

Deadlands 1876

THE SUN DANCE

Background

Usually held during the late summer when the buffalo herds are at their peak, a Sun Dance is a gathering of Plains Indians during which they celebrate their connection to the Great Spirit, Wakhán T'hánka, through various rituals of purification and praise. The Lakota name for this ceremony is Wiwányang Wachípi, which literally translates as “sun-gazing dance,” while the Cheyenne call it “Hoxéhevóhomó’hestótse,” sometimes shortened to “Hestósenestótse.”

The Sun-Pole

Before a Sun Dance may be properly conducted, a specific ceremonial space must be established and consecrated. Although the exact design of such spaces and the customs surrounding their construction vary from tribe to tribe, all feature a central “sun-pole” as a symbolic bridge between the earth and heavens. The Cheyenne send a special scout to locate a forked tree, which is ritualistically stripped of its branches by the tribe’s virgin maidens before being “killed” by the warriors’ arrows. After the tree is cut down, a medicine bundle is fixed to its fork, and this “hoxéhemaxe” is used to support a ceiling of rafters radiating from the sun-pole like the spokes of a wagon wheel. This ceiling is then covered with buffalo hides. Within the enclosed Sun Dance Lodge, or “hoxéheome,” a buffalo skull is often used as an altar, its hollows stuffed with owlfruit sedge, known as “water-monster plant.” The Sioux prefer a more open space for their Sun Dance rituals. They first identify a sacred cottonwood tree or “chanwákhan” to serve as sun-pole. As with the Cheyenne, the virgin maidens of the tribe strip the branches from the tree, after which it is charged by the warriors who attack it with arrows and gunfire. If the tree survives the ordeal, it is considered worthy, and must be felled without touching the ground. The chanwákhan is carried back on a blanket to serve as the centerpiece of an open arbor known as a “hóchoka,” or scared circle. Left open to the sky, the hóchoka is ringed by a perimeter of hide-covered poles with an entrance facing east. The chanwákhan is decorated with medicine bundles of sage and tobacco, buffalo hides, and often a buffalo penis, which is believed to confer virility to the dancers.

Sequence of Events

A Sun Dance can last any number of days, but most follow a particular sequence of events. Once the sun-pole has been cut down and the lodge made ready, three days of fasting, smoking, sweating, and dancing get underway. The dancing becomes increasingly more intense each day, with the third day involving the most elaborate costumes and general festivities—the tribe’s heyókha may tease the dancers, and the atmosphere is one of joyous celebration. On the fourth day, dancers who plan to undertake the Vow of the Sun—those who plan to be “pierced”—undergo their ritual of self-mortification. This agonizing ordeal is the climax of the Sun Dance ceremony. The evening is devoted to healing, celebration, and feasting, which may carry over into another day of festivity. Once the Sun Dance is over, it is customary to leave the lodge standing, allowing the elements to slowly reclaim the sacred space after the tribe has moved on.

Vow of the Sun

Although many different rituals are practiced during a Sun Dance, the most important—and infamous—is the “Vow of the Sun.” Indeed, this ritual of bravery is so closely associated with the Sun Dance that it is generally referred to by the same name. Intended to simultaneously test a warrior’s bravery, pay homage to the Great Spirit, and invoke a powerful vision, the Vow of the Sun varies in form, but always involves a period of fasting and ceremonial purification followed by a gruesome ordeal of self-mortification. Such rituals leave lasting scars, and the visions experienced during a warrior’s Sun Dance are believed to be transformative. Although the specifics of individual Sun Dances vary from tribe to tribe, a few common practices are detailed below. All of them involve some form of piercing and tearing. This is symbolic of the separation that occurs during birth, when the dancer was ripped away from the Great Spirit and forced into the physical world.

Tethered Dance

Often performed when there are multiple celebrants, each warrior is fastened to a pole with a rawhide tether connected to his flesh by wooden or bone pegs. The warriors then run a proscribed number of times around the tether, ultimately ending their dance by tearing their bodies free from the embedded pegs. As described by Frederick Schwatka, an eyewitness to a Brulé Sun Dance in 1875:

Each young man presented himself to the medicine man, who took between his thumb and forefinger a fold of the loose skin of the breast, about halfway between the nipple and the collarbone, lifted it as high as possible, and then ran a very narrow-bladed but sharp knife through the skin underneath the hand. In the aperture thus made, and before the knife was withdrawn, a stronger skewer of bone, about the size of a carpenter’s pencil, was inserted. Then the knife blade was taken out, and over the projections of this skewer, backwards and forwards, alternately right and left, was thrown a figure-of-eight noose with a strong thong of dressed skin. This was tied to a long skin rope fastened, at its other extremity, to the top of the sun-pole in the center of the arena. Both breasts were similarly punctured, the thongs from each converging and joining the rope which hangs from the pole.

The whole object of the devotee is to break loose from these fetters. To liberate himself he must tear the skewers through the skin, a horrible task that even with the most resolute may require many hours of torture. His first attempts are very easy and seem intended to get him used to the horrible pain he must yet endure before he breaks loose from the thongs. As he increases his efforts, his shouts increase, huge drops of perspiration pour down his greasy, painted skin, and every muscle stands out on his body in torturous ridges, his swaying frame, as he throws his whole weight wildly against the fearful fetters, being convulsed with shudders. All the while, the beating of the tom-toms and the wild, weird chanting of the singers near him continue. The wonderful strength and extensibility of the human skin is most forcibly and fearfully displayed in the strong struggles of the quivering victims. I have seen these bloody pieces of bone stretched to such a length from the devotee that his outstretched arms in front of him would barely allow his fingers to touch them.

Four Directions Sun Dance

An alternate version of this dance involves a warrior being fastened to a quartet of tethers, each representing one of the four directions. Two of the holding pegs run through his breast, and two pierce the backs of his shoulders. The dancer twists within this quartered web until all four skewers are ripped from his flesh.

Skull Dance

In this version of the ritual, buffalo skulls are attached to the warrior's body on leather thongs connected to bone skewers. The warrior dances all day long, often dragging the skulls through the underbrush and across rocks in an attempt to tear them free. The dance ends when the warrior liberates himself from the fetters or collapses from exhaustion—at which point, the Medicine Man lifts the dancer's prone body off the ground by the thongs, tearing out the pegs and ending the ordeal. An alternative version of this dance employs a saddle instead of a buffalo skull.

“Piercing the Heart”

In this ritual, the chest of the warrior is pierced with skewers as described above, except his body is then hoisted to the top of the Sun Dance Lodge with halyards of rope or sinew. The warrior is suspended until the skewers tear through the muscles of his chest. Performed by the Cheyenne more often than the Sioux, this gruesome ritual was famously depicted in the film *A Man Called Horse*.

“Scarlet Blanket”

Only practiced by the most dedicated warriors, this ritual offers Wakhán T'hánka a “scarlet blanket” by gouging fifty small chunks of flesh from each arm. While blowing on a bone whistle, the warrior then gazes at the sun and dances until he collapses from a loss of blood. The most famous example of a Scarlet Blanket was that offered by Sitting Bull during his Deer Medicine Rocks Sun Dance a few weeks before the Battle of the Little Bighorn.

Game Mechanics

An Indian player-character wishing to perform a Sun Dance must first take the “Sun Dance” Edge, which offers an excellent role-playing opportunity for player and Marshal alike. The player must spiritually prepare for the ritual, and then role-play the actual Sun Dance in a proper campaign setting. A successful Sun Dance requires three Attribute rolls vs. TN-4 in this order: Strength, Spirit, Vigor. A Critical Failure on any roll ends the ritual and negates any previous rewards.

Stat	Crit. Failure	Failure	Success	Crit. Success
Strength	Cannot endure ritual. Penalty STR1	Permanent damage. Penalty STR2	Reward STR1	Reward STR2
Spirit	Chickens out! Penalty SPT1	No Vision. Penalty SPT2	Vision. Reward SPT1	Powerful Vision. Reward SPT2
Vigor	Bleeding out. Cannot endure ritual. Penalty VIG1	Incapacitated. Needs help to complete. Penalty VIG2	3 Wounds. Reward VIG1	2 Wounds. Reward VIG2

Strength Roll

This first roll is made at the beginning of the ordeal, and represents the overall ability of the celebrant to sustain the physical burden of the Sun Dance itself, whether being tethered to the sun-pole, suspended from the rafters, or dragging along a buffalo skull. A critical failure on this first roll means the celebrant cannot properly begin the ordeal—perhaps he panics at the first incision, or goes into shock before the ritual gets underway.

Penalty STR1

After experiencing this level of failure, the celebrant receives the Outsider Hindrance. The warrior cannot attempt another Sun Dance until he has gained a new rank; but if he is successful the Hindrance is removed.

Penalty STR2

Although the Sun Dance may still be successful, the ritual physically damages the warrior, permanently decreasing his Strength Attribute by one die.

Reward STR1

A successful Sun Dance grants the warrior additional reserves of strength. He is given four d6-dice that may be used to increase the damage of any successful attack. These dice may be used one at a time or in any combination; but are not replenished once used.

Reward STR2

A successful Sun Dance grants the warrior additional reserves of strength. He is given four d6-dice that may be used to increase the damage of any successful attack. These dice may be used one at a time or in any combination; but are not replenished once used. Additionally, the ritual has made the warrior inherently stronger, permanently increasing his Strength Attribute by one die.

Spirit Roll

This roll is made at the pinnacle of the Sun Dance, and reflects the capacity for the body's agony to propel the celebrant into an altered state of being, where he may properly receive a vision.

Penalty SPT1

The character does the unthinkable—he panics and chickens out of the Sun Dance! Not only does this permanently decrease his Spirit Attribute by one die, it adds the Outsider Hindrance *and* the Yellow Hindrance. The warrior cannot attempt another Sun Dance until he has gained a new rank; but if he is successful both Hindrances are removed.

Penalty SPT2

The character may complete the Sun Dance, but he receives only confusing hallucinations in place of a lucid vision. A Fate Chip is temporarily confiscated at the beginning of the next gaming session.

Reward SPT1

An intense vision is granted the character by the Marshal. Although the specifics of the vision are highly individual, its effects may be symbolized by a single-use Fate Chip awarded as a token of its power.

Reward SPT2

An extraordinarily powerful or prophetic vision is granted the character by the Marshal. Although the specifics of the vision are highly individual, its effects may be symbolized by a single-use Fate Chip awarded as a token of its power. Additionally, the character becomes more enlightened, and his Spirit Attribute permanently increases by one die.

Vigor Roll

This final roll is made at the conclusion of the ritual, and represents the overall physical damage inflicted by the ordeal itself. If the celebrant is tethered, suspended, or has skulls fastened to his flesh, this roll represents the final fetter being torn from his body. The Wounds incurred by this Vigor roll are applied regardless of Toughness, and cannot be Soaked. Because of the trauma associated with such prolonged torture, only one Wound level may be healed through medicine or magic; the remaining Wound levels must be recuperated through Natural Healing.

Penalty VIG1

The warrior is so traumatized by the ritual that he becomes Incapacitated and starts Bleeding Out. The Medicine Man is forced to carefully remove the skewers rather than tearing them free. Although there is no shame to this, the Sun Dance is considered a failure. The warrior's body has been irreversibly damaged, and his Vigor Attribute is permanently reduced by one die. The warrior cannot attempt another Sun Dance until he has gained a new rank.

Penalty VIG2

The warrior passes out before he can free himself from his restraints, forcing the Medicine Man to complete the Sun Dance by violently tearing the remaining pegs from his body. Although there is no shame in this, the warrior's injuries are severe, and all Natural Healing rolls are at -2 until he fully recovers.

Reward VIG1

The Sun Dance has uncovered deep reserves of physical willpower within the warrior! He is awarded a special "Sun Dance" token that may be used once per game session to Soak any damage.

Reward VIG2

The Sun Dance has uncovered deep reserves of physical willpower within the warrior! He is awarded a special "Sun Dance" token that may be used once per game session to Soak any damage. Additionally, the Sun Dance has made the warrior more resilient, and after he has completely healed the damage inflicted by his ordeal, his Toughness is permanently increased by one point.

Additional Rules

Multiple Sun Dances

An Indian character may renew his Vow to the Sun, providing he has gained a full rank since his last Sun Dance. However, the Target Numbers for the three Attribute rolls are now increased to TN-6. This pattern repeats itself—every new rank allows another Sun Dance, but each time the Target Numbers increase by 2.

Non-Player Characters

Most veteran Indian NPCs have undergone a Sun Dance ritual when they were young warriors. In order to simplify record keeping, the Marshal may assume an NPC's given statistics already reflect the outcome of this ritual. However, so every Indian Extra or Face Card does not get a free Soak roll, the Sun Dance token only applies to Wild Cards.

Sources & Notes

Sources

Sources for this document include Frederick Schwakta's "The Sun Dance of the Sioux," a colorful but somewhat unsympathetic eyewitness account published by *Century Magazine* in 1890; Nathaniel Philbrick's *The Last Stand*; Thomas E. Mails' *The Mystic Warriors of the Plains*; and David J. Wishart's opus, *Encyclopedia of the Great Plains*. Helpful online resources include Gerald Ice's "[Wiwang Wachipi](#)" site, the entry on "Sedge" from the [Cheyenne Plant Lore](#) site, the [Akta Lakota Museum & Cultural Center](#) Web page, the [Mythical Folk](#) site, and believe it or not, the delightfully flaky [Crystal Links](#) site. Needless to say, the infamous 1970 film *A Man Called Horse* provided a useful visual resource, along with numerous contemporary photographs of Sun Dance lodges and drawings of the practices and rituals. If any readers are better informed than this pale washíchu author, please send corrections and clarifications his way!

Notes on Lakota Spellings

This document uses simplified transliterations of Lakota words and phrases. The official IPA spelling of "Wakhán T'hánka" is *Wakháŋ Tháyka*, "Wiwányang Wachípi" is rendered as *Wiwányang Wachípi*, "chanwákhan" as *chanwákhan*, and "hóchoka" as *hóchoka*.

Author's Note

In translating this important Native American ritual into gaming terms, the author means no disrespect to any tribal customs or beliefs; and does not mean to trivialize the importance of the Sun Dance to modern Americans of indigenous heritage. Indeed, some of the information found above is derived from modern Lakota who still perform the Sun Dance. Marshals wishing to conduct a Sun Dance in their games are encouraged to research the practice more thoroughly, as authenticity not only adds color and nuance to a game, it pays greater respect to historical customs and practice.

It should be kept in mind that *Deadlands* is an apocalyptic horror game set in the "Weird West," and its approach to the material emphasizes the supernatural, the bizarre, and the mythic. Set in 1876, the game scenario is often informed by the nineteenth-century perspective of Indians as the mysterious and dangerous "other." One of the strengths of a well-run *Deadlands* game is found in its capacity to reveal the inherent savagery of white civilization and its genocidal drive to conquer the West, even as it draws from contemporary racist accounts and colonial narratives such as Custer's autobiography, Parkman's western travelogue, and Schwatka's lurid description of the Brulé.

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