



The Ghost Dance among the Sioux

George Sword

(Events described: 1889-1890)

The Ghost Dance was a new religious movement promoted at the end of the 1880s by a Northern Paiute prophet named Wovoka. Wovoka lived in Nevada, but word of the new religion quickly traveled through indigenous networks to reservations across the trans-Mississippi west. When Lakota people (known more commonly in that era as “Sioux”) began to practice the Ghost Dance on their reservations in South Dakota, US officials feared it was the prelude to an armed uprising. That fear led to the Wounded Knee Massacre, when US soldiers shot down a band of Lakota families.

The following document recounts how Lakotas from the Pine Ridge and Cheyenne River reservations traveled, first, to Nevada to meet Wovoka and, later, to Wyoming to observe the Ghost Dance as practiced among the Arapaho people. The document was written in the Lakota language by George Sword, an Oglala Lakota who worked for the US government on the Pine Ridge reservation as a police captain and later as a judge. Sword’s account was translated into imperfect English by another indigenous person, whose name was not recorded. That translation was then published in a report on the Ghost Dance that was produced in the aftermath of the Wounded Knee Massacre by James Mooney, a white ethnologist working for the Smithsonian Institution.

In the story of ghost dancing, the Ogalala heard that the Son of God was truly on earth in the west from their country. This was in the year 1889. The first people knew about the messiah to be on earth were the Shoshoni and Arapaho. So in 1889, Good Thunder, with four or five others, visited the place where Son of God said to be. These people went there without permission. They said the messiah was there at the place, but he was there to help the Indians and not the whites; so this made the Indians happy to find out this. Good Thunder, Cloud Horse, Yellow Knife, and Short Bull visited the place again in 1890 and saw the messiah. Their story of visit to the messiah is as follows:

From the country where the Arapaho and Shoshoni, we start in the direction of northwest in train for five nights and arrived at the foot of the Rocky Mountains. Here we saw him and also several tribes of Indians. The people said that the messiah will come at a place in the woods where the place was prepare for him. When we went to the place, a smoke descended from heaven to the place where he was to come. When the smoke disappeared, there was a man of about forty, which was the Son of God. The man said:

“My grandchildren! I am glad you have come far away to see your relatives. This are your people, who have come back from your country.” When he said he want us to go with him, we looked and we saw a land created across the ocean, on which all the nations of Indians were coming home; but as the messiah looked at the land which was created and reached across the ocean, again disappeared, saying that it was not time for that to take place. The messiah then gave to Good Thunder some paints—Indian paint and a white paint—a green grass [sagebrush twigs?],^a and said, “My grandchildren, when you

^a The phrase in square brackets is an editorial interpolation that appears thus in the source publication, presumably inserted by James Mooney.

get home, go to farming and send all your children to school. And on way home, if you kill any buffalo, cut the head, the tail, and the four feet and leave them, and that buffalo will come to live again. When the soldiers of the white people chief want to arrest me, I shall stretch out my arms, which will knock them to nothingness, or, if not that, the earth will open and swallow them in. My father commanded me to visit the Indians on a purpose. I have come to the white people first, but they not good. They killed me, and you can see the marks of my wounds on my feet, my hands, and on my back. My father has given you life—your old life—and you have come to see your friends; but you will not take me home with you at this time. I want you to tell, when you get home, your people to follow my examples. Any one Indian does not obey me and tries to be on whites' side will be covered over by a new land that is to come over this old one. You will, all the people, use the paints and grass I give you. In the spring, when the green grass comes, your people who have gone before you will come back, and you shall see your friends then, for you have come to my call."

The people from every tipi send for us to visit them. They are people who died many years ago. Chasing Hawk, who died not long ago, was there, and we went to his tipi. He was living with his wife, who was killed in war long ago. They live in a buffalo-skin tipi—a very large one—and he wanted all his friends to go there to live. A son of Good Thunder who died in war long ago was one who also took us to his tipi, so his father saw him. When coming, we come to a herd of buffaloes. We killed one and took everything except the four feet, head, and tail; and when we came a little ways from it, there was the buffaloes come to life again and went off. This was one of the messiah's word came to truth. The messiah said, "I will short your journey when you feel tired of the long ways, if you call upon me." This we did when we were tired. The night came upon us, we stopped at a place, and we called upon the messiah to help us, because we were tired of long journey. We went to sleep, and in the morning we found ourselves at a great distance from where we stopped.

The people came back here, and they got the people loyal to the government, and those not favor of the whites held a council. The agent's soldiers were sent after them and brought Good Thunder and two others to the agency, and they were confined to the prison. They were asked by the agent and Captain Sword whether they saw the Son of God and whether they hold councils over their return from visit, but Good Thunder refused to say "yes." They were confined in the prison for two days, and upon their promising not to hold councils about their visit, they were released. They went back to the people and told them about their trouble with the agent. Then they disperse without a council.

In the following spring, the people at Pine Ridge Agency began to gather at the White Clay Creek for councils. Just at this time, Kicking Bear, from Cheyenne River Agency, went on a visit to the Arapaho and said that the Arapaho there have ghost dancing. He said that people partaking in dance would get crazy and die, then the messiah is seen and all the ghosts. When they die, they see strange things; they see their relatives who died long before. They saw these things when they died in ghost dance and came to life again. The person dancing becomes dizzy and finally drop dead, and the first thing they saw is an eagle comes to them and carried them to where the messiah is with his ghosts. The man said this:

The persons in the ghost dancing are all joined hands. A man stands, and then a woman, so in that way forming a very large circle. They dance around in the circle in a continuous time until some of them become so tired and overtired that they became crazy and finally drop as though dead, with foams in mouth, all wet by perspiration. All the men and women made holy shirts and dresses they wear in dance. The persons dropped in dance would all lie in great dust the dancing make. They paint the white muslins they made holy shirts and dresses out of with blue across the back, and alongside of this is a line of yellow paint. They also paint in the front part of the shirts and dresses. A picture of an eagle is made on the back of all the shirts and dresses. On the shoulders and on the sleeves, they tied eagle feathers. They said that the bullets will not go through these shirts and dresses, so they all have these dresses for war. Their enemies' weapons will not go through these dresses. The ghost dancers all have to wear eagle feather on head. With this feather, any man would be made crazy if fan with this feather. In the ghost dance, no person is allow to wear anything made of any metal, except the guns made of metal is carry by some of the dancers. When they come from ghosts, or after recovery from craziness, they brought meat from the ghosts or from the supposed messiah. They also brought water, fire, and wind with which to kill all the whites or Indians who will help the chief of the whites. They made sweat house and made holes in the middle of the sweat house, where they say the water will come out of these holes.

Source: James Mooney, *The Ghost-Dance Religion and the Sioux Outbreak of 1890*, part 2 of *Fourteenth Annual Report of the Bureau of Ethnology to the Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution, 1892-93*, ed. J. W. Powell (Washington DC: Government Printing Office, 1896), 796-798, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/uc1.32106000541737>. Public domain, Google-digitized.

Excerpt edited and annotated by John-Charles Duffy. Two paragraphs that in the source publication were enclosed in quotation marks have been reformatted here as a block quote, along with a third paragraph that in the source appears to have been left outside the quotation marks by mistake. It is unclear if the paragraph beginning “The persons in the ghost dancing...” is meant to be understood as a quotation or as a summary; that paragraph has been left here the same way it appears in the source publication, with neither enclosing quotation marks nor block-quote formatting.

Non-standard English grammar retained from the source, but punctuation emended for readability. The spellings of tribal names and of *tipi* replicate the source publication. The words *mountains*, *creek*, and *agencies* are capitalized here when they appear in place names, although they were lowercase in the source. The capitalizing of *Son of God* but the use of lowercase for *messiah* and for *father* (referring to God) reproduces the usage of the source; so too does the use of lowercase for *ghost dance(rs)*.

This edited presentation of Sword's account of the Ghost Dance is intended for *teaching* purposes only. For *research* purposes, you should consult, quote, and cite the source publication listed above.



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