

CLARK WISSLER



THE SUN DANCE OF THE BLACKFOOT INDIANS

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The Sun Dance of the Blackfoot Indians

Enriched edition.

Introduction, Studies and Commentaries by Jackson Price

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Introduction

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At the meeting point of ceremonial obligation and ethnographic attention, this study traces how a community makes meaning through a demanding rite. *The Sun Dance of the Blackfoot Indians* by Clark Wissler is an early twentieth-century ethnographic monograph centered on the Blackfoot homelands of the northern Plains, in present-day Canada and the United States. Written by a leading American anthropologist of that period, it emerged from sustained fieldwork and museum-based research, aiming to document a complex ceremony with care and system. The result is a focused account that balances description, interpretation, and attention to social life surrounding the rite.

It introduces readers to the ceremony's structure, participants, and supporting practices without presuming prior knowledge, moving step by step through preparations, roles, sequences, and meanings as recounted by community members. Wissler writes in a measured, analytic voice that favors clarity over flourish, presenting observations in careful order and resisting speculation beyond what sources support. The tone is respectful, restrained, and precise, creating a reading experience that is immersive through accumulation rather than dramatic incident. Sections build on one another like careful field notes expanded for publication, inviting readers to track patterns, note variations, and attend to method as much as content.

Across this account, several themes emerge with clarity: how collective labor organizes space and time; how ritual action reaffirms bonds of kinship and obligation; and how songs, gestures, and objects carry teachings across generations. The Sun Dance appears not as an isolated spectacle but as the living center of a seasonal cycle, drawing together dispersed households, directing resources, and coordinating attention toward shared commitments. Individual responsibilities intersect with communal aims, and private vows are set within public protocols. The narrative emphasizes continuities and variations alike, showing the ceremony as both durable and adaptive within the Blackfoot world to which it belongs.

Readers will also encounter the methodological signature of early twentieth-century anthropology: painstaking description, comparison among reported versions, and careful notation of terms as they were given to the researcher. Wissler's approach assembles multiple testimonies to map procedures and interpret symbolic associations, while acknowledging when information is partial or uncertain. The result underscores both the value and the limits of a documentary project shaped by its time. The language and categories reflect the scholarly conventions of the era, yet a sustained effort is made to keep the record faithful to sources, distinguishing observed practice from inference and marking points of divergence.

Attentive to material settings as well as to social relations, the book dwells on how spaces are prepared, how objects are assembled and handled, and how bodily discipline organizes the flow of events. Such attention yields a vivid, though unadorned, sense of the sensory world that surrounds the rite: the architecture of the gathering place, the cadence of movement, the coordination of labor. The prose is exacting without being opaque, and its cumulative

detail rewards patient reading. As the pieces align, the ceremony's inner coherence becomes legible, not through sudden revelation but through careful, steady attention to process and pattern.

For contemporary readers, this work matters as a record created during a period when many Indigenous practices were being documented through external lenses, and it invites critical, respectful engagement. It aids scholarship on ritual, social organization, and cultural history, while also reminding us that ceremonies are living institutions entwined with sovereignty, stewardship, and community wellbeing. Read in concert with Blackfoot-authored scholarship and with contemporary collaborative research, it becomes a resource to be contextualized rather than an endpoint. Its enduring value lies in preserving specific knowledge while prompting reflection on the ethics of representation and on responsibilities owed to source communities.

Approached with care, *The Sun Dance of the Blackfoot Indians* offers an opportunity to learn about a central ceremony and to observe how a scholar of its era sought to render it intelligible. The book's patient structure and even-tempered tone encourage a mode of reading that privileges listening, comparison, and thoughtful hesitation. Without disclosing particulars better encountered within the text, this introduction points toward the book's core: a sustained effort to present practice, context, and meaning in concert. What follows invites attentiveness to a living tradition and to the interpretive frame through which it was recorded and shared.

Synopsis

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Clark Wissler's *The Sun Dance of the Blackfoot Indians*, published in the early twentieth century as part of the Anthropological Papers of the American Museum of Natural History, presents a systematic ethnographic study of the Blackfoot ceremony commonly known as the Sun Dance. Drawing on extended fieldwork among Blackfoot communities and structured interviews with knowledgeable participants, Wissler organizes the material to describe the ceremony's structure, personnel, and sequence while situating it within Plains culture. He emphasizes careful documentation of procedural detail, the social settings in which the rite unfolded, and the technical vocabulary used by practitioners, establishing a clear foundation for subsequent discussion and analysis.

After outlining the scope of his inquiry, Wissler summarizes mythic accounts that explain the origin and sanction of the rite, noting that multiple versions circulate among the Blackfoot divisions. He treats these narratives less as fixed texts than as explanations that frame obligation, reciprocity, and the relationship between humans and powerful beings. The stories establish why the ceremony is undertaken, what outcomes are sought, and why particular objects and songs possess efficacy. By presenting variant tellings alongside common motifs, Wissler shows how cosmology anchors practice while allowing local emphasis, preparing the reader for the ritual logic that guides the sequence of events.

He then turns to sponsorship and preparation. The ceremony is typically undertaken in fulfillment of a vow, often initiated to seek recovery from illness or to secure communal well-being. Wissler describes how a principal sponsor is identified, how helpers and ritual specialists are enlisted, and how obligations of generosity, feasting, and distribution activate kin and camp alliances. He details the preliminary observances, the gathering of materials, and the moral expectations attached to the vow. Throughout, he treats the rite as a public, redistributive enterprise that reaffirms social ties while directing attention to the ethical framework that binds sponsors, officiants, and participants.

The monograph proceeds through the event's sequence, from selecting a site to the ceremonial raising of the lodge and the installation of the central structure. Wissler enumerates the roles of leaders, assistants, singers, and guardians, and the protocols governing entry, seating, and movement. He summarizes the order of songs and dances, the alternation of periods of activity and restraint, and the observances that mark each day. Without sensationalizing, he notes disciplines such as fasting and sustained effort that give the rite solemnity. His focus stays on process and instruction, yielding a step-by-step portrait of how communal action creates and sustains the ceremonial space.

Special attention is given to sacred objects and their handling. Wissler catalogs the regalia, emblems, and bundles central to the rite, explaining how each is prepared, displayed, and empowered through prayer and song. He outlines the rules of ownership, custody, and inheritance, as well as the formal transfers through which rights to conduct particular segments are acquired. These transactions, combining instruction with gift exchange, ensure continuity of knowledge while regulating ceremonial authority. He also

considers body paint, ornamentation, and gestures as semiotic systems, showing how visual codes align with mythic themes and how precise performance is essential to the rite's recognized validity.

Wissler broadens the analysis by comparing Blackfoot practices with Sun Dance variants reported for other Plains peoples. Mapping shared traits and distinctive innovations, he argues for historical connections and local development, while acknowledging gaps in the record and the effects of external pressures. He documents how reservation-era restrictions and missionary campaigns altered timing, scale, and some procedures, and he distinguishes older recollections from more recent adaptations. This comparative frame serves two purposes: it clarifies what the Blackfoot consider characteristic of their ceremony, and it situates the rite within larger culture-area patterns that, in Wissler's view, illuminate diffusion and selective adoption.

In closing, Wissler emphasizes the ceremony's social and cosmological dimensions: its capacity to renew relations with sacred powers, reaffirm communal bonds, and transmit expert knowledge through formal mentorship. He positions the study as both a descriptive record and a contribution to theory about ritual integration and cultural distribution. Without claiming finality, he underscores the need for precise documentation and respect for indigenous categories. The work's enduring significance lies in its granular portrayal of procedure, its attention to the ethics of obligation, and its value as a historical source for a rite that endured suppression yet persisted in memory and practice.

Historical Context

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Clark Wissler (1870–1947), a leading American anthropologist at the American Museum of Natural History, produced *The Sun Dance of the Blackfoot Indians* during the museum's expansion of ethnological research in the early twentieth century. As curator of anthropology, Wissler organized field expeditions and edited the *Anthropological Papers*, where the study appeared. The work arises from his sustained investigations of the Plains culture area, a concept he helped formalize to classify regional patterns of lifeways and ritual. It reflects professional anthropology's consolidation after 1900, when museum-based institutions prioritized systematic documentation of Indigenous ceremonies, material culture, and social organization under standardized comparative frameworks.

The Blackfoot Confederacy, comprising Siksika, Kainai (Blood), and Piikani (Peigan) in present-day Alberta, and Amskapi Piikani on the Blackfeet Reservation in Montana, inhabited the northern Great Plains. After the buffalo herds collapsed in the 1870s–1880s, treaties and reserve/reservation regimes reshaped political geography: Treaty 7 (1877) established Canadian reserves; in the United States, successive cessions culminated in the 1896 transfer of mountain lands later incorporated into Glacier National Park (1910). These dislocations, combined with ration-based economies, created the historical backdrop for Wissler's record of the Sun Dance (Okan), a ceremony that had anchored seasonal cycles, social alliances, and sacred obligations in the pre-reservation era.

Government suppression of Indigenous ceremonies crucially framed the period Wissler documented. In the United States, the 1883 Code of Indian Offenses authorized agents to prohibit the Sun Dance and related practices, with enforcement varying but persistent into the early twentieth century. In Canada, amendments to the Indian Act in 1895 and later regulations curtailed large gatherings and dances, and officials, including the North-West Mounted Police (later Royal Canadian Mounted Police), monitored compliance. By Wissler's field years, many communities held curtailed or clandestine observances, or substituted public elements with modified forms. This climate shaped access, testimony, and the comparative lens through which his account was assembled.

Wissler's Blackfoot studies drew on field trips in the first decade of the twentieth century and collaboration with interpreter-collector David C. Duvall (1877-1911), whose assistance facilitated interviews and object documentation. The American Museum of Natural History supported acquisitions of ceremonial paraphernalia and detailed descriptions of ritual sequences, songs, and narratives, characteristic of the era's salvage ethnography. The resulting monograph adheres to the Anthropological Papers' format: sectionalized accounts cross-referenced to museum collections and informant statements. While filtered through translation and museum priorities, the work preserves terminology, roles, and procedural order important to Blackfoot religious life, providing a baseline for later scholarship on Plains ceremonial systems.

Intellectually, the study reflects debates then animating American anthropology. Franz Boas's emphasis on historical particularism had redirected the field from evolutionist schemes to culture-specific histories; Wissler, trained at Columbia and based at a museum, articulated