The Lakota Sun Dance: A Composite View and Analysis

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The Lakota Sun Dance is the archetypal expression of western Sioux religious belief. In a sense, the dance is the public, ritualized manifestation of an understanding of reality that was shared among the group as a whole. In the context of a cosmological society, the dance represents the people’s participation in the life of the cosmos itself. In this, the Sun Dance is similar to the rituals of other cosmological societies such as the Mesopotamian New Year’s Festival.

The literature on the old form of the Sun Dance varies greatly in quality. Surprisingly, there are only four major accounts of the ritual. Anthropologists seem to have been preoccupied by questions regarding diffusion. There are, however, a plethora of short articles that typically record eyewitness experiences. Besides these works there are only derivative narratives, usually based upon the work of only one of the major commentators.

1. This article is based upon my dissertation, “The Sacred Hoop: The Way of the Chiricahua Apache and Teton Lakota” (Ph.D. diss., University of Notre Dame, 1976). Much of the information in this article was acquired on a research grant provided by the dean of the College of Arts and Letters, Professor Frederick Crosson, and the chairman of the Department of Government, George Brinkley.

The cosmos is a whole in that the gods are included within its bounds, there is no concept of transcendence; see Henri Frankfort, et al., Before Philosophy (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1946), and Frankfort, Kingship and the Gods (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948), especially pp. 318-33. See also Melody’s “Maka’s Story: A Study of a Lakota Cosmogony” forthcoming in Journal of American Folklore.

2. The most authoritative account of the Sun Dance is J. R. Walker’s “The Sun Dance and Other Ceremonies of the Oglala Division of the Teton Dakota,” Anthropological Papers of the American Museum of Natural History 16, pt. 2 (1917): 51-221. Other relatively complete accounts include: George Bushotter’s recollections recorded in manuscript and published in J. Owen Dorsey’s “A Study of
The following article collates the major reports of the Sun Dance. It also notes the substantial differences between the more important analyses and the information supplied by the shorter commentaries. Consequently, the article implicitly includes the range of variation that occurred in the dance. Upon this comprehensive basis the article proceeds to analyze the


ceremony in an attempt to discern, to the largest degree possible, the Lakota understanding of the dance.

The Sun Dance, a tribal ritual, took place in late June (Moon of Fatness) or early July (Moon of Cherries Blackening). One danced to fulfill a vow, to secure supernatural aid for oneself or another, or to acquire supernatural power. Yet, to a large degree, the dance was performed for the people; it was a


William Bordeaux in his Conquering the Mighty Sioux (Sioux Falls, South Dakota: n.p., 1929), pp. 133-139, presents an account of the 1928 ceremony at the Rosebud Agency. Even though old men (who had taken part in or had seen the old dance) undertook the dance, the government withheld permission for the "torture" phase. Another account of this Sun Dance is found in M. I. McCreight, Chief Flying Hawk's Tales (New York: Alliance Press, 1936), pp. 44-55. Various changes from the old practice can be found in both of these accounts. In Julia McGillycuddy's McGillycuddy Agent (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1941), pp. 163-75, there is an account of the last dance that followed the ancient practice. This is the ritual that was witnessed by Alice Fletcher and Captain John Bourke.


Hartley Alexander's The World's Rim (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1953), pp. 136-67 is primarily an interpretive commentary based largely upon J. R. Walker's work.

Fred M. Hans, in The Great Sioux Nation, A Complete History of Indian Life and Warfare in America (Chicago: M. A. Donohue and Company, 1907), pp. 274-80, presents a summary account that is at major variance with the descriptions of almost all the other observers/participants. Due to this his description is suspect.

Derivative accounts—usually they merely summarize the report of one observer—include Gordon MacGregor, Warriors Without Weapons (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1946), pp. 88-91 and K. Brent Woodruff, "Political and Social Organization of the Teton-Dakota," South Dakota Historical Society Library, Pierre, pp. 87-97. This account is based upon the work of Lowie and Walker. Also, it appears to be a Master's thesis, but it is not identified as such.

In the following pages, I have relied primarily upon Walker who states that his aim is "to present a full account of the Oglala Sun Dance, giving the information as it was received, as nearly as may be, when irrelevant matter is eliminated and it is systematized" (Walker, "Sun Dance," p. 55).
tribal expression. "And the reason for all this was that they
wished that there might be an abundance of good things; that
the people might live long; this they prayed." As such, there
were four stages to the ceremony. These were: (1)
announcement of candidacy; (2) instruction of the candidate;
(3) establishment of the profane and ceremonial camps; and (4)
the dance proper. A shaman must supervise all the rites of the
ceremony. He controlled the ceremonial camp and supervised
all the ceremonies pertaining to the dance except the dance
itself.

The dance had four forms. These were: (1) Gaze-at-Sun; (2)
Gaze-at-Sun Buffalo; (3) Gaze-at-Sun Staked; and (4)
Gaze-at-Sun Suspended. The Gaze-at-Sun form could be
danced only in conjunction with the others. This form entailed
suffering a wound that should not be smaller than the size of a
louse. It could be as large and as deep as the candidate willed,
and it should cause blood to flow. The other forms differed in
terms of the type of wound and the degree of suffering that was
to be borne. Those who danced the fourth form—Gaze-at-Sun
Suspended—undertook the ceremony in its fullest sense. Before
the people, they established their embodiment of the four great
virtues—bravery, generosity, fortitude, and integrity—and their
scars were "honorable insignia." With proper instruction, such
men became shamans.7

3. Blish, "The Drama of the Sioux Sun Dance," p. 629-30; informants differ as
to the exact date for the dance. See among others: Neihardt, Black Elk Speaks, p. 80;
Fletcher, "The Sun Dance of the Oglala Sioux," p. 580; and Brown, The Sacred Pipe,
p. 67; such a vow most often involved safety or success in warfare. Several accounts
emphasize the linkage of the Sun Dance with warfare. See, for example,
McGillycuddy, McGillycuddy Agent, pp. 168, 173.
5. Walker emphasizes this point though many of the other authorities either do
not mention it or are not at all clear in this matter. In agreement with Walker are
Fletcher, "The Sun Dance of the Oglala Sioux," p. 581; Blish, "The Drama of the
Sioux Sun Dance," p. 629; Lame Deer and Erdoes, Seeker of Visions, p. 203; and
6. Most of the authorities concur on this point. An exception is Densmore,
"Teton Sioux Music," p. 131, who holds that there were six forms of the dance.
7. Due to the elements of suffering and sacrifice the Sun Dance, as it
historically existed, was probably one of the most misunderstood of all Indian rituals.
Sioux Indian agents termed it a "heathenish annual ceremony" and "aboriginal and
barbarous" (Densmore, "Teton Sioux Music," p. 86). Eventually, the dance was
outlawed. The last Sun Dance that followed the ancient practice took place in 1881.
According to the 1868 treaty the Lakota retained the right to practice their religion.
After making the vow to undertake the dance, the candidate selected a mentor. If he was dancing to become a shaman (fourth form), he must select a shaman as his mentor. Otherwise, he could choose almost anyone. The candidate went to the tipi of the one he wished to be his mentor; they smoked, and he told of his intentions. At a subsequent feast at the tipi of the candidate the relationship was accepted and solidified. As such, the relationship was sacred. As the mentor returned to his own tipi, he was followed by the candidate who carried a pipe and tobacco pouch. This act was considered the public announcement of his intention.

Next, the council of the band met to approve the candidacy. By this act, the council “pledge[d] the people as constituents of the ceremony.” A friend of the candidate was appointed his attendant. “It is expected that he and the candidate will be kolapi, or comrades, during the remainder of their lives.” Typically, these events would occur during the fall and winter. Following these preliminaries, invitation wands would be sent to other bands. The purpose of these invitations was to induce others to become candidates and to estimate the number that would be present at the camp. The leader of the dance was selected by the candidates except when the mentor of the first candidate was himself a shaman. In this case, the first candidate was the leader.

The advance preparations were complex. A candidate would revitalize himself in the inipi, and he would usually quest...
for a vision. His tipi, implements, utensils, and clothing would be consecrated. During this period, he would also be taught the rules for the second, third, and fourth forms of the dance. The candidate would be told to be subordinate to his mentor, to meditate upon his undertaking, to speak little, and to use only consecrated utensils. He was not to become angry, listen to ribald speech, go into the water, or have sexual intercourse. These instructions ended the announcement phase of the ritual.

In the instruction phase, the candidate was prepared to dance the second, third, and fourth forms of the Sun Dance. If the candidate’s purpose was to become a shaman, he should be taught that:

11. This consecration occurred at the request of the candidate. To accomplish this, the mentor made an altar in the candidate’s tipi between the fireplace (center of tipi) and the place of honor. Everything that grows or breathes was removed from this space. The altar itself was a square. Each side was aligned with one of the Four Winds. “The sides of the altar should be toward the west, the north, the east, and the south, so that one side will be toward the tipi of each of the four winds. The sides should measure not less than four hand breadths, nor more than the height of a man. They may vary anywhere between these extremes. The smallest altars should be made in tipis and the largest in the Sun Dance Lodge. At each angle of this square a pointed space should be projected half-way between two of the directions. These are the horns of the altar that guard it against all malevolent beings. The square space and horns should be dug to the depth of a finger length and loosened soil removed and freed from everything. Then it should be pulverized, replaced, and made level. The one who replaces and levels the soil should utter an appropriate invocation, or sing an appropriate song, or both for in this manner the altar is consecrated to the purposes for which it is made. The mentor should place on the altar in the tipi of the candidate a buffalo skull with the horns attached, so that the nostril cavities will face towards the place of honor. He should then decorate this skull with stripes of red paint, one across the forehead and one lengthwise on each side of the skull; at the same time, he should paint 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 side of the skull indicate that the Buffalo God will give special 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 it in communion with the Buffalo God. This should be done in order that the potency of the pipe may harmonize all those communing.” The altar remains until the candidate enters the Sacred Lodge in the Ceremonial Camp (Walker, “Sun Dance,” p. 69 [italics in original]).

According to Fletcher, “The mellowed earth space,” the altar, “represents the unappropriated life or power of the earth” (Fletcher, “Indian Ceremonies,” p. 284n. 6).

the people will consider that he is endowed with a knowledge of the laws and customs of the Lakota and supernatural wisdom; that he can communicate with supernatural beings and interpret their wills; that he will have supervisory authority over all ceremonies; and that if he knows the will of a supernatural being to be that any law, custom, or ceremony be altered or prohibited, he should act according to such will. He should also be informed that the people will hold him to strict account for his action as a Shaman, and if they find that he exercises his authority only to gratify his own desires, the akicita, or marshals of the camp, may adjudge and punish him according to his offense, even to the taking of his life.  

As part of these instructions the candidate was given guidance for his conduct in the sacred lodge and the mentor explained the purpose of the torture to him. Such torture should cause the blood to flow, for when the blood flows as a token, it is the surest guarantee of sincerity, and without such a guarantee the people or the Sun may doubt the professed purpose of the dancer. They should cause pain, for to endure pain willingly for the accomplishment of a purpose proves fortitude, the greatest virtue that he must manifest when in the presence of the people he appears before the face of the Sun. The first great virtue, bravery, is made most manifest by enduring the greatest flow of blood and the most suffering that the rites of the Sun Dance demand.

A dancer should endure the torture of gazing at the Sun while dancing, so that no one can say that he did not dare to look into the face of the Sun when making a request of Him. One who endures the torture to the uttermost of the demands of the rites of the ceremony performs his part in a manner acceptable to the Gods and can expect a communication from them.

After the instruction was completed, the preliminary or profane Sun Dance camp was established. At a previously designated location, the profane camp was established for four days. The first day was occupied by the selection of a superior for the ceremony. If the mentor of the first candidate was a shaman, then he was selected. If not, the

13. Ibid., p. 72 (italics in original).
15. Ibid., pp. 72-92.
mentors selected a shaman to serve in this capacity. The superior was “head of the organization for the ceremonial camp,” and he had “supervision over all that occur[ed] in that camp.” On the second day, those who wished to participate in the ceremonies in an ancilliary manner announced their intention to do so. Mothers who wished their children’s ears pierced announced this fact and the name of the one selected to do it. Parents announced the names of children for the procession to the sacred tree, and maidens declared their intention to be attendants to the dancers. Lastly, the women who wished to chop the sacred tree declared their intention. Anyone could propose anyone else for this task. Now, the council deliberated while the women who appeared before it supplied the Feast of the Bear God—consisting of dog.

The third day in the profane camp was marked by the appointment of the hunter (scout), digger, escort, and musicians. They were installed with their insignia of office by the superior. The function of the hunter was to find and mark the sacred tree while the digger, as his name suggests, dug the hole in the dance lodge for the sun dance pole. He also made the altar in the dance lodge. The musicians provided the music for the dance itself while the escort, usually composed of members of the various warrior societies, existed to fight the malevolent gods present at the ceremonial camp. These announcements were followed by the Feast of Buffalo Tongues. The bands of the candidates supplied the tongues, with each band vying for the honor of supplying the most. This was the last feast that the candidates were permitted to attend, and they were given at least an entire tongue. The celebration continued into the night. On the last day of the profane camp the superior

16. Ibid., p. 96.
17. As part of this ritual, which is incorporated into the Sun Dance ceremony, the one chosen to pierce the child’s ears exhorts the parents “telling them that this rite obligates...[them] to rear the babe so that it will conform to the laws and customs of the Oglala and that the ears thus pierced signify a loyalty to these laws and customs” (Ibid., p. 115). Given this, the ear piercing seems to signify the cosmicising of the child. In this, the child assumes the relationship of a part to a whole, the tribe and through the tribe, the cosmos. For parallels in other Siouan Tribes, see Fletcher, “The Child and the Tribe,” Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences 1 (1915):569-74 and Alexander, The World’s Rim, p. 148.
announced the names of the women who were to chop the sacred tree. These women should be known for their industry and hospitality. They should also have had relatives killed in war. Their function was to chop at the tree until it was about to fall. Then, the one chosen to fell the tree struck the last blow. The superior also announced the names of the female relatives that would be permitted in the dance lodge to render what aid was permitted. These women had to be virgins. When the names were announced, each woman had to declare her chastity and this declaration was subject to challenge. These announcements were followed by the Feast of Maidens, which was provided by the relatives and friends of the new appointees. Only women could partake of this feast. This feast could be followed by a woman’s dance, one in which the women chose their partners. At sunset, the superior proceeded to a nearby hill with a pipe to ask for blue days for the ceremonial camp. At dusk, the camp was quiet. Unlike the previous nights there was no “merrymaking.”

Now the people relocated; they moved to the ceremonial camp. Like the profane camp, it existed for four days. The location of this camp was fixed by the superior’s recognition of the sacred spot. He scanned the ground for an indication, and his fetish drew his hand to the place once he saw it. Then the superior made smoke from buffalo chips to propitiate the Buffalo God. In the meantime, the escort had fought the malevolent gods to drive them from the camp area. With the sacred spot as the center, the camp was now established with the tipi of the superior occupying the chief place across from the entrance. Next, the superior located the sacred lodge and sun trail. The sacred lodge must be a new tipi. It was erected

19. “The Superior should locate the Sacred Lodge in the following manner. He should begin at the Sacred Spot and walk four paces toward the entrance of the camp circle [towards the east] and there pause. The digger should drive into the ground where the Superior paused one of the stakes provided with the equipment. Then the Superior should go four paces in the same direction, and again pause. There the digger should drive another stake. This should be repeated until the digger has driven all sixteen of the stakes provided with the equipment, so that they will be on a straight line from the Sacred Spot to the entrance. These stakes mark the Sun Trail of the camp. When the trail is so marked no one should walk on or across it, except when necessary in the performance of duties. The last stake driven locates the door of the Sacred Lodge which should open towards the south” (Ibid., p. 101).
by the women who were to chop the sacred tree. This lodge was supplied with an altar, which had a buffalo skull facing the place of honor. While the sacred lodge was being constructed, the hunter was ordered by the superior to search for game. If he saw signs of an enemy, he was to return and report. Under this guise the hunter selected a cottonwood that would serve as the sacred tree. He marked the tree with circles of red paint on the west, north, east, and south. While the hunter was searching, the construction of the dance lodge began. It was circular with the sacred spot as its center. During this process, the digger made the hole into which the pole was to be placed. He also made an altar in the dance lodge between the hole and the place of honor. As these tasks neared completion, the people began the Buffalo Feast. To propitiate the Buffalo God and the Whirlwind God, the patrons of domestic affairs and love making, a procession moved four times around the inside of the camp circle. This was followed by a feast to which all the old, the poor, and the needy were invited. The superior danced the Buffalo Dance, and he dedicated the food to the buffalo, the god of generosity. The feast ended around sundown. Then the superior and mentors proceeded to the top of a nearby hill to pray that the Great Mystery would “heed the words of the

20. There is little agreement regarding the manner in which the tree was selected. See Curtis, The North American Indian, 3:91; Bushotter in Deloria, “Teton Myths,” p. 437; Neihardt, Black Elk Speaks, p. 80. Yet, there is general, though not universal agreement that the sacred pole was a cottonwood. According to David Miller, the cottonwood “represent[ed] the way of the people and symbolically connect[ed] earth with heaven” (David H. Miller, Ghost Dance [New York: Duell, Sloan & Pearce, 1959], p. 297). Miller’s comment is especially interesting in that he “became Indian.” Black Elk notes that it was the cottonwood that “taught us how to make our tipis, for the leaf of the tree is an exact pattern of the tipi, and this we learned when some of our old men were watching little children play house from these leaves ... Another reason why we choose the cottonwood tree to be at the center of our lodge is that the Great Spirit has shown to us that, if you cut an upper limb of this tree crosswise, there you will see in the grain a perfect five pointed star, which, to us, represents the presence of the Great Spirit. Also perhaps you have noticed even in the very lightest breeze you can hear the voice of the cottonwood tree; this we understand is its prayer to the Great Spirit, for not only men, but all things and all beings pray to Him continually in differing ways” (Brown, The Sacred Pipe, pp. 74-75); McGaa interview, 2 Nov. 1968; see also Lame Deer and Erdoes, Seeker of Visions, p. 208.
Following an exorcism, if necessary, the second Holy Day began with the procession of the Bear God (similar to the one on the preceding day). After this, the superior announced the report of the hunter. He had found an enemy. The escort was to take the enemy as a captive. After three attempts, the escort found the enemy (the marked cottonwood). They treated the enemy with derision and contempt. In the manner of victorious warriors they returned to the camp. Now a procession was formed to bring in the enemy. The procession left the camp and halted three times. A fourth interlude was at the tree itself. During the halts the superior smoked. Upon reaching the tree, the superior proclaimed the name of a renowned warrior four times. The man so named by the superior then came forward,

21. “The tree is thereby made the Sacred Tree and... endowed with the extraordinary potency so that it can bring disaster on anyone who profanes it by treating it as other trees are treated” (Walker, “Sun Dance,” pp. 103-4).
took the chopping tool, and recounted the deeds that made him eligible to strike the tree. He then struck the tree four times on the west side. In a similar manner, though with different warriors, this was done on the north, east, and south sides of the tree.

Then the superior commanded that the tree be felled. The women who were appointed to chop the tree now did so. The woman appointed to fell the tree struck the last blows. The people trimmed the tree, leaving the bark only at the smaller end. The tree was then carried to the camp on poles. Each quarter of the distance, another group of carriers took charge. As each group of carriers placed the tree on the ground so as to effect this transfer, they cried like wolves. This was the cry of victorious warriors who were bringing a captive. When they reached the camp, the pole was taken into the dance lodge and laid with the butt end towards the sacred hole. Then, the people dispersed. After this, the superior and mentors painted the tree. On the west, it was red, the north blue, the east green, and the south was yellow. The fork of the pole was not painted. While the pole was being painted, one of the mentors created the figures of a man and buffalo from buffalo hides. The man represented Iya while the buffalo was Gnaski. They would be used during the next day’s ceremonies.

The third Holy Day began, like the previous ones, with a prayer by the superior and if necessary, an exorcism of the camp. This was followed by “the Procession of Sex.” With the women leading, the people marched around the inside of the lodge.

22. “While the others are painting the Sacred Pole one of the mentors should cut from the dried buffalo skins without hair, provided with the equipment, the figures of a bull buffalo and of a man, each with exaggerated genitals, and painted black. When the Sacred Pole is painted, all but the Superior, Mentors, and Shamans should be excluded from the Dance Lodge. Those remaining should sit in a circle around the black images, and by incantation, impart to the image of a man the potency of Iya, the patron God of libertinism, and to the image of the buffalo the potency of Gnaski, the Crazy Buffalo, the patron God of licentiousness. When thus prepared, these images should be carefully wrapped and bound so as to restrain them until they are elevated [on the pole on the third day]” (Ibid., p. 108 [italics in original]).

23. See ibid., pp. 105-8. There is little, if any agreement regarding most of the details presented in this paragraph. See, among others, Bushotter in Deloria, “Teton Myths,” p. 441; Curtis, The North American Indian, 3:93; Eastman, The Soul of the Indian, p. 59; Neihardt, Black Elk Speaks, pp. 80-82; McGaa interview, 2 Nov. 1968, which, of course, is a more contemporary account; Herman, “The Sacred Pole,” p. 37; and Williams, “Sun Dance of the Teton Dakota was very trying Ordeal,” p. 11.
camp circle four times. In song and speech the women praised
the Earth and Femininity, while the men lauded the Sky and
Wind. After this, the major event of the day occurred, the
raising of the sacred pole. Yet, before the pole was raised,
various objects were attached to it. The first was the “Fetish of
the Sun Dance.” On the opposite side of the pole’s fork was
“the banner of the Shamans.” This banner was made of a “red
material that . . . [would] wave.”24 Lastly, a heyoke, a
contrary, loosely tied the image of the man and buffalo on
either side of the fork above the fetish and banner. The tree was
ready to be raised. Only men with (painted) red hands could lift
the pole, and they paused three times in raising the pole (at the
fourth pause the pole was in the hole).25 Iya and Gnaski now
prevailed in the camp. A time of verbal license began in which
sexual joking was paramount. Finally, the superior ordered the
escort and warriors to drive the malevolent gods from the
camp.26 The images were knocked from the tree, and the
warriors began the victory dance. The superior placated the
fetish with the incense of buffalo chips, and he scorched the
fallen images to destroy their potency. Now “he should lean the
dried buffalo penis against the Sacred Pole with a pipe beside it,
thus making effective the potency of the Fetish to maintain
decency in the camp.” The ceremonies of this day concluded
with the Feast of the Shamans. The people ate in silence so that
the shamans might pray.27

24. It is made inside the Dance Lodge with “four times four wands of
chokecherry wood and enclosing in it a wisp of sage, one of the sweetgrasses, and a
tuft of shed buffalo hair. He [the shaman] may also enclose in it such trinkets or
ornaments as the people give for that purpose . . . It should be four arms’ length and
four hands’ breadth wide, with a wand at one end to keep it spread” (Walker, “Sun

25. After the pole was raised, the following song was sung. Symbolically, this
song was sung by the pole.

26. Julia McGillycuddy does not record the fact that the buffalo was an
ithyphallic figure. She does record this in regard to the figure of the man. She also
holds that the figures were shot from the pole after the “torture” phase of the ritual.
See McGillycuddy, McGillycuddy Agent, pp. 171, 174.

The fourth day of the ceremony was the culmination of the rite. After the superior on a nearby hill invoked the Sky and Bear gods, there was the braves’ charge. From the chief place of the camp, the warriors charged around the dance lodge. This was repeated for each of the cardinal directions (west, north, east, and south). The “young men who took part ... thereby obligate[d] themselves in the presence of the Sun, each to do his duty as a warrior against an enemy of the people.”

After this, the people assembled on either side of the sun trail. The superior and the mentors proceeded to the sacred lodge. After circling it four times, they entered. Then, the candidates were arrayed for the dance. Each candidate’s feet and hands were painted red. The color of the sky was put on him to indicate the form of the dance that he was to undertake. The design that was the candidate’s totem was also painted on him. He wore a red skirt, and on his shoulders, an otterskin cape. He also had buffalo hair armlets and rabbitskin anklets. On his head there was a wreath of sage and in his right hand a sprig of sage.

When this was completed, they walked along the sun trail to the dance lodge. They walked on the south side of the stakes, pausing at each one. Each stake was removed as the dancers passed. While walking the trail, the candidates wailed as if they were in mourning. In arriving at the dance lodge, the procession paused as the candidates faced the sun and wailed once more. The procession now circled the dance lodge four times. On each circuit, the procession paused at the entrance while the candidates, once again, cried out. The procession entered the dance lodge and proceeded along the left side of the lodge to the place of honor. After three feints, the leader placed the buffalo skull (the one from the sacred lodge) on the altar in

28. Ibid., p. 112.
29. For the second form, he is painted blue across the shoulders. For the third, he is painted blue on the shoulders and chest while for the fourth form blue paint is applied to the chest and forehead. Ibid.
31. Likewise, the sacred lodge was dismantled after the candidates left it to walk the sun trail.
such a way that it faced the sacred pole. Those who had an official capacity now entered the lodge. After this, any who so wished could enter. The superior lit a pipe and all smoked in communion. On the altar the attendants made a buffalo chip fire, and the superior made an incense of sweetgrass. In this way, "all will be harmonized with the potency of the Buffalo God." Following this, the dancers were prepared for their ordeal. If a candidate was to dance the fourth form, his mentor would place a sacred hoop in his right hand.

[it] should be bound with thongs so as to divide its enclosure into four equal parts and it may be ornamented in any manner. The Mentor should inform the Candidate in a harangue that the people can hear that this hoop is an emblem of the Sky, of the Four Winds, of time, of all things that grow, and of all things that the Lakota make that are circular; that only those who are renowned are entitled to wear, or place the hoops on their tipis; and that if he dances the Sun Dance to its completion he will be entitled to this insignium.

At this point, the relationship between the mentors and the candidates ceased. The superior continued in his office, but the leader now conducted the ceremony.

As such, there must minimally be two dances. These were the Buffalo Dance and the Sun-Gazing Dance. Only those who were going to undertake the second, third, or fourth form of the Sun Dance or who had danced on former occasions could

33. Ibid. According to Black Elk, the holy man who instituted the rite made the following speech to the tree before it was cut down. "Of all the many standing peoples, you O rustling cottonwood have been chosen in a sacred manner; you are about to go to the center of the people's sacred hoop, and there you will represent the people and will help us to fulfill the will of Wakan-Tanka. You are a kind and good-looking tree; upon you the winged peoples have raised their families; from the tips of your lofty branches down to your roots, the winged and four-legged peoples have made their homes. When you stand at the center of the sacred hoop you will be the people, and you will be as the pipe, stretching from heaven to earth. The weak will lean upon you, and for all the people you will be a support. With the tips of your branches you hold the sacred red and blue days. You will stand where the four sacred paths cross—there you will be the center of the great Powers of the universe. May we two-leggeds always follow your sacred example, for we see that you are always looking upwards into the heavens. Soon, and with all the peoples of the world, you will stand at the center; for all beings and all things you will bring that which is good" (Brown, The Sacred Pipe, p. 74 [italics in original]).
dance as a buffalo. In this, the dancers imitated the rage and defiance of the buffalo bull. This dance was done in the form of a circle around the buffalo skull from the altar. Upon the successful completion of this dance, the dancers became Buffalo Men, and the people sang their praises. During the Buffalo Dance the children’s ears were pierced.

The Sun-Gazing Dance was a drama of four acts: the capture, torture, captivity, and escape. In the capture, the

35. Examples of such praise are: "You now belong to the people of the Sun; you will not have to pay the price when you take a woman for your wife; you now will have many children who will honor you; you now may receive a communication from the Sun" (Ibid., p. 115).

36. According to McGillycuddy, just prior to the Sun Dance proper a give away period ensued. At various times throughout the ceremony it was appropriate to give or "throw away" possessions. "The voice of the official crier now rose above the tumult, urging the necessity of giving to the poor and the obligation to care for the widows and orphans of the bands. The effect was magical. Warriors brought ponies into the ring and turned them loose; bolts of calico and flannel appeared; beads and blankets were piled at the base of the pole; and many stripped jewelry and finery from their bodies and added them to the heap, all for distribution at a later hour" (McGillycuddy, McGillycuddy Agent, p. 172).
dancers were taken as enemies. In the torture phase, their skin was pierced (under the muscle). Captivity was the dance itself while escape occurred when the flesh was ripped so that the bonds were broken. The dance itself was done to the accompaniment of music, and it had set intermissions or rest periods. At the beginning of the second dance period, the

37. “If for the first [sic, second] form, the captor should bind the sticks through the wounds with strong thongs as many of the buffalo heads provided as the captives chooses [sic]; if for the third form, the captor should bind to the sticks thrust through the wounds four strong thongs securely fastened to four posts, so that the dancer will be in the midst of the posts; if for the fourth form, the captor should bind the sticks through the wounds with strong thongs that are securely fastened to the Sacred Pole; or if the dancer is to dance actually suspended, the thongs bound to the sticks should pass through the fork of the tree so that the dancer can be drawn from the ground or lowered to it” (Walker, “Sun Dance,” p. 117).

38. According to Bushotter, one danced with the arms outstretched and with the hands spread towards the Sun (Deloria, “Teton Myths,” p. 448); The following are several examples of the dancing songs:

Wakantanka
when I pray to him
heard me
whatever is good
he grants me.

Wakantanka
when I pray to him
black face-paint
he grants me.


39. The following songs were sung by the Intercessor (superior?). The “Noon Song” was sung at noon on either the first or second day of the ceremony. According to Densmore, the ceremony lasted through the second day until all the dancers were exhausted.

where
holy
you behold
in the place where the sun rises
holy
may you behold
where
holy
you behold
in the place where the sun passes us on his course
holy
you behold
where
goodness
you behold
at the turning back of the sun
goodness
may you behold.”
captors feigned to discover that the captives were Buffalo Men. The captors gave what aid the ceremony allowed. Escape from the bonds did not occur until after the fourth dancing period. This was accomplished by violently pulling against the fetters, and it was continued until escape was accomplished.

To free oneself by one's own efforts was the most successful completion of the dance. If a dancer fainted, this was considered the least effective form of the dance. If a dancer did not faint but was still unable to free himself, his female relatives could throw heavy things on the rawhide rope(s) to which the skewers implanted in his flesh were attached. If this did not succeed, a friend could be offered a present to help. Such a friend would then add his strength to that of the dancer in pulling against the thongs. If this succeeded, it was considered that the dancer had completed the dance, but in a less effective manner than if he had freed himself by his own efforts.

The Sun-Gazing Dance continued until all the captives had

The following song was sung by the Intercessor during a period when the drummers were resting.

'the sun
is my friend
a hoop
it has made me wear
an eagle
it has made me wear
the moon
is my friend
a crane
it has made me wear
a hawk
it has made me wear.'


40. According to George Catlin, it was considered a disgrace to faint or fall during the dance (George Catlin, North American Indians, 2 vols. [1841; reprint ed., Philadelphia: Leary, Stuart & Co., 1913], 1:262). Elizabeth Custer recounts the story of a man who pleaded to be cut free after he had fainted. "On reviving he begged to be cut down, and ever after was an object of scorn. He was condemned to wear squaw's clothing from that time on. They mocked and taunted him, and he led as separate an existence as if he were in a desert alone. The squaws disdained to notice him, except to heap work upon his already burdened shoulders" (Elizabeth Custer, Boots and Saddles, new ed. [Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1961], pp. 196-97).
escaped or until the next morning. If escape had not been effected by this time, the captives were freed. In such a case, it was considered that they had been rescued. This was considered as meritorious as escaping. At the conclusion of the ritual, the leader announced the fact at the entrance of the Sun Dance Lodge.

The sacred pole was left standing with the fetish and the banner of the shamans. Eventually, the Winged God or the Four Winds would cast it down. The dancers could now expect a communication from the sun before the dispersion of the next winter's camp. If a man danced to become a shaman, he took a shaman as his tutor.

The Sun Dance, a complex of ceremonies, is preeminently the celebration of warriors and buffalo hunters. It is the public recognition and celebration of the great virtues: bravery, generosity, fortitude, and integrity. Yet, the dance is much more than a recognition of these virtues for it is also their highest expression and fulfillment. For example, generosity can really proceed no further than to offer one's flesh for the people. As one informant noted:

"The cutting of the bodies in fulfillment of a Sun Dance vow is different from the cutting of the flesh when the people are in sorrow. A man's body is his own, and when he gives his body or his flesh he is giving the only thing which really belongs to him. We know that all the creatures on the earth were placed here by Wakantanka. Thus if a man says he will give a horse to Wakantanka, he is only giving to Wakantanka that which already belongs to him. I might give tobacco or other articles in the Sun Dance, but if I gave these and kept back the best no one would believe that I was in earnest."

41. A curative or regenerative power was associated with the pole during the ceremony. Mothers would lay their children at the base of the pole so that their sons would be brave and their daughters would be the mothers of brave warriors. See Lame Deer and Erdoes, Seeker of Visions, p. 211 and Neihardt, Black Elk Speaks, p. 81.

must give something that I really value to show that my whole being goes with the lesser gifts; therefore I promise to give my body.43

Given this, the "torture" element of the Sun Dance is an expression of self-sacrifice as a demonstration of sincerity. Undertaken on behalf of the people, it is redemptive. The flowing of the blood represents an attempt to guarantee, insofar as man can, an abundance of good things. In this, the pain inflicted by the cutting is of minor consequence. As a contemporary Lakota notes:

[the pain] gives you supreme concentration on God, on the Great Spirit. You blow on that eagle bone whistle, you're blowing on it like that, and you don't even see the crowd. You have supreme concentration, and these men are pierced. I was the only man who wasn't pierced, I didn't feel I was ready. And they lean back, and the pain makes you concentrate on God, but really the pain doesn't bother them that much, because they are so [garbled word] on their

people, always thinking about the people, how to help the people. And some of these dancers will have visions. The way is marked by suffering. A great-hearted man will suffer intensely for the people and, in a sense, redeem them. The give-aways represent the people’s participation in this almost unfathomable generosity. In offering all that one has, the dance symbolically represents the limit case of the virtues of the buffalo hunters and warriors.

The dance is a celebration of the people. This is stressed by the council’s approval of the initial candidate. Even if one dances in fulfillment of a private vow, there is a manifest public dimension to the ritual that exists from its beginning. On a more mundane level the Sun Dance camp is a place of reunions, story telling, children’s games, and courting. Regardless of the torture (which preoccupied white observers), the ritual must be viewed as a sequence of celebrations that culminate in the Sun-Gazing Dance.

In the context of the ritual, the Sun Dance camp must be viewed as a sacred locus. The center of this camp is fixed by the location of the sacred spot which, in turn, is discovered or recognized by the shaman. Once the shaman recognizes the spot, his fetish draws his hand towards the place. Everything is located in reference to this locus. The sun dance pole, once it is raised at the sacred spot, is an omphalos. As Black Elk notes: "When you [the pole] stand at the center of the sacred hoop you will be the people, and you will be as the pipe, stretching from heaven to earth... You will stand where the four sacred paths cross—there you will be the center of the great Powers of the universe.” Given this, it is not at all surprising that the pole is associated with fertility and fruitfulness. As a conduit that intersects the various levels of reality, it is naturally associated with the fecundity of the beginnings. Manifestly, the Sun Dance is a celebration of the creative or generative power of the sun. This is indicated by the leaning of the pipe and buffalo phallus against the pole after the destruction of Iya and Gnaski. In all of this, the sacred tree is viewed as a conductor of life. One must also note the phallic nature of the tree and the womb-like nature of the sacred spot. A suggestion of another level of

44. McGaa interview, 2 Nov. 1968.
symbolism is supplied by Walker's noting that each fork of the sacred tree was aligned north and south. Thus, symbolically the sun passes through the fork of the pole. At noon, the sun is directly above the pole. It could thus be viewed as a resting place for the sun. The pole itself is the nexus between the sun and earth, and it could even be understood to be the sun's phallus. Indeed, the pole is the conduit of life for the dancers and the people.

Above all, however, it is an attempt to live the moral way regardless of the difficulties. This is demonstrated by the destruction of the ithyphallic buffalo and man. These figures, Iya (Libertinism) and Gnaski (Licentiousness), represent divisive forces that can rend the social fabric. When the figures are shot from the pole, the camp is exorcised. In fact, the ceremony as a whole contains many elements of exorcism. The tree before it is felled, the ithyphallic figures, and even the dancers are treated as enemies. As part of the entire ceremony the malevolent gods are driven from the camp. Among other things, the ceremony seems to represent a renewal, a regeneration. Symbolically, through the dancers, the people renew their acceptance of the moral way, regardless of other alternatives. In the Sun Dance ceremony, the people choose the good, the generative warmth of the sun.

The Sun Dance is a prayer, a natural hymn, a supplication. The people, aware of their frailty, dance in the midst of the sacred, primal permanence. A Lakota dances with his arms outstretched, hands spread towards the sun. If a candidate intends to dance the fourth form, he carries a sacred hoop in his right hand. The hoop is a replication of the sacred whole of which man and the Lakota are only a fragmentary part. “And the reason for all this was that they wished that there might be an abundance of good things; that the people might live long; this they prayed.”

45. Bushotter in Deloria’s, “Teton Myths,” p. 449. See also Melody's “Maka’s Story.”