

ETHNOLOGY

# Thoughts Can Kill

## Extraordinary Duels Fought by California Indians, in Which Only Weapon is Hypnotic Power, Described by Chief

By EMILY C. DAVIS

**T**HE MOST extraordinary duels in the world are fought in California. Not in the movies, either, though one of these contests would make a tensely dramatic scene.

The strangest of all personal battles are fought by clashing minds. Not a pistol is fixed. No sword flashes through the air. The fighters merely face one another and hurl their thoughts and power until the weaker fighter falls down helpless—paralyzed, maybe, or even dead. Yes, stone dead.

You don't believe thoughts can kill?

Testimony that thoughts have this deadly power has come to Washington from two sources recently.

Chief Wi'ishi, athletic young Indian of the Mission tribe in California, visiting Washington this summer, told of his own experiences in such combats. With smiles and gestures, he showed how the power is hurled from heart to heart, straight as the blow of a fist from a Joe Louis or a James Braddock.

And listening to Chief Wi'ishi, Dr. John P. Harrington of the Bureau of American Ethnology nodded his assurance that these psychic battles do take place, sometimes with crippling or fatal results. White men are not generally welcome at these little known events. But Dr. Harrington has spent many years among the Mission Indians, studying vanishing customs of the aboriginal New World. He has attended some of the secret contests, and has heard stories of other duels which have become Indian history.

### Surpass Orientals

From what he has seen and heard, Dr. Harrington has come to a surprising conclusion about the American Indian's psychic powers. That is, it seems surprising in view of the fame of Hindus in this field. He says plainly that American Indians surpassed Oriental mystics of India in psychic exploits.

As for white men in America, Dr. Harrington dismisses the lot with a casual: "We are mere infants compared to the Indian in use of mental powers."

The American Indians set great store by psychic development, regarding material show as not nearly so important, he explains. All Indians tried to develop their minds in such matters as concentration and meditation. They tried to learn healing and killing art through dreams, and to draw on reserves of power that they felt within them.

American Indians could—and a few still can—perform stunts equal to the famous Hindu rope trick and other illusions of the fakirs in India. The American Indians mastered the secrets of hypnotism. They claimed power to kill an enemy a hundred miles away. More startling than that, they claimed power to restore life to an apparently lifeless form. That is to say, Indian adepts at psychic power, the medicine men, attained these marvels.

### Super-Attraction

All this being the case, you can see why a battle of power between two master minds would be a super-attraction in the Indian world. For the Indian crowd, it had all the excitement of Spain's bull-fighting contests—well-known men in a supreme struggle before their eyes, with death perhaps for a sudden ending.

For the fighters, the contest was a solemn and necessary business. They had to go through with it. They were medicine men, depending heavily on psychic powers in their healing. Well, then, they were expected to show off on these occasions, let the public see that they could indeed work wonders. If a medicine man won a knock-out victory, he could count on plenty of patients. If he lost! Down went his prestige. He might be left paralyzed, helpless. But he had to take that risk.

Modern doctors may well be glad they are not expected to show their skill in any such public contests.

The psychic battles take place, Dr. Harrington explains, at inter-village fiestas which Mission Indians hold at intervals. More than anything else, the villages look forward to these fiestas. Village chiefs arrange for the affairs in advance and pay for them by an elaborate system of banking, using shell wampum for money. Messengers of the chief giving the fiesta go out to invite the people



### PSYCHIC WEAPON

*Chief Wi'ishi shows how he takes the power from his heart—by way of his throat.*

of villages all around. And on the appointed day, each group arrives at the village in ceremonial entry, hearing welcoming speeches and returning them.

"Among the invited villagers of a group," says Dr. Harrington, "there is sure to be a medicine man, one revered for his powers over the unseen universe. He walks over to men of his own class and power, who may be standing among the receiving group, and in a very few words he invites them to a test of power.

"They draw a line on the ground, like the goal line for a tug-of-war, while the challenger goes down to the creek and prepares for the contest by painting his face or putting on ceremonial costume, even if only adding a feather to his hair or fixing his necklace.

"When he emerges, he is no longer the man that retired from their sight. He is changed, like a rampaging bull. He marches on, with clutching hands, extracting from his heart and extracting from the air an invisible power. Beyond

the line stand the waiting medicine men—sometimes not merely one, but four or five opponents lined against him. They stand tense, not knowing what fate is in store for them. Every one knows that men have fallen down dead in these contests.

### Clutching Power

"Still the challenger comes on, snatching, forming, and holding the invisible power of the universe in his two hands, and ready to throw it when least expected.

"Suddenly, he throws it! One of the receiving medicine men falls, foams at the mouth, kicks, and lies still. The crowds stir, wondering if he is stunned, or dead.

"But the injured medicine man staggers to his feet again. He gathers power, and with gestures of catching and holding it, he suddenly shoots it back at the intruder. All the medicine men hurl their power at the challenger. Still, the intruder does not fall. He pushes forward daringly and crosses the line in triumph."

After the contest, which in this case does not include a funeral, the winning

medicine man is the hero of the fiesta. He has withstood the power of four of the most powerful medicine men of the countryside.

"Indians with knowing smiles and secret conversation about the fiesta ground congratulate the winner on having crossed the line," says Dr. Harrington concluding his account. "The man's reputation is made for months to come. He will have no trouble in getting cases of sickness of the kind he knows best how to cure, and he is sure of liberal payments. He is a great doctor."

But, what actually happens when mind struggles with mind "to the death"?

Chief Wi'ishi, who talks halting English in his soft, very low voice, explains it one way. Dr. Harrington another.

Says the young chief: "My father, he medicine man. My grandpa, my great grandpa, he medicine man. Only medicine man's son has this power. It given to me by my father. Power thrown from here—inside—so. Power strike down, kill."

### Fear Kills

Dr. Harrington's explanation is that if an Indian dies in these combats, he really kills himself. It is the fear, the excitement of the contest, and perhaps the sickening feeling inside that he is indeed not so strong as his rampaging opponent. All this turmoil of apprehension and fear proves too much for a weak heart or an otherwise failing human engine. By sheer auto-suggestion, the weaker man dies or falls paralyzed—because he expects that fate to overtake him. The psychic blow of the conqueror has killed him, in one sense.

Chief Wi'ishi, politely smiling, is not quite sure that all this talk of auto-suggestion is as good as his own simple explanation. But, whatever the inner facts may be, as Dr. Harrington points out, the fundamental fact remains: thoughts and fears act as weapons in these fights, dealing knock-out blows.

In these Indians, the subconscious mind, Dr. Harrington goes on to explain in Freudian terms, becomes so conditioned to seeing certain activity follow certain stimuli that it is only necessary to furnish the accustomed environment for the Indians to expect a given result. In this case, the downfall or "permanent damage" to the weaker fighter is a foregone conclusion. Therefore, it happens.

Text books on psychology, Dr. Harrington says, have overlooked the striking phenomena which many Indian situations, such as the psychic contests, reveal.

"Nowhere," he declares, "do we find such astounding facts concerning psychic

development as in the extreme southwest of the United States—that is, in southern California."

Like the Hindu, who can make a tree grow before the astonished eyes of a crowd, the Indian medicine man performs similar feats that depend on hypnotism of a whole group. Dr. Harrington has seen them raise a stick from the ground without touching it, make it sink again, or follow them. Tables can be made to engage in the same unnatural behavior.

### Hypnotism

"That's hypnotism," says Dr. Harrington, accounting for medicine man's "power" in modern terms. "The Bible miracle of Aaron's rod turning into a serpent before the eyes of Pharaoh is somewhat similar, and may have been achieved by similar means."

The medicine man who is so powerful—by his reputation—that he is known to destroy an enemy for a patron, even at a distance of a hundred miles, gets his results by auto-suggestion. The other fellow actually kills himself. Like the Indian whose own fears and self-suggestion kill or paralyze him in psychic duel, the Indian who knows he is being attacked by a powerful medicine man with magic rites, may actually die of heart failure, or a stroke. Or he may worry himself into a "run-down" physical state in which he is ready to take almost any disease that comes along. If he dies in a reasonable time, the medicine man gets the credit. The medicine man has done nothing to kill—except induce the victim to destroy himself. The Indian, accustomed to regard psychic forces as tremendously real, is a ready prey for such thoughts. So, the medicine man "gets his man" more often than he could in a more resistant and tough minded society.

### Not Psychic

As for the medicine man's ability to raise the dead, Dr. Harrington finds, while that is impressive to hear about, it actually is not an example of psychic power, either on the part of the Indian doctor or the patient. It is merely an accident, when it happens.

Primitive people, Dr. Harrington explains, do not use the word dead much in medical matters. They scarcely distinguish between a man who lies in a coma, apparently lifeless, and a man whose heart has entirely stopped. If a doctor revives the man in a coma, every one is astonished, and the Indian doctor gets credit for restoring life.

Unexplained, the Indian medicine man's achievements are mystifying and



### SUSPENSE

*He holds the power tight in his hands, awaiting the psychological moment for hurling at his foe.*

awe-inspiring, as unexplained psychic phenomena always are.

Until psychologists and ethnologists came along to explain the unbelievable, by ferreting out the natural laws, the Indians kept their secrets. A medicine man transmitted his power and the techniques for using it only to his son or nephew. With solemn ceremonies, the youth received the power which was "coughed up" by his older relative, held invisible

in his hand, and transferred to the boy's heart through the chest wall.

Indian medicine men never tried their famous power to down the white men, when they invaded America. Or, if they did, it failed to work. The Spaniards and other foreigners were, as Dr. Harrington has pointed out, mere infants in psychic development, and the Indian's most potent medicine failed to "take."

*Science News Letter, October 5, 1935*

#### ARCHAEOLOGY

## Earliest Americans Linked With Old Stone Age Europeans

**W**ERE the earliest known Americans contemporaries of the cave men of the end of the Old Stone Age in Europe and Asia? The remains we have of their arts and crafts indicate that they were, Sir Arthur Smith Woodward of the British Museum, noted student of Stone Age man, intimated at the meeting of the British Association for the Advancement of Science.

Sir Arthur identified the stone implements of the "Yuma" culture of the American Southwest with the "Solutrean" culture of France, carried on by an apparently highly intelligent branch of the Cro-Magnon race. This does not mean, however, that the earliest Americans were also Cro-Magnons; very different races often use similar things—as Indians and Fiji Islanders of today drive Fords. But the use of similar things by different peoples in widely separated parts of the world is at least an indication of their possession of a common culture,

and suggests that they lived at about the same time. On this basis, Sir Arthur provisionally assigned the end of the Ice Age as the possible date of the first human immigration into the North American continent.

Once man got here, he was not content to use only his own versions of Solutrean tools which he had brought with him, but branched out into inventions of his own. The speaker told of types of spearheads used by these earliest comers from the "Old Country," which were fitted to the shaft after a fashion never used by Stone Age man in Europe. It is perhaps the first known instance of "Yankee inventiveness."

These first Americans came into a land that must have been as strange to them as the later America, with its bison, grizzly bears, pronghorn antelope and other animals never before seen by white men, must have looked to the first settlers from Europe. Associated with implements of human manufacture in the Southwest are bones of extinct species of bison and musk ox, the latter found only as a vanishing genus in today's Arctic regions. Even stranger were the lumbering long-haired ground-sloths, which have been found not merely as fossils but as dried natural mummies, with parts of flesh and hide and hair still on them. Sir Arthur mentioned having visited these sites during a recent sojourn in the United States.

All these things make the "dating" of the earliest American very difficult. These animals were all dead in Europe by the end of the Ice Age. The most plausible inference at present seems to be that they survived, at least in small numbers, considerably later on this continent, to serve for food to the earliest American immigrants—and no doubt to give him moments of bewildered wonderment as well.

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Buffalo-Grass

**M**ANY features of the proposed national reform program for land use are simple returns to the natural state, as things were before our young and over-eager civilization "tore the country wide open" to transplant into it cultivation and exploitation methods that worked all right "in the Old Country." Now we are undertaking to re-grow the forests our grandsires cut down, to re-flood the lakes and swamps our fathers drained. It has been realized that wildlife at high productivity may quite readily pay better than farming at low.

In keeping with the rest of this program is the endeavor to re-establish buffalo grass on the now unprofitable plowlands of the Great Plains region. We have found that a cycle of drought will easily wipe out all the agricultural gains made by years of "boom" wheat farming, and that winds often double the ruin and make it permanent by whirling away the soil itself, after drought and the locust have eaten every green thing.

The old native vegetation of the "short-grass" country was dominated by a low-growing, crisply curled, thick-sodded species known as buffalo grass, because of its importance in the diet of the great herds of bison that once covered the

### FALL BOOK NUMBER

- The Fall Book Number, to be issued October 26, will list practically all of the important new books on science.
- Readers of the NEWS LETTER, who have written scientific books published since July 1 or to be published before December 31, are invited to send in the titles for inclusion in the list. Please give title, author, publisher and price. Mail before October 10 to:

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WORLD'S OLDEST LANGUAGE—  
ETHIOPIAN, by Dr. John P. Harrington,  
Bureau of American Ethnology,  
Smithsonian Institution.

Tuesday, Oct. 15, 4:30 p. m., E.S.T.  
WHEN THE DUCKS FLY SOUTH, by  
Dr. W. B. Bell, Chief, Division of Wild  
Life Research, Biological Survey.

In the Science Service series of radio addresses given by eminent scientists over the Columbia Broadcasting System.