

THE ARIKARA CONSOLATION CEREMONY

From ancient time, the Arikara tribe had a custom, which is still sometimes practiced, of consoling the mourners after a death. On such occasions some of the close friends of the bereaved family appoint a day and a place at which they will come together and have there those in whose behalf the function is held, for the purpose of showing sympathy toward them and to draw away the mourners' minds from their bereavement; to cause them to consider death as an episode which comes in the course of all lives; to cause them to lay aside in some degree the burden of their immediate grief, and to take up again the ordinary occupations, the usual pains and joys of everyday life.

Mother Corn has her part, and the largest part, in this ceremony, as in every episode of individual or of tribal life of the Arikara. In that tribe, Mother Corn is connected with every event in the life of the individual from birth to death, and with everything in the community and tribal life throughout the annual cycle of the seasons, with all affairs, domestic and foreign, of the tribe.

When the neighborhood gathers to "comfort the mourners," or "wipe away their tears," as they say, provisions are brought for a dinner, for a community dinner is always one of the features of any public function. Some friend of the family goes to the priest of a sacred bundle and requests him to "open the bundle," and he slaughters a beef for the offering and the dinner, thus validating the request for the "opening of the bundle."

On October 14, 1922, I was in camp in the Arikara community of Armstrong, fifteen miles southeast of Elbowoods, North Dakota. A short time previous to this a death had occurred, and now on this day it was planned to "comfort the mourners." I was invited to be present, for, they said, "You, *Pahok*, are one of ourselves, so it is right and proper for you to take part with us in our affairs." (The Arikara, as well as the Pawnee, always call me by the name *Pahok*, which had been conferred upon me some years before in the Pawnee tribe.) So I went and witnessed the ceremony.

Four-Rings was the officiating priest. The sacred bundle opened on this occasion was the one, which is in the custody of an old woman named *Štešta-kata*. Four-Rings asked another old man, the leader

of the Bear fraternity, in whose house the ceremony was held, to assist him in the ritual. The house was built of logs and had an earthen floor. It was warmed by a wood fire burning in an iron stove standing in the center of the floor, and the sacred bundle was laid at the west, in the same relative positions as they would have had in the old-time earth-lodge of the Arikara. On the west wall, just above and to the rear of the sacred bundle, was suspended a bunch of wild sage (*Artemisia gnaphaloides*).

The ritual of this particular bundle is, in its movements, the reverse of those of the other sacred bundles of the tribe, so it is commonly designated as "The Left-handed Bundle." For this reason, the stations of the fire-tender and the pipe-tender are respectively at the northeast and the north of the fireplace, instead of the southeast and the south.

When the ceremony was about to begin, a shovelful of live coals was brought from the stove and placed on the ground before the sacred bundle for the purpose of burning incense. Then the priest broke and pulverized some dried sweetgrass (*Savastana odorata*) from a braid of the same provided for that purpose, and sprinkled it upon the live coals. When the smoke of the incense began to rise the priest incensed himself first, and then his assistant did the same. This was done by spreading the open hands over the incense, then they were rubbed together as though to wash them in the fragrant smoke, and a gesture was made as though gathering both hands full of the smoke and then spreading it down over the head and shoulders of the person in the common gesture of blessing. Then the priest incensed the sacred bundle and laid it back upon the altar, untied the binding thongs, opened out the bundle, and laid out in order the relics which it contains.

At this time a wooden bowl was brought and placed before the altar. Then the sacred relic pipe of the bundle was prepared, the bowl being attached to the stem and secured by a tie which was on the stem for that purpose.

Then a man was sent to fetch two small billets of wood which were laid in position parallel to each other about eighteen or twenty inches apart before the altar to serve as a rest for the sacred relic pipe, which was then laid on them horizontally, the bowl at the right (south) side of the altar, the mouthpiece at the left (north) side. That is to say, the pipe when laid in position had the bowl at the right and the mouthpiece at

the left of the priest as he sat in the rear of the open sacred bundle.

While the man was gone to fetch these billets of wood on which to rest the pipe, the priest, kneeling on one knee at the right-hand (south) side of the altar, held the relic pipe at an angle of forty-five degrees with the bowl on the ground, the while he appeared to be engaged in silent prayer and meditation, after which he laid the pipe to rest on the two wooden billets.

Then some water was brought and poured into the wooden bowl. The priest then chewed a substance derived from some plant, the species of which I did not learn. Having begun the chewing of this substance, he took up the bowl of water and held it aloft, then lowered it and carried it sunwise round the fireplace and back to the altar, where he again elevated the bowl of water toward the sky and then lowered it to the ground where it was before, then dropped into it from his mouth some of the chewed substance. Then with his fingers, he removed some more of the chewed substance and placed it in the water in the bowl. Then with a brush of what appeared to be small twigs he stirred the mixture in the bowl of water.

Now the priest took the ear of sacred corn from the bundle and leaned it against the bowl of water so that it pointed toward the fireplace.

At this time a bundle of a few stalks of a certain kind of grass was brought, and the priest laid this about eighteen inches to the right (south) of the bowl of water. Then he directed the fire-tender to make certain cuts of the beef which lay a little to the east of the fireplace. This was done as he directed.

The priest and his assistant now prepared pipes and smoking material on a cutting board and placed them on the left (north) side of the lodge midway between the fireplace and the north wall of the lodge. A man was then called and asked to occupy this station as pipe-tender. It was his office to fill and pass out the pipes and to take them up again after each period of smoking. The material used for smoking was a mixture of the old-time Arikara tobacco (*Nicotiana quadrivalvis*), which is still cultivated in that tribe, and the inner bark of red dogwood (*Cornus stolonifera*).

Now a man was called upon to be the cook to boil the meat for the dinner. So he took a metal tub to use as a boiling pot, filled it half-full of water, and carried it out to the fire already prepared in the yard. Then he came in with another metal tub, and in this, he carried out the meat and put it into the cooking

vessel on the fire.

During the pause at this time the people who were present for the ceremony came forward one after another, bringing gifts which they laid before the sacred bundle at the altar, thus participating in the community of interest and endeavor of the occasion. These gifts comprised articles of wearing apparel or any other objects of use or value, including money. These gifts were for the purpose, first, of compensating the officiating priest and his assistant, and the fire-tender, pipe-tender, cook, and waiters who served, and the rest to be distributed to old, sick, or needy people of the community.

When the bringing of gifts was finished, the people were all again seated and were quiet and attentive. Then the priest recited a part of what may be called the Arikara Book of Genesis. In the celebration of the ceremony of "comforting the mourners" this recital extends only so far as the account of the entrance of sickness and death into the world, and runs thus:

"All the different kinds and tribes of living beings, including the human race, the various kinds of mammals, all kinds of birds, of reptiles, fishes, all things which live and move in the water and upon and in the ground, and all the tribes of flowers and grasses, of trees and shrubs and every kind of plant, all living things, were first contained and took substance in the womb of Mother Earth.

"This closely restricted condition was grievous from the want of illumination and freedom. Little by little there came to all living things an apprehension of the imperfection of their state, and more and more they felt the urge impelling them to emerge from their condition of inertia, from darkness and restraint, and to come out into the light and to attain liberty of movement over the surface of the earth.

"At that time of beginnings there were none of the living creatures as we see them now. There was no vegetation; no fishes in the waters, nor any birds or any insects in the air, or animals in the light of the sun upon the lap of Mother Earth. All still were concealed beneath her bosom. All things still were but in embryo. But these living creatures were exerting themselves and making all endeavor, for they had strong aspiration to come up into the light and to attain freedom. So they constantly continued to pray and grope, and to do their best to explore and to find some way to accomplish the purpose.

"All creatures were striving and doing what they could, each in its own way; but they met many

difficulties and many obstacles which were hard to overcome. The mole tried to bore through the ground to the surface, and did succeed in doing so; but when he pushed through and faced the light, he was blinded by the brightness of the sun. He drew back from the dazzling light, and so today the mole still lives just below the surface of the ground.

“Then the people, that is to say, living things of all kinds, began to come forth from the opening of the earth. But before all had come out the earth closed upon part of them and kept them still restricted, so it is that badgers and gophers and all such animals, and the snakes, still have their dwelling in the ground.

Now the living beings, which had come forth upon the surface, began to move and to travel westward. In their journeying they came to a great water. Here was another difficulty to be overcome. All their powers must be exerted. Those, which could fly over, as the fowls of the air, were required to do what they could. Others tried to make their way through the waters; but before all had overcome the difficulty, a part of them were trapped and overcome by the waters; but before all had overcome the difficulty, a part of them were trapped and overcome by the waters, and so there are still the people of the waters, such as the fishes of all kinds, and all other creatures which live in the water.

“Now the free-moving being which had succeeded in coming through or crossing over the great water, traveled on again upon their course. After a time they came to a great, dense forest. So here, their way was again impeded. Here, again, as always before, they prayed and called upon all the elements of the universe, and tried their best to open a way to pass through this great forest which seemed impenetrable. And some made their way through this difficulty; but some again, as in previous cases, did not win through, and these remained in the woods, and still live there at the present time. These people are the deer, the moose, bears, porcupines, raccoons, beaver mice, and all the forest-dwelling kind, large and small.

“And the God blessed the people of the human race and showed them still greater favor. To those who earnestly sought with prayer and fasting, to know his will, he revealed mysteries and gave power. He gave them the Sacred Bundle and the pipe to use in prayer, and taught them religion and instructed them how to worship, and we follow that teaching to this day. And God gave them roots of many kinds of plants from Mother Earth, that these should be medicines for the healing of wounds and the cure of sickness.

“And God blessed all the living creatures on the earth, the trees and vines and flowers and grasses, all the growing, living things upon the lap of Mother Earth which look up to the Sun; all the animals on the earth and in the waters, and the fowls of the air. He blessed all these, the plants and the animals, and said that they are all friends of human beings, and that we should not mistreat them, but that all creatures have their place in the universe, and should be treated with respect. It was taught that the pipe should be used to offer smoke to all things which God had blessed. And so it has been done from ancient time through all the ages till the present time.”

Now here we have an allegory. It is said that there were two creatures, two dogs, which were sleeping, and so were unnoticed and forgotten when smoke-offerings were made. Afterward these two dogs, whose names were Sickness and Death, awoke. And when they awoke they were grieved and angry because of the neglect. Then they said to the people, “You neglected us and made no smoke-offerings to us. Therefore, in punishment of your carelessness and neglect of us we shall bite you. So you and all people who follow after you shall be bitten and shall suffer from Sickness and Death. And we will never leave you. We will follow after you and be with you always. ‘So,’ they said, ‘Sickness and Death shall be always among the people of this world.’”

“And we see that it is even so with all things in this world. Our powers increase and then diminish; we rise and go forth in fresh strength and then we lie down in weariness; we rejoice in health and then languish in sickness; the sun rises and sets; the brightness and splendor of day are followed by the darkness of night; the moon waxes and wanes; the flowers bloom in the springtime and are cut down by the frosts of autumn; the wind blows, and again there is calm; water rises as a vapor and floats in the air as clouds, and again falls as rain upon the earth; springs rise in the hills, and their water flows down into the rivers. So changes come to all things in this world; all things die and are born anew.

“So to you who mourn, I say your grief also shall pass away. If you continue to mourn day after day it will but give you more of sorrow. Now wipe away your tears and grieve no more.”

When the priest reached that point in his recital which told of the prevailing power of sickness and death in the world, the women began to wail. The priest concluded his recital with this argument of the

transitory conditions of life and all things in the world. He ceased speaking and for a moment gave way to his feelings by weeping. Then he recovered himself and said "*Nawa!*" which is the equivalent in the Arikara language for the words "So be it." When he said this, the wailing ceased.

Then the assistant priest was called to prepare the relic pipe, and the pipe-tender was called to take up the pipe from its rest and hand it to the assistant priest. The assistant priest untied the cord and removed the bowl from the stem. Using the mussel-shell for a cup, he took into his mouth some of the medicine water from the wooden bowl; then with one of the stalks of grass which had been provided, he cleaned the pipe-stem and pipe and reattached the relic pipe to the stem and replaced the pipe upon the pipe-rest before the altar. Then the pipe-keeper was directed to bring all the common pipes to the altar, where they were also cleaned and were then returned to the pipe-tender's station.

Then the mussel-shell cup was wiped, and some medicine was taken from a bag and placed in the shell. The pipe-tender was next called to take up the relic pipe and to carry it round the fireplace and hand it to the assistant priest at the south side of the altar. The lightning stick was carried to the fireplace and ignited and brought back to the assistant priest who lighted the sacred pipe with it and made smoke-offerings to the four quarters, to the earth and to the sky, after which the pipe was carried round the entire circle of the company and the mouthpiece was presented to each person, who then either drew smoke from it and stroked the stem toward himself with both hands to invoke its blessing, or merely performed the gesture without actually drawing smoke.

After this communion smoking, one of the mourners, a daughter of the deceased woman, was called to come and stand before the sacred bundle at the altar, with her face toward the fireplace. The ear of corn from the sacred bundle had been placed in the bowl of water into which some herbal extract had been injected as before mentioned. This ear of corn was taken from the bowl by the assistant priest and held above her head, then passed down the right side of her body, then down the back, down the left side, and down over the front, and replaced in the bowl of medicine water. The mourner was then directed to take the ear of corn from the bowl and pass it along between her lips, drawing thus into her mouth the medicine water which dripped from the ear of corn, and then to dip from the bowl with the mussel-shell and

take the water in her mouth. She was now directed to walk to the fireplace and there to stand and bathe her face and hands with the mouthful of water she had taken from the ear of corn and from the mussel-shell out of the wooden bowl. Each of the mourners now came forward in turn and did likewise. So the tears of their mourning were washed away. One old woman, after she had performed this rite, commenced to weep. The fire-tender was directed to wipe away her tears for her and comfort her. This he did, and then dismissed her, lifting his right hand aloft, open, with palm forward in the gesture of peace.

After all the mourners had performed this rite, the assistant priest took the wooden bowl, dipped some of the water from it with the mussel-shell, drank it, then with his lips drew some of the dripping water from the ear of corn and replaced the ear with the other relics of the sacred bundle.

Next he took up the bowl and carried it to the northwest quarter, and there poured out a little of the water, then to the northeast quarter, then to the southeast quarter, then to the southwest, at each quarter pouring out a little of the water. Then he drank again from the bowl and set it down where it was before by the altar. Thus all the four quarters of the universe, and the assistant priest for the people, were made participants with the mourners in the sorrow-cleansing efficacy of the medicine water.

At this time the priest left the room and went outside, upon the housetop, and called aloud the following proclamation:

“Come all ye, for Mother Corn has now completed the service for those who have been mourning! These people shall be no longer in sorrow, for Mother Corn has wiped away their tears. Come all ye, for Mother Corn has prepared a feast for all, for the old and the young! And this feast is for all those who are relatives of this family which was in sorrow and mourning. Come, for everything now has been done in the way ordained by Mother Corn in ancient time! Come! Come all those who have gone before us and are living in another world! The feast is now ready, for Mother Corn has comforted the family which was afflicted with sorrow, and now there shall be no more mourning.”

While the priest went outside and proclaimed from the housetop, the assistant priest blessed the food of the feast, which was about to be eaten, by taking a small piece of meat from that which had just been brought in from the cooking fire, and this he carried about the lodge circle, stopping to cut off and place a

particle on the ground at each of the four quarters, then to the earth in the center at the fireplace, and a particle was offered to the sky and then placed in the fireplace.

The pipe-tender was called to take up the relic pipe of the sacred bundle, and bless himself from it, and then to bring to it from his station all the common pipes and have them blessed from the relic pipe.

Then the priest, seated at the rear of the sacred bundle and regarding the sacred relics contained in it, made an exhortation to the mourners and all the assembly. He said:

“I wish to call to your minds all the blessings which we enjoy from Mother Corn. Think of all she has done for us in the past summer. It is from her bounty that we have been given a good crop of corn to supply our need for the coming winter. And she has provided for us many other good things. We live happily by her wise and good teachings. Today this Sacred Bundle is open before you all, and Mother Corn is speaking to you from it and she calls to you and counsels you in wisdom to walk in the right road through life. In these days, so many persons are forgetful of the teachings of Mother Corn and are indifferent to the celebration of her mysteries. We ought to have the Sacred Bundle opened at least once or twice every year, because from it we are taught the good things from heaven, even as we see here today. Mother Corn has wiped away the tears of this family, which was in sorrow. And these people will receive a blessing from Mother Corn in this feast, for Mother Corn rejoices in the feasts and gifts which are given in her name. And we have asked Mother Corn that grief and sorrow be taken away from us.”

When he finished speaking, the people in the assembly called out “*Nawa!*”

Then the fire-tender, as chief waiter, took meat and broth from the cooking-pots and made ready to serve all the people. Meanwhile the assistant priest addressed the assembly, saying:

“I wish to say a few words concerning the part I have taken in the work here today. It is not of my own will and desire that I have done this. It is not that I wish to put myself forward. It is a hard thing, a thing difficult and exacting for anyone to go through. But there are now but a few of us living who know anything of the ritual of this Sacred Bundle, and I am one of those few. And that is why Mother Corn has given me a part in this service. And I assure you all that I shall always do my best to assist in giving instruction whenever in future the Sacred Bundle shall be opened.”

The people responded "*Nawa!*"

Then the fire-tender served food to the priest and his assistant, and then the fire-tender and his assistants served the boiled meat and broth, bread, and coffee to all the people.

After the priest and his assistant and the men mourners had eaten, the pipe-tender filled and lighted the pipe and passed it to them all in turn, so that all smoked in communion.

When they had smoked, the pipes were cleaned and put away, the sacred objects of the bundle were replaced in their covering, and the bundle was again tied up. When the people had finished eating, they arose and passed out of the house, speaking amiably with one another as they passed. Dusk was now coming on, and the people started for their homes.

A Teton Dakota was there present as the guest of an Arikara family with which he was visiting. Not understanding the Arikara language, nor knowing their customs, this scene was quite strange and unintelligible to him. He had been seated on the opposite side of the room from me, and had observed me there, so, as soon as we had gone outdoors, this Dakota came directly to me to ask me what the ceremony was and what it meant, for, he explained to me, being a visitor and a foreigner among the Arikara, he did not understand their language, and their customs differed from those of his people. The only common means of communication between the Dakota and the Arikara is the English language, of course. And he was desirous to learn from me what this Arikara ceremony was and what it signified.