

■ The Ghost Dance Among the Lakota

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Author: Z. A. Parker

Genre: report

Summary Overview

In January 1889, a Paiute medicine man named Wovoka had a vision that resulted in the birth of an American Indian religious revitalization movement called the Ghost Dance. A peaceful movement that called on Indians of all tribes to live peacefully and ethically, abstain from drinking alcohol, work hard, and perform the sacred dance, the Ghost Dance spread rapidly through many tribes in the western United States, as most tribes were facing difficult times and cultural upheaval due to being confined to reservations. By 1890, the Ghost Dance had reached the Lakota Sioux at the Pine Ridge Reservation in Dakota Territory. The Lakotas had been particularly hard hit by the realities of reservation life and had fought the US Army since 1866 for the right to continue their traditional way of life. This document gives an outside observer's perspective on the practice of the Ghost Dance at Pine Ridge.

Defining Moment

In late 1889, two Sioux medicine men, Short Bull and Kicking Bear, arrived in Nevada to visit Wovoka and learn the Ghost Dance, in order to bring it back to the Pine Ridge, Standing Rock, and Rosebud Reservations. When the Ghost Dance arrived at Pine Ridge in 1890, it gave hope to a people who had believed their future to be hopeless. It promised that if the Lakotas performed the dance with all of their hearts and abstained from violence and vice, the white people who were flooding into the Great Plains would be eradicated, and the idyllic lifestyle of the American Indians would be restored. A nomadic people who had once sustained themselves by following the bison, the Lakotas had been asked to practice agriculture on their reservations. Not only was this completely alien to their cultural background, but also the lands in the Dakota Territory, to which they had been assigned, were particularly poor for agriculture, especially without dependable irrigation methods, which were neither naturally occurring nor provided by the government.

Adding to the cultural crisis faced by the Lakotas, their holiest place, the Black Hills, which had been promised to them in perpetuity in the 1868 Treaty of Fort Laramie, had since been invaded by gold-seeking white Americans, resulting in the rebellion that led to the Lakotas' iconic victory over General George A. Custer at the Battle of the Little Bighorn in 1876. That victory, however, did not turn the tide of white expansion, and great Sioux leaders, such as Red Cloud, Crazy Horse, and Sitting Bull eventually settled on the reservations, dependent on government subsidies to help their people survive on a land that was not suited to agriculture and did not permit them to sustain themselves any other way.

Into this hopeless situation came the Ghost Dance, which promised a way back to the Lakotas' cultural past, and large numbers accepted its message and began participating in the dance. The most influential Lakota leader at the time, Sitting Bull, supported the practice among his people, though he did not participate in the dance itself. Agents of the US Bureau of Indian Affairs, including Standing Rock's James McLaughlin, opposed the movement, as they believed it presaged a renewed call for war against the United States.

Author Biography

Little is known about Mrs. Z. A. Parker, the woman who relayed this eyewitness account of the Ghost Dance. According to James Mooney, the ethnographer who took down her recounting of the dance, she was a teacher on the Pine Ridge Reservation who observed Lakotas performing a Ghost Dance near White Clay Creek on June 20, 1890. Much more is known about Mooney, as he was one of the foremost ethnographers of American Indian rituals and beliefs and the first scholar to do significant work on the Ghost Dance. Mooney worked for the Smithsonian Institution's Bureau of American Ethnology, where his job was to compile information on

American Indian tribes. His most significant work was among the Sioux and the Cherokees, and he was widely

regarded as his generation's leading expert on American Indians.

HISTORICAL DOCUMENT

We drove to this spot about 10:30 o'clock on a delightful October day. We came upon tents scattered here and there in low, sheltered places long before reaching the dance ground. Presently we saw over three hundred tents placed in a circle, with a large pine tree in the center, which was covered with strips of cloth of various colors, eagle feathers, stuffed birds, claws, and horns—all offerings to the Great Spirit. The ceremonies had just begun. In the center, around the tree, were gathered their medicine-men; also those who had been so fortunate as to have had visions and in them had seen and talked with friends who had died. A company of fifteen had started a chant and were marching abreast, others coming in behind as they marched. After marching around the circle of tents they turned to the center, where many had gathered and were seated on the ground.

I think they wore the ghost shirt or ghost dress for the first time that day. I noticed that these were all new and were worn by about seventy men and forty women. The wife of a man called Return-from-scout had seen in a vision that her friends all wore a similar robe, and on reviving from her trance she called the women together and they made a great number of the sacred garments. They were of white cotton cloth. The women's dress was cut like their ordinary dress, a loose robe with wide, flowing sleeves, painted blue in the neck, in the shape of a three-cornered handkerchief, with moon, stars, birds, etc., interspersed with real feathers, painted on the waists, letting them fall to within 3 inches of the ground, the fringe at the bottom. In the hair, near the crown, a feather was tied. I noticed an absence of any manner of head ornaments, and, as I knew their vanity and fondness for them, wondered why it was. Upon making inquiries I found they discarded everything they could which was made by white men.

The ghost shirt for the men was made of the same material-shirts and leggings painted in red. Some of the leggings were painted in stripes running up and down, others running around. The shirt was painted blue around the neck, and the whole garment was fantasti-

cally sprinkled with figures of birds, bows and arrows, sun, moon, and stars, and everything they saw in nature. Down the outside of the sleeve were rows of feathers tied by the quill ends and left to fly in the breeze, and also a row around the neck and up and down the outside of the leggings. I noticed that a number had stuffed birds, squirrel heads, etc., tied in their long hair. The faces of all were painted red with a black half-moon on the forehead or on one cheek.

As the crowd gathered about the tree the high priest, or master of ceremonies, began his address, giving them directions as to the chant and other matters. After he had spoken for about fifteen minutes they arose and formed in a circle. As nearly as I could count, there were between three and four hundred persons. One stood directly behind another, each with his hands on his neighbor's shoulders. After walking about a few times, chanting, "Father, I come," they stopped marching, but remained in the circle, and set up the most fearful, heart-piercing wails I ever heard—crying, moaning, groaning, and shrieking out their grief, and naming over their departed friends and relatives, at the same time taking up handfuls of dust at their feet, washing their hands in it, and throwing it over their heads. Finally, they raised their eyes to heaven, their hands clasped high above their heads, and stood straight and perfectly still, invoking the power of the Great Spirit to allow them to see and talk with their people who had died. This ceremony lasted about fifteen minutes, when they all sat down where they were and listened to another address, which I did not understand, but which I afterwards learned were words of encouragement and assurance of the coming messiah.

When they arose again, they enlarged the circle by facing toward the center, taking hold of hands, and moving around in the manner of school children in their play of "needle's eye." And now the most intense excitement began. They would go as fast as they could, their hands moving from side to side, their bodies swaying, their arms, with hands gripped tightly in their neighbors', swinging back and forth with all their might. If one, more

weak and frail, came near falling, he would be jerked up and into position until tired nature gave way. The ground had been worked and worn by many feet, until the fine, flour-like dust lay light and loose to the depth of two or three inches. The wind, which had increased, would sometimes take it up, enveloping the dancers and hiding them from view. In the ring were men, women, and children; the strong and the robust, the weak consumptive, and those near to death's door. They believed those who were sick would be cured by joining in the dance and losing consciousness. From the beginning they chanted, to a monotonous tune, the words

Father, I come;
 Mother, I come;
 Brother, I come;
 Father, give us back our arrows.

All of which they would repeat over and over again until first one and then another would break from the ring and stagger away and fall down. One woman fell a few feet from me. She came toward us, her hair flying over her face, which was purple, looking as if the blood would burst through; her hands and arms moving wildly; every breath a pant and a groan; and she fell on her back, and went down like a log. I stepped up to her as she lay there motionless, but with every muscle twitching and quivering. She seemed to be perfectly unconscious.

Some of the men and a few of the women would run, stepping high and pawing the air in a frightful manner. Some told me afterwards that they had a sensation as if the ground were rising toward them and would strike them in the face. Others would drop where they stood. One woman fell directly into the ring, and her husband stepped out and stood over her to prevent them from trampling upon her. No one ever disturbed those who fell or took any notice of them except to keep the crowd away.

They kept up dancing until fully 100 persons were lying unconscious. Then they stopped and seated themselves in a circle, and as each recovered from his trance he was brought to the center of the ring to relate his experience. Each told his story to the medicine-man and he shouted it to the crowd. Not one in ten claimed that he saw anything. I asked one Indian—a tall, strong fellow, straight as an arrow—what his experience was. He said he saw an eagle coming toward him. It flew round and round, drawing nearer and nearer until he put out his hand to take it, when it was gone. I asked him what he thought of it. “Big lie,” he replied. I found by talking to them that not one in twenty believed it. After resting for a time they would go through the same performance, perhaps three times a day. They practiced fasting, and every morning those who joined in the dance were obliged to immerse themselves in the creek.

GLOSSARY

consumptive: wasted of body; debilitated by illness, often pulmonary tuberculosis

medicine man: a traditional healer and spiritual leader

needle's eye: a chanting circle game in Victorian times

Document Analysis

Parker's account of the Ghost Dance demonstrates a number of differences between Wovoka's vision and the way the dance was practiced and thought about by the Lakotas. The account also conveys Parker's perception, common among white people at the time, that the practice of the Ghost Dance by the Lakotas was leading to

resumed resistance to white expansionism.

One of Parker's most notable observations is her description of the Lakota ghost shirts, which were worn during the practice of the dance. Wovoka made no mention of such shirts; they were a purely Lakota addition to the dance. According to Parker, “The wife of a man called Return-from-scout had seen in a vision that her

friends all wore a similar robe, and on reviving from her trance she called the women together and they made a great number of the sacred garments.” There were different versions of the shirt for men and women to wear. Both versions were decorated by various painted symbols, including birds, stars, the sun, and the moon.

The ghost shirts were largely responsible for the perception of the Ghost Dance as a militant movement that could possibly lead to a renewal of warfare. While Wovoka had preached that Indians should coexist peacefully with white people, it has been argued that the Lakotas ignored this message of nonviolence and instead saw the Ghost Dance as a potential precursor to the elimination of the white race. They claimed that the ghost shirts would protect them against the bullets fired by the US Army. Additionally, part of the chant reported by Parker—“Father, I come; Mother, I come; Brother, I come; Father, give us back our arrows”—seems to imply both the resurrection of the Indians who had died before and the resumption of hostilities with the Americans. Parker’s account demonstrates the fervor with which the Lakotas practiced the Ghost Dance, noting that at least one hundred of those participating danced until they fell unconscious.

Alarmed by accounts such as Parker’s, McLaughlin called for the Lakotas to stop the dancing, but he was unable to control the spread of the movement. McLaughlin then asked the US Army to dispatch a unit to the reservation and also sent his own tribal police (Lakotas who worked directly for the reservation agent) to arrest Sitting Bull, whom he erroneously believed to be the leader of the movement. When the tribal police arrived at Sitting Bull’s home on Standing Rock Reservation to bring him into custody, a firefight broke out that resulted in the death of the great Lakota spiritual leader.

Essential Themes

The Ghost Dance movement may have been short lived among the Lakotas, but it had a profound influence on their history and the history of American Indians as a whole, in both the short and the long term. Immediately after the killing of Sitting Bull, a Lakota chief named Spotted Elk, also known as Big Foot, took approximately 350 Lakotas, mostly women and children, and fled the nearby Cheyenne River Reservation for Pine Ridge. They were pursued by troops under the command of Major Samuel Whitside and were eventually intercept-

ed. Spotted Elk, who had contracted pneumonia during the journey, surrendered, and he and his band were escorted to Wounded Knee Creek. On December 29, 1890, soldiers were attempting to disarm the Lakotas when a shot was fired. The federal troops opened fire on the largely unarmed camp with Hotchkiss artillery, killing at least 150 Lakotas. The massacre at Wounded Knee is widely regarded as the symbolic end of the Sioux Wars, which had begun with the First Sioux War in 1854.

Despite the violent attempts at suppression, the Ghost Dance did not die out, and it was still being performed by a number of other tribes on the Great Plains into the 1960s. By the end of that decade, the American Indian Movement (AIM) had formed to advocate for Indian rights and welfare. Many of the movement’s participants looked to the Ghost Dance as inspiration for their own conflict, as it symbolized American Indian resistance to US policy and the encroachment of American culture. Leonard Crow Dog, an Oglala Lakota holy man and AIM activist, revived the practice of the Ghost Dance in the 1970s.

In 1973, AIM activists and about 200 Lakota returned to Wounded Knee, seizing the town to protest the failed impeachment of Oglala tribal president Richard Wilson and the failure of the US government to honor its treaties with Indian nations. FBI agents and US marshals besieged the activists for seventy-one days, and one agent and two protesters were killed during the standoff. The event and the publicity given it by the press resulted in greater attention for the cause of American Indian rights throughout the United States.

—Steven L. Danver, PhD

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