

XIII. MEDICAL KNOWLEDGE  
OF THE INDIAN. C.

[3D PAPER, TITLE XIII.]

(443)

Schoolcraft, HR. Historical and Statistical Information Respecting the History and Conditions...Phila: Lippincott & Co. 1855;5:443-46. #7061

TITLE XIII.—SUBJECTIVE DIVISION, MEDICAL KNOWLEDGE OF  
THE INDIAN.

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GENERAL ANALYSIS OF TITLE XIII.

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The Indian as a Physician.

# MEDICAL KNOWLEDGE OF THE INDIAN.

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## THE INDIAN AS A PHYSICIAN.

By the descriptions given in the preceding pages of these volumes, of the aboriginal ideas of medical magic, the topic is relieved of one of its chief difficulties, and the arts and ceremonies of a class of influential pretenders to medical knowledge exposed; for it is on this subject, more than any other professing to be useful to their fellow-men, that the Indians bend their efforts. The cure and knowledge of diseases are subjects too interesting, in every wigwam, not to excite an absorbing care. The Indian, seeing cures performed which often strike him as wonderful, and of the rationale of which he is ignorant, soon comes to believe that there is an amount of occult knowledge on this head, which mysterious spiritual influences could only communicate, and the men who profess this art have ever been regarded with the greatest respect.

But it is necessary to distinguish between the simple and honest Indian doctor, or muskikiwininee, and the meda, or magical professor. The latter is a member of the medawin, or grand medicine society. He aims to give efficacy to his skill by necromancy. He shakes the charmed skin of a stuffed weasel, bird, or magic bone, at his patient. He uses violent genuflections; he is an adept in incantations. The power of the prophet, or jossakeed, goes one step higher. He invokes the spirits, not of his ancestry indeed, who have preceded him to the land of spirits, but of the gods or monedos, who are represented on earth by the various classes of birds, quadrupeds, and reptiles, who have glided in, or flown across, his pathway through life. It is by the superior knowledge of these that he sees into futurity, foretells events, and predicts health, disease, and all the vicissitudes of life. The mishineway, who is of the third order of these ceremonialists, is a mere initiate class to these mysteries, and begins his functions in the path to promotion, by lighting the pipe that is to give a sacred character to these institutions.<sup>1</sup> The Indian physician must not be confounded with these orders. He

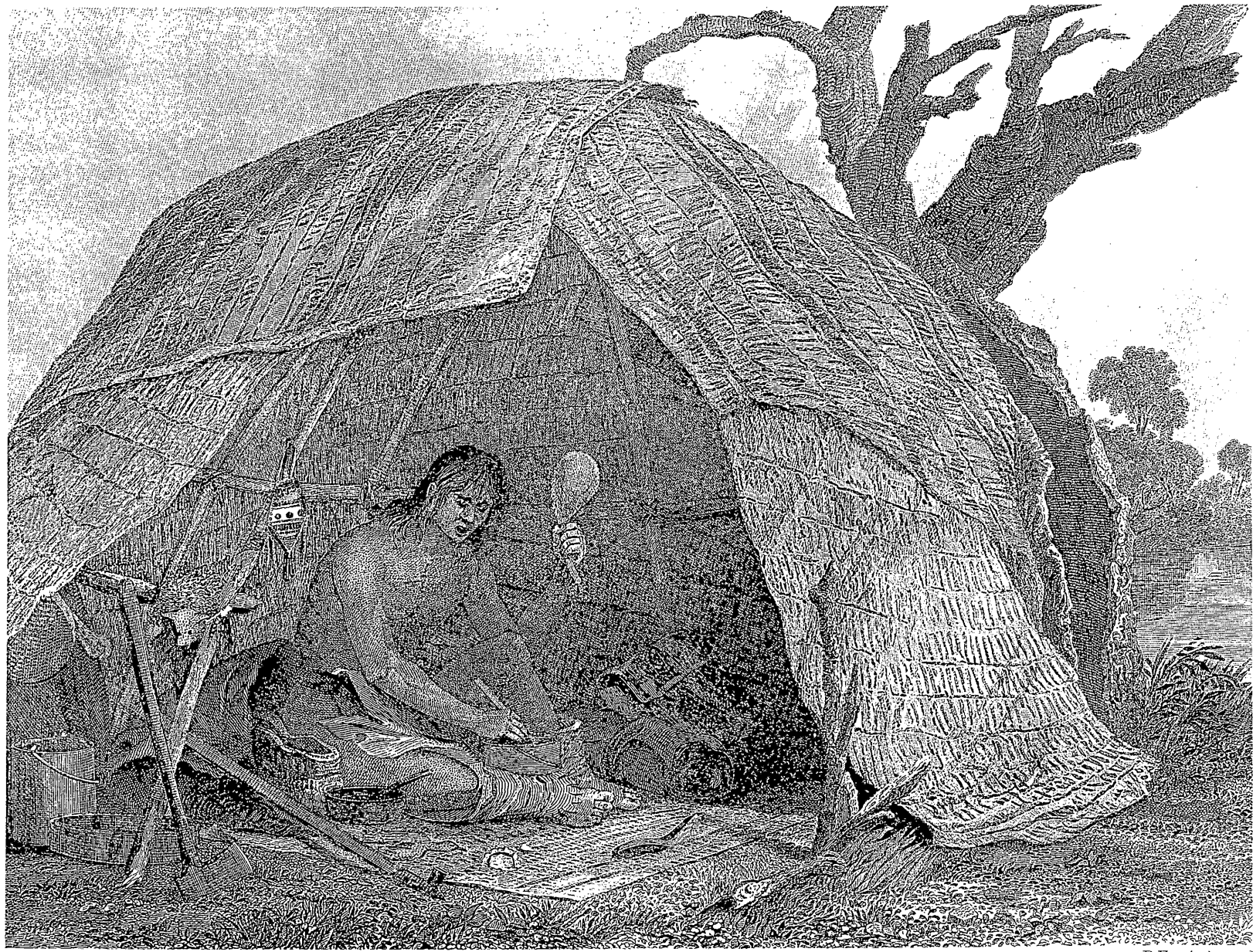
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<sup>1</sup> There is a class of practitioners who are neither truly medas, nor medicine-men, but something between, having leanings to the higher ceremonial exhibitions of the art. Their mode of administering medicine is after this sort. Having prepared to give the remedy to the patient, he addresses it as if it were a sentient person, in this manner, saying, "You have been created for the use of man; you will perform the office for which you have been designed; you will cleanse this man's body; you will act like one who sweeps clean, and cleanse all that is hurtful to him; and if you are too powerful, you must return from the patient's body, without injuring him."

heals bruises or sores by emollient cataplasms, and attends the cure of wounds and cuts with very great care, and attention to the cleanliness of the injured parts. He administers simples culled from the botanical catalogue, whose laxative, aperient, or other properties, are known to him. He has a general knowledge of the most common disorders of the stomach and bowels. He knows the value of the most unremitting care and attention to the patient who is committed to his hands; and on this, so far as relates to topical cases, his success doubtless often depends. If he concocts his liquid vegetable remedies (Plate V.), on compound theories of the effects on different parts of the system, it is with a simple reliance on the natural powers of the mixture, and not from any faith in the magical doctrines. It is not known that the Indian physician has ever directed his mental vision so far to causes, as to feel the pulse; but it is certain that he becomes satisfied of its fullness by the common remedy of bleeding for inflammations, or fullness or rapidity of its beat.

It is this class of practitioners who, by their care and devoted personal attention, are so generally useful. There is known to them a forest materia medica, and a pathology which regulates the practice; and we cannot doubt that they much mitigate the diseases and accidents of Indian life, and deserve to be regarded as benefactors to their race.

To ascertain these practices, reference has been made to physicians of established reputation and judgment, who have been much thrown into contact with Indian society on the frontiers, whose contributions to a true knowledge of the subject have been given in prior volumes. The paper of Dr. Pitcher (Vol. IV.), derives especial value from the botanical list of plants employed by the aborigines as of remedial worth; and it is worthy of remark, denoting, as it does, much accuracy of observation in the Indian practitioners, how generally the properties ascribed to them coincide with those attributed to the same plants in civilized practice. By exhibiting a view of the low state of physical knowledge during the mediæval ages, there is a benevolent abatement of the tone with which we ought to regard the Indian superstitions. To acquire this knowledge of the actual skill possessed by the Indian physician, that it might be exhibited in contradistinction to his superstitious practices, appeared to the author important; and having accomplished this object, his task is terminated.

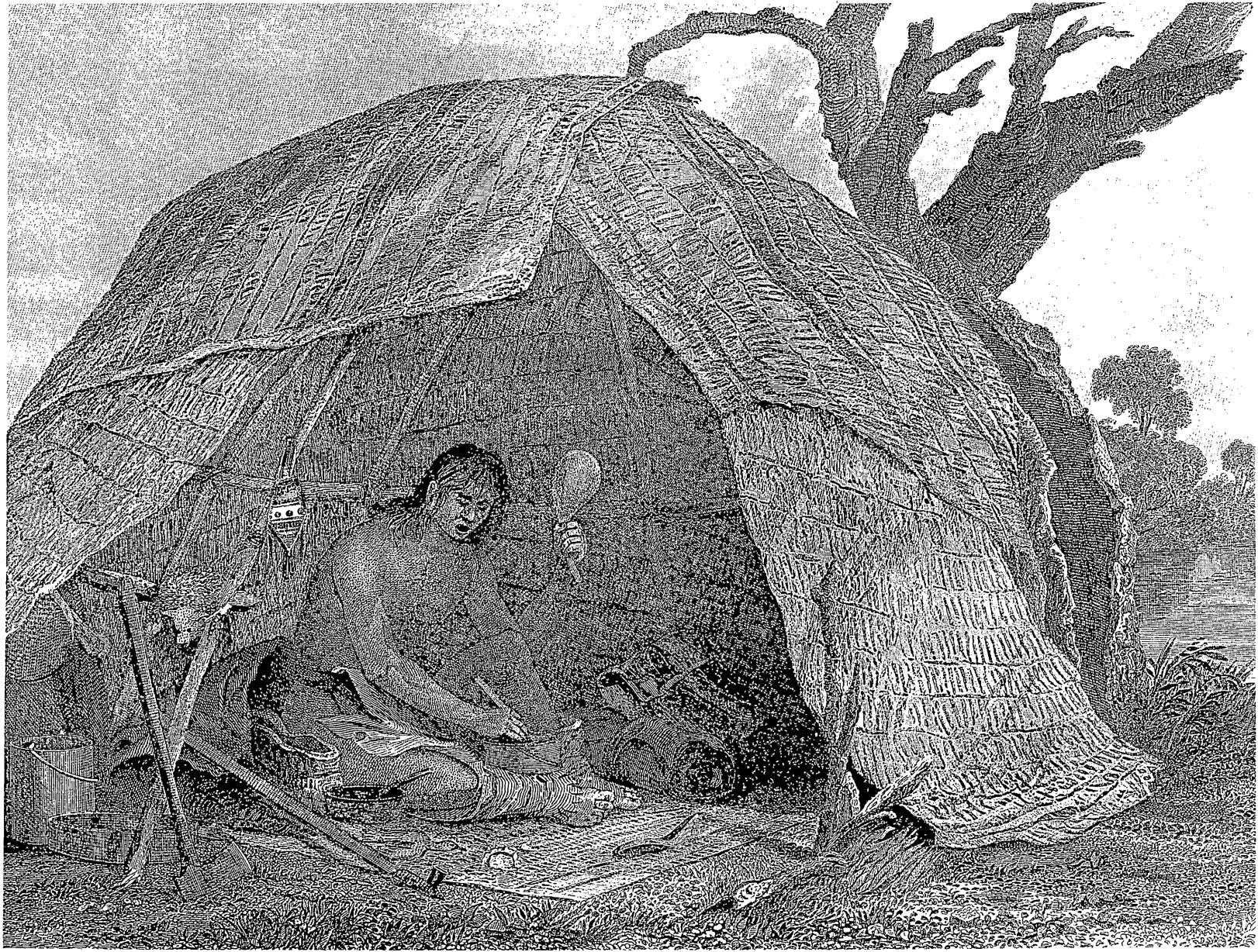


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INDIAN DOCTOR CONCOCTING A POT OF MEDICINE!

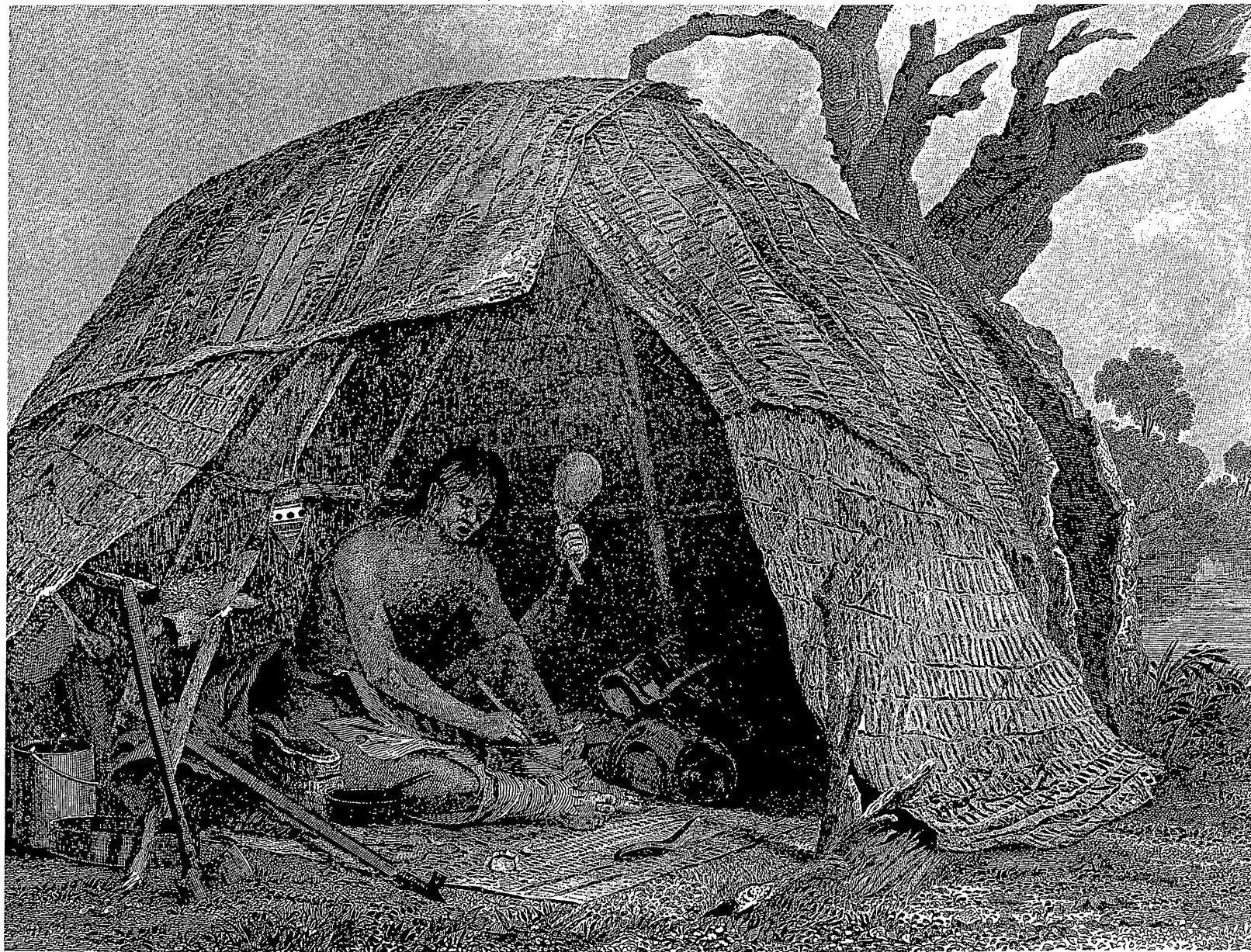


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INDIAN DOCTOR CONCOCTING A POT OF MEDICINE