergo the sacrifice of clowning, the rich material rewards at the end of service provide additional enticement. We may assume that the power of performance also attracts many. In a good performance, the performer

can get a profound sense of power within exposure. This power is particularly apparent when one is enacting the monstrous or allowing the expression of the deeply hidden side of oneself. Performing the role of a clown would allow the dark and hidden side of oneself not only expression but power. The clowns largely dominate and control the entire ceremony. We find evidence for the Zuni's love of performance in their rigorous year-round dance schedule.

Unfortunately no one has seen fit to ask the Zuni themselves why they are willing to play the role of a Koyemshi, what their mental state is when they enact the role, and what value the performance has for them. The one exception to this was the much maligned Captain John G. Bourke. Bourke felt both appalled and fascinated by the scatological rites he observed. He considered such rites "survivals" of ancient religious ceremonies. Nevertheless, Bourke asked a Tewa Indian how he could stomach eating feces and drinking urine. He received the following reply:

We have a medicine which makes us drunk like whiskey; we drink a lot of that before we commence; it makes us drunk. We don't care what happens; and nothing of that kind that we eat or drink can ever do us any harm. (Bourke 1891: 8)

We can easily hypothesize that the "medicine" referred to might be a psychedelic substance. The hypothesis would cohere with the clown's emphasis on excessive dancing, portraying the monstrous, and fasting which could be seen as standard ritual ways to induce euphoria. Such

a view opposes our notion of the staid, reserved Zuni society. Clowns are, however, anti-structural and do not fit within the normal strata of society.

We could easily treat the Koyemshi as liminal beings for they meet many of the criteria and seem to fit the model quite well. The Koyemshi are the unformed. Covered in clay, they put one in mind of the creation myth and the formless pre-emergence days in the fourth underworld.

Everywhere there were unfinished creatures, crawling like reptiles one over another in filth and black darkness, crowded thickly together and treading each other, one spitting on another or doing other indecency, insomuch that loud became their murmurings and lamentations, until many among them sought to escape, growing wiser and more manlike. (Cushing 321-447)

The Koyemshi can be classed as liminal in several other ways. We have suggested that their actions produce a freeing of conceptual categories. Turner claims that "liminality is the realm of primitive hypothesis, where there is a certain freedom to juggle the factors of existence" (1974: 241). Koyemshi are also dangerous, and people consider all liminal creatures dangerous because of their lack of classification. Lastly, their impotence makes them sexually ambivalent. These are all characteristics of the liminal being.

Despite this obvious correlation, difficulty arises in classing the Koyemshi as perfectly typical liminal beings. Although we normally consider ritual liminality as part of a process leading from separation through the liminal to

aggregation, the Koyemshi remain permanently liminal. The progression of separation, limen, and aggregation should strengthen society. Functionally, in rites of passage, the liminal is used to create disassociation and confusion after which the eternal truths, the sacra of society can be introduced. These sacra justify and explain the society and the new form of life which the initiate will enter with the aggregation phase. The subject is receptive to them owing to the pressure created by his uncomfortable and disorienting liminal state (Turner 1974: 242). But where are the sacra introduced by the Koyemshi? I find no evidence of their existence.

Also defying our normal perception of the concept of liminality, we must admit that the Koyemshi are central to Zuni ritual rather than marginal, and they do not fit the profile established for *communitas* by Turner (1966: 106). Though the Koyemshi aggressively deny classification on their own, they receive a classificatory position by their constant opposition to the Katchina. Hieb demonstrated this opposition excellently. He contrasted the Koyemshi poverty and formlessness with the Katchina wealth and order. The Katchinas are associated with the clouds, the Koyemshi comment from below in a cave (Hieb 1972: 242). This opposition places them within a structure which Hieb explains as a manifestation of the fundamental dualism of Zuni thought.

Hieb's analysis of the Koyemshi being in a state of opposition to the Katchina is excellent, but in my opinion it does not go quite far enough. Looking deeper, one can see that the caves of the Koyemshi

are to the East; the Koyemshi are associated with below and the Katchina with above. These factors leave the Zuni in the middle.

It has often been stated that balance and centrality are major religious conceptions for the Zuni; they are essential life concerns. If balance is not maintained then it will not rain, the crops will wither, and the people starve. Zuni ceremony reaffirms the balance. It shows the people that they reside in the center. The Koyemshi are seen as children. They are unformed, of the mythical past, and represent an earlier and less advanced state. They live in womb-like caves. The Katchinas include those who have completed their path, the deceased ancestors of the Zuni. When a Zuni member of a ceremonial society dies he joins them. The Koyemshi is the past; Katchina is the future. The Zuni are again in the middle.

Liminality occurs in the arrival of the Koyemshi and the Katchina, but not only they are liminal. It is not so much that the Koyemshi and Katchina are pockets of liminality betwixt and between the categories of society, as that they surround society and provide a context in which it makes itself liminal. The Koyemshi and the Katchina are permanent and the Zuni become liminal. The ritual demonstrates that the Zuni are not only middle but "betwixt and between" as well. The Zuni inhabit a temporary and transitional stage between two fixed and permanent states. This realization during the ceremony inverts all normally held views. It replaces the centrality of ego with that of humility and makes

the ceremonial time a sacred one.

Various theorists have viewed clowning as serving to release social tension, to obtain access to supernatural power, and to provide a conceptual liberation. We have spoken of clowning as a socially acceptable format for allowing expression among deviant members of society and as a societal attempt to control deviance. To the notion of balance I have added the theory that ceremony frames and identifies the society that performs it. In all probability, all these assertions are to some degree true. None of them can currently be verified to my satisfaction. It will first be necessary to do more fieldwork. This suggestion may seem appalling in light of the apparent overemphasis on the Zuni by anthropological followers of Boas in the thirties. Nevertheless, we do not have what we need to answer fundamental questions about the Koyemshi due to a seeming dearth of descriptive material. Many have skipped straight to theory. The present author has done nothing to correct this error. We may be applying a limited ethnocentric view to explain away the phenomenon of clowning instead of trying to understand it. The Zuni and especially those who enact the Koyemshi should be questioned. We know nothing of what the Zuni consider to be the meaning, function, or experience of clowning. The one assertion we can be relatively certain of is that our ideas of clowning are more likely to be too small than too large.

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