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A MOHAVE FUNERAL

Among enlightened nations the funeral rites are usually significant only of a desire to show respect to the dead and to protect the living, but among semi-civilized and primitive peoples the forms observed often have had their origin in some ancient and, perhaps, partially forgotten tradition or superstition. The Mohave Indians, a tribe living along the Colorado river for some distance above and below Needles, come under the latter class.

These Indians burn their dead, not because they appreciate the sanitary advantages of cremation as compared to burial, but because of a



Fred Harvey Postcard

tradition among them that the Great Spirit was burned. They follow with great exactness the directions given by the Great Spirit in regard to the burning of his own body.

As all burnings are conducted in exactly the same manner, a description of one that was witnessed by the writer not long since near Fort Mohave, A. T., will serve as a type.

The deceased in this case was a young buck. The medicine man had predicted his death and the mourning had commenced several days before he died. About dusk on the day of the burning word was brought to the fort that the sick Mohave was breathing his last.

All of the whites at the fort, about seven, started immediately to the camp where the sick boy lay. This camp was about half a mile from the fort. Less than half of this distance had been covered when the weird sound of the crying reached us. We supposed from this that death had come to the sufferer, but we were not certain of this, for, as has been stated, the crying had been going on at intervals ever since the medicine man had pronounced the decree of fate.

As we were pursuing our way along the winding path among the mesquite trees, we suddenly met in the gathering gloom a number of bucks walking in single file. One of them was leading a pony. Now we felt certain that death was in the camp ahead. The pony had belonged to the deceased and these bucks were taking it away to prepare a feast, in which all the mourners would participate after the burning. We found the mourners gathered under and around an open shed, which was framed with willow and covered with arrow weed. The corpse lay, wrapped in a white garment, on the ground in the center of the group. Most of the Indians present were, crying aloud or talking in wailing tones. One of the local chiefs talked continuously in a loud voice, using his eloquence, not to console the mourners, but to augment their grief.

As soon as the body was cold it was placed on a rude litter and carried to the funeral pyre, already prepared. The Mohave funeral pyre is always constructed in the same manner. First, a hole about two feet deep, two feet wide and four feet long is dug, the long way being north and south. This being filled with dry brush, dry willow or mesquite logs are piled up over it to the height of about three feet. These logs are placed so as to form a trough on top for the body and are held in place by green stakes.

When the pall bearers reached the pyre, the litter was raised to the top and the body was turned into the trough, face down and with the head

toward the south, both essential conditions. The litter was left on the pyre and more logs were piled rudely on the body until it was completely hidden.

The dry brush underneath was now lighted and, in a minute, the whole pyre was in a blaze. As soon as the fire was fairly started the belongings of the deceased—clothes, blankets, etc., a very meager outfit—were added to the pile. Then the crowning act of devotion was performed by the only relatives of the deceased present, the brother-in-law and sister. They removed their own clothing and added it the scanty wardrobe of the departed brother. This act is fully explained by their belief that everything burned at this time passes with the departing soul to the spirit land and is used there the same as here. Even the pony eaten that night would carry its master again in his new home.

The scene of the burning that night was one long to be remembered. The blazing pile of logs in a little clearing in the mesquite trees, the shadows of the night pressing close around, but dispelled in the small circle containing the group of Indian mourners; a smaller group of whites and the gruesome but hidden object fast turning to ashes; the doleful and unceasing wailing and the stentorian tones of chief—all of these contributed to make the occasion one of real solemnity. As the fire burned low the mourners and the whites slipped quietly away, leaving the elements to complete their work of destruction unwatched.

C. E. JARED.

Mohave, A. T.

Oct. 3, 1899.