

Pîtarîsâru', "Bravest of the Brave"

In 1817 Pîtarîsâru' (c.1797 - c.1836), son of Ckiri Pawnee Chief Rîçirîsâ, rescued a young female prisoner tied to sacrificial posts before a huge tribal gathering. Rîçirîsâ, or Knife Chief, wanted to stop the annual sacrifice in east central Nebraska of a prisoner to the bright "Morning Star," Venus. This ancient ceremony ensured the renewal of the earth. The chief would break tribal tradition and would face the wrath of powerful spiritual leaders. Young Pîtarîsâru', the chief's oldest son, volunteered to stop the sacrifice on the appointed day. The chief reluctantly accepted.

The intended victim from the Comanche Tribe had been captured by a Ckiri Pawnee war party. She did not know her intended fate. She could expect to spend her life as a slave or eventually become a wife to a Pawnee. Her hopes for the latter could well be imagined. Once secretly pledged by her captor to the spiritual leaders for a sacrifice to Venus, she was clothed in pure white buckskin dress. The intended victim was provided with an abundance of the best foods. Care was taken to provide whatever needs or wishes she might have, except freedom. Indeed, with such generous treatment, she might imagine herself happier with the Ckiri Pawnee than returning to her own tribe - until the perilous day.

The pampered prisoner was suddenly and solemnly led out of her earth lodge through a great gathering of the tribe to a large wooden frame. There she was securely tied into place with leather thongs. The planet Venus was shining brightly in the eastern sky. Tradition called for her head to be split with a tomahawk, that she might not suffer, and then be shot with many arrows to ensure her sacrificial death.

This ceremony was halted in 1817 by the very young Pîtarîsâru' stepping forward, turning and facing the assembled tribe. He declared it was his father's wish to abolish this ritual sacrifice. The chief's son said he was there to offer his own life or to release the young woman. He promptly stepped up to the victim, untied her arms and legs, and quickly led her through the hushed tribesmen to waiting horses. Together, they rode away.

At a distance safe from pursuit, Pîtarîsâru' gave the young woman a bundle of food. He told her she must make her own way, some 400 miles, back to her people. It was later reported she met a war party of her own nation the very next day and was safely returned to her home. Pîtarîsâru' returned to his father's lodge, facing an uncertain reception among his tribesmen.

The heroic story of Knife Chief and his son, Pîtarîsâru', does not end there. Ancient Ckiri Pawnee sacrifices to ensure the renewal of the earth were not that easily dismissed. In the spring of 1818, a Ckiri warrior offered as sacrifice to the Morning Star a captured young Spanish boy. Knife Chief and chief-in-training Pîtarîsâru' brooded about this new victim of tradition. Pîtarîsâru' said: "I will rescue the boy...as a warrior should, by force." Knife Chief did not want his son to risk another tribal showdown.

The old chief visited Mr. Pappan for trade. Mr. Pappan, of a highly respected French Canadian trade family working out of St. Louis, donated a goodly amount of trade goods for Knife Chief to offer in exchange for the Spanish boy. The old chief, Pîtarîsâru', and others added to the pile of merchandise in Knife Chief's lodge. Then, arming himself with a war club, the chief invited into his lodge the warrior who had captured the boy and offered him for sacrifice to the "Morning Star."

Knife Chief showed the warrior the pile of goods which he was offering in exchange for the safety of the Spanish boy. The chief ordered the warrior to accept the exchange or be killed then and there. The warrior, true to his pledge, refused the offer of goods.

"Strike," called out Pîtarîsâru'. "I will meet the vengeance of his friends."

Knife Chief, however, added to the pile of merchandise, giving the warrior another chance to weigh the consequences. This time the warrior accepted his chief's offer.

As a measure of his beliefs, the warrior released the boy but gave the pile of goods as an alternate. Cloth was cut in strips and hung from poles at the place of sacrifice. Other parts of the ransom were burned.

The annual Ckiri ceremonial sacrifice of a captive soon died out. In 1823 Chief Rîçirîsâand his son, Pîtarîsâru', visited Washington, D.C. There, among other honors paid to them, was a carefully crafted silver medallion given to the tall, graceful, and handsome Pîtarîsâru'. The inscription "Bravest of the Brave" was engraved on the medal. He and his father had brought an end to ritual human sacrifice in the Nebraska Territory. Pîtarîsâru' is also known as "Generous Chief". This medal was removed from his grave sometime around 1900 and sold. After a three year long legal battle, in 2022 the medal was finally repatriated to the Knife Chief family.

Ref: Matt Reed, Pawnee Tribal Historic Preservation Officer