

THE GHOST DANCE RELIGION AMONG THE OKLAHOMA CHEYENNE

By Donald N. Brown*

From out of the West had come the word that the Great Spirit was going to right the wrongs visited upon His red children. The Indian was to be restored to his rightful inheritance. Soon the entire Indian race, living and dead, would be reunited to live a life of happiness which would be forever free from death, disease, and misery. This was the message of Wovoka—a message which had come to him as a direct revelation from the God of the Indians.¹

All of this had been revealed to the young Painte Indian as he lay tossing with fever in his Nevada home. The year was 1888 and Wovoka's brethren were in a state of great excitement due to an eclipse which had recently occurred. The very fact that the "sun died" gave credence to the story which Wovoka told when he recovered from the fever. He reported that he had been transported to another world where he had seen people who had died years before. These were living as they had in days gone by, and were happily occupied with their oldtime sports and work. At the conclusion of his visit God told him to tell his people what he had seen. He was instructed to tell the Indians that they must be good, love one another, and not quarrel among themselves or with the whites. If they followed these admonitions, and also some other commandments, they would soon be reunited in a world where there was no sickness or death. Wovoka was also given a dance to take back to the people which would help them secure happiness, and which would hasten the wonderful event.²

The message brought by Wovoka was a welcome one to the Indians of the Plains. Wherever they had lived throughout the broad expanse which was the American continent the Indians had been subjected to persecution. Even though the white man had succeeded in driving the Indians from their ancestral homes, and in confining them on relatively poor reservations, he had not been able to break their spirit. The message gave the Indian the hope that the day was coming when he and his people would once again control the verdant hills and rushing streams which designated their former home.

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¹ Frederick W. Hodge, *Handbook of American Indians North of Mexico* (Washington, 1907), Vol. I, 491. Wovoka was known to the whites as Jack Wilson because he worked for a rancher by the name of Wilson.

² Jas. Mooney, "Ghost Dance Religion and the Sioux Outbreaks of 1890-91" in the *14th Annual Report of the Bureau of American Ethnology* (Washington, 1896), part 2, 771-72. Hereafter cited as Mooney, "Ghost Dance Religion."

Because a return to the "good old days" was promised by the messiah his message spread like wildfire. Before long nearly all the Indians of the Interior Basin in the West were practising the dance which he had brought. Soon the word jumped the Rocky Mountains, and the methodical four-time drumming which marked the step of the newly given dance reverberated across the plains.

Not the least among the Plains tribes that heard the call and acceded to the wishes of the Great Spirit was the Southern Cheyenne. This proud people of Algonquian stock had every reason to desire a return to the conditions which existed before the white man invaded their country. Once their domain had encompassed a vast region; now they were confined on a comparatively small reservation. Then the innumerable buffalo herds furnished an undiminishing supply of food; now the mighty animal had completely disappeared. Then the Cheyenne were a powerful, happy, and numerous people; now they were dispirited and relatively few. All of this had come to pass since the white man had pointed his wagon westward. Lured by reports of gold, he had pushed the Cheyenne from their Colorado hunting grounds. Lured by descriptions of the land, he had pushed them from Kansas, and into the confines of an Indian Territory reservation. Grim reminders of the futile resistance of the Cheyenne to these encroachments were the death-strewn fields of Sand Creek and the Washita.

The northern branch of the Cheyenne who lived in Wyoming first heard of the promises of Wovoka in 1889. These Indians were deeply interested, and they sent a delegation to Fort Washaki to learn more about the "messiah." The principal Cheyenne delegate, Porcupine, was joined by a group of Sioux led by White Short Bull and Kicking Bear. From Fort Washaki in Wyoming they journeyed to Fort Hall in Idaho where they met some Shoshoni and Bannocks who were firm believers in the new doctrine. Growing more excited with every favorable report the delegation led by Porcupine decided to go the limit and visit Wovoka himself. Consequently they joined other groups with the same purpose in mind, and set out by railroad for Nevada. After arriving in Paiute country they wasted little time before taking part in the dances which were being held near Pyramid Lake. Interestingly enough the leader of these dances was Wovoka himself.

Early in the spring of 1890, Porcupine and his unknown Cheyenne companions returned to their reservation with accurate news of the messiah. Porcupine appeared before a council, and talked for five successive days about what they had learned. His report of the divine message aroused the wildest excitement among the Cheyenne. After the tribal leaders debated the matter for several days the Ghost Dance was initiated according to the instructions received from Wovoka.²

² *Ibid.*, 817-19.

The Southern, or Oklahoma, Cheyenne received the first hint of the new religion from their relatives in the North. The word came through letters written by government school students who had returned to the northern reservation.⁴ The Southern Arapaho in the Indian Territory, long-time allies of the Cheyenne, were highly interested in the story of a new messiah. As a consequence, they raised funds to send Black Coyote and Washee, two members of their tribe, to the northern reservation to learn the truth of the rumors. The two remained in the North until the delegation returned from the Paiute country. They listened eagerly to the account of the messiah and his doctrine, took part in the dances, and learned the songs. Filled with enthusiasm, they returned to their Indian Territory homes, arriving in April, 1890. There among the Arapaho they inaugurated the first Ghost Dance held among the Southern Plains Indians.⁵

The Southern Cheyenne, however, were not so willing to trust entirely the favorable report of Black Coyote and Washee. Therefore they sent Little Chief and Bark from their own tribe to seek the truth from their northern relatives. A little later White Shield journeyed northward on the same errand. These delegates also brought back a favorable report. As a result the Southern Cheyenne began the dance in the summer of 1890.⁶

The "Ghost Dance" constantly grew in fervor and frequency among the Cheyenne and their Arapaho friends.⁷ Soon it had practically superseded all the other dances of the two tribes. All along the Washita and Canadian rivers the drums slowly beat time for both men and women. Almost every camp held all-night dances two or three times a week.

In September, 1890, there occurred the largest dance ever held among the Cheyenne and Arapaho. In that month nearly all the members of the two tribes, as well as some Caddo, Wichita, and Kiowa, gathered at the dancing grounds on the North Canadian, some two miles from Darlington.⁸ Added interest was given this meeting by the presence of Sitting Bull, a southern Arapaho, who had returned from a sojourn in the North. He laid claim to having

⁴ Anna M. Miller, *A History of the Ghost Dance Religion Among the Indians* (Norman, 1935), 31.

⁵ Mooney, "Ghost Dance Religion," 894.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 895.

⁷ These two tribes had long been friends, and they lived on the same reservation in what is now Oklahoma. Although the Cheyenne had their separate dance with songs in their own language, they more commonly used the Arapaho songs. *Ibid.*, 895.

⁸ The Caddo were the first of the guests to take up the dance. They returned home from the dance held on the South Canadian and began the dance, using the Arapaho songs which they had learned. From the Caddo the dance spread to other of the neighbors of the Cheyenne and Arapaho. Miller, *A History of the Ghost Dance Religion Among the Indians*, 35-36.

seen the messiah who selected him as the first and greatest apostle.⁹ Whatever his qualifications, Sitting Bull was responsible for the introduction of what was to become the most important feature of the Ghost Dance among the Southern Cheyenne and Arapaho. After the dance had been in progress for two or three days, and the people had reached a highly emotional state, Sitting Bull announced that he would perform a great wonder before the assembled people. He said that, after he had completed this feat, the people would be able to make songs for themselves. The next night he appeared among the six or eight hundred dancers wearing a wide-brim hat with a single eagle feather perched thereon. Nothing happened for several hours until the dancers had worked themselves into a high state of excitement. Then Sitting Bull stepped dramatically into the slowly-moving circle, approached a young Arapaho woman, and commenced making hypnotic passes before her eyes with the eagle feather. In a very few moments the woman became rigid and fell unconscious to the ground. Sitting Bull repeated the process until more than one hundred of the devout dancers were stretched out on the ground. All of these recovered with no bad after effects. The ones who had been in a trance told of having experiences in the other world. Most told of their vision through the medium of song. From the time of this "great dance", the trance was an important feature among the Cheyenne and Arapaho.

Coincident with the big dance and the continuing smaller dances was the nervousness exhibited by newspapers throughout the territory. The columns of *El Reno*, *Oklahoma City*, and *Guthrie* newspapers were filled with lurid warnings of danger. They contained assorted accounts of war dances, scalping parties, and imminent uprisings. All were in journalistic accord in demanding that troops be sent to protect the defenseless whites. The War Department obliged by sending Lieutenant H. L. Scott of the Seventh Cavalry, then stationed at Fort Sill, to investigate the possibility of an outbreak. Throughout December, 1890, and continuing through January and February of 1891, Lieutenant Scott visited the various camps of the western tribes in the territory. Upon the completion of his tour, the young officer reported that no danger was apprehended.¹⁰ The Plains Indian was making his last stand, but it was a praying stand and one which foreboded no ill to the white man.

In the early spring of 1891, the Southern Cheyenne and their Arapaho allies sent the first of several delegations to see Wovoka. The group, including one woman, was to contact the messiah in his

⁹ *Ibid.*, 32.

¹⁰ Indian Commissioner Morgan was making a tour among the western tribes in November, 1890, and he satisfied himself that the sensational reports were false. Mooney, "Ghost Dance Religion," p. 900. One cause for the hysteria rampant in Oklahoma was undoubtedly the trouble which was occurring among the Sioux in the North.

Nevada home and bring back the latest news from heaven.¹¹ The only tangible thing brought back was some sacred medicine paint which Wovoka had given them.

In August of the same year another delegation was sent to visit the messiah.¹² This was perhaps the most important of all the visits made by the Cheyenne and Arapaho because it was at this time that Wovoka sent the tribes a personal letter. Two of the Arapaho delegates, Grant Left Hand and Casper Edson, who had studied at Carlisle, wrote the message down and delivered it to the people on their return. In a free rendering version the message of Wovoka to the Cheyenne and Arapaho went something like this:¹³

When you get home make a dance to continue five days. Dance four successive nights, and the last night keep up the dance until the morning of the fifth day, when all must bathe in the river and then disperse to their homes. You must all do it the same way.

I, Jack Wilson, love you all, and my heart is full of gladness for the gifts you have brought me, when you get home I shall give you a good cloud which will make you feel good. I give you a good spirit and give you all good paint. I want you to come again in three months, some from each tribe there [Indian Territory].

There will be a good deal of snow this year and some rain. In the fall there will be such a rain as I have never given you before.

Grandfather* says, when your friends die you must not cry, you must not hurt anybody or do harm to anyone. You must not fight. Do right always. It will give you satisfaction in life. This young man has a good father and mother.†

Do not tell the white people about this. Jesus is now upon the earth. He appears like a cloud. The dead are all alive again. I do not know when they will be here; maybe this fall or in the spring. When the time comes there will be no more sickness and everyone will be young again.

Do not refuse to work for the whites and do not make any trouble with them until you leave them. When the earth shakes‡ do not be afraid. It will not hurt you.

I want you to dance every six weeks. Make a feast at the dance and have food that everybody may eat. That is all. You will receive good words from me sometime. Do not tell lies.

¹¹ In all probability the representatives were seeking some information as to the time when the Indian Millennium would occur. Different dates were assigned by Wovoka for the fulfillment of the prophecy. *Ibid.*, 777.

¹² Members of this delegation were Black Coyote, Little Raven, Red Wolf, Grant Left Hand and Casper Edson of the Arapaho, and Black Sharp Nose and Standing Bull of the Cheyenne. *Ibid.*, 900.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 781.

* This was a universal title of reverence among the Indians and here meaning the messiah.

† Possibly this refers to Casper Edson, the young Arapaho who wrote down this message of Wovoka for the delegation.

‡ This is a reference to the coming of the new world.

In accordance with the instructions of Wovoka the Cheyenne and Arapaho ceased their frequent small dances. Instead several camps would participate in a larger dance which would be held every six weeks.

The form of the dance among the Cheyenne and Arapaho was generally the same as among the other tribes. Variations were not uncommon, however, due mainly to the fact that a dancer would often receive a revelation which would be incorporated into the dance. One of the variations was the auxiliary Crow Dance which was organized by Grant Left Hand. He claimed that it was a dance seen in a trance vision of the spirit world.¹⁴ The dance was held in the afternoon as a preliminary to the regular dance at night. Another interesting variation had to do with costume. Most of the tribes allowed no metal of any kind to be worn in the dance. The Cheyenne women, however, wore in the dance their finest belts studded with large disks of German silver.¹⁵ These were the main variations in form which were prevalent among the Cheyenne and Arapaho.

There were certain fundamentals which were common to all of the tribes. The dance was always held in an unenclosed area which had previously been consecrated by one of the leaders.¹⁶ That night the dancers of all ages and both sexes would step into the circle clothed in their finest and painted in a particular manner, each as the Great Spirit had directed.¹⁷ The movement of the dance was as follows: A circle was formed with each person grasping the hand of his neighbor. Dancing was done almost in place. It consisted of a sort of rocking motion, back and forth, with an almost imperceptible movement to the side.¹⁸ The entire movement was done tensely and fervently, the object being communication with the dead. This communication came through the medium of hypnotic trances which were brought about by the medicine man.

The Ghost Dance songs were an important part of the dance. In them was embodied much of the doctrine back of the dance, the history of the tribe, and revelations which came to individuals while

¹⁴ This dance in reality was only a modification of the "Omaha dance of the Northern tribes." *Ibid.*, 991.

¹⁵ The subject of costuming in the Ghost Dance is interesting and deserving of a full-length paper. The Sioux, for instance, wore a "Ghost shirt" which they believed was impenetrable by bullets or weapons of any sort. Wovoka disclaimed responsibility for this shirt. The shirt was brought south to the Cheyenne by White Buffalo sometime in the early part of 1891. The Southern Cheyenne debated the matter and then refused to allow it to be worn in the dance. They said the doctrine of the Ghost Dance was one of peace while the Sioux had used the "Ghost shirt" as an auxiliary of war. *Ibid.*, 788.

¹⁶ The priesthood of the dance consisted of seven and sometimes fourteen individuals. Outside of consecrating the ground their main purpose was to start the songs during the dance. *Ibid.*, 919.

¹⁷ Miller, *A History of the Ghost Dance Religion Among the Indians*, 61.

¹⁸ Bernard S. Mason, *Dances and Stories of the American Indian* (New York, 1944), 150-53 gives a lucid explanation of the movement of the Ghost Dance.

in a trance. Some of the songs grew in favor and were sung more often than others. Most of them, however, were replaced by new songs as more people received revelations. In every tribe there were special songs which were used to open and close the dance.¹⁹ James Mooney wrote that the Arapaho songs were to be considered the best when we think of the "number, richness of reference, beauty of sentiment, and the rhythm of language."²⁰ They received much favor among the Southern Cheyenne who, even though possessing a myriad of songs of their own, used the songs of the Arapaho almost exclusively. Yet the songs of the Southern Cheyenne are important because, as noted above, they are a source of information regarding the history of the tribe and the doctrine of the dance. As an example of this it might be of value to note two or three of the favorite songs.

The first song to be noted refers to the "river of turtles." This is the "Turtle River" on which the Cheyenne say they once lived.²¹ Translated the song is:

My children, my children,
Here is the river of turtles,
Here is the river of turtles,
Where the various living things,
Where the various living things,
Are painted their different colors,
Are painted their different colors,
Our father says so,
Our father says so.

A similar song is the one which goes:

I waded into the yellow river,
I waded into the yellow river,
This was the Turtle River into which I waded,
This was the Turtle River into which I waded,

A song composed by Porcupine of the Northern Cheyenne pictures the new earth coming over the old world. It is represented as making a humming noise as it approaches. This was the manner in which many of the Cheyenne felt that the new era would begin. The song is as follows:²²

¹⁹ Miller, *A History of the Ghost Dance Religion Among the Indians*, 69.

²⁰ Mooney, "Ghost Dance Religion," 953.

²¹ The Cheyenne seem to identify the "turtle river" with what is now the Saint Croix river which forms the boundary between Wisconsin and Minnesota. They were driven out of this area at an early date by the Sioux. *Ibid.*, 1024.

²² All of these songs are taken from *ibid.*, 1028-1030.

Our father has come,
Our father has come,
The earth has come,
The earth has come,
It is rising—Eye ye!
It is rising—Eye ye!
It is humming—Ahe e ye!
It is humming—Ahe e ye!

As important as the songs and dance were, it should be made clear that throughout all tribes they were secondary to the doctrine. The dance was only a medium to hasten the reunion of the whole Indian race upon a regenerated earth. There were, however, some differences of opinion among the tribes as to how this final change would come about. East of the mountains it was commonly thought that a deep sleep would come upon all believers. While they were in this state the destruction of non-believers and whites would occur. They thought a new earth with all the resurrected dead, and with the buffalo, elk, and other game upon it, would come from the west and slide over the earth. As the new world approached the faithful Indians would be carried upward by sacred feathers which they would wear in their hair. After alighting on the earth, the faithful Indians would become unconscious for four days. Upon awakening from the trance, they would find themselves in the midst of former friends and oldtime surroundings.²³ The Cheyenne, like the other tribes thought that the white people were to be destroyed by supernatural means. In accordance with other tribes they believed that devout attendance upon the dance would ward off disease and restore the infirm to health.

The doctrine and ritual of the Ghost Dance were fairly complete among the Southern Cheyenne and Arapaho by the end of 1891. The time set by the messiah for the Indian millennium had come and gone. The date of the event was now an open question, with most tribes believing that at some time in the unknown future the Indian would be reunited with friends who had gone before. When the date set by the messiah had passed, some of the tribes began to lose faith. Not so the Cheyenne and Arapaho. Instead they sought to bolster their belief by sending additional delegates west to get news from Wovoka.

In October, 1892, a blow came to these faithful tribes. In that month another delegation visited Wovoka. He astounded them by saying that he was tired of so many visitors and asked them to return home and tell their people to stop dancing. The Cheyenne and Arapaho generally refused to accept the message of their delegates as being genuine. Nevertheless the report was very depressing.²⁴

²³ *Ibid.*, 786.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 901.

A year later, still uncertain as to the validity of the report and continuing to do the dance, some of the Cheyenne dictated a letter to the messiah. In it they asked Wovoka to send them some sacred paint or anything else that would make them think of him. They also desired "some good words to help us and our children."²⁵ In addition they asked him to tell them whether or not he had been truly reported by the delegates of the preceding year.

As time passed the wild excitement engendered by the dance finally cooled. The opening of the reservation to white settlement, however, served to intensify the religious feeling of the Cheyenne. They now felt their dependent and helpless condition even more. Although they continued the Ghost Dance, they no longer felt that it would immediately ameliorate their condition. Instead their feelings became "a fixed but tranquil expectation of ultimate happiness under old conditions in another world."²⁶

The Ghost Dance was in all probability a good thing for the Southern Cheyenne. The doctrine back of the dance and the instructions given by Wovoka called upon the Indians to live in peace. They were instructed to love the white people and each other. They were cautioned to refrain from fighting, lying, and stealing. They were told of the sanctity of work and the good which would come from working. They were instructed to put away all practices which savored of war. By observing all of these commandments happiness could be secured.

That these commandments were valuable in themselves could not be denied. But the Ghost Dance did even more than help the Cheyenne to assimilate moral doctrine. It served as the emotional bridge by which the Cheyenne crossed hesitantly from their old way of life into the dawn of a new. Although the Ghost Dance was postulated on a return to the "good old days" it did help the Indians to accept the conditions imposed by their new way of life. The transition from a tribe of buffalo hunters into a people seeking to acclimate themselves into the strange new life forcibly imposed by the white people was not an easy one. That the transition was not more bloody in its latter stages among the Southern Cheyenne can be partially attributed to the peaceful philosophy of the Ghost Dance religion.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 901.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 743. The Ghost Dance became a fixed part of the tribal life of the Cheyenne and Arapaho.