

CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE OF THE GHOST DANCE¹

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FEW religious movements have been so fortunate in their contemporary chroniclers as the Ghost Dance of 1890 in the sympathetic record of James Mooney.² In his long historical account and commentary, Mooney enlarged upon earlier movements of a similar nature, ghost dance origins and sources, the doctrine, the forms of the dance, its psychological aspects in the trances, the spread of the religion in detail, the local forms of the religion among a number of the tribes, and the actual historical events which brought some tribes into conflict with the government over the doctrine. But Mooney's report was at once so voluminous and full a record, that since its publication there has been a tendency to regard the Ghost Dance as a closed book, finished and forever settled in this definitive treatment.

James Mooney investigated the Ghost Dance at intervals in the years from 1890 to 1893. Of his own work he states that his investigations brought "personal observation and study of the Ghost Dance down to the beginning of 1894."³ In his introductory remarks, Mooney comments that "the investigation . . . might be continued indefinitely, as the dance still exists [in 1896] and is developing new features at every performance."⁴ Thus Mooney himself recognized that he had not written the final chapter.

And in truth the Ghost Dance, like all vital cultural manifestations, was not, and could not be, an episode that had an arbitrary beginning and an arbitrary close. In human culture, as in human experience, what has come to attention and prominence never disappears. Either it is retained in some form as a part of culture thereafter, or it leaves its impress and influence upon other aspects of culture.

To measure the pulse of the Ghost Dance movement, Mooney found it necessary to consider the religious revivals of earlier American Indian prophets, demonstrating that no mere arbitrary point could be selected as the beginning of the Ghost Dance. In a passage of his concluding remarks, Mooney called attention to the fact that among some of the tribes which participated in the Ghost Dance, "the Ghost Dance has become a part of

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² James Mooney, *The Ghost-Dance Religion and the Sioux Outbreak of 1890*. BAE-R 14, pt. 2, 1896.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 654.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 653.

the tribal life and is performed at regular intervals,"⁵ indicating that no arbitrary date could be set upon its close. If the Ghost Dance did not suddenly arise, flourish, and disappear, but rather had a natural growth upon the basis of earlier culture in response to cultural needs, and after the excitement of its period of storm and stress settled down to become a more or less integrated part of a newer, changed culture, then Ghost Dance effects are a significant ethnological problem. For if the field ethnologist today is to penetrate to older levels of aboriginal culture, he must attend to the local Ghost Dance and mark off the changes it has caused.

According to James Mooney's concept of the Ghost Dance it was a movement of revolt, religiously directed, an attempt to throw off an alien yoke, and recover aboriginal freedom. In the course of that movement, the activities which composed it could not fail to influence directly the rest of culture. I should like to call attention to certain phases of this influence, of how changes which came about were related to the doctrine and to the activities of the dance. While I shall use facts from the Pawnee to illustrate my meaning, I believe that the general bearing of the point of view will be found relevant to the situation among other tribes.

The Ghost Dance spread among American Indian tribes at a time when the final destruction of native culture was well advanced. Perhaps the greatest destructive influence was not so much the influx of white settlers or the consequent appropriation of tribal lands, as the annihilation of the great herds of buffalo. With the disappearance of the buffalo, the economic stability and security of the Indian tribes vanished. In its place came want and hunger. A feeling of desolation which spread among these tribes made them ripe for any message of hope.

The Ghost Dance doctrine brought hope. It promised a destruction of the invading white man, a return of the buffalo and old Indian ways, and a reunion of the Indians and their deceased forebears. The last may well have been a Christian element, as well as the moral precept accompanying it that Indians were not to fight any more, but live together in one great brotherhood. But the sanction for this hope was native to the Indian mind. It was based on the vision, on the direct supernatural experience. In the vision a message came from the deceased, telling the living what to do, telling the living what would happen.

With the destruction of the buffalo and the influx of the white man, Indian ways of life were vanishing. This was clearly the case if we read the Pawnee story aright. The old Pawnee societies had long since ceased to function. Practically all these societies were concerned with war and hunt-

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 927.

ing. Intertribal warfare had been legally eliminated, although of course occasional skirmishes occurred. But the Pawnee steadfastly maintained their treaty obligations and avoided warfare with their ancient enemies, appealing, as in the case of the Sioux massacre of the Pawnee in 1873, to the federal government for redress. In the same way, tribal hunting became a memory. With the disappearance of warfare and hunting, the societies no longer had a function.

The great esoteric bundle ceremonies of the Pawnee had also ceased. The reason given by old men today is not a failure of belief, but the same failure of the supply of buffalo which destroyed many of the societies. A cardinal tenet of Pawnee ideology was the sacred character of buffalo meat. None but buffalo meat could be used in the great ceremonies; in fact, not only was buffalo meat essential, but in many of the bundle ceremonies buffalo concepts and orientations of powers concerned primarily with the buffalo were part and parcel of the ritual and ceremony itself. Without these aspects of the ritual and ceremony, the performance became meaningless.

The medicine-men's phase of Pawnee religion had not entirely died out. Many leading doctors who controlled the right to demonstrate dances had died, taking their esoteric teachings with them to the grave; but one or two Doctor Dances were still held almost every year. For these a sufficient supply of buffalo meat could be obtained, or the medicine-men themselves found justification for substituting ordinary beef for buffalo meat. The great Doctor Performances involving feats of magic and sleight of hand had ceased. The last one occurred among the Pawnee in 1878 or 1879.

The ordinary social activities of daily life had also broken down to a great extent. Most of the games were no longer played, or were revived here and there intermittently. Thus while in former times the spring was not only a time of great religious and ceremonial activity, of great economic and industrial activity, but also a time for the revival of games for the young and old, in the years before the Ghost Dance there was no general spring revival of social activity.

This decline of Pawnee culture was not altogether a direct result of the changing conditions, but in considerable part was connected with the Pawnee pattern for handing on traditional knowledge.

According to the Pawnee conception, the knowledge and learning of an individual had to be handed down by actual instruction of the young. This was somewhat different for the two basic types of bundles: the sacred bundles (with which can be associated the society bundles, probably derivative), and the doctor bundles. A sacred bundle was physically owned by a man who did not necessarily know its significance and ritual, although he

did carry out his obligations toward it according to the instruction of a priest; it was physically cared for by the owner's wife; and its ritual learning was controlled or owned by a priest. The bundle itself was inherited in the male line (ordinarily). The ritual learning was taught by the priest to his successor, usually a close relative (though not necessarily in the male line alone), but lacking close kin of the right temperament and character, the priest taught whom he wished. On the other hand, a medicine man owned his bundle *and* its correlative teachings, performances, rites. He turned these over to his successor, who was usually a close relative (son or nephew, etc.), but again, if the medicine man found his own kin unwilling to take over his bundle, he would teach someone else who came to him desiring to learn.

Ordinarily, a man taught his successor largely by demonstration. That is, the apprentice took part in the actual demonstrations of the ritual, watching what went on. In the course of the procedure, his master explained details. As the teacher found his pupil mastering phases of the activity, he turned over to the pupil such parts of the ritual, performance, etc., as he found were understood. In this way, as a rule, a man learned *all* of another's teachings only if the teacher lived to be an old man. In fact, the Pawnee conception was that as a man taught what he knew he gave up part of his life, and that when he had given over all his teachings, he would die. Hence the old and learned always held back something until they were ready to die. If a priest or medicine man died, what he had not taught to his successor was lost. Usually, when an old man knew he was on his deathbed, and valued his learning and his apprentice, he called the apprentice in, and in dying whispers told him the essentials of what he had not before that time communicated. Now since among the Pawnee a man has no right to handle in a ceremonial manner what he does not understand, what he has not learned to carry out, it happened in most cases that doctor bundles were broken up upon the death of the owner. Some part of the bundle had already been transferred to the medicine man's apprentice; some further part which the apprentice understood but had not already been given, was now handed over to him; and the rest was buried with the deceased medicine man. As the ownership of the sacred bundles was divorced from the knowledge of their rituals, the same did not happen to them. The physical bundle survived, but gradually less and less of its contents were understood by living men.

The important point to remember in this is that in old Pawnee ideology what of traditional learning was lost through death was lost beyond recovery. There was no sanction for carrying out any ritual, other than that

the one who attempted to carry it out had learned about it from the man who formerly had controlled it and demonstrated it.

As conditions became unfavorable for carrying out the activities and demonstrating the rituals of the ceremonies and societies, there was neither the stimulus for the old to teach and for the young to learn, nor the customary mechanism in operation for the transfer of learning. Hence the normal rate of cultural forgetting was accelerated, and in the course of only a few years, relatively, most of the old traditional ways were buried in the grave.

Into this situation of cultural decay and gradual darkness, the Ghost Dance doctrine shone like a bright light. Indian ways were not gone, never to be recovered. Indian ways were coming back. Those who had lived before in the "golden age" were still carrying on old ceremonies, old dances, old performances, and old games in the beyond. They were coming back; they were bringing the old ways and the buffalo. Dance, dance, dance. The white man would be destroyed by a great wind. The Indian would be left with the buffalo, with his ancestors, with his old friends and his old enemies. Cast aside the white man's ways like an old garment; put on the clothes of the Indian again. Get ready for the new day and the old times.

The dancers shook and fell in hypnotic trances. They saw the people in the beyond dancing too. They saw them playing games, ring and pole games, handgames; they saw them gathering for war dances and the hunt; they saw them gathered in their old society brotherhoods.

The visionaries awoke and told what they saw. *They* are doing all these things; we must too. So the people began games and dances. They revived war dances and societies; they revived the Horn Dance, the Young Dog Dance, the Iruska, the Big Horse Society, the Roached Heads, the Crazy Dogs. Again they carried out the Pipe Dance; they renewed interest in the Doctor Dances. They played handgames.

In short, the activity of the Ghost Dance times was not a mere revival of old ways, it became a renaissance of Pawnee culture.

This effect occurred in the following way: In a vision the subject would "see" some old way of life which had come to be disregarded. He would "remember" it. His vision then became a command upon those alive who knew how it must be carried out, to do so. Sometimes there were men alive who knew the thing thoroughly and were persuaded by the demand of such a supernatural message to begin it again. But often a ritual or dance was only partially remembered. Then many men would get together and pool their memories to revive the affair. If the "seen" phase of old life was social

and non-esoteric, the visionary himself would revive the old way. Hence games, and handgames.

Most important of all were revivals of those old ways which had been utterly lost. In older Pawnee theory, as we saw, only direct learning from the owner sanctioned use and demonstration. But in a vision in the Ghost Dance one saw the deceased (the "ghost", in other words); one saw those who had known how to do these things and had died without handing them on. The deceased in the vision told the visionary what to do just as he would have done in life. He appealed to the visionary to revive his ways because the old life was soon to reappear in its entirety. Thus an entirely new form of sanction came into Pawnee thought. Where it would have been sacrilege formerly to have carried out a dance or ceremony to which one had no right, where before such behavior would have invited supernatural punishment, the trance vision now constituted a supernatural command that the performance *be* revived.⁶

⁶ The Bear Dance of recent years among the Pawnee, such as that which James Murie studied and recorded, was a Ghost Dance revival. The following quotations from Murie's account in *Ceremonies of the Pawnee*, in press, Bureau of Ethnology, serve to illustrate the account given above of these revivals. The account is presented by Murie as of the Skiri Bear Dance, but I have found on internal evidence, such as the affiliation of the owners of the revived ceremony, the choice of individuals for the leaderships, the story or teaching associated with the ceremony, the fact that the bears are "yellow bears," etc., that the form must be considered that of the Pitahawirat band.

"At the death of Bear Chief of the Pitahawirat, the main bearskin and other things belonging to the Bear Society were buried with him. He had not taught the secret ceremony to any one; so it was supposed that the Bear Society was lost. At a meeting of the medicine society when the ceremony had ended, a woman arose, her name Woman Yellow Corn, and said, 'I had a vision. I saw Bearchief wearing the bear robe over his shoulders and the bear claw neck-piece around his neck. He was painted with yellow earthen clay, and had black streaks from each eye down the face. He said, 'My sister, Father (bear) and Mother (cedar-tree) have not had any smoke for many years. We (dead people) are watching for our people to have the ceremony. The people think the ceremony is lost. It is not, for one of the Bear men who knows the ceremony is still with you. I ask that you tell the people so that they can have the ceremony, for it is time.' I woke up and the last few days have been crying to think that I should be the one to tell you. I have a cow which you can have so you can have the ceremony.' Then she began to cry.

"The leaders of the Bear ceremony each in their turn arose, went to the woman and blessed her. . . . They said, 'My sister, this is very hard. None of us know the ceremony but Father (bear) and Mother (cedar-tree) will plan a way themselves so we can have the ceremony. . . .'

"Some days later the members of the Bear society met and compared their knowledge of the ceremony. When all had spoken a man named Big Star . . . questioned the others as to their knowledge of the ceremony. He found that none in the meeting knew the ceremony. So he said, 'Brothers, this is hard. You see I am paralyzed, and I could not sit and carry the ceremony out. If you will all agree I will try it. Before we do anything we must select men to be

This renaissance meant not only the revival of activities. It meant also that a good deal of ceremonial paraphernalia which had been lost or buried in times past, was duplicated from memory and vision. Many of the society regalia and ritual objects which were purchased by the museums around 1900 from the Pawnee were not the old sacred objects. Those had long before disappeared, many of them prior to the movement of the Pawnee to Oklahoma in 1874-76. They were the Ghost Dance revival objects, the Ghost Dance reincarnations of the old lances, drums, regalia and pipes.

Following this revival of old ways, there was a new reintegration of Ghost Dance suggestions, old ways, and current thought. In terms of this the ghost dance handgames arose, and passed through many transformations. In some of these, special revivals of old societies were incorporated.

the leaders. You and I know that there are some men here who are descendants of deceased men who were leaders in the Bear Society. . . .’ So he selected . . . Little Warchief, . . . Little Sun, . . . Good Buffalo, . . . and Roaming Chief. . . .’

These men were ceremonially inducted into office. Big Star then seated himself with these leaders at the altar and made arrangements to collect among the people the ceremonial utensils, etc., for a set of things needed to carry out the ceremony.

“When all the others had gone out, Big Star told the four men to watch as he carried on the ceremony, that he would carry on the ceremony for them. He also told that Tirawahat had planned through the woman for them to have the ceremony, so he was willing to carry the ceremony on for them without pay; that in olden times men paid to learn the secrets of the Bear ceremony, especially in going after the Mother Cedar-Tree; that he himself did not purchase the right to carry the ceremony on, but that Bear Chief who was the last man to know the ceremony had given him the right to sit near him and watch; that Bear Chief took pity on him and taught him the ceremony and songs without pay. He then told them to go to their homes, that on the morrow when they entered the lodge each one was to take his seat. They were then dismissed with the exception of Little Warchief.

“When they were alone Big Star questioned Little Warchief about the songs and asked if he knew them. Little Warchief said, ‘Yes, I know the songs.’ Big Star was glad of this for although he could carry on the ceremony, he was afraid that he would not be able to sing the cedar-tree songs.”

Later at the preliminary feast to set the date of the ceremony, “when all were in, Big Star said, ‘You, who are sitting at the altar and those of you at the stations, old men and chiefs. Today we sit in this lodge as men of the Bear Society. We are gathered together here, through Woman Yellow Corn, who had a vision of one of our departed relatives who asked that we have this ceremony, that Father and Mother might receive our smoke’. . . .’

Inasmuch as Murie, in reporting this and the rest of his account, was unaware of the nature of this whole procedure as a revival, it is interesting substantiation and illustration of the interpretation I have outlined above. Murie’s confusion about the band affiliation of the ceremony is no doubt due to the pooling of knowledge, which does include men of various bands. Of interest is that in the account of Murie of the felling of the cedar-tree, the tree is made to fall westward, a Ghost Dance orientation; in earlier times the tree would have to fall eastward. The whole nature of this revival of a ceremony whose owner is dead, and whose bundle is buried in the ground, would have been impossible without the Ghost Dance and its doctrines.

New forms of intertribal visiting were founded on revivals of old customs and Ghost Dance ideas. Society and dance revivals were integrated with Ghost Dance thought. Thus vital phases of Pawnee life which survived until recent years were not exactly what Pawnee life had been in the 19th century; they were based on old forms and traditions, but they were changed permanently into new forms by the cultural stimulant of the Ghost Dance years.

The Ghost Dance was not merely a religious revival movement. Its roots lie deep in the gradual cultural destruction which preceded it. Its doctrine and the activities it demanded infused new life into the culture, and constituted instrumentalities for an actual renaissance of the forms of old culture. Along with this renaissance there came into being also new cultural forms, unknown before.⁷

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⁷ Since the preceding discussion was written, the cultural problems of the Ghost Dance have been more fully analyzed in: "The Pawnee Ghost Dance Hand Game; a Study of Cultural Change." In Press, Columbia University Press.