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## The Symbolic Role of Animals in the Plains Indian Sun Dance

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*For many tribes of Plains Indians whose bison-hunting culture flourished during the 18th and 19th centuries, the sun dance was the major communal religious ceremony. Generally held in late spring or early summer, the rite celebrates renewal—the spiritual rebirth of participants and their relatives as well as the regeneration of the living earth with all its components. The sun dance reflects relationships with nature that are characteristic of the Plains ethos, and includes symbolic representations of various animal species, particularly the eagle and the buffalo, that once played vital roles in the lives of the people and are still endowed with sacredness and special powers. The ritual, involving sacrifice and supplication to insure harmony between all living beings, continues to be practiced by many contemporary native Americans.*

For many tribes of Plains Indians whose buffalo-hunting culture flowered during the 18th and 19th centuries, the sun dance was the major communal religious ceremony. Although details of the event differed in various groups, certain elements were common to most tribal traditions. Generally, the annual ceremony was held in late spring or early summer when people from different bands gathered together again following the dispersal that customarily took place in winter. The sun dance, a ritual of sacrifice performed by virtually all of the High Plains peoples, has been described among the Arapaho, Arikara, Assiniboin, Bannock, Blackfeet, Blood, Cheyenne, Plains Cree, Crow, Gros Ventre, Hidatsa, Kiowa, Mandans, Ojibway, Omaha, Ponca, Sarsi, Shoshone, Sioux (Dakota), and Ute (Spier, 1921, p. 459; Liberty, 1980, pp. 165-66). Today many of these tribes still carry out the sun dance, sometimes in altered form. The overall significance of the sun dance involves renewal — the spiritual renewal of participants and their relatives as well as the renewal of the living earth and all its components. In its broadest aspects, kinships within both the social and natural realms are reaffirmed. This regenerative theme is evidenced by the Cheyenne, for example, through naming the structure in which the ritual takes place the New-Life-Lodge. This

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term expresses the idea that the sun dance is supposed to “re-create, to re-form, to re-animate the earth, vegetation, [and] animal life” and hence is a “ceremony of rebirth or renaissance” (Dorsey, 1905a, p. 57).

Specific reasons for participation vary among individuals and tribes. Motivations for the sacrifice include thankfulness for blessings received, the fulfillment of a vow previously made in return for the beneficial outcome of a certain crisis, and the desire to insure the safety of a person in the armed forces or to obtain a cure for a sick relative. Less specifically, the ordeal may be undertaken to promote the general welfare of the dancers people. Historically, Crows held the dance to seek aid in obtaining vengeance for kin killed in warfare (Lowie, 1935, p. 297). Some tribal traditions include the transfer of sacred medicine bundles in the context of the ceremony.

Generally, each sun dance has a sponsor or pledger, usually the main dancer, who bears the expenses of the ceremony. The event ordinarily involves about a week or more of activity consisting of an early private period, during which preparations are made and instruction and prayer take place, followed by the public phase of dancing. Construction of the sun dance lodge is accompanied by complex rituals in which a special tree is cut for use as a center pole, with the dance enclosure erected around it. The entrance faces east, and in some tribes sunrise ceremonies mark each days dawn during the dance. Inside, an altar is constructed, usually featuring a decorated buffalo skull. Dancers fast and abstain from drinking during the three or four days of dancing. While special songs are chanted by drummers near the lodge entrance, each participant moves rhythmically back and forth from the periphery of the lodge to the center pole. Dancers continuously blow on eagle-bone whistles, fixing their eyes on the crotch in the center pole that is typically known as the Thunderbirds Nest or eagles nest. Periods of rest alternate with intervals of dancing. At the end of the sun dance, purification rites are held and the participants may drink water and break their fast. The lodge is then abandoned, its components remaining briefly as a reminder of the ceremony before returning to the elements.

In former times, voluntary torture was part of the climax of the sun dance in certain tribes such as the Sioux and Cheyenne. In those cases, the dancers were pierced through the breast or shoulder muscles by skewers which were tied to the center pole, and they danced by pulling back until their flesh tore away. Sometimes the thongs inserted in the sufferers bodies were attached to a varying number of buffalo skulls rather than to the center pole (Spier, 1921, pp. 474-75; Walker, 1917, pp. 116-19; Laubin, 1977, pp. 291-92).

Sun dance participants strive to obtain supernatural aid and personal power through their sacrifice which will not only assure the accomplishment of desired outcomes but which will bring them a richer and more meaningful life as a member of their society. The sacred ritual reaffirms tribal membership and cultural identity and ensures that the people will prosper for another year. Following the sun dance, there is a renewed feeling of social harmony. And because of a world view that includes nature and all living beings within the realm of kinship, that sense of harmony extends beyond human relationships to include the entire creation. As one contemporary native American explains, the sun dance “is the ritual reenactment of the relationship the Plains people see between consecration of the human spirit and Wakan Tanka [God] as manifested as Sun, or Light, and Life-Bestower. Through purification, participation, sacrifice, and supplication, the participants act as instruments or transmitters of increased power and wholeness . . . from Wakan Tanka.” The purpose of the ceremony is “to integrate: to fuse the individual with his or her fellows, the community of people with that of the other kingdoms, and this larger communal group with the worlds beyond this one. . . . The person sheds the isolated, individual personality and is restored to conscious harmony with the universe.” The community “is the bedrock of tribal life” and it “necessarily includes all beings that inhabit the tribe’s universe” (Allen, 1986, pp. 61-63).

Although many in-depth studies of the sun dance have been made by anthropologists, the inclusion of symbolic animals in the ceremony has received only passing mention. I first became interested in the role of animals in the ritual when attending a Crow Indian sun dance during my field research on the Crow Reservation in June 1980. During that ceremony, everyone in attendance was requested not to kill any animals or birds on or near the grounds where the sun lodge had been erected for the duration of the sun dance. This prohibition was part of the effort to maintain a sense of harmony between people and nature—essential to the promotion of healing and regeneration of life that is the central focus of the ceremony.

Integration with the rest of creation is expressed throughout the sun dance by symbolic objects that represent attributes of various animal kin. For example, Sioux participants may wear the skins of rabbits on their arms and legs, for “the rabbit represents humility, because he is quiet and soft and not self-asserting—a quality we must all possess when we go to the center of the world” (Brown, 1967, p. 85). The wearing of strips of rabbit fur by the Cheyennes who build the sun dance lodge may refer back to the time when the tribe lived in the north and subsisted chiefly on rabbits

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(Grinnell, 1923, vol. 2, p. 218). The Arapaho sun dance involves a rabbit-tipi, whose name originated from the myth in which rabbits conducted the secret ceremonies of the sun dance lodge. Those who still perform the rites are called Rabbit-men (Dorsey, 1903, p. 37). Weasel and otter hides, because they come from “tough little animals,” are linked to the Crow sun dance (Voget, 1984, p. 253), probably conferring endurance. For the Lakota, these two animals are especially “wakan,” meaning akin to sacred (Walker, 1980, pp. 101, 168).

### **Eagle Symbolism**

The eagle, a highly important sacred animal in Plains belief, plays a major role in the sun dance. Most obviously, the bird partakes of the ritual by having his nest represented at the fork of the lodge. In Arapaho mythology, this nest symbolizes the thunderbird, or eagle, who built his nest in a cottonwood tree. “Just as [these] birds fly about overlooking the earth, so does the Father. He is in the form of a bird” (Dorsey, 1903, p. 114). Some tribes, notably the Crow and Shoshone, fasten an actual mounted golden eagle to the rafter over the entrance or near the nest. Considered “chief of all the creatures of the air,” and “powerful in battle,” the bird acts as “guardian protecting the people from evil.” The eagle is admired for courage, swiftness, and strength. Sometimes identified as the thunderbird, he is distinguished by his extraordinarily high flight, bringing him nearer to the sun and in closer proximity to the Great Mystery than any other creature (Laubin, 1977, pp. 279, 315; Grinnell, 1923, vol. 1, p. 188). “Eagle is the primary servant of the Sun and in his spiritual manifestation takes the form of Thunderbird.” Eagle is a bearer of messages from spirit to man, and from man to spirit” (Voget, 1984, pp. 307-308). Thus, in the sun dance the eagle exerts his power as a facilitator of communication between people and the supernatural forces. Crows shed light on the eagle’s symbolic role in the sun dance ritual, explaining: “Thunderbird in his earthly manifestation of eagle epitomizes the dynamism of thunder and lightning. He is the awakener of earth and of its greening; he is the servant of the Sun, the giver of heat and light.” The eagle is associated with success, for “prosperity and wealth follow the eagle, who may bestow the gift of curing” (Voget, 1984, p. 312). Eagles “have sharp eyes and know everything” (Brown, 1967, p. 77). As expressed by a contemporary Sioux medicine man, “in an eagle there is all the wisdom of the world” (Lame Deer and Erdoes, 1972, p. 136).

A Crow who is dancing intensely may focus on the eagle at the top of the pole. The eagle may “finally move and show itself to the person,” and “may begin to dance

alongside one as he 'charges' and dances back from the center pole." The eagle may then accompany that person in a vision, dancing beside him and instructing him about the medicine acquired through the vision. On the second day of the dance, a participant may see the eagle soaring above the lodge. "The eagle is alive with a beauty and strength unmatched anywhere, having been endowed with keen eyesight as well as foresight." The bird carries the Creator's messages and symbolizes forthcoming blessings (Frey, 1987, pp. 108-109, 118). In unison, each dancer constantly blows upon a whistle fashioned from an eagle's wing bone, making sounds like the cry of an eagle, keeping time with the drum. This activity symbolizes the force of prayers which rise high like eagles to reach the Great Mystery. According to Black Elk, the sound made by the whistle "is the voice of the Spotted Eagle; our Grandfather, Wakan-Tanka, always hears this, for . . . it is really His own voice" (Brown, 1967, p. 71). The whistle is painted with colored dots and lines to represent the remarkable perception of the eagle. The fluffy down feather at the end of the whistle is blown back and forth, representing breath and life (Mails, 1972, pp. 165, 167; Laubin, 1977, p. 279). The plume is "taken from the breast of the eagle, for this is the place which is nearest to the heart and center of the sacred bird" (Brown, 1967, p. 71). Under certain conditions, when a dancer suffers greatly from thirst, water may come to the eagle-bone whistle (Frey, 1987, p. 140).

Because of the eagle's special capacities, his feathers have supernatural and curative functions. An observer recorded that once when the thirst of some Arapaho dancers became intense, a participant used an eagle feather to bring a refreshing rain (Shimkin, 1953, pp. 449-50). During the sun dance, a medicine man may direct his eagle-feather fan toward the bodies of people who seek healing. The feathers are first touched to the center pole and then to the patient, transmitting power from the pole to the sufferer. The sun dance leader brushes away illness with a feather. Fanning motions directed to the body may withdraw and whip away causes of sickness. Feathers are held upward toward the sky to reach the eagle so that the bird may bear the prayers for curing upward to the Creator (Frey, 1987, p. 134; Shimkin, 1953, p. 448; Voget, 1984, p. 240).

## **Buffalo Symbolism**

It is the buffalo, however, as the very source of life for the Plains tribes, who occupies the central role in the sun dance. From that animal, Plains people once derived not only meat for sustenance, but skins for tipis, fur for robes, and virtually all materials for the

tools and objects necessary for everyday living. Crows still commemorate the buffalos fulfillment of their needs in former times. "Even today, Crows view the buffalo as a provider of good things for living. 'It represents plenty to eat, plenty to wear, and a peaceful wholesome life.'" The buffalo symbolizes the "necessities without which life would be hazardous and wearisome," and "also bestows great curing powers." In the contemporary sun dance, it still "radiates power" (Voget, 1984, pp. 307, 312).

Proximity of buffalo herds as influenced by their migrations indeed determined the time and locality chosen for the great ceremonial (Roe, 1970, p. 664). The preeminent status of the buffalo is illustrated by the fact that in certain tribes, the origin of the sun dance is traced to the buffalo. The inception of the ceremonial involves a visionary encounter between a person and a buffalo emissary with supernatural power. Ute and Shoshone myths, for example, reveal that the buffalo helped the individual who began the tradition, giving him instructions as to how to carry out the dance and revealing the benefits that would follow from proper performance of the ritual (Jorgensen, 1972, p. 26). For the Lakota, it was a deity in the form of a White Buffalo who brought the Sacred Pipe through which all ceremonies and rituals are empowered (Allen, 1986, p. 16). The Cheyenne sun dance was taught by the Creator to a medicine man, later known as Erect-Horns because of the buffalo horn cap he wore. He journeyed to a high peak in the company of a woman and when the couple came forth from the mountain to return home, "the whole earth seemed to become new, and there came forth buffalo that followed them" (Dorsey, 1905, p. 48).

Themes relating to the buffalo consistently occur throughout the sun dance. Historically, various ceremonies relating to the animal have taken place as a preliminary to the climactic dancing. A sacred song of the Oglala Sioux that followed certain rituals pertaining to the buffalo skull expresses the participants' desire for blessings and its association with the buffalos power:

Wakan-Tanka be merciful to me. We want to live!  
 That is why we are doing this.  
 They say that a herd of buffalo is coming;  
 Now they are here.  
 The power of the buffalo is coming upon us;  
 It is now here! (Brown, 1953, p. 87)

As the Cheyenne sun dance progresses, buffalo songs change in tempo. "The rattle beat

becomes slow and ponderous, as if a great herd of buffalo was moving across the prairie." A Cheyenne who was present the first time these buffalo songs were sung in the sun dance lodge related that "as they were chanted, a herd of buffalo bulls ran over the hill and down into the camp" (Powell, 1969, vol. 2, p. 658).

Buffalo ceremonies, buffalo dances, and feasts of buffalo flesh were sometimes included as preliminaries to prayers that the Great Mystery would "heed the words of the Buffalo which He will speak that night in commendation of the people." A Sioux shaman dedicated food to "the God of generosity, the Buffalo God." In buffalo dances, participants "imitate the pawing of a buffalo bull in rage or defiance and...manifest a defiant bravery of the dancers equal to that of the buffalo bull." While dancing, they "gaze continually at the ornamented buffalo head." Those who complete "four periods of this dance become buffalo men" (Walker, 1917, pp. 104, 115). After the tree to be used as the center pole had been chosen, Sioux Buffalo Cult members carried out a ceremony to honor the buffalo and bring his spirit to the dance (Laubin, 1977, p. 279).

Flesh of the animal was utilized in various ways. Prior to inserting the center pole into the ground, the Sioux placed buffalo fat into the hole. Before the dancing began, the sacred sun dance pipe was filled and sealed with fat from a buffalo's heart. A buckskin bag containing a piece of buffalo hump, the choicest of all parts, was suspended from the bundle of branches above the pole. A feast of buffalo flesh often followed the termination of the sun dance. Buffalo tongues, as "the most sacred part of the most sacred animal," were an important feature of the sun dance in many tribes. In preparation for the Blackfoot sun dance, one-hundred tongues were gathered and prepared according to proscribed rituals and consumed as sacramental food during the ceremony. The tongues were "prayed and sung over" and were consecrated to the sun. A feast of buffalo tongues preceded the onset of the dancers fasting among the Lakota and Blackfoot (Laubin, 1977, pp. 278, 282, 283; Frey, 1987, p. 121; Melody, 1976; Harrod, 1987, p. 125; Wissler, 1918, pp. 235-39; McClintock, 1910, p. 305).

Formerly the Hidatsas, Arikaras, and Shoshones prepared the head of a buffalo killed in a special hunt so that it looked alive during the sun dance. Today the Shoshones and Crows use a mounted head that is kept from year to year for that purpose. The stuffed buffalo head is tied near the fork of the center pole during the ceremony. Representing the great herds upon which the tribes once depended, it remains as a symbol of abundance (Frey, 1987, p. 105; Laubin, 1977, pp. 313-14). In earlier times, some form of a buffalo calf or its hide was placed at the top of the center pole. The initiator of a Sisseton Sioux sun dance would prepare a life-like stuffed calf

or yearling for this purpose which in later years was replaced by a small rawhide buffalo effigy (Skinner, 1919:383). While placing the skin of a young buffalo at the top of the tree, the Oglala pledger would say

It is from this buffalo person that our people live; he gives to us our homes, our clothing, our food, everything we need. O buffalo calf, I now give to you a sacred place upon the tip of the tree. This tree will hold you in his hand and will raise you up to Wakan-Tanka. Behold what I am about to do! Through this, all things that move and fly upon the earth and in the heavens will be happy! (Brown, 1967, pp. 78-79)

In some tribal sun dances, a pair of rawhide effigies, one in the shape of a buffalo and one in the shape of a man, were suspended from the center pole under its fork. The Oglala offered these figures to the six directions with a prayer stating that the buffalo which had been provided is “the chief of all the four-leggeds upon our sacred Mother; from him the people live, and with him they walk the sacred path. Behold, too, this two-legged, who represents all the people.” Wakan-Tanka was asked to bestow upon “these two chiefs...all the favours that they ask for” (Brown, 1967, p. 79). In the ceremony the buffalo

represents the people and the universe and should always be treated with respect, for was he not here before the two-legged peoples, and is he not generous in that he gives us our homes and our food? The buffalo is wise in many things, and, thus, we should learn from him and should always be as a relative with him. (Brown, 1967, p. 72)

Charles Eastman, a Sioux, states that the man was painted red and the buffalo black. “The paint indicated that the man who was about to give thanks publicly had been potentially dead, but was allowed to live by the mysterious favor and interference of the Giver of Life. The buffalo hung opposite the image of his own body in death, because it was the support of his physical self” (1970, pp. 59-60). In J. R. Walker’s account, both the buffalo bull and the man were painted black and were depicted with exaggerated genitals. Incantations were made to impart potency to the figures (1917, p. 108). Formerly, as a preliminary to the Teton Sioux sun dance, warriors shot at the rawhide effigies to represent “the overcoming of enemies and the success of many buffalo hunts” (Laubin, 1977, p. 283).



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Various parts and products of the buffalo are incorporated into the sun dance. The officiating Sioux priest wore buffalo horns upon his head. He might attach bands of buffalo skin with loosening hair to his ankles and wrists, and his robe came from a buffalo who was shedding. Special power was attributed to the shed hair of the all-important animal (Laubin, 1977, p. 286). The thongs used by the Sioux in the self-torture ritual were made of buffalo rawhide (Brown, 1967, p. 95). Among the Cheyenne "in earlier times, the buffalo rawhide was used as the drum throughout the ceremonies, thus continuing the principle that all essential sacred items in the sun dance are related to the buffalo" (Powell, 1969, vol. 2, p. 660). At a certain point in the Lakota ritual, a dried buffalo penis was placed against the center pole. This was done to "give increased virility to the dancers," so "they could get more children" (Walker, 1917, p. 110; 1980, p. 36). The center pole is viewed as a conductor of life, and therefore leaning the buffalo phallus against it confirms the pole's association with fertility and reinforces the symbolic meaning of the ceremony as a celebration of the generative power of the sun. The cottonwood pole, as "the conduit of life for the dancers and for the people" could be "understood to be the sun's phallus" (Melody, 1976, pp. 454-55). A rattle made of buffalo scrotum once played a role in the Shoshone sun dance ritual (Shimkin, 1953, p. 444). Sioux dancers undergoing the self-torture phase of the ceremony were given buffalo tails for use as fly brushes and fans (Laubin, 1977, p. 291).

Ritual burning of buffalo chips was also practiced. After the site for the sun dance lodge had been chosen, buffalo chips were lighted on the sacred spot where the holy tree was to be erected (Laubin, 1977, p. 280). Lakota belief held that smoke from the buffalo chips was "an incense to propitiate the Buffalo God." Pieces of dry buffalo excrement "have a wakanla, or spirit-like of themselves" and this spirit-like is released by burning, as the smoke, and this ascended to the Buffalo God as an intermediary." Prior to the dancing, a fire of buffalo chips on the altar (with sweetgrass incense) insures that "all will be harmonized with the potency of the Buffalo God that should prevail during the ceremony" (Walker, 1980, p. 37; 1917, pp. 101, 113-14).

Even objects that are sacred in themselves are molded into the image of the buffalo. On the second day of dancing, Sioux participants sometimes added to the wreathes of sage they wore on their heads "two eagle primary feathers inserted straight up in the wreathes, one on each side of the head." These looked "much like long horns, symbolizing the plenty of Buffaloes and buffalo power" (Laubin, 1977, p. 289). Horns made from the sacred sage adorned the head of a dancer who had vowed to drag four

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buffalo skulls, and the form of the buffalo was worn on his chest (Brown, 1967, p. 93).

The most dramatic representation of the buffalo in the sun dance is the animal's skull. Painted and decorated in various symbolic ways and resting on a bed of sage generally facing toward the east, it becomes a sacred altar during the ceremony. The Oglala directed prayers to Wakan-Tanka indicating

the chief of all the four-leggeds is tatanka, the buffalo. Behold his dried skull here; by this we know that we, too, shall become skull and bones, and thus, together we shall all walk the sacred path back to Wakan-Tanka. Here on earth we live together with the buffalo, and we are grateful to him, for it is he who gives us our food, and who makes the people happy. For this reason I now give grass to our relative the buffalo. (Brown, 1967, p. 90)

Offerings were then presented: balls of sacred sage were placed in the eye sockets, a bag of tobacco was tied on to one horn, and a piece of deerhide attached to the other horn to represent a robe for the buffalo. The skull was painted with red lines, signifying "You, O buffalo, are the earth!" (Brown, 1967, pp. 90-91). Oglala belief held that the Buffalo God, or Relative God, resided in the skull (Walker, 1917, pp. 130-31).

Similarly, the Cheyenne stuffed the eyes and nasal cavity of the buffalo skull with grass which "represents the earth's vegetation, especially that which grows near the water. Its use continues the prayer that the plants, trees, and grasses will be plentiful, in order to supply the needs of both men and animals" (Powell, 1969, vol. 2, p. 636). Symbols were applied to the skull indicating the road to the spirit world, day and night, and the sun and moon. Offerings were made to the skull along with prayers for favor and protection (Dorsey, 1905a, pp. 96-97, 113-14). The Arapaho, too, saw the buffalo skull on the sun dance altar as "the dwelling-place, during the ceremony, of Man-Above." The "various black and red dots on the skull indicate prayers, while the grass knobs placed in the eye-sockets and in the nasal cavities were said to indicate the times when the Indians used grass garments, before the appearance of the buffalo." The grass balls also represent a deity who owns the rivers and creeks. His body is represented by the water grass, or flat grass, and when these balls of grass are inserted, "the buffalo is then complete, ie., the life is restored," for "the animal lives on grass" (Dorsey, 1903, pp. 118-19).

The pipe which was to be used in the Sioux sun dance was first placed upon the buffalo skull, "being careful to have its stem point toward the east." The prayer to

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Wakan-Tanka which followed linked the pipe with the powerful animal, for the sacred pipe would “soon go to the center of the universe, along with the buffalo, who has helped to make strong the bodies of the people” (Brown, 1967, p. 83).

The mentor of an Oglala sun dance candidate decorates the buffalo skull on the altar with “stripes of red paint, one across the forehead and one lengthwise on each side of the skull.” At the same time, he paints

a red stripe across the forehead of the Candidate. The stripes across the forehead indicate that the Buffalo God has adopted the Candidate as a hunka, or relative by ceremony. The red stripes on the sides of the skull indicate that the Buffalo God will give especial protection to the Candidate. The horns of the skull should be adorned with any ornaments that the Candidate may apply. Then the mentor should fill and light a pipe and he and the Candidate should smoke it in communion, alternately blowing the smoke into the nostril cavities of the skull, thus smoking in communion with the Buffalo God. This should be done in order that the potency of the pipe may harmonize all those communing. (Walker, 1917, pp. 69-70)

The candidate must observe many rituals with regard to the altar because “it is a sacred place occupied by the potency of the God, the Buffalo, and should be revered as the God is revered” (Walker, 1917, p. 70).

At the end of the original Sioux sun dance, all objects such as fur, feathers, and wreaths and other symbols used in the ceremony were piled up in the center of the lodge. “These things were too sacred to be kept and should be returned to the earth. Only the buffalo robes and the eagle-bone whistles were kept. ... On top of the pile of sacred things the buffalo skull was placed, for this skull reminds us of death and also helps us to remember that a cycle has been completed” (Brown, 1967, pp. 98-99).

The buffalo skull served numerous functions. The Sioux dance leader, when resting, “threw himself prone on the ground, west of the sacred place, pressing his head against the sacred buffalo skull” (Laubin, 1977, p. 288). When a Crow dancer offered a portion of himself during the sun dance by slicing off the tip of a finger, he performed this sacrifice “steadied on a buffalo skull whenever possible” (Voget, 1984, p. 307).

In a much more dramatic way, buffalo skulls were used to implement the supreme sacrifice of the sun dance that was made in the voluntary torture phenomenon enacted in some tribes. The practice resembles and may have originated from procedures in the

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Mandan “O-Kee-pa” ceremony, as described by the artist, George Catlin, in 1832 (1967, pp. 39-100); it probably spread to the western tribes from that locus (Hultkrantz, 1973, p. 17). In the self-inflicted torture process, participants were suspended from the top of the lodge by thongs attached to skewers passing through back or chest muscles. Additionally, from incisions made in various areas of their bodies, buffalo skulls were hung from skewers. In another form of this sacrifice, instead of being suspended, a man would volunteer to “carry four of his relatives on his back, meaning he would drag four buffalo skulls.” An Oglala who made that vow spoke of it as bearing “my closest relatives, the ancient buffalo” (Brown, 1967, pp. 86, 95). Two to eight skulls might be attached, and as the dancer moved, in addition to tearing his flesh by means of the skewers, the skull and especially the horns dug into his body.

### *Meaning of the Buffalo Skull*

Eastman explains that the buffalo skull that is dragged after the dancer represents “the grave from which he had escaped” (1970, p. 60). It is relevant to the understanding of this practice that “among hunting peoples bones represent the final source of life, both human and animal, the source from which the species is reconstituted at will.... The ‘soul’ is presumed to reside in the bones and hence the resurrection of the individual from its bones can be expected.” For hunters, “bone represents the very source of life. ... To reduce a living being to a skeleton is equivalent to re-entering the womb of this primordial life, that is, to a complete renewal, a mystical rebirth.” The idea that “the inexhaustible matrix of life of the species” is found in the animal’s bones is characteristic of the “mystical relations between man and his prey” that are “fundamental for hunting societies.” Plains tribes such as the Dakota “believe that the bones of those bisons which they have slain and divested of flesh rise again clothed with renewed flesh, and quickened with life, and become fat, and fit for slaughter the succeeding June” (Eliade, 1974, pp. 63, 159, 160-61). Thus the theme of rebirth is expressed through the role of the buffalo skull in the sun dance and this concept of universal regeneration infuses with transcendent meaning the participants’ suffering of ritual pain in association with the skull of the sacred animal.

### *Visionary Experience*

The buffalo plays a significant role in the visionary experience that is sought in the sun dance. A Crow dancer may be guided by a buffalo during a vision. In the contemporary

sun dance ceremony, “dancers challenge his [the buffalo’s] attention by ‘running at it,’ suffering and praying that the Buffalo Person will take notice and ‘run over them,’ bringing a dancer what he desires and perhaps something more—the gift of a power to cure” (Voget, 1984, p. 307). A Crow who is dancing intently may see the buffalo on which he is focusing move. “The buffalo may ‘chase’ a dancer, knocking him down. When this happens, the dancer is said to have taken a ‘hard fall.’” It has come about “with the force of the Buffalo.” As a climax, “he realizes he has the ears and horns of the Buffalo; he’s looking about through the Buffalo’s eyes. He and the Buffalo are one.” After relating these events to the medicine man, “he’s told of the vision’s significance, and cautioned ‘never to eat of the buffalo’” (Frey, 1987, pp. 118-21, 125).

Ute and Shoshone participants reach a point in the ceremony “where they believe that they are indeed ‘knocked down’ by Buffalo.” When a dancer is unconscious for a short time, it is assumed that “he is afraid of Buffalo and has rejected his power.” Elder shamans then shout encouragement, telling him “You can get what you’re looking for. ... If you want to be a doctor [shaman] you’ve got to work for it. You’ve got to take it away from that buffalo. He wants to give it to you, but it isn’t going to be easy.” The participant usually attempts to dance again, desiring to be one who “made it,” who did not “collapse in front of Buffalo and then fail to muster the courage to get up to dance and again to meet Buffalo head on.” It is believed that “Buffalo knocks down those who violate customs, or pursue power too fast, or who cannot withstand the hot-dry force.” Those who get up and dance again after being knocked down show they “have the courage to withstand Buffalo’s jolts of hot-dry power.” Fellow participants may catch a falling dancer and “send him back to ‘fight Buffalo’” (Jorgensen, 1974, pp. 213-14). Shoshones and Utes believe that

the buffalo snorts fire out of his nostrils, that his eyes roll, and that he becomes alive, just like an enraged bull in a bull ring. He challenges those who would accept his power to come and get it. If a person goes down and is knocked unconscious but does not receive a vision, it takes great courage to face Buffalo again. It is believed that, when a person receives his vision, he is “knocked down” as if he were hit by a thunderbolt from above, and it is a foregone conclusion that the dancer will not only dance again but that his dancing will be effortless. (Jorgensen, 1974, p. 214)

During a vision, the dancer is usually unconscious for several hours, and in that interval

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he “may learn new songs, new curing techniques, and a new dance step.” He is in the company of the supernatural forces and may talk to the spirits and perhaps to Buffalo. He is instructed about his power and about new aspects and interpretations of the dance. Spectators may “see Buffalo’s eyes roll and turn red” when the dancer has been “hit” (Jorgensen, 1974, pp. 214-15).

Prophetic visions regarding buffalo may be granted to sun dancers. One Sioux related that he saw “a herd of buffalo heading north. He saw white people killing buffalo until they were all gone. So he knew what was coming, but the things foretold in a vision could not be prevented.” Later, during the great drought of 1930, with its disastrous dust storms, a more optimistic vision indicated that “the buffalo had returned to ‘hook up the ground’” (Laubin, 1977, p. 293).

### **Animals in the Plains Indian World View**

Interactions with animals, particularly the eagle and the buffalo, are inextricably interwoven with the sun dance of the Plains Indians. The roles assigned to them relate to the animals place in the world view of the society in which this ritual is a major event, and reflect intimate human relationships with the natural world that differ from those typical of the Judaeo-Christian tradition. The animals who share the Plains environment are viewed as wise and powerful. They possess most of the same capacities human beings have and in some ways exceed them. Beliefs about creation indicate that certain animals existed before people did, and were in communication with the Creator. They advised the Creator and helped in bringing humankind and even the earth itself into existence. Animals are intermediaries between human beings and the supernatural forces. All living creatures are part of a single interrelated community. Each one has its own part in this web of life, which is envisioned as a circle rather than as the linear hierarchy with humankind at the top that pervades western thought. Jamake Highwater, a writer of Blackfeet heritage, emphasizes the “*sympathetic undertone*” of the native Americans’ relationship to the world around them, and explains their belief in the solidarity of life as an expression of kinship (1981, p. 69).

With this view of animals as relatives, a hunter/gatherer society that places strong valuation on obtaining animals for food generally possesses cultural resources for dealing with the inevitable inconsistencies between an attitude of mutuality and kinship with living beings and the antagonism involved in killing and eating them. In his recent study of Plains Indian religion and morality, Howard Harrod points out that the sun dance ritual is an important factor in the resolution of this conflict. Killing

animals violates kinship relations, but the ceremonies of world renewal that focus on the buffalo serve to bring about a symbolic reconciliation. Through the process of elevating the buffalo to a sacred status that is not conferred upon any other animal and by showing it great respect and reverence in the sun dance ritual, the potentially disruptive practice of feeding upon its flesh is somehow mitigated. There is a resultant deepened sense of kinship that helps to restore harmony between people and the buffalo (1987, pp. 116, 133, 165, 171-72).

Members of traditional Plains Indian society define themselves not as separate entities, but as part of a whole. They see themselves primarily as partaking of a kinship network, emphasizing their membership in family, clan, and tribe. The contrast between this mode of viewing the self as subordinate to the whole and the strong individualism of modern Western society has been well established (see Leach, 1982, pp. 139-40). In the same way that Plains tribespeople experience their broad communal ties to other human beings, this ingrained way of relating is extended to the wider society, including non-humans (Hughes, 1983, pp. 16-17, 61). Thus land, essential to all life—animal and human—could not be imagined as individually owned.

A sense of reciprocity permeates Plains ideology. Dynamic interrelationships between people and nature require giving as well as taking. Hence the sun dance ritual includes all of nature in its scope, but places an emphasis on those creatures and forces that are most beneficially related to human welfare. The sun lodge represents the whole universe where the drama of cosmic renewal is played out, and all elements of nature — including the sun, moon, and stars — are praised. The strictly spiritual tie to the eagle is well represented and his ceremonial role is focused upon religious perceptions regarding his conscious awareness, his role as messenger, and his powers of flight.

Relationships with the buffalo are more complex and intricate. As the major animal represented in the sun dance, it has both spiritual and physical ties to humankind. It is, quite simply, acknowledged as necessary for bodily existence. Without it, there would be death, or at least an impoverished life. Since humankind has a spirit as well as a body, the buffalo is seen as answering all the needs of people — those manifested by the spirit as well as the flesh. When it is stated that “all the good things of Cheyenne existence are fulfilled in the buffalo” (Powell, 1969, vol. 2, p. 635), this assertion includes the full range of human experience. It has been well established that the native ethos does not include a religion separate from other aspects of daily life as in the Western concept, but rather encompasses a world in which all of life is permeated by spiritual forces (Harrod, 1987, p. 6).

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Through dependence upon the buffalo for food, the animal literally becomes “flesh of our flesh” for the consumers. In this sense, as in many other important ways, the great animal entered the Plains Indians’ psyche. Lame Deer extols the power and wisdom of the buffalo and explains

We Sioux have a close relationship to the buffalo. He is our brother. We have many legends of buffalo changing themselves into men. And the Indians are built like buffalo, too – big shoulders, narrow hips. According to our belief, the Buffalo Woman who brought us the peace pipe, which is at the center of our religion, was a beautiful maiden, and after she had taught our tribes how to worship with the pipe, she changed herself into a white buffalo calf. So the buffalo is very sacred to us. You can’t understand about nature, about the feeling we have toward it, unless you understand how close we were to the buffalo. That animal was almost like a part of ourselves, part of our souls. (1972, p. 130)

He goes on to point out that without the buffalo, “we were nothing,” enumerating the many ways its flesh, skin, horns, organs, and bones were used to benefit people. Further, “his mighty skull, with the pipe leaning against it, was our sacred altar. The name of the greatest Sioux was Tatanka Iyotake — Sitting Bull. When you killed off the buffalo, you also killed the Indian — the real, natural, ‘wild’ Indian.” The natives’ close identification with the buffalo is expressed by Lame Deer’s praise of the animal as smart, playful, possessed of a sense of humor, hardy, and well suited to its harsh environment. The buffalo seems specially fashioned for the Indians, because Lame Deer says “White hunters used to call the buffalo stupid because they were easy to shoot, weren’t afraid of a gun. But the buffalo was not designed to cope with modern weapons. He was designed to deal with an Indian’s arrows” (1972, pp. 13-31). Regarding the buffalo as “the closest of all animals to human beings,” Plains Indians saw parallels between the great beast and their own species. “The buffalo evidently had a religion, for they were seen to purify their ‘children’ by washing them and made ‘offerings’ of hair when they rubbed against trees” (Hughes, 1983, p. 325).



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## **The Sun Dance: Sacrifice, Integration, Reciprocity, and Regeneration**

A very important consideration in understanding the Indian's perception is that the buffalo is a highly social animal, innately gregarious. That is a trait with which the Plains people could identify, finding similarities to the broad allegiances and communal relationships characteristic of their own social organization. Unlike more solitary species, the buffalo, as a herd animal, is often referred to by the natives as a "tribe" or "nation." And, as mentioned, the movements and whereabouts of that "buffalo nation" influenced Plains Indian tribal structure and location at a given season. Generally, the Plains Indian interactions with buffaloes do not involve personal contact with individual animals, but rather the whole species or population. Calling the animal "Buffalo" always implies reference to the group or at least a member who represents that group. One specific buffalo is rarely, if ever, singled out or named — as is often the case in many societies with any animal who is to be eaten. This practice helps in combating the revulsion that may accompany the consumption of flesh from a familiar individual being. Thus communal ritual reconciliation is made with the species as a whole: human society propitiates the buffalo nation.

Helping to relieve the guilt resulting from killing and eating sentient creatures, too, is the pervasive belief that animals willingly offer themselves to hunters. This idea is reflected in the observation that "the Plains Indians spoke of their hunt not as 'driving' the buffalo but as 'leading them'; not 'chasing,' but 'calling'" them. Certain men among the Cheyenne and Blackfeet possessed "the power of charming the buffalo into a corral or over a cliff." They accomplished this feat by disguising themselves in buffalo robes and imitating the animals' movements and sounds (Hughes, 1983, p. 30). The conviction that the buffalo voluntarily give themselves to be killed for the benefit of human beings is closely associated with Plains people's sense of identification with the animal and with the force of reciprocal obligations toward it. As expressed by members of one tribe, "Since buffalo allowed themselves to be used in order that the Crow people could live, it seemed fitting . . . to offer a part of themselves to the sun and other spiritual persons" (Voget, 1984, p. 307).

Thus the sacrifice of the dancers through fasting, thirst, and self-inflicted pain reflects the desire to return something of themselves to nature, with special reference to the life-sustaining buffalo, in exchange for past and future benefits. It is relevant that, as mentioned, the Mandan O-kee-pa (Okipa) ceremony, from which elements of the Plains sun dance are almost certainly derived, features the self-torture of participants

by means of buffalo skulls. In addition to that practice, there were certain animal-oriented rituals included within the O-kee-pa that shed light on the meaning of the sun dance. For example, Catlin described a bull-dance “to the strict observance of which they [the Mandans] attributed the coming of buffaloes to supply them with food.” The colorful event was enacted by men dressed as buffaloes, wearing buffalo head masks, who imitated the motions and behavior of the animals (1967, pp. 54-57). The name O-kee-pa means “look alike” and refers to the bull dancers, who were all of the same stature and who were identically dressed and painted (Bowers, 1950, p. 111).

Additionally, men disguised as other animals including grizzly bears, eagles, antelopes, swans, rattlesnakes, beavers, vultures, and wolves, imitated the sounds and behaviors of their respective species. In this spectacle, the players enacted interrelationships involving struggle between various forms of life. Animals growled and chased each other and meat-feeding scenarios took place (Catlin, 1967, pp. 54-57). This performance represents the expression of a theme dealing with predator-prey relationships. Evidently, the ambiguities of carnivorous behavior were being explored through ritual. Early in the twentieth century, as a preliminary to the Blackfoot sun dance, similar figures dressed to resemble wolves and grizzly bears interacted with dancers in the guise of buffaloes (McClintock, 1910, p. 300), indicating a preoccupation with the same theme. Such rituals provided an overt expression of the tensions involved in the dilemma of one form of life feeding upon another that underlie the sun dance ceremony.

To a greater or lesser degree depending upon the tribe, the sun dance includes the elements of sacrifice and pain on the part of participants. The ultimate gift is the offering of one’s own body. In a deep sense, this phenomenon of undergoing physical agony relates the supplicants to the rest of nature; it is an atonement in the true meaning of “at onement,” with reference to the unity of the cosmos. For all living creatures are subject to suffering and share a common capacity for pain. According to Oglala tradition, “This truth of the oneness of all things we understand a little better by participating in this rite, and by offering ourselves as a sacrifice” (Brown, 1967, p. 95).

Mircea Eliade explains the Mandan O-kee-pa as a rite of “initiatory torture” inflicted for the purpose of “spiritual transmutation of the victim.” Death, represented by undergoing torture, signifies that the profane man has been killed and the participant has come to life regenerated in body and soul. The person must “die” through the ordeal of “being cut to pieces” in order to bring about his symbolic resurrection (1975, pp. 206, 207, 208). As Eastman analyzes the meaning of the cutting and bleeding of

the Sioux dancer who is pierced, the pain that results is “the natural accompaniment of his figurative death” (1970, p. 61). The flesh that is torn away when the thong breaks loose “represents ignorance,” which “should always be behind us as we face the light of truth which is before us” (Brown, 1967, p. 86). Thus the sun dancer is reborn, mentally and spiritually as well as physically, along with the renewal of the buffalo and the entire universe.

The great sun dance ritual establishes the tenet that there is no final death, for all living things can be renewed. Human beings, however, like all their fellow creatures, must cooperate in order to bring about universal regeneration. By feeding grass to the buffalo skull, the cycle of life is symbolically perpetuated. To appease the buffalo who gives so much to people, appreciation and good intentions must be shown, and deferential behavior is mandated. By significant acts like refraining from eating buffalo flesh after the animal has provided a vision, leaving some of the meat to propitiate the animal’s spirit after a buffalo is slain, and planting a piece of sacred buffalo tongue back into the ground during the ceremonial feast (Frey, 1987, p. 121; Walker, 1917, p. 130; McClintock, 1910, p. 305), honor is given to the spiritual presence of the buffalo. Because the animal’s spirit still remains when the buffalo is killed, death is not final; eternal return is assured for both buffalo and humankind through reciprocal actions that maintain the harmony of the natural world. Thus at the close of the Oglala sun dance, Wakan-Tanka is addressed: “You have taught us our relationship with all . . . beings, and for this we give thanks. . . May we be continually aware of this relationship which exists between the four-leggeds, the two-leggeds, and the wingeds. May we all rejoice and live in peace!” (Brown, 1967, p. 98).

### *Note*

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