

## *Death and Funeral Customs Among the Omahas*

by Francis La Flesche (1857-1932)

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DEATH AND FUNERAL CUSTOMS AMONG THE  
OMAHAS.

THE approach of death is believed to be foreshadowed in various ways. There are not only intimations received by the person about to die, but there are men and women who are supposed to have a supernatural gift and can foresee death coming to one. Those persons who possess this gift receive it through the medium of visions or by having passed through an apparent death or swoon. This and other powers are sought for by means of solitary fasting and chanting the one tribal prayer to Wa-kan-da, who alone can give the desired gift. Many days and nights are often spent in this way by seekers for the gift, but those who meet with success are very few. The unsuccessful ones are, however, not without comfort, because they have faith and believe that their prayers will be heard by the hearer of prayers, who will not let them go unrewarded. Clay is put upon the head and face, and very little clothing is worn. The time for such sequestration is in the summer time, when all animals are active and in the full power of life, when the sun is hot and the thunder sounds through the air. The supplicant appeals to all the powers that surround him, as through these he expects his cry to be answered.

There are three degrees of powers which come to man through visions :—

First. When the vision takes the form of an animal which addresses the man, he will then have acquired a power which will stead him in danger, and give him success in life.

Second. If the vision assumes the appearance of a cloud, or a human shape having wings like an eagle, and a voice addresses the man, he will have the additional power of being able to foretell events.

Third. When the vision comes without any semblance, and only a voice is heard, then the man is given not only the power to achieve success and foretell events, but he can also foresee the coming of death. Should a man endowed with the third degree so elect, he can in due form join the Ghost Society ; or, if he prefers, he can practise his powers individually.

A member of the Ghost Society, or one entitled to membership therein, foretells death in the following manner. He will suddenly see, either by day or night, a man or woman walking, but not touching the ground. A halo surrounds the one who thus treads the air. Sometimes the person so seen walks in a sprightly manner, and the face is joyous. Again, the vision may pass with slow steps and bent head, as in sorrow. The former is supposed to represent a person

about to die a natural death, or be killed in battle, or meet with some accident ; the latter, one whom death overtakes in a quarrel, or who dies in an angry or unforgiving mood. All these visionary persons are always seen walking away from the village, they are never seen entering it or approaching a lodge. The person recognized in such a vision, when he has been told that he has been so seen, can have his death averted by appealing to the man of dreams, who alone has the power to ward off the coming death. This is done in two ways. The seer can turn aside death, by pouring hot water in a line at right angles to the path leading to the tent entrance of the man whose death is predicted ; or he can enter into a sweat-lodge, prepared by the man who is threatened with death, and taking in this man also, sing, during the sweating, sacred songs appropriate to that rite. A bit of flesh is cut from one of the arms of the menaced man, and a lock of hair from the opposite side of his head, and cast into the fire ; and he is rubbed with artemisia dipped in water, as this plant is the food of the ghosts. These rites, omitting the cutting of the flesh and hair, must be performed on four successive nights.

A person who during illness, or from some other cause, falls into a swoon is supposed to pass into the world of spirits, and from that experience to have acquired the ability to see ghosts or spirits. Such an one can foretell death, and can avert it in the same manner as has been already described.

In still another manner this power has been obtained, as the following story, fully believed by the Indians, will show. Ka-hae-num-ba's mother had a quarrel with her husband when the tribe were moving out on the annual summer hunt, and were already some days distant from the permanent village of the people. She determined not to accompany her husband, but to return to her lodge in the village. Her three sons were absent at the time the woman started across the prairie ; when they returned to camp and learned of their mother's departure, they put saddles on their horses and set out in pursuit. They sought in vain for any trace of her, and after a time she was given up for lost. The woman when she left the camp hid by day and travelled by night, for she was afraid of the Sioux, who were at war with the Omahas ; and she also feared lest her relations should track her and take her back to the camp. About this time a large gray wolf appeared, and he accompanied her on her journey, going before her and stopping to look now and again to see that she was following. He would sometimes run far on in advance to mount a hill and scan the country. All seeming to be safe, he would run down and lead as before. This wolf kept her company until he came in sight of the village, when he suddenly

disappeared. At last she reached the village, the lodges were empty, for everything had been cached. She entered her own lodge; she was hungry and weary and lay down on one of the reed platforms which are used as seat and a bed; as she lay she heard some one on the roof shout her father's name, as if to the assembled village, saying that his daughter had returned; she also heard people moving about. Her own lodge, she soon found, was inhabited by ghostly beings. One afternoon, as she sat in her lodge, she heard a child's feet run past and pause near by: then the voice of a little girl said, "Mother, the people are coming this way, right into our house!" Soon footsteps were heard entering the long projecting entrance-way to the lodge, and the number increased until a large company was present. The drum was brought in and put down in its proper place; the ghostly women as they chatted took their seats in the rear, and the men their accustomed stations. By and by the men began to sing and to dance. They belonged to the H<sup>ā</sup>e-th<sup>u</sup>-ska, a society of warriors only. The woman, as she sat on the platform, heard it all, and she could even see the dust raised from the earthen floor by the men as they danced around the fireplace. As she became familiarized with the scene she tried hard to discern the individuals dancing. At last she was able to distinguish their feet, and finally they became visible as high as the knees. She was never able to see any more of their persons, although they came frequently to her lodge, holding feasts and dancing the H<sup>ā</sup>e-th<sup>u</sup>-ska. No one spoke to her, though they talked of her, as well as of their hunting and other matters connected with their daily affairs. One morning she heard an old man on the roof of the house calling out that a runner had come in bringing in the news that the Omahas were returning home. Then the ghosts were heard departing, and that afternoon the tribe came back to the village. When the woman heard the ghosts go away she became dejected and homesick, and when her own family found her she would neither eat nor speak. She was very thin and haggard, and no one knew what to make of her conduct. It was noticed that she plucked and ate the wild sage. After a time she was persuaded to partake of some corn, and at last she consented to eat meat. It was some time before she became reconciled and willing to resume her old life, for she still mourned for the company of the ghosts. Finally she narrated her experience to her sons, and the people understood what had happened to change her so much.

There are also signs of death common among the people, as the howling of a dog near the lodge. This, however, is not considered as infallible as that of a dog mounting the earth lodge and looking down through the central opening upon the inmates assembled

within. When the dog's head is seen peering over the edge fear seizes upon the company, and some one is swift to seize the first weapon at hand and chase the little beast until by the forfeit of its life it has averted the impending death. If a sick person sees his dead relatives and hears their voices, this is thought to be a premonition of death, and that the end of his own life is at hand.

When one is in the dying agony the relatives give vent to their grief in loud wails. The crying continues at intervals until death takes place, and also up to the time of burial. This cry has been by some white persons mistaken for a song or chant, but it in no way partakes of that character; it is a genuine expression of anguish and grief. The wail or cry is interspersed with terms which express the relationship between the deceased and the person grieving. The writer has many times heard the cry of Indian men and women, and has seen the tears flow down their cheeks. There is something truly awful in the sound when men and women together lift up their voices in the wail of grief. It is far from being like a song or chant.

The terms of relationship which are mingled with this cry over the dead are some of them peculiar to grief. This is true of the terms used by a husband toward his wife, or a wife to her husband, also of parents toward their child, or an older brother toward a younger brother. It is only at this time of great sorrow that these terms are used, and they partake of the special nature of endearment.

When the breath has left the body of the one dying, the nearest relatives, such as parent or child, brothers or sisters, husband or wife, begin with a mad zeal to strip themselves of every ornament and cut their hair, scattering the shorn locks about the fireplace. The older married women who have borne children clip the hair short to the ear, while the young women part with but an inch or two. Young men do not sacrifice their locks but the older men shear theirs short. The older women pull off their leggins and moccasins and gash the flesh of their legs below the knee, lengthwise and crosswise, till the blood flows freely. All the while they wail and call upon the dead. The young men who are near relations to the deceased remove their leggins and moccasins, and pierce their legs with a sharp knife, until the blood runs fast from the wounds. The old men do not scarify themselves.

With every new arrival, whether the person be of near kin or not, the wailing starts afresh. By this long-continued crying, the excitement of grief, and the pain of wounds, the relatives become exhausted before the time of burial arrives, and unable to speak above a whisper. Soon after death the corpse is placed in a sitting position facing the east and dressed in gala costume, ornaments are put upon the hair and person, and sometimes the face painted in the

same manner as the Hunga in the ceremony of the sacred pipes, that is, if the deceased belonged to one of the gentes owning a sacred pipe. The "Hunga-keunzae," as this mode of painting is called, is done by painting the entire face red with vermilion, then a black line about the breadth of the little finger is marked across the forehead horizontally, and down both cheeks to meet a line drawn across the chin, thus forming a square. A centre line starts from the one across the forehead and falls along the nose to its point. This black paint is made of charcoal and prepared fat. Men, women, and children belonging to the Nenebatan (sacred pipe owners) gentes of the tribe, with few exceptions, are painted in this manner after death.

When a member of a society dies, the body is taken care of by the fraternity, and the burial ceremonies are transferred from the family to the management of the society. For instance, when a member of the Mawadane society dies, the body is taken immediately after death, while the body is yet limber, to the lodge where the society is accustomed to meet. On its arrival it is placed in a sitting posture, facing the east, and decked with the regalia of the society. The face of the corpse is painted in the manner in which the man while living was accustomed to paint when attending the meetings of the society. In his right hand is placed the "Ta-sha-gae," or deer's hoof rattle, which is carried only by the leader of the society. This preparation of the body is done by the relatives of the deceased and one or two members of the society. When all is complete the crier summons the members, and these wend their way to the lodge where the dead man sits as a silent host. The Mawadane songs which were the favorites of the dead member are then sung and the rhythmic steps taken, while presents are laid on the drum; these latter are offerings toward the funeral ceremonies. As each gift is made, the crier sings forth the name of the giver, that all the village may hear of the deed. While the body lies in state in the lodge, either of the family or the society of which the deceased was a member, if the person or his family are held in high respect by the tribe, the young men, those between the ages of twenty and thirty, gather together to perform a ceremony expressive of their esteem and grief. Having stripped themselves of their garments, except the breech-cloth, a loop is cut through the skin of the arm, midway between the point of the shoulder and the elbow, and the end of a willow twig, about a foot long, having the leaves on, is thrust through the loop of skin. The blood trickles down the willow stem, and spatters the hanging leaves. The young men then walk slowly to the lodge where the dead lies and stand abreast before the tent entrance, singing the funeral song, each man accenting the time by striking together two short sticks of willow. All shed tears as they

sing. This song is an old one, having been handed down from an unknown past. It is the only funeral song in the Omaha tribe. The writer has witnessed this ceremony upon two occasions, and learned the song, which is as follows :—

M. M. ♩ = 100.

1 E ah tha ha ah-ee tha hae ah ha ah

ah hae ah ah ah e tha ha ah-ee tha hae ah

ha ah ah e tha ha ah-eetha ah e ah ha ae ha o e tha hae

hae thoie ha ah o e tha haah-ee tha hae ah ha ah

ah e tha ha ah-ee tha ah e ah ha ae ha o e tha hae tho.

At the close of the song the chief mourner, whether man or woman, steps forth from the lodge, wailing. The young men join in the wail of the mourner, who advances with uplifted hands, and passes along the line, pausing an instant at each person. This act is an expression of thanks and acknowledgment of the sympathy and honor shown. When the end of the line is reached, the mourner retraces his steps, and pulls from each young man's arm the blood-stained willow twig, throwing it on the ground. Some relatives present a horse, the gift being an additional acknowledgment of the honor shown the dead, which is often returned to the donors after the funeral is over. The young men, after being relieved of their willows, return to their starting point, where they dress and disband. This custom was last observed about five years ago.

The burial takes place on the third or fourth day after death. The intervening period is a busy time for those having the funeral arrangements in charge. Goods are collected from the kindred, to be given to the poor at the time of the interment. The grave, never

<sup>1</sup> The words are musical syllables used with the same accuracy as the notes. The music played in octaves conveys a better idea of the effect of the song.



more than four feet deep, is dug by a poor man, who is paid for his labor. The body is borne upon a stretcher made by binding two cross-sticks on two poles ten or twelve feet long; tent poles are sometimes used for this purpose. The bed of the stretcher is woven of willow wands, on which a robe is spread, the hairy side uppermost, and pillows are used to keep the sitting corpse in position, the feet being covered with robes or blankets. The stretcher is sometimes carried by four men, near relatives, or drawn by a horse with a pack-saddle to which one end of the poles is fastened. The horse of the dead, which is to be killed at the grave, is led behind the litter, followed by the crowd, wailing as they walk. When the grave is reached the relatives gather around the opening, the corpse is lifted from the litter and held by the bearers while the robes on which it sat are arranged for its reception in the grave, where it is placed upon them, facing the east, and the articles of value, chiefly ornaments worn by the person during life, are deposited beside the body. If the deceased be a man, his weapons are then laid by his side; if a woman, her sewing-bag containing her awl, quills, and articles used for embroidery; if a child, its playthings are placed beside it.

At the burial of a warrior his favorite horse is decorated as the master was wont to paint the animal; this painting being always in accordance with the man's visions. After the corpse is deposited in the grave, a rawhide rope is loosely tied about the neck of the horse, and two men take hold of each end of the rope and draw it taut until the animal falls dead. For this service each man receives as a fee a robe, a war-jacket, or a pair of beaded leggins. In recent years the horse has been shot. Sometimes when the grave is still open, the concluding ceremonies take place, at other times the body is covered. The weather is apt to decide the order of proceedings. If a storm threatens the grave is at once closed; but should the day be clear and no prospect of rain, then the corpse remains in full view during the entire ceremonies.

The grave is covered in the following manner: A crotched post is thrust firmly into each end of the opening, projecting about two feet above the surface of the ground; a pole is laid in the crotches of these posts, forming a ridgepole; the roof is made by laying closely side by side hardwood sticks, long enough to have one end rest on the ground and the other on the ridgepole. Upon these grass is spread thickly, and lastly earth well tamped, and sod laid on, making a mound four or five feet high. The surroundings are carefully cleared of rubbish and dried grass, so that the grave may be safe from fire.

When the body is deposited in the grave the wailing ceases, and the funeral ceremonies change in character. The poor of the tribe

are assembled on one side and counted. The gifts collected from the kindred are brought forth and equally divided among the poor. In this distribution of gifts, none of the relations of the deceased, near or distant, receive anything. If a horse, or any article equal to the value of a horse, such as a war-bonnet, a ceremonial pipe, an otter-skin, or puma quiver, or an unplucked eagle should be among the articles to be given away, two methods of disposal are customary, in order to prevent any preference being shown in the distribution. The near relatives toss a stick into the air, and the crowd scramble for it as it falls; the one who secures it is entitled to the article it represents. The stick so thrown always represents a horse, or an article its equal in value. This method is called "Zhan-ee-ke-nae," — fighting for the stick. If this method is not used, and the deceased is a young man, then the young men, not relatives, have a foot-race, the winner to receive the gift. Should the dead be a young woman, then young persons of her sex run the race for the horse. In these races, men who have dreamed of animals, which dreams can give speed to a person, are called on to help by their charms toward winning the race. Horses are sometimes pitted against each other, and supernatural expedients are resorted to in order to secure victory.

These ceremonies are considered by the Omahas as showing respect to the dead. They are believed to assist the soul upon its way to the land of spirits, strengthening and encouraging it by scenes of joy and happiness; otherwise the memory of the wailings of sorrow would weigh upon it, making more difficult its inevitable journey.

For four successive nights following the burial the loving mother, or if the deceased was an orphan, then a near female relative, patiently carries wood upon her back, and near the mound kindles a fire, keeping it burning brightly throughout the night to light the dear departed one to the land of happiness. This service is done without weeping, that the spirit may not be arrested or distressed as it travels hence.

Over the grave of a man belonging to one of the secret societies, the insignia of his membership is hung. If he belonged to the "Washiskathin" or Shell Society, his otter-skin bag would be suspended from a pole placed at the head of the grave; if to the Pebble, his eagle-wing fan; if to the Buffalo, his buffalo-tail; if to the Horse, his horse-tail. These are placed at the grave privately, that is, without ceremony, and within a few days after the burial, by the man's immediate family.

There are a variety of beliefs concerning the immediate action of the spirit upon its withdrawal from the body. Some think that the soul at once starts upon its journey to the spirit land; others, that it hovers about the grave as if reluctant to depart. Because of this

latter belief, food and water are placed at the head of the grave for several days after the burial. The spirit is supposed to partake of this food. No Indian would touch any article of food thus exposed; if he did, the ghost would snatch away the food and paralyze the mouth of the thief, and twist his face out of shape for the rest of his life; or else he would be pursued by the ghost, and food would lose its taste, and hunger ever after haunt the offender.

There is a belief in the tribe that before the spirits finally depart from men who died of wounds or their results, they float toward a cliff overhanging the Missouri, not far from the present Santee Agency in Nebraska, and cut upon the rocks a picture showing forth their manner of death. A line in the picture indicates the spot where the disease or wound was located which caused the death. After this record is complete, the spirit flies off to the land of the hereafter. It is said that these pictures are easily recognized by the relatives and friends of the deceased. This place is known as "Ingthun-ghae-ke-ka-gha-ee-thun," where the spirits make pictures of themselves.

A suicide ceases to exist; for him there is no hereafter. A man struck by lightning is buried where he fell, and in the position in which he died. His grave is filled with earth, and no mound is raised over one who is thus taken from life.

*Francis La Flesche.*

Of the Omaha tribe.

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#### OBITUARY NOTICE.

JOSEPH LA FLESCHÉ, formerly chief of the Omaha tribe, died at his farm near Bancroft, Nebraska, September, 1888. This remarkable man was deeply versed in Indian lore, and had won his honors by a full compliance with Indian customs and superstitions. He was also an acute observer and reasoner, and foresaw the inevitable change which awaited the Indians. As chief, in which function he was confirmed by United States authority, he was a leader of his people in the direction of civilization. At a later period, he discerned that the tribal system was an obstacle to the advancement of his race, and he not only abandoned his official position, but was the means of the overthrow of the office of chief. During his later years he was deeply interested in the preservation of the history and traditions of his race, and rendered invaluable assistance to laborers engaged in the task.

*Alice C. Fletcher.*