



The sundance is the predominant tribal ceremony of Great Plains Indians, although it is practiced by numerous tribes today as a prayer for life, world renewal and thanksgiving. On a personal level, someone may dance to pray for a relative or friend, or to determine their place in the universe, while on a larger scale, the sundance serves the tribe and the earth. Indigenous people believe that unless the sun dance is performed each year, the earth will lose touch with the creative power of the universe, thereby losing its ability to regenerate

The sun dance was outlawed in the latter part of the nineteenth century, partly because certain tribes inflicted self-torture as part of the ceremony, which settlers found gruesome, and partially as part of a grand attempt to westernize Indians by forbidding them to engage in their ceremonies and speak their language. Sometimes the dance was performed when reservation agents were lax and chose to look the other way. But as a rule, younger generations were not being introduced to the sun dance and other sacred rituals, and a rich cultural heritage was becoming extinct.

Then, in the 1930's, the sun dance was relearned and practiced once again. Michael Fitzgerald, an adopted member of the Yellow Tail family of the Crow tribe, and author of *Yellow Tail Crow Medicine Man and Sun Dance Chief* related this amazing story to me. A man by the name of John Trojillo was walking in the mountains while on a vision quest when he was struck by lightning. At that moment, the Spirit of the mountain came to Trojillo and carefully explained to him different healing ceremonies and medicines.

Three days later, Trojillo noticed himself walking through a rock, and then saw himself lying on the floor of the cave. He laid down in his body and awoke, realizing that he had been in his Spirit all this time, not his physical body.

Trojillo was given explicit instructions to follow for a years time. He was told to pray, to go on vision quests, and not to practice his medicine power. Afterwards, Trojillo was able to call upon the Spirits of the medicine fathers, whenever someone was in need of help, and was the vehicle for many miraculous healings. The first

healing was especially dramatic, involving a man who had been shot twice, just above the heart. The doctors of this time were not skillful enough to perform such a delicate operation, but Trujillo prayed for the man, and sprinkled the wound with a sacred powder, called lightning root. The next day, the bullets worked themselves out and were lying beneath the man. The patient fully recovered and lived many more healthy years. While the herbs played a role, Trujillo credited the mans survival to the Spirits who had responded to his prayers.

Trujillo became prominent in his tribe as a result of this incident and was asked to reinstate the sun dance on the Shoshoni reservation. Then in 1941, he was invited to the Crow reservation to teach the sun dance, which had also been lost due to generations of U.S. government Indian policy. Since this new version differed from the original dance, the Crows called the ceremony the Crow Shoshoni sun dance.

The tribes learned that the sun dance consisted of various elements. There was the ritual of the sacred pipe, the purification ceremony, monthly prayer ceremonies, and a yearly ritual. The sun dance chief offers the prayers from the sacred pipe to the four directions, as well as the earth and sky, on a daily basis. The purification ceremony is performed before the sun dance and again afterwards. Monthly sun dance prayer ceremonies take place 12 times a year, at the time of the full moon. During this ceremony, two medicine bundles are opened, and ritual objects are taken out and placed on an elks skin in the middle of the floor. Heated coals are brought into the lodge, incense is placed on the fire, and special songs are sung to help carry the prayers of the smoke to a subtler world.

At the end of the ceremony, people in the audience come forth to be healed. Animal instruments, such as eagle feathers and otter skins, are used. Fitzgerald notes that a great spiritual leader, Yellow Tail, used a hollowed out horn of a spiked horn elk as his primary method of healing. Blowing on a patients back with the horn created a terribly shrill sound, but resulted in many miraculous cures and protection against danger. In one instance, a prominent American Indian was sent to Viet Nam and shot at close range by the Viet Cong. Although the bullet tore through his tee shirt, it did not penetrate him.

During the healings, the medicine man prays over the patient, touching him or her with the animal instrument. The bad spirits are taken into the prop, and then cast into the wind. Sometimes herbs are given to the patient to alleviate simple symptoms, but as mentioned earlier, the essential cure is through prayer. The medicine man calls forth spiritual entities to enter the physical world in order to cure the patient.

In addition to the 12 monthly ceremonies, there is a three to four day sun dance that takes place each summer, usually in July. The preparation is too detailed to describe here, but involves building a lodge from a large cottonwood tree, with a forked branch in the middle. Twelve upright poles are placed about 13 paces from the center pole in a circular fashion, with rafter poles connecting the outside of the circle to the inner pole. From an aerial view, this appears as a wagon wheel with a hub in its center. This symbolizes the tribe (on the outside of the circle) trying to find their way straight to the center.

Fitzgerald told me about the preparations for the Crow sun dance, where the dancers greet each sunrise with sacred songs. Then the medicine man prays on behalf of the tribe, the world, and all creation. Throughout the day, 100 or more tribe members may dance to a drum beat, which represents the heart of the universe. The dancers fast for the duration of the ceremony. All their time is spent praying to the Creator and dancing toward and away from the center pole. The ceremony is brutal and causes many dancers to collapse, what Indians call taking a fall. This is followed by a vision, similar to what happens on a vision quest, only here many people are given guidance for the good of the tribe. In a sense, this is a community vision quest to renew the people and the bioregion.

On the second day, spectators from the tribe enter the lodge to be healed, bearing gifts of tobacco and incense. This is exactly the same process that takes place during the monthly prayer sun dance ceremonies, where harmful spiritual and physical manifestations are taken into an animal instrument and cast off to the wind, while prayers are said to heal the person.

Sun dance ceremonies typically end with a purification ceremony so that tribe members can re-enter the world refreshed and regenerated. Fitzgerald notes that this ritual is as concrete as it is symbolic, and related to me a time when he was in a purification lodge with Yellow Tail. While praying, Yellow Tail suddenly threw a scoop of water onto the very hot volcanic rocks. The force of the 212 degree steam knocked Fitzgerald down. He equated the feeling to that of an egg that sizzles when dropped onto a skillet. Yellow Tail continued to pray, and then asked Fitzgerald if he was alright. Fitzgerald leaned up onto his elbow to assure Yellow Tail that he was fine, feeling too embarrassed to admit that he was thrown onto the ground. At that moment, Fitzgerald realized that this was more than a symbolic death; there was an element of pure suffering accompanying this ceremony of death and renewal.

The dual meaning of this ritual is also expressed by Yellow Tail, who says, "When water is thrown onto the rocks, the heat does not merely cleanse us from the outside. It also goes all the way into our hearts. We know that we must suffer the ordeal of the heat in order to purify ourselves. In that way, we re-emerge from the sweat lodge at the end of the ceremony as new men who have been shown the light of the wisdom of our spiritual heritage for the first time. This allows us to participate in all of our daily tasks with the fresh remembrance of our position on earth, and our continuous obligation to walk on this earth in accordance with the sacred ways."