

THE "SAGE DANCE" OF THE ARIKARA

The name of this ceremony, as rendered in English, is derived from the very prominent use of *Artemisia gnaphaloides*, commonly called wild sage. This is a ceremony of purification, preliminary and preparatory to all the other public ceremonies, as Cedar Tree Ceremony and Mother Corn Ceremony. In the old times it was performed each night for four successive nights. The "Sage Dance" was performed in July, 1924, by the Arikaras, camped for the purpose at the place called Armstrong, fifteen miles east of Elbowoods, North Dakota, in as nearly as possible the ancient way. This was in preparation for the Holy Cedar and Mother Corn Ceremonies to be recorded by the Heye Foundation Expedition in charge of Dr. Melvin R. Gilmore, with Mr. E. F. Coffin as photographer, operating the motion picture camera. Other members of the party were Dr. Hartley Burr Alexander, of the University of Nebraska; Mr. Shoemaker, a photographer from the University of Nebraska; Mr. Keene Abbott of Omaha, Nebraska; Mr. George F. Will, Bismarck, North Dakota; and Mr. Russell Reid, Bismarck, North Dakota. Mr. Reid assisted in the photography, and Dr. Alexander and Mr. Will assisted in observing and recording the ceremonies.

Crow-ghost was the Master of Ceremonies, or Chief Priest, in this ceremony. The place of celebration was the Holy Lodge at Armstrong. This lodge is built of logs, approximately round, to represent the ancient round earth-covered Holy Lodge. The present lodge is constructed with a plank floor. A sufficient quantity of earth was carried in and laid in the center on this plank floor for the purpose of forming a fireplace. Earth was also, brought in to form the altar about 18 feet long, 6 feet wide, and 8 inches high at the west side of the lodge, against the wall opposite to the entrance, which is at the east side.

The roof is of shingles and has a cupola at the apex of the central dome. Glass windows are set in the sides of this cupola, lighting the interior of the lodge by skylight as the ancient domed, earth-covered lodges were skylighted by the central opening over the fireplace. The roof is supported by four posts as in the ancient pattern, and these four posts have mystic ritualistic significance. The southeast post represents the Sunrise; the southwest, the Wind; the northwest, the Thunder; and the northeast, Night.

The place of the head chief of the tribe is next to the wall even with the Sunrise (southeast) post.

From this place on round the circle of the lodge are arranged the several mystic fraternities, or orders, beginning with the Ghost fraternity, then the Deer, the Buffalo; the Cormorant. These occupy their respective segments of the circle on the south side. Then the chief priest and his assistants sit on the altar. On the north side of the circle, beginning at the altar, are the orders of the Ducks, the Owls, the Sioux, and the Bears. The Sacred Bundles of the tribe are hung upon the wall at the west side above the altar, except the one which is opened for use in the ceremony, and that lies upon the altar before the priests.

Before the altar is a rawhide, dried, and rolled into the form of a hollow cylinder. There are also sixteen wands of sandbar willow, a gourd rattle, and a heap of *Artemisia gnaphaloides*.

The hide cylinder is to serve as a drum, beaten by the sixteen willow wands to keep time for the singing and dancing. Quantities of firewood have been provided to maintain the fire in the central fireplace. The wood is dry diamond willow (*Salix cordata*).

When the "Sage Dance" was to be performed, women were called upon to volunteer to go to the timber and get the necessary wood for the fire. They carried it on their backs tied with ropes or burden straps. A guard of warriors accompanied the women when they went for the wood, because they were always in fear and danger from the enemy (the Dakota). The manner of calling for volunteers was for the guards to call at the houses and ask for the burden-straps of the women. Those who volunteered to go signified their willingness by handing over their burden-straps, which the guards then carried down to the timber when the party went after the wood. Then, on the return with the wood, if any burden-straps remained in possession of the guards it showed that the owners had either been lost from the party or had not come to fulfill their promise. The matter was investigated, and if a woman had left her house to go after wood and had not appeared with the party, she would be sought to find out what had become of her, if any accident, or if she might have been captured by the enemy. If nothing untoward had happened to her, and she had merely failed to perform the duty she had volunteered to do, then she was required to pay some specified forfeit assessed by the chief priest before she could recover her burden-strap and take her place in the lodge with the spectators of the ceremony.

On the present occasion, Crow-ghost was the Chief Priest. Before the ceremony began, a herald

was sent upon the roof of the lodge to announce the coming performance. He faced toward the east as he began his announcement, and then towards the circuit of the camp around the lodge, and then through the skylight to those within the lodge. The ceremonies began by the lighting of the fire in the fireplace by the fire-tender, then the priest filled the ceremonial pipe and lighted it at the fire. He passed the pipe first to the fire-tender then to the assistant fire-tender, then to others who participate in the ceremony, passing sunwise around the circle. Crow-ghost then rose at the altar and made a speech explaining the nature and purpose of the ceremony. He said, "This ceremony is not of human origin, but was given from above in the ancient days." He welcomed our party as visitors and declared his pleasure that we were to make a record of the ceremony, and said he hoped that in all these ceremonies we shall observe all that is done and make notes fully and freely; and he bespoke for us every assistance from his people. He wished that this ceremony should be preserved in the records of the Museum as a memorial of the religion of the Arikara. He then prayed to the Chief Above that the ceremony might bring a blessing upon all, including the part of white men who were participating.

Then the pipe was lighted ceremonially and smoke was offered by the Chief Priest to the Four Quarters, to the Above, to Mother Earth, to the heap of *Artemisia* before the altar, and to the drum and rattle, then the priest and singers in turn smoke in communion.

Then a member of the order of Ghosts distributed the heap of *Artemisia* to the leaders of the several mystic orders, beginning with the Ghosts and going on round the circle sunwise. The leaders then distribute to the members of their own orders the *Artemisia* which they have received, each retaining a wisp for himself.

The members of the several mystic fraternities now go forward and crouch in a semi-circle before the altar and sing and shout. The leader of the Ghost fraternity takes the rattle from the altar and goes to the entrance of the lodge and calls out to the waiting populace that ceremonies are beginning and returns to the altar while the people rush in and sit down in the spaces at either side of the entrance as far as to the southeast and northeast posts of the lodge.

The singers now take up the willow wands and beat time on the hide cylinder while they sing to all

the elements of the universe, the powers of nature, in the earth and the air above, and to the waters of the earth, the wind, the clouds, rain, wind, fire, hills and mountains, valleys and streams, lakes, trees and all vegetation, birds and mammals and all living, moving beings, and to the Chief Above, announcing the purpose of the ceremony. During the singing all wave the wisps of *Artemisia* in time with the singing. Next they rise and circle the fireplace, singing as they dance about the fire, shielding their faces in some degree from the fierce heat by means of the wisps of *Artemisia*, but constantly keeping the wisps moving rhythmically in time with the singing. Then they return to their places as before in crouching semicircle before the altar, and a pause for rest follows. After the pause, the singing begins again, and again the dance is performed about the fire. During this dance an old woman takes part, dancing just outside the circle of men dancers, and when they return again to the former position in semi-circle before the altar she also kneels behind them there. Her participation is authorized in recognition of signal services she has done for the public benefit in gifts and fasting and suffering.

After another rest and smoke, a song is sung in praise for the "Gift from the Power Above." Then again, they dance about the fireplace in honor of Fire, singing: "Fire is the oldest, Fire is the first living."

After this dance the dancers move about among the people in the lodge, dancers and people generally crying and wailing. Then the people go out from the lodge to their own dwellings. The dancers return to their places in the stations of their several mystic orders. There they brush themselves with the *Artemisia*, after which the *Artemisia* is all collected again and deposited in a heap before the altar. The leader of each fraternity now makes a smoke offering at his station, and gives the pipe in turn to each member of his order. Then the pipes are ceremonially put away.

The Chief Priest appoints one to carry the bundle of *Artemisia* down to the river. He runs ahead bearing the *Artemisia* and all the priests, dancers, and singers hurry after, the chief priest last of all, down to the waterside. They all remove their moccasins on the bank and the bearer of the bundle of *Artemisia* advances with it held aloft in both hands before him as he wades out into the river. He stops and makes four times the motion of tossing out into the water the bundle of *Artemisia*. At the fourth motion, he lets go. As the *Artemisia* touches the water he and the others after him, advance into the stream and bathe

themselves in the water thus sanctified.

This act concludes the ceremony of the “Sage Dance.” The conclave of mystic fraternities is hereby ceremonially cleansed and properly prepared to perform the great tribal ceremonies of the Holy Cedar Tree and those in honor of Mother Corn, which are to follow.