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0521328942 - We Shall Live Again: The 1870 and 1890 Ghost Dance Movements as Demographic Revitalization - Russell Thornton

Excerpt

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1. The 1870 and 1890 Ghost Dance movements

The Ghost Dances of 1870 and 1890 were similar social movements among American Indian peoples of the western United States. Both originated near the Walker River Reservation in western Nevada. The early prophets of both movements belonged to the same Paviotso (Northern Paiute) tribe (one disciple of the 1870 dance appears even to have been the father of the originator of the 1890 dance, though there is scholarly debate on this issue).¹ Both movements sought similar objectives, especially the return to life of American Indian dead (Kroeber, 1904: 34–35). And both movements included similar tribal rituals of songs and circular dances (Kroeber, 1925:868).

Despite such similarities, each movement was in fact distinct. They occurred approximately twenty years apart. They also covered basically different geographical areas, with only some slight overlap. The 1870 Ghost Dance spread from its late 1860s origin in extreme western Nevada throughout most of Nevada and into Oregon and California, where it was probably strongest and certainly most pervasive. The 1890 Ghost Dance began from virtually the same Nevada location in the late 1880s and reached throughout the state, but only slightly westward into Oregon and California; it spread primarily to the north, east, and south, affecting Indian peoples in Idaho, Montana, Utah, the Dakotas, Oklahoma Territory, New Mexico, Arizona, and other states as well. Eventually it encompassed most of the central western United States, in contrast to the far more limited area of the 1870 Ghost Dance. (See Map 1.1.)

For these reasons, the two movements are properly treated separately.

The 1870 Ghost Dance movement

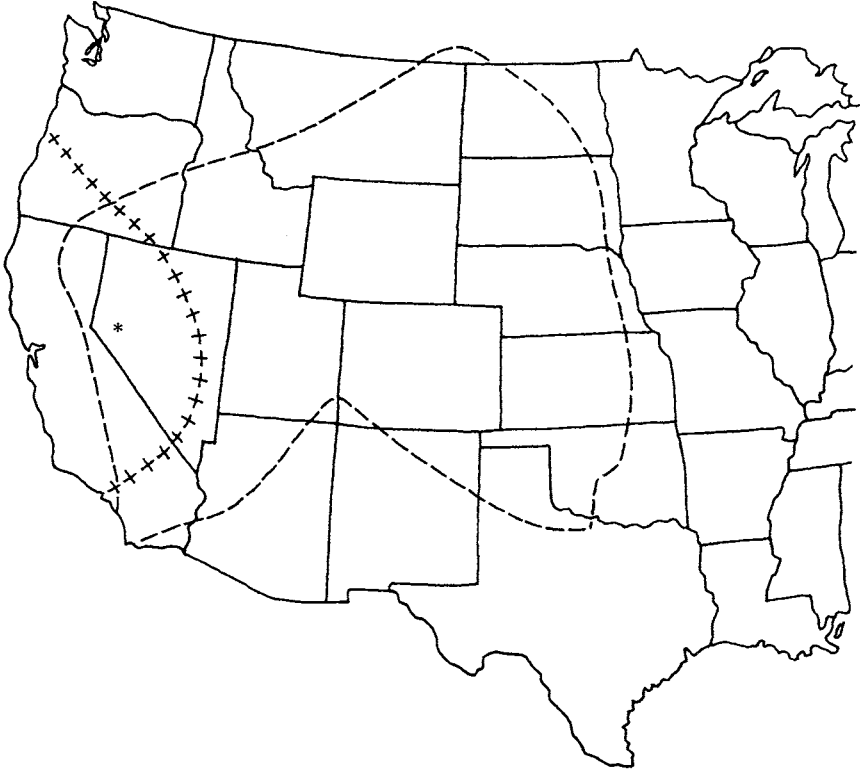
The originator of the 1870 Ghost Dance was a Paviotso man named Wodziwob. The movement began when Wodziwob fell into a trance and brought from it the idea that the spirits of Indian dead could return and change the earth into a

¹ Mooney (1896:701) mistakenly attributed the origin of the 1870 movement to Tavivo or Numa-taivo, a disciple of Wodziwob and the father of Wovoka, the originator of the 1890 movement. This issue produced some scholarly confusion (see, for example, Kroeber, 1925:868), until it was apparently clarified by Du Bois (1939:3–4). Wovoka would have been in his mid-teens at the time of the 1870 movement (Mooney, 1896:764).

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Map 1.1. Areas of the 1870 (+) and 1890 (-) Ghost Dance movements and approximate place of origin (*)

paradise for Indians. Eternal life for all Indians and the disappearance of all whites were associated features of Wodziwob's vision (Mooney, 1896:702; Du Bois, 1939:4). Wodziwob's trance took place some time in the late 1860s, and the probable date of his first actual teaching is 1869 (Du Bois, 1939:4).

Disciples spread his revelation to other Indian groups. The primary disciple seems to have been Woneyuga (Frank Spencer), a prophet of the movement in his own right, but other disciples were also involved, including one named Tavivo or Numataivo (Du Bois, 1939:6). According to some scholars, Wodziwob lived until about 1918 and was arrested for practicing shamanism a few years before he died on the Walker River Reservation (Hittman, 1973:267).

Objectives

As the 1870 movement grew, elements were added to Wodziwob's original prophecies. What additions were made depended in part on which American

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Indian tribe received the teachings from which disciple at which point in time.² The additions also depended on the nature of the tribe in question, with each tribe adapting the prophecies to its own context and culture.

A further common theme was the return of animals, fish, and other food in abundance (see Mooney, 1896:703; Spier, 1927:47; and Du Bois, 1939:10). Another involved change in the relations between Indians and whites, not necessarily the elimination of all whites. Thus some said that “the whites were to burn up and disappear without even leaving ashes” (Du Bois, 1939:10); but others said that there would be no distinctions between the races; and still others said that the races would be eternally separate (Mooney, 1896:703).

Despite these and other somewhat divergent themes, according to Kroeber (1904:34), the single overriding idea of the 1870 Ghost Dance movement was “the belief in the return of the dead.” This quickly became the central focus and apparently persisted as such throughout the movement (Du Bois, 1939:5–12). It took several specific forms, however: Sometimes the “Supreme Ruler” was to bring spirits of the dead back to earth (Mooney, 1896:703); sometimes dead relatives would be returning from the south (Du Bois, 1939:7); sometimes “the dead would come from the east when the grass was about 8 inches high” (Du Bois, 1939:10); sometimes the dead would return in armies from the rising sun (Du Bois, 1939:15); and sometimes the dead would return from their graves (Du Bois, 1939:22). In at least one instance, the return of the dead was linked directly with the destruction of whites: Kroeber (1904:34), citing Powers (1877), asserts that northern California Indians believed that their “dead would return . . . and would sweep the whites from the earth.”

Ceremony

The movement held that these prophesied events would be realized if American Indian peoples performed an actual “ghost dance.” The dance was probably originally an existing Paviotso round dance, employed for all special occasions. In it, men and women joined hands in a circle, then rotated the circle to the left, with a shuffling side step. Unlike many American Indian dances, it was not restricted to a special site but could be performed almost anywhere. Facial painting was involved in the ceremony as well, but it also was apparently only the usual Paviotso type. Because originally the 1870 Ghost Dance had no unique ceremony, its distinguishing features among the Paviotso were the visions experienced by the disciples and prophets during the dances and the resulting songs of participants (Du Bois, 1939:6–7).

From the original Paviotso round dance, the 1870 ceremony underwent mod-

² There were also occasional arguments about the prophecies between the disciples and Wodziwob and consequent changes in them (Du Bois, 1939:130).

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ifications as performed by different tribes, just as the movement's objectives and the way they would occur changed as well. The dance was performed in a large circle by some Indians at some times; by others at other times it was danced in two or even ten circles, revolving alternately in opposite directions. The dance was performed indoors by some tribes, out-of-doors by others; in the morning by some, at night by some (Kroeber, 1904:33); sometimes around a pole, sometimes without one. It was performed in some instances with men and women separated and in others with the sexes mixed. Some tribes performed virtually naked and others fully dressed; some performed after ceremonial bathing, others did not; some waved handkerchiefs during the dance; some used a "clapprattle" (Spier, 1927:47–51); and some used special colors and designs of paint, one for men and one for women (Gayton, 1930:67).

Despite these changes, two central elements from the original Paviotso round dance stayed with the ceremony throughout the duration of this first Ghost Dance movement: the circular motion from left to right and the clasping of hands by the participants. Other Paviotso characteristics also often remained. As Du Bois (1939:7) explains:

Foreign tribes in accepting the prophecies, not only placed them in a new context, but also attached to them Paviotso traits which were merely in solution among the originators. In the process of doctrinal borrowing they made these common Paviotso traits necessary concomitants of the cult. In fact, they may almost be said to have created the cult as a dynamic and specific movement.

Area

The 1870 movement spread quickly in western Nevada to adjacent bands of Paviotso and Paiute, then into the nearer parts of California and Oregon. The dance was taken up early by the Washo of Nevada and California, the Klamath of Oregon, and the Modoc of Oregon and California (Spier, 1927; Du Bois, 1939:129; Nash, 1955 [1937]). It apparently did not spread far beyond this immediate area until after 1870; but from 1871 on, it did spread quickly in all four directions, eventually through much of Oregon and California, where it was performed by tribes extending south through the San Joaquin Valley (Kroeber, 1925:868–72; Gayton, 1930; Du Bois, 1939:129). Knowledge of the movement apparently even reached the so-called mission tribes along the southern California coast (Kroeber, 1925:870–72).

Indian peoples eventually participating in the dance and its later manifestations were the Achumawi; Alsea; Atsugwei; Bannock; Cahto; Calapuya; Chilula; Coos; Costanoan; Gosiute; Huchnom; Karok; Klamath; Konkow; Lassiki; the Coast, Eastern, and Lake Miwok; Modoc; Monache; Nisenan; Nomlaki; Paiute; Patwin; Paviotso; Pomo; Santiam; Shasta; Shoshone; Siuslaw; Tolowa; Tututni; Umpqua;

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Ute; Wailaki; Wappo; Washo; Whilkut; Wintu; Yana; Yokuts; Yoncalla; Yuki; and Yurok. (The Ghost Dance is even said to have spread to the Mormons, though this claim may not be true. See Mooney, 1896:703–04.)

As the movement spread among American Indian peoples, it developed three distinct manifestations: the Earth Lodge Cult, the *Bole-Marú*, and the Big Head Cult, an offshoot of the *Bole-Marú*.

The Earth Lodge Cult originated among the Northern Yana shortly after 1870 and spread to the Hill Patwin, Lake and Coast Miwok, Cahto, Wintu, Shasta, Achumawi, Wappo, Coast Yuki, Sinkyone, Pomo, and Nomlaki, as well as to several Indian peoples in Oregon (Bean and Vane, 1978:670). Its tenets were that the destruction of the world was imminent and that survival depended upon performing proper rituals in earth lodges.

Some have asserted that the Earth Lodge Cult stressed the destruction of the world and minimized the return of the dead. Du Bois (1939:132), however, concluded differently, arguing that the idea of the return of the dead was always present and that the only reason for distinguishing between the Ghost Dance and the Earth Lodge Cult was the use of the earth lodge structure itself.

The name *Bole-Marú* comes from the combination of the Patwin and Pomo words for the cult. It developed among the Hill Patwin from the original Ghost Dance (Du Bois 1939:1) and emphasized the role of a “dreamer,” that is, a person who could see into the future, and individual salvation through a supreme being. The *Bole-Marú* was particularly popular among the Pomo and Maidu, in addition to its Patwin originators (Bean and Vane, 1978:670–71).

The Big Head Cult, in turn, was a variation of the early *Bole-Marú* and was concentrated in northern California and Oregon (Du Bois, 1939:2, 117–27, 129). Both it and the *Bole-Marú* were also related by Du Bois (1939:137–38) to the idea of the resurrection of the dead, though both likely minimized that idea in favor of other objectives.

Although the 1870 Ghost Dance per se had songs, none of these have survived. Some have survived from a local Wintu “dream dance” cult of the wider *Bole-Marú* and Big Head Cults. Du Bois (1939:57) presented two of them:

Above we shall go,
 Along the Milky Way we shall go.
 Above we shall go,
 Along the flower path we shall go.

Down west, down west,
 Is where we ghosts dance.
 Down west, down west,
 Is where weeping ghosts dance,
 Is where we ghosts dance.

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By the midpoint of the decade, the 1870 Ghost Dance movement and these three variations on it had diminished. It could be said to have ended as a social movement at that time, though the Big Head Cult was prevalent through the 1880s (Du Bois, 1939:127) and the *Bole-Marú* religion continues today (Bean and Vane, 1978:671–72). Individual tribes apparently forsook the movement either because they were forced to do so by fearful whites and government agents (see Spier, 1927:51) or because they simply lost interest, perhaps because “it didn’t work” (see Gayton, 1930:81; Hittman, 1973:268–69).

The 1890 Ghost Dance movement

The second Ghost Dance movement originated with a vision by a Paviotso named Wovoka, “The Cutter.” He was also known as Jack Wilson and was the son of Tavivo, the disciple of Wodziwob, originator of the 1870 movement. Wovoka’s vision occurred in either 1886 or 1887, depending on how one reads Mooney (see Mooney, 1896:771–72). Whatever the date, during one of these two years Wovoka experienced a revelation at Mason Valley, Nevada, near the Walker River Reservation, directing him to

tell his people they must be good and love one another, have no quarreling, and live in peace with the whites; that they must work, and not lie or steal; that they must put away all old practices that savored of war; that if they faithfully obeyed his instructions they would at last be reunited with their friends in this other world, where there would be no more death or sickness or old age. He was then given the dance which he was commanded to bring back to his people. By performing this dance at intervals, for five consecutive days each time, they would secure this happiness to themselves and hasten the event. [Mooney, 1896:772]

The 1890 Ghost Dance movement began with the dissemination of this revelation, though it may also be traced to the 1870 movement because of the family connection. Unlike the originator of the earlier movement, however, Wovoka took an active role in spreading his Ghost Dance and relied less on disciples, though they were important to its growth.

Wovoka lived until September 20, 1932 (Stewart, 1977:219), with some continued veneration. Despite Mooney’s statement (1896:927) that by 1896 Wovoka had retired to obscurity, a report from the Nevada Agency in May 1917 states that Wovoka continued to be visited occasionally by delegations from distant tribes (Stewart, 1977:221).

Objectives

As was true for the 1870 Ghost Dance, variations developed in prophecies of the new movement as it spread from tribe to tribe over the years. In some instances Indians and whites were to be one people; in others, all whites were to die; and

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in still others, the whites were to be driven back across the ocean to their former countries (Mooney, 1896:784–86).

Even when a prophecy was constant, the way it might occur could vary, as was the case with the 1870 movement. Given the single theme of destruction of the whites, for example, different tribal groupings thought it would happen differently. Some in the southern part of its area said that destruction would come from a cyclone; others in the west said that it would result from an earthquake; and still others in the north said that it would be attributable to a landslide (Fletcher, 1891:57).

Additional themes of the 1890 movement were also close to those of 1870, for example, restoration of game and creation of a paradise on earth (Overholt, 1974:42). Here, again, the specific form might vary widely from region to region or tribe to tribe or perhaps even within a tribe, from one subarea or subgroup to another, or from one time to another (Hill, 1944:523; Dobyns and Euler, 1967:6).

Nonetheless, the basic objective of the 1890 movement remained constant, just as it had in 1870. Central to both Ghost Dance movements was the return to life of deceased populations of American Indians: “The great underlying principle of the Ghost Dance doctrine is that the time will come when the whole Indian race, living and dead, will be reunited upon a regenerated earth, to live a life of aboriginal happiness, forever free from death, disease and misery” (Mooney, 1896:777).

Even the name of the dance projects the return of the dead to life. Some tribes called the dance by names referring to its actual performance: To the Paiute it was the “dance in a circle”; to the Shoshone, “everybody dragging”; to the Kiowa, “dance with clasped hands”; to the Comanche, “with joined hands” (Mooney, 1896:791). It was named most frequently, however, by Indians as well as by whites, for its central objective: “By the Sioux, Arapaho, and most other prairie tribes it is called the “spirit” or “ghost” dance (Sioux, *Wana’ghi wa’chipi*; Arapaho, *Thigû’nawat*), from the fact that everything connected with it relates to the coming of the spirits of the dead from the spirit world, and by this name it has become known among the whites” (Mooney, 1896:791).

Ceremony

Actual performances of 1890 Ghost Dance ceremonies varied, as did the 1870 ceremonies. Some tribes would dance at prescribed times for several days, others only once. Some would dance around a pole, which might or might not be decorated, others around a tree, which might or might not be decorated, and others with neither tree nor pole. Some tribes included fasting and sweat baths (Mooney, 1896:chap. 11), whereas others did not. Some tribes on some occasions would “consecrate” the ground before dancing (Mooney, 1896:918), but others would not.

The dance of the Northern Cheyenne, for example, had features that were said

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not to be found to the south, such as four fires built at each cardinal point outside the dance circle (Grinnell, 1891:66). Sioux tribes wore the “ghost shirt,” a somewhat distinguishing feature of their dance; although the Arapaho and other tribes used such shirts as well, many other tribes did not wear them. Sioux participants would not wear metal; participants from the southern tribes would wear silver (Mooney, 1896:915). The Cheyenne and Southern Arapaho had a preliminary dance, the “crow dance,” that other tribes did not use (Mooney, 1896:921–22). It was performed as a “warm-up” to the Ghost Dance ceremony.

Actual performance of the dance might differ even from year to year. Dobyns and Euler (1967:6) described reported changes in the 1890 Ghost Dance ceremony among the Walapai and Havasupai: A dance in 1889 lasted all night, but one in 1891 only until midnight.

One factor that remained constant for the actual 1890 ceremony, as it had for the 1870 one, was the circle: The Ghost Dance was always a circle dance.

Also central to performances of the 1890 dances were hypnotic trances and songs, both of which linked the themes or objectives of the ceremony with the physical activity of dancing. In many performances, dancers were hypnotized by leaders or by individuals who had experienced a trance (Mooney, 1896:924). It was during trances or immediately thereafter that visions would be experienced (Grinnell, 1891:68; Mooney, 1896:923) and expressed in songs.

Mooney (1896:953–1102) reported many songs of 1890, mostly from such prairie tribes as the Arapaho, Cheyenne, Sioux, Kiowa, and Caddo, but also from the Paiute. These are somewhat problematic for analysis. They tend to be highly individualized, and a single dance might easily produce dozens of them. Some songs with special qualities, however, became part of a tribe’s ceremonies and were sung as opening or closing songs. Of the two, closing songs were said to be more important and more permanent (Mooney, 1896:953). After an apparent analysis of these, Overholt (1974:56) asserts, “The two most frequent themes in the songs are the return of the dead and the restoration of the game, both of which are central to Wovoka’s original teaching.”

Mooney describes this Arapaho song as a call for the return of game (1896:967):

How bright is the moonlight.
 How bright is the moonlight.
 Tonight as I ride with my load of buffalo beef.
 Tonight as I ride with my load of buffalo beef.

Songs calling for the return of the Indian dead to life are this Arapaho one (Mooney, 1896:972):

My father did not recognize me (at first),
 My father did not recognize me (at first).
 When again he saw me,

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When again he saw me,
He said, "You are the offspring of a crow,"
He said, "You are the offspring of a crow."

and this Sioux one (Mooney, 1896:1070):

Mother, come home; mother, come home.
My little brother goes about always crying.
My little brother goes about always crying.
Mother, come home; mother, come home.

Both themes appear in this Sioux song (Mooney, 1896:1072):

The whole world is coming,
A nation is coming, a nation is coming.
The Eagle has brought the message to the tribe.
The father says so, the father says so.
Over the whole earth they are coming.
The buffalo are coming, the buffalo are coming.
The Crow has brought the message to the tribe.
The father says so, the father says so.

Area

From a geographic origin virtually identical with that of the 1870 movement, the 1890 Ghost Dance spread also among the Paviotso and other Paiute of Nevada and into Oregon and California, overlapping the 1870 area to some extent. In addition to the Paviotso and other Paiute, the Washo and Pit River and Tule River Indians of this area also performed it.³ It was not pervasive there, however, particularly not in California.

Concomitantly, and in contrast to the 1870 Ghost Dance, the 1890 movement spread widely to the east, northeast, and southeast. It was performed in Idaho, Montana, Utah, Wyoming, Colorado, and the Dakotas by the Arapaho, Arikara, Assiniboin, Bannock, Cheyenne, Gosiute, Gros Ventres, Hidatsa, Mandan, Shoshone, Sioux, and Ute of these areas and even reached the Dakota Sioux in Canada (Kehoe, 1968). It also reached Nebraska, Kansas, and Oklahoma Territory, affecting the Southern Arapaho, Caddo, Comanche, Delaware, Iowa, Kansas, Kickapoo, Kiowa, Kiowa-Apache, Oto-Missouri, Pawnee, and Wichita. It was even in the Southwest and California among the Chemeheuvi, Havasupai, Kichai, Taos Pueblo, and Walapai (Mooney, 1896:pl. LXXXV).⁴

³ The Pit River Indians are more or less the same as the Achumawi; the Tule River Indians are apparently those of Tule River Reservation, primarily the Yokuts but perhaps also the Kern River Indians (Tubatulabal).

⁴ It is extremely difficult to ascertain the exact area of the 1890 Ghost Dance (or, for that matter, of the 1870 movement). Mooney indicated that almost all of the tribes west of the Missouri River had at least heard of it.

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End of the movement

As was true for the 1870 movement, the 1890 Ghost Dance lasted but a few short years. By the mid-1890s, many tribes had ceased to perform the ceremony, surely for reasons similar to those ending the 1870 movement. Also, however, the death of Sitting Bull, a Ghost Dance leader, the massacre at Wounded Knee Creek, and related armed battles between the Sioux and U.S. government troops surely dissuaded some tribes from involvement in the 1890 Ghost Dance. Nonetheless, some tribes, especially those in Oklahoma Territory, incorporated the ceremony into tribal life for many years (Mooney, 1896:927). It has even been performed in contemporary times.