Adventure into a Celestial Sphere

SANTO DOMINGO, N.M.

THE INSISTENT drumbeat echoes the most miraculous pulse in the world—the beat of the living heart. It is appropriate that this should provide the underlying rhythm of the ceremonial dances at the Santo Domingo pueblo, the largest pueblo (2,000 inhabitants) of the Indians of the Rio Grande, midway between Santa Fe and Albuquerque.

These Santo Domingo Indians, of Keres stock, are said to be the most conservative of all Indians. They prefer to keep away from the white man, be he Spanish or "Anglo" (as the Indian calls the non-Spanish white). Still, every year on August 4, they display their hospitality by inviting outsiders to attend a day-long celebration in honor of their patron saint, St. Dominic. A statue of the saint is brought out of the mission church before the visitors arrive and is placed in a shrine, made of green boughs, in the long plaza lined with one-story (and occasionally two-story) adobe houses. It is set between two huge *kivas* —in Santo Domingo, one is the ceremonial center for the turquoise clan and the other for the pumpkin and squash clan—and from these great, circular edifices emerge the hundreds of men and women and children who will honor their saint with a pre-Christian *Corn Dance*.

It is an unforgettable sight—I watched for ten hours—to see the long main avenue of the pueblo filled with dancing, chanting Indians dressed in gorgeous costumes ranging from somber black to vivid turquoise and fiery red and snowy white, the black to remind the living that death is ever present, but the blue of the sky, the golden glow of the sun, to symbolize the continuation of life, with white feathers serving as silent prayers.

A striking prologue to the *Corn Dance* is the appearance of the Koshare, who play a major role in the ceremony. Their bodies and costumes are mostly painted white, though some use dark dye, but it is purposefully splotchy and suggests creatures from the spirit world. And that is really what the Koshare are, for they link the living with the dead. Their black loin-flaps represent the netherworld or death, and the golden tufts of dried corn husks which stand up from their white helmets symbolize the sun.

Early in the morning, before the dancing begins, the Koshare run through the streets of the pueblo clearing the town of evil spirits. "You might think of them as special police," an Indian friend told me. Although they have magical powers and serious duties to perform, the Koshare are an amiable, even mischievous lot. They run and dance where they please, and during the mass formations, they weave themselves in and out of the formal patterns made by the dancers. They do their own steps, improvise at will, even move in syncopation with the tread of the other Indians. They also pause to adjust costumes, secure slipping headdresses, and help some of the five- and six-year-olds get back into the proper patterns when they have lost their way. I asked my Indian companion if a Koshare might be described as an equivalent to the god Pan. "Partly," he replied, "but there is a great deal of Till Eulenspiegel there, too."

Once the Koshare have performed their initial duties, the dancers and singers of the two clans, one at a time (they dance together only on rare occasions), fill the plaza. The entrances and exits themselves are splendid pageantry. Adobe stairs lead to the flat peak of the tall brown *kivas*. Long ladders, which pierce the sky at one end, also descend to the sacred mysteries deep within. As the Indians mount or descend the outside staircases, they, like the thrusting tips of their ladders, are silhouetted against the blue, cloud-flecked sky. The golden corn tufts of the Koshare seem to be splinters of sunlight, and they, along with the multicolored costumes, are spectacularly defined against the vault of the firmament itself, as if we were witnesses to an adventure into a celestial sphere.

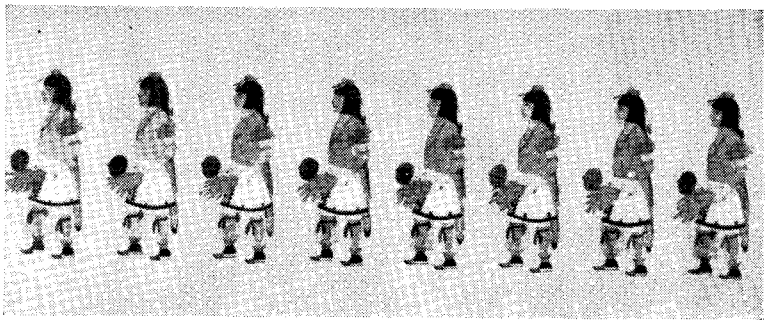
The Koshare are always men, but the two big bodies of dancers are made up of both men and women, some very old, some in their prime, some only little children. The men, bare-chested, wear white skirt-like dress, quite short, and fur-topped white moccasins. They are decorated with strings of shells (in prehistoric times, the area was a vast inland sea) worn diagonally, and with bells around the waist or below the knee. Blue, yellow, and green clusters of feathers bob from their forelocks (some wear their hair in flowing manes, while others have it bobbed or cut short). In the left hand, there is a green branch; in the right, a rattle.

The female dancers wear black dresses but they are brightly embroidered and are cinched by red belts. On their heads they carry thin boards which stand upright. These are blue and symbolize clouds and rainbows—the soft, white prayer feathers are attached. Most of the women have hair which falls below the waist, while others have the equivalent of a Dutch cut. A few wear moccasins but most are barefoot. They carry green boughs in both hands.

The large choir of men is composed mainly, but not entirely, of the seniors of the tribe. They do not wear traditional Indian dress, but they are distinctively Indian. Ordinary trousers and brightly colored shirts are augmented by bands of cloth (in every color imaginable)

—*Photos by Milo.*

Paintings of the *Corn Dance* (this and facing page) are by Awa Tsireh, from the collection of the Museum of New Mexico.



"The actual steps employed in the *Corn Dance* are not many [but] there is great choreographic variety."

worn around the head or used to tie the buns of long-haired Indians; by great, turquoise-studded silver belts; necklaces and bracelets boasting the largest turquoises I have ever seen; moccasins or boots. Green branches are stuck in their belts, and their leader carries a tall pole, tipped with crimson feathers, which he waves in great arcs over singers and dancers—a blessing from the sun.

The actual steps employed in the *Corn Dance* are not many—the women frequently use a toe-touch followed by a flat-foot step while the men do little jumps kicking their heels up lightly—but there are variations on these basic steps and there is great choreographic variety. The dancers enter and depart in long-line processionals. But the lines shift swiftly and smoothly from two to four to five and, sometimes, even to eight ranks. The dancers may move up and down as in military parade or they may face each other and move back and forth, with great dexterity, through each other's ranks. They also break into blocks of dance figures and, very occasionally, into circles. Diagonal units of performers also vary the pattern, and at one point, early in the day, there was a vast ellipse which found the dancers stretched from one *kiva* to another, encompassing the shrine of the saint, nearly touching walls of homes flanking both sides of the plaza.

The singers, huddled closely to one wall of the plaza, surged slowly en masse, shifting positions as the dancers advanced and retreated. A tight semicircle was their basic formation, and their steps, a rhythmic shuffle.

As the afternoon progressed, an intensification of movement, sound, and spirit occurred. The heartbeat of the drums became swifter, the pitch of the drum itself climbed steadily to a peak at the ecstatic finale, and the dancers and singers, wholly involved in their ritual all along, seemed to find themselves in a mass, communal hypnosis. Faces were impassive, but inner dynamics, an identification with forces of mystery, could be felt by the onlooker.

As pace and pitch grew, not only did the Koshare make their choreographic infiltrations of the dance formations increasingly elaborate, but also a few of the old, old men of the pueblo, touched by the hand of unseen spirits, entered the vast dance design. They made their own way within the framework of the ceremonial; often, as they danced on old and weary legs, their veined hands were raised heavenward as they made incantational traceries in space. Each seemed to be alone, though part of many, in an awesome contact with deity. One of the gestures was an invitation for rain. It rained, lightly and briefly.

Scenes such as these can be recorded by the visitor only in the mind. The Indians of Santo Domingo permit no cameras, no drawing pads, no notebooks carried by foreigners on their huge reservation. They are even suspicious of non-Keres Indians. They hold to ancient ways, yet the new is juxtaposed to the old. On the roof of an adobe home you will see antlers, proof of a successful hunt, side by side with a television antenna. Outside the kitchen door, you will find the age-old beehive oven—and oh, how sweet the bread smells!—sharing the area with an electric washing machine.

Inside an Indian home, to which I was invited for lunch because my Indian companion (a Cherokee) knew the family well, I sat down to a delicious meal which included home-cooked bread, home-raised fruits and vegetables, and macaroni salad! A newborn baby was on a cradleboard (only his feet were showing, since his body and head were concealed beneath a tent-like structure) suspended from the ceiling as a swing. And every time Grandmother passed by, she would give the baby a push. "Sleeps better that way," she said.

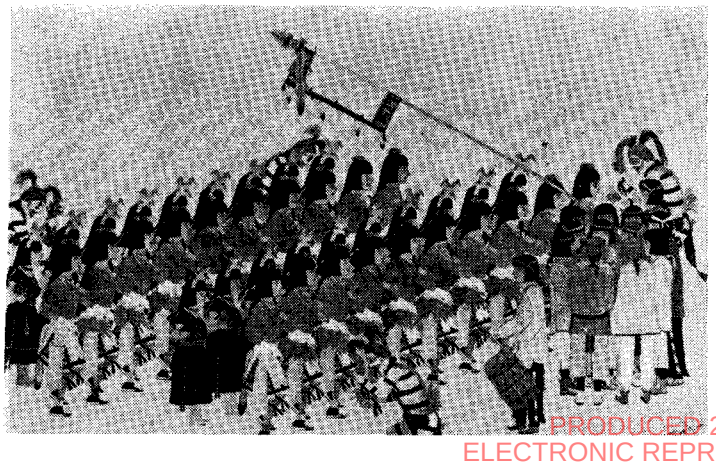
In the exquisite, whitewashed mission church of Santo Domingo, one would find on one wall the Stations of the Cross, and in another very special area, murals of the squash, the corn, the maize. Behind the church, while the *Corn Dance* was being reborn in the plaza, a handful of young Indians were dancing the frug, the watusi, and variations thereof.

In the plaza, St. Dominic was greeted by prayerful visitors, by gifts of bread, by men dancers who shook their rattles in his direction, by women dancers who waved their green branches at him, by rites older than Christianity.

Which dominated? Which rhythms prevailed? As the plaza became incandescent with the patterns of ancient dance, a five-month-old baby, carried by a seven-year-old sister, waved a single green leaf, in perfect tempo, as 500 Indians of the village danced by.

Did it seem incongruous that at one point in the *Corn Dance* an old Indian should blow a trumpet, another should play a tattoo on a snare drum, and a younger man should fire a rifle? Not at all. It was a sardonic reminder that the invaders—first the Spaniards and then the "Anglos"—should also honor the saint. And that we should also.

—Walter Terry.



BOOKED FOR TRAVEL

Edited by Horace Sutton

The Natural World

EDITOR'S NOTE: *Horace Sutton is on vacation this month. The following report, by the recently retired book critic of The New York Times, is the first of a series of guest articles on Africa.*

ONE EVENING last winter my wife and I, our courier-guide-friend (an English lady), an African driver, and an African game ranger were riding in a Land-Rover in the great Serengeti National Park in Northwest Tanzania. It was about 6 o'clock and we were returning to the Seronera Lodge after hours of blissful delight photographing wild animals. In less than an hour it would be dark. The use of headlights is forbidden in all East African game parks. As we approached the lodge we met a Volkswagen. Its driver hailed us in an unmistakably American voice: "Is this the way to the leopards?" Our two Africans burst into scornful laughter and our guide called out: "Second to the left and straight on till morning."

There are 5,600 square miles in the Serengeti Park. There are vast, arid plains little better than deserts, grassy savannahs dotted with umbrella thorn trees, groves of yellow fever trees beside the few streams which remain wet the year round, bone-dry gulleys which are brooks in the rainy season, and a labyrinthine network of tracks made by the four-wheel-drive cars in which most tourists go out to see and photograph the game. We had seen the leopards ourselves, but only the Africans knew precisely where the leopards were. Even if they had been willing, it was impossible to tell the rash strangers how to find them. And yet, there were extenuating circumstances for the question.

Today, several years after the three East African countries—Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania—became free, the magnificent wildlife of the game parks flourishes in such glorious profusion that tourists can confidently expect to see all the more common varieties of animals and, with luck, some of the less familiar.

Tourism, for these reasons, is now enjoying a tremendous boom in East Africa. In Kenya, which has the most efficient and enlightened government of the three countries, the rush is so great that tourists are signing up with local travel agencies in Nairobi three and even four years in advance. The lodges in the game parks are nearly always full. New hotels are being built in Nairobi and also on the Indian Ocean coast. Packaged tours from Germany and Switzerland fly in hordes of tourists at bargain rates. Rich Americans revel in the joys of private safaris complete with white hunters, squads of African servants, several trucks loaded with camping equipment, food, drink, and even refrigerators. Less affluent Americans find the lodges comfortable and attractive—much more so than many of the hotels in their own country.

The lodges consist of a principal building containing the dining room, bar, and kitchen, and of rows of cottages for the guests. They are situated on beautiful and even spectacular sites. The New Lodge at the Amboseli Reserve looks out directly on Mt. Kilimanjaro. Samburu Lodge in the Marsabit Reserve perches on the banks of a river. Water buck, baboons, and elephants ford the river while guests, cocktail glasses in hand, admire them. The Kilaguni Lodge in the Tsavo National Park looks down on a large water hole. Animals come to drink there all day long with the greatest congestion in the early evening. While having dinner there my wife and I watched eight elephants pad silently in single file out of the darkness into the light cast by the lodge lamps, drink, and then go into a conference, heads in, tails out, like a caucus of Republican governors.

Seven years ago, when we made our first trip to East Africa, the present tourist explosion could not be foreseen. Refugees from the Congo were pouring into Kenya, and the white settlers in Kenya were gloomily wondering if similar horrors would happen there. African politicians were shouting that when they obtained freedom they did not want their country to be a zoo. Wild animals were only meat, and poaching in the parks was a way of life.

—*Philcarol of Monkmeyer.*

"Seeing the animals . . . is the chief joy. . . ."

Now all this is changed. The economic importance of tourism is fully understood. Leading officials discuss ways of increasing it. And the African governments are much more severe on poachers than the British dared to be. In spite of continued problems—droughts, overpopulation of animals in certain districts (elephants in Tsavo Park and hippopotamuses in Queen Elizabeth Park), continued poaching, inadequate funds—the future of the game parks looks brighter than it ever has.

Why do so many travelers delight in African game and why do most of those who can afford it return to Africa again? Every traveler is an individual with his own peculiarities, his own personal response to the beauty and fascination of close contact with lions and elephants, giraffe, and buffalo; but all tourists share a sense of wonder unobtainable anywhere else on earth. They experience an exhilaration, a joy and excitement which were once part of the heritage of mankind. But now in our overcrowded world the great spectacle of many kinds of animals living in freedom without fear of man the killer can be seen only in Africa. Only in Africa can the urban, pampered product of modern civilization watch and photograph a rich abundance of wild animals proceeding about their customary business in the immemorial ways of their kind.

Seeing the animals, just being there with them, is the chief joy of the tourist in East Africa. But photographing them is a close second. One starts taking pictures of every animal in sight. This one may be a better specimen. That one is doing something more interesting. Or he is posing against a more beautiful background. After several days or weeks one becomes more demanding. One elephant won't do. What is required is a herd of elephants, or elephants taking a dust bath, or baby elephants.

Lions are always irresistible. They have such benign faces, such dignity, such lazy serenity. We photographed lions napping high in trees, lions marching so close to our Land-Rover we thought they might be planning to jump in with us, lions mating, and lions sleeping in a dozen postures of total relaxation. One afternoon in Serengeti we drove into the midst of a pride of lions so numerous we nearly ran over several. It was like entering a field of lions, some grotesque example of medieval heraldry—not one lion rampant, but twenty couchant. Breathlessly we counted.