
THE SERI INDIANS

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condition characterized by absence of property and thrift-sense; while its most essential concomitant is extratribal antipathy too bitter to permit toleration of alien blood, or even of alien presence save under the constraint of superior force.

MORTUARY CUSTOMS

The prevailing opinion among the better informed Caucasian neighbors of the Seri is that the tribesmen display an inhuman indifference to their dead; and this opinion is one of the factors—combining with current notions as to cannibalism and arrow-poisoning and beastlike tooting in battle—involved in the widespread feeling that the tribesmen are to be accounted as mongrel and uncanny monsters rather than human beings.

The opinion that the Seri neglect their dead on occasion would seem to rest on a considerable body of evidence; Mendoza's record of the numberless neglected corpses of warriors polluting the air and poisoning the streams of Cerro Prieto in 1757 would seem to be unusual only in its fulness; and Señor Encinas, albeit so conservative as to repudiate the reputed anthropophagy and to recognize better qualities among the folk than any contemporary, declares that they are utterly negligent of their dead, save that when the bodies lie near rancherías heaps of brambles are thrown over them to bar—and thus to lessen the disturbance from—prowling coyotes. Quite indubitable, too, is the specific testimony of vaqueros to the effect that Seri raiders overtaken by the Draconian penalty of the frontier merely lie where they fall, even when this is well within reach of the tribesmen, Don Andrés Noriega's verification of his boast (ante, p. 113) being an instance in point. On the other hand stands the conspicuous fact (unknown to the frontiersman) that well-marked cemeteries adjoin some of the rancherías of interior Seriland. The sum of the somewhat discrepant evidence accords with a characteristically unsatisfactory statement by Mashém, to the effect that the mourning ceremonies are important only in connection with women—i. e., matrons—because "the woman is just like the family" ("la muger es como la familia"); and this intimation, in turn, is corroborated by the single known instance of inhumation in Seriland, as well as by certain indirect indications connected with the scatophagic customs (ante, p. 213). On the whole it seems certain that the mortuary ceremonies attain their highest development in connection with females, the recognized blood-bearers and legislators of the tribe.

The special dignification of females in respect to funerary rites is without precise parallel among other American aborigines, so far as is known, but is not without analogues in the shape of (presumptive) vestiges of a former magnification of matrons in the mortuary customs of certain tribes. The vestiges are especially clear among the Iroquoian Indians, whose aboriginal socialry coincided with that of the

Seri at various points; witness the following passage from the Onondaga mourning ritual, as collected and translated by Hewitt:

Now, moreover, again, another thing, indeed, our voices come forth to utter; and is it not that that we say, that far yonder the Hoyaner [chief of highest grade] who labored for us so well is falling away as falls a tree? So, moreover, it is these things that he bears away with him—this file of mat-carriers, warriors all, visible and present here; also this file of those who customarily dance the corn-dances [the women]—they go prosperously. And alas! How utterly calamitous is that thing that occurs when the body of this woman falls! For, verily, far yonder in the length of the file will the file of our grandchildren be removed! These our grandchildren who run hither and thither in sport, these our grandchildren who by creeping drag themselves about in the dust, these our grandchildren whose bodies are slung to cradle-boards, and even those of them whose faces are looking hitherward as they come under the ground.¹

The identifiable cemeteries of Seriland are few and small—much less populous than might be expected of a tribe numbering several hundreds for centuries, and able to maintain well-worn trails threading all parts of their rugged domain. Three graves were noted near the abandoned rancheria at Pozo Escalante; one was observed near a jacal skeleton at Barranca Salina; five or six were made out doubtfully on a low spur adjacent to Punta Antigualla; another was found near the rancheria midway thence to Punta Ygnacio; still another was doubtfully identified hard by a ruinous jacal just where the foothills of Sierra Seri descend to the plain stretching toward Punta Miguel; and this distribution may be deemed representative. A scant half-dozen perceptible graves were observed near the considerable rancheria of Punta Naragansett, which was numerous inhabited during the Dewey surveys of 1873; one was found adjoining the old jacal near Campo Navidad; but none were discovered in connection with the extensive rancheria on Rada Ballena. The largest known cemetery occupies the triangular point of shrub-dotted plain pushing out toward the site of the old rancheria at the base of Punta Tormenta; it comprises perhaps a score of evidently ancient graves, while two newer ones were found on the pebble bar beyond the jacales. When near the pebbly beaches the graves are marked by heaps of pebbles and small cobbles, commonly about the size of those used as hupfs, these cairns being 3 or 4 feet long, two-thirds as wide, and seldom over 12 or 15 inches in height; and most of the cairns are accompanied and enlarged by piles (ranging from a peck to a bushel) of the scatophagic shells already noted. The graves remote from pebbly beaches are marked by heaps of cholla stems and branches, rudely thatched with miscellaneous brambles roughly pinned

¹MS in the archives of the Bureau of American Ethnology. A somewhat more obscure version was recorded by Hiale in "The Iroquois Book Rites": "Now, there is another thing we say, we younger brothers. He who has worked for us has gone afar off; and he also will in time take with him all these—the whole body of warriors and also the whole body of women—they will go with him. But it is still harder when the woman shall die, because with her the line is lost. And also the grandchildren and the little ones who are running around—these he will take away; and also those that are creeping on the ground, and also those that are on the cradle-boards; all these he will take away with him." (Brinton's Library of Aboriginal American Literature, number II, 1883, pp. 141-142.)

together by okatilla stems, the shocks being sometimes nearly as high and broad as the jacales. A few of the scatophagic shells were found about the bramble-marked graves at Pozo Escalante, and a single one at Barranca Salina. In general the association of cemeteries and rancherias, or of graves and jacales, indicates that habitations are usually abandoned for a time when a death occurs within or near them.

The most conspicuous cairn seen in Seriland was well within Tiburon. It stands on the southern side of a little rock-butte about a mile and a half east-south-east of Tinaja Anita, south of the main arroyo, and near where the trail from the tinaja bifurcates toward Arroyo Carrizal and Punta Narragansett, respectively. It is shadowed

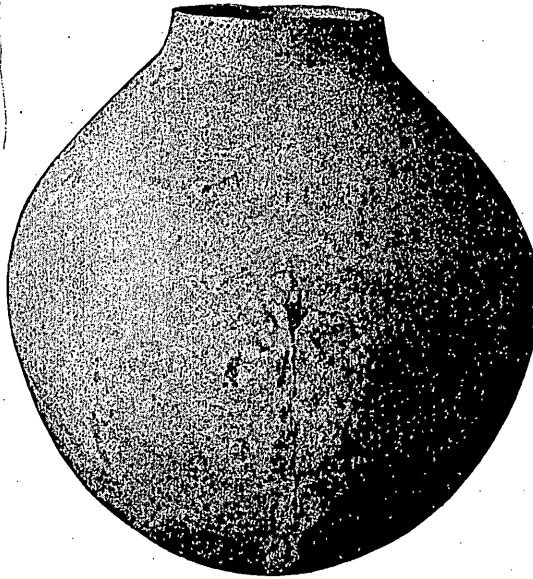


FIG. 39—Mortuary olla.

by a notably large and widespreading paloverde, and is in the form of a cone estimated at 7 feet in height and 18 or 20 feet across the base. The materials, at least on the surface, are rounded pebbles and cobbles, possibly from the adjacent arroyos, though more probably from the beaches, of which the nearest is miles away. It was not determined to be mortuary.¹

On the death of the matron, a grave is scooped out by means of shells

¹As an indication of the conditions for observation in Seriland, this cairn is fairly typical: it was seen but once (on December 25, 1895), and the observation was limited to a few minutes by the attendant circumstances. On the evening before the party landed at Campo Navidad, with the hope of working up the coast nearly or quite to Punta Tormenta on the following day; but before morning a down-bay gale was whitening the waters of Bahía Kunkaak so fiercely as to prohibit embarkation. Meantime the supply of water—that standard commodity of arid regions—was too nearly exhausted to permit inaction; so while Mr Johnson with three guards ascended the Sierra to establish a new topographic station, the leader of the party with the remaining seven men set out in search of water. The nearest known aguaje was that of Arroyo Carrizal; but under the hypothesis that some of the better-beaten trails turning northward might lead to nearer water, one of them was taken; and after turning back from half a dozen false scents, the principal trail was followed to the well-known Tinaja Anita, 15 miles by the trail from Campo Navidad; and here the party watered. It was on the return trip that the cairn was discovered; but the party were laden with filled canteens and saucepans and coffee-pots, the day was well spent, and the camp more than a dozen miles distant even over the air line traversing spall-sprinkled taluses and sharp-edged rocks; moreover, the men were naturally and necessarily heavily armed and on constant guard. Accordingly even the short stay and cursory notes involved an additional mile of darkness on a trail so rough as to cut through shoe-soles and sandals and catch scents of blood to tempt coyotes to the camp site. Thus it was that the cairn was not more critically examined and is not more fully described.

a few yards from her jacal, preference being given to relatively elevated or commanding points. The excavation is about 30 inches (90 cm.) in depth; within it is placed first the pelican-skin robe of the deceased, so arranged as to fold over the body; then the corpse, dressed in the ordinary costume of life, is compressed into small compass by closely flexing the knees and bringing them against the thorax, extending the arms around and along the lower limbs so that hands and feet are together, and bending the head forward on the chest; when it is deposited in the receptacle in such manner as to lie on the left side, facing north-

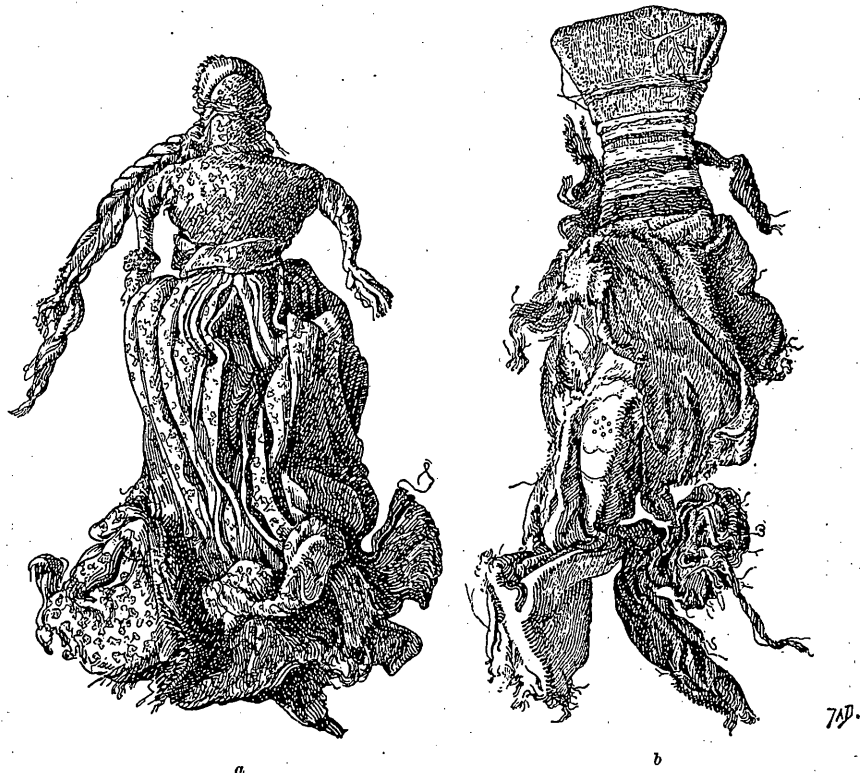


FIG. 40.—Woman's fetishes.

ward. Near the face is laid a dish of baked clay or a large shell filled with food, and beside it a small olla of water (an actual example is shown in figure 39), while the hupf, awls, hairbrush, olla-ring, and other domestic paraphernalia are placed near the hands. Next the personal fetishes and votive symbols (in the form of puppets or dolls such as those shown in figure 40 *a* and *b*) of the dead mother are slipped beneath the face, and her paint-cup, with a plentiful supply of paint, is added; the poor personal possessions, in the form of shell-beads and miscellaneous trinketry, are then heaped over the face and shoulders, and these are covered with the superfluous garments and miscellaneous

property of the deceased. Finally the pelican-pelt bedding is folded over the body, and two turtle-shells are laid over all as a kind of coffin, when the grave is carefully filled, and the ground so smoothed as to leave no mark of the burial. During subsequent hours the stones for the cairn or the cholla-joints and other brambles for the brush-heap are piled over the spot, while the scatophagic shells are added at intervals apparently for weeks or months and perhaps for years after the burial.

The mortuary food is carefully selected for appropriate qualities (i. e., for "strength" in the notion of the mourners). It comprises portions of

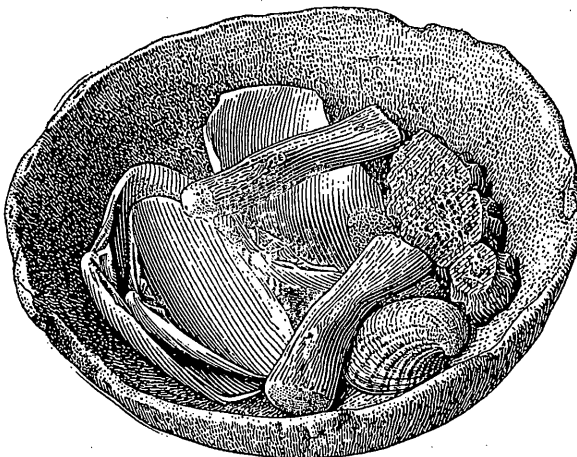


FIG. 41.—Food for the long journey.

turtle-flippers, and, if practicable, a chunk of charred plastron—the food substance especially associated with long and hard journeys—with a few fresh mollusks, and, judging from a single good example as well as from analogy, one or two scatophagic shells. The remains of a funerary feast are illustrated in figures 41 and 42, the latter being the scatophagic receptacle utilized apparently in the absence of the customary Noah's ark. It may be significant that this shell is perforated at the apex, evidently by long wave-wear before utilization, and that the accompanying olla bears marks of having been broken, then repaired, and afterward perforated, as illustrated in the photo-mechanical reproduction (figure 39); for these

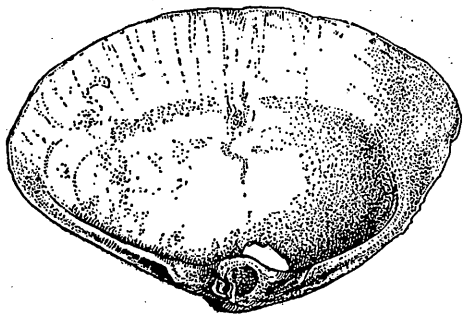


FIG. 42.—Mortuary cup.

features perhaps express that idea of "killing" mortuary sacrifices, ostensibly to fit them to the condition of the deceased, though really (in subconscious practicality) to protect the sepulcher from predation.¹

¹"In all stages of development belief runs a close race against cupidity, and is sometimes distanced; so the sages learn that even a buried weapon may be a source of contention, which they thenceforward forestall by breaking or burning it." (Primitive Trephining in Peru; Sixteenth Ann. Rep., Bureau of American Ethnology, 1897, p. 22.)

Soon after the death (immediately after the burial, so nearly as could be ascertained) there is an apparently ceremonial mourning, in which the matrons of the clan, and, at least to some extent, the warriors also, participate. The mourners wail loudly, throw earth and ashes or ordure on their heads, and beat and bruise (but apparently avoid scarifying) their breasts, faces, and arms. This is continued, culminating daily about the hour of interment, for several days—unless the rancheria is sooner abandoned, in which case the period of formal mourning is shortened.

In addition to the formal mourning of matrons there is a custom of nocturnal wailing after the death of warriors in battle, and, apparently, also, following the death of matrons or nubile maidens, which attracts the notice of frontier rancheros and vaqueros. According to their accounts the first note of lamentation may be sounded at any hour of the night by any of the group to which the deceased belonged; it is successively taken up by other members of the party until all voices are united in a resounding chorus of inarticulate moans, wails, shriller cries, and wild howls, likened by the auditors to the blood-bellowing of cattle; if other groups of the tribesmen are within hearing, they, too, take up the cry, so that the lamentation may extend to the entire tribe and echo throughout practically all Seriland at the same moment. The fierce howling and attendant excitement may rise so high in the group in which the wailing begins that all seem bereft of customary caution; and sometimes they suddenly seize ollas and weapons, and decamp incontinently, perhaps scattering widely and racing for miles before settling again for sleep or watchful guard.

The ideas of the folk concerning death and concerning the relations between the living and the dead are largely esoteric, and are, moreover, veiled by the nonequivalence of Seri expressions with the terms of alien languages.

At least an inchoate belief in a life beyond the grave was intimated by Mashém and his companions at Costa Rica, and their circumspection of speech and mien indicated a strong veneration for, or dread of, the manes; though the specific expressions were connected with deceased matrons, who alone seemed to be prominent in the minds of the clan-mates. So far as could be gathered the belief seems to be that the dead find their way back to the primordial underworld, whence Earth and Beings were brought up by Pelican and Turtle (or Shark) respectively, and are liable to return by night with mischievous intent.

The direct expressions of the Seri informants are fully corroborated by the association of things in interior Seriland. The burial of water and food, of the personal fetishes and votive objects, and of the highly prized face-paint belonging to the dead matron, attests anticipation of a post-mortuary journey; while the temporary abandonment of jacales and rancherias and the nocturnal fears and flights alike betoken

dread of sepulchral visitants. The most suggestive of the associations, i. e., between the scatophagic stores and the sepulchers, awaits full explanation.

SERIAL PLACE OF SERI SOCIALRY

In the conventional seriation of social development four stages are clearly recognizable, viz: (1) Savagery, in which the social organization is based on blood kinship reckoned in the female line; (2) barbarism, in which the basis of organization is actual or assumed consanguinity reckoned in the male line; (3) civilization, in which the laws are based on property-right, primarily territorial; and (4) enlightenment, in which the organization is constitutional and rests on the recognition of equal human rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Now, in terms of this seriation of general culture-stages, the place of the Seri tribe is clear. Reckoning consanguinity wholly in the maternal line, as they do, they belong in the initial stage of savagery. Accordingly they pertain to the lower or more primitive of the two great stages represented by the American aborigines.

A still more refined seriation may be effected through conspection of the several lines of activital development—the esthetic and industrial, and especially the sophic or fiducial, as well as the strictly social; for these lines are most intimately intertwined. Thus, in the Old World, the transition from maternal to patriarchal organization was accompanied, and evidently superinduced, by the development of zooculture into extensive herding; in different districts of the New World, a parallel transition attended the development of agriculture to a phase involving the protection of acequias and fields by armed men; while throughout primitive life, laws are formulated and enforced chiefly through appeals to the superphysical or mythologic. Now, review of the Seri esthetic indicates that the decorative concepts and activities are in large measure inchoate and are practically confined to a single manifestation, i. e., the delineation of totemic symbols primarily denoting zoic tutelaries and incidentally connoting the blood-carriers of clans consecrated to these beast-gods; so that the esthetic motives and devices of the tribe are essentially zoosematic. In like manner a considerable part of the technic of the tribe is zoomimic, as already shown, while even the most highly developed industrial activities occupy the biotic borderland of mechanical chance rather than the characteristic demotic realm of intellectual design. So, too, the faith of the folk is exclusively and overweeningly zoothestic, to the extent that every motion, every thought, every organized action, every law, every ceremony, is shaped with reference to mystical potencies vaguely conceived as a pantheon of maleficent beast-gods; and it is this dark and hopeless faith that gives character to the tribal esthetic and technic. Concordantly the faith finds reflection in the very elements of the social organization; the matron is the blood-carrier and the lawgiver not in and for herself