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1961

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THE REDBIRD SMITH MOVEMENT

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In this paper I have set myself two tasks. First, I will relate a religious revivalistic movement that took place among the Oklahoma Cherokee around the turn of the century. I think that just the description of this movement will be of interest. Certainly, it is a very important nativistic revival which has never been reported. And since it was a Cherokee nativistic movement it may be doubly of interest to students of the Iroquoian peoples.

The second thing I will do is to discuss some ideas regarding nativism in general that are suggested by this one case—the Redbird Smith Movement.

Now before I get into the description of the movement itself, I shall review the major outlines of Cherokee culture history. In the 18th century Cherokee were following a typical Southeastern pattern of life. Their economy was based on hunting and gardening. They lived in settlements called "towns" along the watercourses of the southern Appalachian region. Each matrilineal extended family farmed a small piece of land along the valley. And in each settlement there was a ceremonial center, usually a "townhouse" for winter ceremonials and, nearby, a pavilion for summer ceremonials.

In the vicinity of the ceremonial center lived the officials of the town organization. There was a series of officials called the White organization. This White organization governed the town in internal civil matters, directed communal farming, and supervised the ceremonies. Another organization called the Red or war organization functioned during periods of warfare. This group of officials was similar in structure to the White organization.

The six great ceremonies of the Cherokee, though too complex to describe here, have these elements in common: the ceremonial lighting of the sacred fire, the sacrifice of tobacco or wild meat to that fire, the purification of participants in the ceremonies, and a series of all-night dances.

There seems to have been no overall political structure among the Cherokee at first contact. The largest unit appears to have been the region with a large town as the nucleus.

The first part of the 18th century was a period of comparative stability for the Cherokee, but in the last decades of that century they became embroiled in a period of intensive warfare with American frontiersmen which lasted some 20 years. During this period most of the Cherokee moved farther south into Georgia and they emerged from this war in a very disorganized state.

Immediately following this period of warfare, in the first decades of the 19th century, Cherokee culture underwent a series of drastic changes. The Cherokee took over much of white technology. They became an educated, literate people. They remodeled their political organization after the republican form of government of the United States. And they became Christians.

I am sure most readers are familiar with later events in Cherokee history—the removal to the Indian Territory; the civil war between the Treaty party, later called the “halfbreed” party, and the fullblood faction; and, once again in the last part of the century, the encirclement of the Cherokee Nation by western pioneers.

If we look at the Cherokee in the 1880's we see that there have been a great many changes in Cherokee culture. The “halfbreed” Cherokee were like western Americans in all but political allegiance. The Cherokee were a prosperous, civilized people. But in the fullblood settlements we still find some continuity with older Cherokee patterns. Fullblood Cherokee still lived in settlements along stream courses in a mountainous region. They had taken over much white technology, but they were still basically hunters and gardeners. And they worked their farms in common as they did in the 18th century. The greatest absolute change was in social organization. Family structure was bilateral. The clan was being forgotten. The old town structure was almost completely gone. The new government had taken over the political function of the old organization. And now in each settlement there was a new ceremonial center—a log Baptist church. All that was left of old Cherokee town structure was the communal work organization.

The one trait complex that had remained intact was the Cherokee curing rites. These rites—the formal prayers and complex ritual—were the core of old Cherokee religious concepts.

As far as traits and institutions go, I think one would have to say that Cherokee life had changed a great deal. What had remained stable is the Cherokee value system and world view. Lacking space to describe these covert patterns, let me mention one Cherokee value that is important in the Redbird Smith Movement—any action that affects the group as a whole, is not, in an obvious way, initiated by any one man. Any action that is taken is first discussed leisurely in an informal context by a great many people, a kind of consolidation of

sentiment. Then, the matter is brought up in a formal context, usually by an older person with some prestige, for the group's consideration. And any decision on this formal level requires some semblance of unanimous agreement.

A crucial part of Cherokee world view that is, also, significant in the Redbird Smith Movement is seeing the universe as having a definite order, as a system which has balance and reciprocal obligations between its parts. The individual Cherokee is a part of this system, and membership entails certain obligations. When the Cherokee does not fulfill his obligations, the system gets out of balance and the Cherokee no longer have the “good life.” Most American Indians and, probably, tribal peoples in general seem to see the world in this way. But Cherokee leaders are very conscious of this philosophy and tend to weigh problems in the light of this formulation.

In the 1890's not only had American westward expansion caught up with the Cherokee, but a new philosophy in Indian affairs was being promulgated—the allotment of Indian lands and American citizenship for the Indian. The Dawes Commission came to the Cherokee Nation to get the Cherokee to agree to the allotment of tribal lands and the dissolution of the Cherokee government. The Cherokee leaders refused to consider such a proposal, but the Dawes Commission authorized a census of all Cherokee and a survey of Cherokee lands.

The fullblood Cherokee were very concerned over these events and they were afraid that the halfbreed party, which was in control of the tribal government, would succumb to the pressure. At the same time white squatters began to move onto Cherokee lands. The Cherokee thought they were facing social death—the end of the Cherokee.

There was a resistance organization in the Cherokee Nation that most of the fullbloods belonged to. It was called the Ketoowa Society, the old ceremonial name of the Cherokee. After talking about these alarming events for several years the Ketoowa Society met in special session in 1896. They decided to appoint a committee to “get back what the Ketoowa people have lost.” The leaders of the society appointed Redbird Smith, a local society official and staunch traditionalist, to accomplish this end. They appointed a committee, among whom were several prominent Baptist preachers, to help him. The leaders said to the committee, “At some time the Cherokee have gotten off of the clean white path. We took a wrong turn and now we find ourselves in a deep, dark hollow. God has turned his face away from us. We have lost his rule. You must regain what the Ketoowa people have lost.”

To digress a minute, I could quote very similar passages from speeches of Cherokee chiefs after the smallpox epidemic in the 1730's and, especially, after the war with the Americans. The system was out of balance and the "good life" was no more.

The first step of Redbird Smith and his committee in his assignment to "get back what the Ketoowa people had lost" was to procure the sacred Cherokee wampum belts. They were in the hands of the son of a former chief. Redbird Smith thought that by interpreting these wampum belts they could reconstruct the old Cherokee faith and ritual. They took these belts around to all the old men in the Cherokee Nation, and even to the Creek and Shawnee, trying to "gain knowledge," as they say in Cherokee. While they were visiting the Creek a society was formed, called the Four Mothers' society, which welded the majority of the fullbloods of all the Five Civilized Tribes into one resistance organization. In structure it resembled the old intertribal councils and was a united resistance movement against the coming allotment system and the dissolution of tribal governments. This society retained lawyers and sent delegates to Washington to fight the prevailing trend in Indian affairs.

In the meantime, Cherokee in various parts of the Cherokee Nation began to revive the all-night Indian dances. A small group of Natchez Indians revived an old Natchez-Creek ceremonial ground in the southwestern part of the Cherokee Nation and fullbloods from all over the Cherokee area began to come to dances there. Redbird Smith and his committee began to meet in session at this ceremonial ground when dances were held.

At the annual meetings of the Ketoowa society all-night dances were performed. It was the pattern, at first, for Baptist services to be held in the daytime and Indian dances at night, but the Baptist services were soon discontinued.

In 1898 the Curtis Act was passed by Congress calling for the dissolution of tribal governments, abolishment of tribal law courts, and forcible allotment of lands belonging to the Five Civilized Tribes. But the fullblood Cherokee refused to enroll for land allotments and the Four Mothers' society was still active in its resistance. In 1902 the Indian office imprisoned Redbird Smith, who was now the leader of the Ketoowa society, and several other fullblood leaders. This broke the back of active Cherokee resistance and most of the fullbloods enrolled.

Then the Ketoowa society did something characteristic of Cherokee under stress. They withdrew. They withdrew from the Four Mothers' society. They would not participate in tribal affairs. And they refused to vote in tribal elections or in the new agreements between the United States and the Cherokee Nation concerning the

settlement of Cherokee affairs. Cherokee today say, "We just depended on our religion from then on."

That same year, 1902, Redbird Smith erected a ceremonial ground in his home settlement. And within a year there were 23 such ceremonial centers in different Cherokee "villages."

At first there was only a firekeeper at each ceremonial ground and a minimum of ritual along with the all-night dances. But by 1916 the Cherokee had not only reconstructed a generalized Cherokee ceremony, but also the old White town organization. As the Cherokee say, "We got the rule back, God's seven clan law, by gaining knowledge and better interpreting our wampum belts." Without going into the details of this long series of innovations, the clan even was revived in this period. And either the revival of this long-dead structure and ceremonies is a great coincidence or else it tells us something about cultural persistence.

Redbird Smith died in 1918 but by the time he died the Cherokee say, "The rule was complete."

I know that it is hardly feasible to generalize from this one case of nativism but the data may suggest some possibilities. For instance, it certainly supports the "deprivation" theory of nativism. But the most significant thing about this very complete religious revival is that there was no prophet connected with it, no vision, and no quick reconstruction of old patterns. The movement was spread out over a 25-year period. In recent years we have tended to dismiss culture as a factor in nativistic movements, and we have tended to see religious revivals as following a common pattern—somewhat in the manner of the classic Ghost Dance—a prophet who has a vision and then a period of drastic innovations.

But Cherokee culture does not allow for a prophet no matter how much stress the society is under. One man just does not initiate action this way. In North Carolina during the winter of 1957, several Cherokee became interested in reviving the old Cherokee religion. Many of them talked about this in informal groups all through the winter and spring. But the subject had not been brought up, although it was hinted at, in the formal meetings of the fullblood political organization. When I left North Carolina in June one of the fullblood leaders said to me, "Sometime next winter we may want you to ask some of those Oklahoma chiefs to come down here and teach us all about the fire." That is the Cherokee way.

I think, perhaps, our data on religious revivals are overbalanced. We have an abundance of spectacular revivals in the literature, but not very much on "pedantic" religious revivals like the Redbird Smith Movement. There have been at least four religious revivals among American Indians since World War II that have never been studied.

And there was no prophet or vision associated with them. These are the kind of "not-very-colorful" movements that anthropologists do not study.

My second task in this paper was to try to suggest some general propositions about religious revivals. Perhaps all I want to say is that culture and cultural differences are important variables even in a discussion of nativism.

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SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION

Bureau of American Ethnology
Bulletin 180

Symposium on Cherokee and Iroquois Culture

No. 17. Comment on Robert K. Thomas' "The Redbird Smith
Movement"

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unequivocal verity of conditioning and then placing it in opposition to other explanations.

The problem of acculturative conservatism, because of its broad context, is of a different order than that of the restraining effects of Cherokee culture on the production of prophets. The persistence of selective forms may owe as much, if not more, to reactive stages and more or less conscious efforts to relearn and to preserve as to a continuity in traditional learnings. This is the way in which I read the Redbird Smith effort "to get back what the Cherokee had lost." Actually, from Thomas' evidence it seems as if Cherokee continuity with the past through traditional learnings had been all but snapped, and in its place a complex psychological configuration may have intruded. Fear, insecurity, hostility, and anxiety, but not traditional "unconscious canons of choice," probably inspired the thin line of continuity with the past which the Ketoowa Society formalized during the faction-ridden years immediately preceding the Civil War. An awareness of crisis again seems to have prompted the organized efforts of the Redbird Smith followers, whose activities by and large involved a considerable relearning.

Actually, in the persistence of forms, it is becoming apparent that the psychoaffect underpinning during acculturation cannot be assumed blanket fashion to be the same as that attributable to the form in its aboriginal context. Further, altered forms may not disturb fundamental structured relationships and expectancies, as Friedl (1956) and Boggs (1958) have pointed out for the Ojibwa. When American culture in formal structures, like the committee and the council, supports decision-making and public action through majority consensus, can we discount completely its contribution to the attitude that consensus prevails? May we not also suspect that the very insistence on consensus is as much the effect of insecurity-anxiety in the face of unrestrained individual and factional action as traditional learnings? It would appear as if form persistences might draw considerable support from a number of meanings and affect-states. In the acculturative context special forms and attitudes may hold a special symbolic significance for the peoples involved.

On the narrower issue of Cherokee leadership during acculturation and its dependence on organized consensus, we apparently enter the domain of the particular, with Cherokee culture our broadest dimension. But Cherokee acculturation does not stand by itself; it moves with events throughout the Southeast and to an extent of the East generally. Throughout these woodlands all peoples seem to have valued and emphasized consensus. When unanimity failed, a narrower consensus commonly prevailed—the consensus of a "faction." Thus we see the Cherokee, Dragging Canoe, leading his supporters

into western Tennessee, and the Mohawk, Brant, persuading numbers of the Iroquois to follow his leadership and accept English protection and policy. Perhaps consensus may have operated in greater depth among Indians of the Southeast than in the Northeast, since the former generally possessed a more organized sociopolitical ceremonial life, even to "tribal arks" carried into battle. However, consensus does not seem to have ruled out the outstanding leader in either the Northeast or the Southeast.

If we are to explain Cherokee acculturation as culture bound, in turn we are faced with the problem of describing and accounting for the prophetic acculturative complex which breaks in part with the past, and which depends on reactive and interactive states. Some problems seem to require placement within interactive and explanatory universes of extreme range, others within narrower ranges. One gets the distinct impression, for example, that the Southeast, as an acculturative universe, held a less intense and violent frontier than the Northeast. Perhaps the Southeast had more opportunity for continuous adjustment. But while the native prophet and revelation generally may have been lacking, there may have been a counterpart in the missionary. In a religious revival climate, Christian membership seems to have increased considerably among the Cherokee, for example, after 1815. Perhaps for a century at least, a religion with an ethical view of man in the universe has been a basic integrate of Cherokee adjustment and communication, whether conservative or not. If this is so, the problem of continuity in Cherokee "curing rites," the very "core of old Cherokee religious concepts" (Thomas, this volume, p. 162) takes on a new significance.

In conclusion, I wish to congratulate Mr. Thomas for a challenging and provocative paper.

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