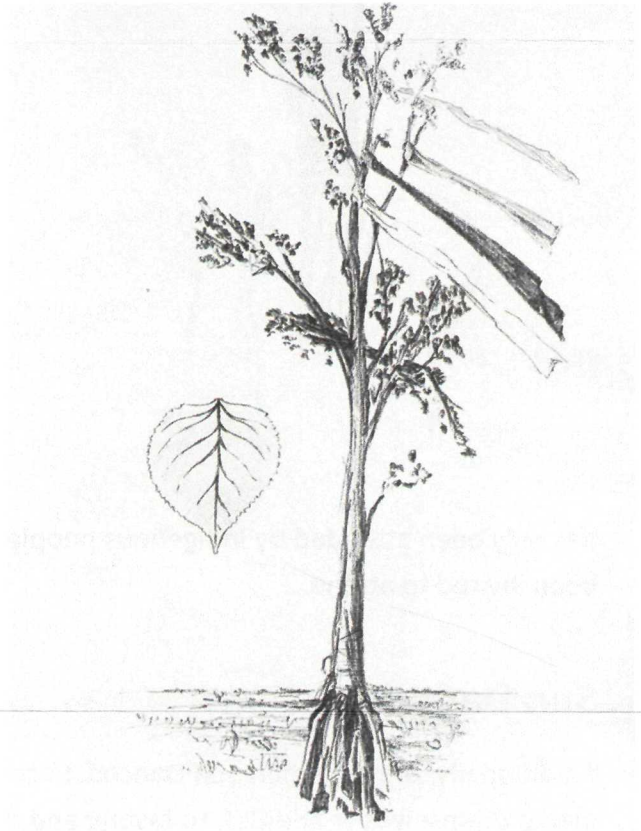




Wiwányang Wačhípi Sun Dance

The Sun Dance is one of the most important ceremonies to the Indigenous people of the Great Plains. It is performed to ensure the tribe's well-being and renew the relationship between humans and the natural world through prayer for all life. Because the Sun Dance is strongly associated with dreams and visions, the specific rituals vary among the different tribes. Fasting and dancing for four days is common. The dancers are voluntarily sacrificing their own well-being for the greater good of the community.

For the Očhéthi Šakówiŋ (Seven Council Fires of the Dakota, Nakota, and Lakota), the Sun Dance takes place every year during the hottest part of the summer, the third day of the ceremony landing on the full moon of that month. A person does what is called "pledging" when they commit to dancing for the next four summers, because everything is done in fours. Historically, different tribes across the Great Plains came together and held a massive Sun Dance once a year.

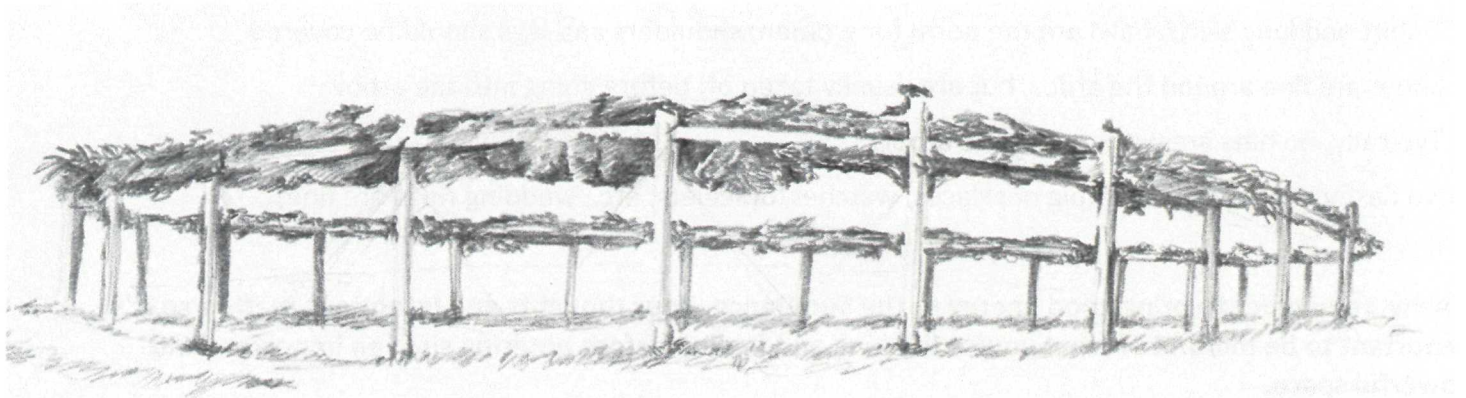


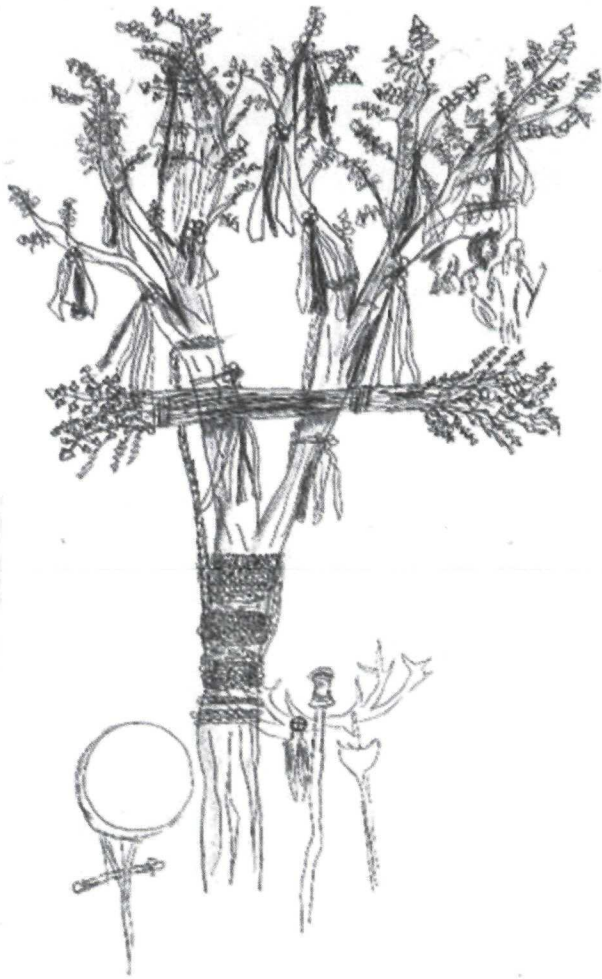
Origin

According to the Lakota visionary and healer Black Elk, the Sun Dance was given to the people through a vision of a man named Kablaya (Spread). He told the people how to prepare and perform the ceremony. The Sun Dance has since been passed down through generations for centuries.

What Happens

The Sun Dance ceremony lasts four days. The day before the first day of Sun Dance is called Tree Day. A ceremonial cottonwood tree is cut down and put up in the center of the arbor (a large circular arena). The morning after Tree Day marks the first day of the Sun Dance. The dancers enter every morning at dawn and dance in 'rounds' throughout the day until the sun sets. During this four-day ceremony, the dancers do not eat or drink. They start and end each day by going into the inípi, or sweat lodge, to purify themselves. On the fourth day when the sun sets, there is a big feast and a giveaway.





The Sacred Tree

The cottonwood is the tree that is used in the Sun Dance ceremony. According to some traditions, it is said to be the spiritually strongest tree. If you cut an upper limb of this tree crosswise, there is a five-pointed star in the grain. A five-pointed star is the mark of Wakǵáj Tǵánka, or the Great Spirit. If you listen carefully, you can hear the cottonwood in the wind, which is understood as all the prayers to the Great Spirit. Prayer ties and flags of the dancers and supporters are tied onto the tree before it goes up. These offerings carry the prayers of the people.

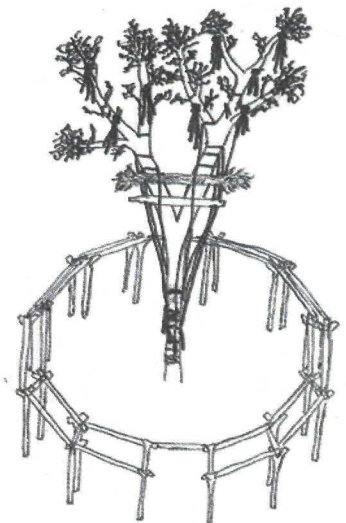
Religious Freedom

In 1883, the federal government outlawed the practice of traditional Indigenous ceremonies. Only since the American Indian Religious Freedom Act of 1978 have traditional and cultural practices been legal again. Despite 95 years of oppression, the Sun Dance was still practiced and has continued to grow since its renewal in 1978. Traditionally, it

has only been attended by Indigenous people. In recent years however, members of many other cultures have been invited to attend.

Sun Dancers

Traditionally, only the men Sun Danced. In some tribes, men voluntarily pierce themselves in addition to fasting and dancing in order to absorb pain so that their people won't have to. Just as women endure pain for the survival of their people, men can do the same through this ritual. However, things have changed over time so that today both men and women can dance. An individual would typically have a dream about Sun Dancing, which would be seen as a message from the spirits. They would then give their pipe to a medicine man and ask for interpretation. After this, they start to prepare for the Sun Dance.



PROTOCOL

Although many Sun Dances are fundamentally the same, there will be different rules and preferences at every Sun Dance because there are different medicine men running each ceremony. If you ever have the opportunity to attend a Sun Dance, keep these things in mind:

- No revealing clothing (ex. no tank tops, short shorts, etc.)
- T-shirt and long skirt/shawl are the norm for women; shoulders and legs should be covered
- Shoes are fine around the arbor, but are usually taken off before going into the arbor
- Typically, no hats are worn under the arbor
- No flashy jewelry or metal (big necklaces, watches/bracelets, etc.; wedding rings are fine)

Finally, remember to bring good energy to the Sun Dance. Your thoughts and intentions matter, so it's important to be mindful of what you're thinking and feeling before entering such an important and powerful space.