



KOYOODE TUKADU:  
PYRAMID LAKE PAIUTE KIT



◆ WE ARE ALL PEOPLE OF THIS EARTH

By the late 1880s, many tribes sought a means of salvation to revitalize their traditional culture. The evolution of a new religion, the Ghost Dance, was a reaction to the natives being forced to submit to government authority and reservation life. The dance leader created a circle dance in which all dancers gracefully shuffled clockwise singing slow songs. The song lyrics expressed the desire to see those who had died. The prophets told the dancers that through the ghost dance their dead family, friends, and their way of life would return.

Wovoka, the son of a Paiute prophet Tavibo, is thought to have been born in 1858. He is better known in Nevada history as Jack Wilson. His father trained him in the ways of a medicine man or Shaman until he died when Wovoka was 14 years of age. The orphaned boy lived and worked on David Wilsons' land on the Walker River near Yerington. Jack became a fast friend and "blood brother" to the oldest Wilson son, Bill. Thus, Jack was welcomed at meals and family prayers. He became very interested with the Christian religion. He tried to use these Christian teachings to form a new religion that would offer hope to his Paiute people. Wovoka wanted to give his people a feeling of faith in themselves. He urged them to follow the ways of peace.

In early 1889, Wovoka, had a vision during an eclipse of the sun in which he saw the second coming of Christ and received a warning about the evils of the white man. Knowledge of the vision spread quickly through the Indian camps across the country. Word began to circulate among the people on the reservations that a great new Indian Messiah had come to liberate them, and investigative parties were sent out to discover the nature of these claims. On one of the excursions, it is said that the messiah appeared to an Arapaho hunting party, crowned with thorns. They believed him to be the incarnation of Jesus, returned to save the Indian nations from the scourge of white people.

Delegations were sent to visit Wovoka in western Nevada. They returned to their camps as disciples, preaching a new religion that promised renewal and revitalization of the Indian nations. Among those who met with Wovoka, Good Thunder, Short Bull, and Kicking Bear became prominent leaders of the new religion which was called the Ghost Dance by white people because of its precepts of resurrection and reunion with the dead. According to Wovoka, converts of the new religion were supposed to take part in the Ghost Dance to hasten the arrival of the new era as promised by the messiah.

The Federal Government was alarmed at the popularity of his Ghost Dance and forbid the new faith. As he grew older, Wovoca withdrew from both the whites and his Indian friends. He felt his mission failed and he became disillusioned. Although the Bureau of Indian Affairs banned the Ghost Dance along with all other spiritual rituals, the Lakotas adopted it and began composing sacred songs of hope.

# The Ghost Dance



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The Ghost Dance religion promised an apocalypse in the coming years during which time the earth would be destroyed, only to be recreated with the Native Americans as the inheritors of the new earth. According to the prophecy, the recent times of suffering for Indians had been brought about by their sins, but now they had withstood enough under the whites. With the earth destroyed, white people would be obliterated, buried under the new soil of the spring that would cover the land and restore the prairie. The buffalo and antelope would return, and deceased ancestors would rise to once again roam the earth, now free of violence, starvation, and disease. The natural world would be restored, and the land once again would be free and open to the native peoples, without the borders and boundaries of the white man. The new doctrine taught that salvation would be achieved when the Indians purged themselves of the evil ways learned from the white man, especially the drinking of alcohol. Believers were encouraged to engage in frequent ceremonial cleansing, meditation, prayer, chanting, and most importantly, dancing the Ghost Dance. Hearing rumors of the prophecy and fearing that it was a portent of renewed violence, white homesteaders panicked and the government responded.

The government agent at Standing Rock, James McLaughlin, described the Ghost Dance as an "absurd craze" -- "demoralizing, indecent, disgusting." Reservation agents described the Indians as "wild and crazy," and believed that their actions warranted military protection for white settlers. But while one of the primary goals of the Bureau of Indian Affairs was to convert the Indians to Christianity, they did not recognize that the fundamental principles of the Ghost Dance were indeed Christian in nature and had the effect of converting many to a belief in the one Christian God. In addition, Wovoka preached that, to survive, the Indians needed to turn to farming and to send their children to school to be educated. Ironically, while these efforts would appear to coincide with the goals of the Bureau, the Ghost Dance was outlawed by the agency. The Bureau feared the swelling numbers of Ghost Dancers and believed the ritual was a precursor to renewed Indian militancy and violent rebellion.

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