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**Author**

Risch, Barbara

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# A Grammar of Time: Lakota Winter Counts, 1700–1900

**BARBARA RISCH**

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## INTRODUCTION

History, in any culture, may be conceived of as the narrative organization and interpretation of events completed in a recent or remote past. The kinds of events represented in a historical text as well as the pattern of narrative organization would naturally reflect and reinforce cultural beliefs, including notions of temporal order. The Lakota, or Sioux, of the nineteenth century and earlier preserved both tribal and band histories; there were many such records reported among different Lakota groups. Other tribes known to have kept yearly historical records include the Mandan, Blackfeet, Ponca, and Kiowa.<sup>1</sup>

The first reported European contact with the Teton Sioux on the Plains was by the French in the mid-1600s. Among the numerous reasons for the tribe's westward migration from the Great Lakes region were war and economic pressures, for the Chippewa, the Teton's longstanding enemy, had obtained guns early from French traders. Today, the political divisions and designations of the Sioux people correspond to their geographical location after progressive migrations: the Santee remain the farthest east, the Yankton ventured a bit west, and the Teton migrated still farther in the westerly direction. The dialects of the language also roughly correspond to these geographic divisions: Dakota is spoken to the east, Nakota in the center, and Lakota to the west.<sup>2</sup>

Traditionally, calendrical records of the year were textualized in a series of pictographs called *winter counts* or *counting back*, which were kept by members of the tribe known as winter counters, a responsibility and honor generally passed from father to son. The use of the word *winter* instead of *year* stems from the fact that the Lakota calendar reckoned time differently than the

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Barbara Risch is the chair of the departments of English and Philosophy at New Mexico Highlands University where she teaches English linguistics and writing. The work for this article was conducted during a sabbatical leave granted by the university.

Roman calendar, and so had no equivalent for the English word *year*. A year in a winter count spans parts of two years on the Roman calendar. In Lakota reckoning, four distinctions of time were recognized: day, night, moon, and year.<sup>3</sup> Twelve moons comprised the year, “for which twenty seven days are marked off on the pipestem; then the moon ‘dies’ and three days are passed before another one rises and the count is resumed.”<sup>4</sup> The winter season completed the year and in references to the past, winter meant a completed year.

The seven distinct traditions that have been identified in Sioux winter counts reflect the seven bands of the Teton.<sup>5</sup> The word *Teton* is derived from *tintatunwan*, which is conventionally glossed as “prairie dwellers,” where *prairie* specifically implies the space beyond which all other villagers dwell (see table 1). The Teton traditionally referred to themselves as *Oceti sakowin*, usually translated “seven council fires” (from *oceti*, or fireplace, and *sakowin*, or seven). The term *fireplace*, which may also indicate a particular position in the lodge circle, serves as a metaphor for various levels of social organization.<sup>6</sup>

Originally, each winter or year was identified by the pictorial representation of an event incised and painted on hide and later on paper or muslin, indicating its narrative function. The event to be rendered, as well as the symbols themselves, were decided upon by the band historian in consultation with tribal elders. Many forms of spiritual power, or medicine, were associated with particular images and material objects. Winter counts could be destroyed, replaced, or copied as long as the one who reproduced them had the right to do so. In this way, they retained their spiritual power.<sup>8</sup> On certain occasions, such as peace smokes, the historian might be called upon to lead an oratory of the public record about a significant event. On such occasions, he would unroll the picture hide or open the cloth or book and, relying on the images of the pictographic record, recount a narrative. The visual symbols served as a key to narrative memory.<sup>9</sup> With regular use, the symbols and the themes of related narratives were continually re-clarified and reinforced for both the count keeper and others.<sup>10</sup>

Within Lakota culture, winter counts served at least two important social functions. First, the record was used as a calendar by which past events could

Division	Gloss
Teton	Prairie Dwellers
Oglala	They Scatter Their Own
Sicangu	Burned Thighs (Brule, Fr.)
Hunkpapa	End of the Circle
Mnikowoju	Planters Beside the Stream
Sihasapa	Black Foot
Ooheunpa	Two Boilings or Two Kettle
Itazipeo	Without Bows (Sans Arcs, Fr.) <sup>7</sup>

**Table 1** The seven divisions of the Teton (Lakota).

be located in time. Early investigators report that the community was acquainted well enough with the record that it could be referred to for everyday purposes. Turn-of-the-century Plains Indians, when questioned, could identify the pictograph on winter counts that indicated the year they were born.<sup>11</sup> Second and more socially significant, winter counts served as a medium of moral and social instruction. When keepers of the count delivered their oration, they would tell more than the names of winters. They would also interweave traditional stories, including accounts of battles, horse-capture, celestial events, and other engaging tales of social significance. Further, the keeper would enfold such tales within narratives of the sacred dimension, outside the realm of human time.<sup>12</sup>

Narrative is a pervasive force of human cognition. Cultural texts are shaped by multiple narratives, including visual imagery and the drama of storytelling and ritual. Stories are our chief means of looking into the past and future, of explaining, changing, predicting, evaluating, and planning. It is a human framework for seeing the world around us in a way that makes sense of the past, future, and present.<sup>13</sup>

Humans are text-producing creatures. To some extent, the shape of narrative is mediated by their culture. However, across cultures and genres, participants in the recounting and enacting of a narrative are situated in a different spatial and temporal framework than the story's events and actors; narratives refer to events outside immediate space and time. Recounting or enacting a narrative is a mimetic or representational process and can be achieved through a variety of media.

A narrative, then, may be recounted orally, committed to writing, acted out by a group of actors or a single actor, presented in wordless pantomime, or represented as a sequence of visual images, with or without words,... with or without sounds, speech, music and written language.<sup>14</sup>

Though sequential order was maintained in the winter counts, there was no standard arrangement pattern for the pictographic symbols. Traditionally, counts on hide were arranged in a spiral pattern, circling outward from the center, or spiraling inward from the edge. In counts on rectangular cloth, the count might be arranged in rows. If reading began in the upper left-hand corner, the first row might be read from left to right, the second from right to left, and so on, forming a boustrophedon pattern. Other counts on muslin display a spiral arrangement, while still others may be read in a direct row from beginning to end. Battiste Good's winter count, now in the possession of the Smithsonian Institute, reads from the back to the front of a drawing book.

They [pictographs] were arranged spirally or lineally, or in serpentine curves, by boustrophedon or direct, starting backward from the last year shown, or proceeding uniformly forward from the first year selected or remembered. Any mode that would accomplish the object of continuity with the means of regular addition seemed to be equally acceptable.<sup>15</sup>

James Howard<sup>16</sup> notes three successive changes in the winter count medium. Incised and painted bison hide was used first but was replaced by paper or muslin during the reservation period. Both of these forms used pictographs to textualize a visual narrative; pictographs were painted on the new materials in the same manner as they had been painted on hides. After they had learned to read and write in their own language, a third kind of text developed among the Lakota. Pictographs were eliminated entirely and brief verbal explanations of former symbols stood in their place. Usually, some variant of the Lakota alphabet developed by the Reverend Stephen Riggs was used with an English translation provided then or later.<sup>17</sup> The count of White Bull, a Mnikowoju, is one such example. Having learned to read and write, he examined a pictographic text and then provided a verbal transcription of each year's event in a book purchased for that reason.<sup>18</sup>

There is much variation in the verbal translations of pictographic winter counts, which typically only name the winter and provide no apparent clue to the narrative substance of the event and its relation to other narratives. Some of the variation for particular counts has been attributed to the confusion caused by the shift from pictographic to alphabetic writing. With only the names for the winters recorded in Lakota and with the social context for the production and use of the texts at the end of the nineteenth century changing, there was great potential for confusion.<sup>19</sup>

The bulk of research on winter counts has been comparative. Howard has suggested that they are a valuable source for studying change in the Lakota language as well as a permanent record of Lakota history. Below, he describes avenues of inquiry that have since been pursued in related research:

I undertook the present study with the object of determining the relative accuracy of various counts by comparing them with one another and related historic data. As the work progressed, several interesting additional uses suggested themselves. The counts might be used as a means of studying intertribal intercourse in the proto historic and early historic periods. They might also be used to determine tribal locations and the dates of the introduction of important features of Dakota culture, such as the earth lodge, the horse and the sun dance. By emphasis, and reason for being noted by the maker of the count, it seems that the events selected reveal much of the ethos for the Dakota culture for the period they cover.<sup>20</sup>

However, much critical analysis of winter counts remains limited to establishing chronology and assessing the accuracy or validity of the events portrayed. Though findings are prolific, such studies have yet to reveal a coherent or meaningful interpretive structure for the portrayal of the pictographs themselves. Instead, the brief and often contradictory verbal translations are interpreted by comparison to Euramerican historical records as well as other winter counts.

Related work has used the pictographs to comment on the worldview or attitudes of the Lakota people. Stephen Fereca sees the narrative events of the count, with repeated scenes of battle, disease, and death, as a Native portrayal

that stands in stark contrast to the Euramerican romantic image that “the Indian existence was something resembling paradise.”<sup>21</sup> The events of winter counts have also been examined for the kinds of attitudes they might reflect of the Lakota people at a particular time. In a study of both verbal and pictographic texts, Elizabeth R. Henning found that in the period between 1790 and 1820 events referring to horse-capture, warfare, and non-Lakota contacts were highly textualized. In contrast, after 1820 references to food supplies, in-group relations, and religious and supernatural phenomena gained prominence.<sup>22</sup>

Here, our concern lies specifically with characterizing the pictographs that constitute winter counts. Though there is variation in the events portrayed among different traditions, there is nonetheless a remarkably high percentage of yearly designations that they share. Differences in portrayals for a particular year are attributed to changing social practice. In the latter half of the nineteenth century, several men in each sub-band might be designated to keep a count. Others seem to have been kept by individuals of their own volition. Winter counts were also beginning to be produced for sale or trade to whites. For example, not only did Good produce several versions of his pictographic winter count, but his son-in-law also continued producing them and made a business of selling them.<sup>23</sup> Conversely, the high degree of pictographic similarity among counts has been attributed to three factors: (1) count keepers living in close proximity and sharing or borrowing symbols; (2) extraordinary occurrences such as meteor showers, which might have taken precedence for representation; and (3) the increasing murder- and death-rates of prominent individuals.<sup>24</sup>

### WINTER COUNT AS CULTURAL NARRATIVE

In earlier times, the pictographs of winter counts were part of the text of the narrative history of the Lakota people. There is general agreement that Teton winter counts existed before white contact and that they were produced, used, and preserved as cultural texts. It is also generally conceded that an even older form of pictographic writing was employed for their composition. This means that there must have been pictographic textual conventions concerning the elements of the narrative to be rendered and their arrangement pattern. Unfortunately, studies have lacked a systematic description of the narrative framework mediating the visual text.

Invariably, many of the pictographic symbols constituting winter counts are said to represent an outstanding, important, or significant event of the year. The particular kind of significance or import, however, is often left to our own imaginings. Events of winter counts have also been characterized as depicting natural catastrophe, celestial acts, disease, battle, horse-capture, and death. In her study of fifteen winter counts, Henning employed eight categories for the analysis of narrative events. The categorization of events was based on information drawn from both the verbal and pictographic texts. Events were categorized based on whether or not they “incorporated references to” the following: (1) procurement; (2) natural phenomena; (3) in-group, or own band and other Lakota; (4) out-group, or non-Lakota; (5)

location; (6) religion or supernatural; (7) warfare or horses; and (8) whites.<sup>25</sup>

Though the above represents a fairly thorough framework for delineating narrative events in winter counts, some categories themselves seem more relevant to Western historical concerns. For example, it is doubtful that whites interacted with Plains Culture long enough to merit their own category of representation in a pictographic framework. Winter counts contain relatively few representations of whites. The category of procurement also seems decidedly Western, for it implies reference to the acquisition of property in the form of horses and other material goods. However, the Plains Indians generally “procured” their means through ceremony, hunting, battle, and horse-capture. While there are many scenes of battle in winter counts, there are fewer of ceremony and horse-capture, and fewer still of hunting scenes.

Various winter counts depict celestial events in the form of falling stars or meteor showers. Henning includes these in the narrative category of natural phenomena. However, in Lakota origin narratives, a sacred being who drops to earth in the form of a falling star transforms into White Buffalo Calf Woman. A lighted night sky in Lakota is called *hanwakan*, or sacred night. Therefore, the portrayal of celestial events in winter counts may have more to do with spiritual belief than with natural phenomena. In fact, the difference between natural and supernatural, so fundamental to Euramerican thought, was not significant to Lakota beliefs. For the Lakota, the important cognitive distinction was between the common or ordinary and the extraordinary or incomprehensible.<sup>26</sup>

Winter counts are not history in the Western sense and the events depicted, as well as their significance, will differ from Western historical scenarios. The value of winter counts lies in the fact that they provide a unique window into Lakota frameworks of narrative and the kinds of actions and events considered meaningful enough to record. The texts of winter counts allow the opportunity, however slight, to glimpse Lakota culture in the eighteenth and nineteenth century from their own point of view, in terms of the implied narratives they developed to remember about themselves. To that end, some general principles of Lakota beliefs, which are likely to contribute to the shaping of narratives, are to be acknowledged. Basic tenets of common knowledge in a culture, including notions of temporal order, would tend to be textualized in the organization of narrative frameworks.

Winter counts contain frequent portrayals of ceremony and ritual; portrayals that have been categorized as references to death are also numerous. In the Lakota cultural framework of the nineteenth century, the place of humans was well defined: through vision, ceremony, and thoughtful action, humans entered the realm of spiritual power. A person’s spirit, host, and familiar were *wakan*, or difficult to understand, ancient, old, and enduring, and never died.<sup>27</sup> Time was not considered a causal force, shaping events on a course of progress and change. Overall, history was sacred and the past, present, and future intersected. Or, as better stated in the oft-quoted words of Ella Deloria, “You see, we Indians lived in eternity.”<sup>28</sup>

In Euramerican culture, time is viewed as a commodity—we measure it, buy it, save it, spend it, and waste it. In contrast, Lakota winter counts do not suggest a

measured time but frame history as a series of events with no apparent connections between them. In Lakota oral tradition, there is a strong preference for narratives that depict relationships between humans and spirits in historical terms. In fact, the emphasis on the intersection of sacred time and historical events has been seen as a motif in Lakota oral narratives, which dramatize either the conditions under which people access the sacred or how sacred beings established relationships with people and taught them to use spiritual power. The emphasis was on an ongoing genesis, on how relations between humans and spirits are perpetuated.<sup>29</sup>

Typically, analytical categories devised by scholars to describe cultural texts are at odds with the genres recognized by the people themselves. However, a Lakota classification system for oral narrative that distinguishes four categories has been suggested by Deloria. This outline of traditional genres is said to imply a temporal and thematic continuum. At one end were the ancient tales, set in another age. At the other were historical accounts of the supernatural as known through experience.<sup>30</sup> Stephen R. Riggs also notes this distinction when he defines *hitunkankapi* in reference to tales, legend, and tradition, in contrast to *woyakapi*, or a declaration, narration, or history.<sup>31</sup>

According to Deloria, *ohunkakan* tales had primary supernatural and mythic elements and derived their authenticity and authority from the strength of tradition. They could be of two types: those situated in a remote past when the world was still in its formative period and those set in a more recent past with similar emphasis on the amazing and mysterious quality of the events. In contrast, *woyakapi* were tales told as if they occurred within the bounds of the historical memory of the tribe, drawing their authority and authenticity from the verification of experience. They also took two forms: those referring to events in which someone was aided by supernatural powers and narratives of a more local domain that recall past events of the band and tribe. It has been suggested that as the twentieth century drew nearer, oral narratives that verified spiritual beliefs in historical experience became more frequently practiced.<sup>32</sup> Further, the very fact that Lakota oral tradition has persisted is attributed to its incorporation of ritual and spiritual, specifically as they hold meaning for day-to-day life.<sup>33</sup> The pictographs of winter counts should share meaningful narrative properties with oral tradition.

## MATERIALS

This article attempts to formally describe the picture writing of the Teton (Lakota), specifically the conventions of winter counts, through the analysis of five texts. Winter counts from five different traditions were examined: Brule (Battiste Good), Oglala (American Horse), Mnikowaju (Little-Swan), and Two-Kettle (Flame/Blaze). For comparison, the count of Lone-Dog, a Yanktonai (Nakota), is also included. All copies of the counts were obtained between 1870 and 1880 and later published by Garrick Mallery.<sup>34</sup> All begin between 1700 and 1800 and end before 1900.

Battiste Good's winter count was obtained by William H. Corbusier, a surgeon in the US Army, between 1879 and 1880. Good, born in 1821–1822 and otherwise known as Brown Hat, was then living at the Rosebud Agency. The copy was made in an ordinary drawing book with the first record beginning



on the last page; the winter count represents the years 1700–1701 through 1879–1880. Good provided brief verbal descriptions of the pictographs, which were translated into English by Reverend William J. Cleveland of the agency.

A copy of American Horse's count was obtained by Mallery around 1880. American Horse, an Oglala then living at Pine Ridge, said that his grandfather started the winter count and that he and his father had contributed to its production. Mallery himself received explanations for the events through an interpreter. The count represents the years 1775–1776 through 1878–1879.

The record of Little-Swan, which he said had been in his family for seventy years, was painted in a spiral pattern on the dressed skin of an antelope or deer and represented the years 1800–1801 through 1870–1871. Washington West, an assistant Army surgeon at the Cheyenne Agency between 1868 and 1870, employed an Indian to make a copy of the count on cotton. Like Little-Swan, the owner and interpreter of the cloth was Mnikowoju.<sup>35</sup>

Flame (also translated Blaze), who lived with the Sans Arc but was reportedly Two-Kettle by birth, was living near Fort Sully, Dakota in 1877 when a copy of his winter count was made. Explanations for the events were elicited directly from Flame by the interpreter at Fort Sully. The copy was made on cotton cloth, with the first pictograph appearing in the lower left corner, reading toward the right, and the next line above reading from right to left, in a serpentine manner, culminating in seven lines of figures. Flame's winter count represents the years 1786–1787 through 1876–1877.<sup>36</sup>

Lone-Dog, a Yanktonai, was living near Fort Peck, Montana in 1876 when his count was copied onto cotton cloth from a buffalo robe. Arranged in a spiral pattern that began at the center of the hide, the pictographs represent the years 1800–1801 through 1870–1871. At the time the copy was made, Lone-Dog was an elderly man. Interpretations of the pictographs were obtained by Lieutenant Reed, and then later, in November of 1876, by Mallery. Begun before his birth, the winter count had apparently been in Lone-Dog's possession and had been produced by him since his youth. According to Mallery's informants, the count was widely known by the Indians from their own copies.

## METHODS

After an initial review of pictographic and verbal representations in the five winter counts, the following set of narrative categories, in alphabetical order, was posited for use in analysis:

**Battle.** Confrontation with the enemy in groups. For the most part, these disputes are expected. The enemy may be further distinguished by whether or not they were Indian, though confrontations with whites are extremely rare.

**Bizarre Events.** What insurance companies today might call acts of God. Examples include flood, fire, trees falling on people, and the like.

**Celestial Events.** References to the stars and heavens.

**Ceremonial and Spiritual Events.** Reference to prayer and dance ceremony, including those associated with war, or to objects representing such ceremony.

**Condition.** These are references to seasonal weather and food supply, specifically events of plenty or intense winter weather conditions. Freezing temperatures or deep snow implies hunger or starvation.

**Cultural Introductions.** The first time for something. Some items are borrowed from other Indian tribes. Whites themselves are a cultural introduction along with such white cultural items as whiskey, guns, horseshoes, kettles, annuities, and schools.

**Disease or Epidemic.** That is, a disease of epidemic proportions or one that afflicts or kills a great number of people.

**Horse-capture.** These typically refer to Lakota captures, but the capture of Lakota horses also appears.

**Killing or Execution.** Generally considered a sneak attack, these are limited primarily to individuals and occasionally to groups of two to four. This category includes murder, attacks on Lakota, and Lakota attacks on other tribes.

**Natural Death.** Death by natural causes, including accident, age, and illness.

**Peace Talks.** These may be further distinguished by whether or not the other party was for or against the tribe.

The five winter counts were studied individually. First, each representation was assigned to one of the eleven narrative categories defined above. Then the narrative events of each category were examined with particular attention given to the textualization of specific case roles.

For the actions and events of a narrative to take place, the structure requires an actor and often something that is acted upon. Narratives are composed of a limited set of thematic or semantic roles, like those of agent (actor) and patient (acted upon). These thematic roles imply a framework for the actions of objects, humans, and other beings in a narrative progression.<sup>37</sup> The thematic or semantic roles relevant to the descriptive analysis of narrative events in winter counts would include the following:

**Agent.** The doer responsible for an action or event physically taking place. An agent must have will and volition and is therefore animate.

**Force.** The role of things considered to initiate action. Unlike humans and other animals, force has no sense of individual purpose. Examples include lightning, fire, and rain.

**Goal.** The direction in which something goes; may or may not be animate.

**Instrument.** The means by which something is done; specifically the thing used to achieve some end.

**Location.** The role of the place in which an event occurs.

**Mover.** A person or object that performs an overt action, but not on another physical object.

**Path.** The route by which something moves from one place to another.

**Patient.** The role of a being or thing that is affected by the action or event. A patient is that which is acted upon. It is also the role of a being or object that is simply present at the event.

**Source.** The place or direction from which something comes. The source is usually a location, but may be an animate being.

After assignment of a particular pictograph to one of eleven narrative categories, the individual events of each category were described by establishing a meaningful correspondence between the verbal translation, the pictographic representation, and thematic or case roles. For example, a narrative event from Flame's winter count, one of cultural introduction, would be described as such:

**1802–1803:** "First shod horses seen by the Indians."

**Pictograph:** a horseshoe.

**Role:** Instrument (of cultural introduction).

After the analysis of individual events, an attempt was made to characterize the pattern of the category through the textualization of specific case roles. In a pictographic representation, at least one case role will be obligatory while others may be optional.

## RESULTS

Based on a cursory review of the surface structure of the pictographs of winter counts, eleven narrative categories were originally proposed. However, as the case-role analysis progressed, these apparent characterizations did not hold and only four structurally distinct kinds of narrative events emerged: (1) Contest; (2) Used-up; (3) Ceremonial Exchange; and (4) Celestial Events.

### Contest

Narratives of contest include scenes that refer to battle, horse-capture, and the

hunt. In all representations of death in battle, whether the death of an individual or group, the role of patient, the one being killed, is obligatory. That is, it is always textualized in the pictography. In most cases it is an enemy, but the Lakota also occasionally show up as the defeated, particularly to signify the passing of noted individuals. Figure 1 is a representation of the same event from the winter counts of Battiste Good and Flame. Good's (left) reads: "1793-'94. Killed-a-long-haired man at rawhide Butte winter." The same event in Flame's record (right) appears for the year 1794-1795 and reads: "A Mandan chief killed a noted Dakota chief with remarkably long hair and took his scalp."

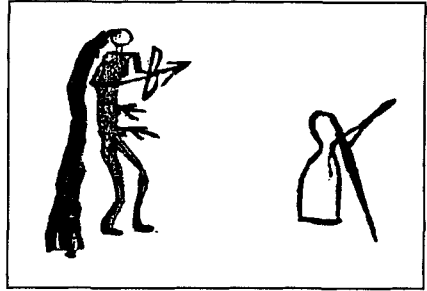


Figure 1 Killed a long-haired Indian.

In the verbal translation of Good's record, it is not clear whether the long-haired Indian was Lakota, but it is likely; in Flame's, he is a "noted Dakota chief." The pictograph in Good's rendering is more embellished, but that is indicative of his style throughout. What is significant is that both representations are the same in that they show the patient, in this case the long-haired Indian, as well as the instrument of his death. In both pictographs, the long-haired Indian is defeated by instruments of war, either dirks or arrows. In pictographs that refer to death in battle, particularly those that represent the death of an individual, the instrument of death commonly appears. Though not obligatory, its textualization is highly likely.

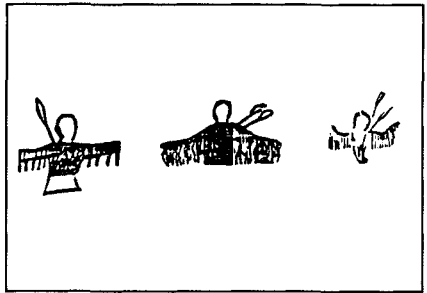


Figure 2 Brave-Bear.

In records that represent individuals who died in battle, the people are typically of some note and have served as leaders. Their identity is commonly indicated by a name glyph, but may be signified in other ways. With respect to the manner of Indian names, Mallery quotes a Captain Carver, who spent time with the Sioux from 1766 until 1777:

the chiefs are distinguished by a name that has either some reference to their abilities or to the hieroglyphic of their families, and these are acquired after they have arrived at the age of manhood. Such as [those who] ... are possessed of some eminent qualification receive a name that serves to perpetuate the fame of their actions or to make their abilities conspicuous.<sup>38</sup>

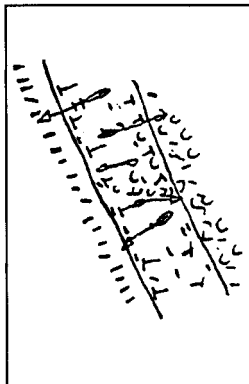
Among Plains Indian men, three types of names were conferred: nicknames, war-deed names, and medicine names. Nicknames, given in childhood by fam-

ily and friends, were likely to refer to personal or physical characteristics. War-deed names were conferred as an honor for accomplishments in battle. Lakota men often received such names on the occasion of their first coup or victory. Medicine names were based on correspondence to narratives of spiritual realms and came from myth. War-deed and medicine names were considered powerful, provided their forebears had shown strength of character in spirit and deed. This system of naming refers to both the everyday and the sacred, with the intersection of these identities in the context of battle.

In scenes of death in battle, an individual's identity could also be represented by an emblem of honor. Figure 2 provides representations of the year 1854–1855 from the counts of Flame, Lone-Dog, and Little-Swan, from left to right. All represent the death of Brave-Bear, whose identity is not indicated by a name glyph, but is more specifically related to the spiritual realm and the referent embodied by the medicine shirt. The arrows indicate the means of his death and his arms, raised and outstretched, reflect a ceremonial gesture.



**Figure 3** Fight-on-the-ice-winter.



**Figure 4** Fight with the Pawnee.

The narrative structure, in terms of thematic or semantic roles, is the same for figures 1 and 2. The role of patient, the one who dies, is textualized along with the instrument of his death, in this case arrows. Further, in pictographs that refer to a bloody confrontation between large numbers of people the visual text is patterned on the same thematic roles as it is when a single person is killed. The role of patient, the group being killed, is always represented. The role of instrument, though not obligatory, is also common. Figure 3 is from Good's record for the year 1836–1837 and reads, "Fight-on-the-ice-winter," describing a fight with the Pawnee that took place on the Platte River.

The Pawnee are identified by their tribal designation, the cuffed moccasins. Again, the figure represents the patient, or the Pawnee, who were defeated. The bow and arrow in hand, as well as the arrows in the gut and leg, represent the instruments of battle and the means of death. At the bottom of the representation are two opposing arrows with a vertical line through each. These opposing figures are said to represent the position of opposing warriors: "the two vertical marks, which are for the banks of the river, and the two opposed arrows, signify the tribes were on the opposite sides of the river."<sup>39</sup>

Scenes that reflect a contest or confrontation between large numbers of people begin to take on the look of a map. Figure 4 is American Horse's pictograph for the same year and reads like a description of a battle. Here, the patient is identified only by specific contrast to the agent. The Pawnee, and their

relative number on the left (indicated by lines) are identified by the fact that they are on foot, in contrast to the Lakota group on the right, designated by both hoof-prints and lines.<sup>40</sup> Such knowledge of past events would have arisen from corresponding oral tradition. The equality of weaponry is indicated by the path of the arrows and bullets, which fly in both directions. The visual representation might imply an oratory concerning battle strategy, incorporating a discussion of relative number and positions, weaponry, and in this case, the value of horses.

In fact, where battle scenes do tend toward maps, the groups are fairly large. The pictographs in figure 5, representing the year 1811–1812, are from the counts of Flame, Lone-Dog, and Little-Swan, respectively. They refer to a battle in which the Lakota drove the enemy into a dirt lodge and then surrounded and killed them there. The defeated are represented by the heads within the circle. The translations report that the enemy were Mandan or Gros Ventre, twenty to twenty-seven in number. According to Mallery, the three round objects represent, “heads of enemies slain in battle. In the sign language of the plains, the Dakota are always denoted by drawing a hand across the throat, signifying that they cut the throats of their enemies.”<sup>41</sup>

Similar to figure 4, the patients, in this case an enemy of the Lakota, are signified by their location within the circle of the earth lodge. Simultaneously, the circle could also refer to the path the Lakota took in surrounding their enemy. A circle with humans inside is also said to represent fear; they are afraid because the world is closing in on them.<sup>42</sup>

Scenes of horse-capture are also textualized in the pattern of a contest. Like battle scenes, which require that the patient, or the defeated, be textualized, scenes of horse-capture always encode a patient, in this case the horse. Most typically a picture of a horse appears, but hoof-prints may also be used as a signifier. As with a human figure, an individual horse can be used to represent a group. In Good’s record (see fig. 6), the source of the horses is indicated by the tribal sign of those who formerly possessed them. In this pictograph for the year 1718–1719 the capture of Ree (Arikira) horses is indicated by the ear of corn, the tribal designation for the Arikara. However, of the five records examined here, the textualization of source is peculiar to Good’s record.

In American Horse’s record, along with the obligatory role of patient, the instrument of the capture is also likely to be textualized. Figure 7 represents the year 1822–1823, when Dog, an Oglala, reportedly stole seventy horses from

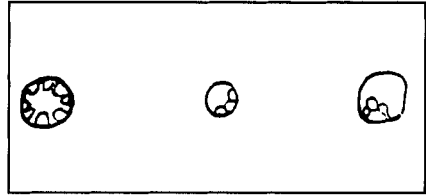


Figure 5 Closing in on the enemy.

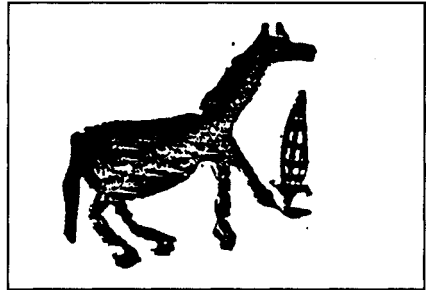


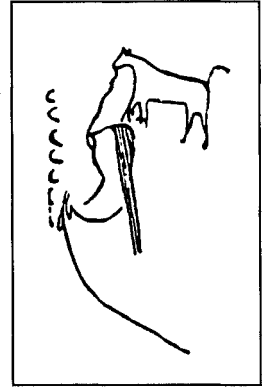
Figure 6 Captured Arikara horses.

the Crow. There are seven hoof-prints and Mallery concluded that each print represents ten horses. However, this does not seem to be a consistent numbering device used throughout the pictographs of winter counts. Here, the captured horses are represented by hoof-prints. The instrument is textualized by the lariat, used as a whip to herd the horses. Also similar to scenes of contest in battle, the agent is signified by his form and name glyph.

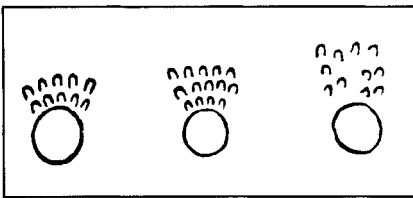
As in battles involving large numbers, a significantly large horse-capture might also take on the composition of a map. In figure 8 from the counts of Flame, Lone-Dog, and Little-Swan, the year 1849–1850 represents another horse-capture. This time, the horses were taken from the Lakota by the Crow. Interestingly, however, there is no tribal designation to signify whose horses were captured. In the translations, the number of horses captured by the Crow is variously reported as, “all, eight hundred or two hundred.” In each pictograph there is a circle, representing either the camp circle or corral, and from ten to fourteen horse tracks drawn above it. As in the battle scene where the enemy was surrounded in the earthen lodge, the number of figures does not exactly correspond to the number of defeated. However, the direction of hoof-prints does indicate the path they took. Again, a circle is used to signify the location.

In scenes that make reference to hunting, injuries are textualized as an Instruments of defeat with the injured person acting as patient. Figure 9 contains pictographs from the counts of Lone-Dog, Flame, and Little-Swan for the year 1832–1833. The verbal notes refer to Lone Horn breaking his leg. Lone Horn is identified by name glyph, the single horn rising from his head. He is also the patient. The broken leg, signified by the leg being bent back, serves as the instrument of his defeat. The verbal transcription for Lone-Dog’s winter count states that Lone Horn had his leg “killed.” Little-Swan reported that the leg was broken while running buffalo. Similarly, Good’s pictograph for the year 1846–1847 refers to an Indian who broke his neck while on a hunt. In the pictograph, the human figure is upside down with a red mark across his neck.

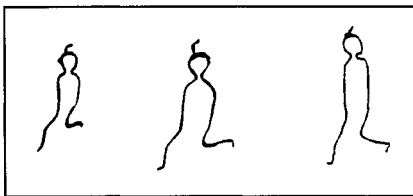
In sum, the narrative event of contest includes scenes that refer to battle, horse-capture, and the hunt. The individual or group that is defeated, who also serves in the thematic role of patient, is always pictured. That defeat-



**Figure 7** Captured Crow horses.



**Figure 8** Captured Lakota horses.



**Figure 9** Lone Horn's leg killed.

ed party may be Lakota, non-Lakota, or a herd of horses. The agent is typically included in contest narratives of relatively large numbers.

In conclusion, the categories initially proposed as battle, killing or execution, and horse-capture, are all textualized visually within the same narrative framework—contest. An unexpected event, that of injuries suffered in battle or on the hunt, particularly broken bones, also emerges in this category. A description of the textualization of pictographs of contest could be written as:

Contest  $\Rightarrow$  Patient (Instrument) (Agent) (Location).

That is, narratives of contest are always characterized by the textualization of the patient. An individual symbol can represent any number of the enemy. When the patient is Lakota, typically a man of note, inclusion in the record serves as a mark of individual honor. Very frequently, the instrument of engagement also appears. When the agent is represented, it is usually because the narration refers to large numbers. In such cases, the pictograph begins to take on the look of a map, and both agent and patient are likely to be indicated by their location.

### Used-up

As before, a number of previously defined categories collapse into this narrative characterization. Similar to contest pictographs, the framework of events in this category require that the role of patient be textualized. In contrast, however, death is brought upon the patient not by the actions of a physical agent, but by a cause that cannot be overtly battled, most typically an illness, which would be a force in terms of case role assignment. In used-up narrative events, the role of patient is obligatory; the role of force, though not obligatory, is also commonly textualized.

In representations of death by disease or physical degradation, smallpox and measles are the most frequently recorded. The patient may be represented by a head or a complete human figure. The force, because it is typically smallpox or measles, is signified by covering the human with red spots. Good's record for the year 1780–1781 (fig. 10) is referred to as the, "smallpox-used-them-up-again-winter."

In four of the five winter counts, excepting Good's, an epidemic of whooping



Figure 10 Smallpox used them up.

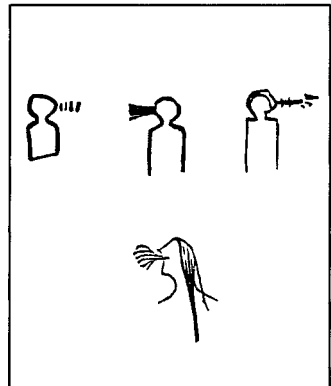


Figure 11 Whooping cough.



cough is recorded for the year 1813–1814. In all the representations in figure 11, the patient is represented by a human figure and the force that caused his death is signified by a cough. In American Horse's count (bottom), the patient is further identified as Lakota by the scalplock.

Another kind of event that emerges in this category was previously defined as one of condition, specifically that of cold. In these representations, which refer to the suffering or death of one or many by cold and implied starvation, the role of patient is always textualized, commonly with the force as well. The force, the cold, may be represented by clouds, or lines of snow on the ground. In figure 12 from Good, the year 1722–1723 was called, "deep-snow-and-tops-of-lodges-visible-only-winter." The patient, signified by the lodge, is the entire camp circle. The force of the cold and the set of related conditions it implies is represented by the snow.

The records of Good, Lone-Dog, Flame, and Little-Swan all refer to the freezing and starvation of horses in the year 1865–1866. Figure 13 from

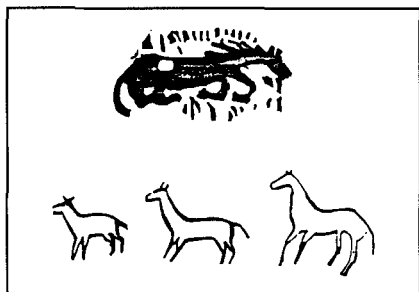


Figure 13 Used up horses.

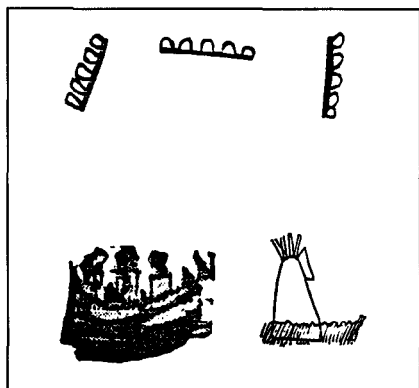


Figure 14 Missouri River flood.

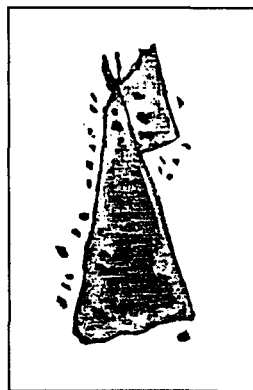


Figure 12 Deep snow winter.

Good's record is referred to as "deep-snow-used-up-the-horses-winter." In this case, the patient is the horse and the force of his condition is indicated by the bed of snow as well as his leanness. Human starvation may also be indicated by leanness or protruding ribs. In the other three representations for the year 1865–1866, it is simply the patient, a single horse, that appears to signify the herd.

One more kind of scene, typically manifested as death by fire or flood, is also characterized by the obligatory textualization of the patient, with the role of force likely to appear. It is therefore most appropriately structured for this category. All the winter counts report the same event for the year 1825–1826: the flooding of the Missouri River and its destructive effects on the tribe. Figure 14 (top), representations from the records of Flame, Lone-Dog and Little-Swan, depicts the patient as a row of human heads on a thick black line. In Flame's and Little-Swan's depictions the peo-

ple are turned sideways. In the representations of American Horse and Good (see fig. 14, bottom), the force of the water is also textualized.

In conclusion, the categories initially proposed as those of disease or epidemic, bizarre events, natural death, and condition of cold and freezing are all textualized in the pictograph with the same elements of a narrative framework: used-up. Pictographic scenes representing these kinds of events require that the patient be textualized and often represent the force. In contrast to many pictographs of contest, the patient in this framework, whether representing an individual or group, is invariably Lakota.

Used-up => Patient (Force).

**Ceremonial Exchange**

As before, a number of previously differentiated categories emerge here with the same narrative pattern. In all pictographs, the instrument is the obligatory thematic role for textualization. First are pictographic representations that are easily recognized as referring to ceremonial or ritual activities. In the counts of Flame, Lone-Dog, and Little-Swan, the year 1804–1805 refers to a calumet dance that was held before going to war. In all counts (see fig. 15), only the ceremonial lance, the ritual instrument of the ceremony, is represented.

In the narrative category of ceremonial exchange, the thematic role of instrument is always represented. The next common role for textualization is that of agent. Figure 16 is from American Horse’s winter count for the year 1846–1847 and reads, “Big-Crow and Conquering Bear had a great feast and gave many presents.” Identified by their name glyphs, Big-Crow appears on the left, with Conquering-Bear to the right, both acting as agents. A ceremonial wand, the instrument, commands the center position.

Negotiations of peace also emerge within this narrative structure. In the records of Flame, Lone-Dog, and Little-Swan, the year 1867–1868 (fig. 17) refers to Lakota peace with

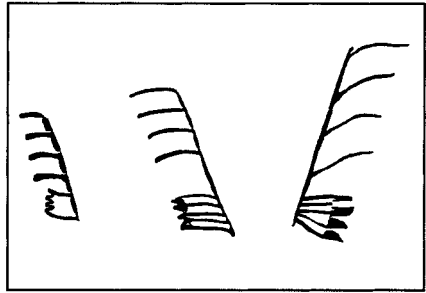


Figure 15 Calumet dance.

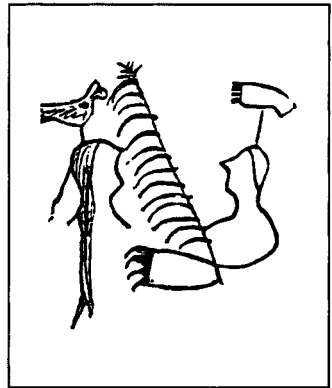


Figure 16 A great feast.

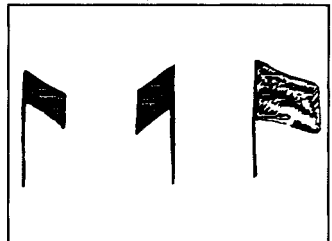
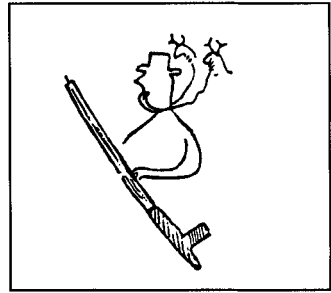


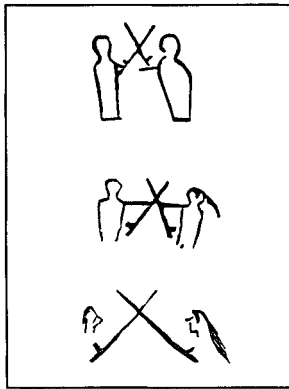
Figure 17 Peace with soldiers.

white soldiers. Lone-Dog's reads, "Many flags were given them by the peace commission," and Little-Swan's translates, "Made peace with General Sherman and others at Fort Laramie." The verbal transcription for Flame's count reads, "much medicine made." All textualize the flag as the ceremonial instrument.

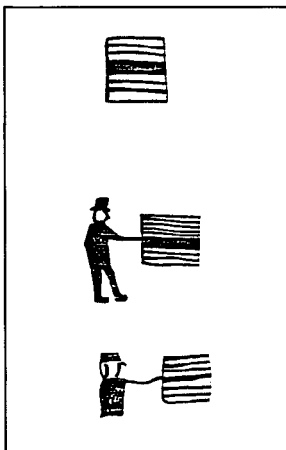
More typically peace is signified by a pipe or the joining of outstretched hands, as seen in figure 18. This pictograph from American Horse's count refers to an exchange in 1865–1866 where-



**Figure 18** Peace with General "Many Deer."



**Figure 19** Peace with the Crow.



**Figure 20** Navajo blankets winter.

by General Maynadier made peace with the Oglala and the Brule. The agent, General "Many Deer," is signified by hat and name glyph and extends a conventional instrument of peace, the pipe.

It is also fairly common that when one agent is present in a representation, the other may appear as well. In figure 19 are the representations of Flame, Lone-Dog, and Little-Swan for the year 1851–1852. This scene refers to an exchange of peace between the Lakota and the Crow. Both agents are textualized with the instrument that signifies the exchange, the pipe, commanding center position.

Pictographic scenes previously described as cultural introductions also exhibit the same textual structure as events of ceremonial exchange. Again, the instrument of cultural exchange is always textualized with the representation of the agent common. Figure 20 represents the year 1853–1854 from the same counts as above and signifies the introduction of Navajo blankets by white traders. In Flame's record, only the instrument of exchange, the blanket, is represented. In the records of Lone-Dog and Little-Swan, however, the agent is also textualized, as the trader stands, arm outstretched, with the blanket in hand.

Battiste Good reports the same event for the year 1858–1859 (see fig. 21), with a verbal transcription that reads, "Many Navaho blankets winter."

All the records make reference to the first trading post in the area. The records of Flame, Lone-Dog, and Little-Swan record it for the year 1817–1818 (see fig. 22). In all the pictographs there is a cabin with a smoking chimney next to a

dead tree. In terms of case-role assignment, there is a double or embedded instrument. The cabin is the instrument of cultural exchange, and the tree the instrument by which it was produced. The verbal transcriptions read, "Trading store built at Fort Pierre ... LaFramboise, a Canadian, built a trading store with dry timber. The dryness is shown by the dead tree ... Trading post built on the Missouri River 10 miles above Fort Thompson."

For the same year, Good's record states, "Choze built a house of dead logs winter." The pictograph (see fig. 23, top) represents the cabin as instrument of cultural introduction, the instrument by which it was produced, the axe, and the agent of its introduction, the white man. The agent is also represented in American Horse's record for the year 1815-1816 (see fig. 23, bottom). A white man stands inside a box, arms outstretched. The verbal transcription simply reads, "The figure is intended to represent a white man's house."

What were previously categorized as scenes depicting conditions of plenty are also structurally similar to narrative events of ceremonial exchange. The instrument is always textualized and a double or embedded instrument may also appear. Figure 24 represents the year 1843-1844 from the counts of Flame, Lone-Dog, and Little-Swan. The transcriptions read, "Buffalo is scarce. An Indian makes medicine and brings them to the suffering.... The Sans Arc made medicine to bring the buffalo. The medicine tent is denoted by a buffalo's head drawn on it.... No buffalo. Indians made medicine to the Great Spirit by painting a buffalo head on a lodge. Plenty came." In all pictographs, the lodge signifies the instrument of ceremonial exchange. Further, whether the buffalo head signifies ceremony or actual buffalo, it functions as an instrument of plenty. In other cases, an abundance of food is indicated simply by a slab of buffalo meat—see figure 25 from 1816-1817 from Flame, Lone-Dog, and Little-Swan—the poles on which the meat was hung and dried, or cloven hoof-prints.

In conclusion, the categories initially proposed as ceremonial and spiritual events, cultural introductions, peace talks, and conditions of plenty are all textualized as the same kind of narrative event: ceremonial exchange. Pictographic scenes repre-

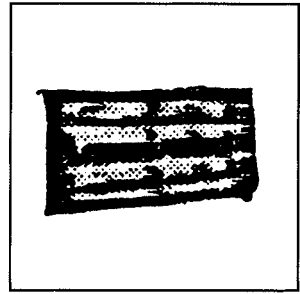


Figure 21 Many Navajo blankets.

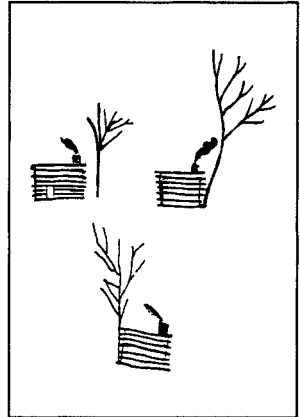


Figure 22 Trading Post.

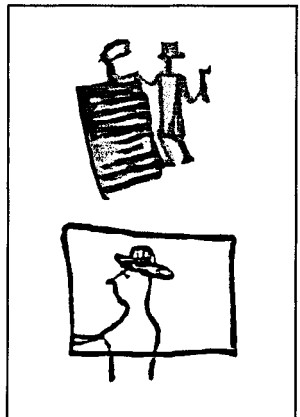


Figure 23 House of dead logs.

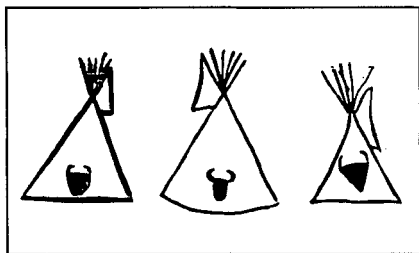


Figure 24 Buffalo medicine.

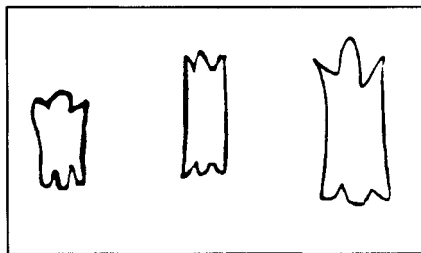


Figure 25 Buffalo meat.

senting these kinds of events require that the instrument and oftentimes the agent be textualized. In some cases, a double instrument may appear:

Ceremonial Exchange  $\implies$  Instrument (Agent) (Instrument).

### Celestial Events

This final structural category of narrative events is only represented by one pictographic scene: celestial events. The celestial body is textualized as a mover and occurs in all representations. The role of path is always textualized as well.

All the counts examined here record a celestial event for the year 1833–1834. American Horse's record (see fig. 26) reports that, "The stars moved around," and depicts a central star with many smaller stars moving around it. The stars function in the role of mover, and their placement around a central star indicates path.

Good's record (see fig. 27) calls it the "storm of stars winter." Here, the role of mover is again textualized by the stars. The lodge represents the path around which the stars move. The pictographs for the same year in the counts of Flame, Lone-Dog, and Little-Swan are shown in figure 28.

Once again, the mover is signified by the stars. The path around which they move is indicated by the moon. In Little-Swan's record, the stars exhibit the pictographic convention for depicting gunshots: darting lines with circles at the end.

In all the records except for that of American Horse, a falling star is also reported for the year 1821–1822. The pictographs of Flame, Lone-Dog, and Little-Swan (fig. 29) simply show a star with a descending line, clearly indicating both mover and path. Good's record (see fig. 30) shows the mover and path as well as the source from which the star came, the sky.

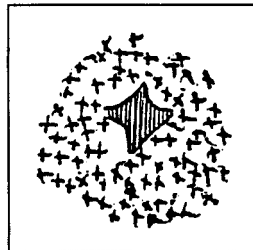


Figure 26 Stars moved around.



Figure 27 Storm of stars.

In conclusion, the category initially proposed as one of celestial events is in fact textualized as such in the abstract structure of the narrative. Pictographic scenes representing these events require that the roles of Mover and Path be textualized:

Celestial Events  $\implies$  Mover Path.

## DISCUSSION

This analysis of Lakota winter counts reveals a narrative structure consisting of four specific event types, each characterized by obligatory and optional case roles in the pictographic representation:

Contest  $\implies$  Patient (Instrument) (Agent) (Location);  
 Used-Up  $\implies$  Patient (Force);  
 Ceremonial Exchange  $\implies$  Instrument (Agent) (Instrument); and  
 Celestial Events  $\implies$  Mover Path.

In winter counts, the shape of narrative is likely to be patterned to correspond with significant elements of cultural belief. It is no surprise that four event types are identified. Lakota symbolism tended to a fourfold pattern, a kind of structural grammar embedded in myth, oral tradition, and ceremony. Formal orations would occur in the context of ceremony, which typically took place over four days, or a period of time divided into four segments. It is said that a new age will arise after the fourth era, which is presently at hand. Further, in Lakota mythology, *skan* established the four phases of time: the day, the night, the moon, and the year.<sup>43</sup> The word *skan* may be used to refer to the sky but may connote a sense of immortality or eternity when used in reference to a spirit that was everywhere.<sup>44</sup> Riggs, for example, defined *Takuskanskan* as, "one of the Dakota gods, the moving god or god of motion."<sup>45</sup> In sum, fourfold patterning mediated cultural text in many ways.<sup>46</sup>

Further, the four narrative structures identified in these winter count pictographs do not seem incompatible with the genres of oral tradition suggested by Deloria. In fact, the frameworks seem consistent with *ohunkankan* tales. Picto-narratives of contest and ceremonial exchange could easily render orations of the

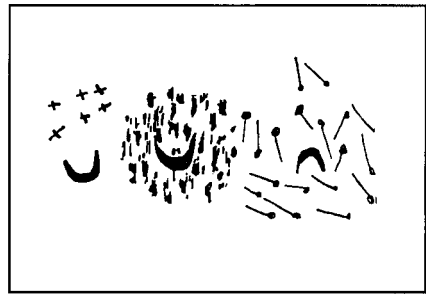


Figure 28 Afar showers.

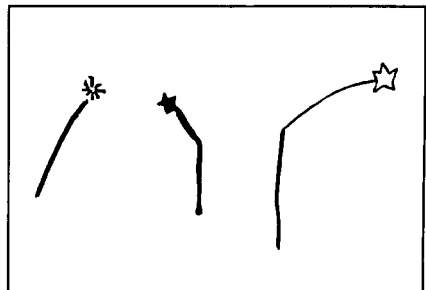


Figure 29 Falling stars.

intercession of the spirit through the sacred instruments of ritual; the representations of noted warriors could recall a person strong in spiritual power and contest. Pictographs of used-up and celestial narrative frameworks might refer to older and more enduring forces. All four pictographic frameworks seem consistent with narratives of a recent or remote past that focus on mystery or amazement, the spiritual nature of the event.

In pictographs of contest, the patient is always represented and refers to either non-Lakota or Lakota. When non-Lakota appear, such scenes could engender tales of honor and admonition. The death of many prominent individuals is included in winter count scenes and the appearance of such a person was considered an honor. Within the framework of a winter count, the deeds of a number of men could be related to each other and to spiritual power.

It has been noted that pictographic representations of individual warriors increase after the early 1800s. Fereca attributes this to the increasing murder of prominent individuals. Henning notes that at the same time references to spiritual phenomena gain prominence. Correspondingly, Elaine A. Jahner notes that as the twentieth century grew nearer, oral narratives that verified spiritual belief in historical experience became more practiced.<sup>47</sup>

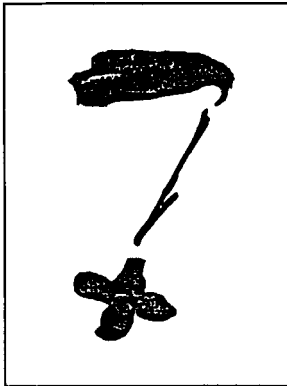


Figure 30 Falling star.



Figure 31 Sent the boys and girls to school.

Narrative events of ceremonial exchange include scenes of ceremony, peace talks, cultural introduction, and the condition of plenty. All these scenes represent the instrument and textualize the importance of instrument and ceremony in the managing of affairs. The narrative category of ceremonial exchange represents ritual behaviors meant to signify and influence the outcome of events. In the pictographs of winter counts there appear to be no structural distinction between scenes of peace exchanges with whites or other Indians. In such scenes, individuals appear with outstretched hands, typically holding a pipe. To the Lakota, even touching a pipe was a sacred act, for it was used to seal bonds with other groups of people as well as Wakantanka, the sacred one. Conversely, any transgressions from the commitment of this act were thought to bring dire consequences.<sup>48</sup>

In the nineteenth century, all the western tribes shared the concept that the whites termed *medicine*, a belief in the intercession and exchange of spiritual power through sacred objects and ritual. This belief is thought to have conditioned their early attitudes and behaviors toward whites.<sup>49</sup> In the beginning, the Lakota associated whites with such medicine, calling them *wasicun* (from *sicun*, power). In winter counts, exchanges

of peace with whites are structurally similar to other ceremonial and sacred acts. Objects of cultural introduction from whites are also characterized as instruments of ceremonial exchange. Nonetheless, elements of white culture and belief soon came to be called *wasicun witusni*, white man's lies or falsehoods. Later, white cultural items were called *wakasotesni*, which literally means "things that can't be destroyed."<sup>50</sup>

This changing attitude toward white beliefs and objects may also be reflected in a pictograph from the record of Battiste Good. For the year 1879–1880 the verbal transcription reads, "Sent the boys and girls to school winter." The pictograph (see fig. 31) depicts a child holding a pen. Initially, one would think that this is a scene of cultural introduction, and so structured in the narrative as a ceremonial exchange, representing the instrument and maybe the agent. Here, however, the child is functioning in the role of patient, who is only represented in narrative events that refer to death. This scene incorporates an object of cultural introduction—white schools for Lakota children—within the narrative framework of being used-up. The pen represents the force that overcomes.

In Lakota belief of the nineteenth century, ceremony and ritual were central to life because through sacred ritual one engaged the supernatural to restore balance to what were considered dual forces. "This harmonious balance is demonstrated in all of the rituals. The famine of winter is offset by the abundance of summer ... the ignorance of darkness is contrasted with the knowledge of light."<sup>51</sup> In much the same way, used-up pictographic frameworks contrast with those of ceremonial exchange; they represent events in which the spiritual power of the Lakota was overcome. In Lakota medicine, illness took place on a spiritual plane—a malevolent force overtook the life of an individual or group.<sup>52</sup> The narrative framework of used-up events implies a loss of spiritual power and textualizes the victim (Lakota) and the force of ill.

In the final narrative category of pictographs, celestial events, only one kind of scene is represented: that of the relations between the heavens and the earth. In oral tradition, movements of the stars manifest the acts of sacred beings. By representing the thematic role of mover and sometimes path, the pictographs foreground the intersection of the temporal and the sacred.

Winter counts were prepared as formal texts with the counsel of elders. Traditionally, the count keepers, an apparently hereditary position, were considered the only ones qualified to maintain the pictographic text if it were to retain its spiritual power. Perhaps the pictographic narratives of Lakota winter counts are better viewed as more inherently sacred than historical texts.

## CONCLUSION

This paper is an attempt to describe a structural pattern in the pictographs of Lakota winter counts. The analysis reveals four different kinds of narrative frameworks, each characterized by obligatory and optional case roles. Evidence of a systematic and conventional patterning of narrative in winter counts, a pattern that reflects elements of cultural knowledge, suggests that winter counts functioned as much more than calendars. It heightens aware-



ness of their function in encoding narrative, and corresponds to their use as records in the context of formal oratory.

Whether these four narrative frameworks resemble a set of expectations that a count keeper might have brought to bear on the pictographic record for use in text production or oratory is unclear. Many more winter counts remain to be examined in this manner. Further, a study of pictographic records referred to as exploit narratives or coup tales, which were also produced by men in great numbers on hide, muslin, and paper may provide other insights. What seems abundantly clear is that there is much to be learned from pictographic records if we refigure our way of thinking about them—and view them as visual narrative, one of many cultural texts.

### NOTES

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