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## Sticks as scripts: Literacy, celestial order, and ritual artifacts in Pawnee ceremonies

Benjamin Balloy

*In memoriam* Douglas Parks (1942–2021)

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In Native North America, prayer or offering sticks are artifacts elaborated during a ritual action, often ephemeral and small. They are usually painted, sometimes engraved, and most often composed of an assemblage of selected materials, such as tobacco, pigment, beads, and hide. Manipulated and arranged by an officiant according to a set of precise instructions, sticks are commonly intended to address certain entities or classes of beings to convey a message, supplications, or prayers, along with more substantial offerings. The use of this type of instrument has been noted in many populations, but rarely examined.<sup>1</sup> In this article, I will explore the nature, function, and contexts of ritual sticks (*rattaru*) among the Chaticks Si Chaticks (Pawnee), based on ethnographic descriptions produced around 1900.<sup>2</sup> Although narrow in scope, this perspective is intended to address broader theoretical questions at the crossroads of ritual anthropology and anthropology of writing. Three primary questions drive

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<sup>1</sup> Southwest ethnography is a relevant exception. See John D. Loftin, “Supplication and Participation: The Distance and Relation of the Sacred in Hopi Prayer Rites,” *Anthropos* 81 (1986): 177–201; and Leland C. Wyman, *The Mountainway of the Navajo* (Tucson, 1975): 42–46.

<sup>2</sup> In this essay, I will adhere to the previous usage of “Pawnee.” Wherever possible, I will use Douglas Parks’s transcription of Pawnee words.

this essay. First, can ritual sticks be considered as a form of writing? Second, if so, why write in a ritual framework with sticks? Third, what kind of understanding of literacy may account for the use of these artifacts? These questions are formulated with reference to various presuppositions, which I wish to examine through this case study. These presuppositions include the following: the function of writing is self-evident and universal; writing, or text, is unrelated (or only superficially related) to images and figuration; picture-writing, as an ambiguous phenomenon, calls for better distinctions between text and picture, not a critical assessment of these very divisions; and literacy is relevant only to human beings.

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A very rich, though old and somewhat neglected, ethnographic bibliography provides considerable material for this study.<sup>3</sup> Although significant, this literature was produced mainly over a short period (about 1880 to 1920), and therefore offers a valuable but limited historical perspective on Pawnee figurative practices—a limitation that must be acknowledged and kept in mind.

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<sup>3</sup> This essay relies especially on: John B. Dunbar, “The Pawnee Indians: Their History and Ethnology,” *Magazine of American History* 4, no. 4 (1880): 241–81; John B. Dunbar, “The Pawnee Indians: Their Habits and Customs,” *Magazine of American History* 5, no. 5 (1880): 321–42; John B. Dunbar, “The Pawnee Indians: Their Habits and Customs,” *Magazine of American History* 8, no. 2 (1882): 734–54; George A. Dorsey, *Traditions of the Skidi Pawnee* (Boston, 1904); George A. Dorsey, “A Pawnee Personal Medicine Shrine,” *American Anthropologist* 7, no. 3 (1905): 496–98; James R. Murie, “Pawnee Indian Societies,” in *Societies of the Plains Indians*, ed. Clark Wissler (New York, 1916): 543–644; Ralph Linton, *The Thunder Ceremony of the Pawnee* (Chicago, 1922); Ralph Linton, *Purification of the Sacred Bundles: A Ceremony of the Pawnee* (Chicago, 1923); George A. Dorsey and James R. Murie, *Notes on Skidi Pawnee Society* (Chicago, 1940); Gene Weltfish, *The Lost Universe, with a Closing Chapter on ‘The Universe Regained’* (New York, 1965); James R. Murie, *Ceremonies of the Pawnee. Part 1: The Skiri*, ed. Douglas R. Parks (Washington, DC, 1981); *Ceremonies of the Pawnee. Part 2: The South Bands*, ed. Douglas R. Parks (Washington, DC, 1981).

Today, the Pawnee Nation of Oklahoma is a federally recognized tribe in the United States, with its political seat in the city of Pawnee, Oklahoma. The historical territory of the Pawnee, from at least the sixteenth century until their move to the Indian Territories shortly after 1873, extended into the central plains around the Loup River in Nebraska.<sup>4</sup> Prior to the nineteenth century, the name “Pawnee” did not refer to a unified entity, but to culturally and linguistically related populations of the Caddoan stock.<sup>5</sup> All these groups were divided into permanent villages built near the flooded alluvial terraces where they practiced agriculture, especially the cultivation of corn. To the north lived the Skiri (Wolf Pawnee), who in the eighteenth century occupied the Loup River valley. The Skiri are commonly distinguished from three more southerly groups, the so called South Bands: the Chawi (Grand Pawnee), the Kitkahaki (Republican Pawnee), and the Pitahawirata (Tapage Pawnee). Each of these tribes, prior to the nineteenth century, operated autonomously, occupying separate villages and using distinct territories, and occasionally maintaining hostile relations.<sup>6</sup>

During the eighteenth century the Pawnee, like many other Plains nations, adopted the use of horses and gradually integrated horsemanship and breeding into their economic and social organization.<sup>7</sup> Their seasonal mobility pattern, particularly their occupation of winter camps

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<sup>4</sup> Waldo Rudolph Wedel, *An Introduction to Pawnee Archeology* (Washington, DC, 1936); Richard White, *The Roots of Dependency: Subsistence, Environment, and Social Change among the Choctaws, Pawnees, and Navajos* (Lincoln, NE, 1983); Roger T. Grange, Jr., “The Pawnee and the Impact of Euro-American Cultures: Three Centuries of Contact and Change,” *Revista de Arqueología Americana* 12 (1997): 87–111; Kurt E. Kinbacher, “Indians and Empires: Cultural Change Among the Omaha and Pawnee, from Contact to 1808,” *Great Plains Quarterly* 32, no. 3 (2012): 207–21.

<sup>5</sup> Other members of Caddoan linguistic stock are the Arikara, who settled on the Middle Missouri by the eighteenth century, and the Wichita, Kitsai, and Caddo, who were further south.

<sup>6</sup> White, *Roots of Dependency*, 148–49, 152.

<sup>7</sup> Pekka Hämäläinen, “The Rise and Fall of Plains Indian Horse Cultures,” *Journal of American History* 90, no. 3 (2003): 833–62.

from where they hunted buffalo, evolved during this period. They adapted to the foraging constraints imposed by the maintenance of large herds during the winter and took advantage of the increased mobility offered by the horse. The Pawnee population as a whole appears to have grown in the first half of the eighteenth century: one estimate puts the figure at 20,000 individuals before the epidemics that repeatedly struck the Plains in the middle of the century.<sup>8</sup> The semi-sedentary groups, more than the highly mobile ones, were heavily affected by the outbreaks of smallpox and measles that European traders introduced as they frequented the Plains in greater numbers and more intensively in the second half of the eighteenth century.<sup>9</sup>

From 1830 onward the Sioux, especially the Teton, expanded south of the Missouri River, which soon led to the expulsion of the Pawnee from the best hunting grounds. This expulsion and a series of other factors (besides epidemics) contributed to their weakening as an ethnic group. These factors included the military and colonial expansion of the United States, loss of harvests, more numerous and deadly conflicts with neighboring populations, reduction of the buffalo herd, reduction of hunting territories, and the ecological transformation of the exploited environment (through logging, the gathering of berries and other edibles, and so on). Though faced with adverse conditions, by the mid-nineteenth century the Pawnee were still maintaining the seasonal mobility pattern that had been largely in place since at least the sixteenth century and was fundamental to their culture. They alternated between permanent villages in the spring and fall and mobile hunting camps lasting several weeks in the summer and winter. Sioux military power continued to grow, however, especially at the expense of the Pawnee. In 1875, in the wake of the battle of Massacre Canyon (1873), a large number of

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<sup>8</sup> White, *Roots of Dependency*, 154. A lower estimate (6,000 to 10,000) in Kinbacher, “Indians and Empires,” 210.

<sup>9</sup> White, *Roots of Dependency*, 154–55.

Pawnee finally resolved to emigrate to present-day Oklahoma, against the advice of US Indian agents and some of their own tribal leaders.<sup>10</sup> The Pawnee, estimated at about 10,000 persons a little before 1830, plunged to fewer than 1,000 individuals censused at the beginning of the twentieth century, when the main ethnographic surveys on which I will rely were carried out in Oklahoma.<sup>11</sup>

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The studies of anthropologists such as George Dorsey, Alice Fletcher, and Clark Wissler are in fact largely based on the mediation of the Pawnee James Rolfe Murie (1862–1921) (fig. 1). Murie is a key figure in our knowledge of the social and ceremonial organization of the Pawnee in the nineteenth century. Yet his contribution was scarcely recognized until the publication of his major works by the anthropologist and linguist Douglas Parks in 1981.<sup>12</sup> It is through Murie's investigations that we have access to some of the traditional knowledge that was held by many Pawnee knowledge keepers. Among these are the figures of the Chawi priest Tahirussawichi (fig. 2), the keeper of the so-called Hako ceremony, and the Skiri priest named Roaming Scout. Without them we would know little about the complexity of Pawnee rituals and their ceremonial cycle before 1870.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> White, *Roots of Dependency*, 199–211. See also Richard White, “The Winning of the West: The Expansion of the Western Sioux in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries,” *Journal of American History* 65, no. 2 (1978): 319–43.

<sup>11</sup> White, *Roots of Dependency*, 156.

<sup>12</sup> Douglas R. Parks, “Biography of James R. Murie,” in Murie, *Ceremonies of the Pawnee*, 1:21–28.

<sup>13</sup> Alice C. Fletcher, *The Hako: A Pawnee Ceremony* (Washington, DC, 1904), 14, 17. For a critical appraisal of Fletcher's renaming of the ceremony, see Weltfish, *Lost Universe*, 481. On Roaming Scout, see Douglas R. Parks, and Raymond J. DeMallie, “Plains Indian Native Literatures,” *boundary 2* 19, no. 3 (1992): 105–47, esp. 112, 113–21; Douglas R. Parks,

Among the Skiri Pawnee, the ceremonial season of the year, between spring and autumn, was mainly devoted to the opening of sacred artifacts commonly designated in the literature as ritual bundles, ceremonial bundles, or sacred bundles.<sup>14</sup> These composite assemblages, prior to being opened, take the form of a package wrapped in various layers of buffalo hide or fabric. Items typically found inside include sticks, rattles, sacred ears of corn, animal hides, and scalp locks taken from enemies and dedicated to the bundle<sup>15</sup> There are various categories of bundles. The most important ones, called *chuharipi-ru'* (“rains wrapped up”), have specific roles in the stages of corn growth and in the organization of the two collective buffalo hunting expeditions in summer and winter. The Skiri formed a federation of about ten otherwise autonomous villages. The accomplishment of the ceremonial cycle relied on the close collaboration of all the villages and on a ritual in which these bundles were brought together. Murie refers to it as the “bundle scheme” of the Skiri.<sup>16</sup>

Each village identifies closely with its bundle, particularly through the narrative of a “vision” accounting for its origin. In this narrative, a founder is instructed by a celestial being—

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“Editor’s Introduction,” in Murie, *Ceremonies of the Pawnee*, 1:24. Parks’s complete edited version of wax cylinder recordings of Roaming Scout’s speech is in press. See <http://zia.aisri.indiana.edu/~corpora/RoamingScout.php>. See also Murie’s unpublished manuscript “Ceremonial Songs of the Pawnee,” Washington, DC, National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian Institution, MS 1788.

<sup>14</sup> Murie, *Ceremonies*, 1:14, 33–37. Early descriptions for the Pawnee are in Dunbar, “Habits and Customs” (1880), 326, and “Habits and Customs” (1882), 741–42. The first specialized study was that of Clark Wissler, *Ceremonial Bundles of the Blackfoot Indians* (New York, 1912). For comparative approaches, see Julia Guernsey, and F. Kent Reilly, eds., *Sacred Bundles: Ritual Acts of Wrapping and Binding in Mesoamerica* (Barnardville, NC, 2006); Margaret Brown Vega, “Ritual Practices and Wrapped Objects: Unpacking Prehispanic Andean Sacred Bundles,” *Journal of Material Culture* 21, no. 2 (2016): 223–51.

<sup>15</sup> Dorsey, *Traditions*, 347n185.

<sup>16</sup> Murie, “Pawnee Indian Societies,” 549–56.

or, as Murie writes, a “god”<sup>17</sup>—to form a ritual bundle. The bundle is the instrument for activating and channeling the specific powers of this tutelary entity for the benefit of the community.<sup>18</sup> Each village is theoretically endogamous; all the inhabitants, divided between two matrilineal classes without any attested matrimonial role, are deemed relatives of the founder. The keeper of the village ritual bundle, who hangs it in his lodge, is a direct descendant of this first visionary. He is the chief of the village (*ri-sa-ru’*), a title inherited from his father. However, it is through his sister, the curator and true heiress of the package, that he possesses the right to keep it.<sup>19</sup> In the case of the *chuharipi-ru’*, there is also a very clear distinction made between the owners of the bundle and the families of those who hold and transmit the right to use the ritual knowledge associated with it. The Pawnee refer to the latter category of individuals as *kurahus*, generally translated as “priest.”

Pawnee settlements have followed a relatively stable plan since at least the sixteenth century. It consists of a compact cluster of hemispherical lodges about ten meters in diameter built of wood and covered with earth. Each earthlodge opens to the east and has a smoke hole on top.<sup>20</sup> There is no permanent building dedicated to ritual activities. It is rather the larger lodges, where a prominent member of the village normally resides, that are used according to need. But

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<sup>17</sup> Murie, *Ceremonies*, 1:29.

<sup>18</sup> Parks, “Editor’s Introduction,” 7.

<sup>19</sup> The situation is complex and partially contradictory in Murie’s telling (e.g. “Pawnee Indian Societies,” 556). See Clark Wissler, “Comparative Study of Pawnee and Blackfoot Rituals,” in *Proceedings of the 19th International Congress of Americanists – 1915* (Washington, DC, 1917), 335. This entanglement of “rights” seems, on a more general level, characteristic of ritual artifacts whose possession and transmission is the foundation of many forms of social hierarchy among the Native American tribes. See Benjamin Balloy, “La hiérarchie dans l’organisation sociale des Muscogee (Creek) de Louisiane, au XVIIIe siècle,” *L’Homme* 237 (2021): 45–74.

<sup>20</sup> Dunbar, “History and Ethnology,” 274–76; Patricia J. O’Brien, “Prehistoric Evidence for Pawnee Cosmology,” *American Anthropologist* 88, no. 4 (1986): 939–46; Weltfish, *Lost Universe*, 15–19.



any lodge, a priori, conforms to the same pattern and therefore can be used for the activities of a priest, warriors (*ra-wira-kis*), or doctor's association (*kura-'u'*). Each earthlodge houses several families centered around a group of sisters, and, in the case of an eminent man, possibly the families of one or more dependents. When ritual bundles are stored, they are hung at the back of the lodge to the west, facing the entrance. There is also an earthen altar (*wahka-ru'* or *wiharu*) described as the “place where the wise sayings of those who have gone before us are resting.”<sup>21</sup> The entire space of the lodge follows fundamental polarities. The east-west axis separates the northern half, which is associated with summer, female, and fertility, from the southern half, which is associated with winter, male, and death. The central hearth, surrounded by a thin earthen border, should be considered an extension of the altar and is therefore associated with the west. From the hearth, the ritual space spreads out radially. In this respect, the lodge provides more than a framework: it offers a diagram of the Pawnee cosmos. In this way, the ritual discourse interacts with the architectural context. This discourse makes explicit or salient aspects of what is already inscribed and represented through the configuration of the lodge.<sup>22</sup>

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The most striking aspect of the Skiri bundle scheme is the fact that each of the stories attached to a “rains wrapped up” bundle (*chuharipi-ru'*), while possessing its own narrative integrity, is also seen as a fragment of a kind of meta-narrative of creation, accounting for the configuration of the heavenly order.<sup>23</sup> Each spring, when the first thunder signals the coming of

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<sup>21</sup> Murie, *Ceremonies*, 1:14, 178; Weltfish, *Lost Universe*, 63.

<sup>22</sup> Weltfish, *Lost Universe*, 62–64. On ritual topology in Native America, see Klaus Hamberger, “Le modèle topologique des sociétés amazoniennes,” *Journal de la société des américanistes* 98, no. 2 (2012): 199–232.

<sup>23</sup> Weltfish, *Lost Universe*, 79–80, 84–85; Murie, *Ceremonies*, 1:33, 38–39, 41, 179.

the rains and the renewal of the vegetation cycle, all the ritual bundles must be opened and “vitalized.”<sup>24</sup> This initiates the ceremonial cycle, which will end at the beginning of the winter. This periodicity is fundamentally linked to the ordering of the universe by the immanent celestial powers of the Pawnee cosmology. The animate form of the principle encompassing all these beings is called Tirawahat (*tira-wa-hat*, “this expanse”). Tirawahat is the origin of all the Heavenly Powers, each generated in turn according to a sequential order. The order in which the bundles are opened and renewed mirrors this sequence.

Each star being, as well as each bundle associated with it, is assigned a precise location. The ritual begins with Evening Star (*cu-piritta-ka*, “female white star”) in the west, then Morning Star (*u-pirikutcu*, “big star”) in the east. The next four beings are associated with the semicardinal directions: first, Big Black Meteoric Star (*u-pirit rarihu-ru rakati-tu*, “big black star”), associated with the northeast, and then the three other semicardinal bundles (southeast, southwest, and northwest).<sup>25</sup> Finally, the remaining “village bundles” are opened in a less formalized sequence.<sup>26</sup> The process of the generation of the celestial beings by Tirawahat establishes the order of the cosmos. In so doing, he configures a chart that is a topological scheme, a calendar, and—because of the relationship between villages and ritual bundles—a sociogram. Since villages are understood to reproduce in this world the scheme of the celestial order of creation, a cosmological discourse is consistently inscribed in the image of the villages at the political-ritual level of the Skiri federation.<sup>27</sup> This cosmological scheme is enacted in

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<sup>24</sup> Murie, *Ceremonies*, 1:33, 71.

<sup>25</sup> The sequence of these last three bundles varies, depending on a two-year cycle that needs no further explanation here.

<sup>26</sup> Murie, *Ceremonies*, 1:38–39, 46, 179. See also Weltfish, *Lost Universe*, 80.

<sup>27</sup> Murie, “Pawnee Indian Societies,” 551–55; Weltfish, *Lost Universe*, 20.

certain ritual contexts through the formalized layout of all the village ritual bundles inside the lodge (fig. 3).

Such “stellar” diagrams exist in various other forms. An especially extraordinary example is a painting, probably predating the nineteenth century, made on the tanned hide of a deer which was part of the Big Black Meteoric Star bundle.<sup>28</sup> Murie purchased the bundle containing the chart in the early twentieth century for George Dorsey, who served as curator of the Field Museum in Chicago. Though repatriated to the Pawnee nation in the 1990s, it remains in the museum’s custody today. In interpreting the chart, we must rely primarily on the commentary of Roaming Scout and Murie’s visual transcription (fig. 4).<sup>29</sup> The chart is divided between a winter sky section, associated with twilight, the west, and the south, and a summer half, associated with dawn, the east, and the north. Between the two, a thin band of starry markings indicates the Milky Way (\**raar-huutuuru-hak*, “linear dust path”). Various constellations are depicted. The caption provided by Murie attests to the function of the star chart as a diagram of the relationships between the bundles and star beings, using seasonal and topological coordinates. What it certainly does not intend to do is represent a particular night sky from a single viewpoint on a particular day. My contention is that the chart provides a figurative narrative, or, more precisely, a graphic recording of a sequence that frames the narrative. Because the salient aspects

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<sup>28</sup> Murie, *Ceremonies*, 1:95–98, 180. For a more positivist analysis, see Ralph N. Buckstaff, “Stars and Constellations of a Pawnee Sky Map,” *American Anthropologist* 29, no. 2 (1927): 279–85; Von Del Chamberlain, *When Stars Came Down to Earth: Cosmology of the Skidi Pawnee Indians of North America* (Los Altos, CA, 1982). For a critical review of the latter, see Douglas R. Parks, “Interpreting Pawnee Star Lore: Science or Myth?” *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* 9, no. 1 (1985): 53–65.

<sup>29</sup> Parks and DeMallie, “Plains Indian Native Literatures,” 117–18 (for Roaming Scout’s commentary); Murie, *Ceremonies*, 1:96, fig. 15.

of this narrative are transposed onto a topology rather than arranged in a linear fashion, they immediately manifest richer relationships.<sup>30</sup>

This narrative appears as a leitmotif underlying almost any ritual action associated with the principal ritual bundles, while taking diverse forms. It is here worth emphasizing the close relationship that the ritual action seeks to establish between the spatial values of discourse, which a diagram or chart can convey, and the temporal, seasonal progression in which the (ideally) successive ritual performances centered on the bundles are necessarily embedded. Indeed, the ceremonial cycle as a whole, closely associated with the maize growth cycle and hunting expeditions, is largely conceived in terms of motion. It is a journey divided into steps, recalling the way in which Paruksti (“Wonderful/Holy Being”)—the personified manifestation of the power of life (*wa-ruksti*)’ breathed by Tirawahat—animated the earthly world in its wanderings.<sup>31</sup> The “steps” consist of a list of fifty-six terms, twenty-six symbolically associated with the “feminine” and thirty with the “masculine.” These steps are the “variables” of the five songs, each of which is made up of fifty-six stanzas that “move forward” by interpolating the fifty-six steps into a repeated formula (fig. 5).

Bundles are most often presented in the form of an item tightly wrapped with buffalo wool strings and hung. Their opening is always a spreading out, an unfolding that makes visible an embodied configuration. On another level, these gestures inscribe the bundles and the items nested within them in a dynamic process of expansion and contraction, of moving away and back, of growth and rest, of death and fecundity. The ritual bundles thus visually transcribe in

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<sup>30</sup> For an analysis of the entanglement of place-names and stories see Keith H. Basso, *Wisdom Sits in Places: Landscape and Language among the Western Apache* (Albuquerque, 1996).

<sup>31</sup> Murie, *Ceremonies*, 1:43–46, 48–52.

this world a narrative of celestial order. The succession of ceremonies likewise parallels the changing of the seasons, enriching the calendar year with a kind of epic narrative.

This interplay between visual forms and utterances strikes me as an intrinsic character of the ceremonialism of the Skiri Pawnee ritual bundles. “Figurative utterances” in ritual context are a clearly recurring feature of their ceremonies. As visual operators, Pawnee diagrams—either painted on hide or displayed in the lodge by the bundle schemes—are instruments that effectively convey the spatial aspects of their narratives. They should be understood not only as a visual composition with various points of connection to a narrative, but as a directional pathway to be followed by a “reader.”

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The close relationship between narrative memory and artifacts in Pawnee ceremonies induces us to consider Carlo Severi’s writings on the arts of memory, or mnemonic techniques, in the Americas. In his analysis of shamanic pictographs among the Kuna of Panama, Severi has emphasized the interdependence of the shamans’ chants and their drawing boards.<sup>32</sup> This mnemonic device is employed by masters when instructing their apprentices. The pictographs, which proved to be highly consistent over time, are intended to facilitate the transmission of a

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<sup>32</sup> Carlo Severi, “Le chemin des métamorphoses: Un modèle de connaissance de la folie dans un chant chamanique kuna,” *Res: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 3 (1982): 32–67; Carlo Severi, “Penser par séquences, penser par territoires,” *Communications* 41, no. 1 (1985): 169–90. This model was then extended to other mnemonic techniques in Carlo Severi, *Le principe de la chimère: Une anthropologie de la mémoire* (Paris, 2007). See also Carlos Fausto and Carlo Severi, eds., *Paroles en images: Écritures, corps et mémoires* (Marseille, 2015); Carlo Severi, “Their Way of Memorizing: Mesoamerican Writings and Native American Picture-Writings,” *Res: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 71–72 (2019): 312–24. On picture-writing in the Americas, see also Elizabeth Hill Boone and Walter D. Mignolo, eds., *Writing without Words: Alternative Literacies in Mesoamerica and the Andes* (Durham, NC, 1994); Elizabeth Hill Boone and Gary Urton, eds., *Their Way of Writing: Scripts, Signs, and Pictographies in Pre-Columbian America* (Washington, DC, 2011).

stable corpus of therapeutic songs, though they are not employed during the healing performance. The system is based on precise rules of correspondence between the drawings and the utterance, albeit according to principles distinct from those of phonographic writing.

Severi notes that these pictographs are exclusively used for a particular class of speech: shamanic chants. They provide an image of the structure of the songs, revealing above all the order of the variables that appear in the sequence of a formulaic utterance, which is organized according to a parallelist structure; that is, in its simplest form, a succession of verses or stanzas that are identical except for one expression whose successive interpolations produce the song. Kuna pictographs do not attempt to express in a comprehensive way the syntax or phonology of the statements which they record. Instead of viewing this as a deficiency, Severi drew attention to the existence of what he calls a “territory-based organization” (*organisation par territoire*) of the “pictographic page,” a form of semantic enhancement or “pictorial enforcement.”<sup>33</sup> Thus, in a song where the items correspond to a list of the names of spirit villages visited by the shaman, the signs are arranged in a way that respects how the song unfolds (its “sequence-based organization”) while also making it possible to record the topological or cosmological relations between them. This information cannot be supplied by the verbal statements alone. In this way, Kuna pictographs not only facilitate the recording of long and complex chants, but also provide a framework for the transmission of the knowledge presupposed by the songs, a knowledge shared only by ritual specialists. Severi thus emphasizes that linguistic data are an integral part of these visual mnemonic devices.

Pierre Déléage further examined how elaborate bodies of ritual chant are preserved and transmitted. In his analysis of the relationship between graphic systems and discourse he

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<sup>33</sup> Severi, “Penser par séquences,” 178; Severi, *Principe de la chimère*, 155, 201–2, 318–19.

attempted to formalize the semiotic principles of such graphic mnemonic devices.<sup>34</sup> Focusing on what he calls “Native American intellectual technologies,”<sup>35</sup> he distinguishes between standardized graphic systems and “selective writings.” The first category refers to graphic systems that “conveyed codified information independently of a given language or discourse” which “could nevertheless be decoded by a community that . . . maintained a set of similar cultural representations.” These systems “were not bound to a discourse to be transmitted and memorized, nor did they fall within the sphere of apprenticeship.”<sup>36</sup> Classic examples are the war records displayed on hides, trees, and the handles of weapons, documented since the seventeenth century (fig. 6).<sup>37</sup> Selective writings, by contrast, are more strictly bound to a discourse in a given language, and only certain items of speech “rigorously chosen according to precise rules” are transcribed.<sup>38</sup>

Graphic systems based on selectivity (writing as the image of a specific discursive structure) are generally bound or “attached” to a limited repertoire and to specific practices.<sup>39</sup> Native American graphic systems following the selectivity principle are in fact very diverse on a

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<sup>34</sup> See especially Pierre Déléage, “Une pictographie amazonienne,” *Gradhiva* 12 (2010): 176–97; “Les pictographies narratives amérindiennes,” in *Lieux de savoir*, vol. 2, *Les mains de l’intellect*, ed. Christian Jacob (Paris, 2011): 744–64; “Transmission et stabilisation des chants rituels,” *L’Homme* 203–4 (2012): 103–37; *The Invention of Writing: Prophetic and Shamanic Rituals of North American Indians (1700–1900)* (Chicago, 2022); “Préface,” in *Préhistoires de l’écriture: Iconographie, pratiques graphiques et émergence de l’écrit dans l’Égypte prédynastique*, ed. Gwenola Graff and Alejandro Jiménez Serrano (Aix-en-Provence, 2015), 5–15.

<sup>35</sup> Déléage, “Pictographies narratives,” 744.

<sup>36</sup> Déléage, “Préface,” 7.

<sup>37</sup> Scott Meachum, “‘Markes Upon Their Clubhamers’: Interpreting Pictography on Eastern War Clubs,” in *Three Centuries of Woodlands Indian Art*, ed. J. C. H. King and Christian F. Feest (Altenstadt, 2007): 67–74.

<sup>38</sup> Déléage, “Préface,” 7.

<sup>39</sup> Déléage, “Préface.”

continental scale. Déléage points out that the semiotic nature of the signs used to selectively transcribe a discourse is indifferent. It can be a knot, a notch, or a part of the thing denoted, as well as a conventional or figurative sign. Regardless of the semiotic system used, the relationship between the sign and the discourse it records is based on the same logic, resulting in two broad types of application. In the first, the word is “essentially the ‘keyword’ of a ceremonial discursive sequence which it refers to.”<sup>40</sup> This is exemplified by the Lakota pictographic annals known as winter counts: sequences of pictographs painted on a hide that record a memorable event from each year to aid future recollection (e.g. “the year the stars fell”).<sup>41</sup> Each pictograph serves as a prompt; the memory of a year goes beyond the event represented. The transmitted knowledge of the meaning of the pictographs is therefore reduced to a roster or tally of names or formulaic sentences. In the second kind of use, like that of Kuna ritual chant, each pictograph also serves as a prompt, but the relationship between the pictographs on the “page” is based on a more sophisticated discursive structure. In this case, knowledge of the meaning of the pictographs supposes the knowledge of a stable text, with a form and content fixed by tradition. The sequence of signs records the salient features of the discourse—most often the “variables” in a chant organized according to a parallelist structure.

The study of North American pictography often comes up against gaps in ethnographic data. It is more particularly the lack of transcriptions of the ritual discourse associated with the display of these graphic techniques—transcriptions that would pointedly convey their repetitive

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<sup>40</sup> Déléage, “Pictographies narratives,” 748.

<sup>41</sup> Candace S. Greene, and Russell Thornton, eds., *The Year the Stars Fell: Lakota Winter Counts at the Smithsonian* (Washington, DC, 2007).



forms and parallel structures—that limits their recognition.<sup>42</sup> However, there are cases that allow us to go further. Déléage’s analysis of Navajo sandpaintings and prayer sticks, for instance, has shown that they function according to the principle of selective writing. Used in therapeutic rites, Navajo sandpaintings are iconic figurations that have garnered the attention of several generations of anthropologists since the end of the nineteenth century. The rites are said to be highly complex, requiring specialists to perform them.<sup>43</sup> One of the first sandpaintings comprehensively published with its linguistic material was collected by Washington Matthews in the late nineteenth century. It pertains to the second day of a nine-day ceremony known as the Night Chant.<sup>44</sup> Regarding the sandpainting, Déléage notes that it “establishes a relationship with the ritual prayer based solely on the transcription of the variable names: the four names of the mountains having the position of variables in the parallel structure of the chant correspond to the depiction of the four mountains in the sandpainting. The order of the stanzas of the chant corresponds to the order in which the mountains were painted and to the order that the mask of Talking God [the main entity evoked by the chant] follows as it journeys through them.”<sup>45</sup> The same is true of the prayer sticks employed at various moments during these rites.<sup>46</sup> To be sure, the sandpaintings are the result of a very elaborate figurative effort,<sup>47</sup> and their mnemonic

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<sup>42</sup> William M. Clements, *Native American Verbal Art: Texts and Contexts* (Tucson, 1996); Dell Hymes, *In Vain I Tried to Tell You”: Essays in Native American Ethnopoetics* (Lincoln, NE, 2004).

<sup>43</sup> Déléage, “Pictographies narratives,” 752.

<sup>44</sup> Washington Matthews, *The Night Chant: A Navaho Ceremony* (New York, 1902): v, 34–47, plate II.C

<sup>45</sup> Déléage, “Pictographies narratives,” 761–62.

<sup>46</sup> Pierre Déléage, “Pictographies chamaniques navajo” (unpublished manuscript, 2007).

<sup>47</sup> Nancy J. Parezo, *Navajo Sandpainting: From Religious Act to Commercial Art* (Albuquerque, 1991).

function alone does not account for their level of formal sophistication—a point to which I shall return.

From Déléage's analysis of Navajo prayer sticks and sandpaintings, I retain the following points, from which I shall develop several arguments regarding Pawnee figurative expressions with ritual sticks. First, a "pictorial page" can be an ephemeral, ground-based image as well as a three-dimensional artifact, or even a combination of both. Secondly, the image that fixes the memory of a narrative is not a priori constrained by any pictorial formalism. A rough iconic schema, in the manner of a chart, as well as a complex figurative image on which we are more inclined to make an overall aesthetic judgment, can function as pictography. It is important to emphasize this point. Complex images can function at the same time as selective pictography. Ritual figurations and graphic systems are usually neatly distinguished, as if they were exclusive categories. The fact that there is a solid continuum or fusion between the two in the case of ritual images is admittedly puzzling, and calls for careful analysis.

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Let us turn now to the use of Pawnee ritual sticks (*ratta·ru'*), which we will consider in the context of the opening rite of the Skiri Evening Star bundle.<sup>48</sup> Without going into the details of an extraordinarily elaborate and complicated ritual, let us remember that this bundle is the focus of the main rites of the Skiri cycle and is, in many respects, central to the ceremonial organization of the federation.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Linton (*Thunder Ceremony*, 13) calls them "wonderful sticks."

<sup>49</sup> Murie, *Ceremonies*, 1:36. For general presentations of the ceremonial cycle, see Weltfish, *Lost Universe*, 84, and Parks, "Editor's Introduction," 11–16.

After an initial series of songs, there follows a sequence of offerings to the Heavenly Powers.<sup>50</sup> According to Murie, the purification rite of a bundle could even be reduced, more or less, to this very sequence of offerings.<sup>51</sup> The action is centered on an officiant who arranges the offering sticks in compliance with the priest's instructions. These sticks, sixteen in all, are stuck into the ground and configure a circuit for the three successive offerings of tobacco smoke, meat, and corn that will take place at each of the sixteen stations (fig. 7). Four assistants are responsible for preparing five sticks each, which they cut from willow stems and then coat with buffalo fat and red pigment, all taken from the ritual bundle. The priest also takes from the bundle the items that are strung to each of the sticks: dried bison pericardium, native tobacco, scalp locks, and strings of blue beads. The sixteen sticks are adorned in an identical fashion and placed outside the lodge.<sup>52</sup>

The officiant who plants the sticks that are prepared for him, and who performs the offerings, is a "visionary." He is the "sponsor" of the ceremony: following a dream, validated by the priest, he has committed himself to dedicating the meat of a buffalo to the ritual bundle.<sup>53</sup> This commitment and the meat itself are necessary for the holding of the rite.<sup>54</sup> By placing one by one the sticks in the designated spots outside the lodge, the officiant scrupulously follows the instructions whispered to him by the priest. As the action unfolds, he thus becomes the recipient

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<sup>50</sup> Murie, *Ceremonies*, 1:48–49, 58–62. The earliest description appears in Dunbar, "Habits and Customs" (1880), 327. See also, among the Chawi (although in a doctor's bundle ceremony), Murie, *Ceremonies*, 2:201–318, and Douglas R. Parks and Waldo R. Wedel, "Pawnee Geography: Historical and Sacred," *Great Plains Quarterly* 5, no. 3 (1985): 164–66.

<sup>51</sup> Murie, *Ceremonies*, 1:62.

<sup>52</sup> Each assistant has prepared an extra one.

<sup>53</sup> Murie, *Ceremonies*, 1:179n21. See also Weltfish, *Lost Universe*, 124–25.

<sup>54</sup> Dunbar, "Habits and Customs" (1880), 331. In Murie's day, the meat used was limited to the tongue and heart.

of ritual knowledge that is partly kept secret from other attendants.<sup>55</sup> This knowledge includes the paramount correspondence between the name of a particular celestial being and each stick's location. Murie, as edited by Parks, does not provide a full transcription of the formulas used by the priest and repeated verbatim by the officiant. However, he provides the lines of the "Smoke Offering Song," presumably sung while the offerings are being made. They are built upon a strict parallelism, especially after the second stanza: "Above / it is the place / (which) has smoked." Subsequent lines are generated by substituting "above" with a list of "great animal powers," designated as thunder, lightning, clouds, and winds. These terms should in turn be understood as referring to the "most powerful beings" (such as Morning Star and Big Black Meteoric Star), which themselves are indices of a direction or position."<sup>56</sup>

The sequence can thus be described as the delineation of a chart by planting sticks in the ground, performed by an officiant instructed by a priest. Each successive offering follows the same circuit. The result is a single diagram enriched by the successive layers of offerings. It constitutes in this respect a variation on the pattern of "bundle schemes" which intend to "draw" a cosmogonic figurative narrative, as discussed above.<sup>57</sup> It is important for our interpretation to stress that these circuits of offerings are not strictly sequential. Between the offering of tobacco smoke and the subsequent offerings of meat and corn, a long chant is sung that describes, step by

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<sup>55</sup> There is a discrepancy between Linton (*Thunder Ceremony*, 13–15) and Murie (*Ceremonies*, 1:60) on this point. It could be that only a segment of the sequence had to remain secret, and perhaps varied with each ritual bundle, in the manner of a signature (see *Ceremonies*, 1:66; Fletcher, *Hako*, 102; Parks and Wedel, "Pawnee Geography," 166).

<sup>56</sup> Murie, *Ceremonies*, 1:48–49. Linton (*Thunder Ceremony*, 13–14) provides various approximations, of which the common formula seems to have been: "Now, ... this offering of [item offered] is to be made to [name of celestial being]." See Basso, *Wisdom Sits in Places*.

<sup>57</sup> Murie, *Ceremonies*, 1:60.

step, action after action, the foundational journey of Wonderful Being/Paruksti.<sup>58</sup> To a certain extent, the circuit of offerings depicts Paruksti's route on Earth, itself a mirror of Tirawahat's cosmogonic gesture.<sup>59</sup>

The ritual presented here appears consistent with that analyzed by Déléage for Navajo sandpaintings and prayer sticks. Pawnee offering sticks, arranged following a pattern and in a sequential order, are selective writings of the "roster" type. Each stick, once it is stuck in the ground, denotes a specific entity. Offerings are addressed to each entity in a sequence that is mirrored by the circuit accomplished by the officiant. In other words, each Pawnee ritual stick is linked to a variable within a fixed formula, of which the Smoke Offering Song evidences a possible template.

The focus on the mnemonic potential of Amerindian graphic systems can lead, however, to the neglect of other forms of effectiveness. Déléage is obviously aware of this. He notes that Navajo sandpaintings involve a "ritual use that goes far beyond their mere relationship to prayer."<sup>60</sup> I would go so far as to say that in ritual contexts, the cognitive value of Navajo sandpaintings or prayer sticks as memory aids appears disproportionate to the "expenditure" of memory involved in the ritual.

If not recording or stabilizing a tradition, what justifies the ritual use of such "narrative technologies"? Why should the rite consist precisely in laying out a specific chart or drawing by means of narrative artifacts like adorned sticks? Why silently draw, outside the lodge, a diagram whose significance—starting with the tally of beings for which the offerings are intended—largely escape the participants? To think that the arrangement outlined by the sticks is intended

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<sup>58</sup> Murie, *Ceremonies*, 1:49–52.

<sup>59</sup> Murie, *Ceremonies*, 1:180.

<sup>60</sup> Déléage, "Pictographies narratives," 762.

to record a discourse is not entirely accurate. As the Pawnee describe it, each stick does not merely mark a spot associated with a celestial being. Above all, it is deemed effective in addressing this being. Is the same true of the overall diagram on the ground? If one surmises that to navigate this drawing could be considered similar to an act of reading, that the image could thus be “read,” we must ask: but read by whom, by what kind of readers?

To answer this question requires adjusting the frame of reference in which we tend to confine the use of these instruments. The notions of offering and prayer, so commonly used to describe them and the associated ritual practices, risk leading us astray. Both notions rightly point to the interactive dimension of the offering but provide a reductive vision of it. On the one hand, to speak of an offering has the defect of reducing the material dimension of the transaction to a form of exchange—corn, meat, tobacco smoke in exchange for benefits. On the other hand, to speak of prayer reduces the stick to a simple token of a mainly locutory act, without recognizing its full performative value. Both notions evade the question of what kind of “gaze-game” or “act of looking” the addressed entity is being invited to join.<sup>61</sup> In speaking of offerings and prayers, we neglect the qualities of the stick as an image, the overall arrangement that the rite draws, and the visual effects attributed to these artifacts by those who produce them.<sup>62</sup> This line of critique does not imply, however, that we should abandon the interpretive framework focused on forms of literacy in the indigenous Americas.

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<sup>61</sup> Carlo Severi, “Ancestors to Come: Some Notes on Primitivism, Anthropology, and Global Art History,” in *Imaginary Ancestors*, exh. cat. (New York, 2018), 287–303.

<sup>62</sup> See David Freedberg, *Le pouvoir des images* (Paris, 1998), esp. 151–52.

Stephen Houston's discussion of the notion of literacy among the Maya provides a useful model for the study of Native American graphic systems.<sup>63</sup> He emphasizes the importance of distinguishing between the skills of the scribe (the ability to produce legible graphic statements) and those of the reader (the ability to respond adequately to a graphic statement). Moreover, the notion or type of response can vary. There are various degrees of competence within any cultural community rather than a clear opposition between the literate and the illiterate.

The theory of the arts of memory tends to take for granted the fact that the community of readers is consistent with that of the scribes.<sup>64</sup> The type of statements readers and scribes are likely to exchange is, in any case, closely shared; this is why they understand each other.<sup>65</sup> But what if we assume a graphic system where scribes are ontologically distinct from readers? How does this affect the formal characteristics of the signs or the objects used to convey meaning? Given anthropological analyses of Native Americans in recent decades, and in line with the ontological turn in scholarship, it makes sense to consider that the transactional function of many semiotic techniques may involve literate communities that include all kinds of beings, not just humans.<sup>66</sup> In the case of Pawnee ritual sticks, their creation implies the meticulous assembling of carefully chosen items, fastened according to precise procedures and gestures. But what

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<sup>63</sup> Stephen Houston, "Literacy among the Pre-Columbian Maya: A Comparative Perspective," in Boone and Mignolo, *Writing without Words*, 27–49.

<sup>64</sup> For an analysis of some divergence, see Houston, "Literacy among the Pre-Columbian Maya," 37–40.

<sup>65</sup> Standardized systems, in the sense of Déléage, although outside the definition of selectivity, nevertheless offer an example of graphic use where the community of readers is generally aligned with that of the scribes.

<sup>66</sup> The ontological turn in anthropology is evident in the broader imputation of agency to nonhuman beings and artifacts. For a recent synthesis and discussion of the consequences of this turn for the analysis of ritual artifacts, see Carlos Fausto, *Art Effects: Image, Agency, and Ritual in Amazonia* (Lincoln, NE, 2020), 1–28.

relationship do these constituent elements have with the efficacy of the stick as a pictographic writing? And what kind of effectiveness is attributed to their assemblage as such?

Let us address the first question. Whether each individual stick should be treated as a kind of “pictographic page” is not a purely theoretical issue. We know of cases where similar artifacts have provided means of interhuman communication. A historical anecdote from a nearby region offers an example. A diary entry written by an anonymous French officer in 1739 describes how besieged Chickasaw addressed a “reed cane” to their assailants (the French and their Native allies).<sup>67</sup> By this means, they proposed to open peace negotiations. Those who produced this instrument—a reed adorned with an assemblage of items—were obviously confident in its capacity to relay a message to anonymous readers, albeit expecting them to belong to their own cultural, if not linguistic, community. It seems to me especially significant that the message was then correctly deciphered, with each element of the assemblage attached to the reed taken into account. But does this precedent allow us to interpret each Pawnee stick as an assemblage of pictographs, as the selectivity model would propose? In other words, is it possible to link each element that adorns the stick—beads, scalp locks, tobacco, and so on—to part of a formula, such as the Smoke Offering Song, as words on a page?

In the Pawnee case, Murie’s comments do not provide a compelling clue as to whether there is a direct correspondence between the visual form of each stick and what may have been the repeated formula of the offerings.<sup>68</sup> The repetition of the sticks from which the chart is fashioned—their puzzling sameness—might have been a way of rendering visually the repetition

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<sup>67</sup> *Journal de la guerre du Micissippi contre les Chicachas, En 1739 et finie en 1740, le 1er d’Avril. Par un Officier de l’Armée de M. de Nouaille* (New York, 1859), 44–45. Pawnee arrow shafts—a kind of stick—could bear personal marks denoting the owner and could be used as signs; see Dunbar, “History and Ethnology,” 278.

<sup>68</sup> Compare Loftin, “Supplication and Participation,” 180–98, on the case of Hopi ritual sticks.



of the formula addressed to the celestial being. At the same time, the sequence the circuit follows and the specific location of each stick makes reference to the roster of names, that is, the variables, in the formula. Each stick can thus be construed as the picture-as-text of an incomplete prayer formula. The image and the formula are deemed “completed” when every stick is staked in the place where it corresponds to the being to whom it is addressed.

My interpretation of the Pawnee ritual sticks highlights their relationship to the conventional principles of Native American pictography. This perspective, however, is only evident from the standpoint of those who write. Should we believe that this standpoint accounts for all of the possible visual properties that can be detected or responded to in these artifacts? Let us come to the second question posed above, regarding the visual efficacy of the sticks. Two complementary aspects of the reaction of the Heavenly Powers are highlighted in the words of the Pawnee priests collected around 1900: these beings “are gladdened” and can therefore fix their attention, their gaze.<sup>69</sup> It is this benevolent attention triggered by the appropriate use of the artifact—appropriate gestures as well as the words, rhythm, and tonal pattern of the songs—that produces the effects sought by the ritual.

The centrality of vision is a point worth examining. As Parks and Wedel observe, Pawnee do not easily partake in the widespread “visionary complex” of the Plains groups.<sup>70</sup> Dreams or visions do occur, but they are less common and usually involve the visionary traveling to one of

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<sup>69</sup> Commenting on Paruksti or Wonderful Being’s journey, Murie (*Ceremonies*, 1:49) notes: “he pauses at B and shouts (thunder); then he opens his eyes to look about (lightning) . . . In the same way as Wonderful Being made the initial journey to the world, the power of life is sent forth anew by the thunders every spring. It is through the clouds that the thunder speaks to, and the lightning vitalizes, the earth.” On the distinction between *kawaha·ru’* (fortune, bringing luck) and *waruks·ti* endowed at the creation, see Murie, *Ceremonies*, 1:71. See also Linton, *Thunder Ceremony*, 13–14; Fletcher, *Hako*, 40, 51–55, 148–52; Parks, “Editor’s Introduction,” 12; and Weltfish, *Lost Universe*, 158.

<sup>70</sup> Ruth Fulton Benedict, “The Vision in Plains Culture,” *American Anthropologist* 24, no. 1 (1922): 1–23; Parks and Wedel, “Pawnee Geography,” 143–44.

the several “holy grounds” or “animal lodges” that the Pawnee locate in their former territory in Nebraska. Nevertheless, there are many accounts of visions offered by celestial beings. On the one hand, it seems that looking at or envisioning celestial beings, from the standpoint of human writers, is a sure way to be guided.<sup>71</sup> Through the vision, the celestial being provides instructions for assembling an artifact—whether it be a sacred bundle, feathered stem (as in the Hako), or ritual stick—and the specific words to sing while holding it. On the other hand, these instruments offer a way to accomplish the reverse operation—to guide the gaze of a Heavenly Power. Through the rite, the formal account of a vision as well as the depiction of the achievements of a celestial being compel the latter to look and see.

According to Fletcher’s report of the explanation of the Hako ceremony offered by the Chawi priest (*kurahus*) Tahirussawichi, “All the good, all the happiness that comes to those who take part in these rites have been promised in a dream, and the dreams which brought this ceremony and its promises came from the east; they always descend from above by that path.”<sup>72</sup> Inasmuch as a Heavenly Power recognizes himself in the depiction of his own achievements, he is bound to his promises, and bound to send his gifts from where he stands—hence the effectiveness of the chart as a topology. This recognition requires compliance with the rules surrounding the correct figuration of the chart, as well as the appropriate words, gestures, and mental attitude, which were transmitted through a vision. Without them, neither the image nor the words are compelling. The request reminding the entity of its promise, if poorly stated, depicted, or written, produces no gaze-game, and therefore no gift. Thus, the offerings of smoke, corn, meat, and scalp locks are not so much offered to the celestial being or its “effigy” so much as they visually prefigure or anticipate the gifts he or she ought to direct toward the people.

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<sup>71</sup> Fletcher, *Hako*, 152.

<sup>72</sup> Fletcher, *Hako*, 150. See also Murie, *Ceremonies*, 1:62.

The stick is at the same time a messenger, a path, a message, and a voice.<sup>73</sup> The ornaments (beads, scalp locks, pericardium, etc.) that adorn Pawnee ritual sticks emphasize the relationships that bind the artifact to a community, which is identified with its sacred bundle, especially since the bundle provides all the items that “clothe” the sticks.<sup>74</sup> From the point of view of a defined being, each ritual stick, once stuck into the ground at the right place, thus offers a correct figuration of the relations that define that being.<sup>75</sup>

What do the celestial beings see when they fix their gaze on the Pawnee sticks? I suggest that each ritual stick, despite its sameness, likely functions as a kind of portrait in the eyes of the entity being called upon—one that is at least pleasing to the eye, if not a faithful likeness.<sup>76</sup> The sticks, taken individually, do not attempt to convey the visual appearance of a prototype, nor do they seek to make the entities present in the ritual space, to offer them a body, a materialization, an effigy in which they could come to dwell. Rather, each stick serves as a site of attraction as much as a site of denotation.<sup>77</sup> As I understand it, each stick is as much a “portrait-attractor” of an entity as it is an image of the request formulated by the officiant. It is effective precisely because it combines both functions. Moreover, I suggest that the participants themselves partially identify with both the sticks and the entities to which the rite is addressed. When the offerings

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<sup>73</sup> Murie, *Ceremonies*, 1:44, 56–58, 87; Fletcher, *Hako*, 18, 20–23, 126, 366.

<sup>74</sup> For a suggestive affinity between sticks and the “clothing” of dead bodies, see Murie, *Ceremonies*, 1:179n27.

<sup>75</sup> On the notion of constitutive relations, see Anne-Christine Taylor, “Les masques de la mémoire,” *L’Homme* 165 (2003): 245.

<sup>76</sup> See Murie, *Ceremonies*, 1:65.

<sup>77</sup> Navajo prayer sticks perform as the portrait of a specific deity, and therefore are deemed to attract him or her, compelling him or her to enjoy self-contemplation. They operate as what Déléage (“Pictographies narratives,” 762) has defined as “ontological attractors” in his analysis of Navajo sandpainting. The notion of attraction, in a similar context, is put forward by Fausto (*Art Effects*, 210) with regard to the ceremonial effigy used in the Javari festival among the Kuikuro in the Upper Xingu region (lowland Amazonia).

are to be made and the sticks prepared, all participants in the lodge must smear their bodies and faces with buffalo grease and red pigment, taken from the bundle, just as the sticks are.<sup>78</sup> We also perceive this idea in the priest's concluding speech: "we have now gone through the ceremony ... It is for that reason that you, priests, entered this lodge, and sit upright in a circle in the lodge, sitting in the places of the gods; that you sit upright, as they do, sitting close together. You sit in their places, and we offer stories and rituals that they recited in the ancient times of the former priests, who long ago sat in the places where you now sit."<sup>79</sup>

Michael Houseman and Carlo Severi, in their theory of ritual action, dubbed such a mechanism "condensation." A multiplicity of representations and functions, typically distinct, condense into a single individual or artifact.<sup>80</sup> Pawnee ritual sticks, because they figuratively condense a portrait and a statement, and because they ontologically unite an entity and an officiant, are related to what Severi has called "complex enunciators."<sup>81</sup> To look at these images is also to read them, and above all to make the request they articulate one's own. "Look at me saying what you ought to say," urges the officiant as he plants the sticks into the ground, which also means "look at yourself saying it."

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Why write in a ritual setting with sticks, or with any other type of image that functions as selective writing—as pictography? What kind of literacy is involved in the reading and writing

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<sup>78</sup> Murie, *Ceremonies*, 1:58.

<sup>79</sup> Linton, *Thunder Ceremony*, 18–19.

<sup>80</sup> Michael Houseman and Carlo Severi, *Naven or the Other Self: A Relational Approach to Ritual Action* (Leiden, 1998). See also Fausto, *Art Effects*, 35–44, 199.

<sup>81</sup> Carlo Severi, "La parole prêtée: Comment parlent les images," *Cahiers d'anthropologie sociale* 5, no. 1 (2009): 25.

of such images? While requiring further research, my provisional answer to these questions would be this. The narratives and sacred words of chants are guidance, and picture-writing is intended to visually capture the sequence as well as the territory of that guidance. Writing and reading, as understood in Pawnee tradition, are deemed the surest ways to guide and be guided by images representing narratives. Picture-writing with sticks does not simply frame the interaction or mirror the words being sung. It produces images endowed with an agency of their own—an agency that is displayed as part of a gaze-game. Analysis of the sticks therefore entails at least two dimensions, one semiotic and the other ontological.

#### FIGURE CAPTIONS

Figure 1. James R. Murie (with hat) and the priest (*kurahus*) John Buffalo (with blanket), before 1912. Silver nitrate negative. National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian Institution, neg. T1681.

Figure 2. The Chawi priest (*kurahus*) Tahirussawichi, 1900. Glass negative. National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian Institution, neg. 01282-A. Photo by De Lancey Gill.

Figure 3. “Bundle scheme” of the Skiri federation. Layout observed during the “Four-Pole” ceremony. From James R. Murie, *Ceremonies of the Pawnee. Part 1: The Skiri*, ed. Douglas R. Parks (Washington, DC, 1981), 73.

Figure 4. Photograph and diagram of the stellar chart of the Big Black Meteoric Star bundle. Skiri Pawnee, Oklahoma. Nineteenth century or earlier. Original on deer hide (tanned), in Field Museum of Natural History, Chicago, cat. no. 71898. From James R. Murie, *Ceremonies of the Pawnee. Part 1: The Skiri*, ed. Douglas R. Parks (Washington, DC, 1981), 96.

Figure 5. The “creation of the world songs” narrating the female and the male “steps” of Paruksti/Wonderful Being upon the earth. Temporal and spatial values are condensed. Parallelism and recursive structure convey the notions of comprehensiveness and motion. Diagram: author.

Figure 6. An Iroquois war record or warrior “portrait” copied from an engraved board, ca. 1666. From a memoir attributed to Pierre-Joseph-Marie Chaumonot, “Mémoire concernant la nation iroquoise,” Aix-en-Provence, Archives Nationales des Outre-Mer, C11 A2, fols. 263–69.

Figure 7. Stations and circuit of offerings during the renewal of the Evening Star bundle of the Skiri. Numbers represent positions and order; solid circles represent lodge posts. From James R. Murie, *Ceremonies of the Pawnee. Part 1: The Skiri*, ed Douglas R. Parks (Washington, DC, 1981), 59.