Painting of the Sun Dance

Jaw or Okicizi Tawa (1850-unknown)[1]
Hunkpapa and Sans Arc Lakota
ca. 1912

On the Northern Plains, the Sun Dance has long been the primary rite of seasonal renewal, a covenant between human beings and other-than-human beings in which humans shed their blood so that the world will be transformed and maintained in holiness. Among the Lakota, the Sun Dance is one of the seven sacred rites by which people show that they are civilized and that they respect the earth, the heavens, and all creatures that move. As contemporary Lakota artist, scholar, and ceremonial participant Arthur Amiotte has observed, "Inherent in the Sun Dance itself is the total epistemology of the people."[2]

The event pictured on this muslin is the crescendo to a multi-day ceremonial affair that includes fasting, dancing, many ritual offerings and lavish feasts. The day that the dancers paint their bodies, don their ceremonial garments, play their eagle bone whistles, dance around the Sun Dance pole and ultimately pierce their pectoral muscles to shed blood is the most sacred of all days. For they do this as an offering for all the people. The Holy Man Black Elk (1863-1950) told Joseph Epes Brown that after instructing the Lakota in these actions the primordial Sun Dance teacher exclaimed, "You have made a sacred center which will always be with you, and you have created a closer relationship with all things of the universe."[3]

This painting depicts the moment when the participants begin to attach themselves to the sacred pole. At left, one man whose chest is pierced stands within an enclosure framed by ceremonial banners. The two men in the foreground have pierced their flesh,

[1] Note to self: on April 25, I emailed asking Joe Horse Capture to use his contacts at Standing Rock to see if he can find out Jaw's death date. It is not in any of the literature.
[2] Arthur Amiotte, "The Lakota Sun Dance: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives," in *Sioux Indian Religion*, Raymond DeMallie and Douglas Parks, eds., Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1987, p. 84.

and the one on the left strains back, so that his pectoral muscles and skin begin to resist his weight. He and one individual directly above him wear the full-feathered headdress of the most accomplished statesmen. Most men have simple long hair to which one eagle feather is attached. Some high-ranking participants wear buffalo horn and eagle feather headgear, visual reminders to all who have gathered that the ultimate Sun Dance sacrifice requires the same courage and bravery that these man displayed in warfare.

The two female participants, drawn in full frontal pose in distinction to the profile views of the other celebrants, wear long woolen dresses. Their intention to cut and offer small pieces of their own flesh is signaled by the fact that they wear Sun Dance ornaments around their necks. Theirs, like that of the man at left who is already attached to the tree, are five-pointed rawhide emblems of the Morning Star. Some of the celebrants wear simple disc-shaped pendants. In each case, these emblems bear witness to the fact that these participants will align themselves with the sacred forces of the universe when they offer their blood.

Although the Sun Dance generally transpires within a Medicine Lodge made of cut trees and branches, artists almost always show the view that one would have from within this holy space. Flags and cloth banners hang from the tree trunk that has been cut in a ritually-prescribed way, brought to the ceremonial precinct by horses, and erected with much solemnity. Other banners are erected on shorter staffs that are held or planted in the ground.

In 1881, at the Sun Dance at Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota, army officer and budding ethnologist John Gregory Bourke observed with a keen eye the dancers with eagle bone whistles who were making the vow to sacrifice their flesh and offer their blood. He described the enormous crowd of spectators and participants, and about the Sun Dancers themselves he wrote, “their breechclouts were elegantly made of only the finest scarlet or blue cloth, tidily embroidered and made so broad that from the waist down they

[3] Joseph Epes Brown, ed., *The Sacred Pipe: Black Elk’s Account of the Seven rites of the Oglala Sioux*, Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1953, p. 100.

seemed to be concealed by narrow petticoats."[4] This woolen trade cloth was a staple of Reservation-era life, having replaced buffalo hides and other skins for both daily and ceremonial wear.

Traditionally, male artists on the Great Plains painted their histories on buffalo hide robes with earth pigments, but the introduction of new materials and the decimation of the buffalo by the 1880s resulted in new formats for old stories. Just as people of the Plains increasingly wore manufactured calicos and woolens, paper and muslin replaced hide as a support for painting and drawing. Men recorded their histories in the pages of discarded ledger books and made painted tipi liners of canvas and muslin that they bought by the yard from trading posts, or received in cut pieces as part of their allotments. Soon, the tipi liners made for use within local dwellings became a canvas for a cross-cultural art. Men made muslin paintings to sell to outsiders who sought scenes of traditional life. Such muslins often depicted the Sun Dance.[5]

Around the edges of this large painted muslin, the artist has framed the ceremony with scenes of horse riding and buffalo hunting, as if to indicate that with the proper ceremonies life will continue as it should "as long as the grass shall grow." Yet at the time

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[4] John Gregory Bourke, Unpublished Diaries, 1872-96, volume 44. Entry for June 20, 1881. The originals of Bourke's tiny handwritten diaries are in the library of the United States Military Academy at West Point, New York, where I examined them in 1996.

[5] One high-ranking Lakota at Pine Ridge, Standing Bear (1859-1933), made a number of these for sale. They can be found in museums in Japan, Germany, and the United States, as well as in private collections. See Peter J. Powell, "Beauty for New Life: An Introduction to Cheyenne and Lakota Sacred Art, " in *The Native American Heritage: A Survey of North American Indian Art*, edited by Evan Maurer, ed., Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1978, pp. 80-106; Arthur Amiotte, "A Journey of Discovery: Standing Bear's Artwork," in *Transformation and Creativity in Lakota Culture: the Collages of Arthur Amiotte*, by Arthur Amiotte, Janet C. Berlo and Louis Warren, Pierre, S.D.: South Dakota State Historical Society Press, 2014, pp. 9-23.
Janet C. Berlo, "Standing Bear and the Battle of Little Big Horn," in *American Indian Art from the Diker Collection*, David Penney, ed. New York: The American Federation of the Arts, forthcoming late 2014, pp. ___. *Note: currently in press; will see page proofs soon*.

of its painting at the beginning of the twentieth century, the Sun Dance had been outlawed for more than twenty-five years. If it was practiced at all by the Lakota, it was done surreptitiously. But the aging artist renders what he still sees and senses in his mind's eye: the vivid colors of the garments and banners, the heat and brightness of the summer sun, the shrill sound of the eagle bone whistles, and the press of the dancers about to offer their flesh on behalf of the people.

About the artist: Jaw was one of the principal Lakota experts on traditional life who worked with ethnomusicologist Frances Densmore at the Standing Rock Reservation from 1911 to 1914. Her book on Lakota music contains transcriptions of Jaw's songs as well as a portrait of him and examples of his muslin paintings.[6] As with most Sioux warriors, he had a number of names during his life. When he was seventeen, he was given the name Okicize Tawa (in English, "His Fight"). Indeed his name sign, as represented on some of his early ledger drawings, is an abstract depiction of mounted warfare: horse hoof prints facing each other on either side of a vertical line, with short gesture marks of a volley of bullets on each side.

Jaw was in his early sixties when he worked with Densmore, singing to her the songs of his life as a warrior, and painting on muslin the scenes from his early life as a hunter, horse stealer, and ritual healer. This muslin probably dates from around 1912 as well. Densmore was by no means the first non-Native with whom Jaw shared his stories. From 1885 to 1910, Mary Collins worked as a missionary at Little Eagle, on the Standing Rock Reservation. In her papers are drawings made on used pages torn from a ledger book. Several depict the war and horse-stealing exploits of a man whose name is written

[6] Frances Densmore, *Teton Sioux Music and Culture*, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1992. Reprint of Bureau of American Ethnology Bulletin 61, 1918. See color plate 17B, black and white plates 59-63, pp. 387-393 and 446-447. Works attributed to Jaw can be found in both public and private collections. See, for example, Gilbert T. Vincent, ed., *Art of the North American Indians: The Thaw Collection*, Cooperstown, NY: Fenimore Art Museum, 2000, p. 129; John Warnock and Martha Warnock, eds., *Splendid Heritage: Perspectives on American Indian Art*, Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2009, p.

on the drawings as Okicinintawa.[7] The pictorial autobiography presented in those drawings shows that he was a member of the Lakota Miwatani Society—the bravest soldiers who are sometimes called "Dog Soldiers" by outsiders. He wears the long red feather-bedecked wool sash of that military brotherhood. In one of these drawings he counts coup on a Crow man and woman, while in another he steals horses.

The artist DeCost Smith met Okicizi Tawa (or Jaw) in 1884, painted a portrait of this young warrior in his prime, acquired some of his drawings, and wrote of his art and his exploits in *Indian Experiences*.[8] According to Smith, this Hunkpapa man's greatest claim to fame and honor was his unparalleled success as one who captured horses from the Crow, traditional enemies of the Lakota. Smith devotes a whole chapter in his book to this man (whom he calls both "His Fight" and Okitcin Ta'wa), recounting his history as a holy man and one whose medicine powers enabled him to successfully steal horses undetected. While Jaw did not illustrate his famous horse-stealing episodes on the Sun Dance muslin illustrated here, even in his sixties he recalled with pride the night in his youth when he captured seventy horses from a corral within a Crow encampment. "No Sioux ever took more horses than that in one night," he told Frances Densmore.[9]

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51. Other painted muslins that Densmore bought from Jaw are in the collection of the Smithsonian Institution.

[7] See Janet C. Berlo, *Plains Indian Drawings 1865-1935: Pages from a Visual History*, New York: Harry N. Abrams Inc., 1996, pp. 182-184.

[8] DeCost Smith, "His Fight—Warrior and Medicine Man," in *Indian Experiences*, Caldwell, Idaho: The Claxton Printers, 1943, pp. 125-137, as well as 114-119 where some of Okicizi Tawa's early drawings are illustrated. Smith's portrait of the warrior is on p. 127.

In the Lakota language, the word for horses is *Sunka' wakan*, literally "sacred dogs." Jaw allowed Frances Densmore to record his victory song: *Sunka' wakan owa'le ca awa'ka we*, he sang. With typical Lakota understatement and modesty concerning an astonishing feat, his song tells the unadorned facts: "Horses I seek, so I am bringing them."

Similarly, in the muslin painting offered here, he depicts with great directness the simple facts of one of the last great nineteenth century Sun Dances on the Northern Plains: the people came together to shed blood to honor the sun, thus ensuring the continuation of the universe.

--Janet Catherine Berlo

[9] Densmore, *Teton Sioux Music and Culture*, p. 392.