Indian and White Cultural Relations in Southwestern Oklahoma

By Charles S. Brant*

The Ghost Dance is a familiar phenomenon to many students of the Indians of western North America. A nativist, revivalistic religious movement, it arose in the latter part of the Nineteenth Century from the widespread unrest engendered by the settlement of white people in traditional Indian territories and the sudden, rapid change in the aboriginal Indian cultures. Once in existence, the Ghost Dance spread quickly among the Indians of western North America and was accepted in varying degrees in different tribes. Many excellent studies of these and related instances of cultural revivalism have been made, and it is unnecessary here to enter into a discussion of the diffusion and practice of such movements.1 The present study examines the reactions to the Ghost Dance by white people in a limited area, southwestern Oklahoma, for which certain illuminating documentary data are available.2 This material presents an interesting chapter in the history of contacts between the Indians

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2 The source materials on which this paper is based consist of a file of letters exchanged among missionaries, local Indian Service personnel and the Office of Indian Affairs during the period 1910-1918, presently in the writer's possession. He is indebted to Mr. Parker McKenzie of Anadarko for his alertness in salvaging this material many years ago and bringing it to his attention during the course of field work in the area in 1948. Thanks are due Mr. Wade Head, then General Superintendent of the Western Oklahoma Consolidated Indian Agency at Anadarko, for permission to utilize the material for research purposes. For the field work opportunity, of which this paper is a partial result, the writer acknowledges the assistance of the Viking Fund, now the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research. Professor Morris E. Opler made helpful suggestions in the initial draft of this paper.
and the white people in the region and provides some insight into the attitudes of the latter toward Indian culture. These historical data may also assist us in understanding some Indian attitudes toward the white people, their institutions and ideas, and perhaps have important implications for other peoples and places at the present time.

This story begins with a letter written in the summer of 1910 to the Commissioner of Indian Affairs by a missionary among the Kiowa Indians. After some preliminary remarks disavowing any intention to criticize the government, the informant tells of a renewal of old customs among the Kiowa: "There is now a great revival of the old ways. There were many years in which we had no wild and crazy dancing. For the last month there have been many Cheyenne Indians camping and dancing for money and horses and other presents. They will take away from this tribe not less than two thousand dollars worth of presents."

The informant continues at length to decry gambling, drinking and idleness on the part of the Indians and to assail the revival of their ceremonies as antithetical to "all that we have done in the way of an uplift." Also singled out for attack is what he calls the eating of "mescal." The letter continues: "Out of your schools these boys go at sixteen years of age and never come back. But soon they learn to eat mescal and go in every evil way. Mescal is the greatest curse we have. I say it without abridgment. I know what I am saying." The recommendation is made to the government that: "There is a medicine that will help all these conditions. ... Pay the good industrious Indians and hold the money of the bad until he

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3 Letter to the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, Washington, D. C., July 27, 1910. The reference is to the "Give Away", a ceremonial presentation of gifts to the visitors by the host group sponsoring a dance.

4 The reference to mescal is undoubtedly in error, and is another instance of the common confusion of the mescal bean with peyote. The former is a bright red, roughly oval-shaped bean that grows in pods on a shrub or small tree not over ten feet high, sometimes called Mountain Laurel. The bean is narcotic in effect when eaten. Peyote, by contrast, is a small, cactus-like plant, the top of which is cut off and dried before being eaten. In this form it is commonly called a peyote "button." During the course of field work in the area, Indian informants insisted vigorously upon the distinction, being aware of the charge commonly made by opponents of the peyote religion that they are mescal eaters, which they deny. It is true that a pre-peyote, mescal bean cult existed in the Southern Plains region, which may have resulted in the carry over of the term mescal and its indiscriminate application to peyote. This whole matter has been treated fully in Weston La Barre, The Peyote Cult (Yale University Publications in Anthropology, 1938, Vol. 19, pp. 14-15 and p. 126 ff.)


6 Ibid.
quits his meanness. I would not give a red cent to the Indian that eats mescal supper. . . . If they entertained and gave presents to these roaming bands of Indians, no money. Hit their pocket books and they will fall in line. It is a sin to give any of these people money. . . . I love the Indian but hate to see him permitted to ruin himself. . . . My words are ended.

This letter indicates the source of complaint from the white people, the alleged evils, and makes recommendations for remedial action that became important. It is interesting, parenthetically, to notice that practical, materialistic means are urged in order to accomplish ends deemed lofty and idealistic.

About one month later, the Superintendent of the Kiowa Indian School at Anadarko was directed by the Office of Indian Affairs to make a complete investigation of the complaints and to report his findings to Washington within two weeks. In September, the Superintendent made his report, the substance of which was that the charges were true, although to a lesser extent than the missionary informant had indicated. The Superintendent pointed out that he had made strong efforts to persuade the Indians to limit the duration of their "Give Away" dance during the summer, and to make their gifts small; moreover, he advised that no lease payments would be made until the visiting Indians had departed. Certain parts of the report are significant in pointing out variation from the attitudes of some other white persons: 7

It must be understood, however, that the customs of a lifetime cannot be changed within a few years. . . . a semi-civilized people do not look at these matters as we do and it is up to us to educate them along this line. . . . Force is out of the question. . . . It must be expected that the Indians, during July and August, will move about more or less as they become restless during these hot months when the drought and hot winds are cutting down their crops. . . . We, in uplifting the Indian, must realize that it can be accomplished by degrees—with better results generation after generation.

The school superintendent was seemingly aware that peoples of different cultures view things in varying frames of reference, that the behavior of the Indians is understandable in terms of conditions and that cultural change is not likely to be effected by sudden or vindictive measures.

At this point, a gap exists in the record and the letters resume in the late summer of 1913. It may be judged, however, from the context, that in the period for which there is no written information the complaints against Indian ceremonies continued and efforts were made to discourage the Indians from engaging in them.

7 Letter to the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, Washington, D. C., September 12, 1910.
The story takes up again with a request from the Commissioner of Indian Affairs to the Superintendent of the Kiowa School to furnish detailed information regarding Indian dances and related activities, so that a decision can be made on the Superintendent's request that the Commissioner address "a strong letter" to certain individual Indians. This request, signed by the Second Assistant Commissioner, states further that "it is the aim of the Office to do away with all the old time ceremonial dances but these have not been totally prohibited anywhere, except the sun dance or dances under other names which partake of its characteristics."

To supply the Commissioner with detailed information, the Superintendent asked three missionaries to send him written descriptions based on their personal experiences of the Ghost Dance among the Kiowa. The same was asked of a Mexican living among the Kiowa who had been captured by them in his boyhood. The report of the latter is distinguished from the others by its matter-of-fact tone and mild disapproval of the Ghost Dance. The accounts by the missionaries are emotional and angry. The missionary informant quoted earlier in this paper is sure he can write without "bias or prejudice," and proceeds to condemn the Ghost Dance in terms of its "material, intellectual and moral" harmfulness. After thoroughly denouncing the Indians who participate, he identifies his purpose with that of the administrator in the following postscript:

Now my brother I have given you my thought freely. And I am not unconscious of the thought that I have played into your hands; and you could use this letter to kill my influence among this people and cause them to hate me. But I have more respect for you than to think you would do that. It would not be soldier like to sell this brother who is fighting for the same cause in another company. You have the facts but you can keep the name from the Indians.

Another missionary reveals that his objection to the Ghost Dance lies in the features which depart from Christianity:

At first the worship in these dances was directed to the Indian's conception of the Supreme God and to God's son, without intermediary, but later they lapsed into a crude form of Spiritualism with some Indian—man or woman—but principally the "High Priest", to go off into a "trance", visit God, and bring back a message for the devotees of the cult.

It is unnecessary to quote further from these reports; the general tenor is the same throughout all of them: strong condemnation in moralistic terms and agreement with the government policy of discouraging, if not outlawing, the dances and ceremonies.

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8 Letter to the Superintendent of the Kiowa Indian School, August 29, 1913.
10 Letter to the Superintendent of the Kiowa Indian Agency, May 27, 1914.
By the summer of 1914 letters were sent by the Commissioner of Indian Affairs to prominent Indians concerned with the Ghost Dance, as a means of dissuading them from its continuance. The Superintendent of the Kiowa Agency was authorized to continue to refuse permission to hold the dance. A lack of understanding of the meaning of revivalistic religion to the Indians is shown in the exhortation to the leader of the Kiowa Ghost Dance group: "There is no possibility of the return to the wild life with an abundance of buffalo and game; therefore the very basis of this so-called religion is without foundation." The virtues embodied in the Protestant Ethic are offered instead: "The only hope for the success and material welfare of the Indians lies in work, honest hard work, just as the best men in the world have done, and the idea of waiting and dancing around until the return of the old days . . . . is not only foolish but a hindrance to industry and thrift."

Apparently, no success resulted from efforts to persuade the Indians to give up the Ghost Dance. On July 1, 1915, a letter was dispatched by the Superintendent of the Kiowa Indian Agency in Anadarko to the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, in which he stated that the Indians intended to hold the Ghost Dance on July 4th, and that the dance was held in the preceding year despite the explicit withholding of permission by the Government authorities. The letter also indicated that the Indians had sought legal advice concerning their right to hold the ceremony and had advised the agent that they intended to proceed with the dance despite refusal of permission. The superintendent stated that "moral suasion" had not succeeded and that he was "anxious to ascertain what effect the withholding of annuity would have on the leaders of the Ghost Dance faction."

Here, again, is the threat of economic sanctions, a measure, it will be recalled, which was initially suggested by the missionary informant.

No reply came in sufficient time for the superintendent to act on the basis of higher authority in connection with the July 4th dance. In a later communication to Washington his action is disclosed:

As the time was short and, as I failed to receive a reply from the Office when the Indians called upon me a second time to know what they could do, I stated to them, plainly, that I had requested authority from the Office to hold up the annuities of the leaders of the ghost dance faction, and as soon as I broached this plan to them, I saw that I had conquered. Then they immediately began to offer a compromise. The Indians were already on the ground and I advised them

11 Letter to leader of the Kiowa Ghost Dance, July 6, 1914.
12 Ibid.
13 Letter to the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, Washington, D. C., August 1, 1915.
that if they would hold the picnic on the following days—Sunday and Monday, July 4th and 5th—and would immediately disperse on the morning of the 6th and would promise me that no dance of any description would be held, that they would be permitted to worship God in such manner as they saw fit.

In order to be on firm legal ground in the future, the agent stated his "request that the matter be carefully considered and that authority be given me now to extend to the Indians, next year, the promise that annuities will be withheld and, that I be given discretion as to what Indians the funds shall be withheld from in case it becomes necessary to carry out the plan to that extent."14

In the interval between this request and a reply, written expressions of opinion concerning dances and ceremonies were sent by individual Indians to the Indian Office in Washington. Unfortunately, the actual letters are missing from our documentary materials, but we may infer their general contents from the replies. The feeling of the Indians that their activities were not harmful, and their requests that they not be interfered with, were summarily dismissed, as seen in the following excerpts from two letters signed by the Assistant Commissioner of Indian Affairs:15

The opinion of yourself and of many of the other Indians with respect to the Ghost Dance and certain other dances and customs is appreciated, but the Office feels that it understands better than some of these old people what is best for the Indians as a whole [emphasis by C.S.B.].

The Office wants the Indians to have only such things as are good for them. Some of the old dances are inconsistent with the civilization and industrial and moral development of the Indians.

In the summer of 1916, in a letter from the Commissioner to the Superintendent of the Kiowa Indian School, the Indian Office granted the request for economic sanctions against Ghost Dance participants by authorizing him to withhold annuity payments in such cases. The authorization was prefaced with the statement that a conclusion had been reached that the Ghost Dance "is a pernicious custom and inimical to the industrial, intellectual, and moral progress of the Indians." This decision opened a period of spying by Government authorities, treachery by individual Indians and general increase of tension in the Indian community.

Four days later, a letter was written by an informer among the Indians to the agent:16

14 Ibid.
15 Letter to leader of the Kiowa Ghost Dance, December 9, 1915, and letter to leader of the Kiowa Ghost Dance, February 21, 1916.
Since I came home and had told some of these Indians about the letter which you have received .... some of them had told me that a big plan was demand for another big time which will take place at Old man Yellow Bird's three quarters, where there will be plenty grass, water and wood. they will invite the cheyennes including with some Kiowas whom were living along the Hog Creek. this dance association will begin the 25th of the next month. ..... I am inform you this before time, so I wish you not mention my name for fear the people might mob me. [emphasis by C.S.B.]

There followed a quick exchange of telegrams between the agency and Washington in regard to including the "Give Away" dance under the provisions of the ruling relating to the Ghost Dance. Upon receiving this authority, the agent sent letters to agents in the Cheyenne jurisdiction asking that the Cheyenne be discouraged from attending the impending Kiowa dance. A letter of warning was sent to the Kiowa leaders, individual Indians were requested by mail to come to see the agent, and government farmers as well as Indian police were instructed to attend the dance and make note of the name and activities of each participant.

Nevertheless, between the summer and autumn of 1916, several "Give Away" dances were held among the Kiowa, Kiowa-Apache and Comanche, and the documentary materials indicate that similar measures were taken by the agent. The annuity payment of every participant was withheld. Upon later advice from Washington, the policy was instituted of permitting each Indian whose money was withheld to make application for payment, conditional upon signing an affidavit pledging himself to refrain from further native ceremonial activities. A large number, but by no means all, of the offenders filed such applications.

The foregoing account constitutes a portion of the historical record of Indian and white relations in Oklahoma, and is instructive in making clear the attitudes held in the past towards Indian culture, as well as the premises upon which it was sought to effect cultural change. The kind of thinking which is illustrated is understandable in the context of the prevailing outlook and knowledge of the period, and the circumstances of the situation.

Modern social science, particularly Cultural Anthropology, has since formulated a new and very different way of viewing native institutions. Today, there is recognition by those concerned with programs of planned change, if not by the public in general, that each culture must be understood in its own terms. that change is seldom effected hurriedly or by force, and that such programs, to be sound, must be devised and interpreted in ways that make them intelligible and desirable from the native point of view.