

## THE FEAST OF THE DEAD: HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

by

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In 1636 Brébeuf was present at a burial ceremony of the Hurons at Ossossoné which he described under the fitting, if somewhat lurid, title of the "Feast of the Dead." His description is so well known and has been so frequently quoted that it requires only the briefest summary. A large pit had been dug, scaffolds had been erected around it, and into the hole were thrown the remains of those who had died in the preceding six or seven years. In some cases only bones remained, tied up in untidy bundles; in other cases, there were cast in the corpses of those who had died recently. With them were deposited ornaments and valuables of different kinds, including three metal pots (1). Brébeuf commented on the ghastliness of the ceremony, and his description was used as a basis by later writers as a picture of the depravity and gruesomeness of "Indian" rituals.

There is no record of later Feasts of the Dead between that witnessed by Brébeuf and the destruction of the Hurons as a culture group in 1649. In the last 150 years, however, there have been discovered in southern Ontario a considerable number of ossuaries, each containing the remains of a large number of individuals. It has been tacitly assumed that such ossuaries were the scenes of comparable Feasts of the Dead. This is probably the case, but it is little more than conjecture that the rituals used were similar to those witnessed by Brébeuf.

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- (1) This ossuary was identified and excavated by Kenneth E. Kidd. See: Kidd, K.E. The Excavation and Historical Identification of a Huron Ossuary (American Antiquity, vol. XVIII (4), April, 1953, 359-379.

In 1956 the operator of a tractor in the outskirts of Toronto turned up a number of bones. It was obvious that they were human and excavation work was suspended. The discovery attracted a good deal of local interest. Speculation as to the origin of the bones ranged from the site of a fierce battle, to the burial of cholera victims, to the hypothesis of an Indian ossuary. Preliminary investigation showed that the last assumption was correct, and the provincial government acted with commendable promptness in declaring the area a site of archaeological importance. The bones that had been thrown out by the excavator were removed to the Royal Ontario Museum for examination.

The Reeve of Scarborough, the township in which the ossuary was located, became extremely interested. Believing, probably correctly, that a Feast of the Dead had been held here, he conceived the idea of another feast being held in 1956 to rebury the bones that had been accidentally discovered. This proposal received considerable local support. Obviously Indian cooperation was the essential factor, and Dr. Dunning will explain the steps taken to approach the Six Nations Indians on the Grand River Reserve, about sixty miles from Scarborough. Suffice to say that a group of the Long-House People accepted the invitation and Indians from a wide area in Canada and the United States participated.

The ceremony itself was extraordinarily interesting, but in addition, the fact that it was held under present conditions is a striking example of cultural continuity, combined with an almost complete change in motivation. In terms of ethno-history, the following points should be mentioned:

- 1) The Feast of the Dead had not been performed since 1636, or 1649 at the latest. None of the Indians had any knowledge of Huron ritual except what they may have read from accounts based on Brébeuf, or on the record of modern archaeological investigation.

- 2) The ceremony which was thought of as a Huron Feast of the Dead derived much of its technique from Iroquois rituals of which the participants were familiar to a certain extent. This was supplemented by modern anthropological studies.
- 3) It was assumed that the ossuary was Huron or proto-Huron, on the basis that the Hurons alone were known to have such types of burial, and yet this mourning ceremony was held under the auspices of the Iroquois, their bitterest enemies and destroyers in 1649. Though this fact was recognized by the Iroquois, it was tacitly overlooked, probably as an indication of pan-Indianism.
- 4) It was believed by the officials who sponsored the ceremony that the "Indians" would know the proper ritual. Unquestionably this belief encouraged the Indians to take part.
- 5) For several centuries the Feast of the Dead had been considered a horrible ceremonial, and as such, condemned by the white man. This was forgotten and the Iroquois were invited to perform the ritual with the support of members of three levels of Canadian Government. The Reeve of Scarboro spoke, almost as presiding master of ceremonies. Officials of the Province of Ontario were present, as well as the Federal Minister of Citizenship and Immigration who spoke in his capacity as the Minister responsible for Indian Affairs. A complimentary dinner was extended by the Township of Scarboro, at which were present not only the Minister of Citizenship and Immigration but other federal members of parliament and, on the provincial level, a Cabinet Minister, the Speaker of the House, and a former Prime Minister. Two graces were said, one by a minister of the United Church and one by an Iroquois "in Indian."

Remembering the efforts made over many years to suppress ceremonials which were regarded as horrible and pagan, the holding of a Feast of the Dead under such conditions is a surprising example of the vicissitudes of culture change.

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