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THE CANE BLOWGUN IN CATAWBA AND SOUTHEASTERN ETHNOLOGY

By FRANK G. SPECK

NOTES on another topic of Catawba ethnology are herewith offered as an addition to older sources in published form dealing with the Southeastern Siouan-speaking peoples. Interest has been accumulating in the field of the Southeast, and some demand has been expressed by ethnologists, whose desires should no longer be denied, that information recorded by the writer during some years of investigation among the Catawba and their congeners be made accessible to students of the area. The blowgun was a cultural property of the Catawba. It has, however, passed entirely out of use in the past two generations, at least as an object of common possession and use. Thus it happens that no further information of importance concerning this significant weapon of the chase may be expected to emerge from the memories and habits of living members of the tribe to cause hesitation in releasing data which now unfortunately possess the guise of finality.¹

With other peoples of the Southeast the Catawba shared the trait of using the blowgun or blowpipe exclusively for purposes of hunting small animals and birds.² It has had a desultory survival down to the present

¹ The sources of information for the material presented were Mrs Sampson Owl, Margaret Brown, Henry Saunders and his son Joe Saunders, Ben Harris, Billy Harris and David Harris (all deceased), and Sam Blue. Investigation was conducted through support given by the American Council of Learned Societies, Bureau of American Ethnology, and the Faculty Research Fund, University of Pennsylvania, variously from 1921 until the present year. The ethnological notes were a product incidental to the collection of myths and texts, with grammatical notes, in the Catawba language.

² Without attempting to cite references in modern ethnological sources at this time, it may be noted that the simple cane tubular blowgun is known to occur among the recent Cherokee (Mooney, Harrington, Olbrechts, Gilbert and others), Creek (Swanton, Speck), Alabama and Koasati (Paz), Yuchi (Speck), Choctaw (Bushnell), Biloxi (Dorsey), Chitimacha (Swanton), Natchez (Swanton); the reed blowgun among the Iroquois divisions and the Tutelo incorporated with them since the middle of the 18th century. (The absence of mention of the weapon among the Iroquois in the early narratives opens a possibility of its introduction to the Iroquois at the hands of the Tutelo.) The weapon was carried to the Oklahoma domicile of the Cherokee, for which we have the testimony of C. T. Forman, *Journal of a Tour in the Indian Territory* (Chronicles of Oklahoma, Vol. 10, No. 2, June, 1932, p. 244), who mentions in 1844 a conservative Cherokee family there where the children were playing with blowguns and bows and arrows. The first, and apparently only, reference in Seminole narratives may be that of an anonymous author in *Narrative of a Voyage to the Spanish Main in the Ship Two Friends, etc.* (London, 1819, pp. 170-71) describing the efforts of a Seminole boy at St Augustine, Florida, to kill a bird with one. Search would undoubtedly disclose other references. Dr J. R. Swanton has indicated references to the instrument in Louisiana in the narratives of Romans and Bossu (1761).



Catawba using cane blowgun on small birds at edge of swamp.

generation of older men, and is known by the designation *wá'sa pu'hę*, "cane-blowing," or "dart-blowing" (*wá'sa*, "cane stalk, arrow").

The problems of its history and distribution in the region are more interesting than the details of its construction, for the Catawba blowgun is extremely simple. It is here economically non-important but ethnologically significant. The first description of the instrument was published by Harrington.³ My own observations upon its manufacture and use are based upon witnessing the gathering of material, the making, and bird

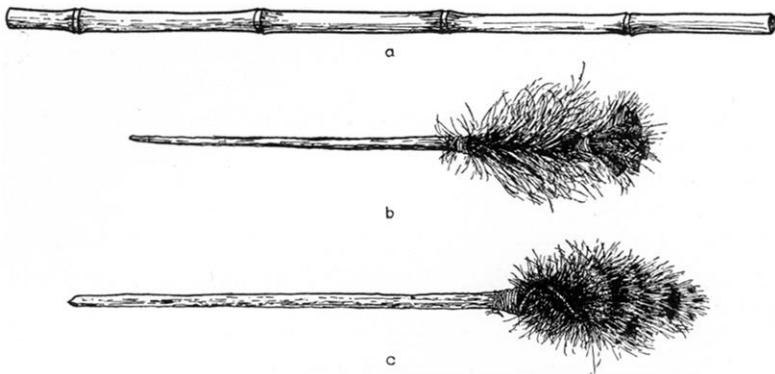


FIG. 1. Catawba blowgun and darts. a, Cane blowgun, showing section of length (small specimen for boy, 52 in.); b, Blowgun dart with down and cut feathers (7½ in.); c, Blowgun dart with rabbit fur (10 in.). (Museum of American Indian, Heye Foundation, Nos. 15-8639, -8637, -9099.)

hunting in the winter of 1930 in company with Joe Saunders (died 1931), who derived his experience from early instruction with his father (see Plate 4). Selected straight shoots of cane (*wá'sa*), cut from the formerly abundant cane-brakes growing in the Catawba river lowlands, were used. There are some flat muddy stretches along the rivers where the cane-brakes attain a height of some fifteen feet. After being gathered, the canes are hung suspended vertically from the branches of trees with weights (properly stones) attached to their lower ends. This prevents warping

An interesting essay on distributional possibilities of the instrument is that of Georg Friederici, *Die geographische Verbreitung des Blasrohrs in Amerika* (Petermans Mitteilungen, 1911, p. 71, map). This author regards the South American weapon as an introduction from western Oceania. N. A. Sprinzin, *The Blowgun in America, Indonesia and Oceania* (Twenty-third International Congress of Americanists, New York, 1928, pp. 699-704) also discusses the question of distribution, without conclusion.

³ M. R. Harrington, *Catawba Potters and Their Work* (American Anthropologist, Vol. 10, 1908), p. 401.

while they are seasoning. The cane is next bored with a heated iron rod which burns through the septa. We know nothing, however, of how the boring was accomplished in early times, nor do the Catawba themselves.⁴ Saunders believed that a smaller cane ramrod well sharpened would accomplish the breaking through the segment barriers when the cane is green. He did not live to put the idea to test.

In size the Catawba blowgun (fig. 1a) is shorter than the weapon of the Cherokee,⁵ this group being the nearest in location to the Catawba. The usual size is five to six feet, though examples made by Joe Saunders, between seven and eight feet long, have been collected. The diameter of the smaller ones is three-quarters of an inch; that of the larger, one and one-quarter inches. No other features of construction entered into the manufacture of any specimens seen or heard of in the tribe. The outside is not scraped to smooth the joints nor is it polished by rubbing, as is frequently the case among the Cherokee.

The darts for the blowgun (fig. 1b, c) are denoted by the monosyllable w₄ (compare w₄'sa, "arrow," also "cane"). The Catawba darts are simple and crude in construction when compared with those of the Cherokee, and are also shorter.⁶ They are made of oak, pine, or cedar slivers, usually eight to ten inches in length, three-eighths inch in diameter, and round in cross-section. The point is trimmed sharp. The piston end or plunger is formed of three or four trimmed soft feathers, almost downy in quality, from either chicken or goose, about two inches in length, attached to the blunt end of the sliver. Sometimes the tying is at one place by a winding of thread that holds the bases, allowing the feathers to point backward and spread out. Other darts have the feathers fastened to the wood at both upper and lower ends. The methods of feathering the darts correspond to those in the feathering of Catawba cane arrows—technically crude. Several specimens made by the Saunders men had rabbit fur and rabbit tail tufts bound on in place of the feathers (see fig. 1b, c). Feather- and fur-tufted darts to

⁴ Harrington (*ibid.*) describes the Catawba blowgun as being made hollow by rasping out the septa of the cane with a tin-tipped wooden rod. The modern Cherokee employ this method. The darts that he secured were wrapped with cotton.

⁵ Also M. R. Harrington, *Cherokee and Earlier Remains on Upper Tennessee River* (Indian Notes and Monographs, Museum of the American Indian, [No. 24], 1922), p. 211.

⁶ The long hardwood (locust, mulberry, or white oak; inf'n V. J. Fewkes) blowgun darts of the Cherokee, are often twenty-two inches in length, wrapped with a thick and even plush of thistle down for four to five inches—masterpieces of workmanship. The dried thistle blossoms are gathered at the right season and kept in wooden frames in neat condition. The blowgun equipment of the Cherokee is prepared and kept with a care which is noticeably lacking in Catawba economy throughout.

strike down feathered and furred small game—could one suppose an old synergetic belief to lie hidden in the association now unknown to the Catawba?

Some of the older men remembered the time when the blowgun was used for securing birds for the cook-pot. It was generally during the winter when the bird migrants, robins, thrushes, doves and other medium-sized birds, flocked at dusk to the dense foliage of the junipers which by accident or art are usually to be found growing near the dwellings or along the edges of the cultivated ground. Here in early evening the roosting birds could be picked off without noise to alarm them. The blowgun is extremely effective under such conditions as an auxiliary weapon in food-getting. Imagination might further serve to add to the picture, portraying the use of the instrument to kill small bright plumaged birds in the early days for their feathers to be woven into feather robes. Among the southeastern groups noted for the exquisite art of feather embroidery, the Catawba were specifically included.

While the efficacy of the blowgun in the hands of the earlier Catawba users of the implement can not be accurately judged at the present time, the following notes have some bearing on the question. The dart can ordinarily be sent to a distance of 100 feet, but at that distance it is incapable of penetration; at 25–30 feet, however, it has a penetration sufficient to pierce the skin of a rabbit (or table oilcloth in two thicknesses). If the missile were to strike the eye of a rabbit, quail, or partridge, it could be fatal to the victim. Its drop from the horizontal at this range is about one foot, which necessitates aiming that much higher at the target. The Catawba blowgunner holds the wider end of the weapon to his mouth with the right hand and supports the cane with his left arm extended as he would a rifle—manifestly influenced by familiarity with the latter in these days. The discharging blast from the lungs is given with a sudden force which launches the dart, accompanied by a distinctly audible rippling sound. It seems, however, insufficient to startle its timid victims. Perhaps it is more than a mere accident that the inventive concept which produced the blowgun took cognizance of the innocent sound of its discharge to the ears of birds in the simulation of the whirr of the dart to the flight of a passing flock-mate.

The Cherokee blowgun, in the hands of one of the tribe accustomed to using it, has a considerably longer range, 40 feet being regarded as close target range; while an observer has recorded for it a shooting-match target range of 100 feet. The common killing range for small game is 40–60 feet. The Cherokee cane blowgun, of similar construction to the Catawba

article, is 9–10 feet in length and throws a dart of 21 inches length, having a piston of thistledown. The Cherokee stance is to hold the cane with both hands near to the mouth, not with one hand extended forward as does the Catawba shooter. Lieutenant Timberlake (1754) describes the Cherokee using a blowgun in the following words:

There are a vast number of lesser sort of game, such as rabbits, squirrels of several sorts, and many other animals, beside turkeys, geese, ducks of several kinds, partridges, pheasants, and an infinity of other birds, pursued only by the children, who, at eight or ten years old, are very expert at killing with a sarbacane, or hollow cane, through which they blow a small dart, whose weakness obliges them to shoot at the eye of the larger sort of prey, which they seldom miss.⁷



FIG. 2. Sketch illustrating twisted shaft of Chitimacha blowgun dart.

In view of what has already been stated concerning the modifications observable in construction of blowgun darts from various tribes of the Southeastern area, it may be noted that still another form is made by the Chitimacha. Specimens obtained from the late chief Benjamin Paul show the following peculiarity. The hardwood splinter constituting the dart is a flat strip twisted for its entire length after the manner of a screw (fig. 2). What effect this can have upon the motion of the dart in flight may be surmised—an addition to its penetrating power caused by its revolution in the air. This is suggestive of the principle of rifling. The thistledown plug of wrapped fibre at the rear end covers about half of the length of the dart. The Chitimacha darts are less than twelve inches in length. This ingeniously conceived addition to the mechanical principles of the blowgun dart in the form of the twist seems to be exclusively recorded among the Chitimacha. I consider it to possess some significance in the historical horizon as a development from within the group; not a trait, through what we know as yet, diffused from or into the immediate locale where it appears. In other respects the Chitimacha blowgun coincides with those of the

⁷ *The Memoirs of Lieut. Henry Timberlake* (London, 1765), p. 45. This early mention in North America of the term sarbacane for the blowgun is most interesting. Sarbacane seems to be the usual term for the instrument in the literature of southeastern Asia and South America (Spanish *cerbatana*, Arabic *sabatānah* being the given derivation). A warning need hardly be sounded against assuming both the term and the weapon to have invaded the New World from the Malay region across the Pacific! Timberlake evidently had knowledge of the South American terminology, which again might induce someone to think that the term was employed by the Cherokee; therefore that the Cherokee had in their turn acquired the idea of the weapon itself through outside sources.

Cherokee and Catawba, resembling the latter in its shorter length.

The occurrence of the blowgun in the Southeastern area of North America awakens some interesting thoughts in the direction of the diffusion theory. While the mechanism itself, not a very complicated one in respect to its composition, has been thought by several students to form part of a complex diffused from South America if not from a more distant locus, we must give weight to considerations that might tend to account for its production independently through long experience with hunting devices, progressing from the simple to the more advanced. In southeastern North America the blowgun is regularly no more than a simple cane tube (*Arundinaria*), lacking the sights and the basketry covering or reinforcements at the ends occurring to the southward; the darts are never poisoned; and it is not important as a hunting mechanism.⁸ Moreover, we find among the Catawba for one tribe—and it may be found elsewhere (as among the Iroquois) were it made the subject of questioning—that a short blowgun of simple elder (*Sambucus*) shoot is likewise known. It is here fundamentally a *simple* weapon. And yet there are some analogies with the implement in use among the Neotropical peoples; for instance, as Nordenskiöld has pointed out, in the non-occurrence together of the blowgun and the blunt or round-headed bird hunting arrow (the blunt arrow is not reported in the Southeast); in the form of the dart and its cotton or feathered piston; in its limit of use to small game hunting; and in the position or stance in which it is held when in use. The history of derivation of the blowgun in the Southeast remains for the present, after all, an open question. To my mind the case in favor of its being a diffused trait from South America is no stronger than that for its local invention.

Not desiring to obscure my purpose of keeping the topic presented within the bounds of an objective essay, a few thoughts may yet be tolerated in respect to the blowgun as a general invention of people in the south-

⁸ To cite an exception, a reference may be given to the Creek Indians (Taskigi Town group) who formerly used a composite form of the weapon "made of a cane stalk about as long as a man is tall. . . . To remove the pith it was sometimes necessary to section the cane, then bind it together again" (F. G. Speck, *The Creek Indians of Taskigi Town*, Memoirs, American Anthropological Association, Vol. 2, Part 2, 1908, p. 110). This information was derived from an old Creek ceremonial leader. Another exception to the remarks above: Mr Louis Korn informs me of a compound blowgun from the Houma (Louisiana) which he examined in the collections of the Museum of the American Indian, Heye Foundation. It is described as a split cypress stick, the two halves grooved to form a bore, cord wrapped, and coated with wax or gum. The darts are twisted into a screw-like form (*Guide to the Museum, First Floor*, Indian Notes and Monographs, Museum of the American Indian, [No. 30], 1922, pp. 72-73). Through Dr Fred Kniffen and Dr Frans Blom I learn that trappers around Houma use a blowgun of the above type. Georges Billiout, a Houma camped near Pointe de Chien, La., described to me a blowgun of alder with darts of twisted cane (see Fig. 2).

ern regions. Active inventiveness in small devices implies, according to some axioms of reasoning, a resourcefulness of mind which needs only to be magnified to account for a major discovery like the blowgun in its more perfected stages. The evidences of manifold ingenuity exhibited in the series of modified forms of dart might accordingly be interpreted as steps in the progression of a discovery indigenous to the cultural soil of the Southeast.

The restriction of the blowgun to cultural levels of relatively "high ethnological status" (*vide* C. Hose, *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, Vol. 3, 1929, p. 750) would seem to be a consideration which would not necessarily apply from the world-wide point of view—perhaps not outside of the Indonesian region. In southeastern North America the involved mechanical progress of boring and polishing the interior of the cane tube, and the adaptation of a lethal poison to improve the efficacy of the darts, are all wanting. The instrument is essentially one of simple development and inefficiency. In the Southeast, furthermore, the knowledge of vegetal poisons is not wanting, but the two discoveries have never been allied to create the death-dealing mechanism which appears in Indonesia and South America. To include two such outwardly unrelated phases of killing devices in the same explanatory category may seem to some, as it does to me, like reading a purpose into an accident in culture history. The popgun of cane identical with the familiar European toy is also a product of the Catawba. It might be asked, from the viewpoint of the inventive faculty in ethnology at large, in what manner are we to regard the popgun as a compression toy known in recent times to Catawba as well as to European toy-makers? Its creation involves essentially the same understandings of air-power and discharge as the blowgun, and the two may be functionally related inventions arising in their respective areas.

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