

Primary Source for *Friendly Fire*

**From *GoldSeeker:*
Adventures of a Belgian Argonaut
*during the Gold Rush Years***

by Jean-Nicolas Perlot

Perlot was a Belgian who spent time with some Southern Miwok people, respected them, learned some of their language. He is the only source I know who reports from the 1850's on the philosophy of the Miwok people. Therefore he is the source from which the speech of "Thundering Crow" is derived in the play.

It is said that the Great Spirit idea was not part of California Indian religion. Therefore there is some controversy about whether "Thundering Crow" in *Friendly Fire* expresses a truly California Indian religious idea.

Here is from pages 229-30 of the translation of Perlot's journal:

His (the Indian's) laws and his customs proceed from his religious beliefs: the Great Spirit (God) himself is his legislator and his judge; but his action is exerted without any intermediary whatsoever. A theocracy without priests— there, truly, is the government of the Indians.

An attentive observer of nature, the Indian sees in the mighty phenomena it presents to him, the manifestation of the will of the Nang-Oua, the Great Spirit, and endeavors to make his conduct conform to it; he obeys him and offers no other worship to him: the precepts of this religion, which the old teach the young, constitute his civil code and his penal code.

If the Indian commits a crime, it is God whom he offends, it is God who will punish him. Others avoid him, for fear of being punished because of him; they leave him in his isolation until they are persuaded by his good works he has succeeded in appeasing the Great Spirit. Thus, the Indian who has fought with another member of his tribe, who has refused to share his food with one more feeble than himself from his tribe, who has broken his bow, his arrows, or his

fishing tackle, has to exile himself from his tribe and not reappear until the moon has returned to the same phase and to the same point of the sky where it was at the moment of the sin, that is, at the end of a month. Each day of this month, when the moon again passes the point of the meridian where it was at the moment of the sin, the Indian is on his guard, persuaded that the Spirit is going to punish him, by depriving him of health or of food or of sleep; it is ordinarily of this last blessing that he is deprived. If it is a murder he has committed, he expects to be killed, even by his relatives or his friends, especially by them, for they are convinced that by giving him death, they are rendering him a supreme service. In fact, if the Spirit lets him live, it is in order to kill him where the Spirit kills, that is, when he will be where the Indians go after death, above the vault which rests on the mountains. Then he will exist no more, he will be annihilated, instead of which, if he is killed on earth, he will go above with the others to live there forever.

I asked Juan, who was explaining this theodicy to me, if the Indians were happier up above, after their death, than here in the mountains. “Oh,” he said, “I don’t know, I don’t think so; we are happy here, and when we die, if we have been good Indians, we are still happy up above, that’s all; isn’t that enough?”

You can see in this passage several seeds of the speech I give to “Thundering Crow.” Yet one could raise questions. Was Perlot making all this up for his European audience? Having read the whole book this seems unlikely. He is the most modest and balanced reporter of any of the authors I’ve read from the period.

Was he transposing beliefs from some other, non-California group, some generic Indian great-spirit romanticism, and attributing them to the Miwok? Arguing against that is that, later on page 230 he uses the correct Miwok words for sun and moon (as they would have been written by a Frenchman, i.e. he writes the word for sun as “Ouatou”; while Barrett’s “Geography and Dialects of the Miwok Indians” writes it *watu*, similarly Perlot writes *Commè* for the moon while Barrett gives *kome*.) He proceeds to a subtle description of how Juan expresses complex abstract ideas, in Miwok. At one point Juan fears that Perlot has not grasped the Miwok and, knowing some Spanish, says to him, “Dios piensa il movimiento.” God thought of motion. [it’s unclear which of the two made the errors in Spanish]. It seems unlikely that Perlot is not reporting his impression of a series of conversations with a real Miwok man who had spent some time among the Spanish.

So far as I know, there is no other record of any European having these kinds of discussions with a Miwok intellectual like Juan in the 1850s – or for the next fifty years. So there is nothing that I know of in the written record to support, or to attack the plausibility of Perlot’s picture.

Of course, Juan's theological picture is much more complicated than is encompassed by "Thundering Crow's" one-minute speech. But simplification is required in any dramatic presentation.

Perlot, Jean-Nicolas, *Gold Seeker, Adventures of a Belgian Argonaut during the Gold Rush Years*, translated by Helen Harding Bretnor, Yale University Press, 1985.