



Iya

Yankton Sioux People – USA and Canada

From the tall grass came the voice of a crying babe. The hunters who were passing nigh heard and halted.

The tallest one among them hastened toward the high grass with long, cautious strides. He waded through the growth of green with just a head above it all. Suddenly exclaiming ‘Hunhe!’ he dropped out of sight. In another instant he held up in both his hands a tiny little baby, wrapped in soft brown buckskins.

‘Oh ho, a wood-child!’ cried the men, for they were hunting along the wooded river bottom where this babe was found.

While the hunters were questioning whether or no they should carry it home, the wee Indian baby kept up his little howl.

‘His voice is strong!’ said one.

‘At times it sounds like an old man’s voice!’ whispered a superstitious fellow, who feared some bad spirit hid in the small child to cheat them by and by.

‘Let us take it to our wise chieftain,’ at length they said; and the moment they started toward the camp ground the strange wood-child ceased to cry.

Beside the chieftain’s tepee waited the hunters while the tall man entered with the child.

‘How! How!’ nodded the kind-faced chieftain, listening to the queer story. Then rising, he took the infant in his strong arms; gently he laid the black-eyed babe in his daughter’s lap. ‘This is to be your little son!’ said he, smiling.

‘Yes, father,’ she replied. Pleased with the child, she smoothed the long black hair fringing his round brown face.

‘Tell the people that I give a feast and dance this day for the naming of my daughter’s little son,’ bade the chieftain.

In the meanwhile among the men waiting by the entrance way, one said in a low voice: ‘I have heard that bad spirits come as little children into a camp which they mean to destroy’.

‘No! No! Let us not be overcautious. It would be cowardly to leave a baby in the wild wood where prowl the hungry wolves!’ answered an elderly man.

The tall man now came out of the chieftain’s tepee. With a word he sent them to their dwellings half running with joy.

‘A feast! A dance for the naming of the chieftain’s grandchild!’ cried he in a loud voice to the village people.

‘What? What?’ asked they in great surprise, holding a hand to the ear to catch the words of the crier.

There was a momentary silence among the people while they listened to the ringing voice of the man walking in the center ground. Then broke forth a rippling, laughing babble among the cone-shaped teepees. All were glad to hear of the chieftain’s grandson. They were happy to attend the feast and dance for its naming. With excited fingers they twisted their hair into glossy braids and painted their cheeks with bright red paint. To and fro hurried the women, handsome in their gala-day dress. Men in loose deerskins, with long tinkling metal fringes, strode in small numbers toward the center of the round camp ground.

Here underneath a temporary shade-house of green leaves they were to dance and feast. The children in deerskins and paints, just like their elders, were jolly little men and women. Beside their eager parents they skipped along toward the green dance house.

Here seated in a large circle, the people were assembled, the proud chieftain rose with the little baby in his arms. The noisy hum of voices was hushed. Not a tinkling of a metal fringe broke the silence. The crier came forward to greet the chieftain, then bent attentively over the small babe, listening to the words of the chieftain. When he paused the crier spoke aloud to the people:

‘This woodland child is adopted by the chieftain’s elder daughter. His name is Chaske. He wears the title of the eldest son. In honor to Chaske the chieftain gives this feast and dance! These are the words of him you see holding a baby in his arms.’

‘Yes! Yes! Hinnu! How!’ came from the circle. At once the drummers beat softly and slowly their drum while the chosen singers hummed together to find the common pitch. The beat of the drum grew louder and faster. The singers burst forth in a lively tune. Then the drum-beats subsided and faintly marked the rhythm of the singing. Here and there bounced up men and women, both young and old. They danced and sang with merry light hearts. Then came the hour of feasting.

Late into the night the air of the camp ground was alive with the laughing voices of women and the singing in unison of young men. Within her father’s tepee sat the chieftain’s daughter. Proud of her little one, she watched over him asleep in her lap.

Gradually a deep quiet stole over the camp ground, as one by one the people fell into pleasant dreams. Now all the village was still. Alone sat the beautiful young mother watching the babe in her lap, asleep with a gaping little mouth. Amid the quiet of the night, her ear heard the far-off hum of many voices. The faint sound of murmuring people was in the air. Upward she glanced at the smoke hole of the wigwam and saw a bright star peeping down upon her. ‘Spirits in the air above?’ she wondered. Yet there was no sign to tell her of the nearness. The fine small sound of voices grew large and nearer.

‘Father rise! I hear the coming of some tribe. Hostile or friendly ... I cannot tell. Rise and see!’ whispered the young woman.

‘Yes, my daughter!’ answered the chieftain, springing to his feet.

Though asleep, his ear was ever alert. Thus rushing out into the open, he listened for strange sounds. With an eagle eye he scanned the camp ground for some sign.

Returning he said: 'My daughter, I hear nothing and see no sign of evil nigh'.

'Oh! The sound of many voices comes up from the earth about me!' exclaimed the young mother.

Bending low over her babe she gave ear to the ground. Horrified was she to find the mysterious sound came out of the open mouth of her sleeping child!

'Why so unlike other babies!' she cried within her heart as she slipped him gently from her lap to the ground. 'Mother, listen and tell me if this child is an evil spirit come to destroy our camp!' she whispered loud.

Placing an ear close to the open baby mouth, the chieftain and his wife, each in turn heard the voices of a great camp. The singing of men and women, the beating of the drum, the rattling of deer-hoofs strung like bells on a string, these were the sounds they heard.

'We must go away,' said the chieftain, leading them into the night. Out in the open he whispered to the frightened young woman: 'Iya, the camp-eater, has come in the guise of a babe. Had you gone to sleep, he would have jumped out into his own shape and would have devoured our camp. He is a giant with spindling legs. He cannot fight, for he cannot run. He is powerful only in the night with his tricks. We are safe as soon as day breaks'. Then moving closer to the woman, he whispered: 'If he wakes now, he will swallow the whole tribe with one hideous gulp! Come, we must flee with our people'.

Thus creeping from tepee to tepee a secret alarm signal was given. At midnight the teepees were gone and there was left no sign of the village save heaps of dead ashes. So quietly had the people folded their wigwams and bundled their tent poles that they slipped away unheard by the sleeping Iya babe.

When the morning sun arose the babe awoke. Seeing himself deserted, he threw off his baby form in a hot rage.

Wearing his own ugly shape, his huge body toppled to and fro, from side to side, on a pair of thin legs far too small for their burden. Though with every move he came dangerously nigh to falling, he followed in the trail of the fleeing people.

‘I shall eat you in the sight of a noon-day sun’ cried Iya in his vain rage, when he spied them encamped beyond a river.

By some unknown cunning he swam the river and sought his way toward the teepees.

‘Hin! Hin!’ he grunted and growled. With perspiration beading his brow he strove to wiggle his slender legs beneath his giant form.

‘Ha! Ha!’ laughed all the village people to see Iya made foolish with anger. ‘Such spindle legs cannot stand to fight by daylight!’ shouted the brave ones who were terror-struck the night before by the name ‘Iya’.


Warriors with long knives rushed forth and slew the camp-eater.

Lo! there rose out of the giant a whole Indian tribe: their camp ground, their teepees in a large circle, and the people laughing and dancing.

‘We are glad to be free!’ said these strange people.

Thus Iya was killed, and no more are the camp grounds in danger of being swallowed up in a single night time. □

Adapted by Zitkala-Ša, Yankton Sioux writer (1901).

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Comments

In trying to be true to our commitment to avoid making adaptations of stories of peoples who have been oppressed by European colonisers and their descendants, we wanted to share this story, written by Zitkala-Ša, a member of the Yankton Dakota Sioux People. It is a story that serves as a metaphor to illustrate Principle 5d of the Earth Charter (*see below*).

Zitkala-Ša (1876-1938), which in Lakota means 'Red Bird', was born on the Yankton Indian Reservation in South Dakota, the daughter of a Dakota mother and a French father, who left them as a child. At the age of eight, she was forced to leave the freedom and happiness of life among her people - as she herself said - to be educated in European customs and beliefs at a Quaker missionary boarding school. There she was given the name Gertrude Simmons, her long hair was cut, she was forced to suppress all the signs and customs of her culture and to pray like a Quaker. The only good things that came out of it for her were that she learned to read and write, as well as to play the violin.

Three years later she returned to the Yankton reservation only to find, to her dismay, that the people on the reservation were beginning to take on the customs and ways of thinking of the Europeans, and that even she had a foot in each world. After another three years in the reservation, she returned to the white world with the intention of continuing her musical training. She learned piano and violin, and ended up teaching music and studying at Earlham College in Richmond, where she would publicly display her fine oratory.

Over the years, crossing the bridge again and again between her culture and European culture, between the reservation and the white world, Zitkala-Ša would eventually become a writer, editor, translator and political activist, as well as a musician and educator. She would even go on to compose an opera with composer William F. Hanson, entitled *The Sun Dance Opera*, based on the Lakota Sun Dance, which the federal government had forbidden the Ute people to perform on their reservation.

In 1916, at the age of 30, she began her Native American activism by being appointed secretary of the Society of American Indians, an association dedicated to the preservation of the Native American way of life. She also lobbied in political circles for her people's right to full American citizenship. From Washington D.C., Zitkala-Ša sharply criticised the Bureau of Indian Affairs, even calling for its dissolution because of its boarding school policies, for the lifting of the ban on indigenous children using their own language and preserving their cultural customs. She denounced the abuses that took place in these boarding schools whenever a native boy or girl refused to pray according to the Christian way.

Also from Washington she began to lecture throughout the United States and, during the 1920s, she started to promote the idea of creating a pan-Indian movement that would unite all the tribes of North America in order to lobby on behalf of the native peoples. In 1924, thanks in part to her efforts, the Indian Citizenship Act was passed, granting American citizenship rights to most of the indigenous peoples who did not already have them.

In 1926, she and her husband founded the National Council of American Indians (NCAI), with the goal of uniting tribes across the United States in their struggle for Indian rights.

However, Zitkala-Ša was not only an activist for the rights of the First Nations of North America. She was also involved in women's rights activism in the 1920s, when she joined the General Federation of Women's Clubs.

Zitkala-Ša died in 1938, aged 61, and is buried in Arlington National Cemetery in Washington. To honour her, the International Astronomical Union named a crater on Venus "Bonnin" after her married name, Gertrude Simmons Bonnin.

In short, we are dealing here with a woman of exceptional stature. As Professor Tadeusz Lewandowski points out in her biography:

Her task was a complex negotiation, her historical circumstances limiting. As an indigenous woman in early twentieth-century America, Zitkala-Ša was bound by political, racial, gender, ideological, and discursive restrictions that, in many ways, she managed to overcome. She faced objectification within white society as an exotic female specimen of a supposedly dying race, a preconception she sometimes used to her advantage. (Lewandowski, 2016, p. 13)

Sources

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Associated text of the Earth Charter

Principle 5d: Control and eradicate non-native or genetically modified organisms harmful to native species and the environment, and prevent introduction of such harmful organisms.

Other passages that this story illustrates

Principle 8b: Recognize and preserve the traditional knowledge and spiritual wisdom in all cultures that contribute to environmental protection and human well-being.

Principle 8c: Ensure that information of vital importance to human health and environmental protection, including genetic information, remains available in the public domain.

Principle 16d: Eliminate nuclear, biological, and toxic weapons and other weapons of mass destruction.

