

ARIKARA ORIGIN MYTH*

The human race was first formed and came into being in the womb of Mother Earth. This closely restricted existence was grievous from the want of illumination and freedom. Little by little, the people came to a consciousness of the imperfection of their state, and felt, more and more, the urge to emerge from their condition of darkness and inaction, and to come out into the light above the earth, and to attain liberty of movement over its surface.

At that time of beginnings, there were none of the living creatures, neither any vegetation nor any birds or any animals, under the sun upon the lap of Mother Earth, all were still concealed beneath her bosom. And these living creatures were exerting themselves and making all endeavor for they had a strong aspiration to come up into the light, and they continued constantly to pray and grope, and to do their best to explore, and to find some way to accomplish the purpose.

All creatures were striving and doing their best in their own way. The mole tried to bore the surface and did succeed, but as he pushed his face into the light, he was blinded by the brightness of the sun. And so, the mole still lives just below the surface of the ground. Then, the people began to come forth from the opening of the ground, but the earth began to cave in before all had come out, so it is, the badgers, and gophers and all such animals still have their dwelling in the ground.

Now, the living beings, which had come forth on the surface, began to move and to travel westward. In their journeying, they came to a great water. Here was another difficulty to be overcome. All their powers must be exerted. Those which could fly over, as the fowls of the air, were asked to do what they could. Others tried to open, by some means, a way through the waters, but before all had crossed over, the waters closed on part of them, and so we still have the people of the waters, such as the fishes of all kinds, and all other creatures which live in the water.

Now, the free moving beings which had succeeded in coming through or crossing the great water, traveled on again upon their course. After a time, they came to a great, dense forest, so here their way

* Told by Four-rings, an Arikara living at Armstrong, fifteen miles east of Fort Berthold, North Dakota. August 1924

was again impeded. Here again, as always before, they prayed and called upon all the elements of the universe, and tried their best to open a way to pass through this great forest which seemed impassable. And so, some made their way through this difficulty; but some, again, as in previous cases, did not win through, and these remained in the woods, and still live there. These people are the deer, the moose, bears, and all the forest dwelling, kind, large and small.

And then, the Chief Above blessed the people and showed them still greater favor. He revealed mysteries to those who earnestly sought with prayer and fasting to know his will. He gave them a Sacred Bundle and the pipe to use in prayer, and taught them religion and told them how to worship, and so we do even to this day. And he gave them roots of many kinds of plants from Mother Earth, that those should be medicines, for healing of wounds and the cure of sickness.

And the Chief Above blessed all the living creatures on the earth, the trees and vines and flowers and grasses, all growing, living things upon the lap of Mother Earth, which look up to the Sun; all the animals on the earth and in the waters, and the fowls of the air. He blessed all these and said that they are all our friends, and that they should not be mistreated, but that all creatures have their place in the universe, and should be treated with respect.

It was taught that the pipe should be used to offer smoke to all things which the Chief Above had blessed. And so it was done. But there were two creatures, two dogs, which were sleeping, and were forgotten when smoke-offerings were made. And they awoke and were grieved and angry at this neglect, and said to the people, "You neglected to make smoke-offerings to us. So in punishment for your neglect of us we shall bite you. And yet we will not leave you. We shall still follow you always." The names of the two dogs were Sickness and Death. "So," they said, "Sickness and Death shall always be among you people. And so it is with all things in the world. The sun rises and sets; the brightness of day fades into the darkness of night; the flowers bloom in the springtime, and are put down by the frosts of autumn; the wind blows and, again there to calm; water is lifted in vapor and floats in the clouds and again falls in rain upon the earth; springs rise in the hills and their water flows down into the rivers. So changes come to all, all things die and are born anew."

Thus runs the story of all living things in the world, their first appearance, their struggles, their growth and development.