

# THE BLACKFOOT SUN-DANCE.

BY

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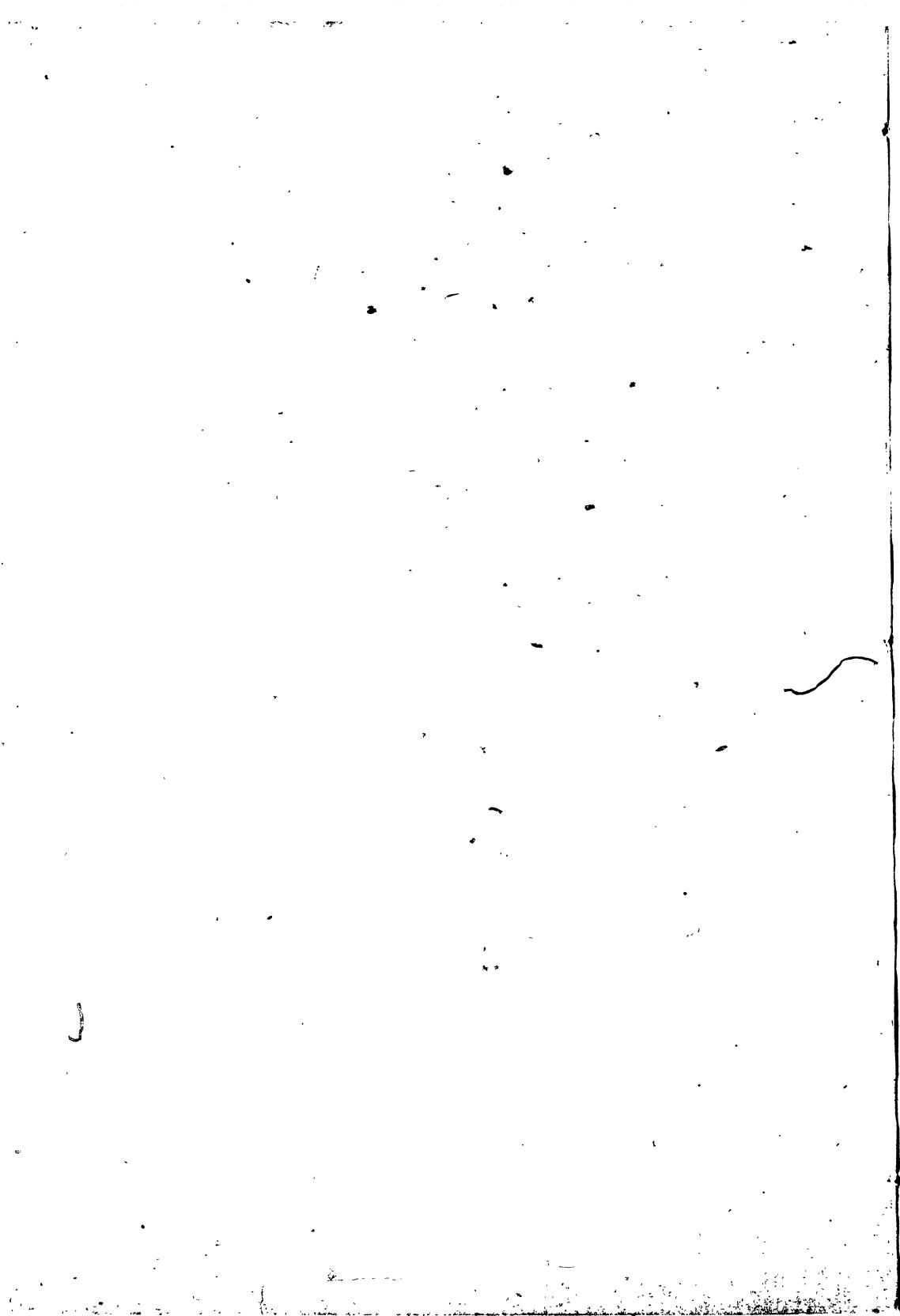
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## THE BLACKFOOT SUN-DANCE.

BY REV. JOHN M'LEAN, M.A.; BLOOD RESERVE, ALBERTA.

The most important sacred festival of the Blackfeet is the Sun-Dance. In the native language it is called Okán, a word whose meaning is now entirely lost. It is known amongst the white people as the Medicine-Dance or Sun-Dance. This arises from the fact that Natos, *the sun*, when combined with other words is also translated *medicine*, referring to the spiritual ceremonies of the medical priesthood. In the native religion of the Indians its true signification is *holy* or *divine*. As examples of these distinctions we have, Natos-aumûqka, medicine-runner, Natoapsínaksín, the divine book, the sun-book, the Bible, Natcyetístekwé, the holy day—the sun-day—the Sabbath.

As these Indians have borrowed some of their ceremonies from the Sioux Indians, and the natives of Yucatan still hold the religious festival of the Sun-Dance, it may have happened that in the dim past they adopted this festival and modified it to suit themselves. A festival of nearly similar import is celebrated amongst the Crees named the Thirst-Dance. The records of tradition state that an old woman had a sick child which she loved tenderly. In her anxiety for its recovery, she prayed incessantly to Natos for help in her distress. One evening as she slept, Natos appeared to her in a dream, and told her that if she would build a Sun-lodge and make sacrifices to him, the child would get well. She awoke, and told her people of the wonderful vision, the lodge was erected, the festival was held, and the child recovered. Since that period, the Sun-Dance has been annually held. The time for the celebration of this festival is when the wild-fruit is ripe, at the end of July or early in August. Seven days is the length of time it is generally held, although this is sometimes shortened. The object of this festival is twofold, namely: military and religious. It is chiefly a sacred assembly, and constitutes a part of their native religious system. A virtuous woman

of the tribe during the year has passed through some trying ordeal, and in accordance with her religious ideas and desires, has prayed to Natos for health for herself or some of her relations, and has vowed to Natos, that if her prayers are answered, she will become responsible for the annual celebration of the Sun-Dance.

The announcement having been made, the young men repair to the woods to procure the necessary materials to build the lodge. When it is cut, lariats are fastened around it, and it is dragged along the ground to its destination by young men on horseback, amid the exultations of their comrades, who as they ride singing and shouting, shoot incessantly with their guns into the logs. A level piece of ground is selected near the middle of the camp and the erection of the lodge is joyfully undertaken. The lodge is circular in form and of various dimensions. Those that I have seen among the Blood Indians were about thirty feet in diameter. In the centre stands the sacred pole from the top of which, heavy ridge poles extend to the sides, which are about five feet in height, strong supports are placed around the sides, the spaces intervening being filled with light brushwood. There is a large main entrance and a lesser one. Opposite the main entrance and against the side of the lodge is the bower for the woman and her husband who have undertaken the celebration of the festival. At the foot of the sacred pole burns the sacred fire. At the left of the bower facing the main entrance a band of young men sit beating on drums as an accompaniment of the ceremonies, in the centre sit the chiefs near the sacred pole, and all around the sides the general assemblage is arranged as participants in the rites or merely as onlookers of a strange scene of a decaying religion and civilization. In the interests of science I have attended four Sun-Dances and taken extensive notes of all I saw, and a description of one of these will illustrate the prevailing ideas of the Indians. As the influences of religion and civilization are slowly undermining the native religious system, in a few years the celebration of this festival will become a thing of the past, and the opportunity for recording these religious customs will be gone.

On a warm day in the latter part of July, I visited the Blood Indian camp, and found the Sun-lodge as already described. There were by actual count one hundred and ninety-eight lodges, comprising about two thousand souls. An old man was riding through the

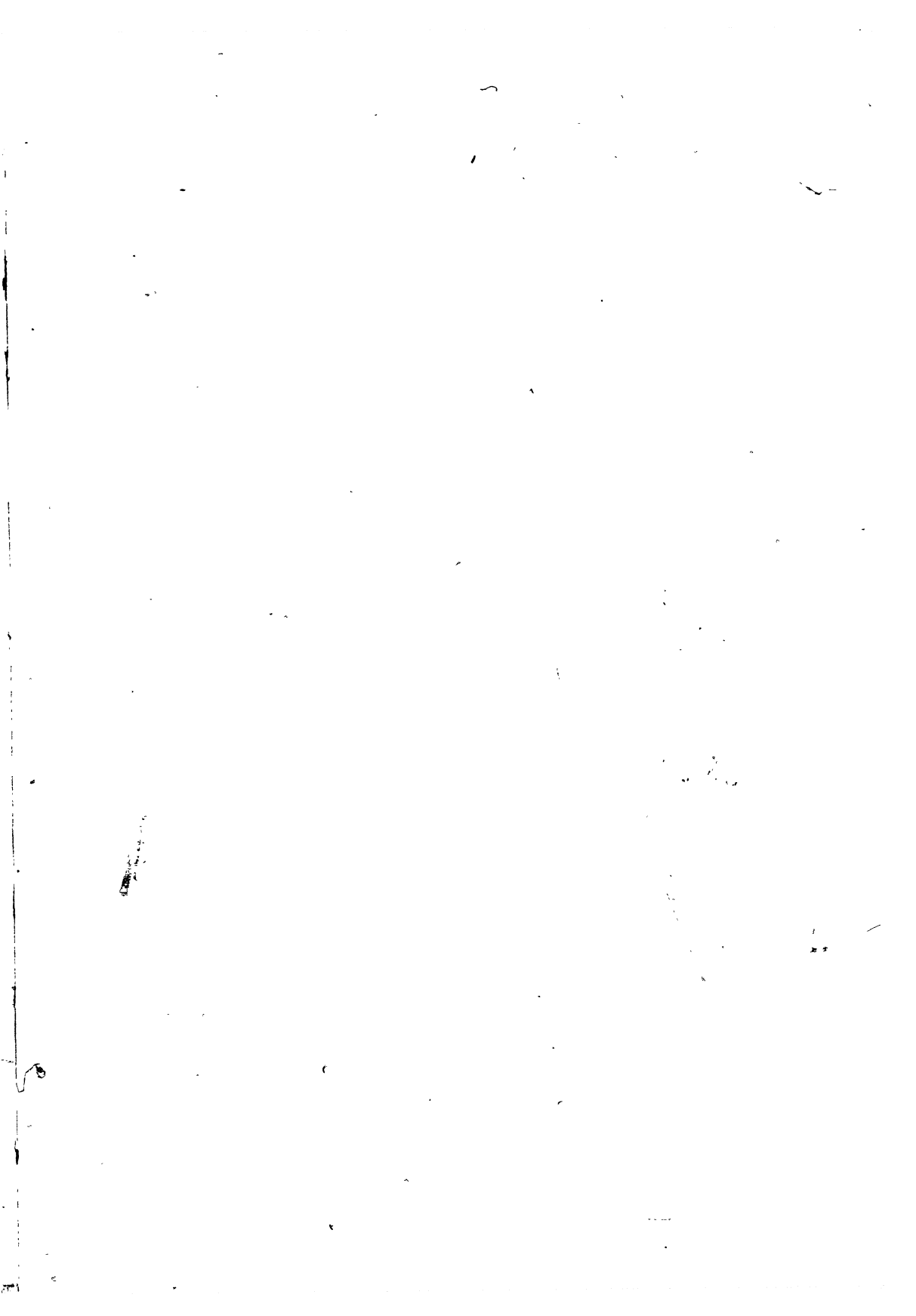
camp calling upon the people to attend the ceremonies. In a lodge near at hand, a medicine man was decorating the persons who were to undergo the rite of torture. I noticed that in arranging the head-dress, before placing it on the head of each individual he passed his hand around it four times as he prayed. This was peculiarly significant, as it showed that these people in common with the Sioux and many other Indians regard the number four as a sacred number. This can be easily traced through their mythology, religious, social and political customs. In the Sun-lodge the sacred fire was burning, and this was used by the people for lighting their pipes. No child or woman was allowed to supply the fuel, but young men who had performed some valorous deed, especially the stealing of horses from a hostile tribe felt it to be an honor to attend to this duty, and none but the brave were qualified for this work. On the sacred pole was placed in the form of a cross X two bundles of small brushwood taken from the birch-tree. The pole was decorated with sacrifices of clothing and various kinds of Indian goods to Natos. The cross evidently refers to the four winds, from its four points, and is not borrowed from the Christian religion, as these people used this symbol before they came in contact with the white men, or had any knowledge of Christianity, besides being very superstitious about adopting any of the rites or symbols of the religion of the pale-face, and incorporating it with their own. In the bower made of light brushwood sat the woman who organized the lodge, her husband and a medicine man. These persons were fasting and praying, and during the full term of the continuance of the ceremonies, very little food was partaken. In the mornings they were allowed a short smoke, and a little water, and in the evenings a few of their friends brought a small quantity of food hidden under their blankets, and without exposing it to view, it was eaten in silence. The medicine man had a crown of leaves upon his head, his body painted, and without any clothing, save a long strip around his loins. At short intervals he arose and danced keeping time to the motions of his body, with a small bone whistle, which he blew upon incessantly, producing a series of monotonous sounds. In the evening the woman prayed to Natos for good health for the people, protection in danger, good crops and a bountiful harvest of wild fruits. The virgins came in the evening and prayed for a long time for blessings from Natos. During the day, the ceremonies con-

sisted of dramatic representations of heroic adventures by single individuals, and contests with the Crow and Sioux Indians by war-parties. One chief borrowed several guns from his friends, and a large number of Indian war implements and native trinkets. Stepping forward that all the people might see him, amid profound silence, he addressed the assemblage. Holding a gun aloft he told how in a contest with an enemy, he had slain him and taken his gun. The band of musicians beat on their *tom-toms* in token of applause. Each article that he had, represented his various victories, and each had its separate story, which was narrated as the first, and the same routine gone through. When he had finished, the whole assemblage joined the musicians in applauding the speaker. Many warriors during the day related their brave deeds in the same manner.

Sham fights were engaged in, which were representations of actual battles. Five or six warriors appeared as Crow Indians and the same or a less number were the Blood Indian warriors. A single horse represented that they had been on horseback, and this was decked in its war-paint. One of the men, the hero of the battle, acted as instructor of the ceremonies to the others. Four times they entered the lodge, and then the fight began. They fired their guns over the heads of the people, the Crow Indians fell one by one, and when they had been scalped amid the laughter and applause of the audience, the scene was at an end. Berries cooked in fat were brought in by the women in pails and pots, and for a short time eating, smoking and conversation were the duties of the hour. Occasionally some old lady would call out the name of a young man, and declare his noble qualities before the people, and another would urge the young men to emulate the heroic deeds of their fathers and go to war.

Presents of bracelets, finger-rings and ear-rings were made to some of the women. The chief warrior carried in his hand the sacred pipe, which he first held aloft with the stem toward the Sun, that Natos might have the first-fruits of everything, and still holding it, stem toward the chiefs, each was allowed to take a smoke. The pipe was beautifully ornamented, and was used only at the Sun-Dance. Some of these pipes are of great value, the one which I saw costing fifteen of the best horses in the tribe, and these were used for hunting the buffalo. The women have one important ceremony to perform, namely: the preparation of the tongues. In former years when buffalo were







in abundance as many as two thousand buffalo tongues were used at a single Sun-Dance ; now, the Indians have to be contented with two hundred tongues of domestic cattle. These are slightly boiled and dried, cut in slices very carefully, taken in sacks to the Sun-lodge and guarded by two young men. This rite partakes of the nature of a sacrament. None but virtuous women are allowed to go up and take a piece of tongue. After the persons devoted to Natos partake, the tongues are distributed amongst the people, as a religious ceremony.

As I stood outside the lodge, a young Indian friend of mine, went to an old medicine-woman and presented his sacrifice to Natos. During the year he had gone on a horse-stealing expedition and as is customary on such occasions had prayed to Natos for protection and success, offering himself to his god if his prayers were answered. He had been successful and he now presented himself as a sacrifice. The old woman took his hand held it toward the Sun and prayed, then laying a finger on a block of wood she severed it with one blow from a knife and deer's horn scraper. She held the portion of the finger cut off toward the Sun and dedicated that to him as the young man's sacrifice. The chief attraction to the pale-face is what has been ignorantly termed "making braves." I desired very much to see this ceremony *once*, that I might know the facts from personal observation, and draw my own conclusions after conversing with the Indians.

Two young men having their whole bodies painted, wearing the loin-cloth only, and with wreaths of leaves around their heads, ankles and wrists, stepped into the centre of the lodge. A blanket and a pillow were laid on the ground, and one of the young men stretched himself upon them. As he lay, an old man came forward and stood over him and then in an earnest speech told the people of the brave deeds, and noble heart of the young man. In the enumeration of his virtues and noble deeds, after each separate statement the musicians beat applause. When the aged orator ceased, the young man arose, placed his hands upon the old man's shoulders, and drew them downward, as a sign of gratitude for the favorable things said about him. He lay down, and four men held him while a fifth made the incisions in his breast and back. Two places were marked in each breast denoting the position and width of each incision. This being done, the wooden skewers being in readiness, a double edged knife was held in the hand, the point touching the

flesh, a small piece of wood was placed on the under side to receive the point of the knife when it had gone through, and the flesh was drawn out the desired length for the knife to pierce. A quick pressure and the incision was made, the piece of wood was removed, and the skewer inserted from the under-side as the knife was being taken out. When the skewer was properly inserted, it was beaten down with the palm of the hand of the operator, that it might remain firmly in its place. This being done to each breast, with a single skewer for each, strong enough to tear away the flesh, and long enough to hold the lariats fastened to the top of the sacred pole, a double incision was made on the back of the left shoulder, to the skewer of which was fastened an Indian drum. The work being pronounced good by the persons engaged in the operation, the young man arose, and one of the operators fastened the lariats giving them two or three jerks to bring them into position.

The young man went up to the sacred pole, and while his countenance was exceedingly pale, and his frame trembling with emotion, threw his arms around it, and prayed earnestly for strength to pass successfully through the trying ordeal. His prayer ended he moved backward until the flesh was fully extended, and placing a small bone whistle in his mouth, he blew continuously upon it a series of short sharp sounds, while he threw himself backward, and danced until the flesh gave way and he fell. Previous to his tearing himself free from the lariats, he seized the drum with both hands and with a sudden pull tore the flesh on his back, dashing the drum to the ground amid the applause of the people. As he lay on the ground, the operators examined his wounds, cut off the flesh that was hanging loosely, and the ceremony was at an end. In former years the head of a buffalo was fastened by a rope to the back of the person undergoing the feat of self-immolation, but now a drum is used for that purpose.

From two to five persons undergo this torture every Sun-Dance. Its object is military and religious. It admits the young man into the noble band of warriors, whereby he gains the esteem of his fellows, and opens up the path to fortune and fame. But it is chiefly a religious rite. In a time of sickness, or danger, or in starting upon some dangerous expedition, the young man prays to Natos for help, and promises to give himself to Natos if his prayers are answered. Upon his return, when the Annual Sun-Dance is held, he fulfils his

vow, gives himself to his god, and thus performs a twofold duty. Of course the applause of the people and the exhibition of courage are important factors in this rite, but its chief feature is a religious one. Instead of being a time of feasting and pleasure, the Sun-Dance is a military and religious festival, in connection with which there are occasions for joy, and the feast enhances the pleasure.

It is impossible to obtain accurately the interpretation of the Sun-lodge ceremonies without a knowledge of the language, as the speeches made explain much that would otherwise be misunderstood. Oftentimes the entire assemblage will burst forth in songs of thanksgiving, and again a famous warrior will sing aloud the praises of a young man or some brave kinsman who merits the plaudits of his tribe. This is a kind of chant in which the name and noble deeds are spoken of, and a tune accompanies or follows the oration.

Prayer is made to Natos only, and everything in Okán is sacred to him. The influence of this festival upon the hearts of the people is such that it keeps alive their native religion, and excites their passion for military glory.

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