

MAKING RECORDS OF ANCIENT RITUALS OF THE ARIKARA TRIBE IN NORTH DAKOTA

The purpose of this paper is to describe the process of making scientific records of some of the ancient ritualistic ceremonies of the Arikara Indians in the summer of 1921. From ancient times there has evolved in the culture of the Arikaras a very considerable body of rituals. These rituals consist of recitative, chants and prayers, and dramatic representation.

In old times there were rituals and ceremonial celebrations connected with the various community activities throughout the cycle of the seasons each year. But in later time, since the United States government has reduced the various Indian tribes from the status of free peoples to that of subject peoples and wards they have been restricted from the celebration of their own seasonal ceremonies.

All the "fifty-seven varieties" of peoples we have imported from the Old World are freely permitted to carry on their peculiar institutions, the Jews with their Yom Kippur and Yom Teruah, the Norwegians with their *sittende Mai*, and others with their own peculiar Old World institutions, but people of the Native American race, who are loyal and true Americans and nothing but Americans, are prevented from celebrating their own age-old festivals.

With the dying of the people of the older generation the number of those who know and can perform the ancient ceremonies is so much diminished that before long time all these rituals will be lost utterly unless records be made now and in the immediate future. It is a fact that within the period of only two years last past, a number of ancient rituals of the Arikara have been lost beyond any possible recovery by reason of the death of all remaining old men of the tribe who knew those particular rituals. It is therefore important to take measures to record for history and science now, before it is too late, the remaining rituals.

It was for this purpose that the curator of the State Historical Society of North Dakota secured the cooperation of the American Museum of Natural History to go upon the Fort Berthold Indian Reservation to make some records of these ancient ritualistic ceremonies. Dr. Pliny Earl Goddard of the American Museum, together with his assistant, Miss Gladys Reichardt, and with Mr. George F. Will of Bismarck, and

the Curator of the State Historical Society of North Dakota comprised the staff which undertook this work in August, 1921.

It was intended that all four of the staff should make as full notes as possible of their observations of the performance of the ceremonies. Moving pictures were also made, and still photographs of many scenes and features of the ceremonies. After the celebration of the ceremonies was concluded phonograph records were made of the songs and prayers of the rituals. All these notes and observations are to be brought together and by comparison to be synthesized into as complete a record as may be.

It should be said that there are more than fifty different linguistic stocks of Indians in North America north of Mexico, differing from each other as much as the Celtic, Teutonic, Slavic, Semitic, and various other stocks of the white race differ from each other. It should also be said that these fifty or more different stocks of the Native American race comprise upward of two hundred different tribes and nations, each with its own distinct language, laws and customs, and unwritten literature.

The Arikara nation is of the Caddoan stock. Other nations of that stock are the Pawnee, Wichita, Waco, and Caddo. The course of migration of this stock has been from the southwest, from the border of Mexico. In the course of their migration the Arikara have gone farther northward than any other tribe of the Caddoan stock. They have been agriculturists as far back in the past as they have any traditions. They brought with them from the south corn, beans, squashes, and pumpkins of many varieties, and acclimated them as far north as the upper Missouri River. The Arikaras have been cultivating these crops in this region for several centuries.

It will be observed that the beautiful symbolism of the rituals and ceremonies which have grown up in the ages of ancient Arikara civilization and culture are expressed in terms of the native faunal and floral life of the Plains region, together with their cultivated crops, especially corn, all of which they regarded as gracious gifts from *Nešanu Nacitakh'* (Chief Above Us), the Creator and Giver of all good.

In skillful dramatic representation, spectacular performance, and reverential solemnity these beautiful observances compare favorably with institutions of similar intents and purposes in our own culture.

The Arikaras, as well as other tribes of the Plains, formerly observed seasonal celebrations of ritualistic ceremonies designed to give dramatic presentation before the people of the mysteries of Divine Providence and to give public expression of thanks to Deity for past blessings upon themselves individually and upon their nation, and seeking to come into fullest accord and harmony with the scheme of Providence in Nature, to put themselves in tune with the Infinite. These ceremonies inspired deep religious fervor, delicate poetic imagination and dramatic art. They have something of the nature of the Miracle Plays of the Christian Church of Europe in the Middle Ages.

The celebration of the ceremonies last August were held in and about a large community hall which was built by popular subscription in the tribe, at a place on the second river terrace on the north side of the Missouri River about six miles southeast of Elbowoods, North Dakota. This hall is built of logs, and is in circular form with a dome roof like the ancient earthlodge. It is about 90 feet in circumference, lighted from a central skylight. It has the fireplace in the center. At the side of the lodge opposite the entrance is the altar. Above the altar were hung the Sacred Bundles of the Arikara nation. These Sacred Bundles are of similar significance to the Arikaras as the Ark of the Covenant was to the Hebrews.

The celebration held at this time was divided into three parts; a preliminary ceremony, the ceremony of the Holy Cedar Tree, and the Mother Corn Ceremony.

The preliminary ceremony was held on August 15 for the purpose of preparing and spiritually purifying the priests and people for the ceremonies which were to come, and to announce to the Universe, to Mother Earth, to the Stars, to the Mountains and Valleys, to the Springs and Streams and all Waters, to the Trees and Grass and all Plants, and to the Birds and Beasts and all other creatures, that the people were about to celebrate mysteries and offer prayers. This preliminary ceremony consisted of songs of invocation, and prayers, and a stately dance or march such as was common in ancient Egyptian, Hebrew, and Greek priestly ceremonies.

These ceremonies were always performed at the request of some member of the tribe, who provides a feast in connection there with. The one who has requested the ceremonies and has made the required provisions for it has the chief authority during the period while the ceremonies are performed and until the

encampment is dispersed. In this instance the ceremonies were performed for the Curator of the State Historical Society, and he therefore provided the three beeves for the feast of the three days.

The events of the second day were the consecration and erection of the Holy Cedar Tree, emblem of Everlasting Life. The Holy Cedar Tree and the Sacred Stone of the tribe were erected in front of the Ceremonial Lodge.

The Sacred Stone is one which has been substituted for the original Sacred Stone of the tribe, which was down the river in the region from which the Arikaras came in the last stage of their upstream migration. That Sacred Stone is the one known as "The Standing Rock," and is now set upon a pedestal at Fort Yates.

The cedar tree used for this ceremony had been cut in the Bad Lands east of Elbowoods, and had been brought to a place upon the prairie a distance of about one-eighth mile from the Ceremonial Lodge.

At about ten o'clock in the morning the Chief Priest and his assistants assembled at the Lodge. Here part of them remained to make preparations to receive the Holy Cedar Tree, while the Chief Priest and seven others whom he selected marched to the place where the tree lay upon the prairie, and there they sanctified and erected it. For this purpose, a hole was made just large enough to receive the base of the tree.

The Chief Priest then sang, beating time with an ancient gourd rattle. The song addressed to the Holy Cedar Tree was :

"We are here.
We have come for thee.
We have come to ask a favour of thee.
We are standing at thy feet."

The Chief Priest kept time with the gourd rattle in his right hand, while he held in his left hand a bunch of wild-sage (*Artemisia gnaphaloides*). Then he sang: "Thy name shall be *Tika Waruhti* (Holy Grandmother). The Created thee to have a place in the Universe; to stand and adorn Mother Earth; the Cedar Tree is a tree of long life. The Creator made thee to endure the longest life."

Then one of the assistant priests sang without words, using Arikara musical syllables, the

significance of the singing being in the tone and the melody. The Chief Priest solemnly smoked to the Cedar Tree and passed the pipe to each of the assistants, and to the tree, keeping the pipe in his own hand, thus bringing all the priests, together with the tree into communion. After this communion with the tree the pipe was emptied at its foot, first having offered the mouthpiece to the Tree, to the Zenith, to the Four Quarters, and to the Nadir. Prayers were then offered, and the Holy Cedar Tree was addressed with the words, "Now is the time we are going to take thee up. We shall have joy today, and thou art joined with us. Thou shalt partake of our joy."

Then the tree was taken up from the hole in which it stood and again laid down upon the ground. Now it was lifted upon the shoulders of the priests and carried in slow and solemn procession to the Ceremonial Lodge. Stopping at a point a little distance in front of the entrance the tree was laid down upon the ground with the foot pointing in line with the Sacred Stone and the entrance to the Lodge.

At this time the people came, bringing offerings of gifts to the tree; cloth and any other articles which they wished to give. Each donor received the ceremonial blessing at the hands of the priests. Many prayers were offered and songs were sung, and after all the gifts had been received the several priestly fraternities marched out and ranged themselves before the Holy Cedar Tree and sang songs and chants to it. After this, dramatic representation was made by the various priestly fraternities representing their animal patrons, such as the Bear, Buffalo, Deer, etc.

It was now about noon, and an intermission was had for dinner.

After the intermission the people were admitted to the Ceremonial Lodge, all of the priestly fraternities being already in their places on both sides of the Lodge and at the altar.

The Holy Cedar Tree was now carried into the lodge by four chosen men, who placed it with its foot towards the altar. More gifts were brought in and placed beside it. The Chief Priest then rose and offered a prayer and sang a chant, brushing the tree with a bunch of *Artemisia*, and the various priestly fraternities in turn sang their songs, and asked its blessings for themselves.

After this the fire-tender tied to the top of the Holy Tree a bunch of turkey feathers, representing eagle feathers (as it was impossible to obtain the eagle feathers which are the proper article for the purpose).

Two priests now walked out to the place where the Tree was to be erected in front of the Lodge, and prepared the place.

Meanwhile the tree was painted with red paint. Two priests now turned the Tree so that its foot pointed towards the entrance of the Lodge, and carried it to the other side of the fireplace. It was then carried out and permanently erected in its place near the Sacred Stone. After the priests had taken their places again in the Lodge the ceremony was concluded.

The Chief Priest then addressed the other priests with regard to the gifts. He said that according to the rule they were all his property, but that it was his intention and desire to give them to the priests who had assisted him. One of the priests then spoke and suggested that the first choice be given to the Lodge Tender, who had kept the lodge in good order for the ceremony. Common consent was given, and the Lodge Tender made his selection. Then one of the priests made other suggestions as to certain persons to be considered as proper recipients of gifts, and these persons in turn made their selections. One of the priests then called attention to the Chief Priest's generosity, and said that although he had renounced all share in the gifts, they must make him take a part. He then called upon the Chief Priest to choose. The Chief Priest answered by saying that his eyesight was poor and he could not see what to take, asking them to choose for him. So one of the priests made a selection for the Chief Priest, and then the remainder of the priests made their selections until all the gifts were distributed.

Then one of the priests made an offering from the food gifts to Father Sun, to Mother Earth, to Mother Corn, to the Sacred Stone, to the Inner Door of the Lodge, to the Two Doorposts, to the Sacred Bundles, and to the Holy Grandmother Cedar Tree. Then they sang a hymn. After this the populace withdrew, leaving the priests within the lodge to eat their food and to sing a hymn.

Later, a firm fence was placed around the Holy Grandmother Cedar Tree to protect it. The people were privileged to break off twigs from the tree to keep as talismans for blessing and prosperity in their undertakings. The Tree was to remain standing in its place before the Lodge until the next spring just before the time when the ice in the Missouri River is about to break up. At that time, the people should come bringing worn-out moccasins of their little children. These they attach to the Tree, and it will then be

carried down and placed upon the ice of the river, so that at the break-up the Holy Grandmother Cedar Tree bearing in its arms the little moccasins, worn out by baby feet of the tribe, will be carried by the stream, drifting past all the ancient Arikara village sites along its course, conveying to them the message, attested by the children's moccasins, that the Arikara nation still lives, and that they do not neglect the celebration of their ancient ceremonies.

On Wednesday, August 17, 1921, was celebrated the Mother Corn ceremony. This is a ceremony which properly belongs to the early spring-time in preparation for the blessing and planting of the fields, but, as was said before, this celebration like others of the old-time life of the Arikaras has been largely suppressed in later years since the Indians have been living under subjugation upon the reservation, so they took advantage of permission given at this time to celebrate it, even though out of season.

The Mother Corn ceremony is a ritual of great antiquity. It has come down to the present generation of the Arikara nation from unnumbered generations of their ancestors who have cultivated corn and have brought its culture from the south gradually throughout the ages until they reached the upper Missouri River prior to the European discovery of America.

The ceremony is celebrated only when someone asks to have a Sacred Bundle opened and the ritual performed in honor of Mother Corn. This requires the payment of a fee and the provision of a beef for the ceremonial offerings and for the feast. In this instance the ceremony was performed for the Curator of the State Historical Society. The carcass of the beef was ceremonially divided into sixteen parts according to ritualistic prescription.

The Sacred Bundle which is in the keeping of the chief celebrant was opened and laid upon the altar. Sacred Bundles vary in their contents and in details of ritual, but every Sacred Bundle contains a sacred pipe which is used in ceremonies, and the Mother Corn ceremony in all essentials can be performed with any one of the several Sacred Bundles of the tribe, differing only in minor details. Each subdivision of the Arikara nation had its Sacred Bundle.

The Chief Priest of the celebration and his assistants were seated at the back of the altar in the rear of the Sacred Bundle. The several priestly orders of the tribe were seated each in its proper segment of the

Lodge circle to the right and left of the altar along the Lodge wall. Before the altar lay a stalk of corn representing Mother Corn. The base of the stalk was toward the altar, the tassel toward the fireplace at the center of the Lodge. The man for whom the celebration is being made has his station at the righthand side of the lodge as one looks from the altar towards the entrance. In the present instance the host was represented by a chosen man of the tribe as his proxy. He also had an assistant.

In the morning the man who was having the celebration performed came into the village carrying on his shoulders an offering from the kill which he has made, and which he was devoted to the celebration of the Mother Corn ceremony. He was accompanied in procession by his assistants singing songs of devotion. The part of the carcass which is carried to the altar for this purpose consists of the tongue, the gullet and trachea, the lungs and the heart, in one place. This portion is to be devoted to the Ruler of the Universe and to the Heavens. The solemn procession advanced through the village and entered the Ceremonial Lodge, coming to rest before the altar, between it and the fireplace. There the host stood and let go of his offering and allowed it to drop from his shoulders to the ground before the altar and in front of the stalk of corn which represented Mother Corn, and between Mother Corn and the fireplace in the center of the Lodge. Then one of the priests advanced and stood by the donor, and with a bunch of *Artemisia* he ceremonially cleansed him by brushing with a downward stroke on each side, then in front and back. After this he addressed the donor according to the ritual, acknowledging recognition for the offering which he has made before the Sacred Bundles and before *Nešanu Nacitakh*, and expressing the thanks of the people to the donor for what he has done and for making occasion for the people to rejoice and to sing and dance in honour of Mother Corn. He prayed that the donor's path in life might be smooth and straight, and that he might have success in all his undertakings and enjoy a long and happy life until the time comes when he shall be ready to die.

In the circle about the fireplace were ranged sixteen sandbar willow withes with the twigs and leaves left on at the tops. At the base of each withe a small piece of meat from the devoted carcass was skewered. As many boys and youths as there were willow withes were appointed to take up the withes carrying the bits of meat. The Chief Priest then instructed each boy as to the duty he was to perform.

Then the priests took up the portion which was devoted to the Heavens and carried it to a place in front of the lodge beyond the Holy Grandmother Cedar Tree, and the boys stationed themselves in a semicircle between the Lodge entrance and the Tree, each carrying a willow withes and its attached bit of meat. The ceremony of consecration of the offering was then performed, and the boys sped away in all directions as they had been instructed, to carry and place away somewhere on the prairie the bit of meat on the willow withes and to say each his own prayer of devotion. These sixteen portions were devoted to all the living things on the earth, the plants and trees, birds, mammals, fishes, reptiles, etc., and to the rocks and mountains, streams, lakes, springs, etc., as the portion containing the tongue, heart and lungs was devoted to the Powers of the Heavens.

After dinner, the people again assembled in the Lodge, the various orders of priests in their proper stations, and the men and women and children in orderly arrangement according to their connections. Women came bringing gifts for Mother Corn. The gifts were received in the person of his proxy by the man who was having the ceremony performed. The donors were blessed by him and the gifts were carried to the altar and placed under the stalk of Mother Corn, for all gifts of the occasion are given in the name of Mother Corn, to be distributed afterwards by the priests to the poor and deserving.

At this stage of the ceremony there is a pause for a period of meditation, and someone among the people arises and says, "Now is the time for us to hear what Mother Corn has done for us. We wish to hear how she has blessed and helped us and our forefathers in ancient time."

To this request, the Chief Priest responds by reciting how *Ne'sanu Nacitakh* (Chief Above Us) in ancient time sent Mother Corn to the people to be their friend and helper, to give them support and health and strength. That Mother Corn comes with life-giving power, that she has walked with the people out of the dim distant days of the past; that in those distant days she gave food to our ancestors; that as she gave food to them in the past, so now she gives to us; and as to our forefathers and to us, so also she will be faithful to our children. Mother Corn has come to us out of the long ago. She has walked with our people along the long and arduous path which they have traveled up from far-away past, and she marches forward with us toward the future. Now and in all time to come she will give to us the blessings for which we have

prayed. Mother Corn is here, and she has the life-giving power!

Mother Corn leads us as she led our fathers all down the ages. The path of Mother Corn lies ahead, and with her we walk each day, going forward with confidence toward the future, just as our fathers followed her leading through all the ages past.

When the lonely prairie stretched wide and fearful before us we were doubtful and afraid; but Mother Corn strengthened and comforted us.

And now, Mother Corn comes here making our hearts glad. Give thanks! She brings us a blessing. She brings peace and plenty. She is here!" Then representative women from each subdivision of the tribe came forward and stood before the altar and took in their hands the ancient bone hoes, and ancient bows and arrows and quiver, and an enemy scalp on a pole. With these articles they performed a stately dance. The bone hoes and the bow and arrows represented ancient activities requisite for the food quest. The scalp represented victory in defense of their nation against enemies; and in this instance the people had in mind particularly the recent victory against the German enemy, in which Arikara young men had performed their full part.

At this stage, some of the older women were overcome by their emotions in remembering the sad experiences of their people and the great changes, which had come. They could not restrain their tears, and they wept and wailed. The fire-tender attended them and wiped away their tears, which he symbolically offered to Mother Corn at the altar.

After this dramatic dance, representing the clearing and preparation of the fields for planting the corn there was another representing a buffalo hunt. In this dance, women and little girls were masked to represent buffaloes. An old man who had in his young manhood killed buffalo with bow and arrow, took the relic bow, quiver and arrows pertaining to the Sacred Bundle, and acted the part of the hunter.

After the conclusion of this act a bowl of mush, representing Mother Corn's gifts of food to the people, was held up before the altar by a woman, who then carried it round the fireplace and placed it for a moment upon the ground at each of the four central pillars of the lodge, and then brought it back and placed it upon the altar. Then the Chief Priest directed that it be passed around the lodge to the representative

women. The women took handfuls of the mush, and then portions to the men whom they chose. This probably signified woman's part as the food-giver to the race in distributing the bounties of Mother Corn.

Then the women gathered before the altar and paid reverence to Mother Corn, taking the relic ears from the Sacred Bundle into their hands and devoutly caressing them. Then they danced before the altar to the singing of hymns in honor of Mother Corn.

After this dance the proxy of the man who was having the celebration performed, ceremonially lighted the relic pipe belonging to the Sacred Bundle. The pipe was smoked to all the Powers, and the head of each priestly fraternity smoked, and then offered the mouthpiece of the pipe in turn to each of his conferees, and then to the people, who either drew upon the pipe and then stroked the stem of the pipe towards themselves, or, without drawing the smoke simply stroked the stem towards themselves and then laid their hands upon their own heads and passed them down over their shoulders and bodies to bless themselves from the venerable relic. This was in order that they and the people with them might be brought in to communion with one another and with all the Universe. After the communion smoking the relic pipe was reverently emptied by the representative of the giver of the feast and it was returned to the Sacred Bundle.

This closed the main part of the ceremony. Later, the distribution of the gifts was made among the people of the articles, which had been offered in the name of Mother Corn. At sunset a band of the older women decorated the stalk of Mother Corn and carried it down to the Missouri River and piously consigned it to the current of the stream that it might be carried back along the course of the migration of the Arikara nation in coming into this land.

Early the next morning an elderly woman stood out if front of the lodge near the Holy Grandmother Cedar Tree and addressed the village. She exhorted all the people to be in full accord, to put away from their hearts any feeling of discord, and from their minds any thought of grudge, and all anger and bitterness, and for all to be of one mind and one heart. Then she addressed a prayer to *Nes'anu Nacitakh'* and to all the Universe to be compassionate to us all, Indians and white people alike, and to bless all Indians and the white people who had taken part in this celebration, and that we might all have success in our endeavors.

After breakfast the people broke camp promptly and drove away to their homes and at once took up their work which had been interrupted by the celebration. They could be seen next day hard at work in haying and harvesting, and in gathering, cooking and drying their green corn for the next winter's supply of food.

One with any sense of historic values or with any sentiment of human emotion cannot view this ceremony without being impressed and deeply moved. If one partly closed one's eyes so that the figures and objects were but dimly seen, and extraneous modern things were excluded, he could see and feel the movement and procession of this venerable and impressive ceremony down through the generations and the centuries from the distant past, with all the human effort and accomplishment which it betokened. The celebration was a spectacle and an experience never to be forgotten.