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# 'You shall grow to become a nation': the Lakota Ghost Dance and religious repression at Pine Ridge

*Lee Irwin*

In the clash of empire with indigenous people, specifically among native Americans, one of the most tragic encounters occurred on the Pine Ridge reservation, South Dakota, on December 29, 1890.<sup>1</sup> This event, memorialized as the 'Battle of Wounded Knee,' resulted in the death of over three hundred Lakota men, women, and children. The conflict, in the deep cold of winter among the snow covered hills of South Dakota, was constructed around issues of Lakota religious activity targeted as unacceptable and dangerous by federal and military agents. The ruthless aggression of the U.S. Army during this event reflects a chilling hostility toward peoples characterized in government policy as 'wards of the government.' While the Lakota peoples, along with all other native indigenes, were under severe criticism for their supposed lack of civility and social accomplishments, the brutality of the massacre was not regarded as 'savage' but as heroic and resulted in eighteen soldiers receiving the Congressional Medal of Honor. How was this violation of religious freedom justified by the aggressive agents? What were the social and political circumstances that supported the suppression of native religion (and Lakota resistance) and what impact did this event have on later Lakota religious practices?

The U.S. government policy toward the native practice of indigenous religions has a variety of sources – cultural, political, legal, and religious – all of which resulted in a forceful legislation of repression. In 1869, U.S. President Ulysses S. Grant initiated a policy of 'moral elevation' by creating a Board of Indian Commissioners (BIC) whose responsibility was to supervise Indian Affairs (in conjunction with the Department of the Interior and the federal Indian Office) and to promote a policy of 'civilizing the savage nations' as a continuation of the much older 1819 Indian

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<sup>1</sup> The line 'You shall grow to become a nation' is a line from an early Lakota Ghost Dance song from Pine Ridge; James Mooney, *The Ghost Dance religion and the Sioux Outbreak of 1890* (Lincoln 1991) 1065 (Original 1891).

Civilization Fund Act.<sup>2</sup> The original members of the BIC were Anglo male lay representatives of eight different Protestant denominations, thus excluding the Catholics. The concept of ‘civilization’ was inseparable from a thorough program of (Protestant) missionization aimed at stripping native people of all *primitive and pagan* religious practices. Missionary field reports were submitted to the BIC annually for evaluation. Goals articulated by the BIC program included ‘statistics on Indian converts, Indians wearing “citizens’ dress,” Indians living in houses, Indians who had “learned to labor,” and [Indian] school attendance.’<sup>3</sup> Further, the BIC Peace Policy identified native peoples as ‘wards of the government’ (as opposed to sovereign peoples) whose education required conversion to Christianity based on the model of a hard-working Anglo farmer. Thus the BIC assigned each Indian reservation to a specific denomination with the expectation that each denomination would establish schools and churches on their assigned reservations to further ‘civilize’ Indians. In establishing this policy, the Lakota (a Sioux nation) were placed under Episcopalian control, though Catholic influence and missions were also present.<sup>4</sup>

Thus Indian ‘moral reform’ was based on a popular Protestant American cultural ideal that established a norm for native behavior and belief that not only denied the intrinsic values of native culture and religion, but redefined native identity in terms of an alien social classification (land owning farmer). It subordinated native peoples to the dominant political structures as dependent (thus not adult) wards of the government.<sup>5</sup> This belittling of native values, maturity, and way of life was inculcated by local authority in the form of the Indian Agent appointed by the Office of Indian Affairs (OIA, after 1947 BIA) to each reservation. These two agencies, each federally appointed, the missionary and the Indian Agent, acted often in concert to promote and enforce the civilizing program. While missionary

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<sup>2</sup> Allison M. Dussias, ‘Ghost dance and Holy Ghost: The echoes of nineteenth-century Christianization policy in twentieth-century native American free exercise Cases’, *Stanford Law Review* 49 (1997) 773-852; 777.

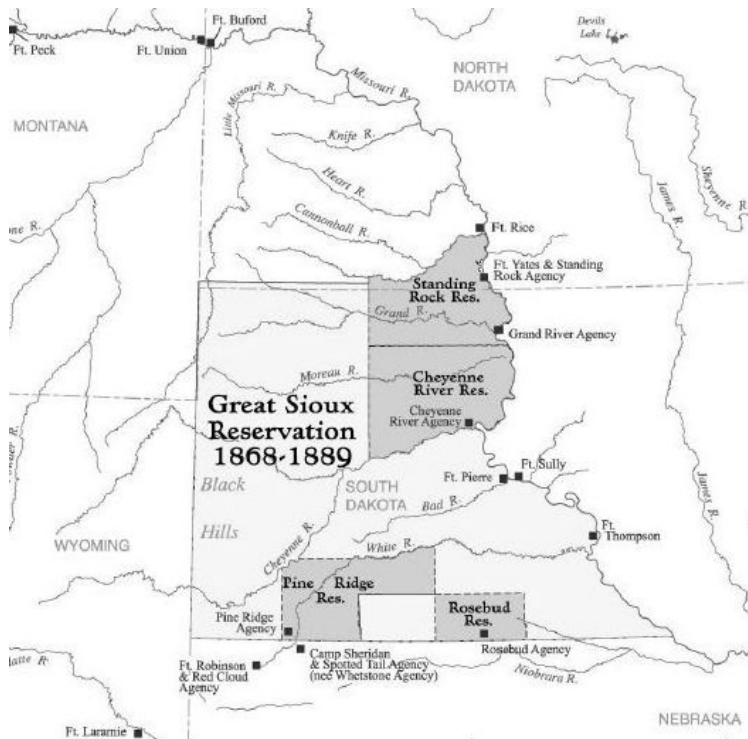
<sup>3</sup> Dussias, ‘Ghost dance and Holy Ghost’, 780-81.

<sup>4</sup> In 1874 the Catholic Church established a Bureau of Catholic Indian Missions (BCIM), as a response to Grant’s Protestant BIC, and in 1885 officially established missions at Pine Ridge and Rosebud; Ross Enochs, *The Jesuit mission to the Lakota Sioux* (New York 1996) 20-26.

<sup>5</sup> Thomas Biolsi, ‘The birth of the reservation: Making the modern individual among the Lakota’, *American Ethnologist* 22 (1995) 28-53; 28-30.

appointees took control of the religious and educational programs on reservations, Indian Agents controlled the distribution of rations and appointed a paramilitary Indian Police force to ensure conformity to federal demands and OIA policies.

Following the 1876 defeat of American forces by native warriors at the Battle of the Little Big Horn, many Anglo settlers rejected Grant's 'Peace Policy' in favor of the military control of native peoples. In 1877, Rutherford Hays replaced Grant as the U.S. President and instituted control over Indian reservations through increased emphasis on the application of federal law on the reservation and the importance of private ownership of land. Also in 1877, the Lakota lost their claim to the Black Hills, as given to them in the Great Sioux Reservation Treaty (1868); this loss meant that the Lakota no longer had access to the sacred ceremonial grounds long used by them for spiritual practices.



Map 1: The Great Sioux Reservation 1868-1889.

While the use of missionary agents to promote the 'Peace Policy' was terminated in 1882 by the new Secretary of the Interior Henry Teller, missionary schools continued to operate on the reservations and to enforce a policy of mandatory education. These programs were of several types: the federal agency education program of the OIA, with teachers appointed by recommendation of the local Indian Agent; federally funded schools not under the supervision of the OIA; missionary schools under contract to the federal government; and missionary schools independently funded by denominations. All tended to follow the principle advocated by Captain Richard Pratt's 'model' Indian school in Carlisle, Pennsylvania: 'Kill the Indian (...) and save the man.' All such schools taught basic Christian (Protestant) moral values, hard work, saving money, going to church often, and 'avoiding Indian dances and medicine men.'<sup>6</sup> Children were stripped of native clothing, not allowed to speak native languages, forced to do menial labor, to attend school and church, and were severely punished for breaking any school rules. Education that failed to produce 'civilized Indians' was inevitably blamed on native peoples and on what was termed their incapacity to learn. Thus education became a formidable instrument of federal and religious oppression and denial of native cultures. In 1885, there were 106 missionary and parochial schools on reservations, many still active today, and catechist religious instruction through these schools was and is common.<sup>7</sup>

In 1882 Henry Teller wrote to the Commissioner of Indian Affairs stating that 'the "old heathenish dances" were a great hindrance to the civilization of the Indians, and ought to be discontinued'.<sup>8</sup> Thus in 1883, the OIA issued 'Rules of Indian Courts' in which many 'Indian Offenses' were listed as punishable by Indian Agents through Indian Courts presided over by Agent appointed Indian judges. Among those offenses punishable were included: 'participation in the sun dance, the scalp dance, and the war dance'. Agents and missionaries alike tended to see all dances as some form of 'war dance' - thus the impact of this order was a ban on all native religious activities, particularly any form of dancing. Also banned were the

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<sup>6</sup> Donald Grinde, 'Taking the Indian out of the Indian: U.S. policies of ethnocide through education', *Wicazo Se Review* 19 (2004) 25-32; 27-29, passim; see also Dussias, 'Ghost dance and Holy Ghost', 784-86.

<sup>7</sup> Ronald Niezen, *Spirit wars: Native American religions in the age of nation building* (Berkeley 2000) 68.

<sup>8</sup> Francis Prucha, *Documents of the United States Indian policy* (Lincoln 1990) 160-61.

practices of medicine men and the distribution (giveaway) or destruction of property as part of any ceremony, such as mourning.<sup>9</sup> Dances were broken up by Indian police, some medicine men arrested, rations were withheld, and threats of military intervention were made by Agents to suppress all visible forms of Indian religious activity. At Pine Ridge, the Indian Agent had a guard house built for the purpose of imprisoning any Lakota who refused to follow government policies, including crimes of ‘immorality’ based on non-monogamous sexual relationships. Termination of dances, for example the Lakota sun dance, impacted native social standing, exchange of goods, and spiritual pride for people denied a major religious ceremony.<sup>10</sup> Religious repression was simply another assault on the Indian way of life reinforced by loss of land, reservation confinement, forced education, and intensive missionization, all of which devalued and diminished native cultural values and practices.

Another complex aspect of the pre-Ghost Dance context was the increasing number of Lakota converts to Christianity which divided the community. As early as 1871, at the Sioux Santee Agency in Nebraska, a native language newspaper, the *Iapi Oaye (Word Carrier)* was published by missionaries Stephen Riggs and his son Alfred Riggs. By 1884 over eight hundred copies per issue were distributed to Lakota readers in Nebraska and North and South Dakota. While the editor Alfred Riggs attacked the OIA for not punishing ‘hostile Sioux’ such as Sitting Bull and Red Cloud, Lakota authors like Sam White Bird and Louis Iron Wing specifically attacked the ‘pagan’ religious practices of the unconverted Lakota and promoted evangelical Christianity as the true spiritual ideal for Lakota people.<sup>11</sup> Another example of a native Christian point of view is the Lakota writings of Emmy Valandry, a Pine Ridge Lakota mixed blood who abhorred the ‘old pagan practices’ of the nonconverted.<sup>12</sup> Thus among the

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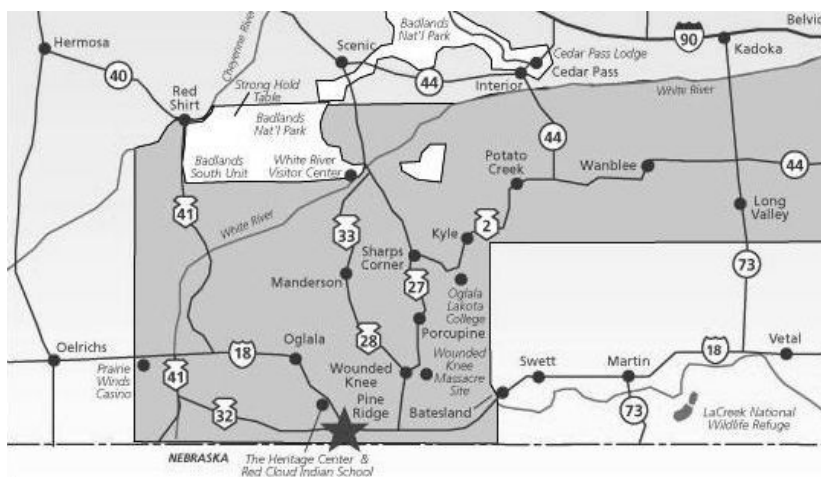
<sup>9</sup> Lee Irwin, ‘Freedom, law, and prophecy: A brief history of native American religious resistance’ in: Lee Irwin ed., *Native American spirituality: A critical reader* (Lincoln 2000) 295-310; 295; Dussias, ‘Ghost dance and Holy Ghost’, 788-89.

<sup>10</sup> Cyldé Holler, *Black Elk’s religion: The sun dance and Lakota catholicism* (Albany 1995) 132-34, esp. note 115; Bilosi, ‘The birth of the reservation’, 46.

<sup>11</sup> Todd Kerstetter, ‘Spin doctors at Santee: Missionaries and the Dakota-language reporting of the ghost dance and Wounded Knee’, *The Western Historical Quarterly* 28 (1997) 45-67; 50-53.

<sup>12</sup> Julian Rice, “‘It was there own fault for being intractable’: Internalized racism and Wounded Knee’, *American Indian Quarterly* 22 (1998) 63-82; 70.

Lakota peoples, there were strongly divided opinions about the viability of traditional Lakota religion and some Lakota supported its repression having been subverted by an increasingly dominant, non-native religious and political regime. Therefore the complex of circumstances surrounding the Lakota Ghost Dance included divided opinion among Lakota peoples concerning the viability or value of the dance.



Map 2: The Pine Ridge Reservation

## The Lakota Ghost Dance

In 1889 a Lakota father, Kicking Bear, lost a young daughter to illness and while mourning her, he had a vision that there was a place 'where the dead souls gather'.<sup>13</sup> Wanting to learn more, he decided to ask the new Ghost Dance prophet Wóvoka (Paiute nation) about his vision and traveled to Nevada to meet him. When they met, Wóvoka told Kicking Bear (before he spoke) that he was seeking knowledge of his daughter and that he, Wóvoka, knew the place where souls gather after death. Wóvoka had a sweat lodge made and laid Kicking Bear in the lodge on white sage, covered with a buffalo robe, and fanned him with an eagle feather. This put him into a

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<sup>13</sup> Alice Kehoe, *The Ghost Dance: Ethnohistory and revitalization* (New York 2001) 46.

trance and initiated a spirit journey to the camp of the Thunderbirds. There Kicking Bear saw many of the Lakota dead, including his daughter, mother, and father. He was then taken to see a Great Being who gave him a pipe and sweetgrass and told him that he must offer up the pipe and the sweetgrass 'to Him, the Creator, the Power that guides all things'. He was further told that his daughter had now joined another tribe and that people should not mourn for the dead. He was instructed to make red powder to mark his face 'as a token of happiness, pleasing to the Power' and he was given a sacred song.<sup>14</sup>

When he awoke, he narrated the vision to those present and Wóvoka 'straightened out his dream for him' because he knew the road that Kicking Bear had travelled in his dream.<sup>15</sup> After his return from visiting Wóvoka, when someone died, Kicking Bear forbid mourning and instead instituted a dance 'on the seventh day' where relatives gathered on a hill and sang songs, wearing the red paint and eagle feathers which Kicking Bear had seen in his dream. Even though Wóvoka functioned as a teacher, prophet, and man of power, visiting native representatives clearly had their own visionary encounters which modified or changed the emphasis of the dance and its purpose. When Wóvoka 'straightened' the dream, he most likely gave interpretations or additions which clarified his perspective on the meaning of the vision. However, there was no compulsion on the part of the dreamer to follow Wóvoka's interpretation as the visions were the sanctifying medium through which the prophecy and the promises of Wóvoka were validated. Kicking Bear was free to take the songs, the red paint, feathers, blessed pinõn nuts, back to Lakota country and teach the dance as he understood it, based on his own visionary realization.<sup>16</sup>

In October of 1890, Short Bull (the brother-in-law of Kicking Bear, who traveled with him to Nevada) gave a talk at Red Leaf Camp near Pine Ridge Reservation after his return from visiting Wóvoka. Short Bull told a story of the soon to appear 'great change' and that a tree would sprout up

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<sup>14</sup> For a more detailed analysis of the Ghost Dance movement among the Paiute and other peoples, see: Lee Irwin, *Coming down from above: Prophecy, resistance, and renewal in native American religions* (Oklahoma 2008) 299-314.

<sup>15</sup> Kehoe, *The Ghost Dance: Ethnohistory and revitalization*, 47.

<sup>16</sup> See Thomas Overholt, 'The Ghost Dance of 1890 and the nature of the prophetic process', *Ethnohistory* 21 (1974) 37-63 and Thomas Overholt, 'Short Bull, Black Elk, Sword, and the "Meaning" of the Ghost Dance', *Religion* 8 (1978) 171-195, for a review of some key Lakota responses to the dance.

where they might all see their dead relatives. They must all continue to dance and after a time, the earth would 'shiver very hard' and then, Short Bull would start a cleansing wind to blow. The Indian people were 'living a sacred life' that would allow them to see the dead. 'If the soldiers surround you four deep, three of you on whom I have put holy shirts will sing a song around them' and some soldiers would drop dead while others fled; the soldiers would all sink into the earth and disappear. The Father Above had commanded them to dance and He would protect them from harm.<sup>17</sup> The Ghost Dance shirts, decorated with various emblems and signs, were made but were not part of the teaching of Wóvoka. Among the Lakota, the young holy man Black Elk claimed that the shirts began in a vision he had when he danced the Ghost Dance at Kicking Bear's camp. While dancing, he flew away from the camp in a vision to a 'beautiful land' where people, including dead relatives, had plenty of food and a flowering tree in the center of their camp. There he saw 'two men coming toward me, dressed in ghost shirts like I was dressed.' After he revived, he and others made an copies of the shirts he had seen to wear in the dance.<sup>18</sup>

Thus while Wóvoka was the messianic Paiute teacher and initiator of the 1890 Ghost Dance movement in Nevada, the dissemination of his teachings were adapted and modified according to the religious traditions and visionary perceptions of other native leaders of the dance. The messianic theme is vague because while non-natives tended to emphasize the drama of the Messiah as an evangelical Christian end-time scenario, native representatives tended to see it as a renewal and rebirth of the earth to its pristine beauty and abundance, the return of the many native dead, and a recovery of native religion and way of life. Further, it was never taught as a war dance nor as a motivating ceremony for aggression against non-natives. Kicking Bear taught that through *singing*, the soldiers of the U.S. Army would be defeated. The theme of the abundance of food always seen in visions of the camps of the dead surely reflects the genuine loss of animals, natural foods, and confinement to marginal reservation land. A poor diet, epidemic disease, loss of freedom, missionary and government

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<sup>17</sup> The 'father' referred to might be either, or both, the Creator and Wóvoka (as Messiah, also called *naba*, 'father' in Paiute), James Mooney, *The Ghost Dance religion*, 788-89, 1109; Michael Hittman, *Wovoka and the Ghost Dance*. Edited by David Lynch (Lincoln 1997) 251.

<sup>18</sup> Mooney, *The Ghost Dance religion*, 790-791; Raymond DeMallie *The sixth grandfather: Black Elk's teachings given to John G. Neibardt* (Lincoln 1984) 260-262.

attacks on native values as mentioned above and a steeply declining population all contributed to the impact and felt need of a 'dance for the ghosts' that would bridge the terrible gap between the living and the many Indian dead.<sup>19</sup>

Often, native representatives returning to their reservations were arrested and sometimes jailed for 'Indian Offenses' as potential instigators of dancing that was banned by the Indian Agents.<sup>20</sup> Such was the case with the Lakota. According to the Lakota delegates sent to see Wóvoka, the prophet had predicted that in the spring 1891 'he [Wóvoka] would wipe the whites from the face of the earth' for their wickedness and injustice toward the Indians, bring back all the Indian dead, restore the buffalo and other animals, and recreate the beauty of the world. Now, in April 1890, they must dance, call Wóvoka their 'father' and prepare for his coming. The Agent at Pine Ridge immediately arrested Good Thunder and several others and put them in jail, also breaking up the council meant to discuss the new teachings. When Kicking Bear returned from a visit to the Arapaho and told that the Arapaho were dancing and meeting their dead relatives, excitement was renewed among the Lakota and the dance was reinitiated at White Clay Creek (summer of 1890). Both Red Cloud and Sitting Bull, Lakota leading men, became adherents of the dance and promoted it among their people; in part as a reaction to the suppression of the sundance and other bundle ceremonies forbidden by the OIA Agents. Fasting for a full day before dancing was added and a sunrise sweat was held before the dance. George Sword, an Oglala captain of the Indian police, recorded that Kicking Bear saw 'people die in the Arapaho dance, then come to life' after an eagle had carried them in visions to where the Messiah (Wóvoka) and his people were dancing. The Arapaho also made ghost shirts (of white muslin) and wore them to dance in with an eagle painted on the back. They said 'bullets will not go through these shirts and dresses' and that enemy weapons could not hurt them. The Lakota, following Black Elk and other dreamers, also made

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<sup>19</sup> Mooney, *The Ghost Dance religion*, 818, 840, 834-835 gives an 1890 list of failures by the government to the Lakota that contributed to the upsurge of interest in the Ghost Dance at Standing Rock.

<sup>20</sup> For a detailed look at the BIA response to the Ghost Dance, Larry Moses, 'Jack Wilson and the Indian service: The response of the BIA to the Ghost Dance prophet', *American Indian Quarterly* 5 (1979) 295-316.

Ghost Dance shirts and wore them while dancing their version of the dance, called *Wanangi Wacipi* (spirit dance).<sup>21</sup>

By late October of 1890, many Lakota were dancing at various sites led by Kicking Bear, Short Bull, Big Foot, Little Wound, Sitting Bull, and Red Cloud while the Indian Agents at the four major Lakota reservations sought to suppress the dance, particularly at Pine Ridge.<sup>22</sup> A new inexperienced OIA agent had been appointed at Pine Ridge, Daniel F. Royer, whose anxieties and panic over the dancing instigated the arrival of U.S. Army troops. In mid-November, Agent Royer was sending telegram after telegram to the Indian Office in Washington asking for 'at least a thousand soldiers' to suppress the 'wild and crazy Indians'.<sup>23</sup> In late November, General Brooke arrived at Pine Ridge with eight troops from the Seventh Cavalry (the same troops as those defeated by the Lakota at the Battle of Little Big Horn) and other mounted soldiers, with a battalion of artillery and nine companies of infantry while additional troops were dispersed to the other Lakota agencies at Rosebud, Cheyenne River, and Standing Rock (Sitting Bull's location) for a total of about 3 000 well-armed soldiers.

The so-called 'Sioux Outbreak' was a creation of newspaper jingoism, irresponsible thinking, over-reaction, and a failure to contain trooper violence on the part of the Army by its commanders.<sup>24</sup> Newspaper reporters from eastern cities arrived by the dozens and started turning out articles based on fantasy and speculation on the coming 'hostilities' or 'uprising' in an attempt to exploit the 'last Indian war'. Based in gossip and exaggeration, these articles generated a climate of fear and, by writing propaganda disguised as news, drew more troops and thus profit for local townsmen in trade and business. When the troops appeared, Lakota people feared the worst and several thousand Lakota, Ghost Dancers and nonbelievers, fled to the desolate Bad Lands under the direction of Short

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<sup>21</sup> Mooney, *The Ghost Dance religion*, 796-798, 819-824; Raymond DeMallie, 'The Lakota Ghost Dance: An ethnohistorical account', *Pacific Historical Review* 5 (1982) 385-405; 400-401.

<sup>22</sup> DeMallie, 'The Lakota Ghost Dance', 393 gives Red Cloud's explanation for the popularity of the dance.

<sup>23</sup> H.J. Viola. *Trail to Wounded Knee: The last stand of the Plains Indians 1860-1890* (Washington DC 2003) 181.

<sup>24</sup> Omer Stewart, 'The Ghost Dance' in: Raymond Wood and Margot Liberty ed., *Anthropology on the Great Plains* (Lincoln 1980) 178-187; 186.

Bull and Kicking Bear which news reporters labeled the ‘Sioux Outbreak of 1890’ even though Short Bull clearly said that ‘they had no thought of fighting’.<sup>25</sup>

At this point Sitting Bull, a leading chief, was killed (December 15) when his arrest was ordered by both the Agent at Standing Rock and the nearby military commander for allowing the Ghost Dance at his camp. Resisting arrest for permitting a religious dance, he was shot and killed by Indian Police while they were surrounded by Sitting Bull’s followers.<sup>26</sup> Other leaders like Hump, who surrendered peacefully, were challenged by the military. Big Foot (Sitanka), leader of a band of Cheyenne River Ghost Dancers, was confronted by Colonel Sumner after leaving his camp in late December. He protested that his band was peaceable, had no intention of challenging the army, and simply wanted to go to the Agency at Pine Ridge to collect their winter rations and annuities. Returning to Cheyenne River in obedience to Sumner’s orders, rumor spread among the Lakota that the army intended to arrest Big Foot (in fact Sumner was ordered to arrest Big Foot and sent him to Fort Meade) and possibly imprison or shoot the dancers if they refused to surrender to the Cheyenne River Agency. This caused a panic and over 340 starving Lakota men, women, and children fled south (December 23), taking Big Foot with them in the midst of a deeply cold and snowy winter. On December 28, Big Foot’s band, nearing Pine Ridge, was intercepted by Major Whiteside of the Seventh Cavalry and an unconditional surrender was given by Big Foot and his warriors.<sup>27</sup>

Both Big Foot and the army moved to Wounded Knee as night drew on, to set up an overnight camp before going on to Pine Ridge agency the next day. At this point, additional troops were sent to Wounded Knee from Pine Ridge, with four Hotchkiss machine guns, for a total force of 470 soldiers to guard about 100 warriors in Big Foot’s band, the rest being women and children. At dawn on the morning of December 29, 1890, the Lakota woke to find themselves completely surrounded on all sides by the

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<sup>25</sup> Elmo Watson ‘The last Indian war, 1890-91: A study of newspaper jingoism’, *Journalism Quarterly* 20 (1943) 205-21; 206-07; Thomas Tibbles, *Buckskin and blanket days: Memoirs of a friend of the Indians* (New York 1957) 300-326; Miller, *Ghost Dance* (New York 1959) 150-158.

<sup>26</sup> Mooney, *The Ghost Dance religion*, 854-860; Miller, *Ghost Dance*, 178-192.

<sup>27</sup> Mooney *The Ghost Dance religion*, 864-67; Elaine Eastman, ‘The Ghost Dance war and Wounded Knee massacre, 1890-91’, *Nebraska History* 26 (1945) 26-42 (an eyewitness account); Miller, *Ghost Dance*, 204-217.

army soldiers. A white flag of truce was immediately raised in the center of the Indian camp but orders were given by Colonel Forsyth, the now commanding officer, for the warriors to surrender all weapons. When the Lakota refused (Big Foot was ill in his tent with pneumonia), a search was made tent to tent by soldiers who tore up the tipis, upsetting the women and children. Yellow Bird, a medicine man, walked among the warriors blowing his eagle bone whistle, urging them to be courageous and to resist the aggression of the soldiers. A shot was fired by a young Indian, killing a soldier, and immediately the troops opened fire on the entire band, while the Hotchkiss guns, firing fifty rounds per minute, mowed down men, women and children as well as many of the army soldiers who were stationed opposite the guns. Lakota warriors returned fire, the soldiers retaliated with ferocious aggression, and the massacre of Wounded Knee began. When the outnumbered Lakota warriors fled to the nearby ravine trying to draw fire away from the women, soldiers pursued both relentlessly, shooting down unarmed women and children until over three hundred Lakota lay dead on the frozen earth. Women and children were found shot over two miles from the site as they were pursued and executed. Forty-one non-native soldiers also died, many killed by their own artillery under the direction of incompetent officers. On New Year's Day, 1891, a mass grave was dug at Wounded Knee and bodies were dragged to the pit, stripped for ghost shirts, and dropped in ('like so much cord wood') without native burial rites or notification of families. This grave marks one of the most tragic and sacred sites in Native American history.<sup>28</sup>

### **The Politics of Oppression**

The Lakota Ghost Dance, and the Ghost Dance more generally among other native peoples, was not necessarily a 'resistance' movement. It might be better understood as a form of communal affirmation through religious

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<sup>28</sup> Mooney, *The Ghost Dance religion*, 868-872, 884-886; Dussias, 'Ghost Dance and Holy Ghost', 795-799; Miller, *Ghost Dance*, 218-244; Col. Forsyth was charged by General Miles with incompetence but was later cleared of all charges while eighteen Congressional Medals of Honor were awarded. For more on the continuing effort of Lakota people to secure a U.S. government apology, see Mario Gonzalez and Elizabeth Cook-Lynn, *The politics of hallowed ground: Wounded Knee and the struggle for Indian sovereignty*, (Urbana 1998).

activity. However, all dancing became a form of resistance under the regime of Indian Agents required to repress such activity. As dancing was a fundamental social and religious activity, it played a crucial role in maintaining a strong sense of Lakota communal identity. Even after the slaughter at Wounded Knee, Lakota and other native peoples continued to dance, though increasingly pressured to abandon the practice.<sup>29</sup> In 1892, Henry Morgan as Commissioner of Indian Affairs affirmed that Indian Offenses should be even more rigorously punished and all forms of dancing terminated. Explicit fines or punishments were given by Morgan, including withholding of rations (from ten to thirty days), imprisonment (ten to thirty days for first offense) with medicine men imprisoned for up to six months for any form of activity (including healings).<sup>30</sup> In 1901, 1902, and 1904 similar letters from the Indian Commissioners required that all 'Indian dances and so-called feasts should be prohibited (...) [as they were] subterfuges to cover degrading acts and to disguise immoral purposes'. In April of 1921 Circular 1665 was issued by the OIA again listing all dances and 'so-called religious ceremonies' as Indian Offenses. This repression was not lifted until John Collier repealed the Indian Offenses persecution of native religions after his appointment to the OIA in 1934.<sup>31</sup>

On the native side of this concentrated attack on their religious values and practices, dancing was both a form of protest and a form of affirmation of what constituted authentic native religious identity. The harsh repressive measures against dancing, which was frequently stereotyped by non-natives as a form of 'war dance,' reflected an aggressive attitude coupled with indifference and ignorance. The fact that multiple agents of the expanding cultural imperium (military, missionary, and educational) colluded in this repression indicates not a unilateral set of shared cultural values or even a consistent political ideology as much as a shared ignorance based in cultural prejudices uninformed by alternative religious beliefs or practices. Native consent, as part of the original treaty obligations, was not sought and in fact, utterly ignored in the pursuit of transforming native peoples into U.S. citizens as imaged by Anglo, largely Protestant,

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<sup>29</sup> Clyde Ellis, 'There is no doubt...the dances should be curtailed: Indian dances and federal policy on the southern plains 1880-1930', *The Pacific Historical Review* 70 (2001) 543-569; 545-47.

<sup>30</sup> Irwin, 'Freedom, law, and prophecy', 296.

<sup>31</sup> Dussias, 'Ghost Dance and Holy Ghost', 800-805.

lawmakers.<sup>32</sup> Native leaders had no influence over policies that were detrimental to religious identity and thus, dancing became a means for affirming the importance of communal traditions and for maintaining connection to the spiritual powers of the world, powers usually denied by missionaries and government agents.

Further attacks on the native way of life (1923) were based on the allotment of individual parcels of land to Lakota families (starting in 1904 at Pine Ridge), holding of individual funds from allotments in wardship (assuming native persons as 'unquestionably incompetent'), degree of blood quanta of each family member (1920s, a policy favoring mix-bloods), health status, and mental competence judged largely on conformity or non-conformity to OIA policies.<sup>33</sup> Together, these policies created a climate of severe repression in which the deaths at Wounded Knee became only a marker of the successful enforcement of the U.S. government's Indian policies. Wounded Knee has never been recognized by the government (or U.S. Army) as an error or atrocity, even though there was some citizen protest over military intervention at Pine Ridge. While there was a strong disagreement between the military and the OIA, with the military using Wounded Knee as an example of the need for greater control of Indian populations by military (not OIA) commanders, the brutality of this event fundamentally undermined any future control of native peoples by the U.S. Army.<sup>34</sup>

Another complexity in this issue was the divided attitudes of the Lakota people toward the Ghost Dance and the fight at Wounded Knee. As noted, some Lakota converts strongly opposed the dance and not all Lakota embraced the practice, including many non-converts. While missionaries denounced the dance as a 'perverted messianic notion' some Lakota converts also condemned the dance as *messiya itonsi* (lying messiah) teachings, claiming the dance was a false practice.<sup>35</sup> Other Lakota, converts to Episcopalian or Catholic teachings, also avoided the dance. Starting in 1890 (and lasting into the 1970s), the Catholic Sioux Congress held annual

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<sup>32</sup> Edward Valandra (Lakota), 'U.S. citizenship: The American policy to extinguish the principle of Lakota political consent' *Wicazo Sa Review* 8 (1992) 24-29.

<sup>33</sup> Biolsi, 'The birth of the reservation', 35-38.

<sup>34</sup> Jeffrey Ostler, 'Conquest and the state: Why the United States employed massive military force to suppress the Lakota Ghost Dance', *The Pacific Historical Review* 65 (1996) 217-248.

<sup>35</sup> Todd Kerstetter, 'Spin doctors at Santee', 54.

four day gatherings with thousands of Lakota attending; these meetings were used to reinforce Catholic values and practices among the Lakota. They also included active preaching against 'old time' Lakota religion and non-Christian practices (such as the Sun Dance and Ghost Dance).<sup>36</sup> Thus there was no unilateral agreement among the Lakota toward the value or significance of the Ghost Dance. Some Lakota converts even expressed the view that the deaths at Wounded Knee were a necessary lesson to those who refused to convert and who wanted to pursue an older way of life.<sup>37</sup>

In the history of Native American religious movements, prophetic teachings have acted to stimulate a wide range of reactions to increasing U.S. government control. Primarily these movements have not emphasized armed resistance but a restatement of native religious identity that often borrowed religious ideas (but rarely practices) from the idioms of popular Christian theology. Inevitably, native spiritual leaders like Kicking Bear and Short Bull reinterpreted prophetic teachings in alignment with their own visionary experiences and the performative genres of their community.<sup>38</sup> The Ghost Dance among the Lakota was such a reaffirmation as the purpose of the dance was not the defeat of the U.S. Army. More appropriately, the dance was a creative reconnection with intrinsic religious values based in dancing, visions of the dead, community feasts, and narrative sharing of religiously constructed events. This reaffirmation took on a more apocalyptic tone due to the suffering, impoverishment, and denial of native values by federal and missionary agents. The enforced limitation of cultural self-expression allowed for few authentic occasions of religious affirmation. The Ghost Dance offered opportunity for a *Lakol wicob'an* (Lakota way) of acting consistent with other Lakota practices. This opportunity was embraced as a means for affirming Lakota identity and kinship relations through vision of relatives who had died in massive numbers due to federal control, brutality, and repression.

The view that formulates the dance as 'resistance' often takes the perspective of the imperial or dominating cultural majority; those who 'resist' do so by opposing or refusing to conform to dominant expectations, however unjust or prejudicial. But often, religiously motivated movements

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<sup>36</sup> Ross Enochs, *The jesuit mission*, 56-58.

<sup>37</sup> Julian Rice, "It was their own fault for being intractable", 75 ff.; Todd Kerstetter, 'Spin doctors at Santee', 58.

<sup>38</sup> For a complete overview of native prophecy and its many modes of accommodation and resistance, see Irwin, *Coming down from above*, 2008.

are based far more in ethnic and communal affirmations that seek to reconstruct intrinsic native perspectives. Such perspectives do not usually arise, as in Native American prophetic movements, in simple juxtaposition to conditions defined by a ruling culture, but instead arise out of a creative synthesis based in primary ethnic values often unrelated to the larger imperium. In the case of the Lakota Ghost Dance, followers of the dance sought to affirm native values rather than to oppose the agents of cultural repression. The tragic outcome of Wounded Knee reveals the incredible ignorance (and aggression) of an oppressor, whipped up by propaganda and inflated news reporting, in a context of divided policies among repressive agents vying for control the Indian peoples, the military, the missionary, or the Indian Office.

This internal conflict and repressive reaction of the military has little to do with the underlying motivation of the Lakota dancers. What was lacking, and is still lacking in many ways, was and is a more informed, sympathetic, and intelligent understanding of native ways of thinking and believing. The 'sacred Lakota way of thought' (*wakan Lakot wicoh'an*) concerning the dance was not based in, nor determined by agents of repression but developed through native inspired teachings aimed at the preservation of native values in the face of considerable misunderstanding, illusion, and self-serving policy making. To understand these movements as motivated by native concerns, it is necessary to take a perspective that does not prioritize the cultural imperium as the defining agent. Native religious movements are today (and always have been) creative, visionary alternatives based in native values that seek to affirm what native people value most, not simply in reaction to oppressors, but as an expression of integrity in the continued development of native ways of thought, religious belief, and ceremonial action.