Pipe Dreams:  
Pipe Cleaners and Dream Motifs  

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Dreams and visions are widely acknowledged as integral and sacrosanct aspects of native North American cosmology. With survival and success dependent upon the guardianship and beneficence of animal-persons and other spiritual beings, dreams and visions become the avenues for contact and interaction with these Other-Than-Human-Beings. Dream revelations, whether experienced as naturalistic or metaphorical images, imply a transfer, or bestowing, of power from the guardian spirit to the dreamer. As part of the dreamer's obligations to this benefactor, the dream images are to be depicted graphically and symbolically to validate the dream experience and to preserve the power that has been conferred. This validation is expressed eloquently in the native voice of Anna Lee Walters (1989:25) who tells us, "The images created by my hands are echoes of the dream-voice within me. They are also evidence of my dream-power ... The images are powerful by virtue of the forces they represent or by what material and means they came into being." Failure to comply with the "orders of the dreamed" would offend the guardian spirit to the extent that favours would be withdrawn and one's success would be tenuous or uncertain (Brown and Brightman 1988:143, 145).

Translation of an individual's dream-inspired images into concrete form was both defined and constrained by the intrinsic and underlying cultural traditions of the dreamer's community. Moreover, it was common practice for the dreamer to relate his vision to his wife (or other female relative) who would then give familiar form to these experiences, according to the regional art style. "Thus," as Ted Brasser (1974:96) states in his article on the art of James Bay, "the elements of the design conformed to widespread symbolic interpretations, while at the same time having specific and secret connotations known only to the dreamer and the artist" (see also Phillips 1989:61; Speck 1935:198–199). It also follows that despite the marked similarities of culturally-patterned styles and motifs, no two
renderings of dream revelations will be exactly alike. This becomes evident upon examination of a number of examples of a particular type of object, such as, in this instance, the Algonquian pipe cleaners from the Quebec-Labrador peninsula (see Figures 1 to 6). These carved bone and antler objects, collected by several ethnographers working among the Montagnais and Naskapi in this region, have been identified variously as pipe cleaners, pipe scrapers, pipe tampers, and fasteners for tobacco pouches. These items, according to Frank G. Speck (1935:227), were “a part of a man’s spiritual hunting equipment and were used to aid luck in hunting” (see also Speck 1924:269). Preliminary investigation of the ethnographic literature and museum documentation tends to reinforce this concept without further elaboration. However, the diversity of motif configurations in contrast with the similarity of their forms intimates that the decorative elements of these objects may be expressions of dream motifs. If indeed these objects are embellished with dream motifs as I suggest, their inclusion in the sacred smoking complex along with the sanctified pipe and tobacco pouch creates a synergistic power that was desired for the success and protection of the owner.

Museum Evidence

An empirical examination of the pipe cleaners held by the Canadian Museum of Civilization in Ottawa, the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto, and the Haffenreffer Museum of Anthropology in Bristol, Rhode Island establishes that they are most often manufactured from bone or antler, and may be plain or decorated with incised lines, carving, painting, or a combination of two or three techniques. The upper portions, or handle of the decorated ones were carved with bilateral symmetry, and include a perforation for the insertion of a hide thong (see Figure 2). The thong was attached to the flap of a tobacco pouch. Generally, the bottom portion or blade has smooth sides tapering to a rounded or blunt point. The combined length of handle and blade ranges from 6cm to 20cm while the width of the handle varies from 0.8cm to 4cm. When in use, the pipe cleaners were used to clean the pipe by removing the ashes the residue of tobacco left after smoking from the bowl (Turner 1894:303). When not in use, the pouches were rolled up.

1 Photographs by Ron Oberholtzer. Pipecleaners shown are from the collection of the Canadian Ethnology Service, Canadian Museum of Civilization, Hull, Quebec.

2 Other museums holding Montagnais and Naskapi pipe cleaners include Rochester Museum and Science Center, Smithsonian Institution, Pitt Rivers Museum, Field Museum of Natural History, and The Museum of the American Indian.

3 The construction and shape of a tobacco pouch with attached pipe cleaner
encircled by the thong and the cleaner-cum-fastener tucked into the thong\textsuperscript{4} (see Figures 3, 5, 6). Closely associated with these pipe bowl cleaners are stem cleaners which are formed from slivers of bone or the wing feathers of geese, Spruce Grouse, ptarmigan and loon (Rogers 1967:121). Although similar in form and function, these objects are used solely to clean the stems of pipes. For the most part, the presence of a carved top, when it occurs, suggests merely a pragmatic means of holding the slender shaft as it was inserted into the pipe stem, and an expanded area for the insertion of a thong into a hole. As only a very few examples exhibit further intentional embellishment in the form of lateral notching on the handle portion (see, for example, CMC-III-B-52 and CMC-III-B-53), these stem cleaners will not be discussed further.

On the decorated pipe cleaners bilateral carving of the handles presents a wide variety of shapes and configurations. Of these, the simplest pattern appears to be a rectangular form enhanced with eight small perforations and a larger central hole as illustrated by the ROM example, 958.131.89 (see Figure 1a). Five of these perforations and the lateral edge of the handle are accented with red paint, the remaining four perforations with blue. Other handles are more complex, exhibiting one or more of the following: tiny rounded positive or negative notches, pronounced angular notches, triangular and round forms, diamonds, and crosses. A number of handles are further decorated with incising and perforations. These elements usually consist of shallow dots or complete perforations, and diagonal lines which are often crossed forming diamonds. Red paint was used to outline perforations of a few of the older Montagnais examples while red and blue paint was used on a number of the cleaners held by the Royal Ontario Museum. In the latter examples, the paint was applied to the lateral edges of the entire cleaner as well as to outline the perforations. On a single type, but expressed on two identical pipe cleaners, one red line and one blue line were painted horizontally across the handle (ROM 958.131.92 and ROM 958.131.325). Beaver fur was attached to the top of two cleaners bearing almost identical forms and motifs (ROM 958.131.88a and ROM 958.131.330b).

Undecorated pipe cleaners, less regular in form, vary from double-pointed types to single pointed types without any demarcation between blade and handle to forms similar to those of the decorated examples but lacking any embellishment (see Figure 6). As well, other material sources

\textsuperscript{4}VanStone (1984:34) suggests that these pipe cleaners function as fasteners only in the south, among the Montagnais.
such as, for example, a loon’s bill and the handle of a modern plastic toothbrush, are utilized.

**Ethnographic Sources**

As closely as can be determined from the available sources, pipe cleaners were found in two distinct regions of the Quebec-Labrador peninsula: the northeastern drainage which includes the bands or communities located at Ungava Bay, the Barren Ground region, Davis Inlet, Nain, and the Northwest River; and the southeastern drainage along the north shore of the St. Lawrence and including the Lac St-Jean area. Based on collection data, these areas are given, respectively, the ethnic identities of Naskapi and Montagnais. According to the literature, the earliest example was collected by Lucien Turner from the Naskapi at Fort Chimo in the 1890s. The northeastern Labrador coast area was the source for those collected by Duncan Strong in 1927 and 1928, Richard White in 1929 and 1930, and Alika Podolinsky Webber in 1960 and 1961. The majority, if not all, of the Montagnais examples held in museums were collected by Speck during his 1912 and 1913 fieldwork seasons. There appear to be no known examples pertaining to the East Cree, for neither Hudson’s Bay Company trader, Ernest Renouf (according to the catalogue documentation from the British Museum in London, England), nor ethnographer, Alanson Skinner (1911) seem to have collected any. However, Edward S. Rogers (1963:121) does note that among the Mistassini Cree, “Pipe cleaners made of bone were said to have been used in the past.” This uneven distribution may be attributed to the collecting process, errors in museum cataloguing, changes through time, or the reluctance of the native people to part with a significant and prized possession.

On a broader scale, the presence of these multifunctional bone and antler objects in the ethnographic repertoire of the Quebec-Labrador peninsula appears to be a singular occurrence in the subarctic as well as throughout North America. This is further compounded by the lack of direct archaeological antecedents. Looking elsewhere, ethnographic analogues are

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5 A large number of museum collections of materials from the Quebec-Labrador peninsula are dominated by Speck’s acquisitions.

6 This problem has been addressed by the author in an unpublished manuscript (1989), “The Roses and Thorns of Using Museum Collections as Primary Documents.”

7 A brief survey of the literature (Rutsch 1973; Steinmetz 1984; Turnbaugh 1975) on pipes and smoking yields no mention of pipe cleaners. However, West (1934:311) mentions that Eskimo pipes are usually supplied with a “pricker”, attached to the pipe by means of a thong, to aid in the extraction of highly-valued tobacco juice.
evident only in the wooden pipe tampers of the northern plains. These tampers are much longer (65–70cm), may have plain, carved, or more commonly, quill-wrapped handles (Coe 1976:186, Fig. 499; 1988:133, Fig. 151; Miles 1963:221, Fig. 11.33; Walters 1989:75, No. 507). They, too, are attached by thongs to pouches, but function only to tamp tobacco into the bowls during pipe rituals (Coe 1988:133). Rather, I think we must look at other bone and antler objects that are also recognized as being embellished with dream motifs. For instance, such objects as the carved and incised Beothuk bone pendants of which no two have identical decorative elements (Howley 1915:340; Marshall 1974, 1978), or similar necklace pendants recorded among the Athapaskans (see, for example, Thompson 1987:142, Fig. 122), or the Inuit marrow scrapers in the collections of the Royal Ontario Museum, and perhaps even the prehistoric Tsimshian bone pendant with shaped blade and distinctly carved handle (MacDonald and Inglis 1982:80, Fig. 7) may provide material for comparison. Within the traditions of the Montagnais and Naskapi, we must consider the bone skinning tools illustrated by Speck (1935:180, Plate XVI) that were “decorated to comply with dream instructions”, as well as the paint tools used by Naskapi women to paint their husbands’ dream motifs onto caribou hide. The handles of these latter objects are carved with motifs overtly similar to those on pipe cleaners. For example, the painted motif of diagonal lines extending from edge to edge (zigzag) with a red dot centred in each of the triangles thus formed on a Naskapi paint tool (ROM 958.131.64) collected by Speck sometime prior to 1950 is analogous to that incised upon a Naskapi pipe cleaner (CMC-III-B-436) collected by Webber in 1961. Likewise, such similarities of motifs can be seen between other pipe cleaners and paint tools, and comparisons can be further extended to include other bone-handled implements such as the incised handles of scribers (see, for example, III-B-94 held by the Newfoundland Museum). These similarities of expression may, under closer examination and comparison, be augmented with ethnohistoric research that will establish a relationship among these items. Another relationship may also exist between the motifs on the pipe cleaners and the beaded bands which are fastened to the pipe bowls and stems. Further research may, in fact, reveal that the use of particular motifs on more than one implement is indicative of individual and/or local group ownership and expression.

Analysis

First-hand observation of these objects in museum collections as a basis for analysis and subsequent interpretation reveals as much about the collecting process as they do about pipe cleaners and dream motifs. This is most
evident with the items held in the Speck collection of the Royal Ontario Museum. The collection was purchased from Speck’s widow and is fraught with both inadequate and absent documentation. Personal assessment of this collection reveals that the expected culturally-determined similarities are too similar and the anticipated diversity of individual dream-inspired expression are lacking. In a number of instances there are striking correspondences between two or more pipe cleaners. For example, cleaners catalogued as 958.131.91 and 958.131.510 are very similar in both form and expressive elements, as are 958.131.324, 958.131.326, 958.131.327 and 958.131.511 similar to each other, while 958.131.92 and 958.131.325 are virtually identical, and so on. Differences are noted only in the execution of the manufacture and decoration. Further comparisons with older bag-fasteners and pipe-tamps illustrated by Speck (1925:163, Fig. 74) and held by the Museum of the American Indian of the Heye Foundation in New York, reveal marked similarities that imply that the older ones may have served as models for contract work commissioned by Speck. Even more significant is the un-used appearance of the objects. The pristine condition of the red and blue paint and the lack of any blackening on the blade or in the holes attests to their newness. This contrasts with Speck’s (1925:162) earlier description of pipe cleaners in which he comments that “The holes in these cases are not deliberately filled with black, but acquire the same condition through the accumulation of grease and dirt adhering to the fingers that handle them.” As well, the careful workmanship and patination of the older examples are remarkably apparent. With the additional knowledge that Speck was known to have reminded the Indians about certain objects or decorative motifs that they should have or should know (Deschênes 1981:10; my translation; see also Preston 1975b), and in addition, those items collected by Duncan Strong, and held by the Field Museum of Natural History, which “show no signs of use and were obviously made for the ethnographer” (VanStone 1984:43), give us reason to reassess the material. This is not to imply that the newness necessarily negates the instructive value of certain objects, but it does temper their value in the study of dream motifs. Although an ethnographer may have the means to request objects made-to-order, this ability does not extend to requesting dreams on a made-to-order basis. Motifs that are copied or borrowed lack power. It is for this reason that further insight and interpretation must be restricted to the older used pipe cleaners. For the most part, these are the ones still attached to tobacco pouches (see Figures 3, 5, 6; see also Figure 4).

Beginning with the account of the Jesuit missionary LeJeune in 1633 (Thwaites 1959, 5:131), the sacredness of the tobacco pouch as the native hunter’s most precious possession has been well-documented (for example,
Fashioned from animal hide (or rarely, bird skins\(^8\)), the pouches became metonyms for those animals, and were addressed as though speaking directly to that animal (cf. Brown and Brightman 1988:76). Based on the museum documentation for the tobacco pouches from the Quebec-Labrador peninsula, there is a positive correlation between certain animals and regional sources for example, caribou among the Naskapi, sealskin among the Montagnais on the shores of the St. Lawrence (see Figure 3), and predominately moose in the Lac St-Jean area (see Figure 6). In many instances pouches were adorned with depictions of a guardian spirit or with symbolic designs revealed in dreams (Phillips 1987:62; Skinner 1911:55; Speck 1935:227). As noted above, when tobacco pouches, as metonyms of animal power enhanced by the protective power of dream motifs, and in their function as containers of the sacred tobacco, are united with pipe cleaners, the combination becomes synergistically more powerful and sacrosanct.

**Interpretation and Meaning**

An interpretation of the symbolism and meaning of pipe cleaners in terms of their dream motifs is, at best, tentative. There are, however, a few scattered clues to the symbolic meaning of certain abstract designs. First we must accept two premises: one, that dream imagery is expressed within the boundaries of culturally-determined forms; and two, that dream representations can be either representational or abstract and non-figural (geometric). In this case, "abstract" refers to the fewest possible clues needed to recognize the subject or content of the whole. This definition works well here taking into consideration Richard Preston’s (1982) findings on the East Cree cognitive patterning whereby actual visual images are built on the basis of actually seeing very little, just as their songs use very few or no phrases or words to evoke an image (Preston 1975), and Catharine McClellan’s thesis (personal communication) that in subarctic art, especially in the Cordilleran region, complete images are represented by merely a few abstract motifs. We can conclude then that abstract motifs are both metonymic in their representation and arbitrary in their meaning. The next step is to consider the motifs on the pipe cleaners and their possible contextual meaning.

All the motifs are non-figural (geometric), comprised for the most part of diamonds, dots, cruciforms, and triangles carved or incised along the outer edges and on the flat surfaces. Dealing first with the diamond-shaped

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\(^8\)A carved bone pipe cleaner is attached to a tobacco bag made from loon throats (I-22; Lt. Henry Nixon Collection, Pitt Rivers Museum, England).
motif (not illustrated), we can take into consideration Ruth Phillips’s findings that on the native material from the Great Lakes, a diamond with a central diamond within it represents the Thunderbird’s torso and heart. This concept is confirmed by Webber (1973–74:119) when she identifies the diamond pendant on the protective necklaces of the Naskapi as representing the body of a bird. Furthermore, Webber also notes that the Lord of the Caribou is closely associated with birds. Hence, when the diamond is formed as one or more of the motifs on an object made with caribou bone or antler, it becomes highly suggestive that the dreamer may have the protection of the Caribou-Being or his associated bird helpers. Speck (1935:51, Figs. 3, 4), on the other hand, suggests that the diamond motif painted on the curve of the toboggan head is done so to favour the Man-of-the-North Spirit. This suggests that the same motif may have more than one meaning dependent upon the total configuration of all the elements or its contextual referents, but with the common abstract significance of a spirit person.

Another decorative device is small dots or holes on a number of specimens (see Figure 4). As Speck has dealt a great deal with the symbolism of this motif, we are in a stronger position for interpretation. Accordingly, dream revelations from the Great Spirit in the form of sunbeams falling obliquely from the sky are represented in art with “holes made in bone and wooden utensils. Some men make a single spot for each dream of successful hunting, adding a new spot . . . each time a dream works out” (Speck 1935:144). Speck also mentions that when these dots are painted on something, the younger men paint smaller dots than the older men. The depth of these dots, and ultimately, holes, may correspond to this practice. Nor is there any definitive indication that all, or for that matter, any, of these particular motifs were present at the time that the pipe cleaners were carved initially, and hence, they could have been added over time. However, in an earlier publication on the dot motif, Speck (1925:162) states that “. . . informants in each of the groups mentioned [Sept Iles Band and Michikamau Band] term these dots píneo meshkenu ‘bird tracks’.” With a number of references correlating partridge tracks — depicted as dots, lines or in the form of a cross comprised of five dots — as being a dream motif for successful hunting, this interpretation may also be valid. Once again we are reminded that the same motif may have different meanings when depicted in certain contexts or configurations, and that the expression of dream revelation is extremely personal.

The cruciform, or cross, motif tends to occur infrequently but when it is used, it is found more often on the pipe cleaners designated as Naskapi than those from the southern regions (Figure 3 is an inexact example). Sparse information intimates that the cross may be a symbol of the shaman (Skinner 1911:53–54; Webber 1983:67), but as iconographical evidence for
this is limited to painted designs on hide objects, renderings carved in bone may have another meaning. Moreover, on a more comprehensive basis throughout native North America, the cross symbolizes the Four Quarters or the Four Winds. Without further validation, the meaning remains rather inconclusive at this point.

The fourth motif to be considered is the triangle and triangular forms (see Figure 5). John M. Cooper (1934:36), discusses the iconographical representation of the caribou god as “an inverted isosceles triangle with a short upright line resting on the middle of the inverted base and with the upper end of the line surmounted by a circle. This picture, or design, is called mistapiu, also.” Evidence of this representation is apparent in a number of pipe cleaners. In particular, the form of CMC-III-C-172 and CMC-III-C-173 is each highly suggestive of an anthropomorphic head attached to an elongated triangular body reminiscent not only of Cooper’s verbal description but also of the triangular-bodied figures depicted on the birch bark scrolls of the Algonquians.

As all motifs discussed acknowledge the association between the concrete rendering of a dream revelation and the Other-Than-Human-Being source, this concept of the pipe cleaner representing a generic or specific mistapiew (cf. Tanner 1979:115) could be developed convincingly within the symbolic dimension of these groups. However, let us consider the implications of the pipe cleaner in its function as tobacco tamper. During the process of filling a pipe with tobacco (or other substances) the tamping can be done quite pragmatically with one’s finger. This implies that the use of the pipe cleaner as tamper is deliberate, symbolizing both the requisite feeding and the mutual sharing of food and tobacco with spirit forces, particularly, one’s guardian spirit. Referring specifically to those pipe cleaners with anthropomorphic heads on triangular bodies (see Figs. 4 and 5), the foot of the body-cum-blade is used to scrape the bowl while the head is used to tamp (ingest) the tobacco. Further support is offered by both Adrian Tanner (1979:113) who notes that mistapiew is particularly fond of tobacco, and by Richard Preston whose fieldwork among the East Cree validates this fondness (Preston 1975:41–42, 46–47, 50, 74, 77, 93–100).

Thus far, the discussion has focussed on decorated pipe cleaners. It should also be noted that there are a number of plain or undecorated pipe cleaners in several museum collections. Their intrinsic symbolic significance may rest in the source of their material, such as, for example, the loon’s bill attached to a Montagnais pouch (Vanstone 1982:50, Fig. 22) However, a tentative understanding may be derived from a Sioux source (Brown 1974:134–136). From this source we learn that when a pipe is first made, it is considered dead until the owner has a vision about it. An appropriate
vision reveals how the owner is to decorate the pipe, and once decorated, the pipe becomes powerful. Can we then extrapolate that these undecorated pipe cleaners, although sanctified through their associative context within the smoking complex, lack the power acquired through dream visions? Acceptance of this would provide further reinforcement that the decorated pipe cleaners do indeed function as concrete manifestations of an individual's dream revelation.

Summary

In summarizing the foregoing, it is clear that any conclusions reached are tentative and must be considered merely an aspect of ongoing research. Based upon the iconographical information derived from the older used pipe cleaners, I feel reasonably confident, however, that the diversity of configurations and individual expression are indeed graphic representations of dream revelations. Where similarities do occur, it appears to be the result of intentional copying at the request of the collector. As well, the finite number of motifs used within the same contextual framework allows us to establish some culturally-determined elements. It is the overall combination of the individually-chosen elements that creates the whole. The whole then becomes a graphic mnemonic device to propitiate one's guardian spirit. Beyond this, the esoteric nature of such a personal experience and the concomitant concrete expression of it must be respected and considered ineffable.
Figure 1: ROM 958.131.89; 90; 91; 93

Figure 2: CMC-III-B-114
Figure 5: CMC-III-C-172

Figure 6: CMC-III-C-131
Brasser, Ted

Brown, Jennifer S.H., and Robert Brightman

Coe, Ralph T.


Cooper, John M.

Deschênes, J.G.

Howley, James P.

MacDonald, George, and Richard I. Inglis

Marshall, Ingeborg, C.I.


Miles, Charles

Phillips, Ruth


Preston, Richard J.


Rogers, Edward S.  

Rutsch, Edward S.  

Skinner, Alanson  

Speck, Frank G.  

1925 Central Eskimo and Indian Dot Ornamentation. *Indian Notes* 2:151-172.


Steinmetz, Paul B.  

Tanner, Adrian  

Thompson, Judy  

Thwaites, Reuben G., ed.  

Turnbaugh, William Arthur  

Turner, Lucien M.  
VanStone, James W.


Walters, Anna Lee

Webber, Alika Podolinsky


West, George A.