The Origin and Development of the Redbird Smith Movement - Part IV

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CHAPTER IV

ANALYSIS OF THE REDBIRD SMITH MOVEMENT AND
COMPARISON WITH THE GHOST DANCE

The Redbird Smith movement was mainly a reaction to white contact and to forced assimilation. There were two main problems in the general field of white contact against which the movement was reacting. One was the social disorganization of the time. This was brought about by the interference of the railroads, the "intruders" settled on Cherokee land, the "boon towns" in the Cherokee Nation, whiskey peddlers, U. S. marshals, and the unfamiliar procedure of the federal courts. The social disorganization of the time was manifested in the wave of outlawry among the full-bloods and the conjuration practices which had increased since the initial breakdown of older forms of controls and institutions.

The second problem with which the movement was principally concerned was the allotment and the break-up of the tribal government.

Although the main informants never couch the Redbird Smith movement in these terms, but only in terms of salvation for the Cherokees, collectively and individually, the testimony of other informants and the subsequent acts of the Ketowah Society and Redbird Smith show the movement to be as much concerned with the second problem as with the first.
The Redbird Smith movement tried to ward off the allotment and the dissolution of the tribal government and, after Oklahoma statehood, tried to establish some kind of communal enterprise. These two problems with which the movement was concerned are not sharply defined in the Cherokee mind and are intertwined with one another.

The Redbird Smith movement can be divided into four major periods. The first period was from about 1896 to 1902. During this period, Redbird Smith was appointed to "get back what the Katoowahs had lost," and the wampums were obtained and reinterpreted.

On a different level, the people of the southeastern section of the Illinois District started a revival of Indian dances. These two series of events led to the participation of the Katoowah Society in the Four Mothers Society. During this time, a culture pattern was being established at the rejuvenated Sulphur Springs Fire, a modified version of the Creek square ground.

The second period, from 1902 to 1907, is characterized by the withdrawal of the Katoowah Society from the Four Mothers and the starting of the Cherokee Fires all over the Cherokee Nation. Stomp dances were revived in nearly all the full-blood areas.

During this period, the Katoowah Council was making innovations and modifying the cultural pattern established during the previous period at Sulphur Springs Fire. This finally ended
in a complete break-away from the leadership of this Fire. The period was also characterized by passive resistance on the part of the full-bloods to enrolling for the allotment.

The third period, 1907 to 1914, is a comparatively quiet period with little action by the Katoowah Society, possibly because of the disastrous blow of the admission of Oklahoma to statehood.

From 1914 to 1922, was another period of action and resistance to forced assimilation. Redbird Smith tried to get a reservation established, and this program was continued by C. P. Cornelius, only to end in failure in the early '20's. During this period, an almost complete reorganization of the Katoowah Society was undertaken, under the tutelage of C. P. Cornelius. The Fire became the center of community life. The Fire-chief took over the function of the old District captain and the Fire became the political unit. The Fire-chief also took over supervision of community labor from the little captain. The reorganization drew together the different facets of the community life.

During this time, the Society became more sacred. Unanimous agreement was made compulsory. And the medicine board ratified or rejected all proposals by the use of divination.

In nearly all of the full-blood areas, at the time of the movement, the Katoowah Society was strong. However, in one area of heavy full-blood concentration, as can be seen by the position of the stamp grounds in Figure 1, the membership of
the Katoowah Society was small. This area is the Flint District of the Cherokee Nation, and is the present area south of Stilwell, Oklahoma. Here approximately twenty-five hundred full-bloods remained loyal to the Baptist church during this period. In many respects this is a very conservative area. Around the turn of the century, when the younger generation among the full-bloods in other areas had forgotten their clans, the clans were still remembered here. Informants in this area, who grew up about this time, generally know their clans. There may be a historical explanation for the fact that this group did not turn toward the Katoowah Society. Most of the Cherokees in this area are descendants of the full-bloods from the Valley towns of North Carolina. They came into this area of the Cherokee Nation in detachments led by Rev. Evan Jones and Rev. Jesse Busbyhead. According to informants, the dialect they speak is the closest Oklahoma Cherokee dialect to that spoken among the Cherokees in Graham County, North Carolina. These Valley towns were the least disorganized of any in the Cherokee Nation. And Evan Jones built his mission in this area in 1821. He seems to have allowed his Cherokee converts a great deal of leeway in accepting the Christian doctrine, and he allowed them to integrate the Baptist religion into their life.

The Baptists were the sect which worked most among the full-bloods, and the Baptist religion was being offered to the Cherokees of the Valley towns before it spread to the full-bloods of other areas. After the Removal, Evan Jones settled
in the Coalinga Black District and worked among these full-bloods, becoming a potent factor in their life.

The Baptist church was probably more fully integrated into the life of the full-bloods here than in any other area. Because of this fact, and possibly because social disorganization was not so prevalent here, the Redbird Smith movement did not have the appeal here that it had in other areas.

The Redbird Smith movement may be compared with another great nativistic movement of approximately this same time—namely, the Ghost Dance.

The Ghost Dance was the result of a vision by Wovoka, or Jack Wilson, a Paiute Indian of Nevada, around 1890. During an eclipse of the sun, in 1889, he fell to the ground unconscious. He was transported to Heaven. There he saw all the dead living happily and engaging in old sports and customs. The land teemed with wild game. God instructed him in a doctrine of peace and in a moral code. If the people on earth would follow this code, they would be united with dead relatives and friends. God also showed him a dance, which if danced at different time periods, for five days, would hasten the event. He also gave Wovoka power over rain.

This doctrine, as preached by Wovoka, quickly spread into the Rocky Mountain region and, to a greater extent, in the Plains area. Each tribe modified the movement to fit its own culture. Songs for the dance, which was a version of the Paiute circle dance, were composed by the different tribes. Among the
Sioux, the doctrine of peace was modified somewhat to fit the emphasis on war in the Sioux culture, with such things as sacred, protective war paint, and the famous ghost shirt which was supposed to protect the wearer from bullets.

A part of this dance, among the Plains Indians, was a state of hysteria which the dance built up, during which people jerked violently and fell to the ground in an unconscious state. In this state, they dreamed of seeing dead relatives, the return of the buffalo, and the practice of old customs.¹

The movement culminated in the famous Ghost Dance outbreak among the Sioux in 1890-1891. A detachment of the Seventh Cavalry was sent to disarm the members of Big Foot's band, who were awaiting the event which promised the return of the buffalo, the return of dead relatives, and the obliteration of the white man. Whatever may have caused the initial disturbance is questionable, but the event ended in the massacre, by the Seventh Cavalry, of the majority of the Big Foot's band—which were mostly women and children. Other Sioux bands left the reservation, but finally returned after peace was established.

There were some similarities between the Ghost Dance and the Redbird Smith movement. Both of these movements preached a return to an older and better way of life. In the beginnings of the Ghost Dance, the philosophy of "Wovoka" was that of peace and brotherhood, much like that of the Redbird Smith

¹Mooney, James, The Ghost-Dance Religion, Bureau of Ethnology, 11th Annual Report, Part II.
movement, but it was later translated into terms of violent resistance by some of the Plains Indians.

There were many points of difference however, even in the early stages of the Ghost Dance movement. It was inter-tribal, while the Redbird Smith movement was primarily for the Cherokees and strictly localized to the Cherokee tribe.

Both movements tried to go back to an earlier pattern of culture; but the ways in which this was to be accomplished were different. In the Ghost Dance revival, a new culture element was added, the ghost dance itself. This was a modified version of the circle dance of the Paiutes, but a new culture element to the Plains tribes. In the Redbird Smith movement, on the other hand, the return to the older pattern was to be accomplished by rationally, according to Cherokee logic, reconstructing the older pattern.

Another difference from the Ghost Dance was that the Redbird Smith movement was started to forestall a disaster--the break up of the Cherokee Nation--while the Ghost Dance, as it was manifested among the Plains Indians, was to nullify the effects of a past disaster. The Plains Indians took over the Ghost Dance after they had been defeated by military force, settled on reservations, and were completely under the domination of the Indian Service, who subjugated them by means of beef rationing, Indian police, and so forth.

The greatest vigor of the Redbird Smith movement came before the allotment.
Another difference is that, because of disastrous results and failure of achievement, the Ghost Dance movement has died out among the Plains Indians. However, the Redbird Smith movement is still in existence among the Cherokees, although in modified form.

The most significant difference between the two movements is that there was no vision and no prophet who gave emphasis to the Redbird Smith movement or directed its course. Redbird Smith was not in the strict sense a prophet. He was a leader in the movement. He was appointed by the head chairmen of the Keteowah Society, along with a committee to help him to "get back what the Keteowahs had lost." The recovery of the wampum belts was not Redbird Smith's achievement alone, and the interpretation of them was the accumulation of the knowledge of that generation.

Throughout this period, until 1908, he also had as adviser and teacher, Creek Sam, and he always maintained the teacher-student relation with him. Even in later periods, he could not "put through" innovations but could only suggest them. The Keteowah council always had the final say. As George Smith said, "The old man never told the medicine men what to do. When he was chief, he would set on the porch while they went down to the water to make the decision, and when they came back, they would come up to his house and tell him what they had decided."
C. P. Cornelius, although the instigator of many innovations, could not be considered a prophet. He was considered an authority on customs which no living Cherokee knew about. As John Smith said, "C. P. knew a lot about old time Indian ways." All of his proposals, however, were passed on by the Council and some of his suggestions were not accepted or were modified. When he would speak before the fire, with John Smith as interpreter, he would refer to the stomp ground as the "long white house." This was not accepted by the mass of the Cherokees who still clung to the older concept of ga-ti-ya, "an agent to help you."

In the burial ceremony, which he suggested, former elements, such as the washing and cleaning of the house by neighbors and the sprinkling of the house with medicine were added.

Although he said that only the seven pallbearers in this ceremony had to drink the concoction of red root, the Katoowah council decided that everyone at the grave should take it.

The lack of visions or of prophets can be explained by the nature of Cherokee culture. The full-bloods of that time were group-orientated and most activities were undertaken communally. The society was highly organized, with specific channels through which any decision for the group had to pass, and the leaders of Cherokee society, then as now, are in the older age group. No action is taken without much deliberation by the group.

An example of usual procedure can be shown by the way
in which a faction broke off from the main Katoowah Society and started a Fire at Marble City, Oklahoma in 1951. This factionalism had been brewing for several years, but no action had been taken until then. When the situation came to a head, a group met twice, once each month, and talked through the afternoon and into the night, without taking action. At the third meeting, action was decided upon, and the first thing the group did was to organize. They first appointed a secretary to take minutes, and then appointed chiefs, Fire-chief, Fire-keeper, all by vote of the group assembled. An organization for work was set up before action was taken. The leaders who were elected were all men over sixty and recognized authorities on Cherokee culture. A committee was appointed to see about obtaining land on which to build a stomp ground. This committee consisted of two men, one to see about obtaining the land, and one man with a car with which to drive him to the county seat.

This type of procedure is typical of Cherokee culture in initiating any type of action.

Although visions of the type which gave rise to the Ghost Dance are not found among the Cherokee, dreams are very important. The Cherokee are not culturally conditioned, however, to dreaming visions which affect the action of a group. Dreams are very important in Cherokee culture in determining individual action. Most dreams of any significance are interpreted as oracles to guide future actions or to predict coming events.
Most medicine men dream short prayers for protection or for curing, and songs for hunting and medicine.

The Redbird Smith movement did make use of visions to determine group action; but seeking visions was undertaken by the group—such as the one in 1914, after Redbird Smith's return from Washington.

An example of the relation of dreams to Cherokee culture can be pointed out in a dream by John Smith, who is an extremely individualistic personality type for Cherokee culture. The dream is as follows (it took place about 1900):

"There was a council at my father's house. He was explaining the wampum belts. He held them up one by one and explained them. The one with the three squares on it was interpreted as representing three nations. I didn't believe it. I thought that they had forgotten the meaning of it. I thought about three days on it. Rabbit Bunch's widow, my mother-in-law, had told me a prayer to use before you go to sleep if you want to know something. I used it. I dreamed the Katoocahs were migrating east in wagons. They had their furniture and their families along. I was in one of the wagons. We stopped at an old camping place with a spring close by. We wrapped our lines on the standard. All the men got out of the wagons, with their axes, and went off west a little ways. I could hear them chopping. They carried poles and threw them down by this everlasting spring there at the bottom of a round knoll as big as a house. They built a square pen at the spring, about two feet high. Then they all went back west a little ways and looked at it. Then, they made all four corners of the pen level. An old man appeared out of the knoll. He was a white man, with long hair and a beard, just dressed in common clothes. He put his hand above the pen and said in Cherokee, 'that's the way to do. Even though you are travelling and stop just for a little while, first make it level.'"

John interprets this to mean that every one is the same—all level. There should be no rich or poor, and every one should share. He said, "I told this to the old men, but they
never said nothing." This type of individual dreaming by a young man was not compatible with Cherokee culture. However, now, since John Smith is in his seventies, and a recognized leader and authority on interpretation of the wampum belts, this dream is accepted.

Another instance is a vision of 1905, which will do well as an example of how vision-seeking is initiated by the group and put through channels.

John Smith's account follows:

"The Ketoowahs were going down hill, having a hard time, and the old men thought maybe they were forgetting something. The time has come to do like in the old days, they said. They used to pick out seven men to ask God a question, and fast seven days and nights. They had Will Elk pick out seven men by medicine. He picked Creek Sam, Charlie Sam, Redbird Smith, John Smith, Martin Bolin, Will Elk, Joshua Glass. He made more medicine and saw that one of them would get the message. It would be me. We met at the Fire on an appointed day and put my father in as spokesman. He took some fire down to the bluff below the house, on a ledge, and built a little fire. He asked God, 'Our Father in the seventh story we come to you as Ketoowahs, for you have said for us to be Ketoowahs. We have kept your word until now. Now we are surrounded, in a dark corner, by grafters, ready to grab the bread from our children. We ask you to help us and tell us what to do!'"

"We weren't allowed to talk except of something of that nature. We were all sitting on the ledge. I saw lightning flash in the west. A storm was gathering. It got closer. I could hear the thunder. It was roaring loud and the wind was blowing. I thought we would be blown away. The rest of them just sat there with their heads down. The storm struck, lightning and rain. My father and I were facing east. Right in front of us appeared two boys about two feet tall, naked, who were chasing one another. They wrestled right in front of us. They got up laughing and went off towards the north, down the hill, looking back and laughing. When they got out of sight, the storm quit."
"I told the rest of them what had happened. My father said, 'One of the boys stopped in front of me and said, I am the Thunder.' The next morning my father said in seven days we would fast again. I was glad, because I had thought they meant seven days straight. On the seventh day, we went to the Fire and then went and sat down about two-hundred yards south of where we had been. This time, we took a bucket of water with us. My father asked the same thing. Along in the night, two of the old men got talking about what the old people used to do. I was listening. All at once, it felt like a quilt or a blanket fell on me. It was power. There I was walking under the bluff. A little old man was sitting on the ground with white hair and mustache smoking a pipe. He looked up and spoke in Cherokee. He pointed to the bluff and said, 'Eat.' There was a cave big as a house, like a tunnel. There were two little women putting food on the table. I threw my hat down and sat down. There was a bowl of hominy with a wooden spoon in it. You had to help yourself. I filled my glass with hominy. Plenty of food—corn bread balls, wild meat, sweet potatoes, beans, but no cake, pie, biscuit, sugar, or nothing like that. I got up, put on my hat, and, all at once, I was back up on the rock. All this time, I could still hear those old men talking. I saw two tigers toward the east about thirty yards looking at us. One was a little taller than the other. I thought it must be a he and she tiger. The she went off to the south, and the he went off to the north. There was a valley toward the southeast that was full of people, but no Indians. They were stirring around and excited. They were afraid of those tigers. Creek Sam came from the north. He had a white sheet wrapped around him. He was trailing the tigers, slowly, unexcited. One of the men spoke, 'Look at that man trailing the tigers, not afraid or excited. He knows something so the tigers won't harm him, that's the reason he's not afraid!' A messenger boy about twelve years old came out of the south. He said, 'The she tiger that went south was captured and caged.' The boy went off to the north to tell the he tiger his mate was captured and caged. All at once, there was a roaring from the north and the he tiger went towards the south to rescue his mate, roaring. There was a hickory tree growing below the bluff—it's limbs came up over the ledge. A man's voice came from this tree, it said: 'You all are here, that's all it's necessary to do. They ain't nothing but what you all can see.' I came to. I told the rest of them what I had seen right then. Creek Sam said, 'That's what we want to know.' And that is all that they ever did say.

"Toward morning, an old fellow got thirsty. He picked up the bucket, it was empty. Everyone laughed. The water
had all leaked out. It was running on the ground away from the bucket. The fire was bright enough to see by. We done without water all the rest of the night. Day-light came, they all laughed again. They said, 'The water leaked out last night; now it's full this morning.' We stayed about another hour, poured the water out, and went to the house.'

This dream shows the importance of vision seeking among the Cherokees and also how it is controlled and channeled by the group. From this fact and preceding facts, it should be clear why the Redbird Smith movement took the form it did.

The only good study of a nativistic movement among American Indians has been among individualist cultures, i.e., the Ghost Dance. Perhaps a nativistic movement among other communal, highly organized cultures, such as Pueblo or Yaqui, would take a form like this one of the Cherokees. A good comparative study could be done on the Crazy Snake movement which happened about the same time among the Creeks. It is comparable to the Redbird Smith movement because it took place in another communal, highly organized culture, but has its violent aspects rather like the Ghost Dance.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


