

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Great Plains Quarterly

Great Plains Studies, Center for

Winter 1983

Review of *Ceremonies of the Pawnee. Part I, The Skiri. Part II, The South Bands* By James R. Murie

Paul A. Olson

University of Nebraska-Lincoln, polson2@unl.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly>



Part of the [Other International and Area Studies Commons](#)

Olson, Paul A., "Review of *Ceremonies of the Pawnee. Part I, The Skiri. Part II, The South Bands* By James R. Murie" (1983). *Great Plains Quarterly*. 1731.

<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly/1731>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Great Plains Studies, Center for at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Great Plains Quarterly by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

Ceremonies of the Pawnee. Part I, *The Skiri*. Part II, *The South Bands*. By James R. Murie. Edited by Douglas R. Parks. Smithsonian Contributions to Anthropology no. 27. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1981. Notes, figures, illustration, appendixes, indexes. 2 vols., 497 pp.

After sixty years the Smithsonian Institution has finally published James R. Murie's work on Pawnee ceremonies in a handsome set of two volumes, impeccably edited by Douglas R. Parks. Murie, part Pawnee and somewhat trained in the techniques of anthropological investigation, began serious study of his own tribe in the 1890s and completed it in 1921 shortly before his death. Through much of his career he worked with white anthropologists such as Alice Fletcher, George Grinnell, Owen Dorsey, and Clark Wissler, some of whom gave him scant credit for his assistance in their research and publications. These volumes were begun in collaboration with Wissler but completed with Murie working virtually alone. Because the Smithsonian was short of money at that time, their publication was indefinitely postponed. From 1929 to 1931 Gene Weltfish revised Murie's linguistic transcriptions to make them conform with Franz Boas's notions of phonetic transcription. In 1936 the Smithsonian again seemed ready to publish the material, but it ultimately remained for Douglas Parks to get the job done.

Parks has adopted a conservative editing procedure. He has improved the style of the material, particularly in the second volume, for which Murie had little help from Wissler. Explanatory notes have been added throughout and a few "glaring inaccuracies" have been corrected. Parks's most extensive editing is of

Murie's transcriptions of the ceremonial songs in Pawnee (which Weltfish had also revised). Parks, who has an excellent command of Pawnee, has authoritatively set the material in a style compatible with contemporary phonemic theory. He has also retranslated the ceremonial songs into simple English. New introductions, a full bibliography, and a sympathetic biography of Murie have been added.

This work is valuable for Great Plains literary scholarship in that it provides a good translation of Pawnee ceremonial "dramas" and songs, which are as fine and powerful in their way as ancient Greek dramas. Such was the opinion of Hartley Burr Alexander, a notable classicist, whose own translations of Pawnee ceremonies are phrased in rather pompous Victorian diction. On the other hand, Alice Fletcher's efforts are based on a rather wild theory of how Pawnee verse ought to be put into English. More recent translations have treated the Pawnee ceremonial dramas as if they had been written by imagists who, having found a good image, put a bad ceremony around it. Yet the power of Pawnee ceremonial poetry or drama lies in the structure of the whole work: ceremonial action, iterative metaphor, and dance—all played out against a coherent and sacred theory of the universe. One hopes that Parks's literal translations will attract skilled poets capable of capturing in English the poetic qualities of the Pawnee materials. Such an achievement would not only help us to understand a distinctive form of verse, but also render accessible a way of treating the Plains landscape and life that is now lost to most of us.

Parks's work is also potentially useful for iconological and iconographical studies of Plains Indian culture. Scholars such as Erwin Panofsky and Rosamund Tuve revolutionized the study of medieval and renaissance European literature and art by making the idioms of those periods penetrable to modern readers. Their approach could be equally useful in the study of Plains Indian art forms.

Consider the following commentary on the calumet ceremony:

The main idea in the Skiri ritual is the series of songs about the bird's nest; the people sitting inside the enclosure are figuratively in the nest, and the song steps recount the coming of life in the eggs and the final flight of the birds into the heavens. . . .

In the Arikara Calumet, there was a basket with a hole in the bottom through which water was run upon children, but the significance of this is not known to me. The Kitkahahki band had a different Calumet. The Skiri make special claim that the ritual was originated by them and passed on to others. In the Skiri version the vertical marks on the ear of corn represented rainstorms and the different powers—thunder, lightning, and winds. They mixed the milk of green corn with blue paint and painted the corn, the blue color representing the sky. (2: 154)

The symbolism contained in this passage (nest and bird, vertical marks on corn, and the blue color of the corn) is a part of an iconology that conveys conventionalized meanings to other ceremonies and stories (e.g., Changing Mother Corn). Just as children in our society are introduced to the meanings of words through use in a variety of contexts, so Indian children were exposed to a conceptual system with a religious symbolic base and to conventionalized meanings of ceremonial objects through the entertainment of bedtime and sacred stories. Such meanings reveal the value system of a given culture and constitute the central knowledge (beyond mere survival techniques) that one generation transmits to another.

Contemporary scholarship tends to treat storytelling and the visual arts as having unique meanings wholly produced by the immediate context. This notion makes the concept of culture impossible. Given this development, it would be useful if books such as Murie's could be used to formulate iconological indexes for Pawnee culture and, through the use of comparative techniques, for all Great Plains Indian cultures. If this were done, we could know what meanings have been carried across the years; our study of the literature and art of

the Great Plains would be correspondingly enhanced.

PAUL A. OLSON
Department of English
University of Nebraska-Lincoln