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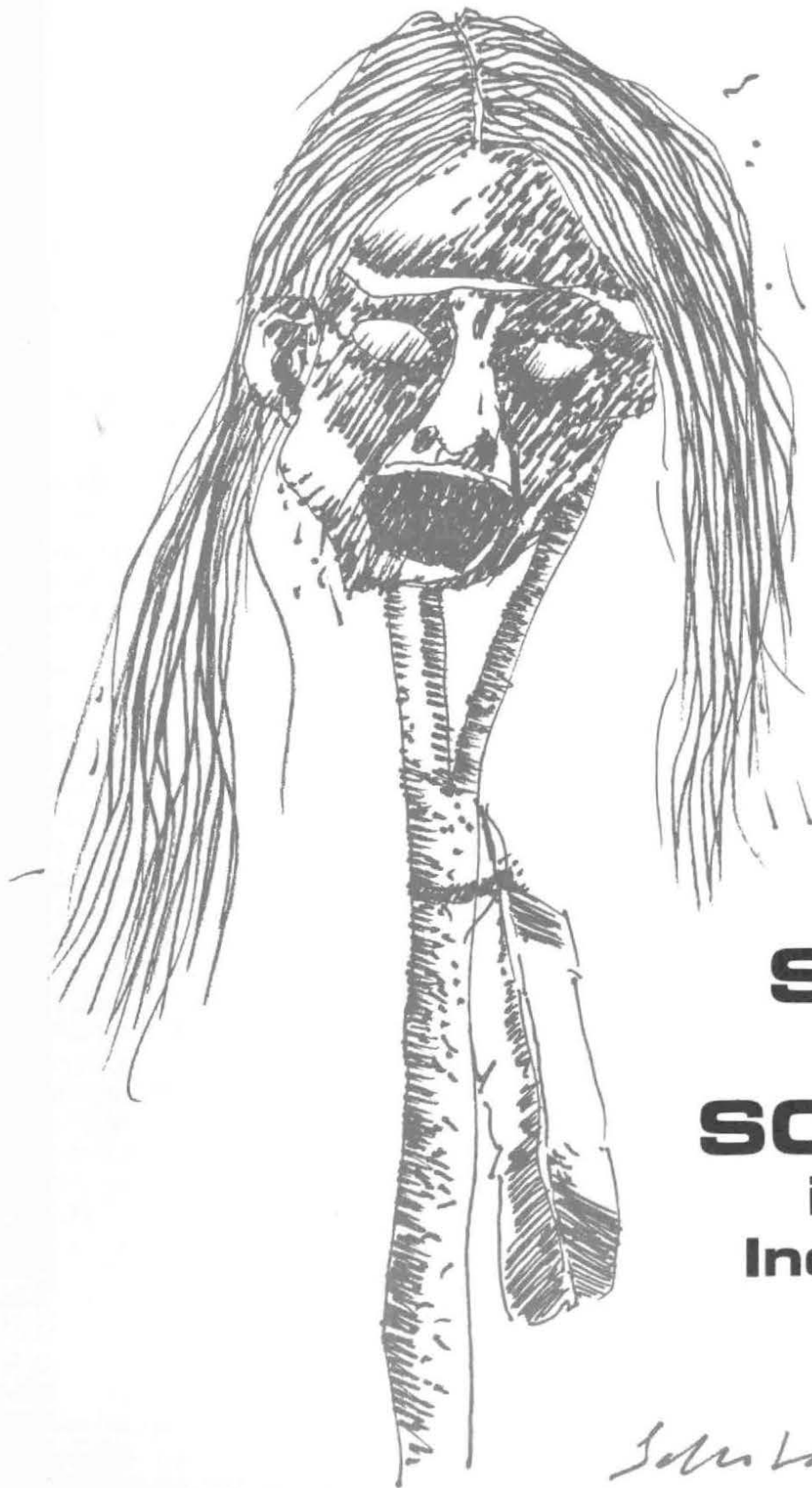
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**SCALPS
AND
SCALPERS**
in Mohave
Indian Culture

John Lohr

By Kenneth M. Stewart

with illustrations by Fritz Scholder

AS WITH OTHER functionaries in the Yuman-speaking Mohave tribe of the lower Colorado River, the scalper was believed to obtain his power to scalp in dreams. The religion of the Mohave featured a most unusual conception of dreaming, which in fact occupied a core position in Mohave culture. In the Mohave ideology all power and special skills came in dreams, which were believed to begin in many cases while the unborn Mohave was still in a foetal state. In typical power dreams the "shadow" or "shade" (*matkwesa*) of the dreamer was impelled backward in time to the scene of creation to the sacred mountain *Avikwame* ("Spirit Mountain"), a peak in the Newberry or Dead Mountains located at the extreme southern tip of Nevada, north of the present community of Needles, California. At *Avikwame* a deity named *Mastamho* conferred power upon the "shadows," of which they would later dream when embodied in mortal form as Mohaves. These power-bestowing dreams were called by the Mohave *sumach ahot*, meaning "dream good" or "dream lucky." At birth the prenatal power dreams were forgotten, but were remembered or dreamed over later in life, usually after the onset of puberty. The dreamer would subsequently demonstrate his power in successful undertakings, thus proving the authenticity of his dreams.

The Mohave, like many other Southwestern Indians, believed that contact with enemies was supernaturally contaminating. Such contact was relatively frequent, since warfare was a major emphasis in Mohave culture. Most of the Mohave fighting (in alliance with the Yuma) was with the Maricopa, Cocopa, and Halchidhoma. For detailed accounts of Mohave warfare see Stewart (1947b) and Fathauer (1954). The main Mohave informants for the present study, with the approximate dates of their births, were

the following: Pete Lambert (1866), Mrs. Abraham Lincoln (1869), Lute Wilson (1879), and Tom Black (1884). In the text the statements of the informants will be identified with their respective initials.

In particular, enemy scalps (*nyiethauk*) were considered by the Mohave to be extremely dangerous, since they were thought to contain the maleficent power of the enemy. If a man who had not dreamed the power to scalp should be foolhardy enough to risk taking a scalp, it was believed that he would go insane and "holler in the night." It was hazardous even for the scalper with dream power (known as the *ahwe sumach*, or "dreamer of enemies") to take a scalp, should he neglect to undergo purification after scalping to rid himself of the nefarious enemy power. Scalping was a specialty which only one or two men in the tribe at any one time were empowered by their dreams to perform. According to an informant (AL), "There were two scalpers in the tribe, Mo'ok and Wusau. I saw Mo'ok when I was a little girl. He was a real old man, very feeble, maybe a hundred years old."

The Mohave scalper performed a variety of functions. He was described by my informants as being both a *kwanami* ("brave") and a "kind of half medicine man." He had dreamed the power to cure "enemy sickness," which resulted from contamination by the evil power of the foe. According to LW, "When the warriors were coming home from battle, they would be kind of a little insane from the enemy's power, and he would take care of them." The scalper might also function as a funeral orator, and at a date subsequent to the funeral he conducted the commemorative mourning ceremony, which I have described elsewhere (Stewart 1947a). The mourning ceremony, held in honor of a deceased chief or distinguished

warrior, featured a conventionalized dramatization of warfare.

The scalper went into battle with the other warriors, and he looked around until he spotted an enemy with "nice, long, heavy hair." Not only might the enemy leader be a target for the scalper, but the scalp of any foe with long hair might be taken. According to AL, "The scalpers have a real hate feeling while scalping. They really mean it."

Dr. George Fathauer, in his excellent article "The Structure and Causation of Mohave Warfare" (1954), stated that the scalper was in fact the leader of the warriors, directing them in battle from the rear (p.99 and pp.106-109). My informants, however, spoke rather of a "head *kwanami*" as the leader, and did not identify him as being identical with the scalper.

The scalps taken by the Mohave were enormous, consisting of the whole skin of the head, including the ears. They were, in fact, sometimes called "head skins." My informants described the process of scalping as follows:

The scalper carried four long sticks of greasewood. He broke the enemy's neck, twisted it, cut off the head with a stone knife, and carried the head off into the gulch where he could hide and scalp it. He took a sharp greasewood stick and, starting at the end of each eyebrow, he cut back over the ears. Then he made a cut from above the nose down the face, and ripped the scalp off, with the ears included. Then he kind of half "tanned" the scalp while the fight was going on, rubbing in adobe. (PL)

The scalper wore a feather bonnet. He watches for an enemy whose hair is kind of long and heavy, knocks him down, twists his neck, and takes off the head. He brings



Scalping



the head over to his own side and scalps it. He peels one side of the face. The ear is the hardest part, so he bites and trims it with his teeth. He works on one side and "tans" it up. When he is "tanning" the scalp on his own side, he kicks it up in the air four times. He might get two or three scalps with good, heavy hair." (LW)

There is also a description of scalping in Kroeber's "A Mohave Historical Epic" (1951:100): "Then Hipahipa said to his companions: 'The man I killed does not have long hair, but I want to scalp him' . . . Hipahipa cut his throat with a stone knife. . . Then he skinned the head. He began to cut at the root of the nose. He took the skin of the hair and eyes and cheeks and ears. Then he cut the skin crisscross to make it soft, and rubbed it with earth."

On the return journey after a battle, the scalper would go off by himself at night and continue to work on the scalp, "tanning" it. This treatment was believed to "tame" the scalp by bringing its evil power under control. But even after the scalp had been "tamed," a person who had not dreamed properly would not dare to touch it, lest he "go crazy and fall unconscious." One informant (TB) said, "The souls of the enemy were in the scalps; that's why they were afraid." However, other informants denied that enemy souls were in the scalps.

While returning from battle, the scalper was under restrictions, which required that he fast and refrain from drinking water. Upon arrival in Mohave country, he turned the scalp over to the permanent keeper of the scalps, the *kohota* (or *kwaxot*) festival chief or dance director, who made preparations for the scalp dance in celebration of the victory. After the dance the scalper spent from four to eight days undergoing purification by

bathing in the river after lathering his body with soaproot, and by fumigating himself over a fire, while abstaining from eating meat or salt. PL said, "If he didn't purify himself, it would kill him. He even cleans his fingernails." The *kohota* also had to be purified after handling the scalp.

On the return trip the scalper was also in charge of the war captives (young females and little boys), since prior to being purified the prisoners (*ahwethauk*) were deemed to be dangerous to other Mohaves because of "enemy power." A Mohave warrior would not violate an enemy woman, because "it would be bad for him," and he would be stricken with "enemy sickness." After the party had reached the Mohave country, the *kohota* (also known as the *ahwe kusumanya*) was in charge of purifying the captives, bathing them in the river each day for four to eight days, to dispel the "enemy power."

PL stated that:

When the prisoners were brought back, the *ahwe kusumanya* washed them. He took care of them and gave them power to be related to the Mohaves. They were magically dangerous if not washed right away. The enemies had dangerous magic on them, so he smutted them and washed them with a mixture of soaproot and arrowweeds. They had to bathe for four days.

The female prisoners, after their purification, might be given to old men as wives, in part as an insult to the enemy, and also "because the men are old, and they figure they might as well get rid of them." (PL)

If the old man could make any children, they would be half-breeds and could marry Mohaves when they grew up. The prisoners never tried to escape and go back to their tribe; they were too well-treated. I

saw quite a few of them in my youth. The Mohaves must have liked to take captives, because there were lots around (PL).

The boy prisoners might after purification be adopted by the Mohaves, but all of my informants refused to confirm that boy captives were ever sold to the Mexicans as has been reported for other River Yuman tribes, the Yuma, Maricopa, and Cocopa (Forde 1931: 168; Spier 1933: 182; Gifford 1933:302).

A swift runner was sent ahead of a returning war party to bring tidings of battle, and to inform the *kohota* as to when the warriors would be home. The *kohota* would then designate a date for the scalp dance, and he sent word around to the various *rancherías* (settlements) so that the people would know when to attend. The *kohota* tied the new scalps on a long pole with willow fibers, and he also brought out the old scalps and fastened them at intervals on the pole. Two of my informants, however, maintained that each scalp was fixed to a separate pole.

The warriors, who had been under restrictions on the return journey, did not attend the scalp dance, but had to undergo lustration by bathing in the river and remaining quietly in their homes during the celebration. My informants were explicit in stating that all members of a war party rather than enemy slayers alone had to be purified. Leslie Spier, however, once expressed doubt that all Mohave warriors had to undergo purification, stating that it was not customary for the area (1955:14). But Drucker's information (1941:135) agreed with mine in confirming that all returning Mohave warriors were restricted and had to bathe. Furthermore, C. Daryll Forde similarly reported that among the Yuma all the warriors were restricted after a war party and had to bathe for four days, although the purification of enemy slayers continued for

an additional four days (1931:168).

In the scalp dance women known as *yakatha'alya* played a leading role. The name *yakatha'alya* was also given to the few women who sometimes accompanied war parties. At least some of these women may have been transvestites. Informants described the scalp celebration as follows:

No one made speeches at the scalp dance. The people were happy to see the scalp brought in. The women made a lot of remarks about the scalp. They ran around with bows and arrows, hollering and dodging, and had a good time. The squaws are the ones who dance around the scalp. They make hurrah around it when he brought it back. The warriors didn't dance around it. The women danced and sang around the scalp. No special songs, just songs they knew. Women would paint their faces black and their hair red like the *kwanami*. Sometimes they would stand up and talk face-to-face like challengers. They would pretend like they had been to battle, telling how they had killed and scalped. The dance went on for four days and four nights.(PL)

The scalps were painted so they look natural, just like a person's face. When the old women got really mad, they'd get arrows and shoot them at the scalps. (AL)

Children danced in the scalp dance, too. They dressed them up with feathers, painted their faces, and let them dance. (LW)

The prisoners (*ahwethauk*) were compelled to be present at the scalp dance, but they were not permitted to join in the festivities. According to LW, the prisoners were well-treated, but the Mohaves taunted and humiliated and "hit them a little, but not much." PL also said that the prisoners were "not much tortured."

After the scalp dance the *kohota* kept the scalps in a corner of his house in a large gourd or *olla*, which was sealed with greasewood or arrowweed gum, or covered with a large sherd shaped to fit the aperture. Periodically, he would clean and dress the scalps with a mixture of clay and pulverized mesquite bark. He too had been the recipient of dream power which protected him from the malign influence of the scalps, provided that he purified himself after handling them.

The people were afraid of the scalps and stayed away from them. The keeper sometimes washed and brushed the scalps, and dyed the hair and painted it and did it up in mud. When he was through he always took a bath and did without salt for four days. (LW)

At harvest time the *kohota* would set a date for a repetition of the scalp dance, and he once more dressed the scalps in preparation. The dance was a great social occasion, and was believed to have a beneficial effect upon the fertility of the tribe.

The scalp dance brought in all the youngsters, and they would have a good time. South, Middle, and North Mohaves would gather and introduce themselves. Lots of marriages resulted, and it led to an increase in the tribe. Thus the scalps helped to increase the number of the Mohaves. (PL)

After the dance the *kohota* again stored the scalps in his house, and he and his family underwent purification by abstaining from salt while bathing and fuming themselves over a four day period.

According to some of my informants, old scalps were brought out and mounted on poles for a dance of incitement prior to the departure of a war party. I cannot, however, confirm Drucker's report (1941: 135) that the Mohave took old scalps along on war expeditions as did the Yuma (Forde 1931:106). My informants denied

the practice for the Mohave.

In summary, the Mohave scalper was an important tribal functionary, who not only played a prominent role in military campaigns, but also doctored "enemy sickness," served as a funeral orator, and directed the commemorative mourning ceremony as well. The scalp itself had a symbolic importance which permeated

many phases of Mohave culture. Scalps as well as prisoners obviously had a propaganda value for the Mohave, since they were a tangible evidence of the prowess of Mohave warriors. It was also an important part of Mohave ideology that any scalps taken from Mohaves must be avenged by taking enemy scalps, and for the death of each Mohave an enemy must be slain. 2

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