When Customs Became Offenses

Read how federal rules affected Tribal religious and cultural practices.

OKH.C.6.2.F "Explain the impact of the Code of Indian Offenses of 1883 on Tribal religious and cultural practices."

NAME _____ DATE _____

1 READ AND MARK

Read it twice

YOUR JOB Underline three practices the code targeted, then number each passage detail that explains an effect on Tribal communities. Use your marks to trace how a rule could change daily life.

The Code of Indian Offenses

1 In 1883, the U.S. Department of the Interior issued the Code of Indian Offenses for many federally supervised reservations. Federal officials claimed they were promoting "civilization," but the rules aimed to replace Tribal lifeways with Euro-American religious and social customs. Indian agents, federal officials assigned to reservations, helped enforce the code through Courts of Indian Offenses. These courts could punish behavior that officials judged unacceptable, including certain ceremonies. The code did not come from Tribal governments, and it did not apply in exactly the same way to every nation. Still, it gave federal officials power to police practices central to community life.

2 Consider a Sun Dance, a sacred ceremony practiced in different ways by several Plains nations. The code named the Sun Dance among prohibited dances and feasts that officials called "heathenish." Under the original rules, a participant risked punishment, including the loss of government rations. This pressure could make a public ceremony dangerous to organize and could interrupt the passing of prayers, songs, and responsibilities between generations. The code also targeted some spiritual leaders, whom officials called "medicine men," if officials believed they encouraged people to continue traditional practices. The rule treated religious leadership as an offense rather than a community responsibility.

3 The code also classified plural marriage as an offense, extending federal control into family life. Rules against ceremonies and spiritual leadership put people in a difficult position: they could follow their customs and risk penalties, or avoid penalties by changing what they did in public. Tribal people were not simply passive. Some continued religious practices away from public view or found other ways to preserve teachings despite restrictions. Enforcement varied among reservations, so the code did not end Tribal cultures. Its impact was to place official barriers between communities and their ability to practice and pass on traditions openly.

2 ANSWER WITH EVIDENCE

Use the passage

1. How did Courts of Indian Offenses change who had power over Tribal ceremonies?

2. Explain how the penalty for taking part in a Sun Dance could affect the passing of traditions between generations.

3. How did the rule about spiritual leaders affect religious practice?

4. How did the rule about plural marriage extend the code's impact beyond ceremonies?

3 YOUR TURN

Your own words

Write a four-sentence museum label about a family in the 1880s deciding whether to teach a ceremonial song to a younger relative. Explain how a rule in the passage might shape their decision, describe one possible way to preserve the song, and make clear that the family's choice is an example you imagined.

ANSWER KEY

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HIGH SCHOOL · OKH.C.6.2.F

PART 1 · READ AND MARK

Underline three practices the code targeted, then number each passage detail that explains an effect on Tribal communities. Use your marks to trace how a rule could change daily life. Accept any marking that follows this job and points at the right text.

PART 2 · ANSWERS

#	QUESTION	ANSWER
1	How did Courts of Indian Offenses change who had power over Tribal ceremonies?	**They gave federally supervised courts power to punish ceremonies that officials judged unacceptable, rather than leaving those practices to Tribal communities.**
2	Explain how the penalty for taking part in a Sun Dance could affect the passing of traditions between generations.	**The risk of losing government rations could discourage public ceremonies, reducing opportunities for younger people to learn prayers, songs, and responsibilities.**
3	How did the rule about spiritual leaders affect religious practice?	**It threatened leaders with punishment if officials believed they encouraged traditional practices, making it harder for them to guide their communities openly.**
4	How did the rule about plural marriage extend the code's impact beyond ceremonies?	**By making plural marriage an offense, the code brought federal authority into family relationships as well as religious ceremonies.**

PART 3 · YOUR TURN (SAMPLE ANSWER)

The Code of Indian Offenses threatened penalties for participation in certain ceremonies, including the Sun Dance. In this imagined family, an older relative worries that teaching a ceremonial song at a public gathering could draw an agent's attention. The relative decides to teach the song privately instead. This possible choice shows how a rule against a ceremony could change the way a tradition was passed on, even if the song itself was not banned.

Accept explanations that connect a specific rule or penalty to a change in religious or cultural practice. For the museum label, students should distinguish the passage's documented rules from their imagined family's response.