

## WICHITA DEATH CUSTOMS<sup>1</sup>

*By Karl Schmitt*

### INTRODUCTION

A purpose of archaeology is to reconstruct in so far as possible the culture or way of life of extinct groups of people. Ethnology has an aim of understanding the life of living groups of people, or of groups in the ethnological present. Ethnologists can arrive at their goal through actual observation of people in action, through conversing with and questioning informants, through reading descriptions of past observers, or through combinations of these techniques. Archaeologists, of necessity, base much of their reconstruction on the analysis of material remains. But, since both archaeologists and ethnologists are concerned with culture, there is an overlapping of interests. Particularly in the realm of death and burial practices is this so. Archaeologists place great emphasis on burial practices in determining relationships, and ethnologists often find the rites and behavior at this time of crisis most illuminating in understanding the total patterning of a given culture. A presentation of the data concerning Wichita death customs may be of help in identification of archaeological sites of possible Wichita provenience and aid in the interpretation of material from known Wichita sites.

Present Wichitas are the consolidated and intermarried remnants of several groups which formerly were politically independent and of much greater population. The Wichita proper, the Waco, and the Tawakoni were culturally and linguistically similar, while the Kichai, although similar in general culture, were divergent linguistically. The Wichita proper were visited in central Kansas in 1541 by Coronado. The Waco and Tawakoni, if they were separate groups at this time, presumably ranged south in what is now present Oklahoma. The Kichai at the same period appear to have been much further to the south and associated with Caddo-speaking groups. After this time there was a southward movement of the Wichita-speaking groups and by 1760 they were established in villages along

<sup>1</sup> This paper was presented at the 1951 meetings of the Texas Archaeological and Paleontological Society at San Angelo. Data were gathered from modern Wichitas in the vicinity of Anadarko, Oklahoma during the years of 1947-51 when the author was conducting ethnological investigations under the auspices of the Faculty Research Committee, the Institute of Human Studies, and the Department of Anthropology, all of the University of Oklahoma. Although a number of informants were used, one individual, Mrs. Cora West, was the principal source of information and gave the most complete data. This is partially because she is one of two Wichitas who lived in the last concentrated Wichita village and thus actually participated in the old culture. She was born near present Wichita, Kansas during the Civil War, when the Wichita and related groups sought refuge there, and is the oldest member of her tribe.

or south of the Red River. With later declines in population there was a general northward movement which finally culminated with the consolidation of the Wichita-speaking groups and the Kichai in the Indian Territory in 1859. The descendants of these groups form the present Wichita tribe. Although Caddo groups and one band of the Delaware were also placed on the Wichita Reservation at the same time, they preserved their cultural identity and in particular still have different burial customs.

Thus, the Wichita and other related groups have lived within the boundaries of the present states of Kansas, Oklahoma, and Texas during the last three centuries, and presumably have left a number of archaeological sites which have not been historically identified. The data presented herein refer specifically to the period of the 19th century but may furnish links to help in the identification of older sites.

#### DESCRIPTIVE DATA

People who were seriously ill were moved to a tipi set up in the family's housing area, and treated there by medicine men or "doctors." My oldest informant became very emotional when the possibility of a death occurring in a grass house was posed, and said, "Nobody die in grass house!" Close association with menstruating women, women near parturition, and sick people could be detrimental to the health of others, particularly men; such people were often separated from the rest of the household. When death appeared imminent word was sent for all the relatives to assemble and even distant cousins (who were "brothers" and "sisters" in Wichita terminology) were expected to come. After death occurred there was no set period of time before burial took place; instead it was considered desirable to have the interment as soon as possible. However, all the relatives had to gather first. At this time a hair cutting ceremony took place:

CW was present at such a ceremony when she was a little girl. Her aunt and step-mother took her to a tipi where a relative had died. On her arrival, she noticed a deceased girl covered up on the ground south of the central fire and a pile of hair and a butcher knife between the corpse and the fire. There were a lot of people present—"just family and friends." Everybody had to cut off part of their hair "to show respect." CW's aunt cut her own hair with the knife and then CW's. All hair was placed on the pile near the fire. A grandmother or an aunt sat at the feet of the deceased and "had charge of hair cutting business." Women cut their hair straight around while men cut theirs on one side only.<sup>2</sup> Afterwards some of the women took the hair and scattered it into the water of a nearby creek.

Soon after the relatives had shown their respect, the actual interment occurred. Non-relatives dug the grave and were rewarded

<sup>2</sup> Men wore their hair loose and shoulder length. A few early photographs of prominent Wichita individuals have been examined. Several had hair longer on one side than the other. CW said this was due to their having been in mourning.

with presents of blankets or robes. The family would ask some old person, usually a woman, to dig the grave and she in turn would ask someone else to help her. Graves were in a cemetery area adjacent to the village and preferably on a hillside, although occasionally there were burials in bottom land. The cemetery of the last consolidated village<sup>3</sup> of the Wichitas occupied during the 1870's was on a hillside to the north and slightly east of the village. In shape the grave was an approximate rectangle and oriented east and west.

The body was washed in warm water and dressed in the deceased's best clothes, and the face was painted. If a man had been a warrior, his "warrior's outfit" consisting of bow and arrows, rawhide shield, warbonnet, and medicine bundle might be placed in the grave also. However, the deceased might have expressed a desire that a nephew<sup>4</sup> or a son have his paraphernalia and then it would not be included in the grave. CW said it seemed that men gave such material to a nephew rather than to a son. Even if the uncle had not specifically made a verbal will, the nephew could take such paraphernalia for his own. Similarly a man's friend, who was also a special war partner, could claim the man's possessions. Deceased persons who had been doctors might be accompanied by their medicine objects, and CW mentioned in particular a type of whistle made from a "deer-shank" or metapodial bone which was part of the paraphernalia of "deer doctors." Women might have implements placed in the grave.

The body was wrapped in blankets and rawhides. After 1880-90, canvas and cotton sheets were used. First rawhides were placed in the grave, and the encased body was laid on them. Then more rawhides were placed over the body. The rawhide wrappings were often perforated and laced. The body was extended on the back with the head to the east.<sup>5</sup> This position seems to symbolize a separation of the living and dead; present-day Wichitas remember how disturbed grandparents and other relatives got when they as children started to sleep with their heads to the east instead of in the approved position of having the head to the west. Dirt would be thrown into the grave by the non-relatives who had done the digging.

During the burial the women present would wail, particularly if the deceased had been a young person or in the prime of life. A young warrior's death occasioned the greatest display. Death of a very old person did not need to be mourned much, if at all, since

---

<sup>3</sup>Karl Schmitt, "Wichita-Kiowa Relations and the 1874 Outbreak," *The Chronicles of Oklahoma*, Vol. 28, No. 2 (Summer, 1950), p. 155.

<sup>4</sup>Only a man's sister's son was a nephew in the older Wichita kinship system. In later times a brother's son also was considered a nephew and could share in the inheritance.

<sup>5</sup>At the present time "white" undertakers have charge of burials and their custom of placing the head to the west causes middle-aged and older Wichitas some concern. Tombstones erected by Wichitas are on the east end of the grave plot.

the individual had had a long life and death was to be expected, and he would really be better off in the afterworld. I have the impression, though cannot prove it, that old people sometimes were suspected of having long lives through the practice of witchcraft and as such were not deserving of mourning. Persons actually executed as witches were not mourned, even by close relatives, since grieving would be a tantamount to admitting that the mourner was himself a witch. The name of the deceased ideally was never mentioned again unless he was thought to be a witch and not worthy of such respect.

At the site of the grave an aged man might be asked by the family to talk and offer prayers, particularly if the deceased had been prominent or a young warrior. The mother or some close female relative often cut up tipi poles and erected a structure over the grave. This consisted of two crossed pieces at each end of the grave, a bar connecting the two, and pieces leaned against the bar from both sides—in final result, a tent-shaped structure. No dinner honoring the dead person was held and food was not offered at the grave.

Following the burial, the tipi was smoked with cedar and aired out and could be used again by the family. If the death had occurred on a war expedition, and the body not brought back, there was no symbolic burial, but the grass house in which the deceased had lived was smoked with cedar and the family continued to inhabit it.

Following the funeral, members of the family were still in mourning. If they were one of the leading families in the village, or a family of means, then non-relatives came to mourn with them. CW described this as follows:

When son or daughter of a first-class, well-to-do, principal family die, the whole village go to the home of the deceased and wail, cry, and mourn with the family. People just keep coming in. Each group stay about ten minutes. The mother or sister (of the deceased) go around to every visitor and take hand and wipe tears off their faces and say, "Let's quit crying—we've cried long enough." Take dishpan and wash visitors faces—give visitors shawls, blankets, and other presents. Then other people come in. By time mourning (is) over, family hardly got anything left—give away everything they have. They stay in mourning for a month or more. Kinfolks bring things they really need, 'til they establish their own home again.

The close relatives of the deceased were in possible danger of death since the spirit could return and try to entice them to joining it in the afterworld. To counter this, one or two ceremonies were held. CW described them as follows:

Family has lost close relative, a brother, a mother. After burial, in next four days, they get medicine man to bathe them in medicated water, then smoke them in cedar leaves. After that they are clear of association with dead ones. If they didn't give the bath and smoke, every night she see him (dead relative). Then she sort of pine, gets sickly.

Then people say she ought to get her bath. After that is done they seem to straighten out.

When anybody dies in family, after burying is over—a few days after, they call some old man, a doctor, to come to that family to make smoke for them. He has a long pipe. He goes in house. All family is together. Whenever doctoring anybody, do it on south side of tipi. Doctor gets coal for pipe from south side of fire, takes four puffs. (He) blow up in air. Just puff straight up and not to the directions. Throws head up. He makes talk, just like praying to God—God is up. He says, "this family, this death would turn them loose from any more death." Then the doctor starts pipe—first father, then mother, then goes clean around as many as are in) family and back to doctor (clockwise). Then he makes smooth place south of fire and empties bowl on ground. He mixes ashes up with dirt and rubs in hands. Doctor goes clean around whole family, rubs hands down them starting at head—that frees them. (The "power" from above, the smoke, and the earth is in his hands.) Folks give doctor blanket of own free will.

Most informants agree that the medicated bath formerly was given in a nearby creek and not in the house, but in the present-day situation such baths are given in the houses. Curtis mentions that baths were taken in the creek on each of four days after death of a relative.<sup>6</sup>

The death of any person was observed with a four day mourning period by the entire village. During this time no dancing, games, or gambling were indulged in. At the end of the four days a representative of the family would have it announced by the town crier that the people had mourned long enough and that it was now all right for them to go ahead and beat the drum and enjoy themselves. Then the village returned to its normal activities. As late as 1949, a group of Wichitas conservative to the older religion delayed a scheduled dance for four days after the death of a young man.

A surviving spouse and the close relatives of the deceased observed a much longer mourning period, which was ended in a ritual described by CW as follows:

When a man dies his people take over looking after his wife. She's supposed to give away everything she had—wasn't allowed to put on any gay clothes or paint, or look good. His people would set a time that they would turn her loose. Husband's family, the women folk, gather up everything a woman wears and pick a certain day. They go to her house and present her with new things—things to eat, pans, dishes. They take her, put on new clothes, comb and braid hair, paint her face, put on beads and bracelets—full dress. Always have some old woman in bunch—the dead man's grandmother. She talk to her (the wife) and advise her how to live—how good it was to live right, think of her people, never leave them. Then have a feast. Dead boy's mother goes wailing and crying—gives daughter-in-law a talk, too. She say, "Now you are loose, go ahead and live as you want to." They (the man's family) didn't have no more to

---

<sup>6</sup> Edward S. Curtis, *The North American Indian*, Vol. 19, 1930, p. 42.

do looking after her. She can marry anytime she wants to. They warn her to take her time, pick out a good man.<sup>7</sup>

When a man loses his woman they aren't so strict. He's supposed to guard himself—not go to doings. They don't hold a man as long as they did a woman. When they turn him loose they take presents to him—man's clothes. The girl's people take the presents. (The presents are taken to the man since at the death of his wife he goes home to his mother's or sister's place.)

After death the spirit left the body and was thought to go to one of a number of villages up in the sky. There it and other spirits lived a life like that lived on earth. It was said that the dead in the villages above knew what was happening in the villages of living people below. Sometimes people would say after a death, "His people must be glad to see him." Not all spirits went to the after-world; those of murderers, suicides, and inveterate gamblers could not be with the rest. It was not reported specifically what happened to those of murderers and suicides: however, since Wichitas did and do believe strongly in ghosts that remain around burial areas and even old haunts of the living, it would appear that they remained on earth. Spirits of individuals who had gambled to excess lined the road or pathway which went to the afterworld. Young people who were inclined to gamble were told, "When you die, you don't want to be a castaway!" The spirits of gamblers are lined "on the pathway—they just sit there gambling."

#### INTERPRETATION AND CONCLUSIONS

1. It should be emphasized that, with few exceptions, the data herein reported are in ideal patterns. Furthermore, these patterns would be ones to which "leading families," or ones prominent in village affairs, would try to adhere. Only important families would go through with complete and ornate hair-cutting, burial, give-away, bathing-smoking, and spouse-freeing ceremonies. In Wichita thinking, lower-class families, poor families, and small families (in the extended sense) seem synonymous. Thus, one hears sayings such as, "He is poor, he doesn't have any relatives." Less fortunate families would make the best approach possible to the ideal, but ceremonies—particularly the give-away and spouse-freeing—would suffer because of the small number of relatives involved, because of the lack of property, and because of no need for "putting up a front."

2. Obviously a great majority of the traits associated with Wichita death customs would not be preserved in archaeological sites. However, Wichita burials of the 19th century, and perhaps the latter half of the 18th, would be expected to occur in cemetery areas and to exhibit rectangular or long oval burial pits, east-west

<sup>7</sup> Often, particularly if there were children, a young woman would marry a brother of her husband; or a man would marry a sister of his wife. This practice of levirate and sororate does not seem to have been absolutely obligatory, but to have had strong positive sanctions.

orientation, and an extended position of body with the head placed in an easterly direction. Artifacts accompanying burials should vary widely, with few or none being found in many interments. Graves of poorer individuals would not be expected to have very many artifacts. But also, due to extensive "give-aways" and the rights of nephews and friends, graves of well-to-do people could be relatively barren of materials. Grave goods to be expected occasionally would be: stone and metal arrowheads, knives, whetstones, flint strike-a-lights, and guns with male burials; very occasionally pottery or metal containers and various bone or metal gardening and skin-working tools with female burials; bone or glass beads and metal trade ornaments remaining from costumes with burials of both sexes; and deer- or eagle-bone whistles, bone or horn sucking tubes, and a wide range of miscellaneous objects remaining from medicine bundles accompanying both male and female "doctors." Generally speaking grave goods would be expected to be scarce.<sup>8</sup>

Since the Wichita occupation of Kansas-Oklahoma-Texas was late in time and since portions of these states have relatively small amounts of annual precipitation, ordinarily perishable materials should occasionally be found with burials. This would be particularly so if the body was well laced in rawhides with other hides above and below.

3. A comparison of the data presented here and those reported by Dorsey is of interest.<sup>9</sup> Although I had read Dorsey previous to doing field work, his data did not influence the gathering of mine. In collecting data, I had my informants "volunteer" statements on general topics, such as death and burial. Also, although some of my informants were aware that a man named Dorsey had once written something about the Wichita, they appeared to have been uninfluenced by that source. Dorsey's and my material are in agreement in major outline and in most details. This is of interest because it is indicative of the fact that two ethnological observers can duplicate or verify each other's work, and perhaps of greater interest since Dorsey did his field work in 1901-3 and I almost fifty years later.

<sup>8</sup> After the delivery of the paper, Mr. Ed Jelks of the Smithsonian Institution River Basin Surveys commented on the two burials excavated at the Stansbury site on the Brazos River above Waco, Texas. This site is thought to be that of one of the two Tawakoni villages visited by de Mezieres in 1772. The two burials were near each other in long, oval pits, extended on the back and with heads to the east. One had no accompanying artifacts, while the other had only a few glass beads.

<sup>9</sup> George A. Dorsey, *Wichita Mythology*, 1904.