

**ANTHROPOLOGICAL PAPERS OF  
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RELIGION OF THE CROW INDIANS**

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**ROBERT H. LOWIE**

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George Grant MacCurdy

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## PREFACE.

Religious beliefs penetrate practically every phase of Crow culture, and accordingly considerable information on this topic is sprinkled through a number of previous publications dealing with this tribe, notably those devoted to the description of ceremonial activities. In the present paper, I attempt to expound those Crow conceptions that would naturally be looked for under the caption of "Religion" and in the interests of clearness, I have sometimes drawn on material already in print.

How fruitful comparative researches in this field are likely to be, is suggested by a preliminary essay on the guardian spirit and vision concept of the area, by Mrs. Ruth Benedict, which is to appear in the "American Anthropologist" and which I have had the pleasure of reading in typescript. Naturally comparison cannot logically stop at the more or less artificial boundaries involved in the delimitation of culture areas. The student of the Plains is led imperceptibly to consider conditions in the Woodland area as well, and it would be odd if the undoubted ceremonial connections between the Plains and the Southwest were wholly unaccompanied by corresponding resemblances in the subjective counterpart of ritual. However, though keenly interested in comparative investigations of this type, I have in the present paper confined myself almost entirely to offering some additional raw data to my colleagues.

The material was not gathered during a single visit specially devoted to the subject here dealt with, but at various times during my Crow field-trips, ranging from 1907 to 1916. Probably more information was obtained from Gray-bull than from any one other native authority, and the sum-total of the statements attributed to him furnishes a fair conception of the religious attitude of a Crow Indian ranking high, though not among the very highest, in public esteem and entering fully into the religious life of his people without functioning as a religious leader. In that sense his career is more typical than that of personalities like Medicine-crow, Big-ox, or Lone-tree, from and about whom, however, I have secured as much information as I could.

ROBERT H. LOWIE.

January, 1922.

## SUPERNATURAL BEINGS.

The Siouan term that has become best known as an equivalent of the Algonkian *manito* is the Dakota *wakȝ*. Variants of this stem, such as *wakanda*, *wakandagi*, *makȝ*, have been reported from Southern Siouan tribes. I know of no phonetic equivalent in Crow. On the other hand, J. O. Dorsey records another Omaha word for mysterious, viz. *qube*, which is clearly related to the Winnebago *qopine*, Mandan *xɔpinu*<sup>1</sup>, Hidatsa *xupɪ* or *maxupɪ*, Crow *maxpé* or *maxpɪ*. The initial *ma* in Hidatsa and Crow is simply the generic nominal prefix, leaving *xp* as the consonantal complex to be used for comparative purposes. The occurrence of Biloxi *xi* with the identical connotation is at least suggestive.<sup>2</sup> Whether it represents a reduced Siouan stem or a radical form, is a question to be decided by linguistic specialists. That the Biloxi form should recall the Northern Siouan languages rather than those of the Omaha group, is not remarkable since this tallies with Swanton's observations on the language generally.

It remains to elucidate the Crow concept by some concrete examples of the application of its linguistic correlate. So far as I know, the Crow never refer to the Supreme Being by a term corresponding to the Dakota *Wakȝ-tafika* (Great Mystery). The concept of God with which they have been familiarized by missionaries is rendered *ak'-bittɪ-dia*, He-who-everything-made; and the aboriginal notion that most closely resembles that of Christianity is covered by terms not involving the stem *maxpé* at all, viz., by the words *Isɪ'kawuaté* (Old-Man-Coyote) and *Ar'acé* (Sun). This, of course, does not mean that Old-Man-Coyote and the Sun are not regarded as *maxpé*; I am convinced that they are. However, it indicates that the Crow are chary of using the term than the Dakota. They apply it, so far as I can see, not to designate particular individualized supernatural beings, but to convey the idea that a person or object is possessed of those qualities transcending the ordinary which are summarized by the generic word *maxpé*. This, then, is an abstract notion to which concrete experiences are or are not assimilated. The man who superintended the driving of deer into a corral is thus described in a text: *ak'dia batsé rək maxpɪ'-tseruk*, "The one who did it was a *maxpɪ* man, it is said." In a myth a woman who has transformed herself into a bear is pursuing her sister and brothers. A magical obstacle is created to delay her. But: *maxpɪ'-racen ik'uctsɪ'-tseruk*, "She was *maxpɪ*,

<sup>1</sup>I also recorded a Mandan stem *mázano*.

<sup>2</sup>J. O. Dorsey, "A Study of Siouan Cults" (*Eleventh Annual Report, Bureau of American Ethnology*, Washington, 1894), 366 f.; J. O. Dorsey and John R. Swanton, "A Dictionary of the Biloxi and Oto Languages" (*Bulletin 47, Bureau of American Ethnology*, Washington, 1912), 221.

that is why she got out, it is said." Old-Woman's-Grandchild, the hero who conquers all sorts of monsters, is of course *maxpé*; his adoptive grandmother, who is often identified with the witch Hicictawia, is specifically described as "also *maxpé*" (*ku maxpé<sup>a</sup> rək*).

The stem appears nominally without the prefix in the form *xapíri(ə)* e.g., *xapíri-ice*, medicine-case. The suffix I interpret as the stem *díe*, to make, to cause. Generally possessive pronouns are prefixed and the medial *p* becomes a sonant. Thus, we get such combinations as, *naxpíté iaxbíríac*, the bear is his medicine; *bíaxbíríac dáta*, take that medicine of mine. This noun designates any tangible object regarded with special veneration, e.g., the feather derived from a vision and insuring safety in battle.

Altogether the Crow concepts correspond to the Hidatsa equivalents, *xupí*, *maxupí*, as defined by Matthews, who writes them *hopá*, *mahopá*. The former means "to be mysterious; sacred; to have curative powers, to possess charm, incomprehensible, spiritual. Same as Dakota *wakan*, but signifies also the power of curing diseases." The noun is rendered "medicine, charm, spell."<sup>1</sup>

Of recent years the question has been broached whether the manitou concept may not be completely merged in that of animism. That is to say, the sacredness of *maxpé* persons or objects is ascribed solely to the connection they have had with spirits.<sup>2</sup> Thus, Dr. Radin quite categorically states that the Winnebago and Ojibway apply their respective terms for 'mysterious' invariably "to definite spirits, not necessarily definite in shape,"; and he evidently regards this statement as of universal validity, at least in North America. A peculiarly shaped object, he argues, receives offerings because it *belongs* to a spirit or is a spirit's dwelling-place; an arrow possesses specific virtues because it is a spirit transformed or a spirit's abode; and so forth.

This point of view does not appear to me to be borne out by the Crow data. It is true that in Crow *theory* almost all 'medicine' objects are derived from a vision, that is to say, from a spiritual visitant. But this spirit is frequently not 'definite' in any ordinary sense of the term. That is, it is not one of a series of supernatural beings definitely conceived by the Indian before his vision, but merely a personified cause of the visionary's subjective experiences. This is why the Crow who has

<sup>1</sup>Washington Matthews, "Ethnography and Philology of the Hidatsa Indians" (*Miscellaneous Publications, United States Geological and Geographical Survey*, no. 7, Washington, 1877), 47 seq., 149, 184.

<sup>2</sup>Paul Radin, "Religion of the North American Indians" (*Journal of American Folk-Lore*, vol. 27, 1914), 344-351.