

A DRESS MADE OF STARS

A description of a Ghost Dance observed on White Clay Creek at Pine Ridge Reservation, Dakota Territory, October, 1890.

Mrs Z.A. Parker

We drove to this spot about 10.30 o'clock on a delightful October day.

We came upon tents scattered here and there in low, sheltered places, long before reaching the dance ground. Presently we saw over three hundred tents placed in a circle, with a large pine tree in the center, which was covered with strips of cloth of various colours, eagle feathers, stuffed birds, claws, and horns - all offerings to the Great Spirit.

The ceremonies had just begun. In the center, around the tree, were gathered their medicine-men; also those who had been so fortunate as to have had visions, and in them had seen and talked with friends who had died.

A company of fifteen had started a chant and were marching abreast, others coming in behind as they marched. After marching around the circle of tents they turned to the center, where many had gathered and were seated on the ground.

I think they wore the ghost shirt or ghost dress for the first time that day. I noticed that these were all new and were worn by about seventy men and forty women.

The wife of a man called Return-From-Scout had seen in a vision that her friends all wore a similar robe, and on reviving from her trance she called the women together, and they made a great number of the sacred garments.

They were of white cotton cloth. The women's dress was cut like their ordinary dress, a loose robe with wide, flowing sleeves, painted blue in the neck, in the shape of a three-cornered handkerchief, with moon, stars, birds, etc. painted on the waists, interspersed with real feathers,

which fell to within three inches of the ground, the fringe at the bottom.

In the hair, near the crown, a feather was tied. I noticed an absence of any manner of head ornaments, and, as I knew their vanity and fondness for them, wondered why it was. Upon making inquiries I found they discarded everything they could which was made by white men.

The ghost shirt for the men was made of the same material - shirts and leggings painted in red.

Some of the leggings were painted in stripes running up and down, others running around. The shirt was painted blue around the neck, and the whole garment was fantastically sprinkled with figures of birds, bows and arrows, sun, moon, and stars, and everything they saw in nature.

Down the outside of the sleeve were rows of feathers tied at the quill ends, and left to fly in the breeze, and also a row around the neck and up and down the outside of the leggings.

I noticed that a number had stuffed birds, squirrel heads, etc., tied in their long hair. The faces of all were painted red with a black half-moon on the forehead or on one cheek.



Buckskin
Pawnee
women's
Ghost Dance
dress. Late
C19th

As the crowd gathered about the tree the high priest, or master of ceremonies, began his address, giving them directions as to the chant and other matters. After he had spoken for about fifteen minutes they arose and formed in a circle.

As nearly as I could count, there were between three and four

*My children, when at first I liked the Whites,
My children, when at first I liked the Whites,
I gave them fruits, I gave them fruits.*

*Father, have pity on me, Father, have pity on me;
I am crying for thirst, I am crying for thirst;
All is gone - I have nothing to eat,
All is gone - I have nothing to eat.*



Arapaho Ghost Dance Song

Buckskin Southern Arapaho woman's Ghost Dance dress, Late C19th



hundred persons. One stood directly behind another, each with his hands on his neighbour's shoulders. After walking about a few times, chanting, "Father, I come," they stopped marching, but remained in the circle, and set up the most fearful, heart-piercing wails I ever

heard - crying, moaning, groaning, and shrieking out their grief, and naming over their departed friends and relatives, at the same time taking up handfuls of dust at their feet,

washing their hands in it, and throwing it over their heads.

Finally, they raised their eyes to heaven, their hands clasped high above their heads, and stood straight and perfectly still, invoking the power of the Great Spirit to allow them to see and talk with their people who had died.

This ceremony lasted about fifteen minutes, when they all sat down where they were and listened to another address, which I did not understand, but which I afterwards learned were words of encouragement and assurance of the coming messiah.

When they arose again, they enlarged the circle by facing toward the center, taking hold of hands, and moving around in the manner of school children in their play.

And now the most intense excitement began. They would go as fast as they could, their hands moving from side to side, their bodies swaying, their arms, with hands gripped tightly in their neighbors', swinging back and forth with all their might.

If one, more weak and frail, came near falling, he would be jerked up and into position until tired nature gave way. The ground had been worked and worn by many feet, until the fine, flour-like dust lay light and loose to the depth of two or three inches. The wind, which had increased, would sometimes take it up, enveloping the dancers and hiding them from view.

In the ring were men, women, and children; the strong and the robust, the weak consumptive, and those near to death's door. They believed those who were sick would be cured by joining in the dance and losing consciousness.

From the beginning they chanted, to a monotonous tune, the words:

*'Father, I come; Mother, I come;
Brother, I come;
Father, give us back our arrows.'*

All of which they would repeat over and over again until first one and then another would break from the ring and stagger away and fall down.

Right: small hand drum painted with stars, a popular Ghost Dance decoration Late C19th



One woman fell a few feet from me. She came toward us, her hair flying over her face, which was purple, looking as if the blood would burst through; her hands and arms moving wildly; every breath a pant and a groan; and she fell on her back, and went down like a log. I stepped up to her as she lay there motionless, but with every muscle twitching and quivering. She seemed to be perfectly unconscious.

Some of the men and a few of the women would run, stepping high and pawing the air in a frightful manner. Some told me afterwards that they had a sensation as if the ground were rising toward them and would strike them in the face. Others would drop where they stood.

One woman fell directly into the ring, and her husband stepped out and stood over her to prevent them from trampling upon her. No one ever disturbed those who fell or took any notice of them except to keep the crowd away.

They kept up dancing until fully 100 persons were lying unconscious. Then they stopped and seated themselves in a circle, and as each recovered from his trance he was brought to the center of the ring to relate his experience.

Each told his story to the medicine-man and he shouted it

to the crowd. Not one in ten claimed that he saw anything.

I asked one Indian - a tall, strong fellow, straight as an arrow - what his experience was. He said he saw an eagle coming toward him. It flew round and round, drawing nearer and nearer until he put out

his hand to take it, when it was gone.

I asked him what he thought of it. "Big lie," he replied. I found by talking to them that not one in twenty believed it. After resting for a time they would go through the same performance, perhaps three times a day. They practiced fasting, and every morning those who joined in the dance were obliged to immerse themselves in the creek.

Taken from the 14th Annual Report of the Bureau of American Ethnology (1894)



Below: two Lakota men's cotton cloth Ghost Dance shirts
Late C19th



We circle around,
We circle around,
The boundaries of the Earth
Wearing our long wing feathers
As we fly

Arapaho Ghost Dance Song

That wind, that wind
Shakes my tipi, shakes my tipi,
And sings a song for me,
And sings a song for me

Kiowa Ghost Dance Song