

A HARVEST HOME CEREMONY OF THE ARIKARA

The Harvest Home ceremony described in this paper was held at the Arikara Community Lodge, in Nishu, North Dakota, on August 16, 1930. This date is rather early for the celebration of the Full Harvest or Thanksgiving Ceremony, for it is usually given at the completion of harvest, or at all events when all the crops are fully matured. Since I had never seen it and since I was departing in a few days, some of the people suggested holding the ceremony at this time for my benefit. Others, although wishing me to see the ceremony, were reluctant to hold it at this early date in contravention of custom. The proponents held that since part of the corn was already hard, and some of the squashes, beans and sunflowers were already ripe, the season could be considered sufficiently advanced to permit the legitimate celebration of the Thanksgiving Ceremony.

Because of this hesitation and uncertainty it was very late in the evening before the people who were to take part had all assembled with the necessary materials and paraphernalia. Frank Hart, Little-Crow, Yellow-Bear, Plenty-Fox, Harry Gillette and Albert Simpson comprised the chorus of singers and drummers.

The objects before the altar for use in the dramatic action of the ritualistic dancing were white, yellow, red and blue flour corn, some squashes, an ancient bone hoe, a burden basket, a rough ordinary heavy stick or cudgel for beating the corn ears to shell off the grains, a seed basket, a fawn skin, and a bow and arrow.

The dancing represented the succession of events related to corn in the annual cycle of the seasons. There were depicted; the selection and preparation of the seed corn, the northward spring migration of the wild geese, the clearing of the fields, the preparation of the corn hills, the planting the seed, the weeding and care of the soil about the young plants, the scaring away of the birds which would spoil the immature ears, the harvesting of the corn, the shelling of the grain by beating the heaped ears, the winnowing of the shelled grain, the magpies fighting over a "corn ball", the flocking of birds for the autumn migration, their southward flight, and last, the ensemble of all the dramatic dancers. Interspersed

with the corn episodes were scenes in the yearly cycle of the squash. In a more complete presentation of this ceremony, there probably also would be enacted scenes in the cycles of beans and of sunflowers.

The objects laid out before the altar were disposed in the following manner, when viewed from the altar itself, and looking toward the fireplace, with the doorway beyond. On the north side was placed an ordinary burden basket. To the left of this were laid a men's corn-shelling stick and a mussel shell. The latter was an instrument which the women used for scraping off the grains from the ears of green corn after they are cooked in preparation of the corn to dry for winter. Next, on the left, was a heap of corn, then some squashes, then a heap of beans, some sunflower seed heads, and last some stalks of Arikara tobacco (*Nicotiana quadrivalvis*). At the right of the burden basket was placed an ancient bone hoe. The blade of the hoe was made from the shoulder blade of a buffalo, sharpened to an edge by rubbing upon an abrasive stone. The handle of the hoe was shaped from a branch of a boxelder tree, the hoe-blade being fastened with rawhide thong on a stubbed side branch growing at the proper angle from the main branch. Next, on the right of the hoe, was laid a bow and arrows. The next object at the right was a small basket for seed corn. To the right of that were placed vessels in order containing respectively quantities of seeds of all the old Arikara crops, namely, varieties of corn, of beans, of squashes, sunflowers and tobacco. Next was laid one ear of corn, then a fawn skin. Next was placed a bird's nest. The nest must be that of a bird called by the Arikara si'kata, said to be a very small brownish-gray bird, having a red spot on its crest, which builds its nest in buckbrush (*Symphoricarpos occidentalis*), and laying small white eggs which are speckled with brown. An informant said the bird is called sic, a small, yellowish bird, and that its eggs are white speckled with reddish spots. To the right of the bird's nest was placed one squash, next was laid a bean plant entire, stalk, leaves and pods with beans. Next in order on the right of the bean stalk were a shelling-stick for men's use and a mussel shell for women's use in shelling cooked green corn. Next to these came the threshing stick, a club for beating off the grains from the ears of ripe corn. Next were placed a mortar and pestle, such as were used for grinding ripe corn. Finally there was placed one corn ball.

Perhaps a description of the last named article should be given. Corn ball is the English

translation of the Arikara name of a favorite food preparation made from ripe corn and sunflower seeds combined. For the preparation of this food both the corn and sunflower seeds were parched separately. For the purpose of parching, ripe sweet corn was used. The other types of corn were each valued for their other several uses, for example, flint corn was used for making hominy. The parched sweet corn was pounded to meal in a mortar. Sunflower seeds were also parched and then pounded to meal. The corn meal and sunflower meal were thoroughly mixed together in the proportion of three parts of corn meal to one part of sunflower meal. This mixture was molded with the hands into balls about the size of base balls. Sunflower seeds are very rich in oil and this mixture of corn meal and sunflower meal makes a fully satisfying food combination. It is of interest to note that this combination, in its elements and proportions, however, arrived at in aboriginal Indian experience, has been said by dieticians to have been found by experiments in their laboratories to be just right for a well-balanced food. Among the Arikaras and other corn-growing tribes corn balls are considered to be one of the favorite food preparations. Hence, its appropriateness for use in the ceremony of thanksgiving for the ingathering of the crop.

After all these objects are placed in order between the altar and the fireplace, a number of the principal women who intend to take part in the ceremony now come forward and arrange themselves in line before the altar, looking toward the doorway. These women represent the going forth of women in springtime to clean up the old stalks and other litter from their fields so the ground can be prepared for the seeding.

The singers, while the drummers beat time, sing of all the activities connected with the corn successively through the seasons, while the women in pantomimic dances, whether in locomotion or in mere motion in one place according to the requirements of the action, portray the events of which the singers are singing, the rhythmic motion of their bodies in every act keeping perfect time with the rhythm of the song.

First, the women dance forward toward the doorway, into the central part of the lodge floor, where they rhythmically imitate the work of cleaning the fields. Then the seed basket containing seeds is placed in front. The act of putting seed corn to soak in order to hasten the germination is now

rhythmically enacted. The purpose of hastening the germination of seed is to bring out the seedlings in the shortest time possible, thus gaining an earlier start for the growing season, which is all too short in some years between the latest killing spring frost in June and the earliest killing frost in August in that northern latitude which is the home of the Arikara people. Still, in spite of all climatic discouragements these people have brought their agriculture with them from their ancient southern home, and as they have advanced northward during the centuries they have gradually acclimatized their cultivated crops to ever shorter and still shorter growing seasons.

A woman now dances with one ear of corn in hand. This corn ear is then shelled into the small seed basket. The bone hoe is laid out and a woman takes it up and dances with it in her hands, representing the digging up of the ground and making the corn hills. Another woman dances to represent the working of the soil in the cornhills with the hands, making a firm seed bed, making depressions to receive the seeds, dropping in and covering them.

Two pairs of ears are laid on opposite sides from the middle place before the altar. Two women now take up these ears of corn from opposite sides, one ear in each hand, and dance toward each other and pass, turn and repass repeatedly. Their action represents the dancing flight of an insect, which the Arikaras in their language call *sakunanawe* (the dragonfly?), as it hovers over their cornfields in the bright spring days.

Four pairs of ears of two different kinds of corn are laid out. Four women take up these eight corn ears and dance with one in each hand. In their dance they swing and wave their arms to represent the spring migration of the returning *goat* (geese), *katorr* (cranes) and *cisunha* (_____) which come back from the south bringing warmth and moisture, the refreshing showers and the warm sun.

The fawn skin seed bag and the bow and arrows were laid out. A woman takes up the seed bag and dances to represent the women going out in seeding time to plant their fields. At the same time the bow and arrows are taken up by a man who dances with them, representing the men going out to watch and guard the women in the fields to protect them from capture or molestation by enemies. They also represent hunters who go out to seek the needed supplies of meat and other animal products.

As each dancing action is concluded the objects to be shown in the next act are laid out. During each act songs are sung by the chorus, which refer to the process in operation. In the season of hoeing and working the soil about the cornhills there are three stages; the first, when the soil is loosened and made fine about the tender young corn plants; the second, or middle stage, when the soil is again worked and all weeds are pulled again; the third and final stage, when the corn plants have attained considerable size and their long, green blades glisten in the sun, making a whispering sound as they rustle in the breeze, while they cast a weaving pattern of shadows upon the ground. In this final stage of hoeing, all weeds are again sought and the soil is drawn up again to reinforce the hills about the base of the stalks.

After the dancing of the planting episode a bone hoe and a bow and arrows are laid out. A woman took up the hoe and acted and danced the episode of hoeing the corn, while a man took the bow and arrows and danced representation of men patrolling on watch guarding the women from the enemies, in the hunt for the meat supply, and watching the corn against ground-squirrels, crows, and other things which might destroy it. A woman dances in representation of a scarecrow standing out in the cornfield.

Arikaras say that in old times it was customary to set up scarecrows in their fields. They say that crows are very inquisitive and very observant, and that they fly about the village during the day keeping an eye on everything which goes on there. They say that if one sits out in the open, working on the construction of a scarecrow, the work will be watched by these cunning crow spies. They will see how it is made, and when it is set up in a cornfield, the crows will recognize it and will know that it is harmless, will only laugh at the men who made it, and will not be at all afraid of it, and so will be not at all deterred from ruining the corn. They say that scarecrows must be made inside the house, where crows cannot watch the process. They say that after a scarecrow is made inside the house it must not be brought out and set up in the field until after dark. They say if it is carried out and set up in daytime the crows will see that the object is harmless, and they will not fear it. They also say that no red material can be used in fabricating a scarecrow, for if any red is used, the crows, when they see it will think it is fresh meat and will try to snatch it. In doing so they will find it is not meat, but in finding this out they will have come close enough to examine and learn that there is nothing in the object which is dangerous to them, and so it

will then have no further deterrent effect upon them.

Another woman dances to represent a hard-working old woman diligently attending the necessary work of her cornfield in spite of fatigue and great discomforts. This acting is intended as an object lesson in endurance and in faithfulness to duty and devotion to Mother Corn. Her action portrays the endurance of the blazing heat of the sun, extreme weariness, fighting against the painful annoyance from the plague of mosquitoes, and other vexations. This is intended to be an example for the edification of young women and as a reminder to all spectators that our food is gained at the expense of labor and pains.

After this, a burden basket is placed in front. Women come forward and dance to represent the gathering of the corn in their burden baskets. Some will represent diligence in working, others will represent those who are neglectful of their work in its proper season, who have been idle, who gossip and flirt. For this latter part, men spectators assist.

Now the heavy cudgel, the threshing stick used for beating the corn ears to separate the grains from the cob, is laid out. Some woman will now act the part to represent those who have idled and neglected their fields in the planting and hoeing time and who therefore now have no crops of their own. Such lazy and careless ones having insufficient crops of their own are obliged to seek employment in working for other, more diligent and provident ones in order to obtain food necessary for themselves and their families when winter comes. These thriftless ones must accept whatever work they can obtain to earn their necessary food, so to them is given the disagreeable and tedious task of wielding this heavy threshing stick.

At this time, all those who had taken any part in the dramatic dancing came out and all danced at the same time for a period. During the dance of the ensemble, the chorus sang songs which contained allusions to all the beneficent Powers.

At the dispersal of the ensemble, a cornball was brought and placed eastward from the fireplace, between the fireplace and the doorway. Two men dressed to represent *ihpako* (the bittern) came out and danced about the cornball in a figure 8 pattern, representing the birds fighting over the cornball. One of the bird-actors is to represent the Arikara people, the other represents an enemy people, the Dakotas for

example. It is understood that at the end of this fight dance two-thirds or more of the cornball shall still be in possession of the one who represents the Arikara. One informant said that the birds fighting for the cornball were magpies. No further certain information was obtained on this point. Perhaps it might be, in different instances, either a pair of bitterns or a pair of magpies.

At the conclusion of the fight over the cornball, all the women dancers came out and danced to represent the autumn flocking and then the southward flight of all kinds of migratory birds of the Arikara country. In this representation, the women danced toward each other in groups, then these groups turned and swiftly danced toward the doorway and dissolved like the flocking and sudden disappearance of all the migratory birds in autumn.

At the end of the bird flight dance, the people all returned to their places and sat down for the feast which is always the conclusion for any Arikara ceremony. Usually, some young woman of good family provides the food for the feast at the Thanksgiving Ceremony. All persons who attend a ceremony and partake of the feast bring with them their own cups and bowls in which to be served their food and drink. The food is always served generously, so the diners are often unable to consume all which is served to them. Food is considered sacred. It should never be treated in a manner which is in any degree lacking in proper respect. The surplus food which is not eaten at the time must be shared with someone who has not participated in the feast, or else it must be carried home to be eaten at a later time. So the bag in which the cup and bowl and spoon are carried serves conveniently the purpose to carry away the surplus one cannot presently eat of the generous portion which is served.

The food and drink have been brought into the lodge and set near the fireplace ready for serving. The people all being now quietly seated again in their places, the pipe is filled and lighted, and the priest reverently makes the customary smoke offerings, ceremonially empties the ashes from the pipe at the fireplace and lays it away. Then he blesses the food. This he does by offering a bit of it to the aides of the Chief Above which are stationed in the four quarters of the world, then to all the previously named objects which had been laid before the altar for use in the ceremony, then last of all to the Chief Above. After the blessing, the people set their cups and bowls before them and the waiters passed along, serving

each with food and drink. When all had been served, and had eaten to satisfaction, the priest again made the ceremonial smoke offerings and put away the pipe. The ceremony was finished and the people now passed out from the lodge and returned to their homes.