



Tsentainte (White Horse), one of James Mooney's Kiowa informants, photographed shortly before his death in 1892. He is shown holding his Cow Shield, which Mooney obtained for the Smithsonian Institution. (Hutchins and Lanney photograph, courtesy Smithsonian Institution, American Ethnology Glass Negative Collection #062602.00)

INDIAN SHIELD HERALDRY

by

James Mooney

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Between 1891 and 1906, Smithsonian Institution ethnologist James Mooney conducted fieldwork among the Kiowas and neighboring tribes in the general vicinity of Fort Sill, in what is now the state of Oklahoma but was then Indian Territory.¹ It was Mooney's good fortune that he numbered among his Plains Indian informants many old-timers who grew to maturity during the "buffalo days."

*Mooney, a gifted Bureau of American Ethnology researcher who authored a number of significant contributions to knowledge about Plains Indian cultures,² hoped to write an account of the shields of the Kiowa and Kiowa-Apache (today called the Kiowa Tribe of Oklahoma). But that work remained unfinished at the time of his death in 1921. Mooney's "Indian Shield Heraldry," reprinted here, originally appeared in a 1901 issue of *The Southern Workman*, a publication of Hampton (Virginia) Institute which prepared African Americans and Native Americans for agricultural careers.³ Even after nearly a century, "Indian Shield Heraldry" is arguably the best brief general introduction to this arcane and complex subject. The piece is vintage Mooney: succinct, informative, and wonderfully evocative of his intimate association with Plains Indian informants.*

[One day in the 1890s] I was riding along with the son of Left Hand, chief of the southern Arapahos, to attend a dance at his father's camp up the river [near Fort Sill]. The young man had been to school and spoke good English. While talking together about the old times he said: "My father never carried a long lance. He broke the handle short off to get closer to his enemy; in battle he made a noise like a buffalo bull." I said I had thought the Indian war-cry was any yell sufficiently loud and horrible to frighten an enemy.

"O [*sic*], no," he replied. "It depended on the shield. Some warriors had an Eagle shield and screamed like an eagle. Some had Bear shield and growled like a grizzly bear. My father carried a Buffalo shield and bellowed like a buffalo bull."⁴

So the Indian war-cry had a definite meaning, like the slogan of the old Highland clans, and the shield had some hidden significance aside from its purpose of turning a flying bullet. It was an interesting discovery to be followed up.

I had with me a number of colored drawings, made by Indians, representing notable exploits on the hunt or the warpath.⁵ In most of them the warrior was pictured in buckskin and war-bonnet, mounted on his pony, with his gun or long lance in his hand, and his shield slung at his side. The pictures were without inscription, and it was my

business to identify them and learn their history. In submitting them to the Indians for this purpose I noticed that in almost every case they identified the tribe of the warrior by his shield.⁶ An Arapaho, a Cheyenne or a Kiowa, would look at a picture, and after a moment's scrutiny would say, "That is a shield of our tribe. It is a Bear shield," and as not more than half a dozen warriors in the tribe had carried such a shield it was then an easy matter to identify the subject of the incident. Or the Arapahos would look and say: "That is a shield of the Kiowas. Ask them about it; we do not know the picture." So there were several shields of each pattern, and each tribe had its own distinctive patterns.⁷

Having selected the Kiowas for extended study, I resolved to give special attention to their shields. The shield of the prairie warrior is a round disk of dressed buffalo hide about twenty inches in diameter. The hide is taken from the back of the bull's neck where the skin is toughest, and is made still tougher by shrinking it over a fire.⁸ The shield has two covers of ordinary dressed buffalo or elk skin the outer of which is removed at the moment of going into the fight.⁹ Both covers are painted and decorated according to certain fixed patterns, and concealed between the two are various sacred "medicine" objects such as a panther claw or eagle feather, which add their mysterious virtue to the protecting power of the shield. It was carried upon the left arm of the mounted warrior, leaving the left hand free to hold the bow, from which the arrow was discharged with the right. When the warrior died the shield was placed under his head in the grave. At the final surrender of the southern plains tribes in 1875 most of their bows, lances and shields were confiscated and destroyed, but quite a number were concealed by their owners until the trouble was over. As the old warriors died, their shields were buried with them, and, as no new ones have been made since, the number rapidly decreased. Thirty years ago there were probably over two hundred shields in the Kiowa tribe.¹⁰ In 1892, only six remained. Of these I have secured three for the National Museum, two are owned by private parties, and only one is now with the tribe.

One of the most noted—a Bird shield—was carried by the old war chief in whose family I lived for several years.¹¹ When I first knew him the old man had the finest war dress in the tribe, consisting of buckskin suit, war-bonnet, shield, lance, bow, and a quiver filled with steel pointed arrows. I was anxious to buy it for the museum, to use upon a mounted figure intended to represent a typical plains warrior, and began by suggesting the purchase of the shield, but the negotiation came to an abrupt end when the old man replied, "I have given it to my son and he may sell it if he will, but if he does he sells his father's life." The son was sent for, and came from another camp, but said only, "I cannot sell my father's life." A year later the young man died and was buried with the buckskin suit upon him, the lance and quiver by his side, and the shield under his head, while his pony was shot beside the grave.

Every detail in connection with the shield is the inspiration of one of those dreams which come to the warrior during his frequent solitary vigils. The shield being his most precious possession, it is naturally uppermost in his thoughts at such times and he prays

for a fuller knowledge of the mystery attached to it or for light in regard to the making of a new one.

Let us suppose that his prayers are answered, and that a spirit—usually that of an animal god—a bear, an eagle, a rattlesnake—appears and directs him to make a new shield for the use of younger men as yet unsupplied.¹² The dream spirit instructs him as to the ornamentation of the shield, the tabus and other obligations attached to it, the style of war paint to be used by the owner for himself and his pony, the war cry, and finally the number to be made and the price to be paid by the purchasers. Everything is a matter of most minute detail as directed by the vision. Having completed his vigil, he returns to his camp and publicly announces that he has received a spirit command directing him to make a certain number of shields of a new order. Should he be a warrior of notable success on the warpath, so that men have faith in the protecting power of his medicine, he will not have to wait long until some young warrior not yet supplied will ask him to make for him one of the new kind.

The making is a matter of time and labor. The hide, after having been shrunken, is cut into shape, painted, and decorated with the feathers, horse-tail pendants or deer hoofs, which make it “medicine.”¹³ The outer cover, painted in a different style from the inner one, is drawn tightly over it with a running cord. Finally the [wooden] tripod to support it when not in use is made and painted.

The young man is then instructed in the prayers and tabus which he must observe during life. These rules always have reference to the particular animal god which inspires the shield. For instance the owner of a Bird shield must never taste the meat of a bird or an egg, or allow the body of a dead bird to lie about his camp. His shield is not supported upon an ordinary tripod, but lies flat upon four upright poles to typify a bird’s nest. Certain shields must be turned at intervals during the day so as to constantly face the sun. A few are fastened to a single upright pole erected behind the teepee, but in general the shield is hung upon a large tripod set up in front of the doorway.

The number of shields authorized by the vision must not be exceeded, but whether or not so many are made depends upon the confidence which the young men have in the “medicine” of the maker, and if his war reputation is not sufficient to give weight to his dreams he may never be asked to make even the first one. Those who carry shields of the same pattern constitute a small society, meeting at times to perform the same prayers and sacrifices to their protecting spirit, and usually keeping together on the warpath.

The colors and decoration of the shield are symbolic, following out a consistent principle.¹⁴ The Sun shield is yellow. The Buffalo shield is also yellow in its ground color, the buffalo being the animal representative of the Sun-god, while in the center are several concentric circles of different colors, representing the buffalo wallow, and at one side is a dark blue spot with a narrow red border, signifying the eye of the buffalo. The pendants are two buffalo tails, and between the covers is the talismanic “buffalo medicine.”

Every shield has its origin myth. Thus the Buffalo shield, the oldest in the tribe, originated from a woman who, while fleeing from the enemy, was overtaken by a prairie fire, but saved herself by crawling under a dried-up buffalo skin until the fire had passed over. While here the Buffalo spirit appeared to her and gave her directions for the shield, which was afterward made by her husband.¹⁷

Usually the shield was buried with its owner at his death. Sometimes, however, an aged warrior who had become too old for the warpath, would formally bestow his shield, and, sometimes his name with it, upon his son or some other young man whom he deemed worthy of the honor. He in turn might do the same years afterward, so that the shield thus became hereditary.

NOTES

1. For Mooney's life see L.G. Moses, *The Indian Man: A Biography of James Mooney* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1984). An introduction to some of Mooney's Kiowa work is in Ron McCoy, "Miniature Shields: James Mooney's Fieldwork Among the Kiowa and Kiowa-Apache," *American Indian Art Magazine*, Vol. 20, No. 3 (Summer 1995): 65-71.
2. "Calendar History of the Kiowa Indians," *Seventeenth Annual Report of the Bureau of American Ethnology for 1895-96*, Part 1 (Washington, DC: 1898), and "The Ghost-Dance Religion and the Sioux Outbreak of 1890," *Fourteenth Annual Report of the Bureau of American Ethnology to the Smithsonian Institution, 1892-93*, by J.W. Powell, Director, Part 2 (Washington, D.C.: 1896). Both volumes are available in paperback reprint editions. In addition to other publications, Mooney also wrote at least six hundred articles for the Bureau of American Ethnology's *Handbook of American Indians North of Mexico*, edited by Frederick W. Hodge and issued as *Bureau of American Ethnology Bulletin 30* (Washington, D.C.: 1907-1910).
3. "Indian Shield Heraldry," *The Southern Workman*, Vol. 30, No. 9 (September 1901): 500-504.
4. Nevertheless, some war cries were, as Mooney says earlier, "any yell sufficiently loud and horrible to frighten the enemy"; or, for that matter, provide the originator with the necessary adrenaline rush of courage.
5. Many Plains Indian warriors created graphic representations of their illustrious deeds on a variety of surfaces, including boulders, tipis, buffalo robes, and paper pages obtained through raid, trade, or gift.
6. In these drawings, an individual's identity could sometimes be established because of his association with a particular shield. For Kiowa examples see Ron McCoy, "Searching for Clues in Kiowa Ledger Drawings: Combining James Mooney's Fieldwork and the Barber Collection of the Cincinnati Art Museum," *American Indian Art Magazine*, Vol. 21, No. 3 (Summer 1996): 54-61.
7. The situation was even more complex: on occasion a shield design could, in essence, migrate from one tribe to another.
8. Any hide from the animal's neck to hump was well-suited for shield manufacture. The Cheyennes' Red Shield warrior society even made some shields from the hindquarters of the buffalo, with the tail left intact.
9. In fact, a shield might have fewer or more than two covers.
10. The figure represents Kiowa shield ownership, circa 1870. On this same topic, Mooney ventured elsewhere that before "their removal to a reservation in 1869" the Kiowas numbered about 1800 people, of whom 420 were probably males over twenty years of age. From this,

Mooney speculated that at that time the tribe contained “about 350 shield owners, representing at least fifty distinct shield origins.” James Mooney, “The Story of a Shield,” Mooney Collection, National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C., 2.

11. When Mooney writes of “the old war chief in whose family I lived for several years” while at Mount Scott, near Fort Sill, he refers to Feathered Lance (*Gaapiatan*). Mooney’s awareness of the race-against-the-clock nature of his fieldwork (and his fondness for what was then called “new spelling”) is illustrated in this passage from a 1902 letter to a colleague at the Bureau of American Ethnology: “As illustrating the necessity of doing this work while it is still possible I may state that this informant [Feathered Lance], who was the only one living who knew the inside pattern [of the Bird shield], the tradition and songs of this shield, died within the past week at the approximate age of 85 and his store of knowledge perisht [*sic*] with him excepting what I may put on record from having him campt [*sic*] with me during two months.” James Mooney letter to W.J. McGee, June 25, 1902, National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

12. The phrase “animal god,” at least insofar as it might be widely understood today, probably conveys a misimpression of what was seen in a vision or dream. Another phrase employed by Mooney, “dream spirit,” seems closer to what those who experienced profoundly influential dreams or visions said they saw.

13. In a Plains Indian context, the word “medicine” (or “Medicine”) conveys the idea of sacred power, usually of a protective variety. Medicine could be an unseen force, or a physical object embodying or otherwise representing that force.

14. The color symbolism on Plains Indian shields in general, and on those of particular tribes, does not appear to have been quite as hard and fast as Mooney implies here.

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