

Indian sun dance

[Art & Culture](#), [Dance](#)



Austin Lauer Lauer 1 T21 Mr. Vale 17 Nov. 2007 I. Thesis: The United States' ban of the Indian Sun Dance in 1883 damaged the religious, cultural, and social framework of the Indians and was a key step in the United States' effort to try to assimilate Indians into American society. II. Introduction - Banning of the Sun Dance and the Historical Events that Led to the Indian Sun Dance Ban: 1. Due to the diminishing supply of buffalo in the 1870s and 1880s, and the Indians' forced movement to reservations, the Indians' economic base was destroyed, and they were forced to rely on the United States government for food and supplies, thereby becoming subject to U. S. economic and political control. [1] 2. In 1871 The U. S. ended treaty-making with the Indians and in the 1870s and early 1880s U. S. policy transformed from a so-called " peace policy" (where Indians were forced onto reservations) to an " assimilation policy" in which the Indian and his ways would be absorbed into the general population. [2] 3. As part of this assimilation policy, between 1869 and 1872 all of the recognized Indian Tribes at the time were apportioned among the 13 Christian denominations recognized by the Federal government. [3] 4. The Secretary of the Department of Interior, Henry M. Teller, established the Court of Indian Offenses in 1883 which promulgated rules for investigating, prosecuting, convicting and punishing people who followed tribal religions, including those who participated in " old heathenish dances," such as the Sun Dance. [3] 5. By 1884, Courts of Indian Offenses were instituted on all Indian reservations and they worked to banish the Sun Dance from the Indian reservations by punishing offenders with imprisonment or withholding of Indian rations from the U. S. government. [3] [7] 6. Subsequent lists of indigenous practices

prohibited by federal regulations were promulgated in 1892 and 1904 prohibiting all dances and any similar feasts. [3] III. Cultural Significance of Sun Dance 1. The Sun Dance is a sacred annual summer ritual that was performed by some twenty tribes of the Plains Indians (the nomadic tribes of the American mid- west). [4] [5] Lauer 2 2. The performance of the Sun Dance varied among different tribes people, but certain activities were common throughout the various Plains Indian tribes. [4] 3. The Sun Dance typically contains the following elements: (a) It was usually preceded by a sweat-lodge ceremony for purification; (b) The annual gathering lasted about four through eight days; (c) Dancers danced around a cottonwood pole (symbolizing the grandfather) for a period of days, during which they fast and abstained from drink; (d) The male dancers may have undergone a piercing in which: cuts are made to the chest or back and a wooden skewer is inserted through the wounds and the dancers and are tied to buffalo skulls or to a ceremonial cottonwood pole in the center of the camp; (e) The dancers then underwent self-torture designed to extricate themselves from the skewers. (f) The dancers danced to a drumbeat often to special arrangements of dance steps; (g) Offerings, were typically made, special songs are sung, and incantations or prayers are recited; (h) Sacrifice of the buffalo (the animal symbol of the sun) was part of the ceremony. [6] [5] IV. Religious Significance of the Sun Dance 1. The main purpose of the Sun Dance (which is a sacrificial dance) was to allow people to renew their faith in the spirits that guide the world. It contained all religion and most rites. [12] 2. The dancers underwent self-torture tied to the central sun pole, where all three worlds are connected: the spiritual world of medicine fathers,

the physical world of the tribe, and the pure world of the grandfather. [8]

[12] 3. As they danced, they pulled hunks of flesh from their bodies as sacrifices to the Indian God, known by some as the " Great Spirit," or " Wakan Tanka," the " Big Holy," or " grandfather." [8] 4. Indians believed that the only thing they own on earth is their body and everything else is a gift. For these gifts they offered the only thing they had, flesh, to show how sincere they are for the prayers being prayed. [16] 5. Women did not offer flesh sacrifices because they endured they pain through childbirth. [17] 6. According to Indian belief, the red man was to have this dance every summer, to fulfill their religious duty to the Indian God. [9] Lauer 3 7. The sacrifice of the sun dances was considered beneficial to the individual, the tribe, and the entire cosmos. [8] V. Social Significance of the Sun Dance 1. " The Indians must conform to the white man's ways, peaceably if they will, forcibly if they must... The tribal relations should be broken up, socialism destroyed, and the family and the autonomy of the individual substituted." [15] 2. Since Indians are nomadic and traveled in small groups, the Sun Dance was a significant social event as it involved a gathering of large groups of people camped together prior to the communal buffalo hunt. [5] 3. The Sun Dance was the Plains Indians' major communal religious ceremony, resulting in the spiritual rebirth of participants and relatives. [10] 4. Preparation for the Sun Dance was also a social event and resembled the setting out of a war party, with a group of scouts searching for a cottonwood tree worthy of being the sacred pole, and groups of maidens and warriors involved in the ceremony of cutting down and carrying the tree to the sacred spot where it would stand. [4] 5. The Sun Dance strengthened values and

institutions of society [13] 6. The Sun Dance had a social order, giving elders a respected place [4] VI. Impact of Banning the Sun Dance 1. Banning of the Sun Dance was a religious blow to the Indians who believed that without the Sun Dance the world would not be renewed. [8] 2. Banning the Sun Dance was socially damaging to the Indians as it attempted to weaken the intergenerational and extended kinship relationships that knit tribal societies together. [3] 3. Because the Sun Dance was central to the cultural and religious life of the Plains Indians, the Indians searched for ways to continue the Sun Dance. [11] 4. The rules prohibiting the Sun Dance and other religious practices could not, as a practical matter, be enforced because there were not enough enforcement officers to monitor and control the practices. [7] Lauer 4 5. Indians continued the dance by dropping aspects that the white officials objected to and presenting it as a cultural festival rather than a religious ceremony. [11] 6. Indians took to performing public Sun Dances for whites, simulating the piercing of the flesh by using harnesses. [18] 7. Also, many other groups continued to hold traditional Sun Dances in secret, complete with the traditional piercing. Guards would be posted at a distance to wait for the approach of white officials. [13] 8. Religious, cultural, and social assimilation of Indians is not successful since the Sun Dance, and other traditional Indian religious and ceremonial life persist, despite U. S. government attempts at assimilation. [1] VII. Subsequent History of the Sun Dance 1. The 1934 The Indian Reorganization Act (The Wheeler-Howard Act) is passed which allows Sun Dance piercing and is intended to promote the well-being of Native Americans by recognizing the value of their diverse cultures, religions, languages and

economies. [2] 2. A full revival of the Sun Dance did not occur until the 1950s. [13] 3. The Sun Dance has been reinterpreted today to suit reservation conditions and the impact of Christian theology. Prayers for good health and the curing of disease have emerged as a major concern. [14] VIII. Summary-----Conclusion 1. The United States' ban of the Indian Sun Dance in 1883 damaged the religious, cultural, and social framework of the Indians, and was a key step in the United States' effort to try to assimilate Indians into American society. 2. I have proven my thesis by showing how the outlawing of the Indian Sun Dance affected the Indians, and how the government did this to try and a assimilate Indians into society. A. Religion B. Culture C. Social FOOTNOTES Lauer 5 1. Gale, " A Reference Work on Native North Americans in the United States and Canada." The Native North American Almanac. 1994. 2. NiiKsa, Clara. " Indian Courts: a Brief History." Maquah. 15 Nov 2007 . 3. Gooding, Susan, and E. J. Brill. At the Boundries of Religions Identity: Native American Religions and American Legal Culture. Leiden, 1996. 4. " Sun Dance." Crystalinks. 15 Nov 2007 . 5. Patterson, Lotsee, and Mary Ellen Snodgrass. Indian Terms of the Americas. Englewood, Colorado: Libraries Unlimited Inc., 1994. 6. Group, Gale. " Commentary on the Sun Dance, American Journey Online: the Native American Experience." galenet. 1999. Primary Source Microfilm. 15 Nov 2007 . 7. McCormik, Anita L. Native Americans and the Reservation in American History. 1996. 8. Verluis, Arthur. The Elements of Native American Traditions. Element Books Limited, 1993. 9. Bear, Luther S. My People the Sioux. University of Nebraska P, 1975. 10. Erdoes, Richard. The Sun Dance People. Alfred a Knopf, Inc, 1972. 11. Hartz, Paula R. Native American Religions. 1997. 12. " Sun Dance." World

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