

The Sun Dance

by
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THE great sacrificial Dance of the North American nomadic Indians, which is consecrated to the Solar Power, formerly included secondary rites that varied considerably according to the tribes: all sorts of mythological elements entered into its composition to such an extent in certain cases as to make the sun's role nearly pass into the background. But this complexity, normal in a fragmented and shifting world like that of the Red Indians, is not of a nature to invalidate the fundamental content of the ritual cycle in question; this content has in fact survived all the political and religious tribulations which the Indians have had to suffer for over a century.

Essentially the Sun Dance has two meanings, one outward and the other inward: the first is diverse, the second invariable. The more or less outward intention of the Dance may be a personal vow, or the prosperity of the tribe; or again, more profoundly—with the Cheyenne for example—the desire to regenerate the entire creation. The inward and invariable intention is to be united with the Solar Power, to establish a link between the Sun and the heart, to realize a ray which attaches the earth to Heaven, or to reactualize this ray which is pre-existent but lost. This strictly "pontifical" (*ponti-fex*) operation is based on the equation "heart-Sun": the Sun is the Heart of the Macrocosm, the human heart is the sun of the microcosm that we are. The visible sun is only the trace of the Divine Sun, but this trace, being real, is efficacious and allows the operation of "analogical magic," so to speak.

The central element of the rite is the tree, image of the cosmic axis which joins earth to Heaven; the tree is the presence—necessarily vertical—of the Celestial Height over the terrestrial plane; it is what allows the contact, both sacrificial and contemplative, with the Solar Power. It is to this tree, chosen, felled, and set up ritually,ⁱ that the dancers were formerly attached by thongs hooked into their chests; in our day the only element of the sacrifice that has been retained is the fast, uninterrupted for the duration—some three or four days—of the Dance, which symbolically and qualitatively is sufficient when one considers that the dancers must abstain from drinking in a torrid heat, while executing the prescribed movement for hours on end.ⁱⁱ

This movement is a coming and going between the central tree—bare and branchless—and the circular shelter, covered with branches; the dance can thus be likened to the two phases of breathing or to the beating of the heart; the entire sacred lodge, with the tree in the middle, is like a great heart whose vital phases are represented by the ebb and flow of the dance, and this symbolism is intensified by the beating of the drum and by the singing which recalls through its monotonous alternations the waves of the Ocean. It is at the centre that the dancers derive their strength: their withdrawal corresponds to the expansive phase—to the assimilation or the radiation—of the spiritual influence present in the tree.

One could ask how such a desire for spiritual realization accords with an adventurous and warrior way of life and with the ruggedness of manners that results from it. One must understand that for the Indian life "is what it is," which means that it is a texture of things and events, of forms and destinies, in which the outer man participates, performing and undergoing them

according to the Laws of Nature, but of which the inner man is independent and which he transcends and dominates in a certain manner; there is in this a fruitful combination of the veneration for impersonal Nature and the affirmation of the sacerdotal and heroic personality, and herein lies the foundation of Indian stoicism, which is the moral expression of this apparent antinomy. ⁱⁱⁱ

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In approaching and receding by little steps from the central tree without ever turning his back to it, the sacred dancer shakes an eagle plume in each hand while blowing, to the same rhythm, an eagle-bone whistle held in the mouth; the slightly strident and plaintive sound thus produced is the equivalent of prayer or invocation; it reminds one of the cry of the eagle soaring in the immense solitude of space towards the sun. The entire dance is accompanied by the singing of a group of men seated about a huge drum which they beat with vehemence in an accelerated rhythm, thus emphasizing the virile character of the principal motive of their chant,—song of victory and at the same time nostalgia, victory over the earth and nostalgia for Heaven. At sunrise a particular rite takes place: the dancers look towards and greet the rising sun, while singing with both arms extended towards it in order to become impregnated with the "Solar Power."

Throughout the Dance the central tree is charged with blessings; the Indians touch it and rub their faces, bodies and limbs; or they pray to the Great Spirit while touching the tree; healings sometimes takes place, prayers are answered and protections granted. Extra-ordinary phenomena of various kinds have been observed, sometimes visions, but above all a sensation of freshness in the proximity of the central tree, betokening the presence of benefic powers.

This idea of "power" is crucial for the Indian: the Universe is a texture of powers all emanating from one and the same Power which is subjacent and omnipresent, and at once impersonal and personal. For the Indians the spiritual man is united to the Universe or the Great Spirit by the cosmic powers which penetrate, purify, transform, and protect him; he is simultaneously pontiff, hero, and magician; these powers are attracted to manifest themselves around him through spirits, animals, and the phenomena of Nature.

The Sun Dance becomes a permanent inner state: there has been a decisive contact with the Sacramental Luminary; an indelible trace remains in the heart. The profane separation between ordinary consciousness and the Immanent Sun is eliminated, and the person lives hereafter under another sign and in another dimension.

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The Sun Dance takes place once a year, in the summer, but it has its reflection or prolongation in the rites of the Sacred Pipe which are practiced in commemoration of the Dance at each full moon; these sessions comprise, along with the use of eagle-bone whistles, prayers addressed to the four Directions of space, then to the Great Spirit, who both contains and projects this quaternity. The symbol for this metaphysic, as we have been told, is the cross inscribed in the circle: the terrestrial cross—with its North-South and East-West axes—and the celestial circle. At its extremities the horizontal cross touches Heaven; its centre also touches Heaven through the axes Earth-Zenith, which is precisely what the Sun Dance tree represents.

This symbolism recalls another sacral image: that of the Feathered Sun,¹ which is found on buffalo hides used as cloaks and occasionally as a background for ceremonies. The sun is composed of concentric circles formed of stylized eagle feathers; the resulting impression is particularly evocative in that the symbol simultaneously suggests centre, radiation, power, and majesty. This symbiosis between the sun and the eagle, which is to be found again in the celebrated head-dress of feathers formerly worn by chiefs and great warriors, brings us back to the symbolism of the Sun Dance: here man is spiritually transformed into an eagle soaring towards Heaven and becoming identified with the rays of the Divine Luminary.

(Original editorial inclusions that followed the essay:)

Temporal experience is of past and future, the so-called "present" always including parts of the past and future. All this Time is absolutely continuous ; only logically but not really divisible into parts. Eternity is the timeless, atomic and self-same Now that at any and every time divides the past from the future, and connects them. Time endures, but Eternity is without duration or extent and cannot be described as "lasting" ; the whole of Time, without beginning or end, is always present to Eternity.

Omniscience and Providence are not of the past and future as such, but tota simul, alzemale, without division or sequence of cause and effect. Just as from the centre of a circle all parts of the circumference and all the radii are visible at once, so the eternal "onsight" is neither a "hindsight" nor a "foresight," and in no way conflicts with determination (the orderly sequence of circumferential events) nor with freewill (centrifugal or centripetal motion). A further consequence is that there remains no opposition between the concepts of gradation and evolution : God is creating the whole world Now as much as he ever was or will be; and so, as Philo says, "there is an end of the notion that the universe came into being `in six days'. " An end, too, of the modern opposition of science and religion ; since experimental science is only concerned with serial events taking place in Time and does not pretend to deal with any kind of timeless experience whatever. On the other hand the philosopher cannot ignore Eternity, because it is the timeless point without which Time itself would be inconceivable in terms of past and future, just as Space apart from any undimensioned point would be meaningless in terms of here and there; and of two things, of which one gives its meaning to the other, the first must be the more real, and more to be depended upon.

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ⁱ See *The Sacred Pipe*, recorded and edited by Joseph Epes Brown, University of Oklahoma Press, 1953, the chapter on *The Sun Dance*. Cf. also *The Arapaho Sun Dance* (Chicago, 1903) and *The Ponca Sun Dance* (Chicago, 1905) by George A. Dorsey, studies which give an idea, at least, of the complex possibilities of the Dance with the differences of mythology and ritual that vary with each tribal tradition.

ⁱⁱ It still happens, however, that Indians secretly practice the rite in the ancient manner. Inversely, certain celebrations of it lack in seriousness and are combined with tribal fairs, yet even here some still practice in secret the authentic rite.

¹ As an example, see the design on the cover of this review.

ⁱⁱⁱ Shintoism presents the same complementariness between Nature-Object and Hero-Subject, each of the two poles recalling the mysteries of Transcendence and Immanence.