

THE NAVAJO SHOEMAKER.

BY ALEXANDER M. STEPHEN.

The Navajo art of shoemaking is a very simple one, and is practically confined to the men.

An awl and a knife are the only tools used. These they very usually combine in a two-bladed pocket-knife, the smaller blade being rubbed down to form the awl. Still the bone awl is very common; those made from the leg bone of the deer being preferred.

The stone knife, for practical purposes, is entirely unknown. It is now only used in religious ceremonies and for surgery. In cases where they deem the use of the lance necessary, under no condition will they use one of metal. It must always be of obsidian, although I have known them to use a fragment of dark-colored glass bottle.

They use three materials to make a shoe—buckskin for the uppers, raw-hide (preferably that of the ox) for the sole, and the loin sinews of the sheep, goat, or deer for sewing. The thick neck skin of deer and badger are occasionally used for soles.

A piece of raw-hide of suitable size for the soles having been procured, it is first pounded with a lump of stone on a rock until it becomes somewhat flexible. The hair is scraped off, but not very close, and it is then buried in moist earth for three or four days to render it soft and pliable. It is then taken out, and the Navajo sets his foot upon it on the ground and cuts out the sole about half an inch or so larger than the size of the foot all around, and at the toe, at least an inch longer.

The soles are then held before the fire and thoroughly rubbed with fat on the hair side. He then fits the shoe sole to the exact size of the sole of his foot by turning up the edges all around close to the sides of the foot, the point being brought well up over the great toe. He next fits a piece of buckskin to form the front upper, inclosing the foot snugly but without compression. Tearing a few fibers of sinew and wetting them with his lips he rolls them on his knee to a stout thread, making two of these and tying them together. He now bores a hole through the sole at the toe and draws both these threads through it from the outside the knot preventing them from passing entirely through.

With one of these threads he first sews down the left side (of course he always begins with the left shoe), and with the other he sews the right side. These seams extend just the length of the front upper. The back upper is then fitted so as to wrap around the ankle and well down on the left or outside of the foot, where it is secured with two silver buttons.

Close to the sole, where the front and back uppers meet, they are fastened together at each side with a short thong of buckskin.

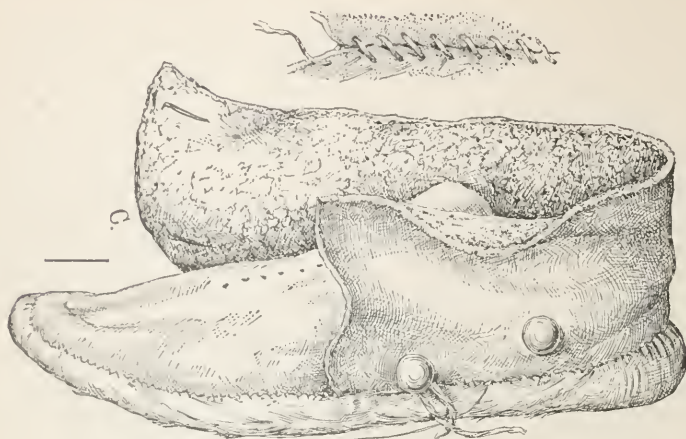


FIG. 1. Navajo shoe, finished.

The specimen* marked C (fig. 1) shows the finished shoe in the style most commonly used, because the method of sewing it is the easiest, being merely successive simple stitches. No significance attaches to the two parts of the uppers being of different colors. Some make them of buckskin all of one color. This style of shoe is called *Ke-bi kít-is-tiz*. The stitch with which it is sewed is in process the same as wrapping a thread around a stick, hence the term for wrapping "*Kít-is-tiz*" is applied to it.

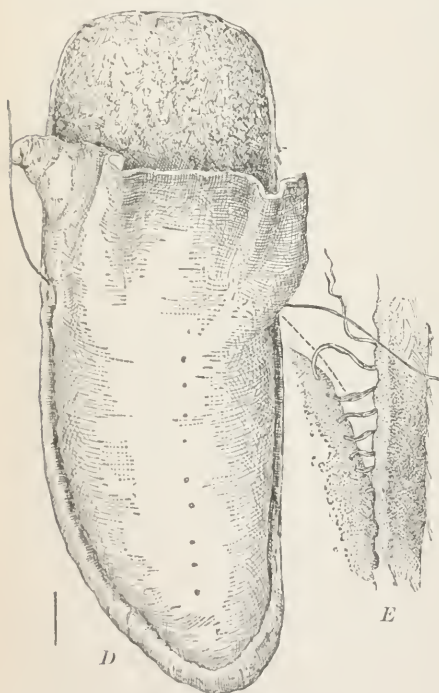


FIG. 2. Navajo shoe, unfinished.

This stitch is entirely longitudinal, and is taken in the sole midway along

The specimen marked D (fig. 2) is called *Ke-bi túta ít-si*, a term implying that the sole incloses the upper portion. This, as the foregoing legend indicates, is the earliest form of skin shoe; this and the former style are the two most commonly used. The small specimen marked E shows another kind of stitch, and shoes sewed in this manner are called *Ke bi-kagi ít-si*, denoting that the upper barely covers the edge of the sole. This

* Refers to collection presented to the National Museum by Mr. Stephen.—ED.

the width of its edge. When finished carefully the serrated edges along the seam should be perfectly regular, and many of the young men take great pains with this style of seam.

The other specimen, B (fig. 3), completes the four styles of shoe stitch known among the Navajoes. Shoes sewed thus are called *Ke piḵ ya-a-klo*—that is, “shoe with thread showing above.”

The women's shoes are sewed in either of the above styles, and the front portion of the upper is fitted the same as on a man's shoe, but the back portion of the upper is always a half of a buckskin, which is wrapped around the leg from ankle to just below the knee. A long strip of buckskin is also attached to this half skin, which strip constitutes the outer wrapping, laid in regular overlapping turns from the foot upward to just below the bottom of their short skirt, where it is secured with silver buttons.

In snowy weather they sometimes make from goat-skin a sort of overshoe, sewed with yucca—the skin being turned hair side in, and cut so that one straight seam from toe to ankle completes the shoe. It is called *Ke teūgi*—worthless shoe. The early yucca shoes were called *Tsä zīⁿ ke*. Yucca is *tsä ziⁿ*—literally “bunch of awls,” from the manner in which the yucca grows in bunches and its sharp pointed and awl-like tips. The early yucca and grass shoes are always described as sandals.

Formerly the Navajoes ornamented their shoes with beads and dyed porcupine quills, but these are now never used.

I procured a curious pair of shoes called *Ke-nas-khūti Ho-zó-hi* “shoe sewed with single straight seam that makes a peculiar mark.” They are only used by the sacred dancers in the ceremony known as the “Song of the winds.”

Formerly these dancers carried snakes of all sorts, as the *Mokis* do, in their snake dance. Now, however, the Navajo only paints a snake upon his arms, the tail on his shoulder, the body twining down the arm over the back of the hand and between the fingers, the head depicted on the palm.

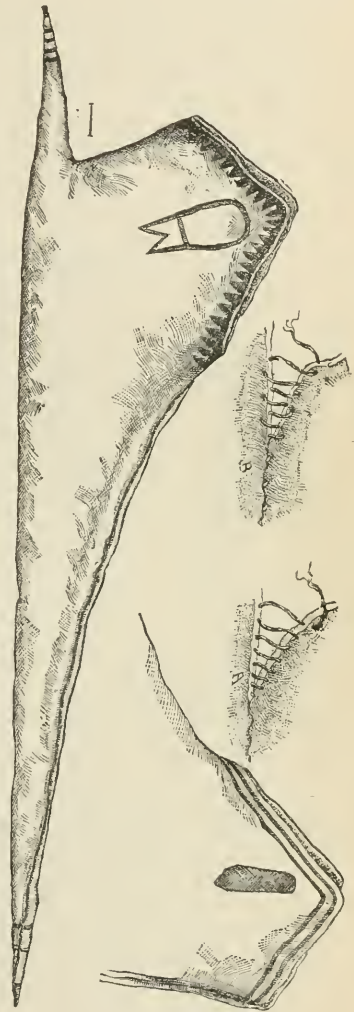


FIG. 3. Navajo dance shoe.

The shoes worn in this dance are stuffed with grass and tied on the feet, the dancers, as they swing their legs, make marks on the sand like the trail of a snake. The refrain at the end of each line of their song is this phrase—Ho-zó-li—which is sung as the marks are made with the toe or heel.

The shoes are each marked with a foot-print designating the right and left. The other curious figure represents a double lobed pouch formerly worn by the "song-men." These dance shoes derive their peculiar



FIGS. 4-7. Awls and needles.

form, I have been told, from those worn in early days at this snake or wind dance.

These were of an entire bunch of yucca for each foot, the stems bound together at the sharp lips and braided in the center with cross strands, which is very probable. But it seemed very interesting that we should find among the Navajos what I fancy must be nearly a counterpart of the fashionable shoe worn in the days of Edward IV. Fig. 4, called Tsa-kia (white awl), is used by the women in basket-making. A similar one, called Tzin-tsü (bone awl), is used in sewing skin bottles and coarse stitches of any skin work. The iron awl, pee-tsü, (Fig. 5) is a very rough specimen of their metal awls for they have many made with

great nicety from long knife blades rubbed down till they are slender, and as sharp as cambrie needles. The awl I send is the one all the specimens are sewed with.

I also inclose two needles, the iron one (fig. 6) "pee be nakan," the wooden one "tsin be nakan" (fig. 7) made from a twig of rose-bush or rather a shrub belonging to the rose family. They are used in sewing the selvage and corner tassels on saddle blankets, etc.

MYTHS (NAVAJO SHOE).

According to my apprehension of Navajo geogony this earth is not a solid, but a cubical shell, inclosing four other, and perhaps many more, successive shells, but the history of only four of these within the outer shell on which we now live are commonly known. The persons who existed on one of these spheres in earlier times, were all genii or deities. Animals had, however, been created. They were made from clay by Pe-go teiti. Also, a family of four brothers were

in existence, their names: Sleep, Hunger, Misery, and Louse. Their father was slain.

The deities came together and built the first hut; it was made in the form of a cone. Their form is still preserved in the construction of the Navajo "ho-hran."

Spanning from east to west, the sides were of sun rays. The north and south sides were of rays from the rainbow. There were assembled at the making of the house—

First man and first woman—man and wife, Hos-di-yélti: "He who never speaks," he is also called Hai-yolç-kalç, "The god of the early day-light." Tjalç kéłç, "Darkness," a female deity. These two are also husband and wife.

I-yá-dîłç-kîłç, "The black (cloud) above." A male deity.

Na-asân, the first-earth, a female deity, these two are also husband and wife.

Tjon-a ái, "The sun god," and his wife called Asûn nût le-bi, a female, and the most highly esteemed of all their deities. At night-fall she has grown to be a wrinkled, exhausted old woman, but she renews her beauty and virginity on the dawn of every morning.

Klé on-a-ái, the moon god, and his wife, Yo la-kai asûn, White Shell Woman. There were also present the seven wind gods, each of different color, four of them beneficent and three of them malignant and destructive.

Hos-dj-yelti brought with him the nine different kinds of corn known to the Navajo. White, yellow, blue, speckled, etc.

These were laid in this hut and from them were formed four pairs of people, male and female, and one old woman. The gods supplied these corn people with everything necessary, except shoes, and these the people made for themselves from three kinds of grass, three kinds of yucca, and the bark of the juniper.

The people continued to make and wear these shoes for a very long while. One day when a great many of the corn men were sitting in a hut making shoes and sleeping-mats and door curtains from grass and yucca, Hos-dj-yelti, wearing a mask, appeared among them. As I have said, he never speaks, but conveys his meaning by signs. He stooped and drew with his finger the figure of a foot-print on the sand—the left foot—beginning at the toe and drawing the left side, then from the toe drawing the right side.

The sole they were to make from the neck skin of the badger, the uppers from deer-skin, and the shoe was to be sewed with sinew from the back of the mountain sheep. The name of the corn man who owned this hut was E-dil-kij i, the cutter, and he proceeded to make the first shoe, and as he finished it all the men pronounced it beautiful.

Coyote came in to admire the new foot-gear, and after he went out the shoe was missed and every one knew that Coyote had stolen it. E-dil-kij i cursed Coyote and all his family, and then went on making

a shoe for the right foot. Presently Coyote returned and asked the people why they had been cursing him. "Because you stole my beautiful shoe," said the cutter. "Listen to me, brother," says Coyote: "I carried the shoe away to do you a good turn. Don't you know, if you go on making shoes like it you will lose your eyes and die?" Coyote then goes on to give lengthy reasons for this, the drift of which was this way:

Hos-dj-yeltis face is of the color of the first light of the east—"la-pa" or pale gray. The freshly cut edge of the badger skin is of this color, and must be concealed, because Hos-dj-yelti always conceals his face with a mask when he visits mankind.

The cutter listened to all this but did not believe it, so he went on making his shoe and had about half finished it when he was struck blind, as were all the people who were in the hut observing. "Aha," said Coyote, "perhaps you believe me now!" and ran off, jeering at them.

The people were in great distress, for they then knew neither "song prayers" nor "medicines," and were therefore helpless.

By-and-bye Hos-dj-yelti, with other deities, came to them, and the ceremonies of the Hos-dj-yelti dance were performed and taught, and the people all recovered.

They were then told that whenever they made this kind of shoe, they should always cover the edge of the sole with paint, either red, yellow, blue, or black. They were also told that thereafter whenever any one had sore eyes they should perform the ceremonies then shown them and they would recover. This elaborate dance is still frequently observed for this purpose.

In these early days the women were once gathered in a hut making baskets from peeled withes. A basket was finished, and as it was of this sacred color "la-pa," the maker and all the women who looked at it became blind. The same incidents as at the making of the first shoe transpired, and after the women had recovered their sight Hos-dj-yelti painted colored figures upon the basket, and since then, when that kind of basket is made, it must always display some colored decoration.

There are different versions of the foregoing myth, as indeed there are of all the Navajo myths, but an old shaman once said to me, referring to these differences, "There are as many traditions and 'song prayers' as there are rays of the sun; they cover the earth as do the rays of the sun and the rainbow from opposite points. Some say your song is not right but they should rather say, 'your song differs from mine.' I say all are good; let each one follow the path he knows. All lead in the right direction if they are straight, that is, if the truth be told."