

ARIKARA ACCOUNT OF THE ORIGIN
OF TOBACCO AND CATCHING
OF EAGLES

It is said that in ancient time a certain man of the Arikara was earnestly desirous of obtaining favor and the blessing of a gift of power from some supernatural being. He had diligently continued for many days to watch and pray, fasting and holding vigil day and night in lonely remote places. This he had done repeatedly during the course of several years; but still he had not received a blessing. At last, while he was thus engaged in meditation, fasting and praying in a high and remote place among the rocky hills, a bird appeared to him in a vision. The bird spoke to him, saying, "All our tribes"—meaning the different species of birds—"have been pleased by your persistence and strong will in fasting. Therefore I have been delegated and sent here to show you our favor and to give you a blessing."

This bird was the Eagle. When the Eagle appeared and came and sat down by the man, it carried in its beak a branch of some plant which the man had never seen before. It was a branch of a tobacco plant of the kind which the Arikara people have cultivated ever since that time and cultivate to this day.

The Eagle said to the man:

"This plant, this tobacco, is for you to burn in a pipe to make smoke-offerings to the Higher Powers. The flower buds of the plant are the part to be used for your smoking material. You see here upon this branch some of the seed vessels containing seeds. You shall take of these and plant them so you shall have increase and your people shall always in all time to come have tobacco to make smoke-offerings. This tobacco is one of the things which will be required to provide for the festivals which shall be celebrated in honor of Mother Corn. These agricultural ceremonies to be held in honor of Mother Corn will be performed at three times in the year. The first of these ceremonies shall be held when the warmth and light of the sun are returning in the springtime, when the hard frost is gone and the grass begins to show green upon the prairie. Then it is time to prepare your fields and to make ready to plant your crops. Then you will perform ceremonies and make prayers for the blessing of your fields, for warm, gentle rains, and that late frosts shall not fall upon and destroy your young growing corn and beans

and other crops.

“The second occasion of ceremonies for Mother Corn will be the middle time of year in the summer season. Then you will perform ceremonies and make prayers for good weather to prosper your fields, that grasshoppers shall not come upon your growing crops and consume them, that the good rain shall continue as needed, that destructive gales of wind and pelting storms of hail shall be averted, and so your crops shall come to maturity and you shall have food for your children.

“The third occasion of the ceremonies for Mother Corn will be at the end of the summer, in the harvest moon, at the time of in-gathering of your crops. At that time you will have a celebration of ceremonies in honor of Mother Corn, when you will dance, and sing songs of praise and thanks to God who has given you good crops of corn, beans, squash, and sunflowers, through the mediation of Mother Corn. At this time the people will bring into the temple gifts of food products, corn, squash, sunflowerseed, roots and tubers, and wild fruits, as thank-offerings and sacrifice to God for His providence. After the close of the ceremonies these thank-offerings of the people in the form of gifts of foodstuff are to be distributed to the poor and needy of the tribe, to widows and orphans and to the aged ones and to the sick.

“This tobacco is also to be used in smoke-offerings in the ceremony of Piraskani.”

“And upon all occasions,” said the Eagle, “I shall be one of the principal things offered in sacrifice. Whenever you make a serious undertaking you should wear one of these feathers.” And he indicated the twelve tail-feathers of the eagle. “Wear one of these fastened to the hair of your head whenever you undertake an important affair, and we will be regardful and will recognize this token and will favor you in your undertaking and give you success.”

Then the Eagle instructed the man in the method to be used to capture eagles to obtain the plumes. He said to the man:

“When you undertake the enterprise of catching eagles to obtain plumes, you should to go some high, remote, and craggy place frequented by eagles. There on the summit you will dig a pit in which you can conceal yourself, sitting with your head just even with the surface of the ground. When you dig the

pit you will carry away and hide from sight the earth which you remove in digging. You will make a framework that will fit over the opening of the pit, on which you will arrange the surface to look just like the surrounding undisturbed ground, putting back sods and vegetation to appear as it was before. And you will fasten some bait there, such as the carcass of a rabbit tied to the frame with sinew. And when you go to your eagle-pit you shall first undergo the cleansing and purifying vapor bath. And you shall go fasting to your eagle-pit and take your place there just before dawn, and so shall you wait and watch there all day in the pit, without food or drink. And you shall have with you in the pit a bundle of artemisia (*Artemisia gnaphaloides*).

“When you have thus settled yourself to watch, you must be quiet but alert. After a while the magpies will discover the bait which you have tied securely with sinew to the frame above your head, and will come and try to take it away. You will remain quiet, not frightening them away. Finally an eagle will observe the magpies and will soar above to investigate. After a while you will notice that the magpies have suddenly flown away. You will know that now the eagle is circling down to the bait. You must now be alert and ready. When he alights you will quickly reach through the framework and seize the eagle by his feet and pull him down into the pit. As you do so you will grasp with your other hand some of the artemisia and thrust it toward the eagle. He will seize the artemisia in his beak and thus you may avoid his snapping and tearing your flesh, and you will grasp and wrench his neck to kill him, being careful to hold firmly the eagle’s feet so that he cannot get his talons into your flesh, else he might dangerously lacerate muscles and tendons so that you would be crippled, or he might even tear open an artery so that you would bleed to death.”

When a man goes upon an expedition for catching eagles he establishes his camp at some suitable place where he finds wood and water at a considerable distance from his eagle-pit. In the evening, after a day spent fasting and watching in his eagle-pit, he takes the eagles he has caught and carries them down to his camp. There he secures the plumes. Then he eats, drinks, and smokes, and rests. Next morning, before daylight, he again takes the purifying vapor bath, puts on clothing not used the day before, and again goes fasting to his eagle-pit as on the previous day. And so he continues to do every day for a

period of about fifteen days, at the end of which time he comes home and brings the eagle-plumes he has taken. Then, when the autumn ceremony is made to Mother Corn in thanksgiving for the year's crop, he takes the eagle-plumes he has secured and carries them into the holy lodge, the temple, and there lays them as his sacrifice and thank-offering to Mother Corn before the altar. At the conclusion of the ceremonies the eagle-plumes are distributed, along with all the other various gifts which the people have brought in offering and sacrifice.

Thus is told the account of the origin of the Arikara tobacco and the ceremonial uses of tobacco and of eagle-plumes, and the method of catching eagles to obtain the plumes.

Tobacco is used on all occasions of solemnity or of seriousness and dignity which concern individual and personal life or of public affairs of a community or of the tribe. In all such affairs of the individual from infancy to death and burial, smoke-offerings of tobacco were made. When an infant was named, an essential part of the ceremony was the making of tobacco smoke-offerings to all the Powers of the Four Quarters, to Mother Earth, and to the Chief Above in the heavens. When a man entered on any undertaking the Powers were invoked to his aid by means of offerings of tobacco; when a plant of medicinal use was dug from the ground it was first reverently addressed and begged to have compassion on the suppliant and to give of its virtue healing. Then offerings of tobacco were placed in the hole from which the root had been dug.

When a person was ill, tobacco was burned on coals as an incense offered to the spirits of all deceased relatives of the patient, and to all the elements of the universe in prayer that the disease might be removed and that the person might recover health.