

PLATEAU SHAMANISM AND MARCUS WHITMAN

by Roderick Sprague

Among the myths and misunderstandings surrounding Marcus and Narcissa Whitman is the motivation for their killing in 1847. This survey of tribal views on killing shamans was prepared by an anthropologist at the University of Idaho. The Nez Perce beadwork shown on page 56 was photographed by Jane Gay in the early 1890's (ISHS 63-221.170).

IT IS VIRTUALLY an article of faith among Northwest historians that the "excuse" for the Cayuse killing Marcus Whitman and other whites at Wailatpu was the fact that if an Indian doctor failed to cure a patient his family could kill the doctor: "among . . . the Cayuse, killing medicine men for failing to cure patients" was accepted.¹ Whitman himself was, according to his chief biographer, well aware of the practice:

Whitman noted that when a Cayuse medicine man was unable to cure a patient, the relatives of the deceased would often kill him. Whitman in a letter to Greene dated April 7, 1843, wrote: "The number & horror of the deaths of this kind that have come under by observation have been great."²

Narcissa Whitman held the same view: "when one dies in your care they will hold you responsible for his life, and you are in great danger of being killed."³

How accurate is this view of the Plateau shaman? A quick review of the classic ethnographic literature, starting in the far north and moving south around the Sahaptan territory and then back to the Cayuse, reveals a startlingly different view concerning the killing of shamans. The exceptions present even more moderate positions.

Among the Carrier, malignant shamans were killed without recourse.⁴ This means that a shaman could be killed for practicing witchcraft against a person but not for simply failing to cure someone who died. Among the Shuswap a "bewitching" shaman could be killed; among the Lillooet "shamans were sometimes killed for bewitching or causing the death of people," and the same is also true for the Thompson.⁵

The only justification for killing a shaman among the Southern Okanogan was for refusing to attend a patient because of malice. After due warning the shaman might be killed by the "chiefs and the people."⁶ The killing of a shaman who had killed through witchcraft was accepted among the Sanpoil and Nespelem, and among the Wenatchi and Kalispel killing a malignant shaman was accepted.⁷ On the other hand, in 1936 ethnologist Allan Smith's oldest informant (born 1854) "stated categorically that Kalispel shamans who failed to cure were never killed."⁸ No information is available for the Spokane, but missionary Elkanah Walker implied that the killing of shamans was practiced.⁹

As for the Coeur d'Alene shamans: "If the person they treated died, they received no payment. Some [shamans] could bewitch people and in this way cause their death. Occasionally they were killed for doing this."¹⁰

One major exception in the Plateau involved the Kutenai. "There was no provision for the

¹Robert H. Ruby and John A. Brown, *The Cayuse Indians: Imperial Tribesmen of Old Oregon* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1972), 100.

²Clifford M. Drury [editor], *Nine Years with the Spokane Indians: The Diary, 1838-1848, of Elkanah Walker* (Glendale, California: Arthur H. Clark Co., 1976), 389n.

³Narcissa Whitman to parents, brothers and sisters, March 30, 1837, in *Transactions of the Nineteenth Annual Reunion of the Oregon Pioneer Association for 1891* (Portland, Oregon, 1893), 95-96.

⁴Verne F. Ray, "Culture Element Distributions: XXII, Plateau," *Anthropological Records* (1942), 8/2:241.

⁵James A. Teit, "The Shuswap," *Memoirs of the American Museum of Natural History* (1909), 4/7:612-613; Teit, "The Lillooet Indians," *ibid.* (1906), 4/5:288; Teit, "The Thompson Indians of British Columbia," *ibid.* (1900), 2/4:361; Ray, "Culture Element Distributions," 241.

⁶Walter Cline, et al., *The Sinkaieth or Southern Okanogan of Washington*, General Series in Anthropology, No. 6 (Menasha, Wisconsin: George Banta Publishing Co., 1938), 163.

⁷Ray, "Culture Element Distributions," 241; Ray, *The Sanpoil and Nespelem: Salishan Peoples of Northeastern Washington*, University of Washington, Publications in Anthropology, 5 (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1933), 210.

⁸Allan Smith, personal communication with the author, 1986.

⁹Drury, *Nine Years*, 382.

¹⁰James A. Teit, "The Salishan Tribes of the Western Plateaus," in *Forty-fifth Annual Report of the Bureau of American Ethnology for 1927-28* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1930), 195-196.

punishment of a medicine-man who exerted evil power, for there could be no proof of his guilt." The only observation on the Flathead is that malignant shamans were killed.¹¹

The Klamath practice was like that of the Coeur d'Alene: no payment if no cure and death if guilty of bewitching. One early ethnologist presents the popular interpretation; but a reading of the Klamath text itself shows that bewitching must be involved before killing of a shaman is permitted. The Wasco-Wishram follow the general Plateau pattern of killing a bewitching shaman, but not for the failure to cure.¹²

The Tenino, Kittitas, and Klickitat are all in the classification of groups who kill malignant shamans. The Yakima shamans "were much feared because of their ability to produce sickness and even death, and the killing of a medicine-man for a deed of this kind was not rare." Nez Perce shamans could be killed for sorcery.¹³

The Umatilla too are classified in one study as one of the groups who kill malignant shamans.¹⁴ Otherwise, from the classical anthropological sources on the Umatilla, Cayuse, and Wallawalla we have no information. However, considering the usual uniformity of Plateau culture and the widespread practice of killing shamans engaging in witchcraft or sorcery but the universal denial or lack of mention of killing for failure to cure, it is safe to assume that such distinctions were made by those at Waiilatpu.

The apparent feelings of those at the mission are found in an account by a Nez Perce who was called Yellow Bull by the whites. The important part of this account as reported by Edward H. Curtis is as follows:

A Nez Perce named Kulkulshmulshmul, my mother's brother, went to Waiilatpu, where he had a wife. When he came back he gave an account of what was going on there. He was crying because his wife had died of the sickness: she had taken some of the Doctor's medicine, and spots came

out on her face. Two hundred people had died. An employe at the mission, a man who had many wives, told the Indians that Doctor Whitman was putting poison in their medicine and killing them. One of the Indians made himself sick in order to test the Doctor, saying that if the Doctor's medicine killed him they would know that he was the cause of the death of the others. He took the medicine and died. Then the head-men met in council and made an agreement that the Doctor should be killed because two hundred of the people had died after taking his medicine.¹⁵

THUS IT WOULD appear from a review of the literature and from Yellow Bull's testimony that Whitman was killed not because he failed to cure the sick who died but rather because he was perceived as killing local Indians through witchcraft. The time had come to protect the population from this evil person, as was the accepted Plateau practice. The case was unusual and called for unusual measures including the killing of Narcissa—who, according to Yellow Bull, at the time of the killing was carrying down the stairs a bundle that "contained something which would be death to all those outside."¹⁶ The others killed were mature males, a prudent move under the conditions and not unusual in a typical Plateau feud.

It is time to view the Waiilatpu debacle not as a vengeful act but as an overdue protective act, well within the accepted procedures of the culture. ■

¹¹Edward H. Curtis, *The North American Indian*, 20 vols. (Norwood, Massachusetts: Plimpton Press, 1911), 7:130; Ray, "Culture Element Distributions," 241.

¹²Leslie Spier, *Klamath Ethnography*, University of California Publications in American Archaeology and Ethnology, 30 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1930), 127-128; Albert Samuel Gatschet, "The Klamath Indians of Southwestern Oregon," in *Contributions to North American Indian Ethnology*, U.S. Department of the Interior, Geographical and Geological Survey of the Rocky Mountain Region, Vol. 2, Part 1 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1890), 69; Leslie Spier and Edward Sapir, *Wishram Ethnography*, University of Washington, Publications in Anthropology, 3:3 (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1930), 247.

¹³Ray, "Culture Element Distributions," 241; Curtis, *North American Indian*, 7:12; Deward E. Walker, "Sorcery among the Nez Perce," in *Systems of North American Witchcraft and Sorcery*, Deward E. Walker, editor (Moscow: University of Idaho Press, 1970), 275.

¹⁴Ray, "Culture Element Distributions," 241.

¹⁵Curtis, *North American Indian*, 7:81.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 82.

