

TRADITIONS OF THE ARIKARA

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Traditions of the Arikara by George A. Dorsey

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GEORGE A. DORSEY

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OF THE ARIKARA**

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615

BY

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INTRODUCTION.

The Arikara traditions in this volume were collected during the year 1903, with funds provided by the Carnegie Institution. The work was part of a systematic and extended study of the mythology and ceremonies of the various tribes of the Caddoan stock. All of the tales here presented were secured through James R. Murie, of the Skidi band of Pawnee. The slight differences in language between the Arikara and Skidi were soon overcome by Mr. Murie, who, when a boy at school, had learned to speak Arikara fluently.

The Arikara belong to the Caddoan linguistic stock, and were formerly closely allied with the Skidi band of Pawnee, from which tribe they separated about 1832. After that time they made their home at various points along the Missouri River until, in 1854, they were placed on what is known as Fort Berthold Reservation in North Dakota, along with the Mandan and Minitaree or Grosventres, the latter two tribes being of Siouan stock. With the Mandan the Arikara had been closely associated even before their removal to the Fort Berthold Reservation. Their dwellings and general mode of life had much in common with the Skidi. Like the Skidi, they constructed the earth-lodge, and their social organization and religious ceremonies in general were also similar to those of the Skidi. Inasmuch as the author has prepared a somewhat extended discussion of the Skidi in his introduction to the "Traditions of the Skidi Pawnee," it will not be necessary here to do more than to refer to that volume.¹

The Arikara to-day number about 380, as against 435 in 1890, and 725 in 1880. Owing to the continued severe hostility of the Indian Department, but little evidence of their former method of life remains. It is said that the last earth-lodge in use fell into ruins in 1900. In possession of certain members of the tribe are some of the sacred bundles or altars; but the people have been so intimidated that their religious ceremonies are, as a rule, held secretly.

In physique they seem hardier than their Skidi brethren on the south, and in disposition, more tractable. In dealings with the Government they have, as a rule, proved themselves men of high honor, and not since about 1820 have they manifested an unfriendly disposition toward the whites.

An examination of the tales here presented shows, as we might expect to find, many points of resemblance with those of the Skidi and other Pawnee tribes. It is apparent at once, however, that the mythology of the Arikara contains many elements not found among

¹Traditions of the Skidi Pawnee, Volume 8, Memoirs of the American Folk-Lore Society, 1904.

the Skidi. This is possibly due to contact with the Mandan, and perhaps, though to a less extent, with the Minitaree. To what extent the Mandan have influenced the Arikara can not be known, as no extended account of their mythology is available.

Inasmuch as investigation is now being carried on among additional tribes of the Caddoan stock, the usual references to the mythologies of other tribes have been omitted in the present volume. At the completion of this investigation the tales of all the tribes of the stock will be considered from a comparative point of view, while other resemblances to the traditions of other tribes will, at the same time, be pointed out. It seems sufficient at present merely to indicate in a general way the character of the tales here presented.

In the first and second tales, each of which tells of the creation of the earth by the Wolf and Lucky-Man, as well as in the creation of people by the Spiders, through the assistance of the Wolf, we have a story of origin not known to any of the other bands of Caddoan stock, and it is possible that this account is due to foreign influence. The story of the appearance of people upon earth, or of the emergence, is presented in a number of variant forms (Nos. 3 to 13). All these myths are of undoubted Arikara origin, and apparently are uninfluenced by the mythology of any other tribe. The difference of these tales from all similar tales among the Skidi is very interesting, and shows that the Arikara possessed a well-defined mythology of their own before their separation from the Skidi. The next two tales (Nos. 9, 10) bear additional testimony to the importance of the cultivation of corn among the Arikara, while in tales 11, 12, and 13 is related, in varying versions, the escape of the Arikara from the buffalo. The fundamental principle of this myth is wide-spread and extended to many of the Plains tribes.

In the next series of tales (Nos. 14 to 28) we have a general account of the period of transformation following the emergence, and which may be characterized in general as transformer legends. As with the Skidi, the poor boy among these tales is the culture hero, while Coyote, the great transformer of the Northwest, takes a very inferior part. At least three well-defined transformers appear in this series; the first in importance is the boy offspring of the woman who climbed to heaven and married a Star. His greatest work is freeing the land from the presence of the four destroying monsters. Only second to Star-Boy in importance is Sun-Boy (No. 16), whose special merit consists in the fact that he made long life possible, though only after a series of memorable contests with his powerful father. The third transformer is Burnt-Hands, the Burnt-Belly of the Skidi. Like

Burnt-Belly, this poor boy, through the aid of certain animals, becomes powerful, kills the mean chief, and calls the buffalo, thus saving his tribe from despotism and famine, and at the same time furnishing by his life a perpetual example to the poor of the Arikara of the value of honest and long-continued effort. In tale No. 20 are related the deeds of two boys who slew the water-monster, one of whom, perhaps, was Burnt-Hands. The deeds also of two brothers, and perhaps the same as those just referred to, are related in the next two tales (Nos. 21 and 22), where we have the additional element of one of the boys turning into a water-monster and taking up his home in the Missouri River, an incident which is of widespread distribution among the Pawnee tribes. The first of these two stories might also be considered as a rite myth, for it has certain reference to the origin of the ceremony of the medicine-men. In the next tale (No. 23) the value of the deeds of the poor boy, who, as in a similar Skidi tale, recovers a mouse's nest and so receives power from the mice and rats, is not so apparent. To be sure, for a while, his power is used advantageously, and he is instrumental in fighting the enemies of his tribe, but he finally abuses his power, and in an encounter with the bear this power comes to an end. A similar fate befalls the hero of another tale (No. 34), who, in befriending some young hawks, obtained the power of the hawks, which power, for a while, was rightly used, but eventually, abusing it, he suffered death. This tale, also, might be considered a rite myth. In tales Nos. 25 and 26 is related how the young man recovered the young women from the power of the bear, through the assistance of the magic flute of the elk. In the second of these two tales some of the women become elks. The story of the man who obtained the elk power is related in tale 27, which also relates how certain people, after entering the water, became animals. In a number of tales presented Coyote figures prominently, but only in No. 28 does he appear as a transformer, where, by his action with the magic windpipe, the seven brothers become bumblebees.

Tales Nos. 29 to 42 may be considered rite myths, inasmuch as they refer either to the origin of a ceremony or of a particular rite or to incidents, which were perhaps connected with a ceremony. Myths of this nature apparently are not as common among the Arikara as among the Skidi. It is possible, however, that this apparent difference will not prove to be real, for as yet no extended and systematic study has been made of the Arikara ceremonies.

In tale No. 29 is found an interesting account of the origin of the well-known ring and javelin game of the Plains, which among the Arikara, as among the Skidi and Wichita, is really part of the ceremonial calling of the buffalo. The tale also relates to the origin of the

buffalo dance. In the next three tales (Nos. 30-32) is related the origin of the wolf dance and of the medicine-men's dance and of the special medicine of one of the medicine-men. In tale No. 33 is related the origin of the rabbit power, presumably the tale of the origin of some special medicine. In tale No. 34 we have perhaps the account of the origin of some band. Here, as in certain other tales, we have the magic power, derived in this instance from the water-dogs, which led to the separation of the people. Tale No. 35 appears to relate to certain incidents of the buffalo dance, while the next tale gives a mythical account of the well-known musical instrument consisting of a stick which was rubbed by another stick or by a bone, one end of the first stick resting upon a hollow object acting as a resonator. Tale No. 38 has reference to some personage in the medicine-men's ceremony. In Nos. 38 and 39 we have an account of the man and the woman who turned to stone and who as such afterward played a prominent part in the medicine-men's lodge. In tales Nos. 40 and 41 we have an account of magic power derived from scalped-men, presumably being accounts of the origin of some special medicine. Tale No. 42, which tells of the power given a young girl through the skull and corn of the altar, which she used for replenishing the impoverished stores of her tribe, seems to be the fragment of some rite myth.

Tales Nos. 43 to 48 are of miscellaneous character, and are not easily referred to any of the categories above mentioned. The first two in this series, which recount contests between the Arikara and the snakes and the Arikara and the bears, are perhaps rite tales, or they may relate to a still earlier time in the mythologic era. The next tale tells of the wife who married the elk and afterward rendered great assistance to her people. This tale in its general features is similar to a wide-spread myth found among the Plains tribes. The story of the four girls who were pursued by the mountain-lion, as told in tale No. 46, is also equally wide-spread, though it is here presented in an abbreviated form. The next tale, which tells of the boy who could transform himself into an eagle, and who became a great chief and warrior, is similar in general to No. 32, but contains no rite element. The story of the whirlwind girl (No. 48) contains certain elements not yet known to exist among any of the Plains tribes.

Tales Nos. 49 to 59 relate almost exclusively to animals, and in all of them the Coyote plays a prominent part, always as a mean trickster, not as a transformer, and committing deeds which generally result disastrously to himself. These tales in general are similar to those of the Skidi and other bands of the Pawnee.

Tales Nos. 60 to 68 may be characterized in general as traditions,