

The Lakota Ghost Dance: An Ethnohistorical Account

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THE LAKOTA GHOST dance (*wanagi wacipi*)¹ has been the subject of extensive study, first by newspapermen, who made it a true media event, and later by anthropologists and historians. The chronology of the contextual events in Lakota history—the 1888 and 1889 land cession commissions and their subsequent delegations to Washington, the beef ration cuts at the agencies, the spread of the ghost dance ritual among the Lakotas in 1890, the death of Sitting Bull, the calling in of U.S. troops, the flight of Lakota camps to the badlands, the blundering massacre at Wounded Knee, and the eventual restoration of peace under U.S. army control of the Sioux agencies—is voluminously detailed in the printed literature.²

The historiography of the Lakota ghost dance period begins with two contemporary works drawn primarily from newspaper sources, James P. Boyd's *Recent Indian Wars* (1891) and W. Fletcher Johnson's *Life of Sitting Bull and History of the Indian War of 1890-91* (1891). Despite the sensationalist tone, both volumes compiled a substantial body of important historical material. James Mooney, in his anthropological classic, *The Ghost-Dance Religion and the Sioux Outbreak of 1890* (1896), included a balanced historical discussion based on unpublished government records, newspaper accounts, and interviews with Indians. Mooney stressed the revivalistic aspects of the ghost dance and the hope it offered for regeneration of Indian culture.

¹Literally, "spirit dance." The term *wanagi* refers to the immortal spirit of a human and may be translated as "spirit," "ghost," or "soul." See James R. Walker, *Lakota Belief and Ritual*, ed. by Raymond J. DeMallie and Elaine A. Jahner (Lincoln, 1980), 70-71.

²For a historiographical survey of the literature on the Lakota ghost dance, see Michael A. Sievers, "The Historiography of 'The Bloody Field' . . . That Kept the Secret of the Everlasting Word: Wounded Knee," *South Dakota History*, VI (1975), 33-54.

Subsequently there have been numerous historical studies of the Lakota ghost dance, most of which are partisan, focusing either on the Indian or military point of view. George E. Hyde's *A Sioux Chronicle* (1956) attempted to reconcile both perspectives and present the ghost dance in its political and economic context. The definitive modern historical study is Robert M. Utley's *The Last Days of the Sioux Nation* (1963), the best presentation of the military perspective.³

The so-called "Sioux Outbreak" with the associated troop maneuvers and the resultant Wounded Knee massacre were, from the moment they began, linked with the ghost dance. This new religion had come into Sioux country from the West, originating with Jack Wilson (Wovoka), a Paiute prophet living in Nevada. Lakota acceptance of the ritual has been interpreted as a response to the stress caused by military defeat, the disappearance of the buffalo, and confinement on a reservation. The ghost dance religion itself has been seen as an epiphenomenon of social and political unrest. As the redoubtable Dr. Valentine T. McGillycuddy, the former dictatorial agent of Pine Ridge, diagnosed the situation in January 1891: "As for the ghost dance, too much attention has been paid to it. It was only the symptom or surface indication of deep-rooted, long-existing difficulty. . . ."⁴

Such an analysis has become standard in the writings of both historians and anthropologists. Mooney wrote that among the Sioux, "already restless under both old and new grievances, and more lately brought to the edge of starvation by a reduction of rations, the doctrine speedily assumed a hostile meaning."⁵ Similarly, Robert H. Lowie asserted in *Indians of the Plains* (1954), a standard text: "Goaded into fury by their grievances, the disciples of Wovoka in the Plains substituted for his policy of amity a holy war in which the Whites were to be exterminated."⁶ However, this consensual interpretation of the ghost dance has not gone unchallenged. For example, in an an-

³James P. Boyd, *Recent Indian Wars, Under the Lead of Sitting Bull, and Other Chiefs, with A full Account of the Missouri, Crazy, and Ghost Dances* (Philadelphia, 1891); W. Fletcher Johnson, *Life of Sitting Bull and History of the Indian War of 1890*, 91 (Philadelphia, 1891); James Mooney, *The Ghost-Dance Religion and the Sioux Outbreak of 1890*, Bureau of American Ethnology Annual Report 14, pt. 2 (Washington, D.C., 1896); George E. Hyde, *A Sioux Chronicle* (Norman, 1956); Robert M. Utley, *The Last Days of the Sioux Nation* (New Haven, 1963).

⁴Mooney, *Ghost-Dance Religion*, 833.

⁵*Ibid.*, 787.

⁶Robert H. Lowie, *Indians of the Plains* (New York, 1954), 181.

thropological overview, Omer C. Stewart explicitly rejected the characterization of the ghost dance as a violent, warlike movement.⁷ Nonetheless, this is a minority viewpoint in the literature.

Reevaluation of the ghost dance starts with an examination of the consensual interpretation exemplified in Robert M. Utley's work. He wrote:

Wovoka preached a peaceful doctrine, blending elements of Christianity with the old native religion. . . . The Ghost Dance gripped most of the western tribes without losing this peaceful focus. Among the Teton Sioux, however, it took on militant overtones. . . . In their bitterness and despair, the Sioux let the Ghost Dance apostles, Short Bull and Kicking Bear, persuade them that the millennium prophesied by Wovoka might be facilitated by destroying the white people. Wearing "ghost shirts" that the priests assured them would turn the white man's bullets, the Sioux threw themselves wholeheartedly into a badly perverted version of the Ghost Dance.⁸

Before this analysis can be evaluated, a number of fundamental assumptions underlying it must be made more explicit. First, the statement that Wovoka's doctrine blended Christianity with "the native religion" implies that there was some fundamental similarity between the native religions of the Paiutes and the Lakotas. This assumption underestimates the significance of the vast cultural differences between these two tribes.

Second, the analysis asserts that the Lakotas perverted a doctrine of peace into one of war. This assertion incorrectly implies that the Lakota ghost dance religion was characterized by a unified body of doctrinal teaching. Lakota accounts of visits to the prophet clearly show that his teachings were not formulated into a creed; each man went away from meeting Wovoka with a personal interpretation of the ghost dance religion. For the Lakotas, this behavior was very much in accord with traditional religious practices, which defined loci of power (*wakan*) in the universe and devised rituals to tap this power, but which left each individual free to contribute to the understanding of the totality of the power (*Wakan Tanka*) through his own individual experiences.⁹ Within the context of a nondoctrinal religion, there can

⁷Omer C. Stewart, "The Ghost Dance," in W. Raymond Wood and Margot Liberty, eds., *Anthropology on the Great Plains* (Lincoln, 1980), 184.

⁸Robert M. Utley, *Frontier Regulars: The United States Army and the Indian, 1866-1890* (New York, 1973), 402-403.

be no heretics, only believers and nonbelievers.

Third, the analysis asserts that the leaders of the ghost dance misled their followers for political reasons, even to the point of making false claims that their sacred shirts would ward off bullets. This assertion assumes *a priori* that to its leaders the ghost dance was a political movement merely masquerading as religion.

Fourth, the claims that the ghost dance "gripped" the tribes and that "The Sioux threw themselves wholeheartedly into" the ritual suggest irrational fanaticism. But the historical record makes it clear that the period of Lakota participation in the ghost dance was basically confined to the fall and early winter of 1890 and that the majority of the Lakota people in the ghost dance camps had only gone to them because they feared that an attack from the U.S. army was imminent. This factor explains why these camps fled to the safety of the badlands.

The standard historical interpretation of the Lakota ghost dance takes too narrow a perspective. It treats the ghost dance as an isolated phenomenon, as though it were divorced from the rest of Lakota culture. It also refuses to accept the basic religious nature of the movement. The so-called ghost dance outbreak has broader implications and interconnections than historical studies have indicated. To dismiss the ghost dance as only a reaction to land loss and hunger does not do it justice; to dismiss it as merely a desperate attempt to revitalize a dead or dying culture is equally unsatisfactory. Even though it was borrowed from outside sources, the ghost dance needs to be seen as part of the integral, ongoing whole of Lakota culture and its suppression as part of the historical process of religious persecution led by Indian agents and missionaries against the Lakotas living on the Great Sioux Reservation.

The primary reasons why previous historical analyses of the Lakota ghost dance have been inadequate lie in our reluctance to consider seriously the symbolic content of Indian cultures—in this instance, to allow the Lakotas their own legitimate perspective. Instead, empathetic writers have characterized the Lakotas as though they were either uncomprehending children or were motivated by precisely the same

political and economic drives as white men. Both attitudes are as demeaning as they are misleading, and they fail to treat Indian culture with the same serious consideration afforded other cultures.

Writing history that deals with the meanings and conflicts of peoples with different cultural systems is a complex task. In recent years historians of the American Indian have turned to ethnohistory to provide methods for understanding the complexities of interactions between participants coming from totally different cultures. In a discussion of the new perspectives available from political, ecological, economic, and psychological anthropology, Calvin Martin has demonstrated the utility and contributions of each to the writing of ethnohistory.¹⁰ Within the discipline of anthropology, however, there is a more general theoretical perspective that may profitably be applied to ethnohistorical study—namely, symbolic anthropology. This method attempts to isolate differing significant symbols—units of meaning—that define perspectives on reality within different cultural systems.¹¹ In the context of ethnohistory, it attempts to compare epistemological and philosophical bases for action from the perspective of the different cultures involved. Its focus is on ideas systematically reconstructed for each cultural system. It does not reduce history to ideological conflicts, but uses ideology to understand the motivation that underlies behavior.¹²

It must not be assumed that the intention of a symbolic approach to ethnohistory is to penetrate the minds of individuals in the past. Psychological approaches to history are necessarily highly speculative, and any claim to intersubjectivity is no more possible with individuals in the past than with those of the present. Rather, the symbolic approach attempts to delineate collective understandings from each of the cultural perspectives involved, and thus to describe the cognitive worlds of the participants in the events under study. Using this as background, the ethnohistorian has a basis for ascribing motives and meanings to past actions. Robert Berkhofer expressed it well when he

¹⁰Calvin Martin, "Ethnohistory: A Better Way to Write Indian History," *Western Historical Quarterly*, IX (1978), 41-56.

¹¹For an introduction to the field, see Janet L. Dolgin, David S. Kemnitzer, and David M. Schneider, eds., *Symbolic Anthropology: A Reader in the Study of Symbols and Meanings* (New York, 1977) and Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York, 1973).

¹²See, for example, DeMallie, "Touching the Pen: Plains Indian Treaty Councils in Ethnohistorical Perspective," in Frederick C. Luebke, ed., *Ethnicity on the Great Plains* (Lincoln, 1980), 38-53.

¹³See Walker, *Lakota Belief and Ritual*, 68-73; Raymond J. DeMallie and Robert H. Lowie, "Wakon: Plains Siouan Concepts of Power," in Richard Adams and Raymond D. Fogelson, eds., *The Anthropology of Power: Ethnographic Studies from Asia, Oceania and the New World* (New York, 1977), 154-165.

wrote: "Historical study, then, in my view, is the combination of the actors' and observers' levels of analysis into a unified representation of past reality."¹³

In attempting to reconcile and combine both Lakota and white perspectives on the ghost dance, it is essential to compare causal notions of change as understood by the two cultures. During the late nineteenth century the basic issues on the Great Sioux Reservation were what kinds of change would occur in Indian culture and social life and who would direct this change. Whites assumed that Indian culture was stagnant and that the Indians could be transformed for the better only by the imposition of Western civilization. Indians, on the other hand, sought to control the process of change themselves.

For the Lakota people, the nineteenth century had been a period of continual changes: further explorations on the Plains, the complete integration of the horse into their culture, the flourishing of the sun dance as the focal point of ritual activity, the slow take over of their country by the whites, the disappearance of the buffalo, and finally the adjustment to reservation life. A discussion of the Lakota view of the relationship between mankind and the natural world, particularly the buffalo, can help us begin to understand these changes from the Lakotas' perspective.

During the 1860s, when commissioners traveled up the Missouri River to sign treaties with the Indians, they found the attitude of the Lakotas toward the buffalo to be particularly unrealistic. To the commissioners it was evident that the buffalo were being exterminated and would soon be gone from the region. To the Indians this decline did not appear to be an irreversible process. For example, the chiefs told the commissioners that they hoped the whites would take away the roads and steamboats and "return us all the buffalo as it used to be."¹⁴ Baffled at this illogic, the commissioners reported that the Indians "are only too much inclined to regard us possessed of supernatural powers."¹⁵ This complete failure to communicate stemmed from the commissioners' assumption that the facts of the natural world must

have appeared the same to the Indians as they did to the whites. Yet the Indians themselves recorded testimony which showed dramatically that the Lakotas thought of the land, the animals, and the people as a single system, no part of which could change without affecting the others. Thus when the commissioners asked if the Indians would consent to live on the Missouri River, they were told: "When the buffalo come close to the river, we come close to it. When the buffaloes go off, we go off after them."¹⁶ The Indians, the animals, and the land were one; while the people lived, talk of buffalo extinction was without meaning. Much later, Black Elk expressed the same attitude when he commented to poet John G. Neihardt: "Perhaps when the wild animals are gone, the Indians will be gone too."¹⁷

To understand this interrelatedness of man, land, and animals—particularly the buffalo—it is necessary to understand the Lakota view of their origins. During the early twentieth century, the old holy men at Pine Ridge instructed Dr. James R. Walker, the agency physician, in the fundamentals of their religion. A cornerstone of their belief was that both mankind and the buffalo had originated within the earth before they emerged on the surface.¹⁸ When the buffalo became scarce, it was believed that they went back inside the earth because they had been offended, either by Indians or whites. At any given time, this explanation accounted for the scarcity of buffalo. Later, Black Elk told Neihardt about a holy man named Drinks Water who had foretold during the mid-nineteenth century that "the four-leggeds were going back into the earth."¹⁹ But this explanation also allowed for the return of the buffalo. The ghost dance Messiah's promise of a new earth, well stocked with buffalo, was completely consistent with the old Lakota system of cause and effect by which they comprehended the ecology. If the buffalo had been driven back into the earth by the white man, they could be released again by the Messiah.

The Lakotas' causal model of change was vastly different from the white man's. The Lakota world was a constant, with relationships among its parts varying according to external pressures. As the nineteenth century wore on, these pressures came more and more from the

¹³Robert E. Berkhofer, Jr., *A Behavioral Approach to Historical Analysis* (New York, 1969), 73.

¹⁴*Proceedings of a Board of Commissioners to Negotiate a Treaty or Treaties with the Hostile Indians of the Upper Missouri* (Washington, D.C., 1865), 104.

¹⁵Indian Peace Commission, in *Annual Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs* (1866), 169.

¹⁶*Proceedings of a Board of Commissioners*, 34.

¹⁷Transcript of interviews of Black Elk by John G. Neihardt, 1931, pp. 3-4, Western History Manuscripts Collection, University of Missouri, Columbia.

¹⁸Walker, *Lakota Belief and Ritual*, 124, 144.

¹⁹Black Elk interview transcripts, 161.

whites. But these pressures were not conceived of by the Lakotas as cumulative or developmental. All that *was* existed in its potentiality before the whites intruded; if they would leave, the world could be again as it had been. From the 1850s through the 1870s the Lakotas tried to get rid of the whites by war; in 1890 they tried ritual dancing and prayer. The white view, of course, was diametrically opposed. This was the age of the developmental social philosophers preaching the doctrine of individual competition for the evolution of humanity. The history of mankind was religiously believed to be progressive; changes were accepted as good and cumulative, leading from earlier stages of savagery and barbarism (in which the Indians still lived) to civilization, which was believed to be becoming progressively better, not only technologically, but morally as well.

It is within this general context of cross-cultural misunderstanding that a symbolic approach can contribute to an analysis of the Lakota ghost dance and subsequent military action. The dance itself, the actual ritual, became the focus of misunderstanding between Indians and whites. Most importantly, dance was a highly charged symbol. For the Lakotas the dance was a symbol of religion, a ritual means to spiritual and physical betterment. Even Lakota nonbelievers accepted the religious motivation of the ghost dance. For the whites, on the other hand, Indians dancing symbolized impending war. Similarly, Indian and white conceptions of ghosts were different. For the Lakotas, the ghost dance promised a reunion with the souls of their dead relations. For the whites it suggested that the Indians were expecting to die, caught up in a frenzy of reckless fatalism.

This clash over the meaning of the ghost dance is fully documented in the literature. For example, in 1890, according to James Boyd's *Recent Indian Wars*:

The Indians mingled tales of their hard treatment with their religious songs, and their religious dances assumed more and more the form of war dances. . . . The spirit of fatalism spread and they courted death at the hands of white men, believing that it would be a speedy transport to a happier sphere.²⁰

However, Boyd's sources—both Indian and white—do not provide factual support for his interpretation. Nonetheless, this seems to have been the general opinion held by whites living on the frontiers of the

Great Sioux Reservation. Boyd wrote:

Older residents, and those acquainted with Indian warfare, knew well that an outbreak was always preceded by a series of dances. While these men were quite familiar with Indian nature, they failed to discern between a religious ceremony and a war dance.²¹

Boyd reviewed the progress the Sioux had made in Christianity, home building, farming, and ranching, and he raised the question of why they would wish to precipitate war. One possible answer came from Red Cloud, who said in an interview:

We felt that we were mocked in our misery. . . . There was no hope on earth, and God seemed to have forgotten us. Someone had again been talking of the Son of God, and said He had come. The people did not know; they did not care. They snatched at the hope. They screamed like crazy men to Him for mercy. They caught at the promises they heard He had made.²²

Towards the end of the book, Boyd revealed his personal interpretation of the cause of the trouble: "The Indians are practically a doomed race, and none realize it better than themselves."²³

Doubtlessly, some individual Lakotas shared this sense of despair. There were no buffalo; the government systematically broke its promises to support the Sioux until they could provide for themselves; and the Indians were starving. The ghost dance, arising at this opportune time, held out hope for the Lakotas. But if the Lakotas truly had believed themselves to be a doomed people, they would have paid no attention to the ghost dance. The religion was powerful because it nurtured cultural roots that were very much alive—temporarily dormant, perhaps, but not dying.

Is it reasonable to dismiss the Lakota ghost dance as insignificant, the mere "symptom" of other troubles, to use McGillycuddy's medical metaphor? This depiction does not explain the popularity of the ghost dance as a religious movement among other tribes. Perhaps it could be used to explain the warlike twist that the ghost dance took among the Lakotas. But when the record is evaluated objectively, it seems clear that the Lakota ghost dance did not have warlike intentions. Hostility was provoked only when Indian agents demanded that the dance be

²⁰*Ibid.*, 180.

²¹*Ibid.*, 181.

²²*Ibid.*, 289.

stopped, and violence came only after extreme provocation—the assassination of Sitting Bull by the Standing Rock Indian Police and the calling in of the army. For all intents and purposes, Sitting Bull's death was unrelated to the ghost dance. Agent McLaughlin had been clamoring for the old chief's arrest and removal from the reservation for some time, ever since Sitting Bull had refused to take up farming and be a model "progressive" Indian, to use McLaughlin's own term.²⁴

Lakota ghost dancers were enjoined to put away whatever they could of the white man's manufacture, especially metal objects. George Sword, captain of the Pine Ridge Indian Police, noted that some of the ghost dancers did have guns.²⁵ When the agent demanded that the dance at No Water's camp cease, he was threatened with guns and retreated to the agency.²⁶ Apparently, the purpose of the weapons was to ward off outside interference with the ritual. However, Boyd quoted a ghost dancer named Weasel: "We did not carry our guns nor any weapon, but trusted to the Great Spirit to destroy the soldiers." This statement was made after troops had arrived at Pine Ridge. Weasel related: "The priests called upon the young men at this juncture not to become angry but to continue the dance, but have horses ready so that all could flee were the military to charge the village."²⁷ However, even this precaution was not considered necessary by fervent believers. Short Bull, one of the ghost dance leaders, assured his people that they would be safe from the white soldiers:

If the soldiers surround you four deep, three of you, on whom I have put holy shirts, will sing a song, which I have taught you, around them, when some of them will drop dead. Then the rest will start to run, but their horses will sink into the earth. The riders will jump from their horses, but they will sink into the earth also. Then you can do as you desire with them. Now you must know this, that all the soldiers and that race will be dead.²⁸

Historical sources provide more information about the ghost dance from Short Bull than from any other of the leaders. Talking to

Walker, he outlined his understanding of the prophet's teachings: "It was told that a woman gave birth to a child and this was known in heaven."²⁹ Short Bull went to meet him. "This man professed to be a great man, next to God." The prophet told Short Bull and the other Lakotas "that he wished to be their intermedator. He said 'Do nothing wrong.'" On another occasion Short Bull said:

Who would have thought that dancing could have made such trouble? We had no wish to make trouble, nor did we cause it of ourselves. . . . We had no thought of fighting. . . . We went unarmed to the dance. How could we have held weapons? For thus we danced, in a circle, hand in hand, each man's fingers linked in those of his neighbor. . . . The message that I brought was peace.³⁰

The messianic and strongly Christian nature of the ghost dance is very clear in Short Bull's teachings:

The Father had commanded all the world to dance, and we gave the dance to the people as we had been bidden. When they danced they fell dead and went to the spirit-camp and saw those who had died, those whom they had loved. . . .

In this world the Great Father has given to the white man everything and to the Indian nothing. But it will not always be thus. In another world the Indian shall be as the white man and the white man as the Indian. To the Indian will be given wisdom and power, and the white man shall be helpless and unknown with only the bow and arrow. For ere long this world will be consumed in flame and pass away. Then, in the life after this, to the Indian shall all be given.³¹

Through the teachings of the ghost dance, and statements about it by Lakotas recorded from 1889 until about 1910, it is possible to proliferate evidence to demonstrate the peaceful intentions of the leaders of the ghost dance. The historical record does not support the accusation that the Sioux "perverted" the ghost dance doctrine of peace to one of war.

Simple refutation of the consensual historical interpretation does little to advance an understanding of the ghost dance. Since it had a short life among the Lakotas, at least as far as active performance of the ritual, perhaps it might be dismissed as an isolated reaction to

²⁴A good analysis is provided by Stephen D. Youngkin, "Sitting Bull and McLaughlin: Chiefdomship Under Siege," unpublished M.A. thesis, University of Wyoming, 1978.

²⁵Mooney, *Ghost-Dance Religion*, 798.

²⁶*Ibid.*, 847.

²⁷Boyd, *Recent Indian Wars*, 194-195.

²⁸Mooney, *Ghost-Dance Religion*, 789.

²⁹Walker, *Lakota Belief and Ritual*, 142.

³⁰Natalie Curtis, *The Indians' Book* (New York, 1935), 45.

³¹*Ibid.*, 46-47.

social stress, a revitalization movement that failed. After all, Mooney estimated that only half of the Sioux were affected by the ghost dance and his sources suggest that of these, only a small number were real believers in the religion.³² But this conclusion ignores the extreme importance that the Lakotas of 1890 placed on the dance, as well as the extent to which its suppression has served in later years as a symbol of white oppression. When Mooney visited Pine Ridge in 1891 as part of his comparative study of the ghost dance, he found the Lakotas uncooperative. He wrote: "To my questions the answer almost invariably was, 'The dance was our religion, but the government sent soldiers to kill us on account of it. We will not talk more about it.'"³³

The study of Lakota history from 1880 to 1890 suggests that it is a mistake to treat the ghost dance as an isolated phenomenon. Its prohibition was only another step in the systematic suppression of native religious practices that formed an integral part of the U.S. government's program of Indian civilization. Missionary observers felt that the ghost dance was only one more eruption of the "heathenism" that necessarily underlay the Indian psyche, a heathenism to be conquered and dispatched when Indians, as individuals, raised themselves from barbarism to civilization. The evolutionary social theory of the times held sway in the rhetoric of Indian policy.³⁴ *The Word Carrier*, a Protestant missionary newspaper published at the Santee Agency in Nebraska, argued in 1890 (before Wounded Knee) that it was the government's responsibility to end the ghost dancing because of its political potential. The argument was an insidious one, expressed as follows:

Their war dances have been suppressed simply as a political measure. The sun dance was forbidden in the name of humanity, as cruel and degrading. The Omaha dances should be summarily suppressed in the name of morality. But all of these alike, as well as all other of their heathen dances, should be prevented as far and as fast as possible until utterly eradicated, because they are potentially dangerous. We ought not to touch them as religious ceremonials, but, as breeders of riot and rebellion, we must.³⁵

The callousness of missionary zeal for the suppression of hea-

thenism is nowhere more dramatically revealed than in *The Word Carrier's* editorial on the Wounded Knee massacre printed in the January 1891 issue:

The slaughter of a whole tribe of Indians at Wounded Knee was an affair which looks worse the more it is investigated. But aside from the question of culpability there is a providential aspect which demands notice. Taking it in its bearings on the whole condition of things among the rebellious Teton [sic] Sioux it was a blessing. It was needful that these people should feel in some sharp terrible way the just consequences of their actions, and be held in wholesome fear from further folly.³⁶

Commentary is perhaps unnecessary, but we can suggest that the fanaticism of Christian missionaries was no less than that of the ghost dancers themselves. Stanley Vestal, in his biography of Sitting Bull, takes the Christian aspects of the ghost dance at face value and seizes the opportunity to comment on the missionaries:

The Ghost dance was entirely Christian—except for the difference in rituals. However, it taught nonresistance and brotherly love in ways that had far more significance for Indians than any the missionaries could offer. No wonder the missionaries became alarmed; they were no longer sure of their converts.³⁷

However, the dominant interpretation of the ghost dance, contemporarily and historically, places little significance on Christian parallels. Some contemporary observers felt that the ghost dance showed striking resemblances to the sun dance, a suggestion that seems at first unfounded, but which gains credibility by reading descriptions of the ritual. Mary Collins, a missionary, witnessed the ghost dance in Sitting Bull's camp and recorded the following description:

I watched all the performance, and I came to the conclusion that the 'ghost dance' is nothing more than the sun dance revived. They all looked at the sun as they danced. They stopped going round now and then, and all faced the sun, with uplifted faces and outstretched arms, standing in straight lines and moaning a most horrible sound. Then they raised themselves on the toes, and then lowered themselves, raising and lowering their bodies in this way, and groaning dismally, then joined hands with heads strained backwards, watching the sun and praying to it until, with dizziness and weariness, one after another fell down, some of them wallowing and rolling on the ground and frothing at the mouth, others throwing their arms and running around and whooping like

³²Mooney, *Ghost-Dance Religion*, 917, 927.

³³*Ibid.*, 1060.

³⁴See Francis Paul Prucha, *American Indian Policy in Crisis: Christian Reformers and the Indian, 1865-1900* (Norman, 1976), 155-158.

³⁵*The Word Carrier*, XIX, no. 12 (Dec. 1890), 34.

³⁶*Ibid.*, XX, no. 1 (Jan. 1891), 1.

³⁷Stanley Vestal, *Sitting Bull: Champion of the Sioux* (new ed., Norman, 1957), 272.

mad men, and all the time, as much as possible, still gazing sunward. They have not yet cut themselves, as in the old sun dance, but yesterday I heard this talk: 'Some said, "If one cuts himself, he is more 'wakan,' and can see and talk with the Messiah."³⁸

These similarities to the sun dance—gazing sunward and the dance step of the sun dance—are suggestive. Also, Mooney notes that of all the tribes who adopted the ghost dance, the Sioux were one of the few to dance around a sacred tree (or pole), the structural form of the old sun dance.³⁹ This element may be superficial, serving only to indicate that when people borrow new ideas, they adapt them to older cultural forms as closely as possible. However, it reinforces the Lakotas' sense of religious loss and their deep felt need to establish continuity with their past. It seems that the new religion, believed to come from a reincarnated Christ wearied of the faithlessness of the whites and ready to aid his Indian children, was incorporated in a ritual form that merged the circle dance of the Paiutes (in which men and women danced together in a circle, holding hands—an innovation for the Lakotas) with the sacred dance circle and center pole of the traditional Lakota sun dance.

A speech by Short Bull to his people on October 31, 1890, points out the importance of the tree or center pole as defining the sacred space for the ghost dance ritual: "Now, there will be a tree sprout up, and there all the members of our religion and the tribe must gather together. That will be the place where we will see our dead relations." Short Bull's ghost dance preachings incorporated traditional Lakota symbolism of the four directions to suggest the unifying effects of the ghost dance on all Indian tribes. "Our father in heaven has placed a mark at each point of the four winds," indicating a great circle around the central tree. To the west was a pipe, representing the Lakotas; to the north, an arrow, representing the Cheyennes; to the east, hail, representing the Arapahoes; and to the south, a pipe and feather, representing the Crows. "My father has shown me these things, therefore we must continue this dance." He promised that the ghost dance shirts would protect them from the soldiers. "Now, we must gather at Pass Creek where the tree is sprouting. There we will go among our dead relations."⁴⁰ Many years later one Lakota who had participated in the

ghost dance as a boy commented: "That part about the dead returning was what appealed to me."⁴¹

In practice, the millennialism of the ghost dance was merged with the symbols of the old religion. The tree, which had symbolized the body of an enemy in the old sun dance, became in the ghost dance symbolic of the Indian people themselves; this tree was dormant, but it was about to sprout and bloom. The tree symbol is best known from Black Elk, who found the outward symbols of the ghost dance so strikingly similar to his own vision during childhood that he was immediately caught up in the new religion. He felt it as a personal call, a reminder that he had not yet begun the work assigned him by his vision. "I was to be intercessor for my people and yet I was not doing my duty. Perhaps it was the Messiah that had appointed me and he might have sent this to remind me to get to work again to bring my people back into the hoop and the old religion."⁴²

It seems clear in Black Elk's case that the ghost dance, while seen as a new ritual, inaugurated by a new prophet—perhaps Christ himself—was in no way felt to be a sharp break with the old religion. It was rather a means to bring the old religion to fulfillment. There is no denial that this new hope for religious fulfillment was born of frustration and unhappiness bordering on despair. The ghost dance was to bring about the transformation to a new life on a rejuvenated earth filled with all the Lakota people who had ever lived before—living again in the old ways, hunting buffalo unfettered by the demands of whites, and freed from the cares of the old earth. Years later, one ghost dancer recalled the wonderful promise of the ghost dance visions:

Waking to the drab and wretched present after such a glowing vision, it was little wonder that they wailed as if their poor hearts would break in two with disillusionment. The people went on and on and could not stop, day or night, hoping perhaps to get a vision of their dead, or at least to hear of the visions of others. They preferred that to rest or food or sleep. And I suppose the authorities did think they were crazy—but they weren't. They were only terribly unhappy.⁴³

In order to put the ghost dance in its proper perspective in Lakota religious history, it is imperative to review the process of religious persecution that marked the Lakota experience during the 1880s. At Pine

³⁸The *Word Carrier*, XIX, no. 11 (Nov. 1890), 30.

³⁹Mooney, *Ghost-Dance Religion*, 823.

⁴⁰*Ibid.*, 788-789.

⁴¹Ella C. Deloria, *Speaking of Indians* (New York, 1944), 83.

⁴²Black Elk interview transcripts, 182.

⁴³Deloria, *Speaking of Indians*, 83.

Ridge, from the beginning of the decade, Agent McGillycuddy preached against the evils of the sun dance. Finally, in his annual report for 1884, he wrote that "for the first time in the history of the Ogalalla Sioux and Northern Cheyennes" the sun dance was not held.⁴⁴ Though McGillycuddy did not fully understand the reasons why, the prohibition of the sun dance was indeed a drastic blow. As a public festival it brought together Lakotas from all the agencies into old-time encampments, with opportunities for courting and fun. In addition to the actual ritual of the ceremony, the sun dance provided the time and place for many additional rituals, including the acting out of visions, dances by groups of people with shared vision experiences, demonstrations of the powers of medicine men (healers), the piercing of babies' ears (essential for identity as a Lakota), and lavish giveaways. Camped around the sacred circle with the sacred tree at its center, the occasion of the sun dance was a real affirmation of Lakota identity and power, in both physical and spiritual senses. In the words of Little Wound, American Horse, and Lone Star, as they explained their traditional religion to Dr. James R. Walker in 1896: "The Sun Dance is the greatest ceremony that the Oglalas do. It is a sacred ceremony in which all the people have a part. . . . The ceremony of the Sun Dance may embrace all the ceremonies of any kind that are relative to the Gods."⁴⁵

In 1888, as the Oglala winter counts—native pictographic calendars—record, a further government prohibition was enforced on the Lakotas: "Bundles were forbidden."⁴⁶ It had been the custom when a beloved person died to cut a lock of his or her hair and save it in a ritual bundle for a year, thus causing the spirit (*wanagi*) to remain with the people. At the end of the period, the spirit was released, and a great giveaway was held; throughout the year goods were amassed to give away in honor of the departed one. In some cases, as upon the death of a first-born son, the parents gave away everything they owned, although, according to tribal customs of sharing, they would in return be given the necessities of life and thus reestablished in a new home to help put the past out of their minds. Agent H. D. Gallagher at Pine Ridge decided in 1888 that although this custom had been

allowed unchecked by his predecessors, he would put an immediate stop to it. Yet, he wrote in his annual report, "I found myself opposed by every Indian upon the reservation."⁴⁷ To the Lakotas it was a final horror: not even in death was there escape from the white man's restrictions. The giveaway after death was prohibited and became an offense punishable by arrest. Ten years later, in 1898, Short Bull, in his capacity as religious leader, sent a plea to the agent begging for understanding:

The white people made war on the Lakotas to keep them from practicing their religion. Now the white people wish to make us cause the spirits of our dead to be ashamed. They wish us to be a stingy people and send our spirits to the spirit world as if they had been conquered and robbed by the enemy. They wish us to send our spirits on the spirit trail with nothing so that when they come to the spirit world, they will be like beggars. . . . Tell this to the agent and maybe he will not cause us to make our spirits ashamed.⁴⁸

Such requests fell on deaf ears. From the agents' point of view, every vestige of heathen religion had to be eliminated before civilization could take firm root. The powers of the agents were dictatorial in the matter.

Following the prohibition of public rituals surrounding the sun dance, as well as the rituals of death and mourning, came the prohibition in 1890 against the new ritual of the ghost dance. Then came the murder of Sitting Bull and the massacre at Wounded Knee. It was a period of grave crisis for the Lakota people, physically and emotionally. Their religion had been effective before the whites came, but now the *Wakan Tanka* seemed no longer to hear their prayers. Under the restraints of reservation life, traditional customs relating to war and hunting were abandoned. For spiritual renewal there were only two places to turn: secret rituals of the purification lodge, vision quest, *yuziipi*, and attenuated versions of the sun dance, or alternatively to the various Christian churches which were clamoring for converts.

But the years immediately following the ghost dance were bad ones for missionaries to make new converts. According to Agent Charles G. Penney, in his annual report for 1891, there were yet "a considerable number of very conservative Indians, medicine men and others, who still insist upon a revival of the Messiah craze and the ghost dance-

⁴⁴Valentine T. McGillycuddy, in *Annual Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs* (1884), 37.

⁴⁵Walker, *Lakota Belief and Ritual*, 179-180.

⁴⁶James R. Walker, *Lakota Society*, ed. by Raymond J. DeMaline (Lincoln, 1982), 151.

⁴⁷H. D. Gallagher, in *Annual Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs* (1888), 49.

⁴⁸Walker, *Lakota Belief and Ritual*, 141.

ing.⁵⁴⁹ The following year the missionary John P. Williamson, a perceptive observer, reported from Pine Ridge that "the effect of the ghost dances in the former years was very deleterious to Christianity, and is still felt among the Ogalallas. The excitement of a false religion has left a dead, indifferent feeling about religion."⁵⁵⁰

The Lakota religious leaders at Pine Ridge who shared their thoughts with Dr. Walker at the beginning of the twentieth century were disappointed, but not defeated. Little Wound, after revealing the sacred secrets of the *Hunka* ceremony, said to Walker:

My friend, I have told you the secrets of the *Hunkayapi*. I fear that I have done wrong. But the spirits of old times do not come to me anymore. Another spirit has come, the Great Spirit of the white man. I do not know him. I do not know how to call him to help me. I have done him no harm, and I do not me no harm. The old life is gone, and I cannot be young again.⁵¹

Afraid of Bear commented: "The spirits do not come and help us now. The white men have driven them away."⁵² Ringing Shield stated: "Now the spirits will not come. This is because the white men have offended the spirits."⁵³

One of the most eloquent testimonies comes from a speech by Red Cloud, recorded by Walker, in which he outlined his understanding of the Lakota *Wakan Tanka*. Then he added:

When the Lakotas believed these things they lived happy and they died satisfied. What more than this can that which the white man offers us give? . . . and when I die I will go with him. Then I will be with my forefathers. If this is not in the heaven of the white man, I shall be satisfied. *Wi* [Sun] is my father. The *Wakan Tanka* of the white man has overcome him. But I shall remain true to him.⁵⁴

Outwardly, the white man's victory over Lakota religion was nearly complete. Inwardly, even among those who—like Red Cloud—accepted Christianity for what it was worth, the recognition of the exist-

tence of *wakan* in the life forms of the universe provided foci of belief and hope.

Any meaningful understanding of the Lakota ghost dance period must begin with an analysis of the foundations for cultural conflict. Lakotas and white men operated under radically different epistemologies; what seemed illogical to one was sensible to the other and vice versa. Objects in the natural world symbolized totally different realms of meaning in the two cultures. This difference has important implications for the writing of history. For example, Utley suggests that "when the hostile Sioux came to the reservation, they doubtless understood that the life of the future would differ from that of the past."⁵⁵ But we can raise a reasonable doubt that this statement truly characterized the Lakota point of view. When Utley writes: "That the vanishing herds symbolized their own vanishing ways of life cannot have escaped the Sioux,"⁵⁶ we must deny the assertion. This is the unbeliever's attitude, totally dependent on acceptance of western philosophy. Similarly, it is necessary to take issue with Utley's claim that "after Wounded Knee . . . the reality of the conquest descended upon the entire Nation with such overwhelming force that it shattered all illusions."⁵⁷ This is political rhetoric to justify the defeat of the Indians, not reasoned historical assessment.

The vast differences between the rhetoric of whites and Indians gives special significance to the ghost dance as the last step in a decade-long series of events aimed at crushing every outward expression of Lakota spirituality. From the believer's standpoint, the social and political problems—the so-called outbreak and the Wounded Knee massacre—were but epiphenomena of religious crisis. The ghost dance was inextricably bound to the whole of Lakota culture and to ongoing historical processes in Lakota society. Although it was introduced from the outside, it was rapidly assimilated to the Lakota system of values and ideas, especially because it promised resolution to the grave problems that beset the people. To recognize it as a religious movement in its own right does not deny its interconnection with all other aspects of Lakota life or negate its intended practical conse-

⁴⁹Charles G. Penny, in *Annual Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs* (1891), 410.

⁵⁰John P. Williamson, in *ibid.* (1892), 459.

⁵¹Walker, *Lakota Religion and Ritual*, 198.

⁵²*Ibid.*, 202.

⁵³*Ibid.*, 206.

⁵⁴*Ibid.*, 140.

⁵⁵Utley *Last Days of the Sioux Nation*, 22.

⁵⁶*Ibid.*

⁵⁷*Ibid.*, 5.

quence to free the Lakotas from white domination. However, such recognition does retain the Lakotas' own focus on the ghost dance as a fundamentally religious movement which was to bring about radical transformation completely through religious means. Virtually all historical data point to the non-violent intentions of the ghost dance religion and the commitment of the believers to achieving their ends non-violently. It was the explicit command of the Messiah. In a cultural sense, this understanding of the ghost dance was shared by all Lakotas, believers and nonbelievers alike.

The importance of the ghost dance is not to be measured in the simple number of participants or in the unhappiness or despair that it reflected, but rather as part of the religious history of the Lakota people. For a time it held out such hope to the Lakotas that its ultimate failure, symbolized by the tragic deaths of the believers at Wounded Knee, generated a renewed religious crisis that forced a final realization that the old ways, with the hunting of the buffalo, were actually gone forever. Out of this religious collapse, new beliefs, new philosophies, eventually developed that would entail a major intellectual reworking of the epistemological foundations of Lakota culture.

Among the writers on the Lakota ghost dance, only John G. Neihardt accepted it as a legitimate religious movement and saw it as an attempt by the holy men of the Lakotas to use sacred means to better the condition of their people.⁵⁸ A symbolic approach means to amination of the religious aspects of the ghost dance, not only because it *was* primarily religious from the Lakotas' perspective, but also because at least some contemporary white observers—the missionaries—understood that the ritual's true power lay in its religious nature. To the white men the ghost dance was seen as the last gasp of heathenism; to the Indians it offered renewed access to spiritual power.

The ghost dance ritual itself was a powerful symbol, but one on whose meanings the whites and Lakotas were incapable of communicating. They shared no common understandings. That the ghost dance could be a valid religion was incomprehensible to the whites, just as the whites' evolutionary perspective on Lakota destiny—that the barbaric must develop into the civilized—was incomprehensible to the Lakotas. Religion, dancing, ghosts, the processes of social change, and animal ecology were all important symbols to both whites and

Indians but the meanings of these symbols in the two cultures were diametrically opposed. By focusing on these symbols it is possible for the ethnohistorian to reconstruct the meanings of events from the perspective of the participants and to arrive at an analysis that has both relevance and insight, and which contributes to an understanding of the historical realities of the Lakota ghost dance.

⁵⁸John G. Neihardt, *The Song of the Messiah* (New York, 1935).