

ORIGIN OF THE OTTER CEREMONY

told to M. R. Harrington

Many years ago, so runs the story, a little girl about ten years of age was given a young otter for a pet, and this she kept and cared for until it was well grown. About this time she began to feel that she should keep him no longer, for she had come to realize that he was pilsu meaning "pure" or "sacred," and, like all wild things, belonged to the Powers Above.

The old people told her what she must do, so she took her otter down to the creek, and, first tying a little bag of tobacco on his neck, said to him: "Now I shall set you free. I have raised you and cared for you until now you are full grown. Go, then, and follow the ways of your kind." The otter disappeared into the waters, and the little girl returned to her home, feeling that she had done well. But before a year had passed, a sickness came upon her, which the Indian doctors told her was caused by her pet otter, which wanted something to eat.

The only way for the child to get well, they said, was for her to have a hog (in some accounts this is a bear) killed and cooked, and then to invite a number of men to eat it all, in the name of the otter. It was done, and when the men finished eating the hog and the soup, they said that the girl would recover, and so she did.

For this ceremony they took an otter-skin to represent the girl's pet. It was used every two years. When the owner died it was passed to the oldest survivor of the family which owned it, and kept in the belief that it would benefit the health of all of them. It was the only one of its kind in the tribe, and is called "Kunu"xäs."

Note: *It came to a time when no singers remembered the songs used in the ceremony so the items used in the dance were given to Harrington for the Museum of American Indian. In that way the family was no longer responsible to hold the ceremony. The drawing below shows how a dancer would wear the otter hide with the head hanging on his chest.*

