

A NEW RELIGIOUS MOVEMENT IN NORTH-CENTRAL CALIFORNIA

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THE Indians of the several rancherías around Clear lake (a hundred miles north of San Francisco), are now in the throes of a new religious movement, which bids fair to spread soon to the rest of the Pomo culture area. This is not the first time that a new religion has appeared among Indians. We only have to think of the Peyote cult of the Southwest, the Ghost Dance of the '70s and '90s in California, the Shaker religion of Oregon, and others. In fact, new religions seem to appear as frequently among modern Indians as they do among modern whites. Whether this has always been so or is a result of the upsetting conditions of modern civilization, is a debatable question. Very little is known positively about the beginnings of most of the modern Indian religions. Since it has been our opportunity to witness the beginning of the present movement, the principal personages of which we have known for several years, it seems worth while to make a record of it.

It is necessary first of all to have in mind the religious-cultural background of this area of California. It is a sub-area of what may perhaps be called the "Dance for the Dead of the Year-Initiation of Boys into the Kuksu Secret Society" complex. This complex forms a wide band, which cuts across the state from west to east, regardless of tribal affinities. It is a highly ritualized system, with all mystical and religious emotions canalized into prescribed channels, numerous traditional taboos. As against this complex one may set up the religious background of the north of the state (with the exception of the northwest Hupa-Yurok-Karok nucleus): no ceremonies, no ritualizations of any kind, no secret societies, very few taboos; but the individual search for "spiritual power" carried to an extreme, merging by insensible degrees into shamanism (among the Pit River people, at least one man in twenty is a medicine-man). The shamanism of the north

is true shamanism: every medicine-man has his own medicine, his own private formula, and holds his degree from no one but his own revelation. The shamanism of the area which now occupies us, was a dried, museum form of the latter: the "madu," or true shaman, was not very popular, not as popular as the "outfit-doctor" with his kit of paraphernalia, his many formulas in jargon, his prescribed mode of performing.¹

This is the region where there suddenly appear new doctors. They are inspired. They have nothing to do with the old methods. Their method is entirely new, and strange for Indians (although the basis of the *mise-en-scène* is unmistakably Indian, just as the most modern of houses, if it belongs to an Indian, is always unmistakably Indian in some undefinable way): they smoke innumerable packages of Chesterfield cigarettes (no other brand will do) in order to acquire power; then they walk around the patient with slow steps, singing a song alone with eyes half-shut, making passes with their hands in the air, tying a handkerchief over the patient's eyes, making passes over his head, blowing on his head,—everything with a certain air of trance and mystery. All this is in sharp contrast to the raucous appeals of the Pit River medicine-man to his "power" out there in the brush to come and help him, to the taking up by all the attendants of the song the doctor is singing, to the violent dialogues between the doctor and his power when he has finally succeeded in dragging him out of the woods onto the scene. Our new doctors do not act that way at all, their demeanor is one of inspired *receuillement*.

But they are not merely doctors healing the sick. They hold a new dispensation, they preach a new morale, they are reformers. The new tenets are: no drinking, no gambling, no swearing, no lying to other Indians, no stealing from other Indians, no quarreling with other Indians. The rule against gambling, however, does not apply to the time-honored Indian guessing-game, but to poker, dice, and the like. Non-stealing is probably meant to put a stop to the old-time way of considering

¹ L. S. Freeland, Pomo Doctors and Poisoners. Univ. Calif. Publ. Am. Arch. Ethn., 20: 57-73, 1923.

your relatives' property as your own. Quarreling is of course one of the worst curses of Indian life, but no amount of religious fervor will ever stop it, any more than lying. But it is on the drinking proposition that the new doctors are most fanatical, and there is no question but that drinking has absolutely stopped in all the *rancherías* affected.

Now, who are the *dramatis personae*? The first one to be possessed of the new spirit was Maggie Johnson, herself a Western Miwok from the Middletown *ranchería*, but married to Henry Johnson, a Southeastern Pomo from the Sulphur Bank *ranchería*. She got her revelations about two years ago, but did not come out in the open with them until last year, when she cured a Thomas from the Sulphur Bank *ranchería*, and also a woman from the same place. These two now started to smoke Chesterfield cigarettes like her, and got power, and began to cure other people around. The next to be cured and converted (for it seems that they all are on the point of death, from which they recover into a new and pure life) seems to have been Henry Knight from the Middletown *ranchería*. He also became a doctor. Then came the turn of George Patch, an old man from Sulphur Bank. Clifford Salvador (from Sulphur Bank) told us how the old man was sick, and the new doctors gathered in his house and started to smoke their Chesterfield cigarettes (they smoke as many as twenty in one hour): "You ought to have been there. You ought to have seen the power. You couldn't help feeling it. It was like electricity through the house. Pretty soon he got well. He began to feel the power. The power was all going into him. The doctors were smoking, but they were not getting any power themselves. It was all getting into George Patch. Then he wanted to be a doctor himself. We told him, 'You had better not. You are too old. You can't sit up all night and smoke. You need to sleep. You can't do that any more.' But he tried it anyhow, and he doesn't seem to mind it at all." This very Clifford Salvador is now in a good way to become a doctor himself. We saw him being "treated" at the meeting held at Sulphur Bank the other day. All the Indians at Middletown are converted, even old Salvador Chapo; but his daughter and her Mexican husband were noticeably

away. All the Indians of Lower Lake ranchería and Sulphur Bank ranchería are converted. Upper Lake and Lakeport (on the western shore of Clear lake) are half converted.

Henry Johnson, the husband of Maggie, has always been an atypical Indian. He could not stand the communal life of the ranchería. He found a piece of government land, and homesteaded it. It was miserable soil, but he worked on it hard. He was proud of his isolation. The other Indians did not like him and called him "stuck-up" and said he bootlicked the whites. Johnson paid them back by saying that they were all thieves and drunkards at the ranchería. He boasted to us (that was some four years ago) that the whites all liked him and called him "a good Indian." "I am respectable. I am not a low-down Indian like those people at the ranchería. The white people in town give me their work." Then he would rant against drinking, and laid all the troubles of the Indian race to this evil. Henry Johnson has not become a doctor. But he was there at the Sulphur Bank celebration with the others. He did not sit on the bench with the other doctors. He sat on a chair a little apart, but he made his long-winded speech too. For one of the characteristics of the new dispensation is the making of long speeches of a moral nature. The remark of Henry Knight to me is tell-taling: "Now what do they call that house? They call it a sweat-house, or a dance-house, don't they? They never had doctoring in there before. It was only for the dancing like you have just seen. Well, now we are using it for doctoring and for praying, just like the whites have their churches. And some day it's going to be called a church too! That's going to be the Indian church, yessir!"

Is the whole new movement, then, nothing but an aping of the whites, a rebellion against the contempt of race discrimination, a desire to be "as good as the whites"? Partly, but not entirely. It is like all "slaves' religions," an expression of inferiority complex through the building of a rigid moral code that makes one feel superior to the others. Insofar, it is a universal expression of a certain social-economic situation. But it is thoroughly Indian, and Californian at that, insofar as it taps the powerful reservoir of the mystical sense so strong in Indian nature,

the resort to an individual revelation, and individual search for "mana." As a matter of fact, the whole movement is traceable to a Pit River medicine-man of the name of Albert Thomas (although he is back in his home on the Pit River, and probably blissfully unaware of the new business). This Thomas has been living with the Pomo for the last few years for some reason or other (being a doctor at home he may have had to take a little vacation for his health). While he was living with the Pomo, especially around Ukiah, he practiced his medicine à la Pit River. The Pomo had never seen that and were quite impressed. It is not unlikely that he mixed in a lot of legerdemain with his real medicine. We have heard plenty of tales about his finding lost objects, and marvelous feats that have nothing to do with shamanism as we have seen it practiced in the north. It is not unlikely that he could not resist the temptation. But that he was possessed of the real feeling of shamanism there is no doubt. One remark of his shows it: "Everybody can get power! Everybody has got power if he knows how to use it!" All the new doctors speak of him with great admiration, almost as if he were the founder of their order. But they sigh and add: "But he drank too much! That's how he lost his power. A doctor can't drink and keep his power!" There is no doubt from the tales one hears that he was a jolly character. They say he used his power on several occasions to locate the caches of bootleggers. So he certainly is not responsible for the new moral code.

An important thing to be noted in connection with this new religious movement is the absence of any animosity towards it on the part of other doctors of the old-time persuasion. Also it is to be noted that the new religion does not conflict with the old-time religion. The old-time religion in this area is of course not the old Kuksu, but what is called nowadays "maru," and is a survival of the Ghost-Dance movement which supplanted the old ceremonial fifty years ago. For our purposes we may consider this as thoroughly old-time Indian in spirit, except perhaps for the introduction of a certain amount of talk about "the father of us all," and going "above, if you are good," and going "below, if you are bad." But except for those evident bits of

Catholic influence from the days of the missions, everything else is thoroughly Indian. While Indian dances have almost completely disappeared in most other regions of California, they have persisted in a very curious manner in this little backwater of civilization, in spite of its nearness to San Francisco. While in other regions they put up an occasional old-time dance at which a few of the old ceremonial dances are performed half-heartedly by middle-aged men while the younger boys and girls stay outside and organize a jazz of their own; here the whole Indian community joins in several times during the year to perform these dances. The young men and boys are present. They all dance with great spirit. They danced from sunset to sunset the other day. The dances occur at intervals of about an hour, and one catches naps in between as well as one may. Some of the costumes were quite new. Everything pointed to the persistence of the old-time Indian spirit in full strength, even among the younger generation. The doctoring in the new style occurred during two intermissions. The same people participated in both. There was evidently not the least feeling that there was any incompatibility or even rivalry between the two.

How far the new dispensation will travel to the east, that is, over the mountains of the Coast Range, is doubtful. There were some visiting Wintun present. They were very contemptuous of the new doctoring business. But it is likely to reach the ocean in the other direction, where there is a more unbroken contact between rancherías.

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