

## 6. Elaine Goodale's Observations of the Ghost Dance

*In 1886, a 23-year-old white woman from Massachusetts named Elaine Goodale traveled to the Great Sioux Reservation in the Dakota Territory to teach in a small village school. She worked there for three years, and became so good at the language that, in 1889, the commissioner of Indian Affairs appointed her supervisor of education in the Dakotas, a position that allowed her to travel and work with local people in the development of their schools. In 1890 she met Charles Eastman (Ohiyesa), a Sioux who had attended school in the east and returned to his people's reservation to work as a medical doctor. (See sections 1 and 7) She married him a year later. They had six children together and became known for their writings about Indian reform.*

*In the 1930s, Elaine Goodale Eastman wrote her own memoirs, mostly concerning the years she spent on the Great Sioux Reservation. In the late 1880s the millenarian "ghost dance movement" swept through the reservation, engendering fear in many white officials and causing them to prepare for an "uprising" on the part of the Indians.*

<sup>4</sup> That is, guns.

<sup>5</sup> In an earlier section, Black Elk has told us that he was wounded in the battle.

While all this was going on, I set out matter-of-factly with my Sioux couple [as my guides] and camp outfit on a tour of inspection among the scattered schools. No courage was required for I had no thought of danger and regarded the scare-mongers with contempt. I visited the homes as usual and talked freely with everyone I met. I was received with the familiar kindness and treated to pounded meat with cherries and other native delicacies.

There was no secrecy about the dance which had caused such frantic alarm. It was held in the Open, with neither fire nor light, after the participants had fasted for a day or two and passed through the purifying ordeal of the sweat-lodge. Anyone might look on, and on a bright November night I joined a crowd of spectators near Porcupine Tail Butte – the only person who was not a Sioux.

Under the soft flow of the hunter's moon perhaps a hundred men, women and children, with clasped hands and fingers interlocked, swung in a great circle about their "sacred tree," chanting together the monotonous Ghost Dance songs. The hypnotic repetition of the words: "Once more we shall hunt the buffalo – Our Father has said it!" alternated with short invocations by prophet or priest and occasional intervals of wailing by the women – that musical heart-piercing sound which, once heard, is never forgotten. No one with imagination could fail to see in the rite a genuine religious ceremony, a faith which, illusory as it was, deserved to be treated with respect.

"You have your churches; why can we not have ours?" was the natural reaction of the people.

In the course of an hour or two, one of the worshipers would break abruptly from the ring, rush wildly about, and fall in a trance or faint, lying for some time motionless. One old woman fell so near me that I could have touched her. Presently she stirred, got to her feet unaided, and addressed the gathering in a strong voice:

"My children, I have seen those dear ones we lost long ago!"

"Ah-h-h! He-ye-ye!" responded the people.

"They are living in a most beautiful country covered with buffalo!"

"He-ye-ye! Ate heye lo!" (Our Father has said it.)

"Their tipis are of skins. They are feasting and playing. They are perfectly happy!" (After each statement the people intone their deep-voiced response.)

"Here everything looks hateful to me – how can I bear it!"

The congregation responds with groans and cries. Then the priest repeats that the Messiah will appear "with the new grass" in the spring and the vision will come true for all believers.

After listening to this strange litany for half the night, I lay down in my tent quite worn out with sympathetic excitement. The spell, or incantation, or rite continued with increasing fervor until dawn.