



The Ho Chunk Medicine Song

Long ago, before the Ho Chunk tribe left their homes by the Great Water in Wisconsin, a young man went alone into the hills to fast. He fasted for twelve days and then a spirit came to him in the form of a vision. The spirit gave him knowledge and also taught him wonderful new words in a song that brought him health and long life.

Wise was the young man when he left the hills, for he brought with him the teachings of the spirit and the power of the holy words. When he came back to his people, he sang his special private song and this became the beginning of one kind of medicine ceremony.

The words he had learned were so holy that the man lived a long life without illness. Nor did he die of sickness. At the end of his long life, his body weakened and he died alone in his wigwam from mere old age.

The song that he created, with its wonderful words has always been cherished by the Ho Chunk people because of its great power. The song was created long ago when the Ho Chunk language was different from what it is now. Today, the Ho Chunk people do not normally use those words in common speech and the exact meaning has been lost. However, the song is still sung but only by medicine men and holy people who understand its meaning.

The medicine ceremony of the Ho Chunks lasts four days and four nights. Holy songs like this are sung and there is a spoken ritual. During the ritual, the holy people teach the ways of goodness and long life privately. The ritual and ceremony are not for public viewing.

During the ceremony, in order to prevent people from becoming tired and drowsy, the ceremony is given life by dancing. The slow part of the holy song is followed by the quick part, which is the music of the dance. In olden times, the medicine ceremony was very solemn, private and sacred. However, today the songs are shared.



Paraphrase of the Ho Chunk song in English:

Saith the spirit,
Dream, oh, dream again, and tell me,
Dream thou! Into solitude went I and wisdom was revealed to me.