

APSÁALOOKE TRADITIONS AT CROW FAIR

By Dale Old Horn, Advisor On Cultural Affairs and Tribal Policy to Chairman Frank White Clay
Crow Tribe Executive Branch

UNDERSTANDING THE WORLD-VIEW OF THE APSÁALOOKE

It is said by many that it is necessary to understand the beliefs and language of a culture to know the people and their traditions. So it is with the Apsáalooke, The Children of the Large Beaked Bird. The following describes the core belief and how it relates to all facets of the lives of the Apsáalooke.

The belief of the Apsáalooke holds that there is only one God who is omnipotent, all powerful, who created all things. The Apsáalooke call this Omnipotent Being lichík Baalee, The First Creator or Creator. This belief holds that anything that exists is created by the Creator which includes all things which are good and all things which are bad or evil. Nothing exists outside of lichík Baalee's creation. lichík Baalee, being omnipotent, can also extinguish anything at will. The Apsáalooke, whose original name is Bīluukee meaning On Our Side, believe that lichík Baalee placed Spiritual Power in seven entities of creation. They are the following:
The Heavens including the Stars and all its constellations, the Sun, and the Moon.
The Air including The Winds, The Clouds, The Mists or Fog, Thunder, Lightning, Rain, Snow, Sleet, and Hail.

The Plants

The Earth

The Water

Fire

All Creatures including we human beings.

The Creator did not place power in everything nor equally and we do not know which of Creation has Spiritual Power. This is the reason why the Belief of the Apsáalooke holds that we respect everything. We do not want to violate or abuse the Spiritual gift of the Creator. With all of this, the Creator also gave us the knowledge that Creation was to be used for our physical and spiritual sustenance. It is this foundational belief that is at the core of the traditions of the Apsáalooke that are practiced at Crow Fair.

HISTORY OF THE HOT DANCE OR POWWOW AT CROW FAIR

The Homestead Act of 1862 was passed under President Lincoln and this spurred west-ward expansion. This law was written to displace the Native American Tribes from their homelands. This was done even though much of the western lands were set aside for Native Americans Tribes through treaties.

Following the Civil War the Forced Assimilation Policy of "christianizing and civilizing" the Native Americans by President Grant was made. The U.S Government process of disenfranchising the Native American Tribes west of the Mississippi from their homelands and the forced elimination of Native American Cultures had begun in earnest.

Grant had established the U.S. Peace Commission whose responsibility was to "make the Indians surrender their lands" through the treaty making process which put the Native American

Tribes in an unfair position because the U.S. Government was not dealing in good faith. Some Native American Tribes resisted this west-ward expansion militarily and others resisted through diplomatic means but they would all end up in similar outcomes.

The U.S. Government had determined that the militaristic Native American Tribes west of the Mississippi were the “greatest light cavalry in the world” and very difficult and costly to defeat. So, under Generals Grant and Sherman the U.S. Government embarked on a “scorched earth policy”, which was similar to the policy used on the South during the Civil War.

The non-Indians killed millions of buffalo under this policy and this brought starvation which weakened the Native American Tribes to the point of capitulation. The U.S. Government had established a ban on all facets of Native American Cultures, namely Native Religions and Languages and manipulated the starving Native Americans through a food rationing process to achieve total assimilation.

The elimination of the native cultures of the Native American tribes through assimilation has been accomplished in many instances, namely native religions and languages. This policy had a strong effect on the Apsáalooke as well and in 1903 Reynolds, the Indian Agent for the Crow Agency, started planning a showcase for the “successful assimilation of the Crow Indians”. This resulted in the Crow Fair of 1904 which was its first year.

Indian Agent Reynolds had invited many dignitaries and the world press was also informed of the Crow Fair. When they arrived the Apsáalooke, being very astute, knew that if their native culture was suppressed in any form the world press would have reported it and it would cause embarrassment for the U.S. Government because it would have been seen as a violation of human rights. So, in addition to the oval flat track racing, displaying of farm produce, animals, and crafts which were prevalent to fairs across the country, the Apsáalooke brought out their big drum and their “Hot Dance”. Hot Dance was a misinterpretation of the Tail Feather Ceremony which started as the Helushka among the Omaha/Ponca which was shared with the Santee then to the Hidatsa then to the Apsáalooke. This War Dance as it is referred to by the Omaha/Ponca in their translation is now called Powwow.

The Apsáalooke had brought a banned practice into the public and by this had contributed to the survival of this Native American Cultural practice. Before 1904, they had kept their native cultural practices alive by hiding them from the U.S. Government Indian Agent and the U.S. Government Indian Police. Crow Fair, the planned showcase for the “full assimilation of the Crows”, became the event which helped the Apsáalooke perpetuate an important part of their culture.

HISTORY OF THE HOT DANCE – BAÁ TAWÉE LISSUUA

The history which was handed down through the generations by the Apsáalooke says a dance of victory in war had been brought to us by the Hidatsa in 1883 at the present site of Joliet Montana. This occurrence was recorded and reported by the Indian Agent and his staff when the Crow Indian Agency was near the present site of Absarokee Montana.

This story relates that an injured young man of the Omaha/Ponca saw a vision of a Victory in War Dance being performed by mystical animals and prominent among them were the grouse.

Through this vision the mystical beings were teaching him the ceremony which was named Helushka or Warrior's Dance.

The young man, becoming healed, returned home and related his spiritual experience to the rest of the Omaha/Ponca and they would use this ceremony to celebrate their war victories. According to the oral history of the Omaha/Ponca, they shared it with their neighboring tribes including the Pawnee/Arikara, Santee and subsequently the Winnebago who had migrated to the plains from the woodlands. Later, the Ponca and the Pawnee would be moved to the Oklahoma Territory through the U.S. Government's Indian Removal Act which adversely affected many Native American Tribes.

During the forced assimilation starvation period under U.S. Government policy, the Santee had traveled up the Missouri Valley and came to the sedentary and agrarian Hidatsa. According to the story told by the Hidatsa they had shared their stored food with the Santee and the Santee showed their gratitude by passing their Helushka and the Tail Feather Society Ceremony to the Hidatsa.

As related in the account told by Hidatsa to the Apsáalooke they had kept this ceremony for about four years and then brought it to the Apsáalooke. They had come from Fort Berthold North Dakota by train since the Northern Pacific Railway had completed its southern spur through the Yellowstone Valley. The U.S. Government had granted land and seemingly unlimited right of way to this railroad company from Chicago to the Puget Sound through the Railroad Act. The Hidatsa disembarked near the present site of Laurel Montana and proceeded up the Clark's Fork of the Yellowstone and then up the Rock Creek valley and stopped at the present site of Joliet Montana. At that time, the main body of the Apsáalooke was camped near the Old Crow Agency near present day Absarokee Montana. It is said about two nights after the arrival of the Hidatsa the Apsáalooke came to the camp of the Hidatsa and greeted their relatives and friends since the Hidatsa and the Apsáalooke were once one nation. The relationship between these two nations had remained strong through the years as it continues to be to this day. The Apsáalooke were given the right to this ceremony and also taught the ritual including "adoption" and the songs appropriate to each of the rites of the ceremony. There are two reports of this ceremony. One of these reports was by the Indian Agent and the other was by an ethnologist. Their reporting is very similar but they differ in one regard. One report holds that the Apsáalooke paid for this ceremony with 600 head of horses and the other reports that the payment was 400 head of horses. But either way it shows how much the Apsáalooke valued this very important ceremony.

This was when the term "Hot Dance" was coined and it was a misinterpretation. The Hidatsa had told the Apsáalooke to eat well and not like a poor person when performing this ceremony. This would mean the consumption of hot food. The phrase hot food was misunderstood by the Apsáalooke to be "Hot Dance" and that was probably because the languages of both tribes, although very similar and alike in many instances, may have evolved over time and misunderstanding occurred because of phonological and terminology differences. And so this term "Hot Dance" has been used by the Apsáalooke for this dance since that time.

The terminology for this dance in English has also changed through the years. In the 1950's and earlier "Hot Dance" was not used in English and this dance was called War Dance and Omaha Dance interchangeably. The Hidatsa would call it Tail Feather Dance. Adding to the multiplicity of terms was the other name used by the Omaha which was Grass Dance.

They relate that the Omaha/Ponca Warriors would wear scalps of the enemy on their belts during this dance. But since the enemy who was killed and scalped died a violent death, it's spirit would bother the warrior who wore the scalp so they would replace the scalp with clumps of grass hence the term Grass Dance which was used for the term War Dance.

The terminology for this dance evolved over the years from War Dance or Omaha Dance to Tail Feather to Celebration to now Powwow. The term Powwow is interesting because it means Spiritual Leader in the Wanpanoag language which is a Native American Tribe in Massachusetts.

ORIGIN OF THE DANCE THROUGH CAMP - ASHÉE LEETAA LISSUUA

The Ashée Leetaa Lissuua means Dance Through Camp. It was brought to the Apsáalooke by a young man of the tribe by the name of Awaxaawéesh Diilish, Walks to the Mountains, who saw it in a vision when he fasted at the Bil Alaxeé, The Water Fall. This place is now referred to in English as War Man Canyon on the Big Horn Mountains. This spiritual event took place after the "Hot Dance" was brought to the Apsáalooke by the Hidatsa. It is related that while fasting he opened his eyes and an Eaglet appeared before him. A Spiritual Voice said to watch because this is what it gave to him. This Eaglet grew to maturity before his eyes and it became a Golden Eagle. It flew off and many people appeared in its trail. The Spirit Being then showed the ceremony to him. It said this procession followed the Pipe because the Pipe is so Sacred that nothing should proceed it. Many of the Sacred Ceremonies of the Apsáalooke follow this belief because the rituals begin with the Offering of the Pipe. The Spiritual Voice said that the Carrier of the Pipe is a Successful Warrior who has not been wounded in battle. This prophesizes the good fortune the people would follow through the next four seasons. Since the warrior days have long passed, a combat veteran, who has never been wounded, with a good service record is used for this role of Pipe Carrier in the modern day. The Spiritual Voice then said that there can be One Leader, Two Leaders, or Four Leaders but never three. This may be because the Spiritual Beings seen in the vision had one body, two legs or four legs. This part of the spiritual teaching is a mystery. The Spiritual Voice then showed the Ashée Leeta Lissuua ceremony and the song. The Spiritual Voice said each part of the ritual was repeated at each of the four stops. The Vision showed the Pipe Carrier leaving the group of dancers and proceeding to a spot. In the modern day, since there is traffic that is sometimes hard to control, the Pipe Carrier is situated closer to the dancers. This is seen to help prevent crossing the path of the Sacred Pipe. The Announcer called for Four songs to be sung and the dancers danced in a clock-wise direction to each of these four songs. At the conclusion of these songs the dancers were told by the Announcer to go to their original place in the procession. The Announcer then called for the lí Ashée Leeta Lissuua, The Dance Through Camp Song, because they were going to the next season. The dancers danced in a procession in a circle and then in a line proceeded while dancing to where the Pipe Carrier was waiting.

The Spiritual Voice said that the dancers would raise the palm of the right hand toward the Water Fall to pay homage to the site of the Spritual Gifting at the first loud beat of the drum. This was the first of the raising of the right hand.

For every loud beat of the drum following this, the dancers were told to raise the palm of their right hands and point it to the dancers that were following because they were welcoming those who followed including the progeny of the dancer to a very good place in their lives. This raising and pointing of the palm of the hand to those who were following also symbolized the welcoming of the generations who were not yet born to a good life. The dancers proceeded to the spot where the Pipe Carrier was waiting and danced in front of him in a circle until all the dancers were situated in that circle. When the singers finished singing and the dancers stopped, the Pipe Carrier filled his Pipe and gave it to the first Dance Leader. The Dance Leader then took the Pipe and gave it to one of the singers. This singer took the Pipe, lit it and offered smoke to the Spritual Beings and prayed. When he was done, he passed it to the singer to his left who in turn offered smoke and prayed. This prayer ritual was repeated by all the singers until all of them had smoked and prayed. The Pipe was passed back in the path that it came in. When this Prayer Ritual was completed, the Dance Leader took the Pipe back and returned it in the same path in which he took it. He then passed the Pipe to the next Dance Leader to his right. The Prayer Ritual of offering the Pipe was repeated. He, in turn, passed it to the dancer immediately beside him to his right and he also repeated the Prayer Ritual. This was done until all the dancers had smoked and prayed.

In the modern day, since there are so many dancers and the women and children are taking part and this prayer ceremony takes quite some time, dispersing of cigarettes is now used for the Prayer Ritual after the designated Dance Leader for that stop has returned the Pipe to the Pipe Carrier.

When the Pipe was put away, women came and gave water to the dancers.

The Announcer called for a Personal Song for the Dance Leader and this was done. The Dance Leader then told a successful war story and made good wishes for the entire Apsáalooke. He then gave away, primarily to this Clan Fathers.

When he was done, the Announcer called for four songs to be sung. When all the dancers danced to each of the four songs, the Announcer called the dancers to their place in the procession. Then he made the call to proceed to the next season. This was repeated four times. This dance, Ashée Leetaa Lissuua, is an example of the prayer ways of the Apsáalooke. The Apsáalooke prayed through word, song, dance and motion and this is done to this day.

ORIGIN OF THE TEPEE – ASHTÁAHILE

The Crow Fair is known as the Tepee Capital of the World. This name is fitting because it is the largest Tepee encampment in the world.

The term Tepee, also spelled Tipi, is a Lakota word meaning home. It is interesting how the English speakers have used many Native American terms sometimes keeping the original meaning and pronunciation intact including Tipi or Tepee.

The Apsáalooke term for Tepee is Ashé also meaning home. When the new European abodes came into use by the Apsáalooke the term Ashé was, of course, also used for these new homes and the term Ashtáahile, which means real home, was coined to designate the Tepee. The Tepee is very important for the Apsáalooke because of its spiritual history. The following relates in part that history.

This story is told by the titling “When Yellow Leggings Went After Red Hair”. They say that Yellow Leggings was capturing raptors to harvest feathers. The Bíiluukee would do this by digging a shallow hole in the ground covered with evenly placed narrow saplings and a small animal tethered, anchored and placed on top. The man would place himself in this trap while wearing gloves made of rawhide. When the raptor alit with its claws embedded in the animal the trapper would grasp its legs and harvest the feathers he needed and let the raptor go.

Yellow Leggings was waiting inside such a trap when, mysteriously, a large boulder rolled on top of him and he could not move it to get out and it is said he was in his trap for several days. It was so long that he resigned himself to dying there. But he heard a voice and it identified itself as a mouse and that he would lead him out of this dire situation if he followed his instructions. Yellow Leggings did and he was led out and taken to a land which he had not seen before. The mouse told him that he would come upon a muskrat that would give him instructions. He came upon this muskrat and it told him to go to this pure white Tepee which was owned by White Owl and his wife.

He went there and saw a bear that was guarding the entrance of the tepee. He went inside and, while they fed him, he discovered they were cannibals. White Owl told his wife that their son did not eat what they ate so she cooked deer meat for him to eat.

Even though it could have been dangerous for him, it was not because White Owl called him his son and said that he was waiting for him. Following the meal White Owl gave him instructions to bring a part of a vicious being which became the sentries of the Tepee. They were the Coyote and the Owl. When the Bíiluukee of old would see these two animals they would say “give thanks because your sentries and protectors are near you.”

Yellow Leggings was later sent by White Owl to bring the head of Red Hair who with his mother were evil beings. He again went to the muskrat who gave him instructions to get help from Ant Woman who also owned a Tepee. He followed the instructions of Ant Woman and the muskrat which led him to Red Hair and his mother. They also owned a Tepee.

As in the wishes of White Owl he, through dangerous situations, beheaded the evil Red Hair and escaped his mother. Yellow Leggings fled back to the Tepee of Ant Woman who also beheaded Red Hair’s mother. After this, he returned to White Owl’s Tepee. He now owned two Tepees from his encounters.

Upon his return, White Owl said to Yellow Leggings that he was now the owner of those two Tepees and that he also is the owner of his Tepee. He also explained the meaning of the color of his Tepee and each of the Tepee poles. All the parts of the Tepee would provide guidance, security and largesse for a comfortable life. With these gifts he sent Yellow Leggings home. Yellow Leggings again went to the muskrat and received instructions of spiritual encounters that he would have. Among those he would come upon the Spirit Being named Deer Woman who eventually remained in her human form and married him. She had seven brothers who were also Spirit Beings and the youngest of them gave him is domesticated animal which was the mountain lion. Yellow Leggings was told that the mountain lion would also guard his door. With these four spiritual gifts of the Tepee he was instructed in how to get home with his wife. He came home to the BÍiluukee with the gift of the Tepees and this began a new phase in the lives of the BÍiluukee in all of the goodness foretold by White Owl. Later a Spiritual Man gave the gift of the Tepee pins to the BÍiluukee and, yet later, the Badger gave the gift of the pegs. Before this time the BÍiluukee would use stones to stay their lodges and the remnants of these stones are now called tipi rings. This spiritual history is why the Apsáalooke are both proud and reverent of their Tepee Capital of the World.

ORIGIN OF DOORWAY SINGING – ASH BILÍAN MALAXUUA

The Apsáalooke, being a militaristic nation, had devised four War Societies which were the Lumpy Woods, Foxes, Muddy Hands, and Big Dogs. These are patrilineal societies in that a BÍiluukee was born into the society of the father. There were the Crazy Dogs but they could not be a society because they had vowed to die a tactical death in battle so as to gain an advantage for their fellow warriors. This tactical death in battle would occur in the same season of the warrior's declaration.

Each of the War Societies had many traditions and one of them was Door Way Singing, Ash Bilían Malaxuua. Each of the War Societies had their own society songs and they would gather and go to the Tepee of their fellow society member and sing their society songs.

The Tepee owner would come out and sing with them and upon the conclusion of the singing, he would invite them to eat. After the meal was completed, the society would move to the next society member's Tepee and the prior host would join. Singing would commence at the new host's Tepee and this would continue for some time.

The Apsáalooke remembered this tradition in the early years of Crow Fair and they revived it. But because of subjugation by the U.S. Government, War Society songs were curtailed either by suppression or attrition. The men resolved this problem and War Dance songs were sung, instead, with lyrics composed. These lyrics often had romantic themes. This tradition of Ash Bilían Malaxuua continues during the nights of Crow Fair.

THE HISTORY OF WAKING CAMP – BAÁ XACHÍOO

There were many outstanding Warriors among the Apsáalooke Nation. These Warriors had achieved their status as Good Men through many outstanding war exploits. Their success was generally attributed to Spiritual Powers and so it, also, was with the Right to Wake Up Camp, Baá Xachíoo.

These Rights were passed to individuals who were thought to be worthy, knowledgeable and well-spoken. With the Right came phrases and other terminology pertinent to the particular Right which was passed on. It is said that since the Warriors knew each other well, a particular "Waking" way was recognizable to the original owner by the phrasing and terminology used. In the modern day, there are several individuals who are bona fide Right owners to Baá Xachíoo. They are relied upon to wake camp and the well-being of the whole camp rested on their shoulders. If something untoward or bad weather occurred, the people would surmise that the person who woke camp did not own the Right to Wake Camp. When all things were good, the people knew they were being cared for by a man with a bona fide Right to Wake Camp.

PRELUDE TO THE 2022 CROW FAIR

The 2022 Crow Fair Powwow Manager, Shawn Backbone, knew that Crow Fair is a major undertaking and much detail to manage. He also knew that he needed help and blessings from the Spiritual Powers to have a successful Crow Fair.

He, being a traditional man, decided that he would utilize ceremonies and dances which had spiritual importance and ask for blessings. The blessings he was seeking were enunciated through the Three Sacred Expressions of Wish Making, Dream Telling and Prayer.

All of these were to be found in the ceremonies and dances that he sponsored for the goal of a very successful Crow Fair 2022 and they had the additional benefit of strengthening the culture of the Apsáalooke. He sponsored the following:

The Retrieving of the War Bonnets, an Honoring of Veterans and the Owl Societies on Veterans Day, November 11, 2022

New Years Dance, an Honoring of the Community and the Crow Fair Board Members December 30 and 31, 2021

Day Time Hot Dance, an Honoring of Veterans and the Hot Dance Societies, April 2022

The Large Victory Return, an Honoring of Veterans, Singers of the Apsáalooke Nation, 2022

Crow Fair Royalty and other Outstanding Women of the Apsáalooke Nation

All these dances and ceremonies were well presented under the leadership of Shawn Backbone, Crow Fair 2022 Powwow Manager and the strong support from Frank White Clay, Chairman, Crow Tribe Executive Branch.