

The Ghost Dance

a Native American Ceremony facilitated by John-Luke Edwards at the third UK Shamanic Conference September 2009

I felt pulled to do this ceremony, although I had no real idea what it was about, I just knew I must do it. Even after reading the blurb describing it in the conference brochure, I still had no idea what it meant in real terms. We were asked to wear white for the ceremony and I had brought along a white shirt, and pulled on a pair of red trousers to go with it that morning, as I did not own any white trousers or skirts. Little did I realise the significance those colours were to have.

Weeks before the conference, I felt the pulsating of power, which I perceived as distant drums calling to me. I was afraid. I was also full of grief. The four days prior to the conference I had flu and as a consequence, no appetite, so hardly ate. I felt very sad for no discernable reason, and read a book whilst ill, about four generations of women (1) which resonated deeply within me, and helped me cry bucketfuls of tears. There were still more to come however.

By the Friday of this ceremony, the tears had returned, and they trickled in an almost constant stream out of my eyes and down my cheeks. I could not stop them, and soon decided to surrender to them, and whatever was causing them,

trusting I would know soon enough. All through John-Luke's introduction to the ceremony and his explanation of what the Ghost Dance is, they kept on coming.

He told a story of a shaman named Wovoka (also known as Jack Wilson), a Paiute Indian, who received a vision during a total eclipse of the sun in January 1889. This revealed a dance that the Indians could do which would reunite them with friends and relatives in the spirit world. But more than this, he was shown all the dead Indians from all different tribes, now one, living happily together with each other and the buffalo. (2) Wovoka said:

You have seen it...the new Land I'm bringing. The earth will roll up like a blanket with all that bad white man's stuff, the fences and the railroads and mines and telegraph poles; and underneath will be our old-young Indian earth, with all our relatives come to life again. (3)

The dance spread rapidly throughout the Indian world, and desperate Indians began dancing and singing the songs, which would cause the world to open up and swallow all those who had done them such harm. To understand what had driven them to the hope that the white settlers would disappear, it is necessary to be aware of the past centuries of dispossession of lands, beliefs, languages and the genocide of their people.

This was a process which had started in 1519, when Cortez had landed in Mexico, and had developed through to the piecemeal removal of Indians from their lands

in the late 1700s by Jefferson after the Louisiana Purchase, and been consolidated by Jackson, who became American President in 1829. (4) He pushed through a series of measures which enshrined the removal process in Law. What it is worth remembering is that no land treaties made with Indians were honoured for any length of time, and they were often shifted away from their ancestral lands into reservations. As Heinmot Tooyalaket (also known as Chief Joseph) of the Nez Perce tribe said after the latest betrayal of General Miles:

It makes my heart sick when I remember all the good words and broken promises...You might as well expect the rivers to run backward as that any man who was born a free man should be contented when penned up and denied liberty to go where he pleases. (5)

As the Ghost Dance spread, the white agent at Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota thought the dance was a signal for a general Indian uprising. He called in the army to suppress the dancers, and although Chief Spotted Elk's band surrendered to them, there was a lust for revenge for Custer's death (6), and the army opened fire on the Indians, killing over 250 of them. This became known as the massacre at Wounded Knee. Dick Fool Bull was a child of 6 or 7 at the time, and he remembers:

This is a true story; I wish it weren't.... We were stopped by soldiers: Then a big noise – like the tearing of a blanket, the biggest blanket in the world. Old Unc

started crying. Ma started to keen. Everyone was crying. (The next day they passed near a stream called Chankpe-opi Wakpala, or Wounded Knee). The soldiers were stacking bodies like firewood. Old Unc said, you children might as well see it; look and remember. So we went on toward Pine Ridge, but I had seen. I had seen a dead mother with a dead baby sucking at her breast. The little baby had on a tiny beaded cap with the design of the American flag. (7)

I did not know the details I have given above until I had left the conference and did some reading, but as John-Luke continued to speak something was touching me deep down and the tears kept on coming. He spoke about the snow the people danced in, which was signified by the markings on the floor traced in white powder, and how the people would fast for four days before dancing. A different animal was at each direction, and we had red paint applied around our eyes to signify blood. I felt the despair of the people as if I was there with them, it seemed like this knowing came from my Spirit; it ran through me like crashing waves in a storm, unrelenting, on and on and on.

John-Luke talked of his friend who had been tied to a chair ('now' history not a 120 years ago) and left roasting in front of a fire for 8 hours because he had spoken words in his own language. Other 'memories' passed through my mind; those of the Australian aboriginals, the Kalahari bushmen, all native peoples everywhere had experienced what John-Luke spoke about, and I sobbed in my despair of what had been done, and what is being done still.

We began the dance. We shuffled side-by-side looking at the floor, not at each other, as befits such a ceremony. We chanted words now lost in my conscious memory, following John-Luke's lead. As we shuffled and chanted and shuffled, I began to feel very peculiar. My body was full of dark circles, moving up and down, up and down through me. My whole body began to shake as I shuffled, first gently then with a stronger and stronger vibration. I would have fallen but was caught from behind, by what seemed at the time to be a bear. I fell forward onto a soft shoulder.

By this time my whole body was shaking with violent vibrations. I felt like I had moved over to one side of my body, and as this happened, my mouth opened and a groan came out of it. And then the most peculiar, heart-wrenching noises came through me, up from the depths of my being and out of my mouth. A keening wail, a cry of grief, so deep, so heartfelt; no words I can find here can truly do justice to that sound. On it went, pausing momentarily so I could take a breath, and then on again, out it came, maybe one voice, maybe many, joining in the agony of despair. How long it continued for I don't know; perhaps 20 minutes, perhaps longer.

And then it was over. I moved back into my body and the dance continued. But now it was clear to me that I had a companion with me, a strong red chieftain shuffled beside me. I could see him in my mind's eye and hear his thoughts echo in my head. He said many things but now the only one in my memory is: *that it has come to this, white people doing our people's dance in a hall.* The dance

went on. Others stopped, and spoke words which came from the people here before us, the ancestors; words of witness to the murder of their friends and family. Again only one comes back to me now, a mother watching her son tied to the stake being killed before her (and our) eyes. There was no time in this dance; there was only the now. Other voices came, calling for peace and acceptance. The dance went on and we passed a river of blood (a long red cloth) through our hands held high, as high up as possible.

Towards the end, John-Luke spoke quietly to each of us, one by one. He said to me,

“Look them in the eyes. Don’t let them look away.”

I looked at every face I could, into each pair of eyes. I didn’t let them look away. And I still won’t. Let them see how it is. Let them see the truth, shining from my eyes to theirs. Let them see, uncensored, what has been done. Let them feel it as I have felt it.

And so the ceremony came to an end with a dance of joy, of celebration, of shouting and drumming and movement. I am affected by this ceremony still. It has changed me. Perhaps for the first time, I have really stood in another’s moccasins and seen through their eyes. It was a total honour to participate in this dance and from it the winds of change blow around me, and I open my arms to receive what they bring.

Notes

1. Lively, P. Consequences (2007)

2. Erdoas, R. & American Indian Myths and Legends (1997)
 Ortiz, A.

3. As Above p.481-484

4. Prucha, F.P. The Great Father (1986) p.65

5. Hunt, N.B. Native American Tribes (1997) p.48-9

6. Erdoas & Ortiz American Indian Myths & Legends (1997)

7. As Above p.481-484

Bibliography

1. Lively, P. *Consequences* Penguin 1997

2. Erdoas, R. & *American Indian Myths and Legends* Pimlico (1997)
 Ortiz, A.

3. Prucha, F.P. *The Great Father* Uni. of Nebraska (1986)

4. Hunt, N.B. *Native American Tribes* Regency House (1997)

5. Bolt, C. *American Indian Policy & Reform* Allen & Unwin (1987)