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SASKATCHEWAN
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SASKATCHEWAN
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HIGHLIGHTS:

- Description of death customs.

I asked him to tell me something of the death customs.

Before the smallpox came, it was seldom that you heard of anyone being sick. The same burial customs were kept up until very recently when the priest made us stop. One thing they cannot put an end to and is still going on today, that is the custom of giving a feast on the fourth night after a death. The food eaten then is the last food given to the dead person and they tell the manito that the food is for the one who has just died.

In the old days when a person was on his deathbed, people would come into the tipi and talk to the parents and relatives, and tell them not to take a bad example, not to cry too much, that he will not be long away from us. After he is dead they dress

him in his very best clothes. If he has an old blanket, some kihtco-ckinigi (or someone else) will take their own good blanket and cover him with it. Later the old blanket will be put over the new one before interment. Then his face is painted and his hair combed. The kihtco-ckinigi did this. They all tried to be kind to the relatives of the deceased showing how sorry they were for them.

If the death came in the evening, there will be a lot of people around the tipi all night, talking to and consoling the relatives, telling them funny stories to distract their minds. These are not wesashketcauk stories but funny anecdotes of gambling games and the like. They sing if it fits in with the story. They tell the relatives, "If you can't laugh, try to laugh anyway and make your heart brave."

Before a person died they usually would say how and where they wanted to be buried. If such instructions were not left, the kihtco-ckinigi decided the matter.

When the corpse's hair was combed a lock was braided on the crown of the head and tied around with sinew. In the morning the kihtco-ckinigi would tell their wives to prepare a lot of food and everybody would have breakfast. Then a kihtco-ckinigi would stand at the back of the tipi. He would have to be a man who had dragged an enemy out of his tipi (this was done by slashing the tipi cover) and had scalped him. This kihtco-ckinigi would say, "I fought with and killed an enemy and pulled him out of his tipi. Now I am going to pull this body out." The sides of the tipi are raised and the body placed on a blanket and pulled out. The people all gather around. The closest two relatives start to cry and then all

the other people cry. Four men carrying the body on the blanket lead the procession to the burial place. The whole camp follows and everybody cries. There the kihtco-ckinigi makes another speech and tells of how he had another fight and took scalps. Catching the braid on the corpse he says, "And this is the way I cut that scalp." He ties the braid to the blunt end of a little three-foot pointed stick he has. Now they are ready to put the body away.

When we were out on the prairie we would dig a hole about five feet deep. In the bottom of the grave a robe was spread and a pillow placed on it (made of hide stuffed with duck feathers). Two slots on each side are dug down the long sides of the grave. The body is lowered in and the crossbars inserted into the slots (made of tipi poles). Then tipi poles are laid across the bars very tightly. The poles are about two feet below the surface. Another robe is placed over the poles and then a rawhide is pegged down over the pit and dirt piled over it. When the pegs rot, the dirt caves in on the poles. The corpse is always placed with the head to the north and feet to the south. At the head of the grave the kihtco-ckinigi plants the stick with the braid tied onto it.

On the fourth night after the death the close relatives give a

big feast. The kihtco-ckinigiui goes and gets the braid from the grave. He plants the stick near his seat where there is a little of every kind of food (at the feast) and some tea laid out. He begs manito let, if possible, the braid become a spirit so that when it is put in a bundle and we speak to it, it will answer. Now the people come in and sit around the tipi. Outside the people sit in a circle. They bring their own dishes. The (men) servers, oskapeus, take charge of distributing the food and handling the pipes. (Here Solomon interpolated a long encomium on these officiants, "We have them yet -- they must be good, honest men who are not ashamed to stand in the middle of the room or tipi." The long and short of it being that he often acts in this capacity at the dances, etc.)

Before the kihtco-ckinigiui talks he smokes a pipe and offers a bowl of food to manito. Then the servers pass out the food. They must not spill a drop. They pass the food around clockwise and must always turn in the same direction. They must serve out all of the food. Then the server that finished first waits until the other one is done and then breaks some sweetgrass over the fire saying, "It is all finished and ready now." The first (previous) time, the kihtco-ckinigiui talked, he took four puffs of the pipe, pointed it up begging that the braid be given a spirit. A bowl of food was offered also. Then the pipe is lit again and the servers started their work. When the pipe is smoked out, the mourner takes it, knocks the ashes out and props it up again before the kihtco-ckinigiui.

Now when the oskapeus burns the sweetgrass, the kihtco-ckinigiui gets on both knees and talks to manito asking that the people be given help. He talks quite a while. The last words he says are, "That is the way we all shall eat now. If anyone cannot eat everything he has, he can take the rest home."

Everybody eats. When they are finished, the server, the one that gets finished eating first, puts sweetgrass on smudge again, passes pipe over it and hands it to the kihtco-ckinigiui. He offers it up and asks again that a spirit be passed to the braid. The pipe is smoked around. After it has gone around the server breaks more sweetgrass on the fire. He then passes the stem over the smudge, swings the pipe around clockwise and passes bowl over fire. He repeats this four times and presents it to the kihtco-ckinigiui. He passes the bowl over the smudge and holds the pipe up and waits until there is silence. Then he starts talking, lowering the pipe four successive times. Another way is to hold the pipe up and rotate it once clockwise and lower it at the same time. Either method may be used. At the fourth lowering (or rotation) he lays the pipe on the ground with the stem toward the door.

After this is done everybody goes out except the kihtco-ckinigiui and some old people. The braid is untied from the stick, wrapped in some print and tied with saganapi (see specimen). Some twist tobacco is also wrapped up but is not tied; the two are placed on top of braids and tobacco already in the bundle and wrapped up.

This bundle is called nayah toikan "A thing to carry on the back." It is tied so that it may be slung across the back when moving. In wrapping the braid, the tip is considered to be the head and always laid at the top end of the bundle. It was always kept in the tipi over everything and when camp was broken up, it was the first thing to be taken out of the way. At night they would lay the bundle beside the pillow. It was taken for all those who had died.

I have several of these bundles in my keeping. The priests are putting a stop to this custom by cutting short the hair of the children so that we can't make up a braid.

In the old days it often happened that they ran out of tobacco. They would make a feast, offer up pipes, unwrap the bundle and take out the tobacco (usually a forearm's length of twist) leaving only a pipeful. As soon as they got a supply of tobacco again they would replace it.

If a person is sick, his relatives may vow to give a big feast to the braid bundle upon his recovery. If fulfilled a big feast is given. Many bundles are collected to keep the host's bundle company. Food is cooked during the day. The feast is at night. The bundle is not unwrapped. The same procedure is followed as at the funeral feast. Trees are placed at the front and back of the tipi so that the spirits will know that it is for them. Spirit tipis are like that.

After the food is eaten, the servers take the four drums which have been piled one on top of the other in the "tobacco place" and pass them over the sweetgrass. The chief talker is called nikana-pihaguu -- "Leader" (usual term for all feasts). He gets the first drum. The leader starts to sing his own song and the others join in the chorus. After the first song the leader passes his drum to the second man, the second man passes his drum to the third, and so on. Then the leader talks to manito and the second man sings his song. Each man sings his own song when he gets the head drum and after that song talks to manito. After four songs all the old men talk together.

The spirits of the braids start whistling when the first song is sung and when it is over and the drums stop, you can still hear them whistling. Everybody hears it and one or two men can understand what the spirits are saying. Only very seldom was whistling not heard and then the four old men would get the blame for not doing things right.

First the host or his wife gets up and dances with the bundle. When the whistling is heard the women or young men take their own bundles and dance with them for one song. Then they stand in their places until the servers take the bundles and tie them back on the rack. As they are dancing they feel someone dancing behind them -- it is the spirit of the bundle. The dance lasts until near dawn.

There was yet another way of burial. When we would be in the

bush when there were plenty of trees, we would pick out a place where two trees grew about four feet apart. Between these trees we would lay down a platform of poles tightly packed between the trees and about seven feet long. Then we would build a box up by fitting logs one on top of the other and notching and dovetailing the ends so that there was no space between the logs. In this we would put the body and cover it with another tight layer of logs. Over this we would stretch a hide and pile over all a lot of sticks and brush.

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