THE SHAKE RELIGION OF PUGET SOUND

BY

T. T. WATERMAN

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A discussion of the Indian groups about Puget Sound would not be complete without a mention of their present form of religion. It consists of a curious sort of Christianity, with a liberal admixture of the primitive religion of this area. It is called the Shake Religion or Shaker Religion, because the believers are visited by shaking or quivering spells. Invented about 1881, this religion is still flourishing and spreading at the present time. The presence of the "shaking" phenomena demands explanation, since there are analogous elements in other religious movements. The question at once arises, as to whence they derived this practice. Shakerism is at present the most important fact in the life of these people.

It may well be explained that there are in America two religious groups going by the name "Shakers." One is a Christian group, small in numbers but somewhat widely distributed in the Eastern States, who are called "Shakers" for convenience, their self-chosen name being Believers in Christ's Second Coming. Their theology seems to be of a more or less orthodox Christian sort, the sect having originated in England in 1772. They practice dancing, however, as a religious observance, and hold to the principle of celibacy, which is followed by the entire body of believers without exception. Among converts to this form of belief there is no marrying or giving in marriage. They moreover carry out remorselessly the idea of community in property. It is obvious, I think, that doctrines such as these will not have any widespread vogue for some time to come. The fame of the group, however, and their nickname, "Shaker," has spread abroad quite widely.

Another group of people, a group many thousand miles away and of an entirely different character, has meanwhile arisen, and have also had thrust upon them the name of "Shakers." This second group is made up of the native Indians living in the region of Puget Sound. In 1881, or 1882, they invented for themselves a "new" form of religion. This system of belief has had a checkered and interesting career, and its followers now number thousands, and are organ-
ized into a "Shaker" church. There is no connection between the two organizations of Shakers, and they have nothing at all in common, except the name.

The Shaker, or "shake" religion of Puget Sound is therefore one of the world's "new" religions, in the usual sense in which religions are new. That is, it is a quaint and curious recombination of old elements.

A variety of ideas and practices may easily be recognized out of which this "new" form of belief has been patched together. The substratum back of this western Shakerism is the primitive heathenism of the Puget Sound Indians. These primitive beliefs and practices are what lend color and vitality to the whole, and result in some curious, picturesque, and wonderfully edifying performances. The history of the Shaker system is briefly this, that on the top of this old "Shamanism," or medicine-performances of the native Indian, there have been added, first, Roman Catholic ideas and institutions, and then evangelical Protestantism, derived largely from the Congregational sources. To see the various doctrines and practices derived from such origins, lying down together like the lion and the lamb in the bosom of one Redskin, is to me the most entertaining and instructive spectacle in the world.

The religion was invented and established by the Indians; but I know of more than one "white" convert. When an observer looks at this "Shakerism" he no longer feels so baffled by the quaint and heterogeneous combinations met with in the "great" religions, such as Islam, Lamaism, or Christianity. In the case of this Indian religion the combination and fusion of utterly dissimilar ideas has gone on before our eyes. I think we will have to recognize the adroitness of the Indian who combined in one ritual, elements of the Catholic mass and the Congregational prayer-meeting, to say nothing of heathen charms and incantations, older probably than either of the others.

The successful concocting of these elements was the work of one individual Indian, named John Slocum, now deceased, "our poor brother, John Slocum," as the Shaker preachers always call him in their sermons.

It is impossible not to notice that Shakerism was "in the air" among the Indians of that region, before it was invented by Slocum. Anyone who is interested in the various efforts at combining Protestantism and Catholicism by these Indians will find the facts in two entertaining works. These are The Ghost Dance Religion, by James Mooney (Smithsonian Institution, Bureau of American Ethnology, Fourteenth Annual Report, Part 2, Chapter 8); and Myron Eells, Ten Years at Skokomish (Boston, Congregational Sunday-School
and Publishing Society, 1886, especially Chapters 22-27). I know of nothing unusual about Slocum, the founder of the religion, except that he "died" in a spell of illness, and "later came to life," when they were making preparations for the funeral. This happened at a moment of crisis both in his own inner experience and in the history of his people. The combination of circumstances put the blend over, converts were made, the disciples increased and multiplied, the system expanded, and the institution is thriving and spreading to this day. The last piece of news I had concerning it was that two Apostles had gone from the Shahaptian tribe, known as the Yakima, of eastern Washington, who have had the religion for years, and had established a congregation among the Lutuami at Klamath Lake reservation in southern Oregon. The Shakers now have a bishop of their own (an Indian named Peter Heek, of Chehalis), licensed ministers, and all the paraphernalia of salvation. The religion has spread north and south many hundreds of miles from its original home.

The Catholic background of the faith may be illustrated by a brief description of the ceremonial objects which are employed. Illumination by candles is sine qua non. An altar covered with a white cloth is rigged up, with a cross, hand-bells, and religious pictures of Mary, the Saviour, the Sacred Heart, and so on. The principal functionaries in the ceremonies wear white cassocks. The church service consists first of a sermon, which serves to quiet everybody down and induce a feeling of solemnity. The leader then turns to one of the worshippers who stand facing him, and says, "Pray!" The member called on delivers an extemporaneous prayer which, like the sermon, is in the native Indian language. At the close of his devotions he repeats, the others following his words, in a deep chorus:

"In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost, it is well."

In the Nusqually dialect spoken on Puget Sound the native words are as follows, as nearly as I can write them in the ordinary symbols of English: "Tu va′ lks nas kuma′ns tihl ta′mnas, tihl Santu Splay, tlob mas i′ sta." The term Santu Splay (Holy Ghost) is of course the French Saint Ésprit. This phrase (in the name of the Father, etc.) was the very first element of Christianity to reach the Indians of the Northwest. It came to them, passing from tribe to tribe, and was used by them as a new and powerful "medicine," long before the first missionary came to them. Every member of the Shaker congregation in turn (every convert, that is) leads in prayer or singing, or both. At the close of each petition, the well-remem-
bered chant rolls forth, "in the name of the Father," deep toned, thrilling with fervor, and a thing moving even to a neutral observer. At the end of the terminal prayer, a deacon or assistant grasps two of the bells and begins to shake them, as Indians do a rattle, one in each hand, in a pounding rhythm. The bell used by the Shakers is not the soft, tinkling bell of the Catholic ritual, silver toned and sweet in a distant chancel, but a substantial dinner bell, its note a brazen clangor that can be heard half a mile. The progress of this deacon around the premises, in a sort of crow-hop, followed in Indian file by the devotees, is accompanied therefore by a considerable din. Meanwhile, a song mounts up in time to the clang of the bells, and as each dancer passes the altar he (or she) revolves once. This exercise or parade is repeated as often as necessary or convenient. The worshippers often in going by the altar pass their hands through the flame of one of the candles, trying to purify themselves by driving away sin. At the close of the dance or parade, every worshiper shakes hands, or touches hands, with every other worshiper and with every spectator, sometimes blessing his vis-a-vis with the sign of the cross. In all these performances, rhythm is very strongly marked, the subject making many voluntary gestures, which pass in some cases into the tremor or shaking spell which has given the sect its name.

Already the curious mixture of acts, symbols, and ideas is, I think, apparent. The mixture is even more conspicuous, however, in the performances by which these people set about curing disease. The sick or ailing person (man, woman, or child) is put in a chair or a bed, and the operators gather about. A general situation appropriate for a cure is brought about by arranging candles, crosses, and religious pictures, and by singing and praying. The assumption on the part of the believers is that sickness is produced by sin, sin being something that can be bodily removed from a person by manipulation. When the patient, for example, is in the proper frame of mind, they pass their hands over his body, gradually working the sinfulness to his extremities and then gathering it in their hands and "throwing it away." The pantomime is often very clever and convincing. On occasion they may vary proceedings by passing a lighted candle along the patient's limbs, to burn away the sin. It is conspicuous that the "shaking" exercise, in its most noticeable form, usually seizes the persons who are curing the sick. I have observed some "shaking" during the course of the Sunday service in church, though a large part of the movements seemed to be voluntary, by way of inviting a shaking spell or trying to induce one. The people who treat the sick, however, very often have the shaking visitation to such a degree that they are completely lifted out of
themselves, becoming suffused with religious emotion, and ringing the bells in a perfect fury, and not seldom losing their senses. A Saturday evening meeting is often called in the church for the purpose of curing sick people, and the excitement at that time mounts much higher than it does in the Sunday services.

A good deal more might be said about the outward manifestations of this religion, but I want especially to speak of the presence in what I have already said of a primitive or shamanistic element, which has come down directly from their aboriginal life and which to me is the interesting thing in the system. The idea of "brushing off sin" from a sick person in order to effect a cure is obviously a direct survival of the old shamanistic way of curing through taking out the disease, or the "pain," as a tangible object. Especially on the northwest coast, heathen shamans always operate with rattles and dances and songs, making a furious disturbance, and finally removing the "pain" from the person with their hands. It is well known that shamans and sucking doctors, not only in this region but far and wide among the world's primitive tribes, are able to remove the pain from a patient and show it to him afterwards; palming some small object, such as a claw or a quartz crystal, and appearing to draw it from the tissues. On the northwest coast it has been the custom through many centuries to regard illness as due to objects or substances within the patient, usually invisible to all but the "doctor," which the medicine man is able to draw out. The pantomime used in the Shaker operations itself is probably part of this primitive style of operation.

I can not resist the inclination to cite here a passage from Swanton's *Haida Texts* (Bulletin 29 of the Bureau of American Ethnology) concerning a famous shaman called Tč'aaawu'nk! This man once felt inwardly that the land-otters were coming to get him, to cure one of their number who was "sick." The incident which follows illustrates exactly the idea current among these Indians in former days as to the cause and cure of sickness, whether in land otters or in humans.

* When he came back from this adventure he saw that the land-otter people were coming to get him. . . He told his nephews that they were coming to get him that night. . . At midnight they came by sea and got him. . . They came in and took him out. . . They got him for the son of the chief among the land-otter people who was sick. . . He took his drum. . . and they started off with him. They had him lie on his face in the bottom of the canoe. They did the same thing to his nephew. After they had gone along for some time they said that the bottom of the canoe was foul, and they landed to clean it. This meant their fur had become wet. The cleaning of the canoe was done by their twisting about. Then they got in again, put them on the bottom, and started off. After they had gone along for a while longer something touched their heads. This, they felt, was the kelp under
which the otters were diving with them. After they had gone along for a while longer they said they were near the town.

When he entered [the house] he saw many shamans gathered in the house. He plainly saw a bone spear on the surface of the body of the sick otter. Just before this, some persons had gone hunting from the town where Te'awaun'uk lived. They speared a white land-otter with a spear. The creature that carried it away was sick here.

He began at once to act like a shaman. After he had danced around the fire for a while he pulled out the spear, and the sick otter stopped moaning. After he had acted for a while he pushed it back into the same place. After he had danced around the fire a while, he pulled out the spear. He pushed it in again. He pulled it out, and stopped performing. He put it in again, and the otter began again to suffer. He now performed again, and he pulled out the spear for the last time. The chief's son was saved.

The corresponding performance of our own people has been briefly described by Eells (Smithsonian Report for 1887):

There were two fires... and the doctor was between them on his knees on the gravel. He was stripped to the waist, having only pantaloons and boots on, and faced the woman. He had a small tub of water... He worked up to the woman and, as near as I could see, placed his mouth on her chest or shoulders and sucked very strongly and then blew out of his mouth with all his force, making a great noise, sometimes blowing into the air, always remaining on his knees.

On another occasion the "doctor" put his hands in water, having warmed them a little, and then placed them on the woman's side, her dress having been opened and partly taken down for the purpose, and he acted as if he were trying to draw out something. This was done a second time, when he plunged into water, placed his mouth next to them and blew suddenly and powerfully a few times **

It is perfectly plain, I think, where the Shaker idea of curing sickness by taking something away from the patient took its origin. The "Shaker" apostles were in fact called "blowers," or Shäpuw'lema by the Yakima east of the Cascades, evidently because they utilized the type of performance just described. The notion that it is sin which is to be removed is of course an infiltration into the Indian's point of view of Christian preachments.

It is noteworthy that in the very region on Puget Sound in which the Shaker religion evolved, the principal religious performance, which is known as the "Spirit Canoe" or Shätxtda'q ceremonial, was a tribal observance whose purpose was to heal the sick. This has been described by Haeberlin in the American Anthropologist (n. s. vol. 20) and by Dorsey in the Bulletin of the Free Museum of the University of Pennsylvania (vol. 3). The existence of this old healing ceremonial accounts, I think, for the religious fervor that attends the healing of the sick by the Shakers. It is an old tribal tradition with them that treating the sick is a proper occasion for
religious fervor, the best and most appropriate occasion for spiritual manifestations. The details of the old "Spirit Canoe" performance do not matter for our present purpose. It is, however, a very picturesque and wonderful ceremonial indeed, and the point was brought conspicuously to my attention that for generations there have been "shaking" phenomena connected with the performances.

The principal part of this performance, for example, was a scene, acted out in pantomime, where certain medicine men went to the underworld to recover the "soul" of a sick man taken there by the "ghosts." The shamans went (in imagination) on a long journey, to the village of the dead people. When they got there and began prowling around among the houses looking for the missing soul the sick man always fell into an ague. When the soul was found and brought back to this world, the next problem was to put it into the patient again. They brought it "from below" in a cloth, gathered around the patient, and made motions as if putting it into him. If it started to float away they would seize it and bring it back. Finally it would take fast hold and the patient was forthwith pronounced cured. During this process the shamans would shake and tremble in every limb. Here we see, therefore, in ancient times, almost the exact counterpart of the modern Shaker exercise; the patient helpless, with the operators gathered around him all shaking and quivering. Nowadays they are, of course, trying to get the sin out, instead of putting a soul in. The ideas have shifted, but the performance remains the same.

I may illustrate this point further by saying that in the old days there were several spirit-powers, the possession of which was accompanied by a similar shaking seizure. For example, there were also in use certain long cedar poles, called te' stidi which musicians up-ended and used for drumming against the roof-boards of the house, as an accompaniment to the songs. Certain people possessed a kind of supernatural power or "spirit-help" known as Tsotsotob. A man who had this power could announce, "Now my power will come into those drumming poles." Then the poles would begin of themselves to quiver, so that the man holding them was thrown into a tremble. Another "power" was called skudi'ilite. People who "owned" this spirit, made objects of cedar, like a board, as shown in plate 1, figure 2, with hand-holds at the sides. These objects were held in the hands of the performers, and very often "power" entered them, causing them to quiver and move about. This likewise threw the person holding them into a tremor. A certain skudi'ilite-object like the one shown in the sketch once moved all about a room, the performer trembling and unable to remain in his place. It dragged him through the fire; it dragged him out of
the house. With all his might he held back, straining and resisting, and finally two white men came to his assistance; but it dragged all three into the river! Specimens of these objects are in the Museum of the American Indian, Heye Foundation, in New York City, and in certain other of the great museums. There is not the slightest doubt but that the quivering and shaking manifested in connection with them goes back a considerable distance into the days before the white occupation. The Indians say that the wooden object became “possessed” and shook the performer, while we would, of course, assume that the performer fell into a shaking seizure, such as occurs in many religious exercises among other races and in other parts of the world, his shaking agitating, in turn, the object he carried. It seems to me that in these old performances and these ancient objects we have the background upon which the present day motor disturbances developed, which give the Shaker group its name. I know educated Indians who have seen these old spirit-objects come to life, and cause the person holding them to tremble like a leaf.

One other point occurs to me in connection with this Shaker religion, which makes one think of the story of some of the world’s great religions. I spoke above of “Shaker” organizations, with church buildings, which have now spread among the Yakima and the Lutuami, and other tribes far removed from Puget Sound. John Slocum had his “inspiration,” the religion started, and the first meetings were held on the shore of one of the numerous inlets of Puget Sound called “Big Skookum,” not far from Olympia. On the north side of that inlet, where the water races by at a change of the tide, is where Slocum lived and “died” and came back to earth from the heavenly regions with a message for his people. It was the Indians there who got his message first, and began to shake, and organized the church. These very Indians, however, have now stopped shaking. They no longer have any particular faith in “shake-help,” and have ceased to hold meetings. The very people among whom the movement started were therefore the first to fall away. This makes one think of the curious history of Christianity, a religious system originating in western Asia but associated in its later history with Europe. Asia has never been Christian in any considerable part since the early days of Christian history. The case of Buddhism is also in line; Buddhism being, of course, a product of Hindustan, originating there, and being borne afar from that country as a center. But only for a relatively short time was Buddhism actually associated with the land of its birth. Buddhists are nowadays to be found by millions in China, in Japan, in Burma, in Siam, in Cambodia, in Tibet; but in the valley where it started
I. POLE FOR DRUMMING ON THE ROOF BOARDS.

2. A SKUDI'LITC OR CEREMONIAL OBJECT OF CEDAR WOOD, WHICH IS HELD IN THE PERFORMER'S HANDS. AT TIMES IT BECOMES FILLED WITH "POWER" ACCORDING TO THE BELIEF, AND MAKES HIM QUIVER AND MAY EVEN DRAG HIM ABOUT. THE DOTS REPRESENT THE SONGS REVEALED TO THE INDIVIDUAL BY THE SPIRITS.

Courtesy Museum of American Indian, Heye Foundation.
A GROUP OF THE PUGET SOUND "SHAKERS" AT TOLT, WASH., GIVING A "BLESSING."
not one Buddhist is to be seen, save perhaps pilgrims, two or three in a year. Thus the history of two of the world's greatest religions is reproduced in miniature among the simple Indians of our own Northwest.

The shaking which thus appears in both the old and the new religions of Puget Sound has been explained psychologically. I do not recall the details, but it is something about nervous tension and rhythmic discharges, resulting in one movement repeated over and over again until it becomes a tremor. I have remarked already that it is by no means new in the study of religion; quite the contrary. Various saints, dervishes, marabouts, diviners, deacons, and elders in various religious exercises and of various races show it. The Tarantism of the Middle Ages (Saint Vitus's dance) was evidently something of the same sort. I can do no better, I think, than to quote a passage from Davenport's Primitive Traits in Religious Revivals, describing what happened to our own civilized mountaineers in the Cumberland region in 1842; the place, I believe, where the Cumberland Presbyterian Church took its origin. He gives on page 78 of his work an account of the following quaint and curious behavior:

Next to the "falling" exercise, the most notable and characteristic Kentucky performance was the "jerks." The unhappy victim shook in every joint. Sometimes the head was thrown from side to side with great rapidity. . . . Peter Cartwright declared that he had seen more than five hundred persons jerking at once in his congregation. And Lorenzo Dow, writing of a time some years later, when the epidemic again broke out in this section, remarks that on Sunday at Knoxville, the governor being present, about one hundred and fifty had the jerking exercise. In 1800 no one was proof against it, saint or sinner, white or black, except, as Lorenzo Dow naively remarks, those who wished to get it to philosophize upon it and the most godly.

One final word about these Shakers will not be out of place. The Congregationalists and Presbyterians, under whose influence they fell, took a strong stand against drinking, gambling, horse-racing, lying, swearing, and smoking tobacco. Whatever may be said about the relative rank of these failings, certain it is that to the Shakers avoidance of them is an essential part of religion. No Shaker will swear, no Shaker will drink. The one virtue of non-indulgence in alcohol has served to make the members of the Shaker church the most prosperous of the Indians. Outwardly their homes are clean and cheerful and inwardly they are filled with a kindly feeling, which can not be mistaken, for it actually radiates from their faces. It makes them, to my way of thinking, more closely resemble the Christian of our ideals than is the case with any people I have ever seen, Indian, white, or otherwise.