

ACCOUNT OF THE PIRASKANI CEREMONY OF THE ARIKARA  
AT ARMSTRONG, NORTH DAKOTA, SEPTEMBER 1922

The celebrant, the "father", was *Kakac* (Little Crow), assisted by *Nettakas Tiriwat* (Rising Eagle), commonly known as White Owl. (*Nettakas*, eagle; *tiriwat*, rising.) The "son" was Melvin R. Gilmore. The name of the ceremony is from *pirau* or *birau*, baby, or child and *skani*, many. The meaning is "God grant us many children." The name is from ancient words of the Arikara language.

The ceremony occurred in September. In October I returned to get further instruction on the ceremony. The two men above named called in an old man named Red-tail to assist them in giving the instruction. Before beginning the instruction the old man, Red-tail, made invocation for God's guidance, gave thanks for his providence in general and for the institution of Piraskani in particular, acknowledged to be given from God for our cleansing from evil and for our enlightenment in the right way of life. He closed his prayer with expression of thanks that the record of the ceremony was to be written down and preserved.

The story is that the Arikara people came from far to the east, and that this ceremonial has been observed from time immemorial. The word to us is that God desired the buffalo (skull) (in the medicine lodge) placed at the northwest post for the protection of the children. The sweetgrass, considered a choice food, was placed as an offering to the buffalo. The skull was painted with red paint, and the paint was applied on the faces of the children in the same pattern so that he shall know his kind (or know his own). The circle inclosing the perpendicular marks represents the household of children made by the ceremony. The handmarks on the skull surrounding the circle (lodge, or house) stand for God's world above, the upper world, which is to come down around the lodge for its further protection. The word came from God to the buffalo, "You are to go out into the world now to guard and protect the children to full maturity."

The word was given us from God that it was His will that the buffalo was to act for Him here on earth as His guard and protector of us. (So it was the Arikara custom to place a buffalo skull upon the house roof overlooking the doorway as a symbol of that guardianship and protection which was over all the goings and comings of the household. "As the buffalo, a magnificent animal, strong and stately, stands firm upon his feet

over his young, guarding them from danger and shielding them from harm, so the Buffalo is to be the protection of the children of mankind, to keep them in health, and to avert death, so that they may have long life and many days to look upon the beauties of the earth and the heaven, the trees and flowers, the birds and beasts, the rivers and the mountains, the sun, the moon and the stars and flying clouds.”

The regular way of seating the people is for the men to sit on both sides from the altar; the women to sit on both sides toward the door. The “children” sit at a little distance before the altar, between that and the fireplace. The buffalo skull was placed near the Post of Night. It is understood that formerly another buffalo skull was placed near the Post of the Thunder, but in 1922, when this ceremony was held, this skull was not present because its owner was now deceased. The instruction which has come down to us is that God directed that the buffalo (skull) must be so placed as to face the south so that he may watch the progress of the sun from its rising to its setting.

The Sunrise, the Wind, the Thunder, and the Night are under the control of Mother Corn for the protection of all her children. The space about the fireplace must be kept open; no one must pass in front of Mother Corn. At the time Sickness and Death came to the people, Mother Corn came to their rescue and has been with them ever since, to be their guide, their comfort and strength and their main support.

In front of the altar, between the Northwest Post and the Southwest Post, or the Thunder and the Wind, is the Holy Place of God in the lodge, so in ceremonies the smoke is sent up from the pipe at this place. God gave the word that when this ceremony is celebrated His unseen presence shall be with them, so good order must be kept. We have observed that whenever announcement has been made that this ceremony is to be given, a great and restful calm has come upon the community until after the performance of the ceremony, and this is both spiritual and physical in the minds of the people and in the weather.

The principal objects used in the ceremony are the two pipes, dressed with eagle feathers. They are a pair, one with dark eagle features, the female; the other with white eagle feathers, the male. The pipes represent the Eagle and are connected with the Thunder, the Northwest Post. All birds of the air, of every species, come under their rules. God’s command gave them (the Eagle and Thunder?) control of thunder and

rain to give life to vegetation, and to give us drink for our thirst, and food from the benefit of rain from the Thunder Birds (Eagles).

God commanded that a cross should be made for the pipes to rest upon, and instructions how it should be made. After the "children" have been cleansed and arrayed in new clothing and their feet set aright to walk in holy and righteous ways, they will be ready to go to God's holy country.

The cross faces the east for two reasons: first, because that is the direction of the sunrise; second, because when a person dies and is buried, the body is to be placed with head at the east. Then, when one Mother Corn resurrects the dead, the risen one will be facing the west, the direction toward which destiny has always led the Arikara people.

The white down feather which is attached to the head of the "child" is a symbol that the "child" has been cleansed and purified from sin. The cross which forms a support for the pipes is also a symbol that the "child" must throughout life bear a heavy burden of example and instruction in righteous living. After the "child" is washed with the water of this ceremony, and the old life and its sine and errors is cast off when the old garments are laid off, the child puts on new garments and his face is painted, and he enters upon a new life according to the instruction given. The burden of the hard instructions is that one is to be truthful and honest, in all things doing what we know to be good and right. The painting on the face is a symbol that the person is a child of God. The white down feather on the head is a symbol of a pure, good life in which should be no mark or stain of sin. It is a symbol of truth and honesty and righteousness as well as purity, and must always be kept, to the latest day of life, and at the time of death should be placed upon the head, for it is upon the strong wings of the Eagle that we shall be carried to the land of God. On the down feather is fastened some hair dyed red. This is a symbol of the Sun giving the light of truth and right. At the base of the down feather is the skin of the neck of a duck. This is a symbol of the water which was divinely commanded to be used in the ceremony. The command of God fell upon the female and the male duck and their little ones to provide water for this purpose, so that this is why they are attached to the down feather.

On the pipes we also find red dyed hair, having there the same meaning as that on the down feather;

that is, the meaning of light-bringing.

The “nest” in which the “child” is placed is a symbol of the nest of the Mystic Thunder Bird, where her little ones are nourished and protected. It is connected in deep meaning with the “Four Posts” of the lodge. The “nest” is made by the laying of four wisps of sweetgrass on the ground in a four-sided rectangle, and the fifth across these. The first wisp is laid with the base toward the Sunrise; the second is laid with the base toward the Wind; the third is laid with the base toward the Thunder; the fourth is laid with its base toward the Night. The fifth wisp symbolizes God above all, and is laid upon the middle of the rectangle formed by the other four wisps, with its base toward the east, the entrance of the lodge, and its top extending toward the west, toward the altar and the Holy Place. So it rests upon the nest like the ridgepole of a house. This wisp is a symbol of the protection of God.

When the symbolic act of washing the “child” is done, he is placed in the “nest”, standing with one foot each side of the fifth wisp of sweetgrass. (In this instance in which I participated, the candidates were placed with face toward the east, toward the entrance of the lodge. But some have since informed me that this was an error; that the child should face west, toward the altar and the Holy Place. This seems reasonable and consistent with all other Arikara symbolic ceremonies which I know, for they are all so oriented that progress is ever toward the west.)

In forming the procession to bring in the “children” the “female” pipe was carried by Four-rings and the “male” pipe was carried by Bears-belly. A woman carried the ear of Mother Corn as the representative of this Divine gift to mankind.

Bears-belly, bearing the “male” pipe, marched up to the entrance of the tent where the “children” were waiting to be brought in procession to the Holy Lodge. He made as though to open the tent door for the entrance of Mother Corn to the “children”, but this was not permitted until he first recited some military exploit which he had some time done in defense of the people. So he told of a victorious achievement without a wound which he had accomplished in warfare. This act was intended, as a parable, as though to say to the “children”, “Thus we wish you to come through the warfare of life without any harm.” Only those who have

been “known of God” are permitted to march in this procession to the Holy Lodge.

A wild cat skin was wrapped about Mother Corn during the procession, both in going to the tent for the “children” and in bringing them into the Holy Lodge. The skin of a wild cat was commanded to be used in the Piraskani ceremony as symbol, for this animal is unusually affectionate toward her young. Her love for her young is limitless, and in their protection she is most fierce. So in the procession the catskin enwraps the ear of Mother Corn as a symbol of protection and care. And in the symbolic act of washing the “child” the catskin is used to wipe away the water of washing as a symbolic prayer that the “child” may be henceforth imbued with this same quiet and good disposition of mind and a like protective love for children.

In the return of the procession, bringing the “children” to the Holy Lodge, one of the female candidates, if there be several, is given the lead, and to her is given the ear of Mother Corn from the Sacred Bundle, to carry back to the Holy Lodge. She now personally represents Mother Corn. Now Mother Corn in the lead is escorted by the bearer of the “male” pipe, the one with white eagle-feathers, on her right, and the bearer of the “female” pipe, the one with dark eagle-feathers, on her left. These are symbolic of protective power. The “children” each with his sponsor, fall into procession now behind Mother Corn. The procession enters the lodge and goes by the south side round to a position before the altar at the west. The “children” here sit down, their sponsors sitting behind them. The pipes are put to rest again in their place before the altar, Mother Corn remaining with the “children”, in the hands of the “eldest daughter” who carried it in the procession. The “children” are seated on a mat or robe in a place in front of the pipes, which are rested before the altar. As Mother Corn is now with the “children”, they, with Mother Corn, have a position in front of the pipes, between them and the Holy Place.

Now there was a quiet pause. At this time gifts were brought for the sponsors by the relatives of the “children”. Then the “nest”, as described above, was built near the Northeast Post, the Night Post.

In the structure of the “nest”, the “father” who was the chief celebrant of the ceremony, took up each wisp of sweetgrass in turn and laid it in place with prayer, making four motions of laying it in place, finally depositing it with the fourth motion.

Now when the “nest” was finished the “male”, light-feathered, pipe was lighted. Smoke from it was offered in turn to the Sunrise Post, the Wind Post, the Thunder Post, and the Night Post. (There is a little uncertainty here as to the order, but the Sunrise is first and the Night is last.) Then smoke was offered to God (*Nesanu Natcintah*) beginning at the Holy Place, all round the fireplace in sunwise direction, and back to the Holy Place. Then smoke was offered to Buffalo Protector and to the water in the water basket which was to be used for the symbolic washing. Then the “father” blew smoke from the pipe upon the nest in the same order as he had laid the wisps of sweetgrass in its construction.

Now the singers and drummers were ranged on the north side of the lodge and warriors in front of them. As each “child” is brought to the “nest” one or another of these warriors takes his stand beside the “child” and recites some war exploit performed at some time by him, before the symbolical washing of the “child”. The reason for this is the hope, thus suggest, that the “child” may, like him, overcome the difficulties and trials and dangers in the warfare of life, and shall lead an upright, useful, helpful and honorable life.

The “father” takes the “child” by the left little finger and leads him round the fireplace in sunwise direction, then to the “nest”, then round the “nest”, the “child” being instructed to step with his right foot on the southeast corner of the “nest”, his left on the southwest, then his right on the northwest, then his left on the northeast, then into the nest, one foot on each side of the middle wisp of sweetgrass, and facing toward the east.

(But here there is a dispute. Little-crow placed the candidates thus, facing the east, but some say, with seeming consistency with other forms of Arikara rituals, that the candidate should face toward the altar and the Holy Place).

The “child” having been brought to stand in the “nest”, being led by the “father”, an assistant holds over his head a small water basket containing water from the Missouri River. In the making of the basket for this purpose a small aperture is left in the center of the bottom. This aperture is stopped with clay before the water is put into the basket. A pointed stick is provided, and at the proper time the clay in the bottom of the basket is perforated with the stick, allowing the water to flow out upon the head of the “child” and to trickle down over his person. The flowing water symbolizes the cleansing of the “child”, not only as by a washing away of evil,

but it is also compared to light, the light of truth, clearing away the darkness or error and giving enlightenment and a new outlook in life. Just before this effusion of water upon the head of the “child” one of the warriors in the line standing before the singers and drummers steps up and recites an exploit of his military career and makes application of the incident to the practical affairs of life, thus giving example and precept for conduct in life’s warfare.

It is said that God ordained this use of the basket containing the water. He instructed Mother Corn to direct the male duck to bring the water, and the female duck to dive and bring up the blue clay used to line the inside of the basket. The round basket, lined with clay and containing water, is a symbol of lakes on the earth. The edge of the basket is painted green, the color of the duck’s neck (and of all vegetation). When the basket is held above the head of the “child” it is like a trap to catch the light of the sun to guide the “child” on his journey through life. The blue clay symbolizes the blue of the high, clear, serene sky of a calm cloudless day. When the water pours fourth upon the head of the “child” it is as though he alone had flowing upon him all the fullness of the clear light of life from the lesson here taught.

After the water has thus been allowed to flow from the basket upon the head of the child, the ear of Mother Corn is inserted and used to push together again the clay to close the aperture in the bottom of the basket. Then the ear of corn is passed down before the face and chest (the face is the outward expression of the character, and the chest is the seat of the heart, the place where God’s spirit is to dwell in us), then down over the shoulder and right side, then down the back, then the left shoulder and side of the person. Now the wild cat skin is passed down in the same order to wipe away the water from the person. This use of the wildcat skin is to symbolize the prayer that all wickedness and evil, and all discontent and restlessness may be dropped from the character just there, and the child may go forth to a new and good life, endowed with quiet and effective powers and determination such as the wild cat possesses.

After Little-crow had given this account, Red-tail added to it and supplemented as follows: He said that when the ceremony was to be held, those who had the pipes would build the “nest” outside the village and would sing and pray. Then they would come to the Holy Lodge and go up on the roof and sing:

“This is the day to become good.”

Then they came down and entered the lodge. There they sang:

“The day is good, all is bright.”

Then they rose and went in procession to bring the “children”.

In the procession the first song is:

1. “Mother is coming (or, may be coming).”

The second song is:

2. “Father is coming (or, may be coming).”

The third is:

3. My child and I are going.”

The fourth is:

4. “My child, there is a nest now,  
There is a nest now, my child.”

When the child was led to the nest, and was standing in the nest, the song was:

5. “Washing away” (purifying).

When the child was led back and seated before the altar and the hair is combed, the song is:

6. “Combing the hair, combing the hair.”

When the face is painted they sing:

7. “Painting down (the face)”. Repeated four times.

When the white down feather is attached to the scalplock they sing:

8. “Feather on the head.” Repeated four times.

Then they take the pipe and sing:

9. “My child, I have given you full preparation.”

The pipe is then offered to the Divine Powers. It is as though God were speaking to use and saying:

“I have prepared you, and now you are ready to go forth into the world and make your stand for good and right living. You now have instruction, and you must be ready to withstand the evil in the world.”

After this offering of the smoke is made to the Powers in the Four Quarters they sing:

“Now my child smoke.” Repeated four times.

And then:

“My child is smoking.” Four times.

Then the food is blessed and a small portion is taken up to feed each “child”. As the bits of food are passed to the “children” the singers sing:

“My child, I am holding it for you to eat.”

In answer to questions on certain points of the ritual the following items of information were brought out.

As to the disposition of the bodies of the dead in graves it was said that God gave command through Mother Corn that the dead should be buried with the head to the east, for when night (death) overtakes us, we no longer follow Mother Corn. But we lie down with the head to the east and when Mother Corn calls us up in the resurrection we rise up ready to follow on again after Mother Corn.

The pipe-rest is made of Juneberry wood. God gave command to Mother Corn that the wood of this tree should be used for the purpose because it is a tree which bears fruit which is good for human food; it is life-giving. A thong of deerskin was used to tie together the pieces of the cross which forms the pipe-rest. When the cross was taken down and put away with the pipes into the bundle, the tie was merely loosened to allow the pieces of wood to be laid parallel together in the bundle.

Any person may go through the Piraskani ceremony five times, but no more. The reason according to the positions of the Holy Lodge: the four Posts, the Sunrise, the Wind, the Thunder, and the Night, and the fifth place is the Holy Place, the place of God Himself.

For making the combs used to comb the hair of the “children” the awns of needle-grass (*Stipa spartea*) were used, also the tail of the porcupine. The needle-grass combs were used to comb the hair of the men, and the tail of the porcupine to comb the hair of the women in the ritual of Piraskani. The reason is because over all the prairie grow different grasses for beauty and for use. When men came back victorious

from a military expedition at the time of year when needle-grass was ripe they would pluck a handful of the needles and stick them in their hair, slating backward on the head.

The porcupine lives in the woods, quiet and happy and peaceful, harmless, giving no offense and unmolested by enemies, living in no fear of harm. So the porcupine pertains to woman's life. They use its quills for embroidery and its tail is used for a comb. This is done with the wish and the hope that, like the porcupine, the "child" may live unmolested and protected from evil, happy in the enjoyment of all nature, and shall live a blameless life, giving offense to no one.

On the second day when we met again for my further instruction, Red-tail made invocation as follows, before we began the work: (first crossing himself, as he is a Catholic)

"Our Father in Heaven, we thank Thee that we are to talk about these ways which Thou givest us through Mother Corn. They are not something which have been made, but they came to us from Thee through Mother Corn. Make us strong and true according to Thy teachings. And we pray that they may bring to us some good things as to our people of old.

And as we give instruction may we speak only what is exactly true, as Thou gavest through Mother Corn. May we not err in instruction. And help us to live according to Thy teaching."

Little Crow powdered some sweetgrass. White-owl brought some coals from the kitchen stove on a fire shovel which he placed on the floor at the west end of the table on which lay the covered Pipes. He, Little-crow, offered sweetgrass first to the Powers of the Four Quarters and to God above, then incensed himself. Then White-owl also incensed himself. The Little-crow undid the covering of the Pipes. The two pipes were laid with Mother Corn between them, the mouthpieces to the east, the tip of the ear of Mother Corn to the east. Then he unrolled the feathers and laid them to the south.

(At the time Red-tail remembered that he should have made offering of tobacco smoke, so he got up and did so now. Standing at the west end of the table over the censer he offered the pipe to God above, and to the Four Quarters in turn. Then he offered the pipe to me, then to Little-crow, then to White-owl, and to the interpreters in turn.)

Little-crow again burned sweetgrass after offering the same to God above and to the Four Quarters; then he incensed himself, and so did White-owl.

Then they took up the instruction about the Pipes lying on the table before us. He said the relative positions of the Pipes and of the sacred ear of Corn, representing Mother Corn, is thus: the male Pipe (the light feathered one) is at the right; the female on the left; Mother Corn at the right of the male eagle.

The green color used is to signify the whole orbit of the universe, including everything; the duck heads with eyes signify the all-seeing eyes of the universe. The duck was commanded, the male to bring the water, the female the clay, for the basket of water. That is why they are on the Pipes. We always see the male and the female ducks flying together in pairs according to God's command to them to work together.

The owl feathers are used on the Pipes because God gave command to the owl to keep guard at night. God commanded the owl to be the sentinel to watch over us at night, whether we are waking or sleeping. He flies all about, keeping night watch. Then he is relieved at dawn and has his rest after daybreak comes. For the daytime God called upon another bird, the magpie, to keep the day watch. He has keen senses of sight and smell, and he is skillful to find food. The feathers of the magpie are placed on the Pipes to signify the hope and prayer that God's children of the Piraskani ceremony may be given keenness of observation to observe and to see and to know and that they may be competent in finding the means of life.

You see ornaments of all different colors of the Pipes. God ordained that it should be so to signify the colors of the rainbow, for, after a storm, the rainbow shows its wonder and beauty in the sky.

The opening through the stem of the Pipe was made by the Thunder (*Waruhti*). When the Piraskani ceremony was first given to mankind from God through Mother Corn it was God's command that smoke should be offered sometimes to the Four Quarters and to God above, and then to the Buffalo, for the Buffalo was also commanded to watch over Mother Corn.

God gave command to Mother Corn to have the pipes made. So he took her to a great rock. Then he told her to reach forth and take up the Pipe. She obeyed and picked up the bowl. Then God said, "Now this bowl represents your personality, your character and disposition. So when this pipe is smoked they may take

on your character in its pure loveliness and beauty of spirit and life. Then God gave command through Mother Corn that the Pipe should be smoked in all places which keep watch over Mother Corn and her children, and that smoke should be offered last to Him.

There is white down on the stem of the male Pipe. The meaning is this. The two pipes are as a pair of eagles, male and female, which have a nest and little ones. They fly great distances hunting food for their young. They bring back in their talons the prey which they have taken. So the white down hanging down from the Pipe is a symbol of the food, of all good things, needful for God's children. God gave command to Mother Corn to decorate with porcupine quillwork the string which attaches the white down to the stem.

When God gave command for the making of the Pipes the owl was commanded to go into the woods and look for suitable wood for the stems. He was sent because he is always flying about in the woods, and he is wise and knows. So the owl brought ash wood for the purpose, because it is strong and straight. Mother Corn took the ash wood which the Owl brought, and then commanded the Thunder to make the opening of the stem. Thunder obeyed and made the openings. Then Mother Corn saw how it was done, and so instructed men how to do it.

The stem was first made, and then the bowl, and then the ornaments. Upon the stem are put the green paint, the eagle feathers, feathers of the owl and of the magpie, the head and the neck of the duck, and the white down. When the stem is finished the bowl is made. This must be of the red pipestone (catlinite). On our journey to this land God commanded Mother Corn to make pipes of this stone, and led her to the place where it is found; therefore we feel that we still have a claim on the pipestone Quarry.

There are two names, either of which is applied to the Pipes. They may be called *Na Piraskani* or *Na Nesanu Nacitah*. The word *Na* means pipe; *Nesanu* means chief or fuller; *nacitah*; means above or on high.