The Sun Dance : The Center Pole and Primal Religion

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1. Introduction

“Primal peoples are not blind to nature’s differences; they are famous for their powers of observation. The point is rather that they see distinctions as bridges instead of barriers” (Smith 376). It is precisely this concept that is at the heart of the Sun Dance of the Plains Indians. The intention of the present paper is to explore how and by what means, symbolism, and religious function a single ritual evokes in the minds of the participants an intensification of “bridges,” i.e. the ritual of emphatic connection to the spirit world around human life. First a brief exposition of the procedures of the Sun Dance will lead to a commentary highlighting the general world view of Native American religions. We will conclude with a discussion of whether or not such a ritual should be considered truly religious in character or as a practice of magic.

2. Origins and Development of the Sun Dance

The Sun Dance was one of the most significant ceremonies conducted by the Plains Indians of North America during the nineteenth century. It was held annually during the summer solstice when tribal people had gathered together again after having disbanded during the winter in order to forge smaller hunting groups and travel at greater distances more easily to find game. In other words, it was a way of renewing communal bonds in a religious context by celebrating the renewed vigor of the earth and sun. Most of the Plains Indians conducted sun dances although specific reasons and some details of the dance itself varied from tribe to tribe, just as the myths explaining the dance’s origins varied. For the Cheyenne the dance began as a way to ward off famine. Their myth tells of one young brave who went to a cave with a female companion and received instructions and a buffalo skin-cap from the Great Spirit. “When they came forth from the mountain the entire earth turned fresh and new. The buffalo came forth to follow them to their homeland” (Hoebel 20). For the Blackfoot the dance’s origins came from the instructions of the Sun himself in exchange for the prevention of sickness in the Blackfoot community. The renewal of the earth, the buffalo, and curing illnesses are all important manifestations of the Sun Dance.

3. A Summary of the Sun Dance Ritual

The ceremony itself can be briefly summarized as a general process whose details are shared by most tribes of the Plains Indians. Medicine men from the tribe choose a cottonwood tree with a fork at the top
generally the winter before the sun dance ceremony. Once the tree is chosen, nothing can alter that choice. When the tree blooms it will serve as the center pole for the sun dance lodge in which the ceremony will take place. First, however, it has to be captured. This means that many warriors within the tribe charge at it to inflict “wounds.” The tree is seen as an enemy at this time, a contradictory concept to the overall respect and sacral dimension the Tree comes to demand and embody respectively. It is in fact the sacrifice of the tree that makes it sacred and foreshadows the sacrifice of the sun dancers that will come on the final day of the Sun Dance. A victory shout rises from the warriors upon prayers of supplication towards the tree. Remaining branches are cut off, tribal members count coup as the tree is cut down, and finally the tree is transferred with ritualistic observances to the site of the sun dance lodge where it is erected in a hole at the center of a mystery circle. Religious offerings are placed in a bundle and placed in the fork of the tree. A buffalo skull is fastened to the top as well. For many tribes a buffalo skull is also used as an altar with eye and nose sockets stuffed with grass. The rest of the lodge is then built over the next few days. During this time the dancers fast. Once the lodge is complete the dancing commences, the dancers weaving back and forth, eyes on the buffalo skull and the sun. A vision is sought as the drummers beat out the rhythms for the participants while the dancers themselves play whistles of eagle-bone. At the end of the ceremony some of the dancers who had earlier made a pledge to do so now have skewers attached to ropes of buffalo thongs inserted into their chests or backs. The ropes are tied to the center sun-pole and the dancers must break free by pulling on the ropes as they dance in order to allow the skewers to tear through the flesh. The Sun Dance then ends, the dancers recite visions to the medicine men, who interpret the visions, and finally the sun dance lodge is abandoned, left standing to nature to do with it as it will.

Admittedly, we have only discussed the ritual in its bare essentials, but there is enough here to convey the philosophical and religious thought of Native Americans. One of the most salient aspects of the dance is the circle in which the dancers move. We can mention the sun and the buffalo skull as two powers that motivate the dancers with their circularity; in a less obvious although equally meaningful sense it should be noted that the Plains Indians’ sense of time is also circular—life believed as beginning and ending in childhood in contrast to the Judaeo-Christian linear life that extends from childhood to old age. “You have noticed,” says Black Elk, the famed medicine man of the Oglala Sioux tribe, “that everything an Indian does is in a circle, and that is because the Power of the World always works in circles, and everything tries to be round [...]. All our power came to us from the sacred hoop of the nation, and so long as the hoop was unbroken, the people flourished. The flowering tree was the living center of the hoop [...]” (Neihardt 155). The sun-pole at the center of the sun lodge is a correlate of this mind-set; it is the center of the universe, the axis mundi, charged with Wakan Tanka, the Spirit that permeates all that is. This spiritual guiding principle illustrating panentheism (spirit present in and beyond all things) transcends duality as it is neither singular nor plural, personal nor impersonal. One major difference between this so-called primal religion and universal religion is that the former does not purport to have a basis in ethical doctrine. Native Americans work from observations of natural processes (the shape of the sun and moon, birds’ nests, the whirling wind, the seasons) to forge a philosophy and spirituality based on circularity and cycles. The sun dance brings this principle to ritual focus. This explains the fasting that all dancers must practice before the ritual begins— the center pole is holy and must be approached in a purified state of being. It is the bridge to the spirit world. The dance is a way of connecting human patterns with the patterns of the universe, a crucial balance that the dancers worked to maintain in a physical and symbolic circle.
4. Intensification and Renewal

Noss emphasizes two points regarding rites of intensification and renewal: “(1) rites to heighten resolve and increase physical stamina for warfare,” and (2) rites for spiritual cleansing or renewal (33). The sun dance fulfilled both purposes. The physical demands on the dancers to dance under a hot summer sun without food and water for a number of days were obviously geared to the Native American ideal of stamina. The dance stresses prowess as well as endurance as the dancers move towards and away from the center pole, the “Wakan Tanka, who is the center of everything. Everything comes from Him, and sooner or later everything returns to Him,” as Black Elk describes the center pole (Brown 56). When a dancer falls with exhaustion beneath the buffalo skull on the center pole, the “participant usually attempts to dance again, desiring to be one who ‘made it,’ who did not ‘collapse in front of Buffalo [and, it should be added, the other participants and observing elders] and then fail to muster the courage to get up to dance again to meet Buffalo head on’” (Lawrence). The prowess and endurance necessary for such a ritual is an obligation on the dancer not only in spiritual terms but in social terms as well. The other participants were most likely made up of others who would be battle and hunting comrades– to conduct oneself during the sun dance respectably was indeed a significant aspect of gaining their confidence and trust. The prowess of one’s dancing, the skill with which one becomes worthy under the eyes of Buffalo, the stamina and endurance, especially regarding the final sacrifice– all of these aspects lend themselves to the social prestige of the warrior. Certainly such social forces of communal bonding are prime motivations for the participants. There is an inter-connectedness present in Native American ritual and thinking– the individual is the tribe, the tribe is the nation, the nation is all things in the universe. Such an awareness becomes intensified for each individual as he reestablishes his place in the universe by participating in the sun dance ritual (starting in the 1950s women too joined the men in fasting and dancing. “Today there are almost as many women dancers as men,” according to Agnes Yellowtail Deernose [qtd. in Fitzgerald 110]). Moreover, every warrior needed to maintain his relationship with a spiritual guardian to survive on the battlefield.

The tree, as was mentioned above, is first attacked by these warriors as an enemy only to become later the revered manifestation of the Wakan Tanka, the center pole in the sun lodge and access to the divine. This is a very problematic paradox, for how can one treat a symbol as inimical and then sacred? It may seem paradoxical to the Western mind, but in order to sacrifice the Tree, thus conditioning its sacredness, they have to embody within it the very things they want to kill for the sake of universal renewal. A symbol, therefore, can be redirected as a result of ritual. In other words, the Tree may stand for negative life forces at the outset, but regenerative ritual purifies it into a sacred power. A similar state of affairs concerns the buffalo. Here we have an example of an animal that is hunted yet venerated. Since the buffalo is at the heart of the Sun Dance (as we have already seen in the desire of the dancer to meet Buffalo head on), it is worth noting such a parallel to the change the sacred tree undergoes. First, we must take a brief look at the rationale behind this.

5. Harmonious Opposites and the Meaning of Self-Sacrifice

It is a product of Western logical tradition that two opposed principles cannot exist together in the same
theoretical construct or entity– one must overwhelm the other. Eastern spiritual thought has no such difficulty, as demonstrated in the yin-yang symbol which embodies the principle of harmonious opposites. In significant ways Native American thought reflects Eastern spirituality. It is not constructed of discrete divisions, but as we have already noted with the help of Huston Smith, it makes “bridges” of observed distinctions. It expresses the inter-connected unity of all nature that is also a feature of Taoist thought. Of course the lifestyle of the Plains Indians is vastly different from the Chinese, but nature as an extension of ourselves, the lack of duality in the universe, a deep humility towards nature rather than a will to conquest, and a will to live in accordance with nature’s principles are all aspects of an ideology that lies at the core of the mentality of both civilizations. Therefore, to return to the buffalo, it is not contradictory to kill the buffalo and to venerate the buffalo as a sacred animal at the same time. The reason for a lack of contradiction is in the manner of the hunt, the complex of reverent atonement at the heart of hunting societies. Joseph Campbell relates a Blackfoot story of the Buffalo Wife who promised a portion of a herd of buffalo that she would marry any who survived a plunge over a cliff. The only survivor among them took her up on this pledge. Eventually her father went looking for her and was stampeded by the buffalo. After finding his wife weeping over her father’s corpse, the buffalo asked why she didn’t weep for the dead buffalo and promised to set her free if she could revive her father. From a single bone of his vertebrae, she was able to do just this. Thereupon she was set free, but not before the buffalo taught her their dance, a dance that would regenerate the fallen buffalo (Campbell). The guilt of hunting the animal is appeased through regenerative ritual, the dance of life that Native Americans understood as necessary for universal balance. The buffalo gives its life to the welfare of the tribe– that is the essence of the story. Therefore, the sun dance is a way of returning the favor, a way of sacrifice to regenerate life– chief among this the life-sustaining buffalo. The steps of each participant recharge the limited energy of the world and its wildlife.

With this in mind we can easily repudiate Hoebbel’s assertion that the self-sacrifice of certain dancers at the end of the sun dance “does not contribute to the earth-renewal purposes of Sun Dance, nor is it done on behalf of the tribe as a whole” (74). While such self-sacrifice may indeed have personal incentives– a sick relative, a hope to avert future pain– Hoebbel simplistically misreads the culture. We must not forget that this is a public ritual involving all members of the tribe. What is undertaken by an individual, especially with regard to ritual, radiates throughout the rest of the tribe and to all of creation. One’s personal spirituality in such a society cannot help but redound upon others. As was mentioned above, the participant has skewers in place beneath the skin. These skewers are attached to ropes of buffalo thongs that are tied to the center pole. The dancer must free himself by pulling away from the pole as he dances. If we keep in mind that the pole is Wakan Tanka, we can understand what is happening here. The dancer, as he tugs at the ropes, feels the pain of what it is like to be separated from the spiritual world. Very often at this point a vision would come to him to be interpreted by the medicine men, a vision that frequently spoke to the tribe itself. The ceremony of the Sun Dance embodies a central theme in much of the religion of early North America– the visionary life of the individual. It was one’s experience of the spirits that was widely regarded as the basic component of spiritual knowledge. The hopes and needs of the people were at stake in the Sun Dance, expressed in fasting, vigils, the stamina of a dancing ritual, and even voluntary physical pain. All of this had a collective impact on the tribe’s relationship with its environment, its very existence. To claim that a collective ritual suddenly terminates with private self-sacrifice that has no connection to what has gone before is to miss the point.
6. Magic or Religion?

The fact that each person can access this visionary life in the Sun Dance means that we are not dealing with magic, the province of specialists generally. To “bend the powers of the world to one’s will,” Noss’s definition of magic (10), however, does seem to apply to the Sun Dance in that the participants do have the definite aim of renewing the earth so that sustenance will continue unabated. Moreover, the grass in the eye and nose sockets of the buffalo is a clear indication of productive magic, the expectation of the buffalo’s sustenance that leads to the sustenance of the Indians themselves. The medicine man will often during the ceremony touch the sun-pole with an eagle feather and touch someone with it in the hope of curing the individual. If this is magic, it is certainly no different from touching the garment of a dead saint or other holy relic established by the Catholic Church. Here too one hopes to “bend powers to one’s will.” It is imperative to realize that the Sun Dance is not done merely for the sake of the tribe—it is done for the sake of the world. It is a revitalizing ceremony. Most Native American tribes believe that the world has a certain amount of energy in store that needs to be recharged. This is the main purpose of the Sun Dance. It is for the birds, the wind, the trees, the grass and the rocks as much as it is for the people themselves. Such a complex function of unity conforms more to the ideas of religion than magic, as we are dealing with universal concerns. While it is true that each tribe has its own subsistence as a driving concern, it is also true that subsistence requires a healthy, flourishing earth, a notion that is full of spiritual concerns too since, as we have noted, dualistic thinking has no place in the Native American mentality. The invisible plane is just as real as the visible one. The Sun Dance serves as a bridge between them with its ritual that presupposes that actions in one world have consequences on the other. This brings us to a final comment on whether the Sun Dance is a religious or magical ceremony: the Native American would simply not concern himself or herself with the distinction, nor would the need for such distinctions enter his or her mind. What cannot be overstated, however, is that participation in the Sun Dance represented a holy moment in the life of the individual, a moment intensified above all others as one’s social identity became reestablished, one’s physical suffering earned a spiritual vision and a sense of rebirth, and one’s spirit poured itself into the sacred river that touched the banks of both worlds.

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