

CULTIVATION OF "MEDICINE TOBACCO" BY THE
CROWS—A PRELIMINARY PAPER

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The ceremony attending the planting of the "medicine" tobacco plant is one of the oldest observed by the Crow Indians. With slight variation the performance of the ceremony is still observed as in the days when buffalo were plentiful, when, about the beginning of winter, the fattest buffalo cows that could be found were killed and the meat cured so as to keep until the following spring. Just after the killing it was announced that the meat would be eaten at the planting of the tobacco plant. To-day beef is used in lieu of buffalo meat.

As soon as the chokecherry trees begin to blossom in the latter part of May, preparations are begun for a feast. After the feast the following is sung, in a chant-like manner, four times, accompanied by the shaking of a rattle:

"I am going to plant tobacco,
There will be plenty,
Come and see the tobacco."

At the conclusion of the fourth repetition some wild onion, earth from mole hills, and dried cattle manure (formerly buffalo or elk chips were used) are put into bowls and thoroughly mixed; to this is added a little of the tobacco seed mixed with water, then after another mixing beef offal is added. The largest intestine of the beef has meanwhile been selected and cut into as many pieces as there are members of the party. Each piece of the intestine is then filled with the mixture and the ends tied with sinew; they are then distributed, each piece fastened to the curved end of a chokecherry stick about three feet long. Each person having one of these sticks is regarded as the offspring of the oldest man in the party, who is alluded to as the "father" and who always conducts the ceremony.

After the distribution of this curious sausage, the personal "medicine charm" of each man is given by him to his wife, or to his nearest female relative present, who suspends it from the middle of a long string, the ends of which cross the shoulders, allowing the medicine to hang down the back. The ends of the string are then grasped in the left hand, which is held across the chest to the right side. In the right hand of each woman is carried a fan consisting of the wing of an eagle. Each woman is dressed in her most attractive costume and wears in her hair an eagle feather.

Directions are given for the forming of a single line abreast, one-half being women and the other half men, and in this form they march to the tobacco planting grounds. This line, which consists of both married and single men and women, is headed by a woman, usually the wife of the old man alluded to as the "father," but if she be not living the nearest female relative of the old man is chosen. The leader always carries a bundle of small branches of the chokecherry tree, to which are tied small stuffed birds.

This march is always at a slow pace in the direction of a mountain to the south (as a crane flies in the fall), and is accompanied with singing, drum-beating, and rattle-shaking. At a distance of about four hundred yards from the beginning of the march the leader stops suddenly and sits on the ground, in which he is followed by the others. As soon as all are seated the old man fills a pipe with tobacco, and after lighting it points it stemward to the sun and then to the earth. This he repeats slowly and deliberately four times, with the invocation at each movement, "May the tobacco grow very tall." He then passes the pipe to the next man in line, and so on down the line, but omitting the women. Sometimes a man may be afraid to smoke the pipe for fear that, if the tobacco should not grow, some great harm would befall him; but if he is not afraid to smoke, and desires to do so, he grasps the pipe-stem firmly with both hands and takes as many inhalations as he desires; and as he smokes, the remainder of the men exclaim, *Ah-ho!* which signifies "Thank you!" This act of smoking is regarded as a ceremonial equivalent to the sacrifice of the life of the smoker that the tobacco plant may grow.

After all the men have smoked the pipe, the "father" sings

a song which is taken up by the others, who also accompany their leader with their drums and rattles. During this song the women dance, which they continue after the men have ceased singing and playing. As the women dance they sing :

“ I walk toward the mountain ;
I am the last one.”

This song is repeated four times, and at its conclusion the march is resumed in the same order as before, a stop being made about four hundred yards from the first stop, where everything is repeated exactly as when the participants halted on their outward march.

This marching, halting, smoking, praying, singing, and dancing are repeated twice more, or four times in all, the last stop taking place about a hundred yards from the tobacco planting grounds. During this last stop the women transfer the chokecherry sticks and the medicine from their backs to young men, usually their relatives, whereupon the latter form in line abreast and the “father” sings the following song four times :

“ I am going to make tobacco,
There will be plenty ;
Come and see the tobacco.”

At the conclusion of the fourth song the young men who have been standing in line engage in a foot-race to the planting ground, on reaching which each one hangs his medicine and chokecherry sticks on branches of trees which had previously been placed upright around the planting ground. The young man first reaching the goal is prayed for that he may have a successful future and especially no ill-luck during the ensuing year. No prayer, however, is offered in behalf of the losers of the race, who are ridiculed instead. The one who first succeeds in hanging up the medicine and the stick prays for that which he desires most.

At the conclusion of the race the entire party advances and begins the construction of a hedge of green branches around the planting ground, which has already been partially and unceremoniously prepared for the planting. As soon as the hedge is completed, the women work the soil as fine as possible by hoeing and

raking; the men and women then stand in pairs, usually man and wife together. The tobacco, which is tied up in the intestine, is next taken off the curved chokecherry stick and held in the left hand, while the stick is grasped by the right hand. The "father" now sings the following four times:

"I am going to make tobacco,
There will be plenty;
Come and see the tobacco."

When the song has been repeated the fourth time, those holding the tobacco and sticks move forward in a row upon the planting ground, and each with the end of his stick makes in the ground a hole about the size of a man's index finger and about four inches deep. The holes are made in rows. The filled piece of intestine is laid across the left arm, and with the right hand a small quantity of the mixture of tobacco and fertilizer which it contains is placed in each of the holes, which are then filled with earth.

When the planting has been finished a large sweat-lodge of bent boughs is erected, sufficiently large to accommodate ten or twelve men. This number enter the lodge and repeat, four times, the following song:

"Say, man, we are going to make a sweat-house."

The men remain in the lodge for about twenty minutes, when they rush to the river and take a plunge. After thus cleansing themselves they take a number of small willow branches and cover them with grease and charcoal; their ends are then stuck in the earth, in a corner of the planting ground, in such manner as to form the framework of a miniature sweat-lodge, in the center of which are put live coals of fire. From the mountains has previously been obtained a root called "bear-root," which is chipped and placed upon the fire; but before this is done the root is held by the "father" in his right hand, which he extends successively toward the east, the south, the west, and the north, facing the east all the time, so that when the hand is extended to the west it is necessarily passed over and back of his head, and when extended to the north it is also over the

head. From this last position the "father" lowers the root with a spiral movement (as a crane alights) toward the fire. This is done four times, each time the hand becoming nearer the fire, until, on its fourth descent, the chipped root is placed upon the fire.

As the incense arises sunward a pipe is filled and lighted by the "father," who sends the first whiff toward the sun, at the same time pointing the stem thereto and praying that the people may live long. The next whiff is blown toward the east, the "father" at the same time pointing the stem of the pipe downward and praying that the people may have no sickness. If the smoke from the burning bear-root rises straight, prayerful petitions are made that the tobacco plant may grow as straight as the smoke, and that the participants and the whole tribe may have no misfortune.

The ceremonies of the day close with a great feast outside the planting ground.

Every seventh day after the planting the older men go to see how the plants are thriving, and as soon as the sprouts appear they return to the camp, singing songs of thanksgiving.

Although the tobacco tract may become overgrown with weeds, no one ever enters the enclosure until the wild plums are ripe; then the medicine tobacco is gathered—roots, stalks, and leaves. As the plant is considered to be poisonous, those who harvest it rub their hands beforehand with a root gathered in the mountains. No ceremony is observed when the medicine tobacco is gathered.

The plant is stored away, and when dry the seeds are put in a buckskin pouch and kept for another planting. The roots, stalks, and leaves are thrown in the river.