

Nineteenth Century Indigenous Prophets in the Northwest and the Elusive Space of Contact

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This paper is about the so-called "prophet dance movement" that emerged out of Indigenous communities in the Columbia River Plateau in the Nineteenth century. The paper argues that though the movement was distinctly rooted within oral Indigenous traditions, its gradual appropriation of Christian images into its practices situates it as a unique cultural encounter between Europeans and Indigenous peoples. Proposed is that the movement, as an unsystematic, unmediated manifestation of cultural exchange, defies easy classification and instead exists in a space of necessary ambiguity between cultures. Also examined is the way that the demographic and cultural effects of upheavals, specifically epidemic diseases, may be linked to the adopted popularity of the movement. Ultimately, the author suggests that the distinctive situation of the prophet dance movement could represent an alternative to the way that conventional historical narratives are constructed conceptualized, specifically in the context of British Columbian history.

The Prophet Dance Movement, a spontaneous spiritual movement that swept across Indigenous communities in British Columbia during the first half of the nineteenth century, has held fascination for numerous ethnographers and scholars since the turn of the twentieth century. Among the many varied records of the movement, some key elements remain consistent. While in a dead or dreaming state, someone visits the Land of the Dead; there, they receive a message and instructions from the Chief of the Dead; they then return to life and spread the Chief's instructions to others and organize large performances of elaborate dance ceremonies. Although rooted in distinctly Indigenous practices and ideas, these ceremonies gradually appropriated Christian imagery around the mid-nineteenth

century. Many interpreters of the Prophet Dance Movement, both early and contemporary, have fumbled to decipher and categorize the phenomenon into a coherent historical and cultural narrative. Yet the movement's very elusiveness and lack of coherent narrative embodies the ambiguities involved in the contact between Indigenous and European cultures that was taking place at this time period in British Columbia. It is therefore necessarily impossible to ascertain an absolute meaning from the movement because it exists as an articulation of the elusive, anarchic space of contact. Its rootedness within Indigenous traditions situates it firmly as a distinctly autonomous Indigenous strategy of conceptualizing the upheaval of their cultures, whilst its later appropriation of Christian elements reflects its existence as an undirected and spontaneous manifestation of cultural exchange.

The early twentieth century ethnographers who made records of these ceremonies tended to censure or demean their Indigenous sources to reinforce their own suppositions of Indigenous peoples' traditions and practices. For instance, in a criticism of one story told to him, Walter Cline in "The Sinkaetk or Southern Okanagan of Washington" writes that his source Suszen "is responsible for the infusion of Christian theology, but the tale as a whole is undoubtedly in traditional form."¹ Cline here is reflecting a historical paradigm of seeking out a specific ethnographic delineation of so-called "traditional," or pre-contact, Indigenous cultures. More broadly, this passage reveals the underlying struggle of reading through both the way information is contextualized and relayed *by* Cline in the text, and also the way information has been contextualized and relayed *to* him by

¹ Walter Cline, Rachel S. Commons, May Mandelbaum, Richard H. Post, and L.V. W. Walters, "The Sinkaetk or Southern Okanagan of Washington," *General Series in Anthropology, Contributions from the Laboratory of Anthropology* 2, no. 6 (1938):170.

his own sources. Indigenous oral sources then are not only mediated through the text they have been assigned into, but also have their own distance from what they are recollecting. The late eighteenth century and early nineteenth century saw dramatic changes to Indigenous worlds through two instances of epidemic outbreaks before extensive contact with Europeans had even occurred. Anthropologist Robert Boyd pinpoints that the first occurred sometime in the 1770s and estimates that at least thirty percent of the Northwest population died.² The second outbreak occurred from 1800 to 1801. These demographic upheavals no doubt had effects on the way former events and ways of life were subsequently interpreted by Indigenous peoples themselves. Therefore, from the sources available there will always remain ambiguities in assertions about the absolute nature of the dance movement.

However, some elements of the Prophet Dance Movement ceremonies can be traced back to definite roots within Indigenous traditions, having emerged from within a pre-existing framework of cultural understandings rather than as an absolute product of encounters with Europeans. Elizabeth Vibert compels this argument in one of the chapters of her book *Traders' Tales*, which focuses on the correlation between the demographic and cultural upheavals and the emergence of the Prophet Dance Movement. Vibert draws parallels between the prophet's journey to the Land of the Dead and subsequent return with moral instructions and the vision quest tradition of seeking out guidance from a guardian spirit. She writes, "[t]he child who achieved a spirit vision returned from the quest with a song, a dance, a name, and a medicine bundle of sacred tokens bestowed by the spirit

² Robert Boyd, "Smallpox in the Pacific Northwest: The First Epidemics," *BC Studies*, no. 101 (Spring, 1994): 29.

partner,” whilst prophets similarly “returned with songs, dances, and supernaturally inspired instructions” from the Land of the Dead.³

Another element to the prophecy narratives that can be traced to a distinctly Indigenous background is the ambiguous figure most commonly referred to as the Chief of the Dead. The Chief watches over the Land of the Dead, delivers messages of instruction to the prophets, and would one day lead the dead souls in the Land of the Dead back to earth with Coyote. Though the role he inhabits is consistent, his definite identity varies and seems to have eventually evolved into the Christian figure of God with the further addition of Christian elements into the prophecies by the mid-nineteenth century. James Teit, an ethnographer working among the Interior Salish First Nations during the early twentieth century, notes in the *Lillooet Indians*: “[e]ven at the present day, some of the old people of the Upper Lillooet have very vague and confused ideas of God. They confound the attributes and actions of God, the Chief of the Dead, and the Old Man [also called Old One] or Transformer of mythology.”⁴ His identity and role as Old One, the Transformer who created the world, seems to exist independent from his explicit role in the prophecies, as he is frequently mentioned in stories from Teit’s collection *Mythology of the Thompson Indians*. In one creation story, for instance, Old One addresses his two daughters, who will give birth to and populate the world with both evil and good people:

³ Elizabeth Vibert, “‘The Natives Were Strong to Live’: Plague, Prophecy and the Prelude to Encounter” in *Traders’ Tales: Narratives of Cultural Encounters in the Columbia Plateau 1807-1846* (Norman & London: University of Oklahoma Press, 1997): 77.

⁴ James Teit, *V. – The Lillooet Indians*, edited by Franz Boas (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1906): 278.

‘You will be sisters, and from you all people will spring. Your children will be male and female, and your descendants will cover the earth. The offspring of Evil will be most numerous at first, but at last the children of Good will outnumber them. Good will prevail, and Evil finally disappear. Then I will collect all people, both dead and alive. Earth and her sisters will assume their original forms, and all together will become changed and new.’ In this manner will come the end of the world, and this is why both bad and good people are found in the world at the present day.⁵

Though the story appears quite different from any role Old One plays in the prophecies, he is definitely associated here with both the creation and the destruction of the world. His place as a Transformer independent of the Prophet Dance Movement whilst also inhabiting an explicit and principle role in the prophecies further works to situate the movement in a pre-existing Indigenous framework. Along with Vibert’s connection of the prophecy narratives with vision quest narratives, this establishes that the Prophet Dance Movement is fundamentally an expression of Indigenous cultural ideas. It thus exists as a phenomenon *within* autonomous Indigenous societies – prompted perhaps by contact with outside forces, but not as a direct product of European interactions with Indigenous peoples.

As previously noted, central to the Prophet Dance Movement was an apparent sense of urgency and imminence for what Leslie Spier, the first early twentieth century ethnographer to compile accounts of the Prophet Dance Movement into a coherent “complex,” calls “an old belief in the impending

⁵ James Teit, *II. – Mythology of the Thompson Indians*, edited by Franz Boas (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1912): 324.

destruction and renewal of the world.”⁶ Spier fixates on this element of predicted apocalypse or upheaval as pre-existing in Indigenous cultures before encounters with Europeans, but is unable to situate the movement as an evolving, non-static entity in a context of a shared Indigenous and European history. Specifically, Spier, like his contemporary ethnographers, seeks to wholly distinguish the later addition of Christian elements into the movement from an earlier, supposedly more traditional incarnation of the ceremonies; about one later prophet narrative involving Christian imagery, he writes that “we must prefer to interpret this as a revival of interest in the cult with the introduction of new elements.”⁷ Consequently, interpretation of these elements of destruction and renewal are limited to one aspect or the other. For instance, James Teit in his descriptions of the ceremonies does not mention destruction, but instead writes that the dances were performed, under the instruction by the Chief of the Dead, in order “to hasten the return to earth of the souls of the departed, and the beginning of a golden age, when every one would lead a life of ease and happiness, and when the dead would be re-united with the living.”⁸ In contrast, Walter Cline records one prophet narrative from the Okanagan that emphasizes apocalyptic destruction, but that is also situated in a self-conscious relationship with Europeans:

The Creator-God Qölüncötn told the dreamer that after a certain period the world would ‘break up,’ and that the

⁶ Leslie Spier, *The Prophet Dance of the Northwest and its Derivatives: The Source of the Ghost Dance* (Menasha: George Banta Publishing Company, 1995): 5.

⁷ Leslie Spier, *The Prophet Dance of the Northwest and its Derivatives: The Source of the Ghost Dance*, 9.

⁸ James Teit, *The Shushwap*, edited by Frans Boaz (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1909): 604.

Indians would go to a new and better land in which the dead would join them. [Cline's source] called the God who appeared to the dreamer a 'white chief.' This chief declared that white men like himself would come into the region, take the best lands, from the Indians, exterminate the game, bring fatal diseases, and introduce railways, automobiles, and airplanes. The land would dry up and the Indians finally pass away.⁹

In the specific context of the nineteenth century popularity of the movement, the element of destruction and renewal to the dances can be understood as a kind of strategy in Indigenous peoples' struggle to conceptualize the dramatic changes that were occurring to their worlds, most traumatically through the spread of epidemic diseases. As mentioned earlier through the work of Robert Boyd, two smallpox epidemics had occurred in the 1770's and in 1800, before Europeans had even arrived in British Columbia. The after-effects of these epidemics are acknowledged frequently throughout early explorer, fur trade and ethnographic records as truly devastating to the Indigenous population of the Northwest.¹⁰ Vibert's reading of the effects within Columbian Plateau Indigenous cultural worlds is useful, in that she emphasizes that epidemics were not directly linked to the arrival of Europeans but instead were conceptualized within an inner spiritual upheaval of Indigenous societies. She writes: "To link the prophetic movements of a particular era to contemporary epidemic is not necessarily to cast them as reactions to the colonial incursion."¹¹ It is the continuous *situation* of upheaval, Vibert argues, that allowed the Prophet Dance Movement and its

⁹ Walter Cline, Rachel S. Commons, May Mandelbaum, Richard H. Post, and L.V. W. Walters, "The Sinkaietk or Southern Okanagon of Washington," 175.

¹⁰ Robert Boyd, "Smallpox in the Pacific Northwest: The First Epidemics," 26.

¹¹ Elizabeth Vibert, "'The Natives Were Strong to Live,'" 59.

urgent belief in both the end and renewal of the world to develop so strongly within Indigenous communities. The Prophet Dance Movement then can be seen as merely one strategy of conceptualizing the physical upheavals within pre-existing belief systems.

Works of even some contemporary scholars remain indicative of early twentieth century ethnographers' struggles in prescribing a definite narrative onto the movement. Larry Cebula in his book *Plateau Indians and the Quest for Spiritual Power* refers to the hybridized Christian and Indigenous manifestation of the Columbia Plateau Prophet Dance Movement as the "Colombian Religion."¹² Yet Cebula's use of the word "religion" seems to blatantly disregard some fundamental elements of the Prophet Dance Movement: it was not an organized, static or homogenous movement. Rather, it precisely defies the neat classification that Cebula, like Walter Cline and Leslie Spier before him, attempts. The fact that it did change from its oral Indigenous framework in the early 1830s to appropriate Christian elements into its beliefs and ceremonies is proof of its syncretic elusiveness.

However, Cebula does make the useful insight that fur traders themselves indirectly introduced Christian ideas to the Indigenous peoples through their everyday interactions with them during the fur trade. Leslie Spier associates this spread of Christian elements into the Prophet Dance Movement with a Catholic group of twenty-four Iroquois who settled in Montana sometime in the 1820's among the Flathead. He then traces the "amalgamation" of Christianity into the Prophet Dance Movement northward into British Columbia in the early 1830's.¹³

¹² Larry Cebula, *Plateau Indians and the Quest for Spiritual Power, 1700-1850* (Lincoln & London: University of Nebraska Press, 2003): 4.

¹³ Leslie Spier, *The Prophet Dance of the Northwest and its Derivatives*, 30-31.

This is perhaps reinforced by James Teit's ethnographic work. Describing the gradual adoption of various Christian elements by the Lillooet into prophet dances and ceremonies, Teit writes:

Eventually, about the year 1850, they began to use the term 'Father, Son, and Good Spirit' when they prayed at the dances. These terms were introduced, it is said, at the instigation of officials of the Hudson Bay Company.¹⁴

In contrast to later missionaries' interactions with Indigenous peoples, religion was not central to the fur traders' primarily economic and material interactions with Indigenous peoples, making the exchange of religious ideas much more spontaneous and fluid, rather than self-conscious and deliberate. The fur traders' religious beliefs were not homogenous either; there were French Canadian Catholic traders, Iroquois Catholic traders, British Anglican traders, to name a few. The variety of different forms of Christianity may even have manifested themselves differently in the way that fur traders practiced them, some traders being stricter in their practice than others. Ultimately, a plurality of religious influences was presented and enforced upon Indigenous people, which may have allowed a degree of fluidity to the Indigenous appropriation of Christian ideas into their own established belief-systems.

The appropriation of Christian elements into the Prophet Dance Movement should be interpreted less as a direct consequence of the imposition of European cultural ideas upon Indigenous groups, and more as a product of the syncretic nature of Indigenous cultures themselves. In her book *The Heavens are Changing: Nineteenth-Century Protestant Missions and*

¹⁴ James Teit, *V.* – *The Lillooet Indians*, 285.

Tsimshian Christianity, Susan Neylan notes about the Witsuwit'en prophet Bini:

It is significant that Native informants always described Bini in such a way as to connect him closely to Christianity or some kind of syncretic melding of Native and Christian beliefs; prophets, so their reasoning went, display the indigenous openness to kinds of spiritual transformation. Such a viewpoint supports the findings of this study that Native groups have never viewed themselves as passive recipients of Christianity. It also confirms the evidence amassed here that Native peoples rarely accepted Christianity as an 'all or nothing' proposition, at the individual level or for group and communal transformations.¹⁵

Within Indigenous narratives of first encounters between Europeans and Indigenous peoples too, Europeans often are identified and conceptualized within Indigenous cultural frameworks. For instance, James Teit records a Nlak:apamux'o'ë woman's story of the Indigenous encounter with Simon Fraser's 1808 expedition down the Fraser River:

very many people thought they were beings spoken of in tales of the mythological period, who had taken a notion to travel again over the earth; and they often wondered what object they had in view, and what results would follow. They believed their appearance foreboded some great change or events of prime importance to the Indians, but in what way they did not know.¹⁶

¹⁵ Susan Neylan, "Prophets, Revivalists, Evangelists," in *The Heavens are Changing: Nineteenth-Century Protestant Missions and Tsimshian Christianity* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2003): 186.

¹⁶ James Teit, *II. – Mythology of the Thompson Indians*, 415.

Similarly, Teit reports that “[w]hen the [Shushwap] Indians saw the first priests, they believed them to be Coyote and his assistants, presaging this important event” of the renewal of the world.¹⁷ Like the epidemics were interpreted as manifestations of imminent upheavals, these stories show Indigenous people appropriated contact with Europeans within pre-existing Indigenous beliefs.

Both twentieth century ethnographers and later contemporary scholars have puzzled over the Prophet Dance Movement, attempting to assert coherent narratives onto the spiritual movement. Ultimately, however, its essence remains necessarily elusive. John Lutz conceives analyzing contact encounters as “looking at how people behaved ‘rationally’ within the context of their own cultural definitions.”¹⁸ This idea of a cultural encounter is useful, though it could be conceived that in the nineteenth century the very “cultural definitions” of British Columbian Indigenous peoples were shifting. The Prophet Dance Movement’s amorphous character then can be seen within the frame of a contact encounter whilst still being firmly rooted as an autonomous expression of Indigenous cultural conceptualization of change. The Prophet Dance Movement ultimately represents an intriguing prospect for the history of British Columbia as an experience of changing Indigenous worlds within an unmediated, undirected space of contact in the midst of epidemic diseases and the fur trade, which subsequently refuses to be prescribed into a clear narrative.

¹⁷ James Teit, *The Shushwap*, 612.

¹⁸ John Lutz, “First Contact as Spiritual Performance: Encounters on the North American West Coast” in *Myth and Memory* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2007): 33.

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