

What Harm Is in Our Sun Dance?

During the late 1800s, when many Native Americans were initially being placed on reservations, many of their rituals and customs were restricted by law. The Sun Dance was one such ritual, outlawed because Sun Dancers fasted for extended periods and cut their own flesh with sharp skewers. The dance was also thought to be politically dangerous, with the potential of encouraging Native Americans to rebel against the reservation system.

The Sun Dance became legal again in the 1930s. During the time it was outlawed, a Blackfoot Indian from the Canadian Plains offered the following argument in favor of the ritual:

You have been among us for many years, and have attended many of our ceremonials. Have you ever seen a disturbance, or anything harmful, that has been caused by our Sun-dance?

We know that there is nothing injurious to our people in the Sun-dance. On the other hand, we have seen much that is bad at the dances of the white people. It has been our custom, during many years, to assemble once every summer for this festival, in honour of the Sun God. We fast and pray, that we may be able to lead good lives and to act more kindly towards each other. I do not understand why the white men desire to put an end to our religious ceremonials. What harm can they do to our people? If they deprive us of our religion, we will have nothing left, for we know of no other that can take its place. We do not understand the white man's religion. The Black Robes (Catholic Priests) teach us one thing and the Men-with-white-neckties (Protestant Missionaries) teach us another; so we are confused. We believe that the Sun God is all powerful, for every spring he makes the trees to bud and the grass to grow. We see these things with our own eyes, and, therefore, know that all life comes from him.

(From Walter McClintock, *The Old North Trail, or Life, Legends and Religion of the Blackfeet Indians* [London: Macmillan and Company, 1910], page 508.)

