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**DANCING SOCIETIES OF THE SARSI INDIANS.**

**BY**  
**PLINY EARLE GODDARD**

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BY PLINY EARLE GODDARD.



## INTRODUCTION.

The rather meager information concerning these societies was obtained among the Sarsi in 1911 and 1913 from Eagle-rib, an aged man, who held high rank as a warrior and is now much respected both by the Indians and by the white people who know him. The summer of 1905 was spent with the Sarsi but for some reason little was then heard about these societies. The material is published at this time in order that as much information as possible may be available for a comparative study of these and similar societies treated in this series of papers.

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## DANCING ORGANIZATIONS.

The Sarsi formerly had five societies in which dancing was an important element. They are collectively known to the Sarsi as *dīl'iccī*, the etymology of which has not yet been determined. They were: —

Mosquitoes (*ts'ī*)

Dogs (*Likūwa*)

Police (*tasgilna*)

Preventers (*nagūltc'ūjna*)

Dawō' (an unidentified small bird)

Connected with these five societies were certain common practices and observances. Each had one or more leaders whose rank was indicated by some decoration or object different from that possessed by the other members. The mosquitoes had a single leader and the dogs four, the other three had two leaders each.

Each society met once a year in the spring or early summer for dancing which was continued for several days. These dances were held in a tipi or some enclosure. The members sat in a circle in the center of which were four singers, one of whom had a drum. In the case of each society four songs were sung and after the fourth song the members, leaving their tipi, harassed in some way the non-members outside. Three of the societies, the dogs, police, and preventers, assisted in keeping order during the sun dance, and probably at other times when the various bands were camped together. They pulled down and cut up the tipis of any who dared to disobey their orders. It is not clear from the information we have to what extent they were concerned in warfare. It was definitely stated by the informant, however, that there was no body of men which punished offences connected with hunting and that the policing mentioned above during the society dances and the sun dance was the only similar work undertaken by these societies.

Membership was acquired by purchase. The position of leader was similarly secured but the price paid was greater. If anyone wished to buy a membership and approached a member properly, that member was obliged to sell. It was then customary for the one who had sold to buy into another society. It was not usual, at least, to belong to more than one society at a time. The informant insisted that there was no especial order in which these societies stood and that a man could join any one he chose without having previously belonged to others. Eagle-rib himself belonged to the mosquitoes, dogs, police, and preventers in the order named. Notwith-

standing the statement of the informant, there is little doubt that the mosquitoes were the less important and less dignified, and usually the first to be joined. The young men joined this society when they were about eighteen, but older and married men were also members. The three policing bodies, the dogs, police and preventers, appeared to be of greater importance. 'The Dawō' was the only society to which the informant had not belonged. Notwithstanding Eagle-rib's statement, it may have been customary to join the societies in a certain order. If that were the case, Eagle-rib probably had not reached the Dawō' when the dances of the societies were discontinued about thirty-five years ago.

The informant knew of the horn society among the Blackfoot and that the wives of the members were concerned in certain of their practices. He said it was the oldest and most important of the Blackfoot societies. He was firm in his statement that the Sarsi never had a similar society.

When asked whether the dance of the dog society was a religious rite like the sun dance or a social function like the Omaha dance, the informant replied that it was religious.

#### MOSQUITOES.

This society had one leader who wore a strip of buffalo calfskin, about six inches wide and two yards long tied over his right shoulder and under his left arm. Along this sash were a row of buffalo calf hoofs. His body was painted yellow, with vertical scratches. The other members, numbering from fifty to sixty, were covered with white clay. Each had an eagle feather tied to the right side of his head and eagle claws attached by a band to his right wrist.

The dance was held in early summer in a tipi. The members sat in a circle with a drummer and three singers in the center. When the singing began, the dancers stood and danced near where they had been sitting; that is, they did not move about as was the case in other dances. They danced in this manner three times, and then a fourth time, after which they went outside and chased the people into their tipis. Imitating mosquitoes they scratched any man or woman they were able to catch outside. For this purpose, they used the eagle claws worn on the right wrist, mentioned above. One of these claws was obtained among other specimens from the Sarsi in 1905.

The informant said the originator of this society was a Sarsi named Milkaiye. Having had a dream about bumblebees (nadisnane) he prepared the claws, the feathers, and the sash, and asked the young men to provide a



big tipi. When the tipi was ready, they all gathered inside. The old man sat down with a common stick standing before himself on which hung the sash and at the base of which lay the eagle claws.

He told the young men he would sing and shake his hair. If they did not see bees coming from his hair when he sang he would not give them the sash and claws. He sang three songs, after which he sang a fourth song and shook his side locks with his fingers. Bees issued from them. He gave the sash to a man who paid a horse for it, and became the leader, and the claws to the others who also gave him presents and became regular members.

It is interesting to note that the Sarsi informant, the only one employed, should have voluntarily given a detailed account of the origin of this society which the Northern Blackfoot claimed to have secured from the Sarsi. While the name is mosquito, the bumble bee is the insect named in the story of its origin. The Northern Blackfoot seem to have had two separate societies, one the mosquitoes and the second the bees.<sup>1</sup>

#### Dogs.

There were four leaders who theoretically, at least, were equal in rank. Each of them had a pipe the possession of which secured for him his position as leader in the society. The pipes were obtained by the payment of ten horses from those who had previously been leaders. One of these pipes is still in the possession of a Sarsi. The members, numbering fifty or sixty, were young unmarried and married men. They had their bodies painted yellow with zigzag lines made by drawing the tips of the fingers down the chest on either side. Their faces were also painted yellow with zigzags on each cheek, and in addition a red line was drawn from the outer corner of the right eye to the top of the ear and from the left corner of the mouth horizontally across the cheek. A bunch of feathers from the tail of the owl was tied to the hair behind.

Each of the four leaders had a strip of red cloth which passed over the left shoulder and under the right arm where it joined. One end was continued in a long streamer. Where the cloth was joined under the arm, an owl feather was tied, and at four points along the extended portion single eagle feathers were attached.

The members sat in a circle with an opening towards the east. On the south side sat the four leaders. Their long sashes, mentioned above, were stretched across the circle in parallel lines. There were four drummers

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<sup>1</sup> Wissler, 420, this volume.

who sat eastward of the center of the circle. Older men, no longer members, led the singing. In the opening of the circle sat two men, who, when the dancing was to begin, took up the long sashes of the leaders and carried them to the wearers. These leaders then got up and danced, two in one direction and two in the opposite direction. The ordinary members danced in the center of the circle. The regular dance was held in the early summer, about midday and continued as many days as the members or leaders desired. The wives of the members joined in the dances of this society. They danced behind their husbands, the wives of the leaders holding the ends of the long sashes as they danced.

When the sun dance was held the dogs put up their tipi, north of the tipi of the giver of the sun dance. It was a duty of the members of this society to keep order among the people. The four leaders told the people what was or what was not to be done. If anyone disobeyed, the dogs might cut up his tipi. Some of the members were always in their tipi and at night the members gathered there and sang their songs, but did not dance.

The society was said to have been originated by an old man in accordance with a vision he had received. To this originator of the society prayers were addressed whenever the dance was held. Membership was transferred by purchase; the purchaser gave clothes and beadwork to the one selling out, and to each of the four leaders, a horse.

The Sarsi consider this society to be equivalent to the Blackfoot dog society.

#### POLICE.

There were two leaders who wore wolfskins which had a hole cut in the back through which the wearer put his head. The head of the skin fell on the wearer's breast and the tail on his back. The regular members were painted with red. A strip of buffalo skin was tied around the head in which two feathers were so stuck as to give the appearance of horns.

There were four singers with drums who had their positions in the center. They sang four times, the members dancing in front of the places where they sat. At the conclusion of the fourth song, they all left the tipi and went outside where their horses were in readiness. Jumping on their horses, they caught all the people they could who happened to be outside of their lodges. They pulled the blankets from those who were so unfortunate as to be caught, and carried them away to the society tipi. The owners had to pay for them in order to recover them.

The Sarsi connect this society with the black soldiers of the Blackfoot.

## PREVENTERS.

There were two head men, one of whom had a bow and four arrows, and the other a beaded flat disk about six inches in diameter. This disk he placed on the ground using it as a small mat on which he rested the bowl of his pipe when smoking. The members were painted in red and wore one eagle tail feather on their heads.

They sang and danced four times and then left their tipi. They took the blankets away from any persons they caught outside and tore them up to make breech cloths for themselves. If when they were chasing anyone he ran into a creek, they did not go after him, but let him escape.<sup>1</sup> If a man who was being pursued gave his blanket to a woman the pursuers did not take it from her.

When the arrows used by the leader of this society were to be transferred to another, a man who had killed an enemy with arrows made new ones. He was paid for doing this.

All the people were much afraid of this society. They had to do whatever its members directed. If their commands were not obeyed, they pulled down and cut up the tipis of the disobedient ones. This, however, could only be done when the society was having a dance, or during the sun dance when they assisted the dogs in keeping order.

This society is looked upon by the Sarsi as related to the catchers of the Blackfoot.

DAWŌ'.<sup>2</sup>

There were two leaders who sat in the doorway during the dance. Each wore a strip of bearskin around the waist and had black stripes down each cheek. The members were painted red. They wore a breech cloth and moccasins. The latter were not tied, but had the tops turned down. A blanket was thrown over the shoulders, which had a hole cut in it in such a position that it came on the back. A cluster of soft eagle feathers was tied to the right side of the head near the crown, and a whistle was worn suspended from the neck. Each member carried a bow and four arrows.

There were four singers in the center. After the three preliminary songs had been sung, the fourth one was rendered and the two men, sitting in the doorway arose and danced in opposite directions, holding their bows and arrows as if they were about to shoot the ground. The other members

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<sup>1</sup> The reason for this is given by the Piégan. Wissler, 404, this volume.

<sup>2</sup> Said to be a small water bird which lays its eggs on the shore of the lake.

danced in a circle, sunwise. When they had danced inside for a time, they went outside, pretended to get scared, and ran about keeping together in a band. If a member stumbled and fell, the others gathered about him and danced. When they had danced the fourth time, the fallen member got up and all the members of the society returned to the tipi. When the dance was over, the men did not tie their own moccasins, but each requested some woman to do it for him. He might ask any woman he chose to do this in payment for which service he gave her a present.

The number of days the dance continued was not fixed. There was no pipe owned by the society. This society in several particulars suggests the Blackfoot braves and the informant gave the Blackfoot name of that society as the equivalent of Sarsi dawō'.

#### HAIR PARTERS.

The Sarsi have a dancing organization which is evidently of foreign origin. It is called by them Mitsikistagūlinna, "those who part their hair in the middle." This is the widely distributed "Omaha" or "grass" dance, which in recent years has been taken up by the Northern Plains tribes. The Sarsi have had it since 1883. It was not learned from what tribe it was secured, but some of the properties in use in 1905 were obtained from the Southern Piegan. Among the Sarsi it was clearly a social organization, largely in the control of the younger members of the tribe.

Notwithstanding this foreign source of the organization, there are several concepts associated with it which are important in the native ceremonies of the Blackfoot and Sarsi. The possession of certain objects confers certain rank, power, and duties upon the individual. These are transferred by the sale of the objects, as is the case with medicine bundles. Membership is secured by the payment of one dollar. The recounting of war deeds and the discarding of property, which is afterwards distributed, follows the customs of the sun dance. The dog feast ceremony of this organization is vowed in a manner similar to the sun dance.

The account of this dance which follows was given by Pat Grasshopper in 1905, who was then about thirty-five years of age. The leader's dance hat was purchased of him. The narrative is not a detailed account of a single performance, but the theoretically correct method of conducting the ceremony with variations to suit hypothetical situations.

They place the wagons in a circle leaving an opening toward the south. The women sit on the left (east?) and the young men on the right (west). Four young men sit in the doorway. Before two of these a sword is stuck in the ground and beside the other two a horse whip lies.

A big drum is on the right side, supported by sticks stuck in the ground. Four young men who sing sit beside it. Four small drums lie in the middle. Four sticks stand opposite the doorway between the men and women. On these sticks are four high hats. Behind the semicircle of young men two sticks stand, on which are two feathered belts. The two young men who own them sit in front of them. The leader of the dance sits opposite where these hang, in front of the line of women. Beside this leader sits the young man who fills the pipes. He is the owner of the ax. The young man who owns the whistle sits with the other young men. When they sing for him he dances around the circle. When he has gone four times around the circle he blows on the whistle. The owner of the shield sits by him. The woman who owns the horsehip sits at the end of the line of women. The owner of the guns sits among the other men. The owner of the drum sits opposite the doorway. The man who owns the arrows sits beside the owner of the drum. The young man who waits on the women sits in the same place, beside the women. One young man who passes the drinking water sits by the drum with a pail and drinking cup near him. With him sits another young man who brings in the food for the dancers. A young man who owns the arrows also sits among them opposite the doorway. He holds a long stick in his hand. There are two young men who gather the wagons and arrange them in a circle. They sit with the others opposite the doorway. The last mentioned two young men, when the dance is held in a tipi, arrange two tipis together. When the dance is inside a house, they clear up the house, sweep it out, take out the rubbish, and hang blankets around the room. If the dance is at night, they fill the lamps. The young men who sing put the drums in the middle of the circle. They burn sweetgrass under the small drums and then give them to the singers. While they are standing they sing four songs.

When these songs have been sung the four women who own the dance hats get up, then the other women arise, and finally all the men stand up. When all are standing the women sing. When they dance the owner of the whip arranges the young men between the women, and they dance around four times in a circle. The woman who owns the whip dances in the opposite direction. She strikes hard with her whip any man or woman who is still seated. She gives the person so struck a horse unless that person becomes angry, when nothing is given him.

The leader dances in the middle. The men who own whips stand outside the ring. The young man who looks after the women stands on the side on which the women sit. The young men who own the swords stand there, too, and look after the women. If a young man takes the hand of a woman these young men pull him back outside the ring so he cannot dance. When the dance is finished the man who held the woman's hand is placed in the center of the circle. The leader gets up and says: "Friends, this person sitting in the center held a woman's hand. Because he has acted foolishly all of you (men) kiss him and shake his hand." Then they shake his hand and kiss him. He is taken outside and the leader warns the others against committing a similar offense. "If any one else does that he shall never dance again." The women dance four times and then the men dance four times. After that the men and women dance together.

A blanket is spread in the middle on which four men sit who have had experience in war. The four young men who act as singers sing four songs for them. With the fifth song they start dancing toward the four tall hats. They place guns and scalps for them in the center. They take them up as if they were capturing them. They make a fair sized boy sit in the center. The four men sit by this boy and pretend to

cut him up and scalp him with their knives. As they dance up to the hats four times they do this to him. Each of the four men gives a horse to the boy. After this they put on the hats and dance around with them. They tell stories of their exploits. When one says, "I captured a horse, or a scalp," they beat the drum for him. "I killed someone," some of them say. They tell about different things. They say, "I fought many times. I captured many horses." After that the man who waits on the women hangs up the women's hats which have been taken down.

They throw away horses and clothing. The leader then says to the young men, "Now it is your turn to dance. You are to throw away clothing." If one wishes to give away a horse he puts a stick with the other gifts.

One by one the young men dance. The drum owner dances first of all. Next the owners of the belts dance. They dance up to the belts and back again four times with different songs and then they put them on. They dance around the circle four times and then they hang up the belts again and sit down. The sword owner dances next. He dances around the circle in one direction while a young woman dances in the opposite direction. They make four circuits in this manner. The young man holds the sword pointing upward.

After they have taken their seats the owners of the horsewhips dance in front of the women four times and take their seats. The leader then dances by himself. The owner of the ax, in his turn, dances four times. When he has taken his seat, the owner of the whistle dances twice and blows on his whistle. At this signal all the men get up and dance. If a man fails to get up the owner of the whistle hits him with his whistle, but he must make him a present for treating him so. When he has whistled four times he takes his seat.

The two owners of the arrows then dance one behind the other. As they pass the women they hold the arrow in their faces. If any woman draws her head back they poke the arrow in her face. They go around the circle four times in this manner. If a person's face has been hit, the one doing it goes up to the leader and says; "I poked such a person's face and I gave him a horse and saddle."

Next it is the turn of the young men who make the preparations to dance. When they have danced four times, the water bringer dances around four times holding up his pail. The shield owner then dances. Last of all the woman owner of the horse whip dances. All the men dance with her.

Each man has a different song. They place young men who have voices that do not easily get tired in the middle to sing. These are the ones who sing for the women. When they begin to sing the young man who waits on the women takes the hats down and gives them to the women. He then dances in front of the women leading them around sun-wise. Then another young man, the owner of the horse whip, arranges the young men between the women. The woman who owns the horse whip dances counter sunwise. She dances around four times. When the women have danced around the circle, the young man takes the hats to other women whose turn it is to wear them. In this manner all the women dance with the hats in turn. Altogether they dance with them a hundred times.

The leader who owns the hat gets up and directs that food for the feast shall be brought in. The leader also gives the clothing and the horses to the spectators. The two young men bring in the food. As they take it around four songs are sung. When they give the food to anyone the recipient says "hau." If anyone fails to say "hau" all the food is placed before him. If he fails to eat it all, he must give a horse. If, however, he does succeed in eating it he receives a horse. If the food causes the man to vomit he receives a horse also. They take the food to all the dancers. There

are ten pails of tea, as much bread as a sack of flour will make, five boxes of crackers, a little beef, and five pails of berry soup. They give some of the food to the spectators.

When they have finished eating the women and the men take turns in dancing. They sing four songs. The leader then stands up and says, "You have finished dancing." When they all get up the withdrawal song is sung. The hat is given to a man who has received wounds in battle. Wearing the hat, he approaches the door four times. When he reaches the doorway the fourth time he goes out. When he is outside he gives the hat to its owner. If no person who has been wounded is present, the owner of the hat leads them out.

### THE DOG FEAST.

The preceding narrative applies to the ordinary social gatherings of the organization. In the following pages the same informant describes the procedure when a pledged ceremony is held by the same organization. From the context it is apparent that it then becomes largely religious instead of purely social.

The relatives of one who is very sick make a vow saying, "I will make a dog feast that this person may get well."

When prayers have been said a young dog is hung. A neat woman cooks it. A fire is kindled for it and the hair is carefully singed off. They put it in a good kettle to boil. The water is poured off four times and then sugar is added. The woman who is cooking it leaves it in her own tipi.

When they have danced a long time, the leader says: "Bring the dog." The sword owners go for it, bring it in, and place it on the ground. The young man who waits on the women burns sweetgrass under the kettle. Then it is held up to the east, the south, the west, and the north. The kettle is then approached to the sweetgrass altar four times and brought to rest near it. A good blanket is spread over it. Another blanket is spread in the doorway on which the owner of one of the belts sits with his belt by his side. Four men sit behind the fire. The blanket is taken from the kettle. They sing for the belt owner who dances twice backwards and forwards without the belt. He repeats this four times. They sing other songs for him and he dances toward the kettle three times. The fourth time he approaches it dancing like a prairie chicken. Before he begins dancing an arrow has been given him. He thrusts this arrow into the kettle and conveys with it a piece of the meat to the man who sits at the end of the line. Again he dances four times, the last time imitating a prairie chicken and gives meat to another man. He continues this way until the four men sitting there have received a portion. The four sword owners are given small pieces of the meat. The head is given to the man who sits at the end of the line as his portion. When the flesh has been removed, the skull is placed in the center of the tipi.

All the men and women are served with the dog meat. The owner of the woman's hat says, "Friends let us eat." The others respond "hau." If any one fails to say "hau" all the food is given him. Songs are sung and the owners of the woman's hat dance. After that all present dance. As they dance they approach the skull by which all the other bones lie. The four men who sit in the middle dance toward it. They sing one song then all the men stand up, raise the right hand, and shout. Then they all sit down again. One of the chiefs then dances around four times with an

arrow with which he gently pokes the skull. Each of the four men do that. All of those who dance throw down property. Those who wish, throw down sticks representing horses. The sword owner goes about with a thin cloth on which the dog's bones are placed. The giver of the dog feast asks some one to pray who knows how. The pipe being presented to him, he says a prayer for those sitting in front.

"May he who invoked the aid of this dog live happily together with his relatives."

A blanket is spread, and on it the hat is placed. A prayer is made for it, and sweetgrass burned under it. It is then hung up again.

When the feast is over, the four men go to the belt, bring it back and approach the doorway where they stand facing first the south, the west, and then the north. After that they come in again. The owners of the belt take seats in the middle. A blanket is spread behind them. The belt is placed on this as four songs are sung for them. With these songs the belt is put around their waists. They then dance around the tipi. When they have done this, all the men in turn put on the belt and then return it to the owners. They take it out again and take it into the tipi. They give the hats to some of the men who put them on and dance around with them.

Those who own many horses are placed in the middle. They sit by the owner of the hat. They give him a coat and other good presents such as a new blanket, beaded moccasins, and earrings. They sing for these gifts and dance in front of them. They dance in front of the one to whom they intend to give them. They dance by the husband of the woman who gives the feast. They give him two or three good horses and many good clothes. When they have finished singing the women get up. They recount deeds for the benefit of the one for whom the feast is given.

The following list was furnished of the objects the ownership of which gives the owner a particular rank and definite duties in the society.

One hat with eagle tail-feathers and very many weasel skins.

A sword with an otterskin which has been sewed up and hawk feathers tied to its hilt.

A horsewhip to which four eagle tail-feathers are tied. These must be tied on by a person who has killed an enemy or struck a coup. A man who has captured a gun paints a gun on the whip. A wide piece of otterskin is tied on for the handle of the whip. Weasel skins are tied along the whip in bunches.

An arrow with beads placed spirally around it. The arrow is forked. At the ends two eagle tail-feathers are tied.

A shield of deerskin stretched over a curved stick. Inside four eagle tail-feathers are tied. It is painted yellow. There is a carrying strap which passes over the right shoulder and under the left arm of the owner who has his body painted yellow.

A crow necklace of crow wing- and tail-feathers covered with beads or porcupine quills.

A belt with eagle tail-feathers so attached that they stick out like a tail ornamented with beads placed on them spirally. Cloth of good quality is fastened to the belt so as to hang crosswise.