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A YUMA CREMATION

BY G. R. PUTNAM

Opposite Yuma, Arizona, on the California side of the Colorado river, lies the reservation of the Yuma Indians, and here, scattered through the bottom lands, live some three thousand of the tribe. They are a comparatively harmless people, few finding their way into the territorial penitentiary at Yuma. At San Quentin, in California, however, there are several of the tribe who got themselves into trouble by carrying out an old traditional privilege—the right of the relatives of a person who has died to kill the medicine man in case the deceased is the third patient lost. Another and rather more rational custom they have is that of burning the dead, and the following notes are written to describe one of these rites witnessed by the writer in March, 1892, while engaged in work for the United States Coast and Geodetic Survey.

Antonio (for most of these Indians are known by English or Spanish in addition to their native names), a well-formed young man of about twenty-seven, had been suddenly taken sick early in the morning while at work in the town, and by 11 o'clock was dead, despite the efforts of the medicine man. Although the Indians now usually resort to an American physician, in this instance the doctor was not called until all was over, when he pronounced it a case of apoplexy. The body was carried across the river to the meeting-house of the tribe, an open structure composed simply of a roof of cut boughs supported by symmetrically placed poles, the sides being entirely open, save a small room at the back. This house stood a few rods behind that of McGill, the chief of the tribe. The latter was a more pretentious structure than the ordinary Indian hut, being built of rough lumber, with low flat roof, but with no floor and few openings and looking much like a large dry-goods box.

The body, rolled in a blanket, was laid on the ground near the front of this open lodge, and the Indians, who had gathered from far and near, grouped themselves about. Close to the corpse stood the old men and women, usually very slovenly dressed and often

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on the California side of the Colorado the Yuma Indians, and here, scattered live some three thousand of the tribe. Harmless people, few finding their way to the primary at Yuma. At San Quentin, in the tribe who got themselves out an old traditional privilege—of a person who has died to kill the deceased is the third patient lost. A custom they have is that of the following notes are written to describe the writer in March, 1892, while United States Coast and Geodetic Survey. These Indians are known by English or their native names), a well-formed young man, had been suddenly taken sick early in the town, and by 11 o'clock was called by the medicine man. Although the man was called until all was over, when he died in convulsion. The body was carried across the house of the tribe, an open structure of cut boughs supported by symmetrical poles being entirely open, save a small opening. The latter was a more pretentious Indian hut, being built of rough brush but with no floor and few openings. A large dry-goods box, covered with a blanket, was laid on the ground near the head of the Indians, who had gathered from all sides about. Close to the corpse stood a man usually very slovenly dressed and often

with hideous faces. On these seemed to fall the principal burden of lamentation, and for hour after hour they kept up a succession of unearthly groans and wails, interspersed sometimes by remarks about the deceased made by the men in a loud tone. Only in a few instances were real tears seen. On the right stood a few of the young men, a class not well represented, however. Among these were to be seen some handsome faces. Their dress was a pair of blue overalls and a white undershirt, without hat or shoes. They never wear anything on the head, depending entirely on their luxurious growth of jet black hair for protection from the fierce sun of Yuma. This is their chief ornament and their greatest pride. It is allowed to fall over the shoulders, and is then cut off straight across the back. It hangs behind in cords formed by rolling when wet. In front it partly covers the face, a characteristic motion being a jerk of the head to throw it back from the face. Their faces were usually clean shaven, and sometimes ornamented with streaks or blotches of paint, or with ornaments in the nose. The young men were generally silent at this ceremony, as were also the young squaws, who were seated on the left of the group. These were dressed in red or blue calico prints, and wore their hair much as the men, save that it was less carefully kept, and was cut straight across the forehead similar to the modern bang.

Early in the afternoon the chief selected a half dozen strong men, and with axes on their shoulders they went to the woods to cut the timber for the funeral pile. This was erected a few rods south of the lodge. A shallow square hole was first dug in the sandy soil. On each side of this was driven an upright stake, standing some three feet above the ground, and at one end a half dozen stakes. Across the hole and between the two side stakes were then laid a number of heavy green willow logs, about eight feet in length, the logs being piled higher on each side so as to leave a trough in the middle to receive the remains. At one side was another pile of logs, which were to form the covering when the body had been placed in position. The upright stakes at the head were intended to support these logs at one end, so that their weight would not rest on the head of the corpse. Around the whole evenly cut brush was placed, standing on end. Everything was arranged neatly but simply.

Without the slightest intermission the wailing in the lodge

continued throughout the afternoon and on into the night. As evening came on the scorching heat of the day was succeeded by a temperature so much cooler that many little bonfires were kindled here and there in the neighborhood, and those Indians who were not taking active part in the ceremonies gathered about in picturesque groups; others wrapped their blankets about them and lay down to sleep, with perhaps a log or a tin can for a pillow. The relatives of the dead man lived at Algodona, about twelve miles down the river, and the ceremonies were not proceeded with until the messengers had returned with them. When all had arrived the medicine man took charge of the remains. A space was cleared about the body, and the lamentations became more subdued. For nearly two hours the medicine man went through various rites. He inhaled the smoke of a cigarette and blew it into the mouth, eyes, nose, and ears of the corpse, and occasionally blew it up toward the stars. He rubbed and pressed the body and now and then straddled grotesquely up and down over it. He finally sang with a clear voice a rude incantation, a repetition of a few short sentences. As his efforts ceased, one of those from Algodona began to speak and continued for many minutes in a calm, dignified, and most pleasing tone. He was followed by McGill, the chief of the Yumas, who spoke in much the same style, though not such a gifted orator. McGill was dressed much as his fellow Indians, save that he carried a cane and wore shoes and a ribbon in his hair. He was a fine-looking man, with a kindly and intelligent face.

As these ceremonies ceased the circle again closed about the body, and the lamentations, which had continued through all, again increased in volume. Nothing more was to be done until the moon rose, about 2 o'clock in the morning. Many again stretched themselves on the ground, and as the hours passed away the scene gradually assumed a quieter aspect. But over the mesa in the east a faint light appeared; gradually the sky was illumined, and the beautiful moon arose, throwing its light over the turbid yellow torrent of the Colorado. When it had mounted half an hour into the sky the scene suddenly became more animated, the wails and moans were redoubled, all were on their feet, and four strong men took up the body, bearing it by the blanket in which it was rolled, and carried it to the

afternoon and on into the night. As the bright heat of the day was succeeded by a cooler that many little bonfires were kindled in the neighborhood, and those Indians who took part in the ceremonies gathered around the bonfires; others wrapped their blankets around themselves to sleep, with perhaps a log or a tin can for a pillow. The relatives of the dead man lived at Algodona down the river, and the ceremonies continued until the messengers had returned with the body. The medicine man took charge of the body, and the ceremony was cleared about the body, and the ceremony was subdued. For nearly two hours the ceremony was held through various rites. He inhaled the smoke and blew it into the mouth, eyes, nose, and occasionally blew it up toward the stars. The medicine man lay on the body and now and then straddled over it. He finally sang with a clear voice a repetition of a few short sentences. Some of those from Algodona began to speak in a calm, dignified, and most interesting manner followed by McGill, the chief of the Yumas, in the same style, though not such a well-dressed man as his fellow Indians, he wore a ribbon in his hair and a pair of shoes, with a kindly and intelligent

expression. The circle again closed about the body, which had continued through all the night. Nothing more was to be done until about six o'clock in the morning. Many again gathered around the ground, and as the hours passed the ceremony assumed a quieter aspect. But over the horizon a faint light appeared; gradually the sky grew bright, the beautiful moon arose, throwing its light on the torrent of the Colorado. When it had risen to the sky the scene suddenly became more solemn, and moans were redoubled, all were silent. The strong men took up the body, bearing it on their shoulders, it was rolled, and carried it to the

funeral pile. Here it was carefully placed in the center of the logs and a blanket spread over it, and then the heavy logs were piled above, supported on the upright stakes, so as not to touch the head, but resting on the feet. The chief stood at one side and directed all. When completed, the pile was about four feet high, four feet wide, and eight feet long, containing therefore about a cord of wood.

On top were placed the possessions of the dead man—in this case but a single blanket, for he was poor. If he had owned a house that would have been burned also. A fagot was brought and applied to the dry brush in many places, and in an instant all was ablaze. As the heat increased the circle gradually widened until there was a great ring of Indians about thirty feet from the burning pile, as near as the heat could be endured. Various articles of clothing were thrown on the pile, some being removed on the spot and others brought for the purpose. This was the clothing the spirit was supposed to take to the other world, where it will be claimed by the original owner on his death. Those who spoke earlier in the evening now spoke again for an hour or more, uttering detached sentences with long pauses between. The groans and wails continued, and some of the old squaws and men went around the circle, laying their hands on the shoulders or heads of others. Some of the squaws had been wailing continuously for fifteen hours (since the preceding noon), and as a consequence their voices were almost entirely gone, and their efforts to use them now were almost ludicrous. A most weird and impressive scene was this, the flames leaping high in the air and lighting the dusky faces of the great circle of Yumas, seated or standing, some now with rather scanty attire, the unearthly wails and the solemn words of the chief, with the moon looking down on all. As the pile slowly crumbled the sounds ceased and many silently moved away in the early dawn.

The next day there was nothing, save a few mesquite beans scattered over the surface, to show where this remarkable ceremony had taken place. The ashes had been carefully gathered into the hole below and the ground smoothed over.
