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Current Trends in the Wind River Shoshone Sun Dance

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CURRENT TRENDS IN THE WIND RIVER SHOSHONE SUN DANCE ¹

By FRED W. VOGET

INTRODUCTION

The Wind River Shoshone, situated on a reservation near Lander, Wyo., not only have maintained a modified form of the aboriginal Sun Dance as a native worship, but also have transmitted the complex to neighboring tribes.² The ceremonial, in both its aboriginal and modern expressions (1937), has been treated by Dr. Demitri B. Shimkin in the preceding paper of this volume.³ The present paper is designed to supplement Dr. Shimkin's study with a presentation of data obtained in 1948 and to analyze trends in change and stability since 1937. For purposes of description the treatment will be made under the following rubrics: Sponsorship and organization, preliminary dances, lodge construction, dance practices, and ideology.

SPONSORSHIP AND ORGANIZATION

The manner of publicly announcing sponsorship of a Sun Dance and its sole direction by the pledger has been maintained, but certain changes in organization are evident. These modifications in part are traceable to the recognition of functions which were emerging in 1937, and to a weakening of the informal pattern of leadership owing to the death of men of "aboriginal" status.

Shoshone tradition emphasizes a single performance in any year, but since 1939 two performances have been given, one during the latter part of July and the other during the latter part of August. While the Shoshone have encouraged the attendance of tourists for some time, it was not until 1939 that a performance was scheduled for their special

¹ The paper is an adaptation of a fuller treatment of the current ceremonial. The writer gratefully acknowledges financial assistance provided by the Laboratory of Anthropology, University of Nebraska, and the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research, McGill University. I also wish to thank Dr. Demitri B. Shimkin for his valuable criticisms of the manuscript and for making the necessary arrangements to include it with his own publication.

² The ceremonials of the Ute, Fort Hall Shoshone, and Crow are traceable to the Wind River Shoshone (Opler, 1941; Hoebel, 1935; Voget, 1948 and MS.).

³ For a detailed account of the ceremonial upon which comparisons are based, the reader is referred to Dr. Shimkin's study, No. 41, this volume.

benefit.⁴ In effect this meant that the Sun Dance had taken on a new function, one which implicated it in tribal enterprises designed to attract white patronage, such as the rodeo. As late as 1937, according to Shimkin, the Sun Dance was supervised by a "semiheditary" society known as the "Cree" or "Antlers." By 1939, however, an elective committee system was instituted which was empowered "To authorize and promote rodeo events, Indian dances, and entertainments among the Shoshone people and any people residing within the bounds of the reservation, who so desires to participate."⁵ The new organization was placed under the jurisdiction of the Shoshone Business Council, and in 1945 a constitution and bylaws were drawn up to determine the full powers and duties of the Shoshone Entertainment Committee.⁶ The above development appears to have been related to a growing dissatisfaction with financial irregularities attributed to older informal organizations, and to the spread of a responsible committee system stimulated by comprehensive Government plans to develop a measure of political responsibility and economic independence among the Shoshone.⁷ The pledger, instead of contacting the semiheditary society, now communicates his intention to the committee, the members of which then assist with the arrangements. The pledger also selects six assistants, who thus constitute a sort of subcommittee, to facilitate the production of the Sun Dance. Not infrequently the members of the Sun Dance Committee may be associated with a society, but such membership is not the basis for their selection. Relationship, friendship, and ceremonial experience appear to be more significant.

While the primary function of the Shoshone Entertainment Committee revolves about the regulation of finances, it is also implicated in transportation arrangements and the provision of ceremonial equipment, e. g., drums, buffalo head, eagle, and cloth pennants. Moreover, ceremonial acts, such as the maintenance of the fire and the bringing of water, formerly performed by special officiants may now be carried out by committee members. In addition, spectators are formally welcomed by the chairman, and he also has charge of the distribution of gifts donated for tribal visitors. Prior to the termination of the performance a report of individual contributions to the ceremonial and of monies collected from tourists is made public. While the informal organization of the Shoshone allows a certain over-

⁴ A telegram from the Wyoming Department of Commerce and Industry, dated April 12, 1939, requested the "medicine man" to have the "Great Spirit" tell him to set a definite date for the dance during the last week in July; hence, the annual scheduling of the performance for July 26.

⁵ The citation is from the constitution of the Shoshone Entertainment Committee as of 1945, but it accords with the intent of the committee elected September 10, 1939.

⁶ This information was supplied by Mrs. J. W. Schultz. As of 1948 the constitution of the committee had yet to be approved by the tribal council.

⁷ Dissatisfaction over the handling of funds is probably of long standing, for one informant stated that the Poke-in-Nose society had been revived ca. 1930 to correct the misuse of funds by members of the Antlers.

lap of ceremonial functions between the elected and appointed committees, it is evident that the committee system has supplanted controls formerly exercised by the semihereditary society. It is equally evident that the function of the ceremonial has been redefined in such a way that it tends to be viewed as a public possession designed to serve the public welfare.

The ceremonial role of the sponsor has not diminished perceptibly in the face of the above committee development. Moreover, older men, frequently members of societies and experienced Sun Dancers, volunteer their services and cooperate fully with the pledger in the direction of the performance. It is apparent, however, that a weakening of the informal leadership structure has resulted from the gradual decline in the number of men who had grown up in the shadow of the aboriginal culture. This has allowed rival leaders to emerge, some of whom are endeavoring to change the ceremonial whereas others are seeking to maintain a status quo.⁸ The Shoshone tend to contrast present Sun Dance leadership unfavorably with that of the past, and informants generally were of the opinion that the powers exercised by current leaders were not so great as those of former years. It is not unlikely that dual performances are symptomatic of emergent factions, for the predominant full-blood membership and the nature of the August performance in 1948 suggest an alinement of conservatives. Certainly dissatisfaction with a particular performance was cited as the reason for a second. Again, undue individual hardship was reported as a motive for sponsoring a second performance.

Sponsorship of the Sun Dance and participation have remained the prerogatives of males. Fifty-six dancers performed in the July and 33 in the August ceremonials respectively. Of the latter, 26 were Wind River Shoshone, the remainder being distributed among the Ute, Idaho Shoshone, and Arapaho. Participants disclosed a range of 15 to 68 years in age, with a mean of 38 years. A break-down according to age disclosed the surprising fact that nearly half of the performers were under 30 years, and of these 9 were from 15 to 19 years of age.⁹ Full-bloods (including one individual rated $\frac{3}{8}$) constituted nearly 72 percent of the participants, whereas in the population at large they totaled no more than 26 percent. Fifteen of the twenty-six Shoshone participants, including the sponsor, were Peyotists.¹⁰

⁸ For an account of John Truhjo's sustained attempts to introduce substantial changes in the ceremonial, see Voget, 1950.

⁹ The threat of induction into the Army probably accounts for the unusual number of youths in the ceremonial.

¹⁰ From data supplied by Shimkin with respect to participation in the ceremony witnessed in 1937, certain correspondences and differences are revealed. Of 23 participants listed, nearly one-third were under 30 years of age. Their ages ranged from 19 to 77 years, the average being 38 years. Full-bloods comprised some 43 percent of the participants, a figure significantly lower than that recorded for the 1948 performance but nonetheless weighted in favor of racial purity. The number of Peyotists totaled 10.

The contributions of women for the most part were routine, such as singing, the bringing of bedding, and the preparation of the feast. No women were observed to help in the construction of the lodge.

PRELIMINARY DANCES

While four preliminary dances usually precede a Sun Dance performance, the minimum requirement is two. The increasing use of two as a ritual number in the Sun Dance was remarked by Shimkin (1942, p. 459), an innovation which he traced to Peyotism. A degree of variability, however, appears to have been characteristic of this subcomplex, for in 1912 Lowie (1919, p. 393) reported a total of three singing dances for the ceremonial.

Theoretically the function of the singing is to render the area for the main performance sacred, but no effort was made to control the movements of spectators, who encroached freely on the "sacred" area west of the fire. Several informants stated that approximately 15 years before no one would have been allowed west of the fire unless he were to remove his shoes. The perfunctory character of current preliminary dances is impressive and indicates a lack of interest which probably is the prelude to disappearance, as Barnett observed, among societies in northwestern California.¹¹

LODGE CONSTRUCTION

Religious activity among the Shoshone, as among most nomadic Plains tribes, has been characterized by a loose ceremonialism rather than by an integrated ritualism. The primary emphasis has been upon the psychic experience of the individual in relation to the supernatural, and thus it is not surprising that the minutiae of ordered form have been neglected. This emphasis upon the end rather than the instruments thereto has allowed individual changes in content, provided they conformed to a minimum definition, and also has influenced the reaction of the group to the introduction of Euro-American artifacts. Thus, the Shoshone have not hesitated in the past to use wagons to haul the timbers to the lodge site, and currently trucks and trailers are coming into vogue (Lowie, 1919, p. 393). In the same vein we note the early introduction of the ax, crowbar, shovel, rope, wire, stuffed eagles, and mounted buffalo heads to facilitate the construction of the lodge.

Activities in relation to lodge construction were informal and without significant direction by the sponsor, who appeared to rely equally upon his assistant and another experienced dancer. These men pro-

¹¹ Barnett, 1940, pp. 44-45. Shimkin (personal communication) observed that the preliminary dances which he witnessed struck him as more perfunctory than that described by the writer.

ceeded at a leisurely pace from one task to another, and when stoppages would occur, the group would confer and soon dispatch a younger man for the required tool or rope. A limited amount of organization was suggested by the pairs of young men assigned to dig the post holes. These were referred to as a "detail," and it was stated that they were to be relieved after a few hours' work. The relief, however, did not materialize.

The construction of the lodge, as Shimkin has indicated, involves a basic sequence of events; but few of these appear to be impervious to variation. In the digging of post holes, special attention was given first to the center post and secondly to the west post and it is quite probable that this sequence is more or less enjoined. For the remainder of the post holes, the workers began at the points marking the entranceway and proceeded in a counterclockwise and a clockwise direction respectively. The erection of the posts marking the perimeter disclosed a basic counterclockwise sequence. When erecting the rafters, special attention was paid to the cardinal points, west, east, south, and north, and then a basic clockwise sequence was followed. The stringers used to lock the rafters in place also were laid in a clockwise manner, beginning with the entranceway.

Certain modifications appear to be in line with a functional redefinition of the complex to accord with current problems and to accommodate to the model of Christian worship. Foremost among such changes is the progressive loss of ceremonial traits deriving from the war complex, a trend also reported by Shimkin. According to Lynn St. Clair, no coup has been struck on either the center pole or the forked rafter preliminary to felling since 1946. The assault on the lodge timbers after they have been brought to the camp is usually omitted,¹² and the ringing of the center pole with charcoal bands by warriors who recite their coups is no longer found.¹³ Several informants traced the above omissions to a lack of eligible officiants owing to the death of men of aboriginal status.¹⁴ The Shoshone, unlike the Crow, have not equated veterans of world wars with aboriginal warriors and allowed the former to substitute in the ceremonial situation (Voget, n.d., MS.). Instead, the Shoshone have substituted prayers by the sponsor. The veteran has been included in the contemporary

¹² A shazn battle was included in the July performance, presumably because of the tourist emphasis.

¹³ The Shoshone apparently do not insist upon the decoration of the pole, but leave the decision to the pledger. In the July performance the base of the pole was smeared with yellow paint; in the August performance the pole was undecorated.

¹⁴ "The reason for selecting these old men to strike the pole is because he had been in many wars and he was protected, we believe, by the Father And then he has that privilege to strike that pole and then he could tell about that deed in form of a prayer. He prays that all the young people be protected like he was through those wars and that his people be healthy and that today they be protected from disease like he was protected from arrows and bullets. But today we have no old men like that to give us blessing like that and the sponsor . . . has to pray . . . for everything"

ceremonial, but only by the introduction of a special subcomplex involving the American flag.

Various subcomplexes which appear to be stabilized in Shimkin's description now seem to be characterized by instability. Thus, the decoration of ceremonial objects, such as the buffalo head and the eagle, is falling into desuetude. Variation in the color of the pennants attached to the forks of the center pole also is apparent. During the 1948 performances, yellow-and-gray and red-and-blue pennants were used in contrast with the usual blue-and-white. While this trait may be potentially variable, owing to the fact that it is the pledger who decides the colors according to his dream, nevertheless it is significant that individuation is so frequent. The attachment of the eagle likewise demonstrates variability; in 1937 Shimkin described the eagle as facing east, whereas in Wesaw's performance in 1948 it faced west.¹⁵ As I have indicated elsewhere, John Truhujo has endeavored to introduce form elements currently integrated in Peyote ceremonialism which he considers aboriginal (Voget, 1950).

DANCE PRACTICES

Ceremonial practices revealed no fundamental changes from those recorded by Shimkin in 1937, but it is evident that a basic trend of simplification is proceeding. The dress of the participants is becoming simplified by the loss of the apron worn over the fringed skirt, although this trait is retained by older men. On the other hand, American artifacts have been accepted increasingly as adjuncts to a dancer's toilet and dress. Thus, towels, wash basins, mirrors, lipsticks, and modern jewelry are standard equipment for the individual performer.

As an adjunct to the drumming and singing, the gourd rattle is used sporadically; it was first employed during the second day of the performance witnessed. The fire is no longer kindled ceremonially by an old warrior, and both coup recitations and shamanistic performances are obsolescent. Attempts by Truhujo to introduce special ceremonial prayers have not met with success, but a close friend, Tilton West, performed a formalized smoking with the pipe during the dance sponsored by Tom Wesaw.

The ideal of striving for the closest contact with the supernatural, epitomized by the semitrance faint, is still expressed, but it is doubtful whether it occurs any more. Rather, an increasing reliance upon dreaming is apparent, for no prolonged dancing by a single performer

¹⁵ The variability may derive from individual inclination, for Tilton West, a close friend of Truhujo (who insists that the eagle should face west), attached the eagle in the August performance. In the July performance Truhujo attached six eagle feathers to each fork of the rafter instead of at the crotch, as is customary.

was observed. And, indeed, the old men appeared singularly unenthusiastic in their encouragement of the performers.

A special subcomplex involving the American flag appears to be permanently incorporated in the ceremonial.¹⁶ The flag is raised every morning before the resumption of the dance following the sunrise ceremony and it is lowered in the late afternoon when the performance is again about to be interrupted. The subcomplex involves a pole (entirely stripped of bark to resemble the usual flagpole) erected at the entranceway, an American flag donated by a woman whose son was killed in action, special flag song, standing of all participants and nonparticipants with head uncovered and facing the flag, drumming and singing solely by a Shoshone group led by the inventor of the song, prayer by the sponsor, and veteran personnel to handle the flag. The incorporation of the above during the war (ca. 1945) emphasizes the sensitivity of Shoshone worship to current problems and the reemergence of the predominant aboriginal function of the ceremonial in relation to war.

Curative practices emphasize the basic pattern of prayer and brushing of the patient with a fan or wing of the eagle, as reported by Shimkin. However, each practitioner maintains a certain individuality in technique and a differential in power is recognized by the public at large. A possible change in the position of patients undergoing treatment may have occurred, for in the 1937 performance they faced west, whereas in 1948 they faced east. However, it is more probable that east facing and west facing were alternatives in 1937 according to the individual practice of the shaman.

The August performance also witnessed the introduction of an alternative to the usual custom of blessing the participants immediately prior to the termination of the dance. All the performers were blessed in groups by the medicine men during the course of the afternoon. In this way the terminal ceremonies were shortened and the blessing by respected nonparticipants obviated. The surprise and complaint which this action elicited probably indicate that it will not become stabilized as an alternative.

IDEOLOGY

The contact of the Shoshone with Christianity, as Shimkin (1942, p. 458) has observed, led to a profound reorientation of the Sun Dance. Christian influences relate to new meanings attributed to the ceremonial as a whole as well as to specific form elements. The conception of the Sun Dance as a "religion" and reinterpretations,

¹⁶ A similar use of the flag developed among the Crow. While diffusion is not to be ruled out, it is not unlikely that a parallel development has occurred, for the Crow commonly make use of the American flag during their festive annual encampment (Voget, n. d., MS.).

such as the center pole and the rafters in terms of the crucifixion and the Twelve Disciples, proceeds apace. Thus, Lynn St. Clair interprets the forked rafter as Judas,¹⁷ and Truhujo conceives the north and south poles to be representative of the two thieves. The latter also has developed a set of "12 commandments." While it is possible that initial attempts at Christian reinterpretation were accommodative in character, the trend is basic today.

The influence of Christianity is also observable in the inflated role of the Creator.¹⁸ While a Shoshone devotee may personify the center pole, buffalo, sun, and earth in address, nevertheless the Creator is first petitioned, and He is usually equated with the Christian deity (cf. Shimkin, 1942, p. 458). It would appear as if Christian ethic has made little impression on the Sun Dance, aside from a general emphasis upon peaceful relations with others. The Sun Dance is not conceived in terms of the moral regeneration of the individual—it is still an individual technique for living and not a technique for salvation.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Both Linton and Barnett have demonstrated that a consideration of culture traits and complexes with respect to form, meaning, function, and principle allows much insight into the process and range of permissive modification (Linton, 1936, pp. 402–421; Barnett, 1940 and 1942). From acculturative investigations among three north-west California societies Barnett concluded that the critical factor in the modification of culture lay in the affective meaning-function associated with a specific form element or complex (Barnett, 1940, p. 42; 1942, p. 15). Changes effected in the Shoshone Sun Dance tend to support the emphasis upon function.

To participant Shoshone the Sun Dance is, above all, a form of worship. It is native worship insofar as the dance was revealed to the Indian long before he had knowledge of the Bible; it is Christian worship inasmuch as prayer is directed to God and the ceremonial comprises elements which can only be interpreted in terms of Christian teaching. It is as if God revealed His worship to the old Shoshone without indicating its full import. As the Shoshone have become

¹⁷ "We know they tell us that one of the disciples, when this people ordered their ruler that Jesus should be crucified—one of his own disciples told the soldiers that he would go and kiss the Saviour and 'that is the way you will know that is the right one that you are seeking.' And all over the Indians use this sign for liar, and we have this pole [forked rafter] and it is the first pole that contacts the center pole. And yet those old Indians didn't know what they had. That's why we have a lot of respect for the Sun Dance. If we believe in it and use it as near like as the old Indian believed in it, we get good out of it."

¹⁸ A similar importance has been attributed to the Creator in Peyotism. (See, e. g., Petruccio, 1934; also Radin, 1923.) With respect to the Ghost Dance of 1870 Du Bois (1939, p. 138) suggests that "much of the Californian idea of a supreme being is a post-Ghost Dance crystallization. Quite probably prior to Christian influences a supreme being was imminent in Californian ideology, but it was vague and without attributes. Christian and Ghost Dance stimuli were necessary to crystallize the concept into a clarity which now permits the Indians to render it by the English word 'God.'"

familiar with biblical history and teaching, they have learned increasingly the "why" of various practices. Thus, in the construction of the lodge 12 rafters rest upon a center pole, just as the Twelve Disciples leaned upon the Savior for their support. The functional redefinition of the Sun Dance in terms of a religion thus has been of the utmost significance. It has led not only to the equation of the native and Christian creators, but also to an inflation of the role of the godhead. Other members of the Trinity also have been incorporated into the world of spirit forces still petitioned by the Shoshone. The place accorded these Christian spirit forces, however, appears to be a prominent one; for leaders of the ceremonial are wont to emphasize the intercessory role of the native forces. Thus, according to aboriginal conception the willows moved in unison by the women's chorus promote abundance; but to achieve the abundance of fruits of the earth prayer today is directed to God through the willows. A similar emphasis upon intercession is noticeable in the self-effacing attempts of the doctors, who explain their cures as due to the activation of some spirit force, notably God. The reinterpretation of the Sun Dance in terms of a "church" has also contributed materially to the simplifying of the ceremonial through the loss of traits associated with aboriginal warfare and shamanism. A change in function-meaning in effect has rendered the above subcomplexes obsolescent and resulted in their progressive disappearance.

It is evident, however, that the basic function of the ceremonial, the alleviation of anxiety-producing conditions facing the individual, has remained constant, whereas the meaning content has changed. Under aboriginal conditions the Sun Dance appears to have been a prophetic instrument in relation to war, whereas its postreserve functions have been to restore individuals to health and to acquire the powers thereto. Herein lies a substantial basis for the perpetuation of the religious complex in the face of the substitutes offered by Christianity and modern medical practice. And, in connection with these function-meanings of the Sun Dance, it is notable that the prayer in attitude of benediction and Christian protective devices (e. g., the cross) are the only Christian forms which have been incorporated into the ceremonial. Prayer has been substituted for aboriginal ceremonial acts, and it is so important to the treatment of a patient that the curative technique is virtually a blessing. It is probably owing to the maintenance of the curative function of the ceremonial that the influence of Christian ethic has been minimal.

The development of a new function for the Sun Dance is found in its exploitation as a tourist attraction. This has resulted in the emergence of a new organization modeled upon the committee complex of the dominant society. The immediate need has revolved about the

regulation of finances, and has resulted in the over-all direction of the ceremonial by an elective tribal committee and the supersession of the informal societal organization formerly associated with the production of the Sun Dance. However, the new organization has not interfered significantly with the basic ceremonial organization: a dance is pledged by an individual who receives divine sanction and who exercises rather full control over the ceremonial activities.

While the reinterpretation of the total complex as a native-Christian worship is well established, the number of form elements to which a Christian meaning is invariably attributed is limited to two, namely, the center pole as the cross and the rafters as the Twelve Disciples. The remainder of the form elements may be given a native or a Christian meaning, and occasionally an informant admits to a dual cultural interpretation.

Finally, the underlying principle of the Sun Dance, evocation of supernatural sympathy through bodily deprivation, also is equated with presumed Christian principle by citing Christ's fasting and suffering during a period of 40 days and nights.

From a review of the data the following conclusions may be offered:

(1) The predominantly native form of the Sun Dance has been stabilized owing to the reinterpretation of the ceremonial as a *revealed native-Christian worship*. In this process of stabilization the ceremonial has become simplified through the loss of certain aboriginal traits associated with complexes no longer functional under the modified conditions. Realizing that their current ceremonial does not measure up to the aboriginal expression either in content or in spirit, the Shoshone have rationalized the losses by pointing to the disappearance of the aboriginal culture—a situation which does not allow fulfillment of the old conditions of the dance. The above redefinition of the ceremonial also has developed an attitude, which, on the one hand, stimulates the attribution of Christian meanings to established forms, and on the other, proves an effective bar to the reintroduction of aboriginal elements. At the same time the death of men of aboriginal status has contributed to a weakening of the informal pattern of leadership and resulted in a relaxation of controls upon the individual. This has allowed the emergence of rival leaders who in time may head opposing factions.

(2) The basic function of the ceremonial has remained constant, but new functions have been added in response to current sociocultural conditions. An addition of function has resulted in the incorporation of a new subcomplex rather than in the assimilation of the new function by established forms. Speaking generally, one may conclude that a change in function has preceded and tended to shape changes in form and form meanings.

(3) The basic principle of the ceremonial has remained constant, but its objective manifestation has been moderated. Moreover, a new meaning has been attributed to the principle to accord with Christian tradition.

In brief, the result of the above modifications is the emergence of a syncretic complex which may best be characterized as native-modified. Basic form, function, and principle have demonstrated a high degree of constancy, whereas the associated meanings have evidenced much variability. The majority of changes in form have resulted from disappearances rather than from additions. When additions have been made, they are based upon the elaboration of special functions or the development of new functions.

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