

SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION—BUREAU OF ETHNOLOGY

J.W. POWELL DIRECTOR

**INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY OF MORTUARY
CUSTOMS AMONG THE NORTH AMERICAN INDIANS**

BY DR. H. C. YARROW ACT ASST SU G USA

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SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION BUREAU OF ETHNOLOGY

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This little volume is the third of a series designed to promote anthropologic researches among the North American Indians. The first was prepared by myself and entitled "Introduction to the Study of Indian Languages," the second by Col. Garrick Mallery entitled Introduction to the Study of Sign Language among the North American Indians.

The following are in course of preparation and will soon appear.

Introduction to the Study of Medicine Practices among the North American Indians

Introduction to the Study of Mythology among the North American Indians

Introduction to the Study of Sociology among the North American Indians

The mortuary customs of savage or barbaric people have a deep significance from the fact that in them are revealed much of the philosophy of the people by whom they are practiced. Early beliefs concerning the nature of human existence in life and after death and the relations of the living to the dead are recorded in these customs. The mystery concerning the future love for the departed who were loved while here, reverence for the wise and good who may after death be wiser and better, hatred and fear of those who were enemies here and may have added powers of enmity in the hereafter—all these and like considerations have led in every tribe to a body of customs of exceeding interest as revealing the opinions, the philosophy of the people themselves.

In these customs, also are recorded evidences of the social condition of the people, the affection in which friends and kindred are held, the very beginnings of altruism in primitive life.

In like manner these customs constitute a record of the moral condition of the people, as in many ways they exhibit the ethic standards by which conduct in human life is judged. For such reasons the study of mortuary customs is of profound interest to the anthropologist.

It is hoped that by this method of research the observations of many men may be brought together and placed on permanent record, and that the body of material may be sufficient, by a careful comparative study, to warrant some general discussion concerning

the philosophy of this department of human conduct.

General conclusions can be reached with safety only after materials from many sources have been obtained. It will not be safe for the collector to speculate much upon that which he observes. His own theory or explanation of customs will be of little worth, but the theory and explanation given by the Indians will be of the greatest value. What do the Indians do, and say, and believe? When these are before us it matters little whether our generalizations be true or false. Wiser men may come and use the facts to a truer purpose. It is proposed to make a purely objective study of the Indians, and, as far as possible, to leave the record unmarred by vain subjective speculations.

The student who is pursuing his researches in this field should carefully note all of the customs, superstitions, and opinions of the Indians relating to—

1. The care of the lifeless body prior to burial, much of which he will find elaborated into sacred ceremonies.
2. The method of burial, including the site of burial, the attitude in which the body is placed, and the manner in which it is invested. Here, also, he will find interesting and curious ceremonial observances. The superstitions and opinions of the people relating to these subjects are of importance.
3. The gifts offered to the dead; not only those placed with the body at the time of burial, but those offered at a subsequent time for the benefaction of the departed on his way to the other world, and for his use on arrival. Here, too, it is as important for us to know the ceremonies with which the gifts are made as to know the character of the gifts themselves.
4. An interesting branch of this research relates to the customs of mourning, embracing the time of mourning, the habiliments, the

self- mutilations, and other penances, and the ceremonies with which these are accompanied. In all of these cases the reason assigned by the Indians for their doings, their superstitions, and explanations are of prime importance.

5. It is desirable to obtain from the Indians their explanation of human life, their theory of spirits and of the life to come.

A complete account of these customs in any tribe will necessitate the witnessing of many funeral rites, as the custom will differ at the death of different persons, depending upon age, sex, and social standing. To obtain their explanations and superstitions, it will be necessary to interrogate the Indians themselves. This is not an easy task, for the Indians do not talk with freedom about their dead. The awe with which they are inspired, their reverence and love for the departed, and their fear that knowledge which may be communicated may be used to the injury of those whom they have loved, or of themselves, lead them to excessive reticence on these subjects. Their feelings should not be rudely wounded. The better and more thoughtful members of the tribe will at last converse freely on these subjects with those in whom they have learned to place confidence. The stories of ignorant white men and camp attaches should be wholly discarded, and all accounts should be composed of things actually observed, and of relations made by Indians of probity.

This preliminary volume by Dr. H. C Yarrow has been the subject of careful research and of much observation, and will serve in many ways as a hint to the student. The literature of the subject is vast, but to a large extent worthless, from the fact that writers have been hasty travelers or subjective speculators on the matter. It is strange how much of accepted history must be rejected when the statements are carefully criticised and compared with known facts. It has frequently been stated of this or that tribe that mutilations, as the cutting off of fingers and toes, of ears and nose, the pulling out

of teeth, &c., are extensively practiced as a mode of mourning find wild scenes of maiming and bloodshed are depicted as following upon the death of a beloved chief or great man yet among these tribes maimed persons are rarely found It is probable that there is some basis of fact for the statement that mutilations are in rare instances practiced among some tribes. But even this qualified statement needs absolute proof.

I am pleased to assure those who will take part in this work by earnest and faithful research that Dr Yarrow will treat them generously by giving them full credit for their work in his final publication.

I must not fail to present my thanks to the Surgeon General of the United States Army and his corps of officers for the interest and assistance they have rendered.

J W POWELL

WASHINGTON, D C, *April 5, 1880*

DEAR SIR: I have the honor to offer for your consideration the following paper upon the Mortuary Customs of the North American Indians, and trust it may meet with your approval as an introduction to the study of a subject which, while it has been alluded to by most authors, has received little or no systematic treatment. For this and other reasons I was induced some three years since to commence an examination and collection of data relative to the matter, and the present paper is the outcome of that effort. From the vast amount of material in the Bureau of Ethnology, even at the present time, a large volume might be prepared, but it was thought wiser to endeavor to obtain a still greater array of facts, especially from living observers. If the desired end is attained I shall not count as lost the labor which has been bestowed.

Very respectfully, your obedient servant,

H C. YARROW.

Maj. J. W. POWELL,

In charge of Bureau of Ethnology, Smithsonian Institution

_The wisest of beings tells us that it is better to go to the House of Mourning than to that of laughter. And those who have well consider d the grounds he bad for thus his judgment will not by the title of this book (as melancholy as it appears) be affrighted from the perusing it.

What we read to have been and still to be the custom of some nations to make sepulchres the repositories of their greatest riches is (I am sure) universally true in a moral sense however it may be thought in the literal there being never a grave but what conceals a treasure though all have not the art to discover it I do not here invite the covetous miser to disturb the dead who can frame no idea of treasure distinct from gold and silver but him who knows that wisdom and virtue are the true and sole riches of man. Is not truth a treasure think you? Which yet Democritus assures us is buried in a deep pit or grave and he bad reason for whereas we meet elsewhere with nothing but pain and deceit we no sooner look down into a grave but truth faceth us and tells us our own._—

MURET

INQUIRIES AND SUGGESTIONS

upon the

MORTUARY CUSTOMS OF THE NORTH AMERICAN INDIANS.

BY H. C. YARROW.

INTRODUCTORY.

The primitive manners and customs of the North American Indians are rapidly passing away under influences of civilization and other disturbing elements. In view of this fact, it becomes the duty of all interested in preserving a record of these customs to labor assiduously, while there is still time, to collect such data as may be obtainable. This seems the more important now, as within the last ten years an almost universal interest has been awakened in ethnologic research, and the desire for more knowledge in this regard is constantly increasing. A wise and liberal government, recognizing the need, has ably seconded the efforts of those engaged in such studies by liberal grants from the public funds; nor is encouragement wanted from the hundreds of scientific societies throughout the civilized globe. The public press, too—the mouth-piece of the people—is ever on the alert to scatter broadcast such items of ethnologic information as its corps of well-trained reporters can secure. To induce further laudable inquiry, and assist all those who may be willing to engage in the good work, is the object of this preliminary work on the mortuary customs of North American Indians, and it is hoped that many more laborers may through it be added to the extensive and honorable list of those who have already contributed.

It would appear that the subject chosen should awaken great interest, since the peculiar methods followed by different nations and the great importance attached to burial ceremonies have formed an almost invariable part of all works relating to the different peoples of our globe; in fact no particular portion of ethnologic research has claimed more attention. In view of these facts, it might seem almost a work of supererogation to continue a further examination of the subject, for nearly every author in writing of our Indian tribes makes some mention of burial observances; but these notices are scattered far and wide on the sea

of this special literature, and many of the accounts, unless supported by corroborative evidence, may be considered as entirely unreliable. To bring together and harmonize conflicting statements, and arrange collectively what is known of the subject has been the writer's task, and an enormous mass of information has been acquired, the method of securing which has been as follows:

In the first instance a circular was prepared, which is here given; this at the time was thought to embrace all items relating to the disposal of the dead and attendant ceremonies, although since its distribution other important questions have arisen which will be alluded to subsequently.

"WASHINGTON, D. C, *June* 15, 1877.

"To—

"SIR: Being engaged in preparing a memoir upon the 'Burial Customs of the Indians of North America, both ancient and modern, and the disposal of their dead,' I beg leave to request your kind co-operation to enable me to present as exhaustive an exposition of the subject as possible, and to this end earnestly invite your attention to the following points in regard to which information is desired:

"1st. Name of the tribe

"2d. Locality.

"3d. Manner of burial, ancient and modern.

"4th. Funeral ceremonies.

"5th. Mourning observances, if any.

"With reference to the first of these inquiries, 'Name of the tribe,' the Indian name is desired as well as the name by which the tribe is known to the whites.

"As to 'Locality,' the response should give the range of the tribe, and be full and geographically accurate.

"As to the 'Manner of burial,' &c, it is important to have every particular bearing on this branch of the subject, and much minuteness is desirable.

"For instance:

"(a) Was the body buried in the ground; if so, in what position, and how was the grave prepared and finished?

"(b) If cremated, describe the process, and what disposal was made of the ashes.

"(c) Were any utensils, implements, ornaments, &c., or food placed in the grave? In short, every *fact* is sought that may possibly add to a general knowledge of the subject.

"Answers to the fourth and fifth queries should give as full and succinct a description as possible of funereal and other mortuary ceremonies at the time of death and subsequently, the period of mourning, manner of its observance, &c.

"In obtaining materials for the purpose in question it is particularly desirable that well-authenticated sources of information only be drawn upon, and, therefore, any points gathered from current rumor or mere hearsay, and upon which there is doubt, should be submitted to searching scrutiny before being embraced in answers to the several interrogatories, and nothing should be recorded as a *fact* until fully established as such.

"In seeking information from Indians, it is well to remember the great tendency to exaggeration they show, and since absolute facts will alone serve our purpose, great caution is suggested in this particular.

"It is earnestly desired to make the work in question as complete as possible, and therefore it is especially hoped that your response will cover the ground as pointed out by the several questions as thoroughly as you may be able and willing to make it.

"In addition to notes, a reference to published papers either by yourself or others is desirable, as well as the names of those persons who may be able to furnish the needed information.

"Permit me to assure you that, while it is not offered in the way of inducement to secure the service asked, since it is barely possible that you can be otherwise than deeply interested in the extension of the bounds of knowledge, full credit will be given you in the work for whatever information you may be pleased to furnish.

"This material will be published under the auspices of Prof. J.W. Powell, in charge of the U. S Geographical and Geological Survey of the Rocky Mountain Region.

"Communications may be addressed to me either at the address given above or at the Army Medical Museum, Washington, D. C.

"Respectfully, yours,

"H. C. YARROW."

This was forwarded to every Indian agent, physicians at agencies, to a great number of Army officers who had served or were serving at frontier posts, and to individuals known to be interested in ethnologic matters. A large number of interesting and valuable responses were received, many of them showing how customs

have changed either under influences of civilization or altered circumstances of environment.

Following this, a comprehensive list of books relating to North American Indians was procured, and each volume subjected to careful scrutiny, extracts being made from those that appeared in the writer's judgment reliable. Out of a large number examined up to the present time, several hundred have been laid under contribution, and the labor of further collation still continues.

It is proper to add that all the material obtained will eventually be embodied in a quarto volume, forming one of the series of contributions to North American Ethnology prepared under the direction of Maj. J. W. Powell, Director of the Bureau of Ethnology, Smithsonian Institution, from whom, since the inception of the work, most constant encouragement and advice has been received, and to whom all American ethnologists owe a debt of gratitude which can never be repaid.

Having thus called attention to the work and the methods pursued in collecting data, the classification of the subject may be given and examples furnished of the burial ceremonies among different tribes, calling especial attention to similar or almost analogous customs among the peoples of the Old World.

For our present purpose the following provisional arrangement of burials may be adopted:

1st. By INHUMATION in pits, graves, holes in the ground, mounds; cists, and caves.

2d. By CREMATION, generally on the surface of the earth, occasionally beneath, the resulting bones or ashes being placed in pits, in the ground, in boxes placed on scaffolds or trees, in urns, sometimes scattered.

3d. By EMBALMENT or a process of mummifying, the remains being afterwards placed in the earth, caves, mounds, or charnel-houses.

4th. By AERIAL SEPULTURE, the bodies being deposited on scaffolds or trees, in boxes or canoes, the two latter receptacles supported on scaffolds or posts, or on the ground. Occasionally baskets have been used to contain the remains of children, these being hung to trees.

5th. By AQUATIC BURIAL, beneath the water, or in canoes, which were turned adrift.

These heads might, perhaps, be further subdivided, but the above seem sufficient for all practical needs.

The use of the term *burial* throughout this paper is to be understood in its literal significance, the word being derived from the Anglo-Saxon "*birgan*," to conceal or hide away.

In giving descriptions of different burials and attendant ceremonies, it has been deemed expedient to introduce entire accounts as furnished, in order to preserve continuity of narrative.

INHUMATION.

The commonest mode of burial among North American Indians has been that of interment in the ground, and this has taken place in a number of different ways; the following will, however, serve as good examples of the process.

"The Mohawks of New York made a large round hole in which the body was placed upright or upon its haunches, after which it was covered with timber, to support the earth which they lay over, and thereby kept the body from being pressed. They then raised the

earth in a round hill over it. They always dressed the corpse in all its finery, and put wampum and other things into the grave with it; and the relations suffered not grass nor any weed to grow upon the grave, and frequently visited it and made lamentation." [Footnote: Hist. Indian Tribes of the United States, 1853, part 3, p 183.]

This account may be found in Schoolcraft.

In Jones [Footnote: Antiq. of Southern Indians, 1873, pp 108-110] is the following interesting account from Lawson, of the burial customs of the Indians formerly inhabiting the Carolinas:

"Among the Carolina tribes, the burial of the dead was accompanied with special ceremonies, the expense and formality attendant upon the funeral according with the rank of the deceased. The corpse was first placed in a cane bundle and deposited in an outhouse made for the purpose, where it was suffered to remain for a day and a night guarded and mourned over by the nearest relatives with disheveled hair. Those who are to officiate at the funeral go into the town, and from the backs of the first young men they meet strip such blankets and matchcoats as they deem suitable for their purpose. In these the dead body is wrapped and then covered with two or three mats made of rushes or cane. The coffin is made of woven reeds or hollow canes tied fast at both ends. When everything is prepared for the interment, the corpse is carried from the house in which it has been lying into the orchard of peach-trees and is there deposited in another bundle. Seated upon mats are there congregated the family and tribe of the deceased and invited guests. The medicine man, or conjurer, having enjoined silence, then pronounces a funeral oration, during which he recounts the exploits of the deceased, his valor, skill, love of country, property, and influence, alludes to the void caused by his death, and counsels those who remain to supply his place by following in his footsteps; pictures the happiness he will enjoy in the land of spirits to which he has gone, and concludes his address

by an allusion to the prominent traditions of his tribe."

Let us here pause to remind the reader that this custom has prevailed throughout the civilized world up to the present day—a custom, in the opinion of many, "more honored in the breach than the observance."

"At last [says Mr. Lawson], the corpse is brought away from that hurdle to the grave by four young men, attended by the relations, the king, old men, and all the nation. When they come to the sepulchre, which is about six feet deep and eight feet long, having at each end (that is, at the head and foot) a light-wood or pitch-pine fork driven close down the sides of the grave firmly into the ground (these two forks are to contain a ridgepole, as you shall understand presently), before they lay the corpse into the grave, they cover the bottom two or three times over with the bark of trees; then they let down the corpse (with two belts that the Indians carry their burdens withal) very leisurely upon the said barks; then they lay over a pole of the same wood in the two forks, and having a great many pieces of pitch-pine logs about two feet and a half long, they stick them in the sides of the grave down each end and near the top, through of where (sic) the other ends lie in the ridgepole, so that they are declining like the roof of a house. These being very thick placed, they cover them many times double with bark; then they throw the earth thereon that came out of the grave and beat it down very firm. By this means the dead body lies in a vault, nothing touching him. After a time the body is taken up, the bones cleaned, and deposited in an ossuary called the Quiogozon."

Dr Fordyce Grinnell, physician to the Wichita Agency, Indian Territory, furnishes the following description of the burial ceremonies of the Wichita Indians, who call themselves. "*Kitty-latats*" or those of the tattooed eyelids.

"When a Wichita dies the town-crier goes up and down through the

village and announces the fact. Preparations are immediately made for the burial, and the body is taken without delay to the grave prepared for its reception. If the grave is some distance from the village the body is carried thither on the back of a pony, being first wrapped in blankets and then laid prone across the saddle, one walking on either side to support it. The grave is dug from 3 to 4 feet deep and of sufficient length for the extended body. First blankets and buffalo robes are laid in the bottom of the grave, then the body, being taken from the horse and unwrapped, is dressed in its best apparel and with ornaments is placed upon a couch of blankets and robes, with the head towards the west and the feet to the east; the valuables belonging to the deceased are placed with the body in the grave. With the man are deposited his bows and arrows or gun, and with the woman her cooking utensils and other implements of her toil. Over the body sticks are placed six or eight inches deep and grass over these, so that when the earth is filled in it need not come in contact with the body or its trappings. After the grave is filled with earth a pen of poles is built around it, or, as is frequently the case, stakes are driven so that they cross each other from either side about midway over the grave, thus forming a complete protection from the invasion of wild animals. After all this is done, the grass or other *debris* is carefully scraped from about the grave for several feet, so that the ground is left smooth and clean. It is seldom the case that the relatives accompany the remains to the grave, but they more often employ others to bury the body for them, usually women. Mourning is similar in this tribe as in others, and consists in cutting off the hair, fasting, &c. Horses are also killed at the grave."

The Caddoes, *Ascena*, or Timber Indians, as they call themselves, follow nearly the same mode of burial as the Wichitas, but one custom prevailing is worthy of mention.

"If a Caddo is killed in battle, the body is never buried, but is left to be devoured by beasts or birds of prey and the condition of such

individuals in the other world is considered to be far better than that of persons dying a natural death."

In a work by Bruhier [Footnote: *L'incertitude des Signes de la Mort*, 1740, tom 1, p. 430] the following remarks, freely translated by the writer, may be found, which note a custom having great similarity to the exposure of bodies to wild beasts mentioned above.

"The ancient Persians threw out the bodies of their dead on the roads, and if they were promptly devoured by wild beasts it was esteemed a great honor, a misfortune if not. Sometimes they interred, always wrapping the dead in a wax cloth to prevent odor."

M. Pierre Muret, [Footnote: *Rites of Funeral, Ancient and Modern*, 1683, p 45] from whose book Bruhier probably obtained his information, gives at considerable length an account of this peculiar method of treating the dead among the Persians, as follows:

"It is a matter of astonishment, considering the *Persians* have ever had the renown of being one of the most civilized Nations in the world, that notwithstanding they should have used such barbarous customs about the Dead as are set down in the Writings of some Historians, and the rather because at this day there are still to be seen among them those remains of Antiquity, which do fully satisfy us, that their Tombs have been very magnificent. And yet nevertheless, if we will give credit to *Procopius* and *Agathias*, the *Persians* were never wont to bury their Dead Bodies, so far were they from bestowing any Funeral Honours upon them. But, as these Authors tell us, they exposed them stark naked in the open fields, which is the greatest shame our Laws do allot to the most infamous Criminals, by laying them open to the view of all upon the highways: Yea, in their opinion it was a great unhappiness, if either Birds or Beasts did not devour their Carcases; and they

commonly made an estimate of the Felicity of these poor Bodies, according as they were sooner or later made a prey of. Concerning these, they resolved that they must needs have been very bad indeed, since even the beasts themselves would not touch them; which caused an extream sorrow to their Relations, they taking it for an ill boding to their Family, and an infallible presage of some great misfortune hanging over their heads, for they persuaded themselves, that the Souls which inhabited those Bodies being dragg'd into Hell, would not fail to come and trouble them, and that being always accompanied with the Devils, their Tormentors, they would certainly give them a great deal of disturbance.

"And on the contrary, when these Corpses were presently devoured, their joy was very great, they enlarged themselves in praises of the Deceased; every one esteeming them undoubtedly happy, and came to congratulate their relations on that account: For as they believed assuredly, that they were entered into the *Elysian* Fields, so they were persuaded, that they would procure the same bliss for all those of their family.

"They also took a great delight to see Skeletons and Bones scatered up and down in the fields, whereas we can scarcely endure to see those of Horses and Dogs used so. And these remains of Humane Bodies, (the sight whereof gives us so much, horror, that we presently bury them out of our sight, whenever we find them elsewhere than in Charnel- houses or Church yards) were the occasion of their greatest joy because they concluded from thence the happiness of those that had been devoured wishing after then Death to meet with the like good luck."

The same author states and Bruhier corroborates the assertion that the Parthians, Medes, Iberians, Caspians, and a few others had such a horror and aversion of the corruption and decomposition of the dead and of their being eaten by worms that they threw out the bodies into the open fields to be devoured by wild beasts, a part of

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