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Sundance: Okaan (O-gaan)

“In the beginning of Blackfoot country there was only the sun, the sky, and the prairies, until the holy woman brought to the people religion of the sun worship. A prayer for the sun is made by the holy woman who sings and asks the sun to be good to her. She says you have been wise old Sun; you have brought me good life and good fortune. Have pity on me old sun. For next summer I will put up a Sundance” (Siksika, 1960).

“On the hill, an offering is left as a sign of devotion to the sun. When the saskatoon berries are ripe in mid summer, the Horn Society gathers in the valley of the river to choose the site of the Sundance and to layout the camp. The site is used often so that the whole area becomes the holy place. Prayers are given with a pipe asking the sun to protect the people and to have a good Sundance” (Siksika, 1960).

The Native American people’s place of worship was the open sky, his alter, a buffalo skull and a pipe, and their Great Spirit, or Creator; the spiritual force that guided the native people in their lives and continues to do so through the ceremony of Okaan, or Sundance. Communications with Creator were not done through a priest of a church, rather it was face-to-face and through dreams and visions. The symbol of the Great Spirit, or God was the circle that represented the Earth, the Tipi, Sacred Hoops of Nations, and the Sun. The people themselves are part of that Mystic Circle with all living creatures (Erdoes, 1972).

The Sun Dance ceremony for the Northern Plains tribes has been considered to be the central ceremony that served as a unifying force to bring together the various hunting bands for the summer buffalo hunt. The basic tenet for Sundance was of seasonal renewal, growth and replenishment that gave rise to annual ceremonies (Ojibwa, 2020).



Sun dance, Shoshone Indians at Fort Hall, 1925.

Another tenet was for spiritual power and affirmation of spiritual identity individually and among tribes (Ojibwa, 2020; Spier, 1921).

The Niitsitapi, or plains cultures are collectively known as the Apikuni (Peigan), the Kainai (Blood), and the Siksika (Blackfoot), all of whom share the Algonquian language (Paper, 1970).

Many of the Blackfoot ceremonies are placed upon the actions of the buffalo. They used to move camp to follow the buffalo as the buffalo were an integral part of their daily lives. “If the buffalo were plentiful, they prospered, if buffalo were scarce, they starved.” Every part of the buffalo supplied the native people with means to make clothing, coverings for tipis, utensils, and meat; thus, “the buffalo was regarded as a holy animal which belonged to the sun, and it was the staff of life to the Indians on the plains” (Siksika, 1960).



Tanned and decorated buffalo hides used to cover the tipis. Each lodge is painted with its own design which is zealously guarded by the family. The designs often come from medicine dreams or the war victory of an ancestor. Special songs also may exist for many designs but can only be sung by their owners. The tents and tipis form a neat circle

with each family taking their traditional place according to its band and its chief (Siksika, 1960).

The Niitsitapi tribes also share a rich ceremonial life involving ritual bundles that are used in the ceremony Okaan; bundles that can easily travel with the tribes that follow buffalo. These bundles are the most precious treasures among the Plains tribes and thought to ensure the survival and well-being of all tribe members that also indicate a custodian’s status among the tribe. Furthermore, the bundle keepers hold the knowledge necessary for the ongoing practice of ceremonies (Paper, 1970; Crowshoe & Manneschmidt, 2002). Many bundles are small in size for ease of travel which grew in size since the introduction of horses. The bundles can include pipes, dance wands, and shakers depending on the ceremony. Use of the bundle complexes often include

ceremonial rituals and songs that are held by a married couple, where the woman generally provides daily care to the bundles. The large ritual bundles are considered to be the most precious possessions of the Plains culture that signifies the sacred care of the bundles and their material value for those privileged to have it in their possession (Paper, 1970).



The opening and transferring of the bundles also require the leadership and participation of male-female pairs, many of which were involved in secret ritual societies. Some men belonged to the Horn Society and some women to the Motokiks Society. Both societies would put up their own lodges for Okaan. The Motokiks would dance and sing rituals for four days, as four is a holy number with the Blackfoot people so they repeat many actions four times (Paper, 1970; Siksika, 1960).

The sacred woman wears the sacred turnip headdress, Natoas, that is transferred with the Beaver bundle also containing the turnip digger and the elk hide robe while her husband engages in a series of sweat rituals that take place in a sweat lodge built specifically for each ceremony (Paper, 1970; Crowshoe & Manneschmidt, 2002). In her Lodge, the sacred woman fasts for four days during the ceremony. Only ritual leaders are allowed to enter her Lodge, the four Spirit Lodges, and the Medicine Lodge that are the focus of Okaan. An experienced couple of the Okaan ceremony provides a ritual passing of instructions to the Sacred Woman and her husband for the present ceremony (Paper, 2007).



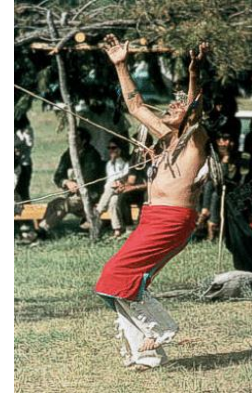
Some women of the Peigan people were known to be involved with important societies as the bundle holders (Crowshoe & Manneschmidt, 2002).

During a ceremonial sweat, cold water is placed upon the rocks when they are hot, forming a purifying steam and a pipe is passed inside for the men to smoke and pray (Siksika, 1960). "We use Willow trees for sweat ceremonies because they contain traces of aspirin (salicylic acid) that help to purify. Creation stories tell us that Creator gave us the 'sweat ceremony in the sweat lodge' for men because we don't have the ability to purify our bodies like women do with their monthly cycles" (Plain Eagle, 2024).

When the Medicine Lodge is prepared with boughs of cottonwood branches, the center pole is erected (Erdoes, 1972). The center pole is provided by someone who makes a vow to the sun. Members touch the center pole reverently before and after each dance to the power of the sun (Siksika, 1960).

In the past the vows were often taken as prayer to aid a husband or son away on a raid. “Presently, the vow usually taken is to request aid for a seriously ill member of the family” (Paper, 2007).

The women leave their lodge to prepare for their public dance. This is the only ceremony where others are permitted to see the women in full regalia. They then serve sacred saskatoon berry soup to their members as a tribute to the sun. Boiled buffalo tongue is also brought by the women and provided for offerings to the sun. The give-away is an important part of all religious ceremonies. The occupation or placement of a person’s position in society is often reflected by their generosity and the children receive a special treat.



For a number of tribes (Blackfoot, Cheyenne, Sioux, Arapho), the Sundance ceremony included a rite of self-torture, where some men would pierce their breasts with skewers and dance for days in the sun without food or water until they collapsed and tore free. This voluntary practice was for obedience, to show selflessness, and a vow to give thanks to the Great Spirit. (Ojibwa, 2020; Erdoes, 1972).

Members come around the center pole for a final prayer. It is left as an offering and will remain. It has become a holy gift to the sun, Natoosi, (Siksika, 1960).



The origins of Okaan are based on a few myths:

The Sundance religion was brought down to earth by a Blackfoot man named Scarface (Siksika, 1960). When Scarface came down from the sky he commanded that a sweat lodge with two doorways be built. In Blackfoot religion, the sun is their main deity, the moon is his wife, and the morning star is their boy. Scarface had saved Morning star’s life and was given the ceremonies of Sundance to take back to his people (Siksika, 1960).

Scarface was a poor young man who was in love with a beautiful young woman from an important family. After seeking guidance form the sun, Scarface achieved his goal of

completing many adventures and was rewarded with marriage to this beautiful girl. They carried out their first Okaan together (Paper, 2007).

An excerpt from Ben Calf Robe: tells how a young woman married the sun and was transported to the sky world. She gathered prairie turnips but was told not to dig an exceptionally large one. Driven by curiosity she eventually digs up the turnip that leaves a hole large enough to see the earth. As a result of her act, she must return home to earth but is given Okaan to take with her (Paper, 2007).

A Kainai Elder George First Rider tells a story of a young woman who marries an older man who repeatedly beat his wife in misplaced jealousy. She attempted to hang herself, but the rope broke; she fell asleep and had a series of powerful dreams. When she tried to tell her husband, he beat her again. Another woman came to help her, grabbed the man and threw him around. The sacrificial ritual of the young woman's dream was carried out at the tree where she tried to hang herself. Further visions developed the ceremony of Okaan with the tree as the center pole and the addition of the lodge, buffalo tongues, and the self-inflicted offerings (Paper, 2007).

The ceremony of Okaan is considered to be the oldest among the Blackfoot, Cheyenne and Gros Ventre people (Ojibwa, 2020).

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