

Otter Skin Dance

Anonymous
Told to Truman Michelson, anthropologist

A child had a pet otter. When the otter grew, the old folks decided to turn him loose, let him go back to where his home was or wherever he wanted.

The old man took the otter and took him far from their home. He cut off a piece of tobacco and tied it round the otter's neck in a little bag. So he talked to this otter, "Well, I am going to turn you loose. You will be at your own liberty hereafter."

So the little child didn't like it, because his pet had been freed. The old folks had turned it loose on their own account. The child wouldn't oppose it. It was simply against the child's will.

So in a short time the child took sick. They had men who were powerful and could tell the cause of things. So they doctored this sick child. So they found it was the otter that was the cause of the child being sick. So these men with power, gifted men, told this child's parents they must get an otter and get the hide and skin it whole. Then they cut the otter hide on the back, splitting it. Then these men with the power told the folks, "Likewise kill a bear and cook the bear meat."

Along in the evening they cleaned up the ground in [a] circle. They cleaned it off good. So there were two men to do the work. And they built a fire in the center where it was cleaned.

They set a fork at the east end of the fire and one at the west end. They put a pole whose bark had been peeled off across the forks. The east fork was about four-five steps from the limit of cleared ground. There were many forks in it. It was peeled off. The branches were sharpened. The bear was to be hung there overnight.

So all the principal old men and women were all together there that night. During the night when they first begin, the man supposed to be the relation of the sick child gets up, tells why they are there and what their intention[s] are, et cetera. He tells them that "We have found out by following these instructions given to us by the people that doctored on the child that we were told our child would get well by following those instructions that were given to us by those men that doctored on the little child."

So then the father of this child, when they started in, got up and started the performance they had planned out. He put on the otter hide. The head was stuffed and hung down over his breast, and the tail hung down his back. He told them that he was going to take a hand in the doings.