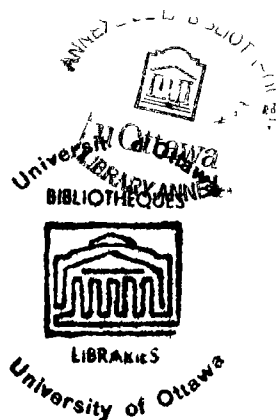


THE SUN DANCE
LITURGY OF THE BLACKFOOT INDIANS
by Sister Annette Potvin, s.g.m.

Thesis submitted to the Faculty of Arts
of the University of Ottawa through the
Department of Religious Sciences as
partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts.



Ottawa, Canada, 1966

*Agree granted
October 14th, 1966
Dr. Jeanchamp, Secretary*

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CURRICULUM STUDIORUM

Born at Victor, Colorado, Sister Annette Potvin was reared in Alberta where she studied, and graduated from the University of Alberta with a Bachelor of Education Degree. She also studied at the University of Montreal where she obtained her Diploma for Pastoral and Catechetical Theology. As a teacher, she has over twenty years of experience among the Indians of Alberta and Northern Saskatchewan.

DEDICATION

On the occasion of the Centennial of Confederation,
I wish to dedicate this thesis to the Indians of Canada,
the first Canadians, and to the missionaries of all
Churches who work among them.

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INTRODUCTION

In this time of liturgical and spiritual renewal, the origin of the Christian religion is the subject of numerous studies and comments. It may be opportune to go a step further and see what was the religion of certain peoples before the advent of Christianity.

On the eve of our country's centennial it may be advisable to participate in the numerous Confederation projects, by choosing a typically Canadian subject for the present study, the first Canadians, the true pioneers of the North-West, the Plains Indians. Among these one group will be considered, the Blackfeet.

We opt for the Blackfeet because though Christians, they still hold openly several ceremonies inherited from their ancestors of the buffalo era, particularly the Medicine Pipe Dance and the famous annual Sun Dance.

This renowned Sun Dance will be the main object of this thesis. An attempt will be made to give an account of this great ceremonial as it took place in the second half of the nineteenth century or early dawn of the twentieth century. The main purpose is to find out whether any of its characteristics were those of a true liturgy.

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The Sun Dance is the expression of interior feelings. Therefore, to get a better grasp of the former, a chapter will be entirely devoted to the Religion of the Blackfeet. As religion, in turn, is a force at work in human life and human history, a brief survey of the Blackfeet's historical and cultural background will be necessary to a better comprehension at once of his religion and of its manifestation as seen in the Sun Dance. The last chapter will be an attempt to draw out any liturgical aspects present in this ceremonial.

It will be clear that the content of this work does not apply to our present-day Indians. The Sun Dance ceremonial like everything else in the Indian's life has evolved considerably. To many modern Blackfeet, the accounts given here might appear as new and as strange as they do for the whites. However, this excursion in the past will, it is hoped, shed light on a culture that is too often left in complete darkness.

One of the difficulties in a research of this type, is the absence of authentic Blackfoot writings, as the Indians were a non-literary people. However, personal letters of early missionaries furnish a wealth of information. Furthermore, competent and reputed ethnologists and anthropologists have lived among the Blackfeet

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and have tried to transmit the latter's beliefs and rituals in several scientific books. Among the contemporary Blackfeet, some have a good knowledge of their ancestral religious heritage and are willing to help us with information.

Here, I would like to express my gratitude to Chief Black Horse, Mr. M. McDougal, of the Piegan Reserve, for his kind collaboration. A word of thanks also to the Reverend Father Georges Tissot, O.M.I., for directing this thesis.

CHAPTER I

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

One of the world's greatest outdoor shows, the annual Calgary Stampede, draws countless tourists to the plains of Alberta. In the spectacular parade opening this six-day event, nobody wants to miss the most attractive feature: the colorful figures of the Blackfoot Indians.

Dressed in their typical, brightly-beaded white deerskin suits, proudly wearing the eagle-feathered head-dress or war-bonnet, these enigmatic, copper-colored horsemen mounted on their equally adorned pintos, ride solemnly into the modern city. Kings of the Plains, they steal the show. The onlookers are fascinated and the children ask: "Are they hostile?"

Of course we know that these tall, upright and husky Indians,¹ the Stampede over, will store away their gay apparel and return to their respective reserves where they dress and live quite in the same manner as their white brothers, driving cars, and spending the evenings in front of their TV sets.

¹ G.B. Grinnell, Blackfoot Lodge Tales, London, David Nutt, 1893, p. 197.

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It is only recently, however, that the Blackfoot Indians have adopted the white man's way of life. Previous to the immigration of the white settlers in the latter part of the 19th century, the Blackfoot world was completely different from what it is now. Free from any outside influences the various tribes of the great central Plain had developed a culture of their own, the Plains culture. One of the outstanding members of this great culture, inhabiting this immense area, was indubitably the Blackfoot people. To the latter nation, we plan to restrict our considerations bearing primarily on religion and particularly on the Sun Dance. But religion, expressing man's innermost feelings, is so closely linked to his daily life, that before proceeding with the exposition of the Blackfoot's "theology", we deem it advisable to make a brief survey of the historical and cultural background of the Blackfeet.

The term Blackfeet is a translation of the native Siksika derived from siksinaam 'black' and ka, the root of oqkalsh 'foot'. Various explanations are given for the origin of this name. It may refer to their moccasins blackened by the ashes of prairie fires; but more plausibly their moccasins were simply painted black, according to the

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custom of certain tribes such as the Pawnee, Sihasapa and others.²

An offshoot of the widespread Algonkian race, the Blackfoot nation actually comprises three tribes in Alberta and another in Montana. The Blackfeet proper are situated at Gleichen, 60 miles east of Calgary; the Bloods, 'Kainai' own the largest track of land, 550 square miles stretching from Lethbridge to Cardston; the North Peigan reserve is located twenty miles west of the town of McCleod, the first headquarters of the North West Mounted Police established in 1874. The South Peigans, 'Pikuni' in Montana, were separated from the North Peigans when the latter chose to live under British rule³ at the time of the first treaty in 1855. Through this Treaty made with Isaac Stevens, on behalf of the American government at the mouth of the Judith River, three tribes of the Blackfeet gave up their claim to the territory south of the border. They continued to hold their hunting grounds in Canada until they signed Treaty # 7 with the representatives of Queen

2 J.R. Swanton, The Indian Tribes of North America, The Smithsonian Institution Bureau of American Ethnology, Bulletin 145, Washington, United States Government Printing Office, 1952, p. 395; F.W. Hodge, ed., Handbook of Indians of Canada, from The Handbook of Indians North of Mexico, published as Bulletin 30, Bureau of American Ethnology, U.S.A., Ottawa, King's Printer, 1913, p. 426.

3 G.B. Grinnell, op. cit., p. 224.

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Victoria at the Blackfoot Crossing in 1877.⁴ Their boundless freedom was thus lost forever as they were then confined to their reservations, where they would try to adapt to their new way of life. But prior to this Treaty, the Blackfoot nation was the sole owner of an immense territory stretching from the North Saskatchewan River to the southern headstreams of the Missouri River, and extending from the base of the Rocky Mountains to the east penetrating well into what is now Saskatchewan to approximately the 105° West longitude.⁵ (See Map A.)

In the course of time the Blackfoot nation had given refuge to the Sarcee, an Athabascan tribe from the north. With the latter and the Gros Ventre 'Atsina', their allies, they formed a loose confederacy which permitted them in time of war to present a united and strong resistance to their neighboring enemies, the Plains Crees and the Assiniboin to the east, the Kutenai beyond the mountains, and the Shoshone and Siouans to the south. (See Map B.)

4 S.H. Middleton, Kainai Chieftainship, Lethbridge, Alberta, Lethbridge Herald, 1954, p. 38.

5 F.W. Hodge, ed., op. cit., p. 426; J.R. Swanton, op. cit., p. 396; S.H. Middleton, op. cit., p. 38.

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Where did the Blackfeet come from? Presumably from the region of Lake Winnipeg.⁶ Around 1790 Mackenzie found them in the area of the upper and middle South Saskatchewan River. Coming from the Red River country they seemed to be in the process of a slow migration towards the northwest.⁷ However, A.L. Kroeber maintains that because the Blackfeet had so thoroughly assimilated the Plains culture, they necessarily must have lived there longer than is usually estimated. He insists that, along with the Arapho-Gros Ventre, they may be regarded in fact "as ancient occupants of the northern true plains".⁸

Another factor supporting this belief is the marked differences in the language spoken by the Blackfeet and that of their kinsmen of the Algonkian family still occupying the central and eastern areas of the country. Only a long separation can account for such diversity.⁹ It is difficult to pinpoint an exact date for the first

6 C.E. Schaeffer, The Story of the Blackfoot Indians, published and copyrighted by the Great Northern Railway Company, Saint Paul, Minnesota, 1958, p. 3.

7 F.W. Hodge, op. cit., p. 427.

8 A.L. Kroeber, Cultural and Natural Areas of Native North America, Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1963, p. 82.

9 Ibid., p. 81.

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occupation of the Plains by the Blackfoot tribes, but we do know that in the early nineteenth century they were already well adapted to their environment, a process which normally requires a considerable period of time.

When Father de Smet contacted them in 1845, they were the self-sufficient lords of their territory. He wrote:

At length, on the 25th of October, thirteen Blackfeet arrived at the Fort. They saluted me with a politeness truly à la sauvage, rough and cordial at the same time. The old Chief embraced me quite tenderly when he learned the object of my journey. He was profuse in attention to me, making me sit beside him whenever I went to visit them in their apartment, shaking hands affectionately with me. He cordially invited me to his country offering to be my guide and to introduce me to his people.¹⁰

Later, around the 1860's Bishop Taché reckoned that the Blackfeet were masters of southern Alberta then called the District of Siskatchewan. (See Map C.)¹¹

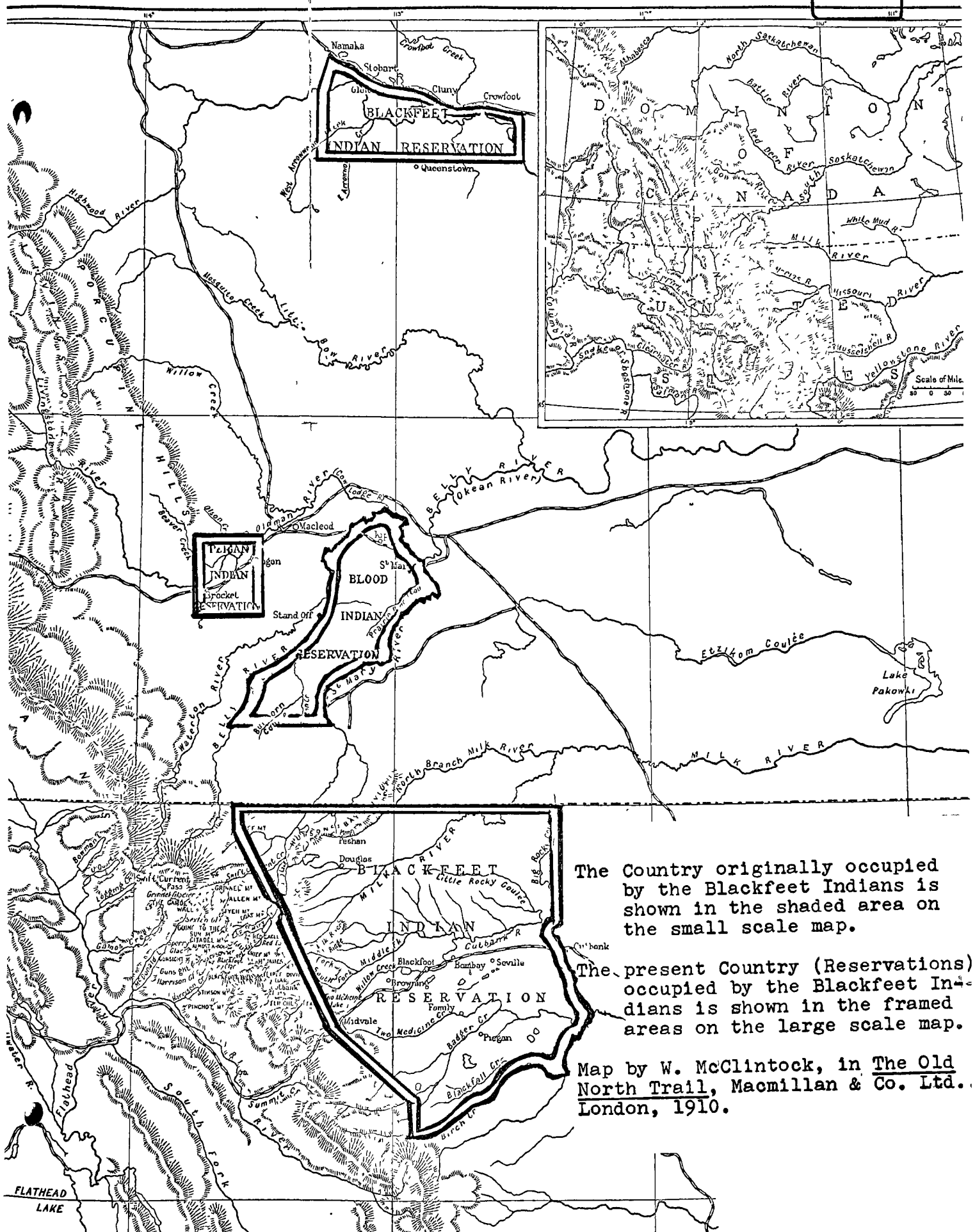
It is on these plains that we will go to observe the Blackfoot Indian and his culture as he lived it a century ago.

¹⁰ L.P. De Smet, S.J., Letter to Mgr. Hughes, in Oregon Missions and Travels over the Rocky Mountains in the years 1845-1846, New York, P. Munigan. 1847, p. 175.

¹¹ A. Taché, Esquisse sur le Nord Ouest de l'Amérique, in Missions des Missionnaires Oblats, Vol. 8, 1869, p. 264.

THE COUNTRY OF THE BLACKFEET INDIANS

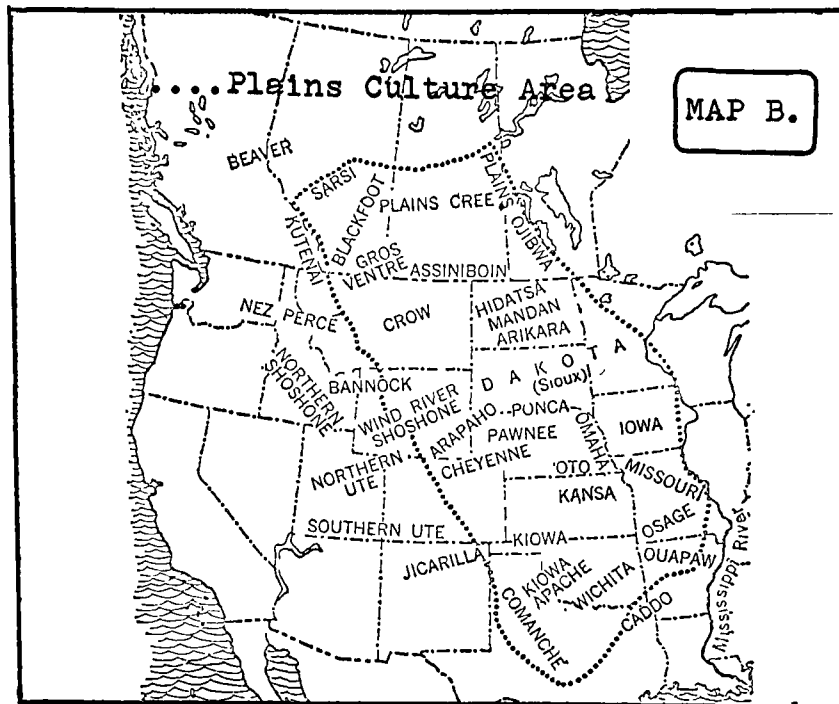
MAP A.



The Country originally occupied by the Blackfeet Indians is shown in the shaded area on the small scale map.

The present Country (Reservations) occupied by the Blackfeet Indians is shown in the framed areas on the large scale map.

Map by W. McClintock, in The Old North Trail, Macmillan & Co. Ltd., London, 1910.



SIX FAMILIES OF PLAINS INDIANS

ALGONKIAN FAMILY	Blackfoot (Piegan-Blood- Northern Blackfoot. Cheyenne Arapaho-Gros Ventre	Plains Cree Plains Ojibwa (Plains Chippewa)
ATHABASKAN FAMILY	Sarsi	Kiowa Apache
CADDOAN FAMILY	Pawnee-Arikara	Wichita
KIOWAN FAMILY	Kiowa	
SIOUAN FAMILY	Mandan Hidatsa Crow	Dakota-Assiniboin Iowa-Oto-Missouri Omaha-Ponca-Osage- Kansa
UTO-AZTECAN FAMILY	Wind River Shoshone- Comanche	Ute

Hyphenated names refer to political groups speaking identical or virtually identical languages.

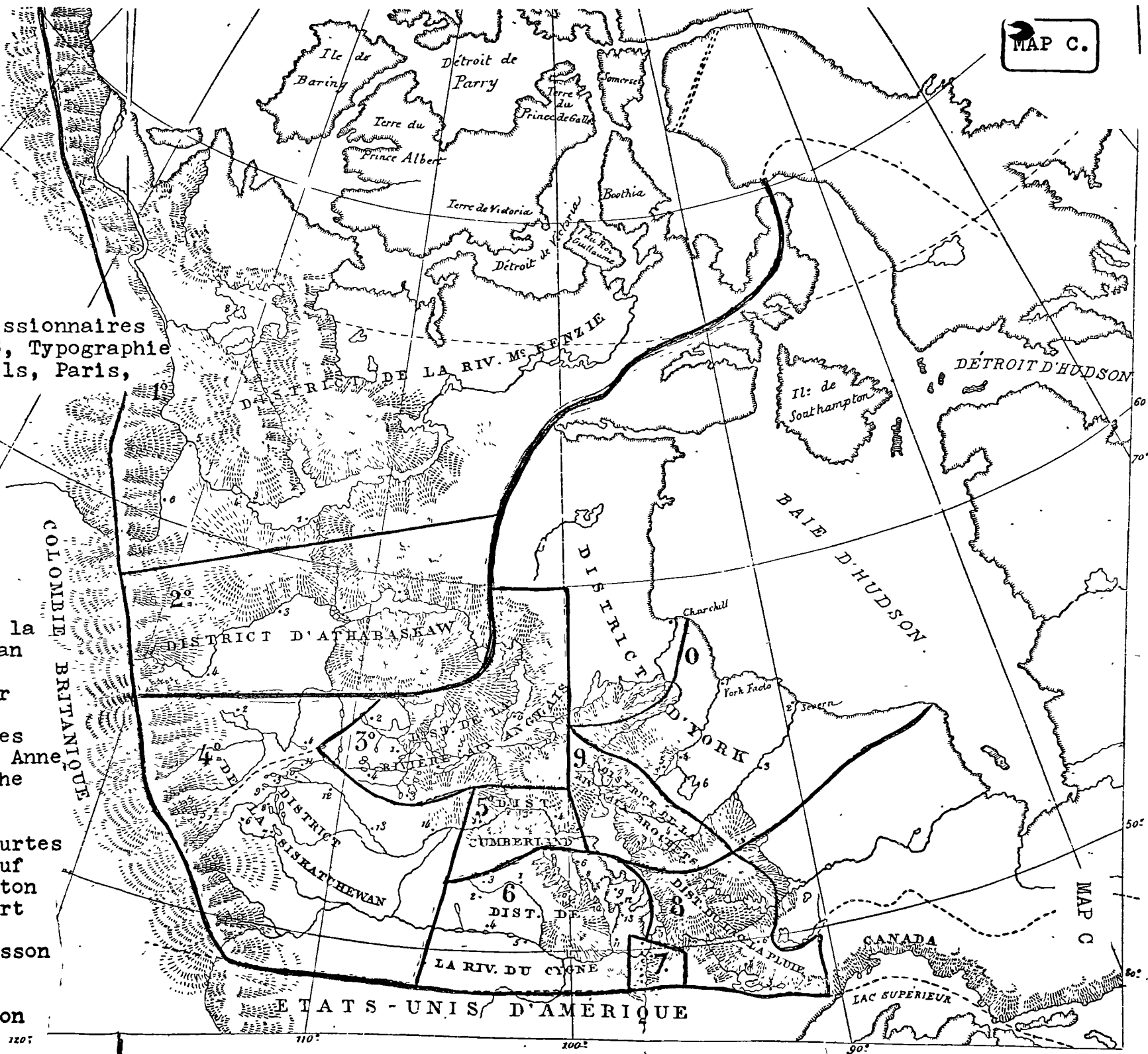
Arranged by R. H. Lowie in Indians of the Plains, The Natural History Press, Garden City, New York, 1963, p. 4.

From

Missions de Missionnaires
Oblats, Vol. 8, Typographie
Hennuyer et Fils, Paris,
1869.

District de la
Siskatchewan

1. Fort Jasper
2. Petit lac
des Esclaves
3. Lac Sainte Anne
4. Lac la Biche
5. Fort de la
Montagne
6. Lac aux Tourtes
7. Lac du Boeuf
8. Fort Edmonton
9. Saint Albert
10. Victoria
11. Lac du Poisson
12. Saint Paul
13. Fort Pitt
14. Fort Carlton



CHAPTER II

CULTURE

Now that we have situated the Blackfoot tribes on their own territory, we shall attempt to study their culture both material and social.

Thus we shall see how they depended on the buffalo for their food, clothing and lodging, and how the horse later influenced their whole way of life.

In their social structure, we shall discover their system of government, their laws and their societies. We shall also find that the family unit was the nucleus of their social organization. Such are the different aspects of the Blackfoot culture which we intend to treat in this chapter.

We feel that this chapter is necessary because a man's relation to his environment and his rapports with his fellowmen often influence his relations with the "other world". Therefore the study of his material and social culture will serve as stepping stones to the study of his religion.

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A. Material Culture

a. Importance of the buffalo

The Blackfeet, like the other tribes of the Plains, depended upon the buffalo for their food, garments and dwelling.¹ However, other animals, such as the moose, the elk, the antelope and the deer were available; the Plains people were typically large game hunters.² Buffalo meat, constituted their main fare. In time of abundance, a considerable quantity of meat was dried in the sun for later use, and converted into pemmican, the Indians' staff of life.

Another important food was the sarvis berries,³ a delicacy often served as a stew at certain gatherings,⁴ notably at the Sun Dance. Camas roots which grew profusely on the eastern slopes of the Rockies, were a source of sugar.

1 R.H. Lowie, Indians of the Plains, Garden City, N.Y., The Natural History Press, 1963, p. 6.

2 Ibid., p. 6. G.B. Grinnell, Blackfoot Lodge Tales, London, David Nutt, 1893, p. 205.

3 G.B. Grinnell, op. cit., p. 203.

4 W. McClintock, The Old North Trail, London, Macmillan and Co. Ltd., 1910, p. 102.

Although fish was abundant in the rivers and lakes, it was seldom eaten by the Blackfeet,⁵ even if it were easily caught with snares made of horse hairs.⁶ Turtles, frogs and lizards, considered as evil creatures were never eaten by the Blackfeet. Neither would they ever consider eating dog meat as did certain tribes. They felt this act an injustice towards man's best friend.⁷

Not only for food did the Blackfoot Indians depend on the buffalo, but also for clothing as well. Although some of their garments were made of tanned skins of elk, or deer, these being finer than buffalo skins, the latter was used extensively. Moccasins were cut out of buffalo cow hide for the summer and of buffalo robe for the winter.⁸ Men and women often, especially in the winter time, wrapped themselves in a buffalo robe. Their bedding, blankets, and pillows were also product of the buffalo. Bags and sacks were also cut out of buffalo hides. The buffalo horns were used to make serviceable ladles, and spoons. Basins and flat dishes were occasionally made of

5 G.B. Grinnell, op. cit., p. 207.

6 W. McClintock, op. cit., p. 238.

7 G.B. Grinnell, op. cit., p. 207.

8 Ibid., p. 196.

split buffalo horn. These were boiled, split and fitted together. They were then sewn with sinew. The finished product was a flared, saucer-shaped dish.⁹

Again, the Blackfeet turned to the buffalo for shelter. Though the Blackfeet were nomads except during the five winter months, each family owned a relatively comfortable dwelling. Their conical skin-covered tent, or tipi (tepee) often called lodge, could easily and quickly be put up or dismantled for the move. It was made of twelve or more tanned buffalo skins, carefully cut and sewn together. This covering was supported by a framework of a dozen or so straight poles depending on the size of the covering. The latter was held down with pegs a few inches from the ground.¹⁰ Distinctive of the Plains tipi, was the smoke vent¹¹ consisting of two flaps called "ears" on either side of the top hole where all the poles of the framework intersected. These flaps could be adjusted according to the direction of the wind or be closed completely if desired. Inside the tent, a lining of cowskin, reached from the ground to five or six feet in height.

9 G.B. Grinnell, *op. cit.*, pp. 202-203.

10 *Ibid.*, pp. 198, 199.

11 R.H. Lowie, *op. cit.*, pp. 7, 33; Oliver Lafarge, American Indian, New York, Crown Publishers, Inc., 1957, p. 151.

This lining separated from the exterior covering by the thickness of the poles, produced a two or three inch space permitting the cold air rushing in from the outside to circulate; the draft thus formed, helped the flaps to free the smoke of the interior fire.¹²

b. Importance of the horse

Although the Blackfeet depended almost entirely on the buffalo for their daily vital needs, the introduction of another animal, the horse, had a profound influence on their culture.

The Blackfoot's mode of life, as we have seen, was quite simple until the introduction of the horse. Previously, the dog was the only domestic animal. Although it was used for packing and traction, it could carry only a twenty-five to fifty pound load. Consequently, hunting, displacement, transportation and war were necessarily limited. It must be noted that bark or dugout canoes were unknown to the Blackfeet; travelling was always done by land.¹³ But with the introduction of the horse, the daily life of the Plains people was considerably altered; from pedestrian nomads, they became renowned horsemen.

12 G.B. Grinnell, op. cit., p. 199.

13 R.H. Lowie, op. cit., p. 7.

...the Plains culture has been one of the well-developed and characterized cultures of North America only since the taking over of the horse from Europeans...¹⁴

The theory that the Indians acquired their first horses from a stray herd, product of a few horses lost or abandoned by the expedition led by Coronado and De Soto in 1541 is "a pretty legend"¹⁵ and has been refuted by several noteworthy historians.¹⁶ It is true that before the coming of the Spaniards, horses were unknown on the American continent, but other theories than "strays" account for the spread of horses on the Plains. It is assumed that southern Indians impressed into the Spanish service in the region of Santa Fé were initiated in the care of horses and that some herders abducted animals in their care and passed them on to other tribes. This practice presumably started around 1630.¹⁷ Through gifts, barter and sometimes theft, horses gradually moved northward and are

14 A.L. Kroeber, Cultural and Natural Areas of Native North America, Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1963, p. 76.

15 M. Bishop, The Odyssey of Cabeza de Vaca, New York, 1933, quoted by J.E. Ewers, in Horse in Blackfoot Indian Culture, Smithsonian Institution Bureau of American Ethnology, Bulletin 159, Washington, United States Government Printing Office, 1955, p. 2.

16 Cf. J.C. Ewers, op. cit., p. 2.

17 R.H. Lowie, op. cit., pp. 42, 43.

thought to have reached the Blackfoot country after 1730.¹⁸ Although this process was rather slow, the Blackfeet quickly adapted to this new animal that was to have a great influence in the northern Plains. As early as 1790 the Blackfoot tribes were characterized as

...the most numerous¹⁹ and powerful nation we are acquainted with. War is more familiar to them than to other nations... In their inroads into the enemies country, they frequently bring off a number of horses, which is their principal inducement in going to war.²⁰

This quotation gives us to understand that before the coming of the horse, there "really had been no incentive to war".²¹ But now, the least offense provoked retaliation. Systematic forays into the enemy territory were organized with the main objective of capturing horses. Occasionally enemies were killed and sometimes parties set

18 R.H. Lowie, op. cit., p. 42.

19 Population of the Blackfeet: "Mackenzie estimated them about 1790 at 2,250 to 2,500 warriors, or perhaps 9000 souls. ... The Official Indian Report of 1858 gave them 7300 souls" (F.W. Hodge, ed., Handbook of Indians of Canada, from Handbook of American Indians North of Mexico, Bulletin 30, Bureau of American Ethnology, Ottawa, King's Printer, 1913, p. 428).

20 E. Umfreville, quoted by J.E. Ewers, in The Horse in Blackfoot Indian Culture, Washington, United States Government Printing Office, 1955, p. 19.

21 G.B. Grinnell, op. cit., p. 242.

out with the definite intention of getting both scalps and horses.²² But more often the two motives blended; a fleeing horse lifter might have to kill his pursuer, while a war raid could be an occasion of capturing horses.²³ Scalping, from the white man's point of view was cruel, but to the Indian it was simply a token of victory.

The custom of scalping the foe arose, not from any desire to inflict cruelty but as an evidence of prowess. It is still customary at the Sun dance for the warriors to narrate their exploits, and to give representations of the battles in which they were engaged. When the warriors returned from the warpath and narrated their successes, the people would not believe the man who had told of his successes unless he was able to give evidence of his valor.²⁴

However, scalping, along with the eagerness shown in capturing horses, may be at the root of the Blackfeet's reputation as "a restless, aggressive, predatory people... constantly at war with their neighbors."²⁵ This ambition to increase their herd of horses is quite understandable; the Indian realized the enormous improvement the horse could bring to his mode of life. With the horse, hunting

22 G.B. Grinnell, op. cit., p. 244.

23 R.H. Lowie, op. cit., p. 114.

24 J. MacLean, Canadian Savage Folk, Ed. William Briggs, Toronto, Wesley Buildings, 1896, p. 60.

25 F.W. Hodge, ed., op. cit., p. 427.

became easier, food more abundant because more accessible, movement of the camp rapid and less tiresome, long journeys became possible, visiting friends became more frequent and trade was increased. Furthermore the horse became a means of joining the numerous societies and purchasing of medicine bundles, because payment for these were in form of horses. Religious ceremonies also, became more elaborate and interesting because of the entry of the horse in the Blackfoot culture. Horses then, became his wealth. Consequently he prized them more than scalps. He did not "boast of his scalps but rather of the number of horses and guns he had captured."²⁶

With the insertion of the horse in his daily life, the Blackfoot experienced a considerable change in his relations, not only with neighboring enemy tribes, but also with his own people. Communications were greatly facilitated. Family, band, and tribe gatherings became more frequent and more popular, thus creating closer bonds of friendship and greater unity among the tribes of the Confederacy.

26 R.H. Lowie, op. cit., p. 117.

CULTURE

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B. Social Culture

Now that we have seen how the Blackfoot was affected in his everyday life by his environment, we shall consider the impact of his social culture on his interpersonal relationships.

Culture and social structure are so interwoven that it is hard to disentangle them.²⁷ The social organization of the Blackfeet certainly influenced the elaboration of customs which in turn formed the attitudes and rules affecting their conduct of life.

a. Government

The Blackfeet social structure was rather simple and democratic. The three main tribes, Blackfeet, Bloods, and Peigans considered themselves as a nation, insisted on their blood relationship but maintained their distinct political independence.²⁸ Along with the Sarcee, a small Athabascan tribe they had sheltered, they were united in a sort of loose confederacy with the understanding that

27 A.L. Kroeber, Culture Patterns and Processes, New York, Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1963, p. 76.

28 A. Taché, Esquisse sur le Nord Ouest de l'Amérique, in Missions des Missionnaires Oblats, Vol. 8, 1869, p. 266; G.B. Grinnell, op. cit., p. 208.

there should be no war against one another. In case of war, they should be allies and join forces to battle against their common enemies. Peace reigned among them. However, in the hey-day of the whiskey trade from 1860 to 1870, several quarrels flared up among them but affected only a limited number of people and were of short duration.²⁹ On the whole, they managed to maintain friendly relations.

Each tribe had its own head-chief, council and Sun Dance. But they occasionally invited some bands of the other tribe for the Sun Dance. Each tribe was subdivided into smaller social units called bands or gentes.³⁰ Each band also had its own chief or band-leader and several minor chiefs.³¹ These formed the band council.

"Among the Blackfeet all men were free and equal and the office was not hereditary."³² However, certain writers report that in some instances it was inherited. Thompson knew a Peigan chief whose office seemed to be "hereditary in his family, as his father had been civil Chief, and his eldest son was to take his place at his

29 G.B. Grinnell, op. cit., p. 208.

30 See Appendix 1.

31 G.B. Grinnell, op. cit., p. 208.

32 Ibid., p. 219.

death and occasionally acted for him."³³ There might have been several other families in which the office was hereditary, but the reason for this exception can be found only in the particular qualities of the individual. It is quite normal for a son to learn from his father the art of being a leader. In that case the son replaces his father because of his own personal capabilities.

Outstanding qualities were always absolute prerequisites to the chieftaincy; bravery and generosity were essential to one's advancement.³⁴

The position of a chief was neither hereditary nor elective, but wholly self-creative. The young man ambitious of this distinction sought to be conspicuous for energy and daring in war, intelligence in council, and liberality in giving feasts and providing tobacco for the guests of his lodge. The exhibition of these qualities in more than ordinary degree would win him the respect and confidence of one after another of his band, who were ready to follow his guidance and accept his council. When this point was reached he began to have influence and be regarded as a leader or chief. Practice in obtaining popularity was usually productive of skill in retaining it, and once a chief the distinction was pretty certain to attach for life. The greatness or authority of a chief depended wholly upon his popularity, upon the

³³ D. Thompson's narrative of his explorations in western America, 1784-1812, Ed. by J.B. Tyrell, Champlain Soc. Publ. No. 12, Toronto, 1916, pp. 346-347, quoted in Ewers, The Horse in the Blackfoot Culture, p. 248.

³⁴ G.B. Grinnell, op. cit., p. 219; J.C. Ewers, op. cit., p. 249.

proportion of the tribe whose confidence could be won and adhesion secured. The number of chiefs that might be in a band was dependent simply upon the number who could secure this following. This system did not necessarily array the members of a band into opposing factions, for several chiefs might enjoy the equal consideration of all.

But besides the general respect in which a chief was held he had his purely personal followers, consisting usually of his relatives and nearer friends.³⁵

The head chief was chosen by the chiefs of the bands from among their own numbers; a man normally rose to office through distinction gained as a prominent band chief.³⁶ A man could not hope to become chief of the tribe or of a band solely on his war record; he must be kind-hearted and willing to share his property with others.³⁷ Therefore a chief "was never a wealthy man, for what he acquired with one hand he gave with the other."³⁸ However, some old chiefs succeeded over the years in amassing considerable wealth particularly in the form of horse ownership.³⁹

³⁵ J.M. Bradley, Characteristics, Habits and Customs of the Blackfeet Indians, Montana Hist. Soc. Contrib., Vol., 9, 1923, pp. 280-281, quoted by J.C. Ewers, in The Horse in Blackfoot Indian Culture, p. 246.

³⁶ J.C. Ewers, op. cit., p. 249.

³⁷ G.B. Grinnell, op. cit., p. 219.

³⁸ Ibid., p. 219.

³⁹ J.C. Ewers, op. cit., p. 249.

The duties of the head chief were varied. It was he who decided when the camp should move; he also selected its new location. For the movement of the camp, he was expected to assist the poor, providing them with food and horses.⁴⁰ In summer, when the bands gathered prior to the Sun Dance, he declared through his announcers the hunting regulations in force.⁴¹

His most important responsibility consisted in enforcing the law and passing judgment for serious infractions. He had direct authority over the All-Comrades to whom he issued orders concerning execution and penalties for crimes which the Blackfeet considered serious enough to deserve punishment.⁴² In all matters he took no decision without consulting with the minor chiefs.⁴³

The unity which reigned among the chiefs of the Blackfoot tribes, fostered good relations among the people. The esprit de corps among the Blackfeet was promoted by their various societies. The military societies numbering over twelve,⁴⁴ each with its own leader who

40 J.C. Ewers, op. cit., pp. 247-248.

41 Ibid., pp. 163, 155.

42 G.B. Grinnell, op. cit., p. 220.

43 Ibid., p. 219.

44 Ibid., p. 220.

could sit on the council in the summer time, were known collectively as the All-Comrades. They served as a kind of police force, maintaining order in the camp, punishing offenders, organizing buffalo hunts, and guarding the tribe on the march.⁴⁵

A few societies admitted women and some, like the Mutokaiks (Buffalo), were for women exclusively. Men's societies were roughly graded so that each one was a stepping stone to the next, men passing from one society to the next at intervals of four years.⁴⁶ The first, Little Birds, included boys from 15 to 20 years of age,⁴⁷ while the Peigan admitted those who had been to war several times. The Braves included tried warriors only. All Crazy Dogs, and Raven Bearers were for old men. A remarkable rule regarding these societies was that each had to include four older men, who acted as messengers, orators,⁴⁸ and probably as monitors.

The Blackfeet also had dancing societies, some of which were purely social while others existed for religious functions. All these societies, whether military or

45 G.B. Grinnell, op. cit., p. 222.

46 See Appendix 2.

47 G.B. Grinnell, op. cit., p. 221.

48 Ibid., p. 222.

or dancing, had something in common; membership was obtained through the formal acquisition of the regalia, which comprised songs, dances, etc., that necessarily went with the membership.⁴⁹ Payment consisted ordinarily in horses.

Although these societies involved the quasi-entire life of the Blackfoot man, his vital interests were still centred on his family life which deserves proper consideration.

b. The Family

We have seen the role of the numerous societies in the Blackfoot Indian's life; we are now going to see how he lived within a more restricted society, his family.

The family was usually regarded as the nucleus of the society as a whole, and as such was considered as an essential institution. Among the Blackfeet, groups of families lived in close proximity, sharing the same location for defence purposes. They also participated in the

⁴⁹ A. Taché, op. cit., p. 266; G.B. Grinnell, op. cit., pp. 220-223; W. McClintock, op. cit., pp. 445-455; D. Jenness, The Indians of Canada, (third edition), Issued under the authority of the Minister of Northern Affairs and National Resources, National Museum of Canada, 1955, Bulletin 65, Anthropological Series No. 15, pp. 320-322; R.H. Lowie, Indians of the Plains, pp. 105-114.

same tribal spring hunt, and were convoked to the same annual religious ceremony. Because of inevitable daily relations, it was necessary that the family circle formed a well integrated unit in order to facilitate the good entente with the neighbors and the rest of the band and finally the tribe. Consequently, marriage was given due importance.

1. Marriage — A war record was required not only for the man who aspired to the chieftainship but also of the one who wanted to be the head of a family. Marriage was considered an important undertaking; a young man could not marry before he had proved his mettle by some successful war expedition. The captured horses and other booty provided him with the material required for the purchase of the wife of his choice.⁵⁰ The implication of purchase in the marriage ceremony was on the whole, disliked by the Blackfeet. They considered it rather as an exchange of gifts between the families of the two parties.⁵¹

As a rule, the initial proposal was made by the parents of the young man who often prompted them to do so.⁵²

50 G.B. Grinnell, op. cit., p. 211.

51 G.C. Ewers, op. cit., p. 249.

52 G.B. Grinnell, op. cit., p. 211; J.C. Ewers, op. cit., p. 250.

However, it was sometimes made by the girl's father, if he had a particular liking for a young man whom he wanted to have as a son-in-law. The question of alliance with another family was treated seriously, and the marriage procedures were well organized, especially in the case of a chief's daughter.

A certain band chief thinks that the son of a neighboring chief would be a good husband for his daughter. He calls in his most important relatives to discuss the matter with them. With their assent, he sends a message to the boy's father to inquire on the latter's views regarding his own project.

On receiving the proposal, the boy's father consults with his kin and if the match is acceptable, he sends an affirmative reply. The girl's parents then proceed to fit her out with the very best that they can provide. New clothes are made of antelope and deer skins. All is white and heavily beaded, and perhaps ornamented with some two hundred elk tushes. A new lodge, including poles, lining and back rests is made by the mother.

During the period between the proposal and the marriage, the young girl has a particular task to fulfill. Three times a day she must carry a dish of choicest foods, of her own cooking, to the lodge where the young man lives. She places the dish before him and waits in silence while

he eats. If any is left over, she presents it to his mother who may eat of it. The girl then picks up the dish and returns home under the scrutinizing gaze of the idle people who know that a marriage is in the making.

When the trousseau is ready, the girl, with the help of her mother, comes with all her belongings on the horses, and sets up her lodge in the middle of the great circle formed by all the lodges of the tribe. In front of her lodge are tied perhaps fifteen horses, her dowry. Also in front of the lodge, one can see on a tripod the gift destined to the young man, her father's own complete war equipment: war clothing and arms, lance, shield, bows and arrows in otter-skin case, war bonnet, shirt and war leggings ornamented with scalps.

While the girl's lodge is being set up, the young man sends to her father twice as many horses as the girl brought with her. After the girl's mother has left,⁵³ the young man goes over to the newly erected tepee, enters and

⁵³ It was taboo for a Blackfoot to talk to his mother-in-law. See R.H. Lowie, Indians of the Plains, p. 86. "A mutual taboo of avoidance existed between a man and his mother-in-law. He could not look at her or even speak to her. The same restriction was binding upon her. Each was warned by a third person if about to enter a lodge where the other was present. If either offended, he or she must make a small present to the other. There were socially accepted ways, however, to remove the taboo." (Dr. Claude Schaeffer, The Story of the Blackfoot Indians, Published by Great Northern Railway Company, Saint Paul, Minnesota, St. Paul Book & Stationery Co., 1958, p. 7.

takes his place at the back, the master's place. The same day, he might order his young wife to move their lodge into the circle because he does not like to be in such a conspicuous place. Often, on the same day he might invite several of his friends for a feast after which he might declare his intention to set out on a war expedition and he might start off the very same night. If he is successful and returns with horses and booty and perhaps a few scalps, he will go directly to his father-in-law's lodge and give him everything. He then comes home on foot.⁵⁴

2. Polygamy — In buffalo days, polygamy was general among the Blackfoot Indians;⁵⁵ it was considered a necessity for several reasons. Firstly, the female population exceeded the male because many of the latter were killed in wars or hunting accidents. Furthermore the number of women in the tribe was increased by those captured in enemy camps.⁵⁶ Secondly, the Blackfeet being against marriage outside of their confederacy, a large number of women could not find a husband.⁵⁷ Thirdly,

54 G.B. Grinnell, Blackfoot Lodge Tales, pp. 211-214.

55 A. Lacombe, Lettre au T.R.P. Général, janvier 1866, in Missions des Missionnaires Oblats, 1868, p. 247.

56 J.C. Ewers, op. cit., p. 250.

57 J. MacLean, op. cit., p. 62.

because of the fur trade, more hands were needed for the tanning of skins and the maintenance of the household in camp or on the move.⁵⁸ Fourthly, a man was expected to entertain according to his social status. The work involved necessitated more than one mate.⁵⁹

A man could have three, six or more than a dozen wives.⁶⁰ The number of wives was normally limited by the economic status of the husband. In many instances men of the rich or middle class were polygamous while poor men were usually monogamous.⁶¹ Economic conditions were such that most men could afford but one woman and very few ventured to support more than five.⁶² Wissler's report⁶³ on polygamy is a gross exaggeration. Twenty to thirty wives are not convincing numbers. Blackfoot chiefs were not African monarchs and the demographic conditions of the Plains could not permit such a household.⁶⁴

58 J.C. Ewers, op. cit., p. 250.

59 R.H. Lowie, op. cit., pp. 81, 82.

60 J.B. Grinnell, op. cit., p. 218.

61 J.C. Ewers, op. cit., p. 250.

62 Dr C.E. Schaeffer, op. cit., p. 7.

63 C. Wissler, The Social Life of the Blackfoot Indian, American Museum of National History, Anthropological Papers, Vol. 7, 1911, 11, p. 22.

64 R.H. Lowie, Reflections on the Plains Indians, University of California, Berkeley, in Anthropological Quarterly, April, 1955, Vol. 28, New Series, Vol. 3, No. 2, Washington, D.C., The Catholic University of America Press, p. 78.

The ceremonies of marriage as described previously applied only to the first wife who had a special claim to the place of honour... to the right of her husband. Hence her title, "sits-beside-him" wife. Her duties were to direct the other wives in their work and see to her husband's personal comfort.⁶⁵

Polygamy was not all roses for the women. Quarrels were inevitable among the group of wives.⁶⁶ However, the widely spread sororal practice favored harmony. All young sisters of a man's first wife could be considered as potential mates and could not be given to another party without his consent.⁶⁷

3. Children — If the Blackfeet had several wives, they had many children whom they accepted readily. The Indians had a generic love for children.⁶⁸ The Blackfeet were no exception; their love for children knew no limit. These little ones enjoyed plenty of freedom and were often spoiled especially by the grandparents. There were no

65 G.B. Grinnell, op. cit., pp. 217-218.

66 A. Lacombe, op. cit., p. 247.

67 G.B. Grinnell, op. cit., p. 217.

68 R.H. Lowie, op. cit., p. 83.

orphans in the Blackfoot tribes. When parents died, their children were adopted immediately and were well treated; "the best piece of meat" was for them.⁶⁹

Children were not whipped or beaten.⁷⁰ However, they occasionally tasted the stick. When children were making too much noise in a lodge where older people wanted to hear each other speak, an older man would go out to get a stick and would warn the children by repeating a "cautionary formula, 'I will give you gum!'"⁷¹ If the children did not heed his warnings, he would "reach over and rap one of them on the head with the stick."⁷² Another method in use for punishing youngsters was "a dash of cold water or a forced plunge."⁷³

The boys would spend the day playing about much as they pleased. However, at a certain age, some formal training was given by men who would gather a group of boys in camp. They would instruct them about the ways of war, instill in their young minds the value of courage and bravery, by pointing to the bold warriors and their great

69 J. MacLean, op. cit., p. 64.

70 G.G. Grinnell, op. cit., p. 188.

71 Ibid., p. 189.

72 Ibid., p. 189.

73 Dr. C. Schaeffer, op. cit., p. 7.

deeds. They were told that it was far better to

...die bravely in battle, while the body is strong and in its prime, while the sight is clear, the teeth sound, and the hair still black and long,⁷⁴

than to live long and see the hardships and infirmities of old age, and die of a slow death that brought only sorrow. At the Sun Dance, boys were encouraged to listen eagerly while the young braves "counted coups".

The girls were taught to be sober and serious. They were closely watched by their mother. A young girl was expected to help her mother with the household duties and learn the arts of dressing hides, embroidering with porcupine quills or glass beads, and preparing the food. Strange as it may seem, it was the father who would tell his daughter about the duties of a virtuous woman and the dangers that awaited her in life. At the Sun Dance, he would take her to the Sun lodge and point to the sacred woman as an inspiration, a model whom she should try to imitate. Like her, she should try to lead a good and pure life in the hope of becoming some day, the sacred woman of the tribal religious celebration.⁷⁵

74 G.B. Grinnell, op. cit., p. 190.

75 Ibid., pp. 190-191.

Contrary to a custom prevalent among many other tribes, there were no puberty rites for either sex among the Blackfoot.⁷⁶ Sometimes close friendships would develop between two boys of the same age; a Damon and Pythias relationship that would often last through life.⁷⁷

Children owned the horses that were given to them through gifts or inheritance. Parents respected this right of ownership and would not dispose of those horses or colts without the children's consent.⁷⁸ At the age of six or seven children were already good riders,⁷⁹ and by the time they reached ten, they were allowed to chase buffalo calves left behind when a large herd pursued by hunters was on the run.⁸⁰ In their teens they were expected to join the adults in the spring tribal hunt.

Among the Blackfeet, courtship was quite unknown. The girls were carefully guarded, and were not allowed to go out of the lodge after dark. Even during the day they were usually accompanied by their mother or a younger

76 R.H. Lowie, op. cit., p. 90.

77 D. Jenness, op. cit., p. 32; Dr. C. Schaeffer, op. cit., p. 8.

78 J.C. Ewers, op. cit., p. 29.

79 Ibid., p. 67.

80 Ibid., p. 159.

sister. Occasionally, however, a young man would court a girl when she went to fetch water at the river or gather wood for the camp fire.⁸¹ But this was done in secret.

Generally marriages were arranged by the parents and whether a girl loved the young man or not, she had to obey her parents. She might cry, but her father's will was law. He might beat or even kill her if she refused to do as she was told. Consequently, many a girl ran away into the bush and hanged herself.⁸²

Sometimes, two lovers who could see no prospect of marriage in the near future, might take two riding horses and elope by night and go and live in another camp. This was frowned upon by everybody and was not considered a marriage. The angry father felt he was defrauded of his payment. Later, if the boy was successful in a war raid, he might pacify the girl's father by offering him his captured horses. Peace was then made and the marriage acknowledged.⁸³ The couple, forming a new family, was then integrated into the band and began performing their role in the social structure of the nation.

81 R.H. Lowie, op. cit., pp. 85, 86.

82 G.B. Grinnell, op. cit., p. 216.

83 Ibid., p. 215.

Names

As with other Indian tribes, patronymics was unknown among the Blackfeet. No family name was handed down from father to son to indicate ancestry. Each received his own particular name which was susceptible to change on several occasions during one's life-time.

A child often received his name from the first object his mother happened to lay eyes on, after the child was born. A name might be inspired by a physical characteristic, or defect, or something peculiar in nature on the day of birth.⁸⁴ As a rule, names were conferred by older people; young people being barred from choosing names because of some superstitious custom. When a name was formally given by older people, it was accompanied by prayer for long life.

This formal bestowing of name was done by a prominent person, usually a man who was called in and paid by the father of the child. A sweat lodge was prepared for purification as was the custom before a religious ceremony. The giver of the names, the child's father and a few of his friends partook of the purifying steam bath. Then prayers for long life were offered for the child and

84 J. MacLean, op. cit., p. 54.

his name officially given.⁸⁵ Names were occasionally inspired in some dreams. They were names of medicine, animals or birds, that became patrons and guardians of the child. Their protection was sought in much the same way as Christians invoke their patron saint. These animals were expected to impart their own supernatural qualities to the child bearing their name.⁸⁶

Sometimes, names were a reflection of some religious action of the parents as in the case of Curly Bear's wife.

... during a scourge of smallpox, her father prayed to the Sun, offering his girl baby as a propitiatory sacrifice to ward off the "great sickness" with the prayer, "Take her, O Sun, and leave the rest of my family". But they all died save the baby. She alone was spared. From that day her name has been "Given away".⁸⁷

The name received in childhood seldom lasted throughout an adult's life. A young man at his first noteworthy achievement, would see his name changed to suit his conduct. Did he show valor in a war expedition, his name was again altered to express his deed.⁸⁸ Whenever he "counted a new coup," he "was entitled to a new name."⁸⁹

85 Dr. C.E. Schaeffer, op. cit., p. 7.

86 W. McClintock, op. cit., pp. 396, 399.

87 Ibid., p. 399.

88 A. Lacombe, op. cit., p. 250.

89 G.B. Grinnell, op. cit., p. 194.

Wrong doing also had its repercussion; an evil action might be translated into a name. In short, a man's name proclaimed his virtue, ability, deceit, meanness or defeat.

As a consequence, a Blackfoot was reluctant to pronounce his own name, either through humility or pride according to the purport involved. He also feared that if he should speak his name, "he would be unfortunate in all his undertakings."⁹⁰ Therefore to find out a man's name, one was obliged to get the information from a second party.⁹¹ A second party was easily found because the Blackfoot people were not secluded individualistics. Their social organizations, as we have seen, were such that he was seldom alone.

90 G.B. Grinnell, op. cit., p. 194.

91 M. MacLean, op. cit., p. 55.

CHAPTER III

RELIGION

So far, we have seen the historical background of the Blackfoot Indian. We have also considered how his life was influenced by his environment and a closer examination of his social culture has helped us to understand his relations with his people, within the family circle as well as in connection with the entire political organization of his tribe.

Both his relations with his fellowmen and with the world about him were expounded in order to help us understand his relations with the "world above him". This view we shall develop in the following pages.

"The Indian is intensely religious. No people pray more earnestly nor more frequently."¹ The Blackfoot Indians are certainly not an exception. They often turn towards their gods for their daily needs, for help and for protection. We say, "gods" because the Blackfeet had major and minor deities.

1 G.B. Grinnell, Blackfoot Lodge Tales, London, David Nutt, 1893, p. xii.

A. Major Deities

Among their major deities, we find the creator Na'pi. Blackfeet spoke about Na'pi, (Old man) who was to them, "a real man, a flesh and blood person"² like themselves. This anthropomorphism is not surprising. Is not the Old Testament full of anthropomorphic descriptions of God, depicting him as a man, eating, getting angry, punishing, extending his arms, and having many other attributes more befitting a human being than a God?

The Blackfoot mythology depicted Na'pi as being simultaneously powerful and weak, able to create, yet in need of help from his animal friends. He sympathized with people, yet he sometimes played mean tricks on them, just through spite. In short, he was represented as a "combination of strength, weakness, wisdom, folly, childishness, and malice."³ Old Man was not the "Great Spirit" but a secondary creator.⁴

The Blackfoot mythology was transmitted orally since the Indians had no writing before the coming of the

2 G.B. Grinnell, op. cit., p. 257.

3 Ibid., p. 257.

4 J. MacLean, Canadian Savage Folk, Toronto, William Briggs, 1896, p. 52.

Whites. An early missionary, Fr. E. Legal received the following account of the creation from the lips of a Black-foot Indian in the 1880's.⁵

In the beginning, Napi wandered over the surface of a limitless sea, in the company of the beaver, the muskrat, the otter, and the osprey (sea eagle). One day, Na'pi asked his animal brothers to dive in search of some soil. They all tried but it was the muskrat who succeeded in bringing up a "pawful" of soil. Then Na'pi told them to dive for a stone. Again, it was the muskrat who brought up the stone.

Old Man took the soil and blew upon it and it stretched out immensely. (Others say that he spread the soil, the way a sower scatters seeds.) The following day, he made the Rocky Mountains. The third day he created the woodlands, the rivers, the fish and the animals; and on the fourth day, the birds.

Then Na'pi undertook to make human beings. He made the woman first. For this purpose he cut one of his own thighs and with it, made a woman. He worked two days on this project but he was not at all pleased with the results. Her eyes and mouth were vertical instead of horizontal; she had no nose and her ears were too long. She had only eight teeth and only three fingers on each hand and foot. Na'pi stopped; he was very tired. But he determined to do better the next day and he went to sleep. During his sleep, he had a dream showing him how he should finish his work. So the next day he repaired his work on the woman, cutting down the ears, changing the position of the eyes and mouth, adding the missing teeth and fingers. Then he saw that all was well done.

Four days later the woman brought forth a son. Then Na'pi and she held a council. He said: "When women will give birth, their

⁵ The account is a free translation of the original quoted in Appendix 4.

children will run after four days." She said: "No! New born children will be wrapped up in swaddling clothes and old men will carry them." Old Man was not pleased but he consented. Then, throwing a buffalo chip on the water, he said: "If this buffalo chip floats on the water, man will not die definitely, but will rise after four days." The woman throwing the stone into the water said: "If this stone goes to the bottom, man will die definitely and when a man will die, we shall cry with sorrow." And Na'pi said: "Let it be so." A few days later, the woman's son died and so she said to Na'pi: "We shall take a new decision." But Old Man said: "No! we shall cry!"

Na'pi said: "Man shall eat the bark of the trees as well as the part containing the sap. Man will not swallow the food and therefore food will not be destroyed definitely. The buffalo, the kid and all the birds and animals that walk over the earth will rise four days after their death." But the woman said: "No. All the animals will die for good and man will eat the buffalo." Na'pi said: "Wild fruits will grow even in winter." The woman replied: "No, they will all be fallen off then." Na'pi said: "Buffalo hides will not be tanned (dressed);" and the woman retorted: "They will be tanned." Na'pi said: "One supply of wood will be needed for fire because wood will not be consumed." But the woman said: "No. Each day, we'll have to gather a new supply." — This is how, through the ill will of the woman, all is for the worse in this world.⁶

This Genesis of the Blackfoot is certainly free from biblical influences but it reflects the rich imagina-

6 E. Legal, Lettre, in Petites Annales des Oblats de Marie Immaculée, Vol. 1-2, 1891-92, pp. 251-255. See Appendix for French text, a translation of the original Blackfoot text by the same author. Text written under the dictation of a Blackfoot. See also G.B. Grinnell, op. cit., pp. 272-273 for story of Creation.

tion and high quality of the story teller. Of course, all the stories about Na'pi were not as simple as this one. Many tales, though full of humour, were obscene and therefore shed doubts on the real character of Na'pi and the place he held in the minds of the people. He had a striking resemblance to Hercules of the Greek and Roman legends. Like him, he was the personification of supernatural power, but a "power uncontrolled by reason and wanton in its exercise."⁷ However, he was the object of reverence and many prayed to him.⁸ Na'pi was immortal. He had left the Blackfoot country long ago, do disappear beyond the mountains or in the east, but he was expected to return some day. In the meantime, true to his promise, he took care of the Blackfoot tribes.⁹

Some people thought that Na'pi was derived from the Sun, but others believed that Na'pi and the Sun were one.¹⁰ At any rate, Na'pi won great renown through the marvels he accomplished on earth. Many places on the prairies were regarded as sacred because of the wonders worked there by him.¹¹

7 W. McClintock, The Old North Trail, London, Macmillan and Co. Ltd., 1910, p. 338.

8 G.B. Grinnell, op. cit., p. 258.

9 J. MacLean, op. cit., p. 44; G.B. Grinnell, op. cit., p. 257; W. McClintock, op. cit., pp. 337, 338.

10 G.B. Grinnell, op. cit., p. 258.

11 A. Lacombe, op. cit., p. 251; W. McClintock, op. cit., p. 322.

However, Na'pi was not the first deity. Natos, the Sun, took precedence over him. Natos was the father and founder of the Blackfoot nation.¹² He was seen as a man, the supreme chief of the universe; "the flat circular earth in fact was his home, the floor of his lodge, and the over-arching sky its covering."¹³

Natos' reputation was without blemish; he was wise, kind, benevolent, and "good to those who do right."¹⁴ He was regarded as the "center of all power and the upholder of all things."¹⁵ Indeed the Sun God was all powerful and he could see and hear everything.¹⁶ He was the one who supplied the hunting ground of the Blackfeet and thus kept them alive.¹⁷

Each spring, the Blackfoot saw that nature awakened under the warm glow of the Sun. The grass grew green and dense; the flowers bloomed and soon, fruits appeared and ripened. The animals stepped out of their dens, and the birds filled the woods with songs. The streams hastened

12 A. Lacombe, op. cit., p. 250.

13 G.B. Grinnell, op. cit., p. 258.

14 Ibid., p. 258.

15 W. McClintock, op. cit., p. 170.

16 Ibid., p. 501.

17 J. MacLean, op. cit., p. 312.

their pace and their waters teemed with new fish. The buffalo calves were born and people themselves felt a new vigour, like new blood running in their veins, making them eager for the spring hunt. These phenomena, the devout Blackfoot attributed to the Sun, Natos, and therefore invited all the people to worship the Sun-God, the source of all good things, of food, life and beauty.¹⁸

It is not surprising that, beholding this yearly resurgence of life, the Blackfeet were inspired to organize the annual celebration in honour of Natos. At this great gathering, the entire tribe could worship Natos together; they could offer him their prayers and sacrifices. The sacred pole was often laden with gifts: hides, clothing, and buffalo robes. Young men sometimes offered personal gifts such as a lock of hair, or a finger.¹⁹ Self mutilation and occasionally, self-torture, were also performed.

Naturally, all was not that clear in the natives' mind and all the Blackfeet did not share exactly the same concepts about the authenticity of Natos. Furthermore, mythology and legends were interwoven in this natural

18 W. McClintock, op. cit., p. 170.

19 G.B. Grinnell, op. cit., p. 258.

religion. Therefore, the Sun, Natos, had a wife, the moon, or "night light". Together, they had a number of children "all but one of whom were killed by pelicans;"²⁰ the lone survivor being Morning Star. These two celestial bodies, the moon and Morning Star, were sometimes invoked. A woman telling of her son's prayer in her behalf specifies:

He had always before prayed to the Sun, but that night, he stood before his lodge, and looking up to the sky, prayed:

'Great Spirit in the Moon and in the Stars!
Have mercy on my mother that she may live. Pity her, for she is a pure woman, and I vow that if she recovers from the sickness of this night she will give the festival sacred to the Sun.²¹

Evidently, the prime object of worship in this woman's mind was Natos, since the invocation to the moon and stars led as if normally to the Sun Dance,²² the tribe's most outstanding act of worship in honour of Natos.

20 G.B. Grinnell, op. cit., p. 258.

21 W. McClintock, op. cit., p. 333.

22 The Sun Dance will be treated in the next chapter.

B. Minor Deities

But besides the supreme Natos, and the secondary deity, Na'pi, together with the moon and stars, the Blackfeet's religious system comprised several minor deities. The prayer of the Blackfoot invariably began with: "Hear Sun, hear Old Man, Above People, listen, Under-water People listen."²³ There was also the Ground Man, a Below person. These were in reality, forces and qualities of nature which were personified and regarded as lesser gods.²⁴

Among the class of Above People, the thunder ranked first and was an object of spring worship; he was considered as the bringer of rain.²⁵ The god Thunder was supposed to be a tremendous bird with flashy green feathers. The fire of his eyes produced the lightning while the rolling noise was made by the flapping of his large wings.²⁶ Sometimes Thunder was thought of as "a

23 G.B. Grinnell, op. cit., p. 215.

24 Ibid., p. 259.

25 Ibid., p. 259.

26 Jean L'Heureux, Ethnological notes on the Astronomical Customs and Religious Ideas of the Chokittapia or Blackfoot Indians, Canada, in The Journal of the Anthropological Institute of Great Britain & Ireland, Vol. 15, 1886, p. 304.

fearful person."²⁷ In the midst of a storm when the rumbling thunder and the flashes of lightning scared the people, they would cry out: "Have pity Thunder Bird! Do not harm us!"²⁸ They might even have recourse to their Buffalo Stone: "O sacred and powerful Buffalo Stone, protect us, drive Thunder Bird away."²⁹

Several legends speak about Thunder Bird. One of these tells us that a Blackfoot was carried to the cavern of Thunder Maker in the mountains. There he heard beating drums and saw

...the Thunder chief, in the form of a huge bird, with his wife and many children around him. All the children had drums, painted with the green talons of the Thunder-bird and with Thunder-bird beaks, from which issued zig-zag streaks of yellow lightning.³⁰

Before letting the man go back to his people, Thunder told him that when he returned to his camp he should make a pipe like Thunder's and add it to his sacred bundle.³¹ He told him to smoke that pipe each spring

27 G.B. Grinnell, op. cit., p. 259.

28 J.W. Schultz, Friends of My Life as an Indian, Cambridge, Boston, New York, Houghton Mifflin Co., 1923, p. 8.

29 Ibid., p. 8.

30 W. McClintock, Story of Thunder-Bird in The Old North Trail, p. 225.

31 A medicine bundle was something sacred and was consequently treated with great respect. For no reason was it ever allowed to touch the ground; it was hung from a tripod and placed outside after sunrise and taken in the tipi before sunset. Every morning the medicine pipe

after hearing the first thunder roll.³² Other legends say that it was his own pipe that Thunder-Bird gave to the Blackfeet.³³ It is a fact that every spring after the first thunder clap is heard, the owners of medicine pipes invite their friends to the medicine pipe dance.³⁴ It is a long and intricate ceremonial comprising prayers, chants, dances and of course the smoking of the pipe.³⁵

This ceremony is held in the pipe owner's tipi. When all the guests are seated in a big circle, a bowl of sarvis berries is set before each one. Before eating, each guest takes a few berries which he rubs into the ground, praying: "Take pity on us, all Above People, and give us good." After everyone has finished eating the berries, the medicine man produces a huge black stone pipe bowl which he fills with new tobacco, and he fits this bowl to the medicine stem. He holds it up solemnly and says:

owner's wife had to make smudge for the bundle and shift the position of the bundle in fixed sunwise sequence.

32 W. McClintock, op. cit., p. 426.

33 G.B. Grinnell, op. cit., pp. 113-116.

34 In the spring of 1964 I witnessed that a similar ceremony took place on the Piegan Reserve at Brocket, Alberta.

35 Ibid., pp. 116, 277; W. McClintock, op. cit., pp. 263-270.

Listen, Sun! Listen, Thunder! Listen, Old Man! All Above Animals, all Above People, listen. Pity us! You will smoke. We fill the sacred pipe. Let us not starve. Give us rain during this summer. Make the berries large and sweet. Cover the bushes with them. Look down on us all and pity us. Look at the women and the little children; look at us all. Let us reach old age. Let our lives be complete. Let us destroy our enemies. Help the young men in battle. Man, woman, child, we all pray to you; pity us and give us good. Let us survive.³⁶

The prayer over, the pipe owner proceeds with the dance. Holding a rattle in each hand he dances in time with the drums, making short, quick steps moving to the doorway and back. This he repeats four times, holding his arms outstretched as one giving a benediction. At the conclusion of this solo dance, a warrior counts four "coups,"³⁷ each of which allows him to touch the pipe bowl with a lighted brand. After the fourth "coup", the pipe is lighted and passed around the circle,³⁸ each guest

³⁶ G.B. Grinnell, op. cit., pp. 277, 278.

³⁷ To "count coup" is from the French and means the telling about worthy deeds.

³⁸ "In passing the pipe when smoking, it goes from the host, who takes the first smoke, to the left, passing from hand to hand to the door. It may not be passed across the door to the man on the other side, but must come back,—no one smoking,—pass the host, and go round to the man across the door from the last smoker. This man smokes and passes it to the one on his left, and so it goes on until it reaches the host again. A person entering a lodge where people are smoking must not pass in front of them, that is, between the smokers and the fire." (G.B. Grinnell, op. cit., p. 188.)

saying a short prayer before putting the stem to his lips. When the smoking is over the ashes from the medicine pipe are placed in a hole in the ground and covered with care.³⁹ This ends the thunder ceremonial, commonly called Medicine Pipe Dance. However, Thunder-Bird continues haunting the minds of the Blackfoot. His picture is painted on their tipi, on their war-shirts and shields, "as a pictorial prayer to this great power for the protection"⁴⁰ of their families, their loved ones, and also for help in war expeditions.

Minor forces also included the Under Water People of whom the Wind Maker was well known. This person was thought to have his abode at the head of the Upper St. Mary's Lake. On certain days, if he decided to produce the wind, he merely had to make the waves roll and the waves in turn would make the wind blow.⁴¹

The Below Person or Ground Man was supposed to live under the ground. It is possible that the Ground Man, simply typifies the power of the earth.⁴² The Blackfoot always showed great reverence for the earth which they

39 G.B. Grinnell, op. cit., p. 278.

40 W. McClintock, The Thunderbird Motive in Blackfoot Art, in Masterkey, Vol. 15, No. 4, July, 1941, p. 130.

41 G.B. Grinnell, op. cit., p. 259.

42 Ibid., p. 259.

called "Our Mother."⁴³ One of their sacred songs contained a verse praising the earth:

The Earth loves us
The Earth is glad to hear us
The Earth provides us with food.⁴⁴

The earth also had an important place in all Blackfoot rites. During the ceremonial for the transfer of the Medicine pipe, the owner began by smoking a whiff towards the sky and another towards the ground.⁴⁵ In other words, he offered a whiff of smoke to the Sun and the other to the Earth.⁴⁶ At the Sun Dance, it was the earth that received the sacrificial gifts, since the sacred food and severed finger or shreds of flesh were deposited in the ground at the foot of the sacred pole. This reverence for the earth is quite normal. If the Sun was the giver of life, the Supreme Father, the Earth, producing the life-giving food, may well be seen as the Mother.⁴⁷

The Blackfoot like all the other Indians, was very close to nature; he depended entirely on it. Therefore,

43 J. MacLean, op. cit., p. 442.

44 W. McClintock, op. cit., p. 70.

45 Ibid., p. 266.

46 J.W. Schultz, op. cit., p. 170.

47 G.B. Grinnell, The Story of the Indian, London, Chapman and Hall, Ltd., 1896, p. 215.

every aspect of it was dear to him. The night sky was a special attraction. He was drawn by the beauty and mystery of this far away world and his imagination, like that of the Greeks, long ago, was set in motion. In his mind, the celestial bodies became alive; they were people whose origin and identity he could explain in his fantastic and enthralling myths. The Morning Star, was the Early Riser, son of the Sun and Moon. The Pleiades were the Lost Children; the North Crown was the lodge of the Spider Man, and Hercules, his five fingers.⁴⁸ The Milky Way was called the Wolf Road, a short trail leading to the Sun's lodge,⁴⁹ "a path worn across the heavens by the travelling spirits of many generations of Blackfoot dead."⁵⁰ Reverence was then due to this awe-inspiring world which Soatsaki, the Blackfoot maiden, had visited after her betrothal with Morning Star. This story has so many parallels with the Virgin's incarnation that it has been named the Christ Story of the Blackfeet.⁵¹

48 W. McClintock, op. cit., p. 500.

49 G.B. Grinnell, op. cit., p. 216.

50 W. McClintock, op. cit., p. 324.

51 Ibid., pp. 491-498. See Appendix 5.

C. Guardians

Apart from the major and minor gods, the Blackfeet invoked another category of beings which were considered not as gods, but as special helpers, protectors or guardians. These agencies enjoyed a certain power derived from the Sun and Old Man.⁵² These guardians occupied a "position corresponding very closely to the patron saints and angels"⁵³ of the Christians and obtained for man help "in danger and protection from sickness and misfortune."⁵⁴

This guardian was secured through a dream. In his desire to obtain a guardian spirit, a young Blackfoot would leave the camp, and go alone in some secluded place, in a coulee or upon the plain where he would fast and pray until he was gratified with the longed for dream or vision. It might take three or four days before a message was communicated to him from Natos, either through some supernatural being or more often through some animal,⁵⁵ bird, rock, butte or mountain. The material form might

52 G.B. Grinnell, Blackfoot Lodge Tales, p. 260.

53 Idem, The Story of the Indian, p. 216.

54 W. McClintock, op. cit., p. 224.

55 G.B. Grinnell, op. cit., p. 217; W. McClintock, op. cit., p. 352.

represent the physical or mental powers which the guardian could impart to his protégé. Whatever it was, this guardian became the visionary's secret counsellor, helping him in all his trials the rest of his life. Consequently, the man's prayers were henceforth addressed to his "medicine".

After the wonderful vision, the dreamer normally killed the animal or bird representing his helper, skinned it and kept it as an object having power to protect and help him. The vision might have told him to preserve several other good luck charms which were usually stuffed into a bag and kept as a sacred bundle.⁵⁶ There were different types of sacred or medicine bundles.

A sacred or medicine bundle might be anything from a few feathers wrapped in a skin or cloth to a multitude of miscellaneous objects—skins of animals and birds, roots, rocks, stone pipes, etc., kept inside a large rawhide bag in which every article has a definite significance and called for a special song whenever its owner exposed it to light. Owners and their wives incurred many obligations and taboos, but they enjoyed considerable prestige in the tribe and believed that the possession of a sacred bundle brought them prosperity and good fortune. Hence there was much rivalry for their ownership, and the man who expended most of his property in purchasing one could always recuperate his loss by selling it again.⁵⁷

56 J. MacLean, op. cit., p. 442.

57 D. Jenness, The Indians of Canada, Ottawa, National Museum of Canada, 1955, pp. 322-323.

D. Sacred Animals

Several animals, whether objects of dreams or not, were regarded as sacred because of their peculiar qualities and power. The most outstanding were the buffalo, the horse, the bear, the raven, the wolf, the beaver, the kit-fox, the geese, and the eagle.⁵⁸

Among the animals sacred to the Blackfeet, the buffalo ranked first. Was he not their source of food, clothing and shelter? The buffalo was normally considered one of the most powerful medicine animals and many a man had it for his personal or secret helper. Its importance was signified by the buffalo skull displayed at the sweat baths preceding the Sun Dance. The buffalo was in fact a "sacred" animal, Nato'ye (of the Sun),⁵⁹ or Natosim (Sun's own)—belonging to the Sun.⁶⁰ The sacred food for the Sun Dance was nothing else but buffalo tongues. Certain buffalo were definitely "Natosim". Whenever a white buffalo was killed, its hide was offered to the Sun.⁶¹ The fortunate hunter who had killed it, would ascend the summit

58 G.B. Grinnell, Blackfoot Lodge Tales, p. 260.

59 Ibid., p. 258.

60 J.W. Schultz, op. cit., p. 11.

61 G.B. Grinnell, op. cit., p. 258.

of some high hill, and there, would spread out the hide, fur up, and pin it to the ground with pegs or weigh it down with stones to prevent it from being blown away by the wind. After a long prayer for good health and long life, he would descend to his everyday occupations. No doubt, his thoughts, now and then, roamed back to the robe offering, confident that Natos was looking with pleasure on his gift, just as a woman's mind dwells on the vigil light she has offered up in the morning to burn as a token of her love for God.

In connection with the buffalo "a fossil shell of some kind,"⁶² or "oddly shaped nodules of flint,"⁶³ or perhaps a colored stone having the shape of a buffalo⁶⁴ was considered as sacred and could be used to call the buffalo when they were scarce.

It was usually wrapped up and treated with care and reverence. The legend giving the origin of the buffalo rock, relates that such a rock spoke to a young woman on her way to fetch some water. It said:

62 G.B. Grinnell, op. cit., p. 125.

63 Ibid., p. 126.

64 J.W. Schultz, op. cit., p. 172.

Take me to your lodge, and when it is dark, call in the people and teach them the song you have just heard. Pray, too, that you may not starve, and that the buffalo may come back. Do this and when day comes, your hearts will be glad.⁶⁵

They did as they had been told and soon great herds of buffalo appeared and they were saved from starvation. From that time, the Blackfeet have attached great importance to the buffalo rock and enjoyed telling about its origin.⁶⁶

Although in a category all their own, horses too, may be classified as quasi sacred animals because of their unique role in the development of Blackfoot social and religious culture.

Above all, the new world of the horse brought time and temptation to dream. The plains are afloat in mysterious space, and the winds come straight from heaven. Anyone alone in the plains turns into a mystic. The plains had always been a place for dreams, but with horses they were more so. Something happens to a man when he gets on a horse, in a country where he can ride at a run forever; it is quite easy to ascend to an impression of living in a myth. He either feels like a god or feels closer to God. There seems never to have been a race of plains horsemen that was not either fanatically proud or fanatically religious. The Plains Indians were both.⁶⁷

65 G.B. Grinnell, op. cit., p. 126: legend of Buffalo rock.

66 J.W. Schultz, op. cit., pp. 170-202.

67 A.M. Josephy, ed., The American Heritage Book of Indians, American Heritage Publishing Co., Inc., 1961, p. 337.

The Blackfoot perhaps more than others. Indeed he was a dreamer, and he dreamed of the remote past, of days when life was different, days when the gods gave people these wonderful animals that replaced the dogs. According to Blackfoot mythology, horses were gifts from Thunder, from the Water Spirit and again from Morning Star.⁶⁸ Horses were from the same source as the most sacred possessions of the tribe.

This animal was a godsend because of the incomparable benefit it brought to the people in alleviating their daily tasks. It undoubtedly had considerable bearing on the elaboration of the Sun Dance ceremonial. The yearly assembling of all the bands in one place, the complex ritual connected with the building of the sacred lodge, the reciting of "coups", and the payment in horses for this privilege, can certainly vouch for the importance of the horse.

Horses, too, were attributed certain supernatural powers. Horses that performed unusual feats or showed exceptional endurance, or escaped from battle without injury, or recovered from mortal wounds were considered as

⁶⁸ J.C. Ewers, The Horse in Blackfoot Indian Culture, Washington, U.S.A. Govt. Office, 1955, pp. 290-297.

being endowed with greater "secret power" than the normal horse.⁶⁹

The striking contribution of the horse to the Blackfoot life was the horse medicine cult. The knowledge of this cult has been so carefully guarded by its restricted members that no other ceremonial except perhaps that of the secret societies, the Horn Society among the Bloods, and the Tobacco Planters of the North Blackfoot, has been surrounded with more secrecy and mystery. The members of this cult practised a ritual designed to aid in the healing of horses or humans, but it dealt mainly with horses, their capture, handicapping enemy war horses and generally with any activity connected with these animals. They became known as horse specialists. Their society's ritual closely resembles the ritual used in the medicine pipe dance.⁷⁰

The bear was another outstanding sacred animal of the Blackfeet. This husky prowler was an object of reverence among all the North American tribes, possibly because of its strength, and its keen senses which made it a very difficult target. The bear was sometimes thought to be

69 J.C. Ewers, op. cit., p. 290.

70 Ibid., pp. 316-317. See also ibid., pp. 263-270 for complete details on the Horse Medicine Cult.

part human, having ribs and feet similar to those of man.⁷¹ The Blackfoot believed that the bear received all his powers from the Sun, and that it could impart them to man who would then become very hard to kill. Like the bear, he could breed fear into his enemies.⁷²

The raven, though less popular, was noted for its cunning and its power to give its farsightedness to man.⁷³ Other well known animals were the wolf and the coyote, supposed to be man's greatest friends. They warned him of danger. If a wolf barked in front of a lodge door, one of the family would die soon.⁷⁴ If a man was hungry, he simply sang a song to the wolf and he would find food.⁷⁵

Geese were foretellers of weather and seasons. Curiously enough they were led by a chief. Wisdom was theirs.⁷⁶

However important were the animals in the day to day life of the Blackfeet, they were not the only object of reverence. Several places and inanimate beings such as rocks, hills or streams were also sacred. The smallest of

71 G.B. Grinnell, op. cit., p. 260.

72 W. McClintock, op. cit., p. 353.

73 G.B. Grinnell, op. cit., pp. 260, 261.

74 W. McClintock, op. cit., p. 476.

75 G.B. Grinnell, op. cit., p. 261.

76 Ibid., p. 260.

the Sweet Grass Hills, the medicine rock of the Marias River,—a rock that was moving under the action of erosion—and other large boulders were regarded as specially powerful, and presents were given to them.⁷⁷

The presents or sacrifices which were usually accompanied by prayers might range from "a spoonful of food or a bit of calico to a scalp taken in war, a horse, or a piece of flesh cut from the body."⁷⁸

Man realized his weakness and inability to cope with many difficulties in his daily encounters. Being constantly at the mercy of the uncontrollable forces of nature, the only sensible thing to do was to win their benevolence. Since he believed in the great Sun Power and Old Man, the creator, "nothing of importance was undertaken without an appeal to divine assistance."⁷⁹ Since he also believed that the animals and inanimate beings received their power from the Sun,⁸⁰ he also invoked their help. Furthermore, his visions instructed him to do so. And as a result, "everyone had a sort of cult or sub-

77 G.B. Grinnell, op. cit., pp. 262, 263.

78 Idem, The Story of the Indian, p. 221.

79 Idem, Blackfoot Lodge Tales, p. 263.

80 W. McClintock, op. cit., p. 167.

religion of his own, inside the general religion."⁸¹ Not content with the annual solemn religious ceremonial of the Sun Dance, each Blackfoot had a ritual relating to his own guardian. Whenever he felt the need for prayer, he simply opened his own sacred bundle and held a religious ceremony in his lodge for his family, or even some friends.⁸²

E. Evil Spirits

a. Souls of the dead

Before their contacts with the whites, the Blackfeet had no idea of the devil.⁸³ It seems that evil powers were identified with the souls of the dead. After death, the persons who had been wicked during their life, were not allowed entry into the Sand Hills area. Instead they remained in the vicinity of the spot where they died. Their sad state, as ghosts excited their jealousy for the living whom they strove to harm. Ghosts of enemies killed in battle were particularly dangerous. Sickness, infirmities, paralysis, insanity and even death were imputed to

⁸¹ O. Lafarge, American Indian, New York, Crown Publishers, Inc., 1957, p. 166.

⁸² Ibid., p. 166.

⁸³ A. Lacombe, op. cit., p. 251.

the action of these malicious spirits.⁸⁴ The spirits of the dead were particularly aggressive towards those who had hurt them when they were living.⁸⁵ Occasionally, some Blackfeet believed that souls of wicked persons were reincarnated in owls.⁸⁶ These birds were thought to be evil because of their suspicious habit of avoiding broad daylight and travelling only by night. Whenever the Blackfoot heard an owl hooting near his tipi at night, he panicked. In order to ward off injury, a man would call out "We are your relatives." The owl-ghost would not harm anyone when some of his relatives were in the group.⁸⁷

The Blackfeet believed in the survival of the soul, but they had no notion of heaven and hell as conceived by the Christians;⁸⁸ "they had no hell, but only paradise in their Hades."⁸⁹ When someone died, people would say: "He is off for the Sand Hills."⁹⁰

The Sand Hills referred to a bleak and forlorn region either in the proximity of the South Saskatchewan

84 G.B. Grinnell, op. cit., p. 273.

85 J. MacLean, op. cit., p. 446.

86 G.B. Grinnell, op. cit., pp. 274, 275.

87 W. McClintock, op. cit., p. 477.

88 J. MacLean, op. cit., p. 448.

89 Jean L'Heureux, op. cit., p. 304.

90 Ibid., p. 304.

River,⁹¹ or the sand dunes of the Bow River, or again the plains northeast of the Sweet Grass Hills.⁹² This dreary region was surrounded by quicksands forbidding entry to the living.⁹³

The Blackfoot's conception of the after-life seemed to be rather hazy. It differed from the "Happy Hunting Ground" idea prominent among most of the other Indian tribes. The Sand Hills did not seem to be a very interesting place.

There, the dead who are themselves shadows, live in shadow lodges, hunt shadow buffalo, go to war against shadow enemies, and in every way lead an existence which is but a mimicry of this life.⁹⁴

Such a dreary destiny was not very inviting. No wonder that the Blackfoot believed that when people died, they took some time to adapt themselves to their new state of life so they remained close to the old familiar places for several months before leaving for the Sand Hills. After they had arrived, they were often lonesome and returned to their old haunts.⁹⁵ For that reason, people often removed their camps, and even tore down their

91 G.B. Grinnell, The Story of the Indians, p. 198.

92 Idem, Blackfoot Lodge Tales, p. 273.

93 W. McClintock, op. cit., p. 149.

94 G.B. Grinnell, op. cit., p. 275.

95 W. McClintock, op. cit., p. 144.

log house when one of the family died, because they feared their souls might come back and harm them.⁹⁶

However, the Blackfeet did not fear death; they accepted it with calm and resignation.⁹⁷ They believed that the most honourable death was death in battle.⁹⁸ For them, "death was a matter of magnificent emotion. Mourning brought wild displays of grief."⁹⁹

b. Mourning

At the death of some loved one, his relatives would leave the camp and retire to a hilltop at sunrise and sunset. There, they would pray, wail, scarify the calves of their legs, gash themselves with arrow points and sometimes cut off one or more joints of their fingers. This would continue until some relative would go and persuade them to desist and return to camp.¹⁰⁰

96 J. MacLean, op. cit., p. 446.

97 G.B. Grinnell, op. cit., p. 275.

98 W. McClintock, op. cit., p. 346.

99 A. M. Josephy, ed., op. cit., p. 339.

100 P. Vegreville, Avenir des [Indiens] du Nord-Ouest, Edmonton, Alberta, Archives of the Oblate Fathers, Provincial House, 1876, p. 172; J. MacLean, op. cit., p. 66; G.B. Grinnell, op. cit., p. 194; W. McClintock, op. cit., p. 150.

The purpose of these extreme expressions of grief was to excite the pity of the Great Spirit, display their indifference to pain and to prove their great attachment to the departed.¹⁰¹

Less drastic expressions of grief were common. Those mourning, refrained from social dances, discarded their beautiful clothes for old ones, gave up braiding their hair, wearing ornaments, and painting themselves. If the loss was that of an adolescent son, the parents would lead his saddle-horse through the camp and their lamentation filled the air. Occasionally too, people would cut the mane and tail of their horse as a sign of mourning. To do this they had to overcome a superstition against cutting off their horses' tails.¹⁰² Women, as a rule, cut their hair short.¹⁰³

c. Burial

The Blackfoot had three methods of burial. The corpse was placed on a platform either in trees or in a lodge, or it was laid upon the ground in a lodge.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰¹ W. McClintock, op. cit., p. 150; R. Lowie, op. cit., pp. 88, 89.

¹⁰² Ibid., pp. 150-152.

¹⁰³ A. Lacombe, op. cit., p. 253; P. Vegreville, op. cit., p. 173; J. MacLean, op. cit., p. 194.

¹⁰⁴ J. Maclean, op. cit., p. 66; G.B. Grinnell, op. cit., p. 193.

The duty of preparing the body of the dead for burial whether it be a man, woman, or child, was reserved to the nearest female relative.¹⁰⁵ The corpse was wrapped up in hides and laced with rawhide ropes. Then it was placed on a scaffold hoisted in some appropriate tree on some hill. Sometimes the platform was suspended in a lodge instead of on the branches of a tree.

Very often, especially if the deceased were a chief or a noted warrior, the corpse was dressed in his best clothes and laid on a bed in his own lodge. Beside him were placed his weapons, his war clothing, his saddle, his pipe and any other prized personal articles.¹⁰⁶ The lodge was ordinarily pitched in a thicket at a considerable distance from camp. In front of the lodge, a number of the chief's best horses, as many as twenty,¹⁰⁷ were killed.¹⁰⁸ If the people could not afford sacrificing a horse they would at least cut off some of the hair from the forelock, mane and tail of the best horse, tie these

105 G.B. Grinnell, op. cit., p. 193.

106 A. Lacombe, op. cit., p. 252; G.B. Grinnell, op. cit., p. 193; W. McClintock, op. cit., p. 149.

107 G.B. Grinnell, op. cit., p. 193.

108 A. Lacombe, op. cit., p. 252; G.B. Grinnell, op. cit., p. 193; W. McClintock, op. cit., p. 150.

tufts together and deposit them along with the other articles and trinkets beside the corpse.¹⁰⁹ If the dead were a woman, certain useful tools such as cooking utensils and tools for tanning robes were laid with her. These articles were usually well wrapped in a piece of hide.¹¹⁰

The Blackfoot's belief in the survival of the soul led them to think that the deceased would need all these articles in their new state of life and that perhaps the souls feasted on the good things deposited at the place of burial.¹¹¹

They believe that the spirits of the dead hold communion with each other, and require food and clothing like the living, only as they are spiritual, they need the spiritual part and not the material for their sustenance. Hence the living do not see the goods disappear, as the dead extract the spiritual part of the material things.¹¹²

The Blackfeet seem to have regarded the after-life more as a state of being than as a definite place. Although they considered the Sand Hills as a specific place, they often thought of the spirits as roaming about the

¹⁰⁹ J. MacLean, op. cit., p. 445; J.C. Ewers, op. cit., pp. 317-318.

¹¹⁰ G.B. Grinnell, op. cit., p. 192.

¹¹¹ J. MacLean, op. cit., p. 446.

¹¹² Ibid., p. 67.

country. This idea was so strong that they reported hearing spirits hooting like owls at night and coming to their lodge to beg a smoke. In answer they would fill a pipe and put it outside the lodge and the spirits would smoke the spirit of the tobacco, leaving the material tobacco untouched.¹¹³

However, these spirits were not the shadows of souls of the good Blackfeet. They were the souls of those who, because of their wicked life, were barred from the Sand Hills. Having no specific abode, they would go about prowling, seeking to injure the living or at least frightening them. Sometimes they were heard tapping on the lodge covering and also whistling down the smoke hole; only the fire below prevented them from entering.¹¹⁴

F. Moral Code

The Blackfoot had no idea of hell nor of the devil,¹¹⁵ but they had some notion of sin; they were conscious of their sinfulness. Therefore it was customary among them to offer sin offerings consisting in tobacco.

113 J. MacLean, op. cit., p. 216.

114 G.B. Grinnell, op. cit., p. 273.

115 A. Lacombe, op. cit., p. 251.

Other sacrifices, mainly clothing, pipes, cooking utensils, were left at the "stone stopping-places of the gods" as offerings to the Sun,¹¹⁶ as prayers for pardon.¹¹⁷

Before participating in any religious ceremony, they tried to purify themselves by entering the sweat lodge for the purpose of driving out all uncleanness from the body.¹¹⁸

He who would be holy must have a clean body and soul, and this can be secured by rejecting evil thoughts and deeds and cleansing his body.¹¹⁹

Sins were often connected with the negligence of prescriptions in the various rituals, also with any violation of their moral code.

The Blackfoot had an "unwritten code of laws for the government of the people, in peace and war, regulating crime, marriage, and applicable to social and domestic life."¹²⁰ Were considered as crime murder, theft, adultery, treachery, cowardice and selfishness.

Murder incurred capital punishment. Sometimes this sentence was commuted to a heavy payment by the murderer

116 J. MacLean, op. cit., p. 442.

117 Ibid., p. 67.

118 Ibid., p. 443.

119 Ibid., p. 67.

120 Ibid., p. 59.

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or his relatives to the murdered man's family. As a consequence the murderer was usually stripped of all his property.

Theft demanded simply the restoration of the stolen property.

Adultery committed by a woman was a serious offence. She might have to pay with her nose, or her ears, or both, or even with her life.

Treachery, or treason, obtained no pardon. If a man went over to the enemy, or helped him in any way, he deserved death at sight.

Selfishness or perhaps greediness, was despicable. If a man left camp to hunt buffalo on his own, and thereby scared the game away, the All-Comrades brought him back by force, whipped him, tore his clothes to shreds, destroyed his lodge and travois and deprived him of his store of meat.¹²¹

Not only was crime punished, but virtue was instilled in the young people. They were often exhorted by some Indian warrior possibly a chief:

121 G.B. Grinnell, op. cit., p. 220; O. Lafarge, A Pictorial History of American Indian, New York, Crown Publishers, Inc., 1957, p. 152.

Never steal, except it be from the enemy, whom it is just that we should injure in every possible way. When you become men, be brave and cunning in war, and defend your hunting grounds against all encroachments. Never suffer your squaws or little ones to want. Protect the squaws and strangers from insult. On no account betray your friends. Resent insults; revenge yourself on your enemies.¹²²

Stealing and revenge among the Blackfeet had been noticed by earlier writers.¹²³ It is clear from the above passage that these applied only when dealing with the enemy; among their own people, loyalty, and support was usual. Whenever some of their own people were slain in battle or in a surprise attack on a small group of lone travellers, the Blackfeet called for great mourning, and the firm determination to revenge.

This arose not from anger only, but they believed that the soul of the departed could find no rest, but roamed throughout the regions of the dead unsatisfied until an equal number of the enemy were slain.¹²⁴

Hence their law "a scalp for a scalp". This law, however, could be softened. Through negociation of a third party, a commutation could be obtained whereby the parents or relatives of the dead would accept horses as compensation

122 J. MacLean, op. cit., p. 312.

123 Mgr. Taché, op. cit., p. 268.

124 J. MacLean, op. cit., p. 60.

for the loss of a loved one.¹²⁵

The Blackfeet were entirely committed to the interests of their own community. After spending several years in their midst, W. McClintock was able to say that it was hard to reach "a higher average of character, contentment and loyalty to the community interests than was attained under the simple life and few wants of the average Blackfoot family, before the invasion of the white race."¹²⁶ A study of the Blackfeet shows clearly that generosity was one of their outstanding qualities. In the camp no one went hungry. A man might have been sick; he might not have had a horse nor a good rider in his household, yet he did not need to worry; his tent was well supplied after the chase. The lucky hunter always shared with the less fortunate.

Some poor people took their dogs or poor horses out where buffalo were butchered, when the animals were killed near the camp. There they could generally find successful hunters who would give them meat to carry home for their consumption.¹²⁷

Lending horses for the hunt was another form of sharing. This custom was general. However, the lender

125 J. MacLean, op. cit., p. 61.

126 W. McClintock, op. cit., p. 394.

127 J.C. Ewers, op. cit., p. 162.

expected some return from the borrower, but this sort of payment was regulated by justice and charity.

Payments depended upon a number of factors, including (1) whether meat was plentiful or scarce in the home of the horse owner at the time of the hunt, (2) whether the owner himself hunted and whether he was successful in this particular hunt, (3) the size and food needs of both the owner's and borrower's families, and (4) the generosity of owner and borrower. Some owners were themselves able hunters and generally would not accept meat or hides from the borrower. On the other hand, men who were too old to hunt or were physically handicapped were forced to rely upon the buffalo killed by other men while riding their horses. If game was scarce the loaner expected a share of the meat killed by riders of his horses. However, it usually was not necessary for the borrower to give him as much as half the kill.¹²⁸

With such a spirit of co-operation, esprit de corps, and large-hearted generosity, it is not surprising that the Blackfeet were not able to understand the "individuality of the white men, each laboring for himself, and apparently not caring for his brother-man."¹²⁹

We have seen before that polygamy was a common practice among the Blackfeet. Divorce was not forbidden. If a woman were lazy or committed adultery, she could be returned to her parents and her husband simply demanded the price he had paid for her. She was then free to

¹²⁸ J.C. Ewers, op. cit., pp. 161, 162.

¹²⁹ J. MacLean, op. cit., p. 305.

marry someone else, with her parents' consent.¹³⁰ Obviously, the husband had every right over his wife; he could divorce her if he so wished or he could keep her against her will. He could beat her, disfigure her and even kill her, but she was not a mere chattel; he could not sell her to another man.¹³¹ In some instances "a woman in the case of cruelty or neglect might abandon her husband."¹³²

If the woman's punishment for adultery was excessive,¹³³ man, contrary to the custom in civilized countries, did not go free. "From his adulterous wife's partner, the husband generally sought redress by dispossessing him of his horses and other property."¹³⁴

A faithful wife was well treated and esteemed. Her position was respectable. She was consulted in important matters; she was occasionally admitted to the

¹³⁰ G.B. Grinnell, op. cit., p. 218.

¹³¹ Ibid., p. 217.

¹³² Dr. C.E. Schaeffer, The Story of the Blackfoot Indians, St. Paul, Minnesota, St. Paul Book & Stationery Co., 1958, p. 7.

¹³³ The law of Moses was no milder.

¹³⁴ A.P. Maximilien, Travels in the Interior of North America, in Early Western Travels, Ed. by Reuben Gold Thwaites, Vol. 23, 1906, p. 100, quoted by J.C. Ewers, in The Horse in the Blackfoot Culture, p. 252.

councils where she could give her personal opinions.¹³⁵ Women could attain to high positions; several doctors of great reputation in the tribe were women. A faithful wife enjoyed the esteem of the entire community. She was considered "pure" and consequently could fulfil the highest religious function among the Blackfeet, that of the sacred woman¹³⁶ at the annual Sun Dance.

In former times immorality was rare among Blackfeet women. Chastity was held of supreme importance in their family life. It is remarkable how constantly the greatness of this sin was impressed upon women, both by the teaching of their religion and the severity of the punishment involved. Women's prayers uniformly began with the declaration of their purity. They believed that, without it, their prayers were in vain, and brought only a curse, if the declaration was false. Their most important ceremonial, the Sun-dance, began with the vow of a virtuous woman, made for the recovery of the sick. If the patient died, or if disaster came during the ceremonial,... the woman who made the vow was suspected of unchastity. Consequently an unchaste woman would have a superstitious dread of making a vow, or of assuming the part of a sacred woman in a ceremonial. Sickness and death were believed to be the penalties for false vows, visited either upon the woman herself, or upon her relatives.¹³⁷

135 G.B. Grinnell, The Story of the Indians, p.47.

136 "The Medicine woman receives a very high measure of respect and consideration. Blackfoot men have said to me, "We look on the Medicine Lodge woman as you white people do on the Roman Catholic sisters." Not only is she virtuous in deed, but she must be serious and clean-minded. Her conversation must be sober." (G.B. Grinnell, Blackfoot Lodge Tales, p. 216.)

137 W. McClintock, op. cit., p. 216.

Their insistance on chastity is impressive. Yet this virtue alone did not suffice. To be accepted for the sacred role, a woman must also possess "kindness of heart towards everyone."¹³⁸

G. The Medicine Man

The moral code as well as the beliefs of the Blackfeet were guarded and transmitted from one generation to the next by their medicine man.

The Blackfoot word "Ninamp'skak" was translated by "médecin" by the French trappers who noticed that this man often used his supernatural power for healing the sick.¹³⁹ "Médecin", passing into the English language became "medicine man".

The Medicine Man really was a doctor-priest who cared for both the souls and the bodies of his brothers. Besides being the protector and keeper of the native religion, he was the priest who prayed and fasted for the people, who led them in major ceremonies, who communicated with the spirits, and who "lived a separate mysterious life from the rest of the people."¹⁴⁰

¹³⁸ W. McClintock, op. cit., p. 88.

¹³⁹ G.B. Grinnell, The Story of the Indian, p.180; W. McClintock, op. cit., p. 168.

¹⁴⁰ J. MacLean, op. cit., p. 447.

He was also a doctor who practised the art of healing through different methods. He usually was a skilled herbalist,¹⁴¹ who discovered the medicinal properties of several plants some of which have "found their place in our pharmacopoeia."¹⁴² He tried to treat certain ailments.

Less important external ailments and hurts, such as ulcers, boils, sprains, and so on, are treated by applying various lotions or poultices compounded by boiling or macerating certain roots or herbs, known only to the person supplying them. Rheumatic pains are treated in several ways. Sometimes the sweat lodge is used, or hot rocks are applied over the place where the pain is most severe, or actual cautery is practised, by inserting prickly pear thorns in the flesh, and setting fire to them, when they burn to the very point.¹⁴³

In some cases, the Medicine Man would administer a purgative, an infusion of a yellow fungus growing on pine trees.¹⁴⁴

Certain Medicine Men, however, effected their cures by prayer only.¹⁴⁵ Since disease was thought to be caused by evil spirits, "prayers, exhortations, and certain mysterious methods must be observed to rid the patient

141 J. MacLean, op. cit., p. 179.

142 D. Jenness, op. cit., p. 53.

143 G.B. Grinnell, Blackfoot Lodge Tales, p. 282.

144 Ibid., p. 284.

145 Ibid., p. 286.

of their influence."¹⁴⁶ Sweet grass incense was used to purify the drum, the Medicine Man's hands, his entire body, and anything which he needed for the ceremony. As the Medicine Man had received all his knowledge and power in one of his visions, he naturally turned to the spirit of his dream for help:

Listen, my dream. This you told me should be done. This you said should be the way. You said it would cure the sick. Help me now. Do not lie to me, Sun person. Help me to cure this man.¹⁴⁷

Sometimes, the Medicine Man not only invoked his dream, but also made use of that of the patient. This dream or charm "often the stuffed skin of some bird or animal belonging to the wounded man, became alive and by its power"¹⁴⁸ effected a cure such as in the case of a gunshot wound.

In such circumstances as in all intervention by the Medicine Man, the prayers, the customary singing, the mysterious gestures and the incense smoke often seemed queer to the uninitiated. Furthermore there were persons who posed as Medicine Men, but who were mere tricksters.

146 G.B. Grinnell, op. cit., p. 284.

147 Ibid., p. 285.

148 Ibid., p. 286.

The latter might go through the same exterior ritual as the former but usually with more noise, more gesticulation and gusto. He usually ended up by applying his mouth to the painful area of the patient's body, and after quite some time, he would get up, spitting what he presumably had sucked out and might have caused the death of the sick person. It could be anything from blood, to pieces of bone, of iron or of an arrow. Of course anyone wise enough would know that these had previously been placed in his mouth.¹⁴⁹ Unfortunately those who did not were duped. This type of man was more of a magician than anything else. Yet, he is the one whose picture has left the

149 "Au son du tambour et avec les accents d'une chanson propre à tel genre de médecine, les sacs mystérieux sont ouverts et on expose à la vue des mortels les fameuses racines. Le nipiskewiyiniw les fait bouillir dans une telle quantité d'eau. Pendant cela, il s'approche du patient et conjure la maladie de sortir. Il chante, il crie et il fait toutes sortes de gesticulations. Il fait avaler une potion du breuvage préparé et commence à palper le malade avec anxiété. Enfin il s'écrie qu'il a trouvé le siège du mal. Il se débat comme un énergumène, encourage l'assemblée à chanter et à frapper le tambour plus fort. Il souffle à pleins poumons sur son patient; tout-à-coup il s'élance sur la partie malade, y applique sa bouche, et après avoir aspiré longtemps, se relève, en crachant avec du sang, tantôt un os aigu ou un morceau de fer, tantôt le bout d'une flèche. "Voilà, dit-il, ce qui devait faire mourir notre parent, mais il vivra à présent." Il ne faut pas oublier de dire que le conjurant a eu l'adresse et la précaution de mettre dans sa bouche l'objet qu'il doit tirer du corps du malade et c'est ainsi qu'il dupe ses admirateurs. Ces hommes après leur conversion, nous racontent les supercheries dont ils ont usé pour en imposer aux ignorants." (P. Vegreville, op. cit., pp. 144,145.

greatest impression and has brought disrepute on the sincere and authentic Ninamp'skak.

People had confidence in the latter, because as a priest of the Sun, his power with the gods was deemed greater and more effective than that of an ordinary man.¹⁵⁰ Consequently he was often invited to unroll the sacred bundle, take out the pipe and perform the ceremonial consisting of prayers, chants and rites. They were offered not only for the recovery of the sick but also for those who were preparing either for a long trip, or a war expedition. In general the Medicine Man petitioned Natos for health, prosperity and an abundant supply of food for the entire tribe.¹⁵¹ Although most doctors were men, several noteworthy Blackfoot doctors were women.¹⁵²

Some Medicine Men, experienced in the observation of nature, could also foretell the weather,¹⁵³ but were often thought of as controlling it; their power extending to such marvels as bringing rain or driving it away.¹⁵⁴

150 G.B. Grinnell, op. cit., p. 286.

151 Ibid., p. 277.

152 Ibid., p. 286.

153 W. McClintock, op. cit., p. 351.

154 Ibid., p. 168.

A man endowed with this power was usually invited to take part in the ceremonials of the Sun Dance in order to ensure plenty of sunshine. During one of these celebrations, a Medicine Man apparently succeeded in changing the course of a rain cloud.

He left the booth, and stepping forth into the circle danced alone. He was short, but sinewy, and as he danced circling around with agile step, he held an otter skin towards the north, south, east and west which with a final gesture, as if driving back the clouds, he waved it over his head. A sudden change in the wind averted its course and it divided...¹⁵⁵

Naturally, rain was averted and the naivety of some of the onlookers attributed the feat to the power of the Medicine Man and not to his experienced and keen sense of observation.¹⁵⁶

The Medicine Man expected to be paid for his services "before rendering them."¹⁵⁷ This fee might be in the form of horses, saddles, blankets, clothing, gun or some other valuable article. The visit to a patient lasted from twelve to twenty-four hours and could sometimes extend to forty-eight hours. If the sick person

¹⁵⁵ W. McClintock, op. cit., p. 320.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 351.

¹⁵⁷ G.B. Grinnell, op. cit., p. 283.

felt some relief, he might call this doctor again and in some instances, by the time he had recovered his health, he had given all he owned to the Medicine Man.¹⁵⁸

As a rule, most Medicine Men were sincere and believed in their profession, and in the efficacy of their practices. In general they were beneficial because of the confidence the patients had in their supernatural power.¹⁵⁹ However, their strict secretiveness as "custodians of the religious rites and mysteries"¹⁶⁰ awakened doubts and suspicions in the mind of early observers. But the Medicine Men cannot be blamed entirely; "their very livelihood depended upon a strict and jealous maintenance of the secrecy"¹⁶¹ and why should they be expected to give their full confidence to outsiders?

The many facets of the Blackfoot religious beliefs which we have reviewed so far, were influenced by the social and cultural milieu. The people of the Plains needed and felt the beneficial action of the Sun in their daily lives. They sensed that there must be a power beyond

158 G.B. Grinnell, op. cit., p. 284.

159 Ibid., p. 286.

160 W. McClintock, op. cit., p. 171.

161 Ibid., p. 171.

that hierophany. This hierophany, in time became a theophany and the Blackfeet apparently began to worship the sun. However, it was not the meteorological phenomenon that was worshipped, but the force behind it, God.

Nowhere in the history of religions do we find an adoration of any natural object in itself. A sacred thing, whatever its form and substance, is sacred because it reveals or shares in ultimate reality. Every religious object is always an "incarnation" of something: of the sacred... It incarnates it by the quality of its being (as for instance, the sky, the sun, the moon or the earth), or by its form (that is symbolically...) or by a hierophany (a certain place, a certain stone, etc., becomes sacred; a certain object is "sanctified" or "consecrated" by a ritual, or by contact with another sacred object or person, and so on).¹⁶²

With the evolution of culture, and the introduction of science among the Blackfeet, certain religious ideas were purified, and the atmospheric hierophanies which had early become the centre of religious experiences made later revelations possible.¹⁶³

¹⁶² Mircea Eliade, Patterns in Comparative Religions, London and New York, Sheed and Ward, 1958, p. 158.

¹⁶³ Ibid., p. 99.

CHAPTER IV

THE SUN DANCE

As we have seen in the previous chapter, religion held a very important place in the lives of the Blackfoot Indians. Their fundamental beliefs, prayers and rituals were not limited to the occasional prayers or Medicine Pipe dance; they culminated in an elaborate ceremonial, the Sun Dance.

It was a major event during which the Blackfoot tribes expressed their religious feelings towards the divinities, tightened their bonds of friendship among themselves, transferred sacred bundles, gave recognition to the braves and manifested their admiration for those who fulfilled their vows to Natos.

This assembly also provided a good occasion for the discussion of new policies by the leaders of the tribes as well as a splendid opportunity for social celebrations.

Because the Sun Dance was the Blackfoot's act of worship par excellence, it seems proper to consecrate an entire chapter to its development. Furthermore, the complexity of the ritual prompts us to give the account in the present tense, so as to facilitate the interpretation of the various rites and produce a sense of continuity.

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We shall try to follow the Sun Dance ceremonial from the taking of the vow by the sacred woman up to the closing prayer by the head chief. It must be noted that we do not intend to give the particulars concerning the transfer or purchasing of the sacred bundles because the rituals involved were for a restricted number of guests. Moreover, their description would lengthen this account beyond the limits of the present work.

In the fifth and last chapter, we shall attempt to draw out the true liturgical elements contained in the Sun Dance.

A. Origin

The Sun Dance was the most elaborate and solemn tribal celebration of the Blackfeet.¹ It was a religious, military and civil festivity held once a year in late July or early August when the sarvis berries and dogfoot berries were ripe. The ceremonies lasted from eight to ten days after which the camp circle was dismantled and the different bands separated for the fall hunt.²

1 In our own day, the Sun Dance is held each year, at Cardston, Alberta.

2 A. Lacombe, Lettre au T.R.P. Général, janvier 1866, in Missions des Missionnaires Oblats, Vol. 7, 1868, p. 253; G.B. Grinnell, Blackfoot Lodge Tales, p. 264; J.C. Ewers, The Horse in Blackfoot Indian Culture, Washington, U.S. Government Printing Office, 1955, p. 128.

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The expression "Sun Dance" was coined by the French and Métis in whose eyes the Indians offered sacrifices and dances to the Sun.³ But the Blackfoot themselves called their celebration "Okan" which means "Dream"⁴ and attributed its origin in fact to a dream.⁵

Long ago an elderly woman had a dearly beloved child who became sick. In her affliction, she earnestly prayed to Natos for help. One night, as the woman was asleep, Natos himself appeared to her. He told her that if she built him a lodge and offered him sacrifices, her child would recover.

When she awakened, she told her people about her wonderful dream. With their co-operation, a lodge was constructed, sacrifices were offered, and a festival was held. As a result the woman's child recovered. And ever since that day, the great celebration of the Sun Dance has been held every year.⁶

³ P. Vegreville, Avenir des [Indiens] du Nord-Ouest, Edmonton, Archives of the Oblate Fathers, Provincial House, 1876, p. 119.

⁴ Ibid., p. 139.

⁵ Belief in dreams is not new. Joseph in Egypt was called upon to give interpretations of dreams.

⁶ J. MacLean, Canadian Savage Folk, Toronto, William Briggs, 1896, p. 231.

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Another tradition traces the origin of the Sun Dance to Scarface, hero of a Blackfoot myth.⁷ According to this story, Scarface, son of Morning Star, lived for some time in the sky with the Sun god. Before letting him return to earth, the Sun gave him all the instructions concerning the Sun Dance:

When any man is sick or in danger, his wife may promise to build me a lodge, if he recovers. If the woman is pure and true, then I will be pleased and help the man. But if she is bad, if she lies, then I will be angry. You shall build the lodge like the world, round, with walls, but first you must build a sweat house of a hundred sticks. It shall be like the sky [a hemisphere], and half of it shall be painted red. That is me. The other half you will paint black. This is night.⁸

Scarface transmitted the particularities of the ritual to his people, the Blackfeet, who, henceforward, were faithful to fulfill the least of its details.

B. The Vow

Spring was greeted with the joy of expectancy. The Blackfoot tribes had survived the five-month winter season which the separate bands had spent sheltered in

⁷ For an account of the entire myth, see J.B. Grinnell, op. cit., pp. 93-103; W. McClintock, The Old North Trail, London, Macmillan And Co., Ltd., 1910, pp. 496-499. See Appendix 5.

⁸ G.B. Grinnell, op. cit., from "Scarface", p. 101.

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secluded thick timber valleys of the Belley, Bow, Milk or Marias Rivers. The lodges had been huddled closely together in cottonwood groves in the proximity of fuel, water, game, and grass. The winter had been long and arduous. Therefore everybody was looking forward to the day when the weather would permit them to meet again with their friends.⁹

During the long winter months, sickness always visited the camp. Women had to nurse their loved ones. In one of the lodges a young boy was very sick. The Medicine Man was called in and well paid for his services. His herb-potions, his poultices, his chants, his prayers and incense, his rattles and his drums produced no results. Therefore his mother turned to Natos for help. She prayed earnestly:

Listen, Sun. Pity me. You have seen my life. You know that I am pure. I have never committed adultery with any man. Now, therefore, I ask you to pity me. I will build you a lodge. Let my son survive. Bring him back to health, so that I may build this lodge for you.¹⁰

Afterwards the Medicine Man came and painted her face red, the color of the sun. Then, she with her family

9 J.C. Ewers, op. cit., pp. 124-126.

10 G.B. Grinnell, op. cit., p. 264.

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stood facing the east while the Medicine Man gazing confidently at the sun, spoke:

Great Spirit in the Sun! I know that this is a pure woman. If her boy recovers, I promise you that she will give a Sun Dance and will eat of the sacred food with you and with the Underground Spirits.¹¹

This mother's trust in Natos was not in vain; her son recovered. He is now able to accompany her to the band spring hunt and the collecting of wild turnips and camas roots. There she decides to tell the band chief of her vow to build a lodge to Natos. The chief is pleased because he and all the members of the band are convinced that she is indeed pure. Because of her vow and her role in the Sun Dance, she is now considered as the sacred woman.

C. Preparation for the Sun Dance

The chief must call all the other bands for the spring hunt which is a kind of prelude, a time of preparation for the great festival of "Okan" or Sun Dance. He therefore sends a messenger with pipe and tobacco to bring the invitation to the chief of the nearest band. The latter in turn despatches a messenger to another band chief who does likewise. The process continues until finally

¹¹ W. McClintock, op. cit., p. 175.

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all the bands have been advised. Each of the widely scattered bands starts out for the rendez-vous. One after another they arrive at the indicated location and take their assigned places in the large tribal camp circle.¹² Order is maintained by the All-Comrade society, under the able leadership of the tribal head-chief. When the tribe is complete, the well organized summer hunt begins.¹³

The aim of this hunt, besides procuring hides for lodge coverings and fresh meat for the people after the winter's dried meat diet, is to secure some three hundred¹⁴ buffalo tongues required for the Sun Dance ceremonial. Only bull tongues are acceptable for this purpose. They are collected by the hunters and handed over to the sacred woman.

Before the tongues are cut and dried, they are laid in a pile in the medicine woman's lodge. She then gives a feast to the old men, and one of them, noted for his honesty, and well liked by all, repeats a very long prayer, asking in substance that the coming Medicine Lodge may be acceptable to the Sun, and that he will look with favor on the people, and will give them good health, plenty of food, and success in war.

¹² See Appendix 3.

¹³ J.C. Ewers, op. cit., p. 127.

¹⁴ In olden days when buffalo were in abundance, as many as two thousand buffalo tongues were used at a single Sun-Dance; after the disappearance of the buffalo, a Blackfoot band had to be satisfied with two hundred tongues of domestic cattle. (J. MacLean, op. cit., p. 234.)

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A hundred songs are then sung, each one different from the others. The feast and singing of these songs lasts a day and a half.¹⁵

When the hunt is finished and the sacred food ready, the head-chief despatches two experienced warriors to select an appropriate site in the neighborhood for the Sun Dance. When the site has been chosen, the head-chief meets with the band chiefs to discuss the procedures of the next day's move. From then on the entire celebration is under the authority of the military and priestly hierarchy.¹⁶ The All-Comrades take over. They act as scouts. They also form a left, right, and rear guard for the people on the march; they are responsible for the tribe on the move as well as in camp. Their duty, besides guarding the camp, is to guide each family in the disposition of the lodges so as to form the camp circle, to prevent any hunting or anything that might disturb the solemnity and the rites of the feast,¹⁷ and to see that no one leaves the camp.¹⁸

To reach the Sun Dance site, the tribe take four days camping at a different place each night. These moves

15 G.B. Grinnell, op. cit., p. 264.

16 A. Lacombe, op. cit., p. 253.

17 Vegreville, op. cit., p. 119.

18 A. Lacombe, op. cit., p. 253.

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take the form of a parade. All the people wear their finest apparel, decorate their horses, and men carry their shields and weapons exposed to view.

The sacred woman rides a travois horse. Her sacred paraphernalia must be transported with care. She must be cautious to avoid hanging anything in front of her, so the Natos' bundle is carried behind her on her saddle. The buffalo tongues are packed in a parflèche¹⁹ and placed on the travois. The fringed-raw-hide bag containing the ceremonial paints, badger skins, and pipe is placed on top of the parflèche. Tied alongside the travois shafts are the three sticks that will be used later to support her ceremonial bonnet.²⁰

As the families reach the site of the Sun Dance, they erect their lodges in their assigned places so as to form an immense circle.²¹ The large, elaborately decorated tipis of the leading chiefs are pitched in the prominent places of honour in the inner circle, while the small and shabby tipis are relegated to the least conspicuous spaces on the outskirts. The Mad Dog society's three lodges are

19 "Parflèche" is a hide bag used for storing meat.

20 J.C. Ewers, op. cit., p. 128.

21 See Appendix 3 for camp circle.

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grouped close to the centre of the camp. In the largest, they keep their weapons and society clothes and gather to dress for their dances.²² There may be as many as two hundred lodges in the entire camp.²³

The day of the arrival is a pleasant and lively day. The people remain outside their tipis looking for friends and relatives. Greetings and laughter fill the camp. Youngsters ride bareback, rounding up horses and driving them to the river for water while men picket their most prized buffalo horses. Women giving due attention to their medicine bundles, are busy putting order in their lodge, and fetching water and wood for their family's needs.²⁴

For her part, the sacred woman retires to her sacred tipi to pray and fast with her husband, her female attendants²⁵ and the priests of the Okan.

22 W. McClintock, op. cit., p. 206. G.B. Grinnell assigns a lodge for each society, see Appendix 3.

23 J. MacLean, The Blackfoot Sun Dance, Proceedings of the Canadian Institute, Ser. 3, Vol. 6, Toronto, 1888, p. 232. He counted 198 lodges comprising about two thousand souls in the Blood Indian Camp one summer.

24 W. McClintock, op. cit., p. 225.

25 The female attendants were women who during the year had vowed to come forward to partake of the tongues, at the next Sun Dance, or women who had previously acted as the sacred woman.

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D. Purification Rites

On the next day,²⁶ the sweat lodge is built.²⁷ A sweat lodge had been constructed at each of the four camp sites previous to this last one. In the first camp, it was located on the east side; in the second, on the south; in the third, on the west and in the fourth, on north side, evidently following the course of the sun through the summer sky.²⁸

It is the duty of the Blackfoot police, the Mad Dogs, to construct the sweat lodge. For this purpose they run to the river and cut down one hundred red willow branches.²⁹

They return, entering the camp from the east side and holding their branches high in the air. They circle

26 There are various opinions concerning the schedule of the ceremonies. Knowing the Indians as I do, I doubt that they would rush to accomplish in one day all the tasks as given by C. Wissler in The Sun Dance of the Blackfoot Indians, in Anthropological Papers, American Museum of Natural History, Vol. 16, Published by order of the Trustees, New York, 1921, p. 230.

27 There could be four sweat lodges as reported by G.B. Grinnell in Blackfoot Lodge Tales, p. 265.

28 W. McClintock, op. cit., p. 290.

29 Fourteen willows were required for ordinary sweat lodges, but one hundred was the essential number for the Sun Dance sweat lodge. R.H. Lowie, Indians of the Plains, Garden City, N.Y., The Natural History Press, 1963, p. 87.

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the camp while singing their society song. Reaching a spot close to the site reserved for the Sun lodge, they lay down their branches and proceed to the construction of a framework for the sweat lodge. The branches are set firmly into the ground and bent to produce an ellipse about four feet high. Buffalo robes are thrown over the willow framework.

The builders are hot and thirsty because they neither drink nor wash during the day for fear it might bring rain which would spoil the celebration.

When all is ready, the sacred woman, preceded by the priests and accompanied by her attendants, comes forth praying. Solemnly and in single file, they circle the sweat lodge and the sacred woman sits on the west side of it, while the priests stand on the south side. The Mad Dogs are still at work digging a hole inside the sweat lodge. The earth is carefully placed to one side to symbolise the earth thrown up by the underground animals, the beaver, otter, badger, and the coyote. The priests, taking off their blanket and moccasins, which they place beside the sacred woman, enter the sweat lodge. Inward purification is thus sought and prayers to the Sun, Moon and Morning Star are offered in behalf of the people. The paint blessed by the sacred woman, and the buffalo skull are given to the high priest. He lays the skull beside the

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hole, the nose pointing west. He then works the paint in his hands and with the tip of his fingers marks one side of the skull with black spots and red spots on the opposite side. These are supposed to represent respectively the stars and the sun.³⁰ or the moon and the sun, or again night and day.³¹ He then stuffs the nose and ears of the buffalo skull with grass which he also entwines around the horns.³² During this ceremony, the other priests chant in unison:

I now put you in a sacred place
This spot is a holy place.³³

In the meantime, the Mad Dogs have gathered one hundred stones and have heated them in a fire close by. One by one the stones are handed to the priests who place them in the hole in the middle of the lodge. Dried sweet grass placed upon the hot stones produces smoke. The high priest holds his hands in this rising incense, and then rubs them over his body while praying to the Sun.

May our lives become as strong as the
stones we have placed here.³⁴

30 W. McClintock, op. cit., pp. 286-287.

31 G.B. Grinnell, op. cit., p. 265.

32 This symbolises the feeding of the buffalo with its favorite grass: *Carex Nebraskensis praevia*.

33 W. McClintock, op. cit., p. 286.

34 Ibid., p. 288.

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Then water is poured over the stones. As steam rises he continues:

May our lives be as pure as the water,
that we may live to be old and always
have water to drink.³⁵

As the dripping priests inhale the vapour, they pray to the Sun, Moon and Morning Star, asking for long life and food for their children.

Four times the Mad Dogs have to lift up the buffalo robes from the lodge's framework to allow fresh air to enter. The fourth time, the priests come out and are given meat. Saying a prayer, they break off a piece which they plant in the ground and then eat the other part. The Mad Dogs pick up the buffalo skull and placing it nose pointing towards the east over the framework of the sweat lodge tie it with bark strips. The ceremony of purification is ended. The high priest rises and leads the little procession back to the sacred tipi. All walk gravely one behind the other, head bowed in silent prayer.³⁶

There, they will continue to pray and fast for the duration of the ceremonies. All they are allowed is a short smoke and a little water in the morning. In the

35 W. McClintock, op. cit., p. 288.

36 Ibid., pp. 286-290.

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evening, after sunset, some friends may bring them some food concealed under their blankets. This food is eaten in silence.³⁷

In the evening, an old Medicine Man, usually the most important one, the "high priest", well versed in the traditional ceremonial, comes to the sacred tipi to give instructions to the other Medicine Men, the sacred woman and her husband on the erection of the Sun Lodge to be made the following day. He stresses the importance of adhering to the least prescription of the different rites.

All those present listen respectfully. Afterwards each one retires to his lodge and in the quiet of the night the sacred woman pursues her prayers and fasting.

E. Construction of the Sun Lodge

Securing the material for building the Sun Lodge is a function of the entire community. Each clan is requested to supply its share of the material and of the labor. Men cut the poles while women on horseback carry them. This is done as part of the ceremonial. The poles are held up at each end by means of lariats fastened to the women's saddle, two women carrying one pole. As an extra precaution a man walks beside the pole to prevent it from

37 J. MacLean, op. cit., p. 233.

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touching the ground. They enter the camp from the four directions, north, south, west, and east. Amid the singing of war songs, they bring the poles to the place selected for the Sun Lodge.³⁸

The centre or sacred pole receives special attention. Everyone goes in search of the best tree. When it is found everybody breaks into song and presents are distributed to the poor.³⁹ A renowned warrior⁴⁰ strikes the tree on the four sides with a red painted axe and afterwards hands the axe to the sacred woman. She chops while saying:

Oh tree! I ask that you will fall easily.
I promise to plant you in a new place and to
give you many presents. May you stand firmly
in your new home.⁴¹

The crowd standing by prays that the tree may fall with prongs flatwise. They cheer with glee when the tree sways and falls to the ground. Meanwhile several warriors fire their guns into the branches. Now jumping to the ground with shrill war whoops the warriors proceed to

38 W. McClintock, op. cit., p. 301.

39 Paul Radin, The Story of the American Indians, New York, Boni & Liverlight, 1921, p. 313.

40 War honors were required of the cutter of the tree. J. Ewers, op. cit., p. 289.

41 Paul Radin, op. cit., p. 301.

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break the branches all the while "counting coup" as if the tree were an enemy. The trimmed tree is now lifted unto a travois and carried⁴² into camp. It is laid near the hole that has been dug for it.⁴³

Then, the people assemble to attend the clothing of the sacred woman. Her assistants dress her with the white ceremonial dress made from skins of antelope and white-tail deer. They sing and make motions imitating the deer and antelope. The medicine bonnet that had stood on a tripod since the opening of the ceremonies, is placed on the sacred woman's head and the elk-skin sacred robe is thrown over her shoulders. During that time the women proceed with the elk dance, making gestures with their hands, and swaying their bodies like the elk and giving the elk call.

The people move closer to the site of the Sun Lodge and sit in rows upon the ground. The sacred woman appears, her face completely hidden by her medicine bonnet. With the other celebrants she comes forward. They all sit together on buffalo robes prepared for them.

42 The sacred pole is sometimes drawn on skids, no one being allowed to place his hand on it. Paul Radin, op. cit., p. 314.

43 W. McClintock, op. cit., p. 301.

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All the material for the construction of the Sun Lodge is ready except the rawhide thongs required to bind the poles and rafters together. Therefore a rawhide must be cut to provide the thongs. This operation is confided to the man who detains the highest war honors of the year.⁴⁴ A robust middle-aged man advances to the foreground. He has already paid for the privilege of performing this rite, by giving one of the best horses captured on his last raid.⁴⁵

Silently he sits on the ground close to the fire from which the sweet-grass incense rises heavenward. There, he must be painted with sacred paint: red over his body and a black circle around his face. The high priest accomplishes this ritual and prays so that the cutter may succeed in his task. The latter standing before the crowd, pauses a moment to ask the Sun for power, then raising his knife high above his head, he calls out: "Hear! men and women for what I speak is true."⁴⁶ He then proceeds to tell about his war feats: he has captured over

44 He is sometimes chosen by the hide cutter of the previous year. W. McClintock, op. cit., p. 306; see also J.B. Grinnell, op. cit., p. 265; J.C. Ewers, op. cit., p. 289.

45 W. McClintock, op. cit., p. 308; Ewers, op. cit., p. 289.

46 W. McClintock, op. cit., p. 307.

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sixty horses from the enemy; on a moonless night, he stealthily entered a Shoshoni camp and took a valued stallion picketed close to the chief's lodge; during a fierce battle, he managed to touch an enemy's body, before killing him; and finally he returned home with three scalps on his belt.⁴⁷ Between the "counting of each coup", he cuts several strips of the hide. Before he has time to reveal all his valorous deeds, the hide is reduced to the desired number of thongs.

Then, the cutter's wife, who was heard singing between each "coup", smiles contentedly, while his friends and relatives join in a lively dance because their brother has successfully returned from so many perils.⁴⁸

But the dance is of short duration; the sun is low and the Sun Lodge must go up. The head chief's loud voice is heard above the din of the drums and songs. He notifies the people that they must prepare for the raising of the pole. Immediately, a group of men, using the freshly cut thongs, tie poles in pairs to form shears that will be needed in the erection of the sacred pole. Others vanish into their tipis to reappear a moment later, wearing their

47 A.M. Josephy, ed., American Heritage Book of Indians, pp. 337, 339; G.B. Grinnell, op. cit., p. 245.

48 W. McClintock, op. cit., pp. 307, 308.

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war clothes and gayest paint. They group by clans, forming four lines towards the four directions of the compass. In groups of two, they grasp the "shears" firmly, and lift them aloft as they intone the grand old hymn "Raising the Pole".⁴⁹ The four lines of men move forward towards the center; four times they halt, the final move producing a large circle. The bundle of willow branches, the "fagot sacré"⁵⁰ symbolizing an eagle or thunderbird's nest is tied in the forks of the sacred pole.⁵¹ The enthusiastic women encircling the determined constructors shout their encouragement and pray to the Great Sun Power for help and success. At a given signal, the lines break up with shrill war-whoops and the men dash towards the pole. By means of the long shears, they grasp the pole from all sides and in the twinkling of an eye, the sacred pole is standing firm in the hole prepared to receive it. Now, the wall posts are erected six feet apart, the rafters or roof poles are put on, and tied solidly with rawhide thongs. The whole

49 W. McClintock, op. cit., p. 309; cf. G.B. Grinnell, op. cit., pp. 93-103; Scarface, Origin of the Medicine Lodge; also ibid., p. 265.

50 A. Lacombe, op. cit., p. 254. He also mentions a buffalo hide as being placed in the crutch with the branches.

51 Ibid., p. 233; W. McClintock, op. cit., p. 310; J. MacLean, Blackfoot Sun-Dance, p. 233.

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circular structure measuring about forty feet in diameter with walls standing six feet in height, is covered with leafy branches and brushwood. However, a small opening towards the west is left free of branches. These will be secured and put in place by the sacred woman and her husband, at dawn, tomorrow, so "that they might do their share in the labour of building the sacred lodge."⁵² The door of the lodge faces towards the rising sun.⁵³

Now that the temple is up, the sacred woman may break her fast. She returns to her sacred tipi where nourishing soup is prepared for her. The builders, however, must complete their task. Opposite the entrance, in the rear of the lodge, a small booth or bower, about six feet long is built. Like the rest of the lodge, it is made of brush and is purposely tightly woven to prevent inquisitive eyes from seeing through. It is for the exclusive use of the Medicine Men.⁵⁴

At the foot of the sacred pole, a sacred fire is prepared. Next to it, is a pile of sweet grass for incense.⁵⁵ The duty of supplying the fuel for the sacred

52 W. McClintock, op. cit., p. 310.

53 A. Lacombe, op. cit., pp. 254-255; J. MacLean, op. cit., pp. 232-233; G.B. Grinnell, op. cit., pp. 265-266; W. McClintock, op. cit., pp. 308-310.

54 J. MacLean, op. cit., p. 233; G.B. Grinnell, op. cit., p. 266; W. McClintock, op. cit., p. 314.

55 A. Lacombe, op. cit., p. 255; Vegreville, op. cit., p. 142; J. MacLean, op. cit., p. 232.

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fire is reserved to the warriors who have distinguished themselves by some noteworthy deed, particularly that of capturing horses from the enemy. No women or children are accepted for this sacred function.⁵⁶

In the rear, there is a space called "holy land" where a small altar is constructed of earth. It is about one square foot and is surrounded with sweet grass and on it lays a buffalo skull painted in black and red.⁵⁷

At the foot of the sacred pole, opposite the sacred fire, a special place, "un espèce d'autel"⁵⁸ is set aside for the sacred stone,⁵⁹ or "block of wood",⁶⁰ the vase for the bloody holocausts, a wooden dish, the sacrificial knife, the torture lariats and the Sun pipe.⁶¹ This concludes the preparations for the following day. Now, the high priest goes out to convoke the people for the next day's ceremonial.⁶² Clothed in a buffalo robe

56 J. MacLean, op. cit., p. 233.

57 A. Lacombe, op. cit.; it was customary among the Blackfeet to build altars with earth.

58 Vegreville, op. cit., p. 140.

59 Ibid., p. 21.

60 J. MacLean, op. cit., p. 235.

61 Vegreville, op. cit., p. 140.

62 Ibid., p. 140; J. MacLean, op. cit., p. 232.

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brilliantly painted, his eagle feather bonnet on his head, a stick in his hand, he rides his best horse through the camp. He calls upon the people to make sure they will be present at the Sun Lodge in the morning. He speaks at some length, and ends his speech with a strong exhortation to the young men:

Come young men, to-morrow is the day on which you will give proof of your courage. You will show that you are not selfish with your body. As for us, older men, our time is past, but to you is reserved to speak for us with your blood.⁶³

All have listened respectfully to the high priest. They now retire to their lodges pondering over the solemn words of the Sun's man. Most of the night will be spent in preparation for the morrow's ceremony. Some paint their bodies, others repair their shields and weapons, or put a last feather to their bonnet and arm bands. A large number pray for good weather, but mothers and sweethearts pray for those who will undergo self torture and the latter, no doubt, ask for courage and endurance in their ordeal.

⁶³ "Allons, jeunes gens, c'est demain que vous allez faire preuve de votre courage: Vous allez nous montrer que vous n'aimez pas (que vous n'êtes pas avarés de) votre corps. Pour nous, vieillards, notre temps est passé, mais c'est à vous qu'est réservé de parler pour nous par votre sang." (Vegreville, op. cit., p. 140.)

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F. The Religious Rite

Early dawn surprises young sleepy heads who must hurry to catch up with their elders who have already left for the Sun Lodge. Several Medicine Men dancing and blowing their sacred whistle⁶⁴ go through the camp urging the late risers to come to the feast.⁶⁵

Upon their return to the lodge, the Medicine Men find it surrounded by a large crowd. The prominent chiefs are already seated on the west side of the sacred pole. Members of various societies are just coming in. They are recognizable by their characteristic dress. Some are wearing war-bonnets of eagle feathers tipped with brightly red-dyed horse-hair, and ornamented with porcupine quills, and others wear caps made by winding otter and mink skins around their heads, the tails hanging down behind. Some are bare, wearing only a loin cloth, but their bodies and faces are painted while others wear war-shirts and leggings of soft-tanned deerskin heavily decorated with beads and porupine quills and trimmed with white weasel skins. About their neck hang necklaces made of beads, elk-teeth, bear claws, and small bones. Around their ankles, dog-skin

64 W. McClintock, op. cit., p. 29.

65 Ibid., p. 312.

bands and bells are attached and around their arms, deer-skin and brass bands with grouse or woodpecker feathers hanging, and floating in the wind.⁶⁶ As they pass by the Sacred Pole, they hang up their shields but do not part with their tomahawks, bows and arrows, spears and elk-hoof rattles. Silently they sit in rows north and south of the sacred fire.

After a brief pause to survey the attendance, the Medicine Men enter solemnly. One of them, the high priest of the ceremony, goes to the small bower or booth built purposely for him. It will be his abode for the four-day celebration during which he will fast and pray for the people. He must stay in all day long.⁶⁷

The people come to him, two at a time, and he paints them with black, and makes for them an earnest prayer to the Sun, that they may have good health, long lives, and good food and shelter.⁶⁸

The people also bring him offerings which are fastened to the sacred pole. Women carry their young

66 W. McClintock, op. cit., p. 272.

67 G.B. Grinnell, Blackfoot Lodge Tales, p. 266; other authors claim that the bower was occupied by the sacred woman, her husband and the Medicine Man (J. MacLean, The Blackfoot Sun-Dance, p. 233). The floor was made of earth taken from the foot of the center pole. It was hardened by wetting and then covered with white clay. Pine boughs were spread over the floor, upon which the Medicine Men slept (W. McClintock, Old North Trail, pp. 314, 315).

68 G.B. Grinnell, op. cit., p. 266.

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children to him, to get his blessing. He takes them in his arms, and

...holding a bunch of eagle feathers in one hand and a buffalo tail in the other, gazes intently at the bright sun and prays that 'they might be endowed with power, and have an abundance to eat throughout their lives'.⁶⁹

Meanwhile the sacred woman arrives; there is a hush in the assembly because she is the "object of honor and veneration from the entire tribe."⁷⁰ The bags of sacred food guarded by two young men,⁷¹ are opened and the food is blessed by the high priest.⁷² The sacred woman then takes a piece of tongue, and holding it towards the sky, offers it to the Sun;

then she eats a part of it and buries the rest in the dirt, praying to the Ground Man, and calling him to bear witness that she has not defiled his body by committing adultery. She then proceeds to cut up the tongues, giving a very small piece to every person, man, woman, or child. Each one first holds it up to the Sun, and then prays to the Sun, Na'pi, and the Ground Man for long life, concluding by depositing a part of the morsel of tongue on the ground, saying: "I give you this sacred tongue to eat."⁷³

69 W. McClintock, op. cit., p. 316.

70 Ibid., p. 315.

71 J.W. McLean, op. cit., p. 235.

72 A. Lacombe, op. cit., p. 255.

73 G.B. Grinnell, op. cit., pp. 266, 267.

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The attendants and other women come forward to help in the distribution of the sacred food, a duty reserved to virtuous women.⁷⁴ During the distribution, one of the men might step forward and tell the assembly how in the spring, in trying to cross a river, he was in danger of drowning. "I then vowed to the Sun that, if I escaped alive, my sister would partake of a tongue for me at the time of the next Sun Dance." Under everybody's gaze his sister performs the usual rite. He then turns to her and says: "Here is my horse and the clothing I wear. Give them to the Medicine Man... and ask him to pray for us."⁷⁵

During this "religious ceremony,"⁷⁶ the drums, rattles and male voices are heard but in a subdued manner, reminding us that the Blackfeet are a people of dreams and that the Sun Dance is a mystic ritual. All at once the musical instruments seem to come alive. The beating of the tom-toms grow louder and louder, the warriors' voices blending with the strong beat become shriller and soon all the emotions that fill these bold hearts seem to burst forth in their tribal songs. Everyone knows that the time for the braves to fulfill their sacred vows is at hand.

74 J. MacLean, op. cit., p. 235.

75 W. McClintock, op. cit., p. 315.

76 J. MacLean, op. cit., p. 235.

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But first, the ceremony of the sacred pipe must take place. The tribal sacred pipe is lighted from the sacred fire and handed to the chief warrior. As he holds it over the sacred fire, a helper places some sweet grass over the flame, and a rising cloud of incense envelops this great symbol of peace.⁷⁷ Then, the chief raises it aloft with the stem pointing towards the sun, so "that Natos might have the first-fruits of everything."⁷⁸ His short prayer ended, he slowly turns the pipe stem towards the north, south, and west.⁷⁹ Then "still holding it, stem toward the chiefs, each is allowed to take a smoke."⁸⁰ This ceremony of reconciliation ended, the music picks up its tempo and people wait expectantly.

G. Penitential Rite

Three young men come forward, and standing in front of the high priest declare that they wish to fulfil their vows to Natos. One reveals that in the spring hunt,

77 J. MacLean, Canadian Savage Folk, p. 279.

78 Idem, Blackfoot Sun-Dance, p. 234. P. Lacombe, op. cit., p. 273.

79 A. Lacombe, Letter, March 3, 1866, in Missions des Missionnaires Oblats, p. 271. J. MacLean, Blackfoot Sun-Dance, p. 234; Idem, Canadian Savage Folk, p. 261.

80 J. MacLean, op. cit., p. 234.

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he was caught in the midst of a buffalo herd and was in grave danger for his life. He had called on Natos and promised to give him the first joint of his third finger if he were rescued. Another tells of his vowing one finger to Natos when he was hard pressed in battle.⁸¹ The third man explains that he had gone on a horse-raiding expedition and "as customary on such occasions had prayed to Natos for protection and success, offering himself to his god if his prayers were answered;"⁸² he too will give a finger.

The priest, taking the hand of the first young man, holds it up towards the Sun and prays. Then the boy lays his third finger on the sacred stone; the priest takes the sacred knife, and with one blow, severs the first joint. He then holds up this severed portion towards the Sun, and "dedicates that to him as the young man's sacrifice."⁸³ The other young men undergo the same treatment or ceremonial. Several young women and men wish to give a proof of their devotion to Natos and for that purpose take their arrows or knife and jab the fleshy part of their arms and

81 W. McClintock, op. cit., p. 318.

82 J. MacLean, op. cit., p. 235.

83 Ibid., p. 235.

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legs.⁸⁴ But the number of such devotees to Natos, is rather restricted, the ordinary men being content with prayer.

However, another ritual is about to begin. One of the Medicine Men takes the rawhide ropes on the altar and suspends them from the center pole. A young warrior is getting ready for self-torture.⁸⁵ All eyes turn on him when he enters the Sun Lodge. His body is painted all in white and he is wearing only a loin-cloth. Chaplets are worn as wrist and ankle bands. The priest accompanying the young man, holds a larger wreath made of twigs and leaves woven together in his left hand. He passes his right hand above and around the wreath four times, "muttering some prayers"⁸⁶ and then places it on the young man's head.

84 P. Vegreville, op. cit., p. 142; J.C. Ewers, Self-Torture in the Blood Indian Sun Dance, in Journal of the Washington Academy of Sciences, Vol. 38, May 15, 1948, No. 5, p. 172.

85 The Blackfeet might have adopted the Sun Dance torture from the Arapaho in historic time. A group of Blackfeet spent a few years among the Cheyenne and Arapaho around 1826 and later returned to their own people. It is probable that the torture was introduced by the Bloods who were always more zealous for this ceremonial than others. See J.C. Ewers, Self-Torture in the Blood Indian Sun Dance, p. 172.

86 J. MacLean, Canadian Savage Folk, p. 196.

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Here is a wreath for the Indian hero who has been successful in his war exploits, and has fitted himself to stand before the medicine pole to offer his sacrifice to the Sun. It is not the crown of the runner in the Grecian Games, but it is sacred, if not more so, in the eyes of the red men of the plains.⁸⁷

The young hero reclines on a blanket and pillow. Everybody knows that he has been the object of special protection. An elderly man approaches and solemnly tells the audience of the great peril during which the young man has vowed to undergo torture in gratitude for Natos' rescue. Then he tells about various brave deeds accomplished by the young man. Between the declaration of each deed, the drummers applaud rhythmically on their tom-toms. When the panegyric is finished, the young man rises, and in a gesture of appreciation, places his hands upon his eulogist's shoulders and draws them downward.⁸⁸

He then lays down again. Four elderly and experienced men whose services the young man has previously retained, come forward. They hold him down while a fifth comes to make the incisions. Two parallel marks are drawn on the skin of the breast under each nipple.⁸⁹

87 J. MacLean, op. cit., p. 196.

88 Ibid., p. 235.

89 P. Radin, op. cit., p. 314.

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This done, the wooden skewers being in readiness, the cutter holds a double-edged knife, the point touching the flesh, which is then drawn the desired length. A small piece of wood is placed on the underside of the flesh to receive the point of the blade as the incision is made. Then, the piece of wood is removed and the skewer inserted under the skin as the blade is pulled out. Lariats are fastened to each protruding end of the skewer. This is done for each breast. The same operation is performed on the back of the young man. He then stands up and his helpers tie the lariats to the cords hanging from the top of the sacred pole. A drum is tied to his back incision.

The young man walks slowly to the pole, embraces it and begs Natos for courage in his self-immolation. As he steps back from the center pole, the cords tighten. He places an eagle whistle in his mouth and starts blowing short, sharp sounds as he dances. Suddenly, he grasps the drum and pulls it off his back, tearing the slit open. He then goes on with his dance, throwing himself backward to put more pressure on the cords holding the skewers. Within a minute or two, the slits give way, the flesh is torn and the skewers go swinging towards the center pole while the young man falls back on the ground. But, he quickly gets up amid the cheering crowd admiring his

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courage, in the fulfilment of his vow to Natos.⁹⁰

His helpers, true to their pledge, come to assist him. The cutter trims the loose pieces of skin and hands them to the young hero who goes and buries them in the ground at the foot of the sacred pole. The young man now retires, probably to his parents' lodge, to have some food. He and his pledgers had been fasting for at least two days pending the sacrificial torture.⁹¹ The pledgers conscious of the sacredness of this event, had prepared for it by taking the customary sweat baths of purification. They too retire for rest and food.

Meanwhile the wild, quick tempo of the drums subsides and the elders, renowned raconteurs, begin telling of the great deeds accomplished by other heroes in the glorious past of the Blackfoot people. The sacred tradition of times immemorial and the myths explaining the origin of their great Sun Dance and other rites, are passed in review. The mystical and hidden meaning of the different rituals are explained to the younger generation by qualified priests. Time is also consecrated to the

90 J. MacLean, op. cit., pp. 235, 236.

91 See Appendix 6 for J.C. Ewers, Self-Torture in the Blood Indians Sun Dance.

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"learning of rites, songs and precepts of the religion of the country."⁹²

This yearly ceremonial also includes a social aspect. Indeed a spirit of festivity crowns the whole event. The formal acquisition of the ceremonial objects, sacred bundles, with the songs that go with them, is an essential and joyous activity. Therefore, singing is heard coming simultaneously from different lodges. Dancing societies vie with each other in the public performance of distinctive and fancy dances. Elaborate and highly colorful costumes brighten the scene. Acquaintances are made, friendships renewed and rejoicing breaks forth in step with the rhythm of the rattles, the beating of the drums and the howling voices of these fierce singers of the plains. One might think that they had read the psalmist's words: "Praise him with drum and dancing" (Ps. 150:4).

But all good things must come to an end. The Sun Dance is over. On the eight day, the Blackfeet break camp and part for the summer hunt. The chief addresses a last message to his people.

Hear! my children, for I speak to you with a good heart. It does us all good to assemble every summer around the Sun-lodge. We have smoked the Medicine Pipe, and the rising smoke

92 A. Lacombe, op. cit., p. 249.

has carried away all our bad feelings. Many have given presents to the Sun, and some have fulfilled their vows. The old people have fasted and prayed, and now feel better in their hearts. The young men have listened to the wise counsels of the chiefs, and the young girls have seen the medicine women, chosen to fast and pray, because their hearts are kindly disposed towards everyone. The Great Sun God is our Father. He is kind, for he makes the trees to bud and the grass to become green in the spring-time. He gave the people good hearts, that they also might be kind and help each other.⁹³

These words will linger in the mind of the Blackfeet while they roam over the prairies in quest of the sustenance, the buffalo.

⁹³ W. McClintock, op. cit., p. 322.

CHAPTER V

THE BLACKFOOT LITURGY

A. Pattern

In the preceding chapter we have considered the Blackfoot Sun Dance. If we limit our interest to the exterior ritual, we risk to miss its most important aspect, the deep significance underlying the whole of the ceremony.

The Sun Dance is far more than a set of rites; it is the external manifestation of the internal feelings of a people towards the forces beyond them, the infinite, the divine. The Sun Dance is the collective prayer of the Blackfoot Indians, their greatest act of public worship; it is a liturgy.

The word "liturgy" normally refers to a function exercised in the interest of the whole community, for political, technical or religious ends.¹ This definition can readily be applied to the Sun Dance since we have seen

¹ J. Oehler, Leiturgie, in Pauly-Wissowa-Kroll, Real Encyclopadie der klassischen Altertumswissenschaft, t. 12, 2, Stuttgart, Metzler, 1925, col. 1871-1879, in A.G. Martimort, L'Eglise en Prière, Paris, Desclée & Cie, 1961, p. 4.

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in previous pages that it was a religious, military and civil festivity.

In this last chapter, we intend to take a closer look at the ceremonial of the Sun Dance and derive from it the main characteristics of a true liturgy. We do not presume to give a thorough analysis of all its symbols and rites, but we shall consider its most important facets. In the first part we shall try to show that, like all the liturgies, it is based on a myth, in this instance the myth being that of creation.

In a second part we shall see that it includes aspects which are part of the Christian liturgy: a convocation, an assembly, a purification, an offertory, a reconciliation, a fast, a communion, an expiation and prayer.

a. Myth of Creation

In expressing themselves in a liturgy, the Blackfeet simply followed a pattern which is common to all peoples. From the very dawn of human history, man has tried to grasp, to reach the invisible and communicate with the transcendent. All groups of men, conscious of their common destiny, have tried to strengthen their unity by adopting a set of laws and by keeping alive a collection of myths.

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A myth, in the sense we are using it here, is not an invention of the imagination; it concerns stories whose origin has been lost in the remote past, but which are nevertheless pregnant with some historical truth. A myth is the unveiling of some mystery, of some event which took place in primordial times and which serves to explain a present situation.

For homo religiosus the essential precedes existence. This is as true of the man of "primitive" and Oriental societies as it is of the Jew, the Christian and the Moslem. Man is what he is today because a series of events took place ab origine. The myths tell him these events and in so doing, explain to him how and why he was constituted in this particular way.²

Myths are kept through the generations because of their meaning and sooner or later become imbedded in some form of religious rites in which the people re-enact the event related in the myth. This is eloquently exemplified in the Hebrew yearly celebration of the Passover when they repeat a mythical archetype. The Christian Eucharist is even more; it is the actualization, hic et nunc, of the paschal mystery, the mystery of salvation. If the Hebrews and the Christians believed in their myths so did the Blackfeet. Through the Sun Dance they repeated the myth

2 Mircea Eliade, Myth and Reality, London, George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1963, p. 92.

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of creation, and through symbols, gestures, and prayers they communicated with the divine.

Let us first examine how the Sun Dance is a commemoration of a myth, that of creation. It is a striking fact that the Sun Dance was held in spring at the very time when nature starts to live anew. The Blackfeet realized that all this wealth of nature they owed to Natos. They considered nature as a "magnalia Dei", a marvel of God. Therefore, the entire community or tribe gathered together to offer their praises and thanks to Natos, the real source of "life".

True to their Scarface myth, which we have mentioned earlier,³ they gathered together to repeat an event that happened in illo tempore, the creation. They constructed a lodge in the shape of the world, as they conceived it, and as directed by Natos. In the center of that lodge they planted a tree representing the center of the universe. During the cutting of the tree and after its erection, the "life of the entire group was concentrated into that tree, a symbol intended to represent and consecrate the thing that is happening to the universe: spring."⁴ The tree and the lodge are then cosmic

3 See Appendix 5 for the Story of Scarface.

4 Mircea Eliade, Patterns of Comparative Religion, London and New York, Sheed and Ward, 1958, p. 321.

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symbolisms. We might perhaps go a step further and say that the tree, becoming the sacred pole, represented the Sun god. People fastened their gifts to it and the young men undergoing torture flung their arms around it and prayed just before their ordeal dedicated to the Sun.

If the Sun Dance, like other people's liturgy, is based on a myth, it also includes several characteristics common to the Hebrew or Christian liturgy. Basing our conception of the liturgy on the Bible, we see that its first appearance is connected with the deliverance of Israel from the bondage of Egypt. Would it be too daring to say that every year the Blackfeet experienced a similar deliverance from the hardships of the long winter months which they spent, as if in bondage, their tipis huddled in a thicket of some secluded valley. With each spring came freedom to roam on the promised land, the vast prairies.

b. Public Worship

We have said that liturgy is public worship. It is evident that it implies the reunion of all the members of a group and this communal gathering becomes a sign of the common faith and unity of the people.

Among the Blackfeet, every family of the great tribes was present for the ceremonies and everyone

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participated in some way or another. We have seen how everybody even shared in the task of constructing the Sun Lodge. There is no doubt that unity among the Blackfeet was clearly manifested during the Sun Dance. Their faith in the divinity was also expressed since the whole ceremony was dedicated to Natos.

The central feature... was a kind of cosmic thanksgiving, in which the people, through the Sun-Symbol, were brought directly into relation with Father Sun.⁵

B. Rites

The Hebrew liturgy started with a convocation from Yahweh speaking to Moses. The entire people answered the call and through the centuries have been faithful in celebrating the Pasch. There is also a convocation in the Blackfoot liturgy. A woman having declared her vow to call the Sun Dance, the chief of her band sends a messenger to advise the entire tribe of the coming event and all without exception come to the rendez-vous to form the assembly of worshippers. The Sun Dance, like the Passover was celebrated annually, and all the Blackfeet knew that Natos had proposed it.

5 H.B. Alexander, The Mythology of All Races, Vol. 10, North American, New York, Cooper Square Publishers Inc., 1964, p. 90.

A striking feature of the Blackfoot liturgy is the important role of the woman. We can find its counterpart in the role played by Mary, the prophetess, sister of Aaron, who led the rejoicings after the crossing of the Red Sea. She "took a timbrel in her hand: and all the women went forth after her with timbrels and dances..." (Exodus 15:20). However, in the Blackfoot liturgy, the sacred woman does much more than rejoice, as we have seen in the previous chapter.

a. Purification Rite

An essential feature common to the Blackfoot and the Hebrew liturgies was the purification rite. Both peoples adopted the custom of purification by water. The Hebrews not only washed their bodies but their clothes as well (Lev. 12-15). The Blackfeet were content to use sweat baths. In both instances exterior purifications were meant to signify the internal cleanness or holiness. We read in Ezechiel: "And I will pour upon you clean water, and you shall be cleansed from all filthiness, and I will cleanse you from your idols." (36:25). The Blackfeet, conscious of their sinfulness, entered a sweat bath before each major ceremony, particularly the Sun Dance. All the men who participated in the Sun Dance even those who limited their action to assisting the young man

undergoing torture, entered the sweat baths. These baths were meant to prepare them "for entry into the economy of the sacred."⁶ For men of all ages, water is a symbol of purification and life. It "purifies and regenerates because it nullifies the past, and restores, even if only for a moment, the integrity of the dawn of things."⁷

The symbolism of purification and regeneration by water found its way into the Christian liturgy where it took on a new and deeper meaning, that of the redemption of the soul and the forgiveness of sin in Baptism.

Another beautiful symbol of purification in use in the Blackfoot liturgy, is the incense. In the Hebrew and Christian liturgy, incense usually reminds men of their prayers ascending to God or sometimes represents the zeal that should burn in the heart of the Christian. But the Blackfoot mode of using incense as a purifier is unique. We have seen in a preceding chapter, how the rising smoke served to purify the hands and body of the Medicine Man as well as the drum and other articles needed in his ritual for the benefit of his patient. During the Sun Dance, the chief warrior holds the sacred pipe over the incense,

6 Mircea Eliade, op. cit., p. 195.

7 Ibid., p. 195.

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before presenting it to the Sun, and to the chiefs. This is one of the most solemn moments of the Sun Dance ceremonial because of the profound symbolism of the pipe. For the chiefs, to smoke "with Natos" in the presence of the entire tribe was a public profession of faith, signifying their good dispositions and close relations with Natos. It also showed that peace reigned among the chiefs, since smoking with someone was a proof of friendship.⁸ It was equivalent to the kiss of peace given during the Christian liturgy.

b. Penitential Rite

The Blackfoot liturgy stressed the aspect of fasting. This penitential custom is common to the Hebrew and Christian liturgies. In the Old Testament, the tenth day of the seventh month was proclaimed a day of atonement. On that day, the Hebrews were expected to fast. (Lev. 23:27). They also fasted on days of grief or mourning (II Kings 12:16) and on the anniversary of some misfortune (Jer. 52:6).

In the early Christian Church, fasting was customary as preparation for the reception of the sacraments

8 J. MacLean, op. cit., p. 279.

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(Acts 13:2-3). Later, Lent was set aside as a special period of fasting, in imitation of Christ and of the prophets.

Likewise, the Blackfeet stressed fasting as a form of penance in relation with their liturgy. As we have seen, not only the sacred woman fasted, but also her attendants, the priests, the Medicine Men, the young men who prepared for self-torture and even the latter's helpers. We may then conclude that their intention was to prepare for their important functions in the liturgy.

The moral significance of this characteristic of the Plains Indians' religious ceremonial lay in the fasting, and occasional self-inflicted tortures and lacerations of the body to obtain the favor of the gods.⁹

The belief that penance is agreeable to the gods is as old as the world. From the very dawn of history men have offered sacrifices to the divinity, either to obtain favors or simply to please. Among many peoples, even human sacrifices were offered.

It is not surprising that the Plains people should also believe in the efficacy of sacrifice, particularly,

⁹ Albert Muntzsch, S.J., The Relation Between Religion and Morality among the Plains Indians, in Catholic Anthropological Conference, Vol. 4, Nos. 1 & 2, January and April, 1931, p. 25.

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self-inflicted torture. It is to the credit of the Blackfeet that they did not inflict torture on others as did the flagellants of the Middle Ages, or offered human victims as did their neighbors to the south. With the Blackfeet, self-inflicted torture was something personal which they decided upon in special situations when they were reduced to great distress. What did they really mean when they told Natos: "If you rescue me I will go through the self-torture at the next Sun Dance"? When someone presented part of a finger to the Sun, did he not try to show that he gave himself to Natos?

It is said that all who take this ceremony die in a few years, because it is equivalent to giving one's self to the sun. Hence, the sun takes them for his own.¹⁰

Although there is no proof supporting the saying that those who underwent self-torture died soon afterwards,¹¹ it reveals the profound meaning it had for the Blackfeet. The giving of a piece of flesh was a symbol of the offering of oneself to the divinity. It is as

¹⁰ C. Wissler, The Sun Dance of the Blackfoot Indians, in Anthropological Papers of the American Museum of Natural History, Vol. 16, Published by order of the Trustees, New York, 1921, p. 263.

¹¹ Heavy Head, the last man to undergo self-torture among the Blackfeet, died in 1951, at the age of 82. He was 20 at the time of the torture. See J.C. Ewers, Appendix 6.

meaningful as the discipline, hair shirts or quirks such as living on top of a pillar.

c. Communion Rite

Of all the features characterizing the Sun Dance, the most salient is definitely the partaking of the sacred food. This rite common to other liturgies, takes however, a particular form in the Blackfoot ceremonial. Here there is no sacrificing of an animal, nor sprinkling with blood, nor burning of parts of the victim as was done in the Hebrew Pasch.

We have seen how the tongues destined to the sacred ceremony were collected during the tribal hunt. The buffalo tongue was the most delicious part of the buffalo meat and the choice of this particular part stemmed back to Natos himself. He had told Scarface, a Blackfoot mythical hero, that the buffalo tongue was sacred. "That is mine" he had specified. He had also explained that the buffalo was the most Nat'-o-ye, an expression meaning "of the Sun," "having Sun power."¹² Now, it must be noted that the tongues used for the sacred food were those of buffalo bulls exclusively. Would it be presumptuous to

¹² G.B. Grinnell, op. cit., p. 101.

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say that in the mind of the Blackfeet, the buffalo was perhaps linked with the idea of the divinity. The bull was a symbol of the divinity in ancient orient; the Israelites reverted to this image when they made a golden bull,¹³ while Moses was on the mountain. Later Jeroboam placed a similar idol at Dan and Bethel¹⁴ in spite of God's command: "Thou shalt not make to thyself a graven thing." (Exodus 20:4).

The importance given to the buffalo in the Blackfoot ceremonial, the buffalo skull, and the buffalo tongues might be an indication, not that they identified god with a buffalo, but that in the latter they saw a theophany, a symbol of God's power and abundance.

The choice of the buffalo tongues as the element of sacred food seems to reveal such a hidden meaning. The ritual of the distribution of the sacred tongues, the act of eating a small portion of the blessed food by each person in the assembly, the purity required and the accompanying prayers, make of this ceremony one that reminds us

¹³ Bible of Jerusalem, Note C, p. 95: The word "calf" was used derisively instead of "bull".

¹⁴ Bible Douay-Challoner, III Kings, 12:28,29. In making his gods in this form, he mimicked the Egyptians, among whom he had sojourned, who worshipped their Apis and their Osiris under the form of a bullock.

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of the Christian communion service.¹⁵

The prayer accompanying the communion is worth considering:

Great Sun Power! I give you my life today, because I have always been a pure and honest woman. I promise now to eat with you and with the Underground Spirits, that my grand-child may recover. I am praying also for these children standing before you, that they may grow and be strong, that they may have long life and may never suffer from hunger. Hear us and pity us.¹⁶

The opening words: "Great Sun Power" is an acknowledgment of God's all powerful attributes. The confession of purity implies an awareness of Sun's sanctity, and the offering of oneself, a feeling of confident abandonment. "I promise to eat with you" implies a close union with the divinity. Is not sharing a meal with someone a symbol of close friendship, even intimacy? "Hear and pity us" is a cry of humility and total dependence on the All-Powerful. This dependence springs from faith in the divinity. It is based on the hope of obtaining the goods of life. Where there is faith and hope, charity is not far. Such religious virtues are gifts from God. He it was whom the Blackfeet worshipped. The Sun was a theophany revealing the true God, with whom they communicated.

15 W. McClintock, op. cit., p. 311.

16 Ibid., pp. 304, 305.

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C. Prayer

There is no liturgy without prayer. Prayer pervades the entire Blackfoot ceremonial of the Sun Dance. We do not intend to analyse all these prayers but we wish to examine at least one of them, the introductory prayer which is representative of many others.

Great Sun Power! I am praying for my people that they may be happy in the summer and that they may live through the cold of winter. Many are sick and in want. Pity them and let them survive. Grant that they may live long and have abundance. May we go through these ceremonies correctly, as you taught our forefathers to do in the days that are past. If we make mistakes pity us. Help us, Mother Earth! for we depend upon your goodness. Let there be rain to water the prairies, that the grass may grow long and the berries be abundant. O Morning Star! when you look down upon us, give us peace and refreshing sleep. Great Spirit bless our children, friends, and visitors through a happy life. May our trails lie straight and level before us. Let us live to be old. We are all your children and ask these things with good hearts.¹⁷

The chief does not pray for himself, but for his people. True, he is asking for life, health, abundance, but are not these requests the object of most people's prayers? His stress on these everyday needs reveals a feeling of dependence on the divinity. "Pity them and let them survive" is an indication that life is considered

¹⁷ W. McClintock, op. cit., p. 297.

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as a gift from the divinity.

"May we go through these ceremonies correctly... If we make mistakes, pity us" implies a recognition of one's weaknesses and limitations and at the same time a desire to please. It reveals the humility of man in front of the All-Powerful, of the creature in front of the Creator.

Charity is evidenced in the petition not only for children and friends but for visitors as well; love of one's neighbor is the first and necessary step leading to the love of God. However, the love of enemy is absent; so was it from the Hebrew code.

Humility and the wish to live in harmony with one's fellowmen is explicit in "May our trails lie straight and level before you". Moreover this passage is "a proof that religion was connected with, and influenced morality."¹⁸ The closing lines "We are all your children and ask these things with good hearts" are, according to Prof. Hartley B. Alexander, "the essence of religious faith."¹⁹

18 A. Muntch, S.J., op. cit., p. 26.

19 H.B. Alexander, Mythology of All Races, Vol. 10, North American, New York, Cooper Square Publishers, Inc., 1964, p. 90.

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We have considered the origin of the Blackfoot liturgy, we have drawn its main characteristics, namely, the convocation, the assembly, the purification rites, the penitential rites, the symbolism of the peace pipe, the communion and prayer. We could perhaps, in closing, point to the dignified and recollected attitude typical to all Indians. The constant accompaniment of drums and singing, the attention given to and the participation in the various rituals are the proper attitudes found in a true liturgy. Finally we could say that the social rejoicings are part of the spirit of festivity which should find a place in religious ceremonies. A true liturgy should be an occasion for communion with one's fellowmen as well as with the divinity. One does not exist without the other. It appears that both were found in the Blackfoot Sun Dance.

Such liturgical characteristics were marvellous stepping stones leading to Christianity. The links that could easily be established between the Blackfoot religion and the religion of Revelation, probably accounts for the rapid and global entry of the Blackfeet into the Christian Churches.

To those who reduced the Blackfoot religion to mere sun worship and superstitious beliefs, an early missionary's judgment may be enlightening:

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This feast of the Sun, Natos, and the cult given to this brilliant manifestation of the almighty power of the Divine Sun of justice, has misled a few of those who have spoken about the Blackfeet, in leading them to believe that this nation does not know any supreme being. Yet these Indians, like others, have an indefinite idea of the Divinity, of the excellence of an invisible being or principle. The word God is not translated literally into their idiom, which however permits to speak so well of the Divinity and to express his attributes. For example, they say: Ispounitapi (the one who is above) and again: Kininon (our Father). This excellent invisible being whom they naturally suppose to be above, in heaven, is really God, whose infinite goodness they affirm in defining him by the very word the Son of the Eternal has put on our lips when he taught us how to pray.²⁰

²⁰ A. Taché, op. cit., p. 267. The above is a translation of the original in French, which is found in Appendix 7.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this thesis has been an exploratory study of the Blackfoot Sun Dance to discover whether or not this ceremonial included true religious values. It has been seen that it is in fact a true liturgy comprising "expressive and symbolic performances, the dramatic utterance of religious thought, the gesture-language of theology."¹

Since religion is not an abstraction but a relation between persons, God and man, it was necessary to consider the Blackfoot in his natural milieu in order to get a better grasp of the influence of the latter on his religious mentality. The opening chapters treating of the historical and cultural background of the Blackfoot, revealed that he was entirely dependent on nature for his subsistence. It was demonstrated that in the absence of science, he naturally attributed the natural phenomena to God. Consequently he turned to the divinity for his daily needs.

Life on the boundless prairies left its mark on the Blackfoot. The dry, wind-swept rolling plains at the foot of the mighty Rockies, have a certain effect on man.

¹ E.B. Tylor, Religion in Primitive Culture, New York, Harper & Row, 1958, p. 448.

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The exceptionally beautiful night sky irresistibly attracted the Blackfoot's attention and like the Greeks of old, he naturally peopled it with gods. This explains why the Sun, Natos, was the Blackfoot's supreme God. The heat of the spring sun was an epiphany of God's power and beneficial intent. Its warmth made the grass grow and because of it, buffalo was plentiful—and the Blackfoot was assured of food, clothing and dwelling. The buffalo then became a symbol of life, and of the Giver of life. Hence, it became understandable that the Blackfoot religion should center on the Sun and the buffalo.

The Blackfoot, conscious of his dependence on God and desiring to show his gratitude organized the famous yearly ceremonial, the Sun Dance. The Sun Dance became a liturgy, a public act of worship through which the Blackfoot in his own way expressed his feelings towards the divinity. At the same time he communicated with his fellowmen, without whom he could not live.

The development of this ceremonial has shown that the Blackfoot liturgy definitely comprised religious values. These offered rich, productive soil, ready for the seeding of Christianity. A seeding that quickly produced a hundred-fold, since within less than a century, all the Blackfeet were Christians.

CONCLUSION

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The Sun Dance was indeed an excellent preparation for the transfer from the natural religion to the Christian religion. Many exterior aspects of the Sun Dance are similar to those found in the High Mass.

In both, there is a special meeting place, the Sun lodge, the church. The people arrive and take their places in silence. A procession opens the ceremony, the celebrants being the last to enter. In both ceremonials, there is an offertory. The Blackfeet offered whatever they had—hides, garments, and robes. These are now offered in money. The reconciliation expressed by the smoking of the sacred pipe is replaced by the kiss of peace, or the modern hand shake. The communion with Natos has become a communion with Christ. The prayers asking for food, health and long life have become "Give us this day our daily bread." The "Pity us" has become "Lord have mercy."

Both the Sun Dance and the High Mass are collective acts of worship, during which men sing the praises of God the author of all goods. In both, men strengthen their bonds of friendship. In the Mass, however, the unity goes beyond the boundaries of one's group; it embraces all nations in Christ. But it remains true that the Blackfoot Sun Dance did comprise religious values that can be termed as true liturgical characteristics,

characteristics that served as an excellent initiation to the Christian liturgy.

It is beyond the scope of this work to develop a liturgical ceremonial that would integrate certain features of the Sun Dance, but it would be in line with Vatican II's recommendations for an adaptation of the liturgy, recommendations that have been put into practice by Father Roger Van der Steene, O.M.I., who has adapted a ceremonial for the Crees of Wabasca in Northern Alberta.²

² See Et cet Oblat devint Sorcier, in Pôle et Tropiques, Janvier 1966, Paris, C.C.P. Petites Annales - Pôle et Tropiques, pp. 4-9.

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APPENDIX 1

GENTES OR BANDS
OF THE BLACKFEET AND BLOOD TRIBES

Each of the three Blackfoot tribes comprised several bands or gentes, "a gens¹ being a body of consanguineal kindred in the male line."² All the members of the same gens were usually considered as relatives and therefore marriages within the band were not permitted.³

The names given to each gens are interesting and meaningful.

Blackfeet (Sik'-si-kau)

1. Flat Bows.
2. Many Medicines.
3. Black Elks.
4. Dogs Naked.
5. Liars.
6. Biters.
7. Early Finished Eating.
8. Skunks.

Bloods (Kai'-nah)

1. Black Elks.
2. Many Lodge Poles.
3. North Bloods.
4. Woods Bloods.
5. Long Tail Lodge Poles.
6. Lone Fighters.
7. Blackblood.
8. Hair Shirts.
9. Many Children.
10. Short Bows.
11. Skunks.
12. Many Horses.

¹ "Gens" from the French, meaning "a group of people."

² G.B. Grinnell, Blackfoot Lodge Tales, London, David Nutt, 1893, p. 208.

³ Ibid., p. 211.

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From the above lists and the one given about the Peigan (Pi-kun'-i) camp, it is evident that there are gentes of the same name in the three tribes. This is because some persons leaving their own gens to join another tribe preserved the name of their ancestral gens.⁴

4 G.B. Grinnell, op. cit., p. 210.

APPENDIX 2

SOCIETIES OF THE ALL-COMRADES¹

Tsi-stiks'	Little Birds	includes boys from 15 to 20 years old.
Kuk-kuiks'	Pigeons	men who have been to war several times.
Tuis-kis'tiks	Mosquitoes	men who are constantly going to war.
Mut'-siks	Braves	tried warriors.
Knats-o-mi'ta	All Crazy Dogs	about 40 years old.
Ma-stoh'-pa-ta-kiks	Raven Bearers	
E'-mi-taks	Dogs	} old men. Dogs and Tails are different societies but they dress alike and dance together and alike.
Es'-sui	Tails	
Ets-kai'-nah	Horns, Bloods,	} obsolete among the Piegans, but still exists with the Bloods.
Sin'-o-pah	Kit-foxes, Piegans	
E-in'-a-ke	Catchers or Soldiers	obsolete for 25 or 30 years, perhaps longer.
Stu'miks	Bulls	obsolete for 50 years.

These societies among the Pikuni were law and order associations. The Mut'-siks, or Braves, was the chief society but the others helped the Braves.²

1 As given by G.B. Grinnell, in 1893.

2 G.B. Grinnell, Blackfoot Lodge Tales, p. 221.

APPENDIX 3

THE CAMP CIRCLE

Whenever the entire tribe gathered together as for the Sun Dance, for instance, the lodges were always pitched in an orderly fashion. The lodge of the chief of each band was situated at a definite spot within the large circle. About it, stood the lodges of his own people.¹

Within the large circle, a smaller one was formed by the lodges of the societies' chiefs. These lodges served as quarters for the members of the bands on duty, for councils, for informal meetings and lounging or idling purposes.²

When the camp circle was formed, the Bloods always camped first, the White Breast gens next, followed by the others in the order indicated in the diagram.³ The same procedure was followed when the camp moved, number 24 always being last.⁴

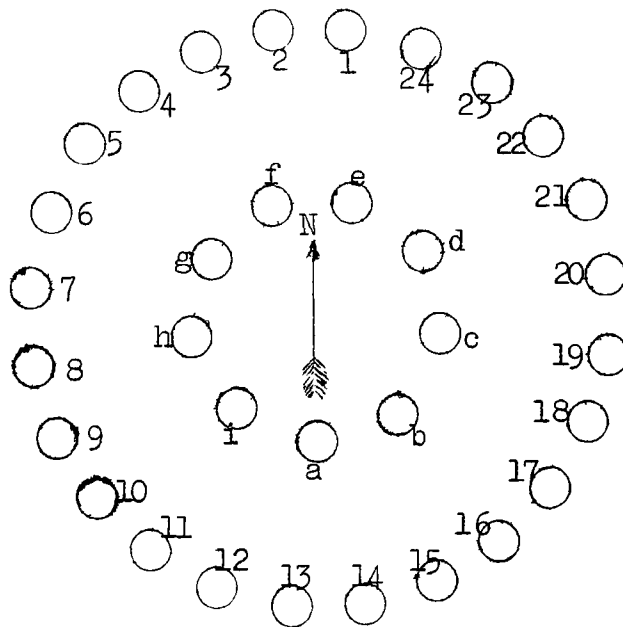
1 G.B. Grinnell, Blackfoot Lodge Tales, p. 224.

2 Ibid., p. 224.

3 Diagram on following page.

4 G.B. Grinnell, op. cit., p. 224.

Diagram of Old-Time Peigan Camp, say 1850-1855.⁵
 Twenty-four lodges of Chiefs of the Gentes about the outer Circle. The inner circle shows lodges of chiefs of certain bands of the All-Comrades.



GENTES OF THE PI-KUN'-I⁶

- | | | |
|-----------------------|-------------------|---------------------|
| 1. Blood People | 6. Early Finished | 11. Skunks |
| 2. White Breasts | Eating | 12. Seldom Lonesome |
| 3. Dried Meat | 7. Don't Laugh | 13. Obstinate |
| 4. Black Patched | 8. Fat Roasters | 14. Lone Fighters |
| Moccasins | 9. Black Doors | 15. Small Robes |
| 5. Black Fat Roasters | 10. Lone Eaters | 16. Big Topknots |

⁵ Arranged by G.B. Grinnell, op. cit., p. 225.

⁶ The gentes listed as Seldom Lonesome, Dried Meat, and No Parflèche belonged to the division of the North Peigans, the group which separated from the rest of the Pi-kun'-i, to come and live on this side of the border at the time of the first Treaty. Cf. G.B. Grinnell, op. cit., p. 224.

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- | | | |
|-------------------|-------------------|---------------------|
| 17. Worm People | 19. Buffalo Dung | 22. All Chiefs |
| 18. Small Brittle | 20. No Parflèche | 23. Red Round Robes |
| Fat | 21. Kill Close By | 24. Many Medicines |

BANDS OF THE I-KUN-UH'-KAH-TSI

- | | | |
|-------------------|------------------|---------------|
| a. All Crazy Dogs | d. Kit-foxes | g. Mosquitoes |
| b. Dogs | e. Raven Bearers | h. Soldiers |
| c. Tails | f. Braves | i. Doves |

APPENDIX 4

CREATION¹

Le Vieux (Demiurge des Pieds-Noirs; dans leur langue, Nâpiw) errait sur la surface de la mer sans limite. Il avait près de lui son petit frère, le castor, puis son autre petit frère, la loutre, puis le huard (sorte d'échassier, dont je ne garantis pas le nom en français. Les Pieds-Noirs ont une sorte de vénération pour cet oiseau qu'ils appellent Matsi-seipiw), puis son petit frère le rat musqué. Alors la queue du castor était droite et celle du rat musqué était large et plate. Le Vieux dit à ses jeunes frères: Plongez et tâchez de me rapporter la terre. Alors tous quatre plongèrent; puis après un temps plus ou moins long, ils reparurent à la surface. Le rat musqué resta le plus longtemps, mais ils ne rapportèrent rien. Ils replongèrent. La loutre, le castor, le huard reparurent bientôt, mais ne rapportèrent rien. Le rat musqué ne paraissait pas et on crut qu'il s'était noyé; enfin sa tête parut à la surface, et en arrivant il s'évanouit. Le Vieux tendit la main, le prit, et en examinant sa patte qu'il tenait fermée, il y trouva un peu de terre. "Voilà la terre, mes petits frères", dit le Vieux. Puis il leur dit: "Plongez de nouveau et allez chercher une pierre." Ils plongèrent et reparurent l'un après l'autre à la surface. Ce fut encore le rat musqué qui resta le plus longtemps sous l'eau et rapporta une petite pierre qu'il donna au Vieux. Alors le Vieux acheva de faire

¹ E. Legal, O.M.I., Lettre, in Petites Annales des Oblats de Marie Immaculée, Vol. 1-2, 1891-1892, pp. 251-255.

la terre. Il mit quatre jours à la faire. C'était bien peu de terre que le rat musqué avait apportée, mais le Vieux souffla dessus et la terre s'agrandit immensément. (D'autres disent qu'il la dispersa comme le semeur disperse la semence.) Le lendemain, il fit les montagnes de Roches (Montagnes Rocheuses). Puis, le lendemain, il fit les bois, les rivières, les poissons et les animaux qui marchent sur la terre. Puis, le lendemain, il fit tous les oiseaux.

Alors le Vieux entreprit de faire les humains. C'est la femme qu'il fit d'abord. Pour cela il se coupa une cuisse, et en deux jours, il acheva de faire la femme. Tout d'abord le résultat ne fut pas trouvé satisfaisant. Il lui avait fait des yeux, mais il arriva que les yeux étaient relevés verticalement au lieu d'être placés horizontalement. De même la bouche était fendue verticalement; il n'y avait pas de nez et les oreilles étaient trop longues. Il y avait huit dents en tout: quatre de chaque côté. Puis le Vieux lui fit les doigts, mais il n'y avait que trois doigts aux mains et aux pieds. Le Vieux en finit là pour le premier jour; il était lassé. Il dit: "Attendez, demain je finirai." Puis il dormit et en rêve il vit comment il devait finir son ouvrage. Le lendemain matin, il se remit à l'oeuvre. Il saisit les oreilles et les roгна; il mit au complet le nombre des doigts. Il changea la position des yeux et de la bouche; il mit le nez et ajouta les dents qui manquaient et trouva que tout était bien.

Au bout de quatre jours, la femme enfanta. Puis le Vieux et la femme tinrent conseil durant quatre jours. Le Vieux dit: "Quand les femmes enfanteront, leurs enfants au bout de quatre jours pourront courir." La femme dit: "Non, les enfants nouveau-nés seront enveloppés dans

des langes et les Vieux les porteront." Le Vieux ne fut pas content, mais il consentit. Le Vieux dit: "Si cette bouse de buffalo sèche surnage et s'en va au gré du courant, on ne mourra pas définitivement, mais au bout de quatre jours on ressuscitera," et il jeta la bouse de vache à la rivière en disant: "On ne mourra pas définitivement si cette bouse de vache descend au courant." Mais la femme parla et dit: "Non, on mourra définitivement et on pleurera ceux qui sont morts. Si cette pierre va au fond de l'eau on mourra définitivement" et elle jeta la pierre à l'eau. La pierre coula au fond et la femme dit: "On pleurera quand quelqu'un mourra et on sera dans le chagrin." Alors le Vieux dit: "Qu'il en soit ainsi!" Or, il arriva que l'enfant de la femme mourut; alors elle dit au Vieux: "On va prendre une nouvelle décision"; mais le Vieux dit: "Non, on va pleurer."

Le Vieux dit encore: "On mangera l'écorce des arbres et la pellicule qui contient la sève. On n'avalera pas la nourriture et si l'on fait ainsi, notre nourriture ne sera pas définitivement détruite. Les buffalos, les cabris et tous les oiseaux et les animaux qui marchent sur terre, au bout de quatre jours ressusciteront." Mais la femme dit: "Non, tous les animaux mourront pour tout de bon, les buffalos, les cabris et tous les oiseaux et les animaux qui marchent sur la terre, et on mangera du buffalo." Le Vieux dit: "Il y aura encore des fruits sauvages, même en hiver;" et la femme dit: "Non, ils seront tous tombés alors." Le Vieux dit encore: "On ne passera pas (préparer, assouplir, chamoiser) les peaux de buffalo"; et la femme dit: "Non, on passera les peaux." Le Vieux dit aussi: "On n'aura qu'une provision de bois à faire pour le feu, car le bois ne se consumera pas." Mais la femme dit:

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"Non, on ira chaque jour chercher du bois." C'est ainsi que par le mauvais vouloir de la femme, tout est pire en ce monde.

APPENDIX 5

SCARFACE OR THE CHRIST STORY OF THE BLACKFEET¹

Legend of Star Boy (Later, Poïa, Scarface)

"We know not when the Sun-dance had its origin. It was long ago, when the Blackfeet used dogs for beasts of burden instead of horses; when they stretched the legs and bodies of their dogs on sticks to make them large, and when they used stones instead of wooden pegs to hold down their lodges. In those days, during the moon of flowers (early summer), our people were camped near the mountains. It was a cloudless night and a warm wind blew over the prairie. Two young girls were sleeping in the long grass outside the lodge. Before daybreak, the eldest sister, So-at-sa-ki (Feather Woman), awoke. The Morning Star was just rising from the prairie. He was very beautiful, shining through the clear air of early morning. She lay gazing at this wonderful star, until he seemed very close to her, and she imagined that he was her lover. Finally she awoke her sister, exclaiming, 'Look at the Morning Star! He is beautiful and must be very wise. Many of the young men have wanted to marry me, but I love only the Morning Star.' When the leaves were turning yellow (autumn), So-at-sa-ki became very unhappy, finding herself with child. She was a pure maiden, although not knowing the father of her child. When the people discovered her

¹ As related by Brings-down-the-Sun to M. W. McClintock, in The Old North Trail, pp. 491-499.

secret, they taunted and ridiculed her, until she wanted to die. One day while the geese were flying southward, So-at-sa-ki went alone to the river for water. As she was returning home, she beheld a young man standing before her in the trail. She modestly turned aside to pass, but he put forth his hand, as if to detain her, and she said angrily, 'Stand aside! None of the young men have ever before dared to stop me.' He replied, 'I am the Morning Star. One night, during the moon of flowers, I beheld you sleeping in the open and loved you. I have now come to ask you to return with me to the sky, to the lodge of my father, the Sun, where we will live together, and you will have no more trouble.'

"Then So-at-sa-ki remembered the night in spring, when she slept outside the lodge, and now realised that Morning Star was her husband. She saw in his hair a yellow plume, and in his hand a juniper branch with a spider web hanging from one end. He was tall and straight and his hair was long and shining. His beautiful clothes were of soft-tanned skins, and from them came a fragrance of pine and sweet grass. So-at-sa-ki replied hesitatingly, 'I must first say farewell to my father and mother.' But Morning Star allowed her to speak to no one. Fastening the feather in her hair and giving her the juniper branch to hold, he directed her to shut her eyes. She held the upper strand of the spider web in her hand and placed her feet upon the lower one. When he told her to open her eyes, she was in the sky. They were standing together before a large lodge. Morning Star said, 'This is the home of my father and mother, the Sun and the Moon,' and bade her enter. It was day-time and the Sun was away on his long journey, but the Moon was at home. Morning Star addressed his mother saying, 'One night I beheld this girl sleeping on the

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prairie. I loved her and she is now my wife.' The Moon welcomed So-at-sa-ki to their home. In the evening, when the Sun Chief came home, he also gladly received her. The Moon clothed So-at-sa-ki in a soft-tanned buckskin dress, trimmed with elk-teeth. She also presented her with wristlets of elk-teeth and an elk-skin robe, decorated with the sacred paint, saying, 'I give you these because you have married our son.' So-at-sa-ki lived happily in the sky with Morning Star, and learned many wonderful things. When her child was born, they called him Star Boy. The Moon then gave So-at-sa-ki a root digger, saying, 'This should be used only by pure women. You can dig all kinds of roots with it, but I warn you not to dig up the large turnip growing near the home of the Spider Man. You have now a child and it would bring unhappiness to us all.'

"Everywhere So-at-sa-ki went, she carried her baby and the root digger. She often saw the large turnip, but was afraid to touch it. One day, while passing the wonderful turnip, she thought of the mysterious warning of the Moon, and became curious to see what might be underneath. Laying her baby on the ground, she dug until her root digger stuck fast. Two large cranes came flying from the east. So-at-sa-ki besought them to help her. Thrice she called in vain, but upon the fourth call, they circled and lighted beside her. The chief crane sat upon one side of the turnip and his wife on the other. He took hold of the turnip with his long sharp bill, and moved it backwards and forwards, singing the medicine song,

"'This root is sacred. Wherever I dig,
my roots are sacred.'

"He repeated this song to the north, south, east and west. After the fourth song he pulled up the turnip. So-at-sa-ki looked through the hole and beheld the earth.

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Although she had not known it, the turnip had filled the same hole, through which Morning Star had brought her into the sky. Looking down, she saw the camp of the Blackfeet, where she had lived. She sat for a long while gazing at the old familiar scenes. The young men were playing games. The women were tanning hides and making lodges, gathering berries on the hills, and crossing the meadows to the river for water. When she turned to go home, she was crying, for she felt lonely, and longed to be back again upon the green prairies with her own people. When So-at-sa-ki arrived at the lodge, Morning Star and his mother were waiting. As soon as Morning Star looked at his wife, he exclaimed, 'You have dug up the sacred turnip!' When she did not reply, the Moon said, 'I warned you not to dig up the turnip, because I love Star Boy and do not wish to part with him.' Nothing more was said, because it was day-time and the great Sun Chief was still away on his long journey. In the evening, when he entered the lodge, he exclaimed, 'What is the matter with my daughter? She looks sad and must be in trouble.' So-at-sa-ki replied, 'Yes, I am homesick, because I have to-day looked down upon my people.' Then the Sun Chief was angry and said to Morning Star, 'If she has disobeyed, you must send her home.' The Moon interceded for So-at-sa-ki, but the Sun answered, 'She can no longer be happy with us. It is better for her to return to her own people.' Morning Star led So-at-sa-ki to the home of the Spider Man, whose web had drawn her up to the sky. He placed on her head the sacred Medicine Bonnet, which is worn only by pure women. He laid Star Boy on her breast, and wrapping them both in the elk-skin robe, bade her farewell, saying, 'We will let you down into the centre of the Indian camp and the people will behold you as you come from the sky.' The Spider Man then

carefully let them down through the hole to the earth.

"It was an evening in midsummer, during the moon when the berries are ripe, when So-at-sa-ki was let down from the sky. Many of the people were outside their lodges, when suddenly they beheld a bright light in the northern sky. They saw it pass across the heavens and watched, until it sank to the ground. When the Indians reached the place, where the star had fallen, they saw a strange looking bundle. When the elk-skin cover was opened, they found a woman and her child. So-at-sa-ki was recognised by her parents. She returned to their lodge and lived with them, but never was happy. She used to go with Star Boy to the summit of a high ridge, where she sat and mourned for her husband. One night she remained alone upon the ridge. Before day-break, when Morning Star arose from the plains, she begged him to take her back. Then he spoke to her, 'You disobeyed and therefore cannot return to the sky. Your sin is the cause of your sorrow and has brought trouble to you and your people.'

"Before Sa-at-sa-ki died, she told all these things to her father and mother, just as I now tell them to you. Star Boy's grandparents also died. Although born in the home of the Sun, he was very poor. He had no clothes, not even moccasins to wear. He was so timid and shy that he never played with other children. When the Blackfeet moved camp, he always followed barefoot, far behind the rest of the tribe. He feared to travel with the other people, because the other boys stoned and abused him. On his face was a mysterious scar, which became more marked as he grew older. He was ridiculed by everyone and in derision was called Poŋa (Scarface).

"When Poŋa became a young man, he loved a maiden of his own tribe. She was very beautiful and the daughter of a leading chief. Many of the young men wanted to marry her, but she refused them all. Poŋa sent this maiden a present, with the message that he wanted to marry her, but she was proud and disdained his love. She scornfully told him, she would not accept him as her lover, until he would remove the scar from his face. Scarface was deeply grieved by the reply. He consulted with an old medicine woman, his only friend. She revealed to him that the scar had been placed on his face by the Sun God, and that only the Sun himself could remove it. Poŋa resolved to go to the home of the Sun God. The medicine woman made moccasins for him and gave him a supply of pemmican.

"Poŋa journeyed alone across the plains and through the mountains, enduring many hardships and great dangers. Finally he came to the Big Water (Pacific Ocean). For three days and three nights he lay upon the shore, fasting and praying to the Sun God. On the evening of the fourth day, he beheld a bright trail leading across the water. He travelled this path until he drew near the home of the Sun, when he hid himself and waited. In the morning, the great Sun Chief came from his lodge, ready for his daily journey. He did not recognise Poŋa. Angered at beholding a creature from the earth, he said to the Moon, his wife, 'I will kill him, for he comes from a good-for-nothing-race,' but she interceded and saved his life. Morning Star, their only son, a young man with a handsome face and beautifully dressed, came forth from the lodge. He brought with him dried sweet grass, which he burned as incense. He first placed Poŋa in the sacred smoke, and then led him into the presence of his father and mother, the Sun and the Moon. Poŋa related the story of his long journey, because

of his rejection by the girl he loved. Morning Star then saw how sad and worn he looked. He felt sorry for him and promised to help him.

"Poŋa lived in the lodge of the Sun and Moon with Morning Star. Once, when they were hunting together, Poŋa killed seven enormous birds, which had threatened the life of Morning Star. He presented four of the dead birds to the Sun and three to the Moon. The Sun rejoiced, when he knew that the dangerous birds were killed, and the Moon felt so grateful, that she besought her husband to repay him. On the intercession of Morning Star, the Sun God consented to remove the scar. He also appointed Poŋa as his messenger to the Blackfeet, promising, if they would give a festival (Sun-dance) in his honour, once every year, he would restore their sick to health. He taught Poŋa the secrets of the Sun-dance, and instructed him in the prayers and songs to be used. He gave him two raven feathers to wear as a sign that he came from the Sun, and a robe of soft-tanned elk-skin, with the warning that it must be worn only by a virtuous woman. She can then give the Sundance and the sick will recover. Morning Star gave him a magic flute and a wonderful song, with which he would be able to charm the heart of the girl he loved.

"Poŋa returned to the earth and the Blackfeet camp by the Wolf Trail (Milky Way), the short path to the earth. When he had fully instructed his people concerning the Sundance, the Sun God took him back to the sky with the girl he loved. When Poŋa returned to the home of the Sun, the Sun God made him bright and beautiful, just like his father, Morning Star. In those days Morning Star and his son could be seen together in the east. Because Poŋa appears first in the sky, the Blackfeet often mistake him for his father, and he is therefore sometimes called Poks-o-piks-o-aks, Mistake Morning Star."

APPENDIX 6

SELF-TORTURE IN THE BLOOD INDIAN SUN DANCE¹

Self-torture survived in the sun dances of the Blood and North Blackfoot Indians of southern Alberta for a few years after its discontinuance among the Plains tribes of this country. In the course of field work on the Blood Reserve, Sept. 1947, the writer met two elderly full-bloods who had been tortured in the sun dance of their tribe. They were the last survivors of men of that tribe who had experienced this ordeal, and they were particularly desirous that their torture experiences should be recorded accurately. These narratives by Scraping White (now 81 years old) and Heavy Head (now 78), related to the writer through the interpreter Percy Creighton, provide new and significant information on the procedure of self-torture in the Blood sun dance ceremony and its meaning to those who submitted to it. They help to round out the only published description of the Blood self-torture, that of the missionary John McLean, who witnessed the ceremony prior to 1889.

In the summer of 1889 the Blood medicine lodge was erected on the north bank of the Kootenay River, in southern Alberta. Three young men, Scraping White (then 23 years of age), Tough Bread (now deceased), and Heavy Head (then 20 years old), presented themselves to be tortured.

Scraping White described his experience thus:

¹ By John C. Ewers, in Journal of the Washington Academy of Sciences, Vol. 38, No. 5, May 15, 1948, pp. 166-173.

"Three of us tortured ourselves in the sun dance that year—Tough Bread, Heavy Head, and I. I was the oldest of the three.

"I was on a war party to take horses from the Assiniboine when I made my vow to be tortured. Shortly before the sun went down, when we were in sight of the enemy camp, I turned to the sun and said, "I want good luck. Now I go to the enemy. I want to capture a good horse and go home safely. I'll be tortured this coming sun dance." As soon as it was dark I went into the enemy camp and took two fast horses out of their corral without any of them knowing it. I had good luck and reached home safely.

"Then I told my relatives of the vow I had made. Yellow Horn, an older relative, who had been through the torture before, told me, "Put up a sweat lodge for me and I shall look after you." I made the sweat lodge the very next day.

"Not long after that the sun dance was held. The torture took place the day after the center pole was raised for the medicine lodge. I was the first one to be tortured. The torture began about noon. Old Yellow Horn cut my breasts with an iron arrowhead and inserted a skewer through the cuts at each breast. These skewers were of sarvisberry wood flattened on both sides, thinned toward the ends but not sharpened, and about this long. [Scraping White indicated a distance of about 2 inches between his thumb and forefinger.] Then sinew was wrapped around the ends of the skewers and they were tied, each skewer to a 4-strand plaited rawhide rope. The two ropes were fastened at their far ends to the center pole at its forks.

"I stook up and Yellow Horn told me, "Now you walk up, put your arms around the center pole and pray. Tell

sun, now your vow is being fulfilled." I did just as he told me. Then I stepped back. Yellow Horn pulled hard on the rawhide ropes attached to the skewers. Then I danced. I didn't dance long before my flesh gave way and the skewers pulled out. Yellow Horn came to me and cut the skin that had broken. He trimmed it off even. Then he gave me the pieces of skin he had cut away and told me to take them and stick them in the ground at the base of the center pole, saying, "Now sun, I have completed my vow."

Heavy Head's narrative of his torture experience was still more detailed:

"There were only two of us, Buffalo Teeth, my partner, and I. We went to war together to take horses. At Medicine Hat we found a small camp of Cree half-breeds. It was night when we saw their camp. It was moonlight. I looked up at the moon and prayed to it, "I shall be tortured at the sun dance if I have good luck and get home safely." Then I stole up to the camp and got one bay that was tied in front of a lodge without any of the enemy waking or seeing me. Buffalo Teeth took a roan. We started back to the Blood camp, traveled three days and three nights with no food other than a black rabbit. We got awfully weak and hungry.

"When I reached home I told my story to my father, Water Bull. The old man got up and sang his encouraging song. Then he told me, "My son, you have done something worth doing. You have made a vow that you will be tortured at the sun dance. You must do it this coming sun dance."

"A few days later I went out to the east point of Belly Butte to fast. While I fasted I dreamed that a sacred person came to me and gave me a drum and certain herbs to use for doctoring. Then I returned home.

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"A short time after that the bands began to come together for the sun dance encampment. I prepared myself to go to an old man named Little Bear, a relative of mine, who had been through the torture himself, years before. I filled my pipe and took it to him. I gave him the pipe and a buckskin horse, and said, "Here is a horse for you. Keep this pipe too. I want you to look after me in the torture." When I gave him the pipe he put it down and went over to the next lodge. There were two old men there, Green Grass Bull and Red Bead. These men were not related to me, but they were both older than Little Bear, and both had been through the torture. Little Bear asked them to come to his lodge, to take my pipe and pray for me. After they prayed, they told me not to take any food or water the day I was to be tortured.

"The day before the torture I ate or drank nothing. Next day I ate or drank nothing until after the torture. However, the three old men gave me some sagebrush to chew.

"I was the last of the three Blood Indians to undergo the torture that day. Scraping White, who was the oldest, was first. Then Tough Bread, then I. I was the youngest. Inside the medicine lodge, on the west side of the center pole and north of the weather dancer's arbor, a shelter was built of sticks like a sweat lodge, covered with willow leaves. I went in there before noon of the day of the torture. I was laid on my back with my head pointed north. I was barefoot, and wore only a breechcloth made from a small, red, trade shawl purchased from the Hudson's Bay Company. There was a little bowl of white paint and another of black paint nearby. The three old men painted four black dots, one below the other, under each of my eyes. This was called "tear paint." If I cried, the tears would run down there. Then they painted a double

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row of six black dots on each arm. They painted the symbol of the moon, points up, on my forehead in black. On the outside of each of my legs they painted a double row of six black dots. The rest of my body was painted white, also my face. They took some of the broad-leaved sagebrush from the ground inside the sweat lodge and bound it together, placed a wreath of it around my head, and bands of it around each wrist and ankle.

"I was taken from the sweat lodge and laid upon a blanket on the ground at the north side of the center pole with my head to the north, my feet toward the center pole. Other people were told to keep back away from me. Then an old man named Low Horn was brought forward. He counted four of his coups. The three old men, Little Bear, Red Bead, and Green Grass Bull, held me—one at each arm, and one at my head. Red Bead took a sharp, iron arrowhead in his hand, and asked me, "How do you want me to cut them? Thick or thin?" I said, "Thin." (I learned later that this question was always asked of the man undergoing the torture before his breasts were pierced, and the one doing the cutting always did just the opposite of the young man's request. So when I said "thin," Red Bead knew to make his incisions deep). Red Bead gave four of his own war coups. He made no prayer. Then he pierced my breasts with the sharp arrowhead and inserted a serviceberry stick through each breast. The sticks were not sharp but flattened at the ends. The other two men held my arms as he cut and inserted the sticks. Blood flowed down my chest and legs over the white paint. Then Red Bead pressed the sticks against my body with his hands. They turned me around to face the sun and pierced my back. To the skewers on my back they hung an imitation shield, not so heavy as a war shield. The shield had feathers on it, but I don't remem-

ber how it was painted. It belonged to a man named Peninsula.

"The ropes were brought out from the center pole and tied to the skewers in my breasts—right side first, then left side. Red Bead then grabbed the ropes and jerked them hard twice. Then he told me, "Now you go to the center pole and pray that your vow will come true." I walked up there. I knew I was supposed to pretend to cry. But oh! I really cried. It hurt so much. Coming back from the center pole I was shouting. Then, before I started to dance, I jerked the shield off my back.

"I leaned back and began dancing, facing the center pole. It felt just like the center pole was pulling me toward it. I began to dance from the west toward the doorway of the sun lodge and back. Then, when the skewers did not break loose, the old men realized that the incisions had been made too deep. Red Bead came up and cut the outside of the incisions again so they would break loose. As I started dancing again the left side gave way and I had to continue dancing with only my right side holding. An old man named Strangling Wolf jumped up from the crowd and came toward me shouting. He called out four coups he had counted and jumped on me. The last rope gave way and I fell to the ground.

"The three old men came to me and cut the rough pieces of flesh hanging from my breasts off even. They told me to take this flesh that had been trimmed off, and the sagebrush from my head, wrists, and ankles, and place them at the base of the center pole. I did as they told me.

"Then I took my robe and walked out of the medicine lodge alone. I went to a lonely place and fasted for a night. I wanted to dream. But I couldn't sleep at all

because of the pain. At sunrise I prayed to the sun.

Some time after that I saw a man approaching on horseback. He said, "I'm going to take you home right away." He took me up behind him on his horse and rode me slowly back to camp. My breasts were swollen and hurt. The rider's name was Red Crane. He told me of a mix-up that took place at the sun dance over horses stolen from the Gros Ventres.

"When I got to my lodge, my mother gave me something to eat. She and my father told me what had happened at the sun dance gathering—a mix-up between the Mounted Police and Indians. I had to stay in the lodge several days. My breasts were so swollen I could hardly move. Indian doctors used herb medicines to take the swelling away and cure my wounds."

APPENDIX 7

LA FÊTE DU SOLEIL¹

Cette fête du soleil, Natous, et le culte rendu à cette brillante manifestation de la toute-puissance du soleil de justice, ont induit en erreur quelques-uns de ceux qui ont parlé des Pieds-Noirs, en leur faisant croire que cette nation ne connaît point un être suprême. Pourtant ces [Indiens] comme les autres, ont une idée indéfinie de la Divinité, de l'excellence d'un être ou principe invisible. Le mot Dieu ne se traduit pas littéralement dans leur idiome, qui cependant permet de parler si bien de la Divinité et d'en exprimer les attributs. Par exemple ils disent: Ispounitapi (celui qui est en haut), et encore: Kininon (notre Père). Cet excellent être invisible que naturellement ils supposent en haut, au ciel, c'est bien Dieu, dont ils affirment la bonté infinie en le désignant aussi par le mot même que le Fils de l'Eternel a mis sur nos lèvres en nous enseignant à prier.

¹ Mgr. A. Taché, Esquisse sur le Nord-Ouest de l'Amérique, in Missions des Missionnaires Oblats, Paris, Vol. 8, 1869, p. 267.