

## THE MAKING OF A NEW HEAD CHIEF BY THE ARIKARA

Since ancient times the general court or ruling body governing all tribal affairs of the Arikara has been composed of the following four classes of the population: first, *Nešánu*, that is, chiefs; second, *Piraškáni*, that is, all persons who have had the public honor of initiation into this civic social order; third, *Nahukósu*, all men who have won war honors for valorous deeds; fourth, *Hunánš* (“all those unafraid to die”), that is, soldiers, all men who have done honorable military duty in the service of the tribe whether they have won special honors or not.

The head chief of the tribe and his four associate chiefs, and the chiefs of the twelve villages in ancient time constituted the first class. The second class comprised all those, men and women, who had been made *Piráu* in the public initiatory rite of *Piraškáni*. This is a mystic order to which a person is chosen and initiated from consideration of temperance and stability, kindness and hospitality, and notable excellence of character. The ritual of the ceremony of initiation inculcates reverence and gratitude for God’s providence, gives counsel to right living and blameless conduct, enjoins liberality, kindness, patience, hospitality, exhorts one to reclaim the erring and guide them aright, and especially urges one to be tender toward children and to give them guidance and to “set their feet in the right paths.”

The third class is composed of all who have won honors in war. To have the right to wear a war honor a man must have done some deed of valor, which has been attested and approved before the court. Upon such proof being shown, the man who had performed the honorable exploit was invested with the proper degree of honor and was publicly proclaimed to have the right to wear the insignia pertaining to that degree. Of course, no man might presume to wear the feather indicative of honor for any exploit until the court has formally taken evidence of the exploit, has attested the findings, and has given public approval.

The fourth class of members of the tribal assembly comprises all the warriors or soldiers of the tribe who are not already included in the previous class.

The general assembly of these four classes or estates was convoked for any public tribal business, whether legislative, judicial, or diplomatic. It also constitutes in itself the electoral body to choose a new

head chief or an associate chief for the tribe.

When the general assembly has been convoked, the man who called the meeting takes the post of pipe-tender for the meeting. He chooses someone to the honor of being the firetender.

In May, 1926, Floyd Bear, head chief of the Arikara, died. The position of principal chief being thus left vacant it was necessary for the general assembly to meet and choose someone to that position. In August the general assembly was called for this purpose. It devolved upon White Bear, as eldest relative of the deceased principal chief to preside over this meeting for the election of his successor.

At such a meeting the chiefs (*Nešánu*) take their seats at the altar place at the west side of the lodge. The others take their places according to the place of their respective villages in the tribal circle. Those of *Awáhu*, *Hokát*, and *Sciriháuh* take their places at the southeast quarter; *Hukáwirat*, *Warihká*, and *Nakarík'* at the southwest quarter.

The representatives of *Tukátuk'* and *Tšminaták'* have their places at the northwest quarter. *Witaúh* should be also represented in this quarter, but, as was said before, that village long ago left the tribe and so it is not represented. It is true there are a few descendants of the two young men of *Witaúh* who turned back and returned to the tribe, refusing to take part with their own village in its secession. But as the village sacred bundle was carried away, the lost village has never more had representation in tribal affairs. In every generation since the secession, the few people who are descended from the two returned young men have been merely among those present at all tribal affairs. They have had no voice in council.

When the council has assembled the pipe is filled by the pipetender and laid before the altar. The presiding chief now announces the purpose of the meeting. Then the pipetender comes to the altar and takes up the pipe and calls upon the firetender to bring from the fireplace a brand to light the pipe. The pipetender lights the pipe and hands it to the presiding chief, who makes the ritualistic smoke offerings to the southeast quarter, to the southwest, to the northwest, to the northeast, to Mother Earth and to the Chief Above in the sky. Having made these offerings, he now returns the pipe to the pipetender. As the pipe is presented to him the pipetender extends his hands, one on each side of the stem, touching it, and draws them thus along the stem to the mouthpiece as he draws smoke from it while the mouthpiece is held to his lips.

Then the presiding chief takes the pipe and carries it to the southeast quarter. The leading man of that quarter rises and advances a few steps, and the pipe is presented to him from the left side. He draws a whiff of smoke and passes it back to the pipetender, who carries it to the southwest quarter, where it is in like manner presented to the leading man of that quarter, and then in turn likewise to the northwest and northeast, all in like manner. Then the pipetender carries the pipe back to its place before the altar. There he kneels on the ground, and with the pipe-cleaner loosens the ash in the pipe-bowl. Then, still kneeling, he offers the pipe toward all four quarters of the universe in turn, beginning with the southeast. He then returns the pipe to the pipetender.

The presiding chief now announces again the purpose of the meeting. In this case, the purpose being the election of a principal chief, the representatives of the four groups of the ancient twelve villages make their nominations. Chief Floyd Bear having no son competent to succeed him, the choice of all the representatives turned to Harry Gillette, whose tribal name is Whiteshield, who is a direct descendant of that Whiteshield who was long ago a noted principal chief of the Arikara. No other names being offered in nomination, and the nomination of Harry Gillette being ratified by consent of the general assembly, the firetender was directed by the presiding chief to present the candidate before the altar. The firetender accordingly went to the candidate and with his left hand took the candidate by the right wrist and led him to the space before the altar. There they paused for a moment, then they walked round in sunwise direction inside the area of the main posts of the lodge about the fireplace to a position before the post at the southeast and stood facing toward the northwest. Both looked up to the sky for a few seconds, then down to the earth. Then they went to the southwest, the northwest, and the northeast in turn, pausing at each station and gazing a few seconds toward the sky and then toward the earth. Then from this last station, the northeast, they passed round the fireplace sunwise inside the area of the four main posts again to the space before the altar. Standing here, facing toward the east, toward the doorway, the candidate gazed in that direction for a few seconds, then down toward the earth, and then, lastly, again toward the sky. Thus in symbolic action the newly elected chief takes the oath of office and makes his vow to be careful for his people, to be watchful for them in all quarters, invoking the help of the Chief Above and of Mother Earth,

and of the aids of the Chief Above who are stationed in the four quarters of the universe. Then his gaze toward the doorway as he stood before the altar symbolized his duty and his pledge always to look out for strangers, for the poor and needy, for all to whom hospitality is due, and to see that such are made comfortable.

Then the firetender conducts the newly elected chief to his new place in the middle at the altar with the associate chiefs, two on each side of him. This is his induction into office. Then, the firetender proclaims the result of the election, announcing the name of the new principal chief, and that he has been duly inducted into office and that he asks for the people's prayers to the Chief Above that he may faithfully perform the duties of his office, and that he may be given wisdom to guide and lead his people.

Then the pipetender fills and lights the pipe as at the beginning, and smoke offerings are again made toward the southeast, the southwest, the northwest, the northeast, to Mother Earth and to the Chief Above, and to the fireplace. The waiter brings a dish of food and places it before the altar. From this dish the firetender takes a morsel and offers a bit to each of the higher powers just as offerings of smoke were made.

After these meat offerings have been made, thus blessing all the food provided for the feast, the firetender again comes and stands before the altar and says to the assembly: "All is done. The offerings have been duly made. You may put your cups and dishes in front of you." This alludes to the Arikara custom that everyone who goes to a feast carries with him his own dishes to be served, and when all is ready each person sets out his cup and dish on the ground in front of him where he sits, so that the waiter may serve him there with food and drink.

So the firetender says, "You may put your cups and dishes in front of you." Then the waiters pass around, distributing the food and drink. The dish before the altar, from which offerings were made, is served to the principal chief or else to any man to whom he directs that it be served.

All having been served, the firetender says, "Now you may eat." Then the eating begins. When all are satisfied and have finished eating, the firetender says, "We have eaten. You may go."