Kenekuk the Kickapoo Prophet

Herring, Joseph B.

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3. Instructed by the Great Spirit

Although Little Duck and Kenekuk had both signed the 1816 treaty by which they and the Vermillion Kickapoos had agreed to “acknowledge themselves in peace and friendship with the United States,” neither was consulted about the 1819 cession treaty.\(^1\) Federal officials realized that the two men would have absolutely refused to sell tribal lands and therefore avoided dealing with them. Both had been born in the Indiana-Illinois region and had grown up near the Wabash and its tributaries. Both had hunted deer along the wooded streams near their homes and buffalo in the immense prairies far to the west. They had played lacrosse and other traditional games, defended their families against Indian and white enemies, married and raised children, buried relatives and friends, and participated in the numerous ceremonies of the Kickapoo bands and clans. They loved their Wabash homeland, and they knew that the Great Spirit would be angry if they voluntarily abandoned it.

By the early 1820s, however, the aged Little Duck was too feeble to continue his long struggle in defense of the Vermillion people. He had led them courageously for many years, advising them to remain peaceful and to seek an accommodation with white settlers in order to retain their Wabash lands. He wisely turned the reins of leadership over to Kenekuk, who could give a strong voice and charismatic direction to the tribal revitalization movement that had been under way since the 1790s. Little Duck was undoubtedly confident that Kenekuk was now ready to guide his people through the trying years ahead.\(^2\)

Little is known of Kenekuk’s life before he emerged as an influential spokesman for the Vermillion bands during the 1820s. The tribe had kept relatively few written or official records before that time, but Kickapoo oral tradition reveals some clues as to his early years. He was born about 1790 or 1791,\(^3\) probably near the banks of the Wabash River some distance from modern Lafayette, Indiana. As a young man, according to tribal accounts, he was a drunken beggar of violent behavior:

   Kenekuk was a bad young man, a drunkard. Once while in a drunken rage he killed his own uncle. For this reason he was banished from the tribe. He therefore went to live on the outskirts of the white frontier settlements, making a living doing odd jobs.

   A white man, a “priest,” felt pity for the young outcast and took him as a helper around the house. One day the priest happened to come upon Kenekuk while the latter was looking through some religious books in the priest’s library. The priest asked Kenekuk what he was doing, and Kenekuk replied that he wished to know what was in these books. The priest replied that the books contained the teachings of the white man’s religion, and that the whites put great store in them. Impressed, Kenekuk asked if he might learn the teachings. The priest consented and the instruction began.

   Later, noting his pupil’s progress, the priest told Kenekuk that if he brought these good teachings back to his own people he would be forgiven by them for the murder of his uncle, as
this would atone for his sin.

Kenekuk applied himself to his studies, and, after he had learned the fundamentals of the white man’s religion from the priest, he brought his own version of what he had learned back to the Kickapoos. As the priest had predicted, Kenekuk was forgiven. Not only was he allowed to return to his tribe and marry, but he also became a leader among them.4

Kenekuk was in his mid-twenties when he returned to a people weary of defending themselves and their homes in the War of 1812.5 By the end of that conflict, even many of those Vermillion Kickapoos who had fought alongside Tecumseh and the Shawnee Prophet were ready to listen to the words of peace and coexistence that Kenekuk had brought with him. Whites who met the Kickapoo Prophet in later years assumed that his preachings of peace and salvation were based solely on Christianity, learned from a priest or a kindly minister. It was Kenekuk’s own interpretation of the Scriptures, however, that he preached to the Kickapoos and other Indians in the Indiana-Illinois region. In fact, his gospel departed significantly from conventional Christianity; it contained an implicit cultural nationalism that merged with, rather than superseded, traditional Indian beliefs.

Shortly after his return, sometime around 1815, the Kickapoo Prophet began telling his people that they had wandered far from God’s teachings. For this reason the Great Spirit had abandoned them, and they had been defeated and dispersed in wars and had lost valuable lands. But according to Kenekuk, God felt lonely and sorrowful without His beloved Kickapoos, and He now had returned to earth to redeem them. God had chosen to reveal Himself through Kenekuk—the Indian Moses—to whom He had left His sacred black coat. By wearing this black coat—God’s holy garment—Kenekuk proved to all that he alone had been ordained to guide his people down the true path. The Indians therefore must no longer pay heed to the alien notions of Protestant ministers or Catholic priests: they should ignore white men dressed in similar black clothing.

The Great Spirit had also given Kenekuk a piece of His heart, which would instruct the Indians in the ways of peace and love. “God took out . . . His own heart,” the Kickapoo Prophet explained, “and sent [it] to teach the red man the way in which he should go.” The Great Spirit’s “heart [is] filled with good knowledge,” and through Kenekuk it “speaks” to the Indians: “This [heart] is from your Father, my children, worship Me.”6

The Great Spirit’s message, delivered through the Kickapoo Prophet, reached the receptive ears of many. Whites were appalled that some Indians actually believed that Kenekuk was the son of God, but they missed the point; it mattered little to the Indians whether Kenekuk was a man or a deity. He was one of them—a fellow tribesman, not a missionary, government official, trader, or settler—a man who was seeking to help them, not to steal their lands or force them to abandon their traditions. The Indians accepted him because he spoke in terms that they understood. Preferring their traditional religious practices, the Kickapoos consistently rejected the overtures of Catholic and Protestant missionaries. Although Kenekuk’s new religion was by no means traditional, it suited the needs of the Vermillion people. They could adopt useful aspects of Christianity, but they did not have to reject the ancient sacred customs, which white ministers insisted that they
Instead, Kenekuk’s syncretic religion allowed them to combine the old ways with the new. As the English traveler Charles Augustus Murray observed, this “miniature Mahomet” had grafted his knowledge of Christianity “upon his Indian prejudices and superstitions.” Yet the basic Christian structure of the new religion was clearly evident; to outsiders the ceremonies seemed to be primitive Roman Catholic rituals. “Their religion and worship in all their parts,” wrote the Presbyterian missionary William D. Smith, “seem to bear a striking resemblance to that of the Roman Catholics, and whatever notions of Christianity they may have, they are . . . decidedly of that character.” The Baptist preacher Isaac McCoy also recognized the similarities between Kenekuk’s religion and Catholicism: “The formula of the Prophet had evidently not been framed from ideas purely Indian, and they more nearly resembled those of the Catholics than any other sect.” The Jesuit priest Benedict Roux also noted the similarities. “It is enough to say to you that they are truly Catholic in desire,” he told his superiors, “and such Catholics in desire that their life gives you a perfect image of that of Christians of the primitive church.”

On the surface, such assessments were accurate, for Kenekuk’s religion had adopted many aspects of Catholicism. In Wisconsin over a century earlier, Jesuit priests had exposed the Kickapoos and other tribes to the prayers and rituals of the Roman Catholic faith. After settling in the area between the Wabash and Vermillion rivers in the eighteenth century, the Kickapoos had lost contact with the priests but had continued to practice some of the Catholic rites. Under Kenekuk these observances were reinforced and intensified.

Indeed, the prophet’s followers worshiped Jesus, the Virgin, and the saints; and they believed in heaven, hell, and purgatory. They also faithfully attended formal services on Sundays and holy days. On a typical Sunday, “criers” ran through the villages, calling believers together for services. As the people arrived, the men moved to one side, the women to the other, the children gathered in between, and everyone stood before a roaring fire in the center of the grounds. After eating a feast prepared by Kenekuk’s most devout adherents, the congregation entered the “church” and sat while the prophet held forth, sometimes for an hour or longer, followed by one or more additional speakers. When they had finished, the celebrants all shook hands and returned to their lodges. One white witness recalled that “no congregation, even in the days of the Puritan fathers, was more decorous” than these Indians.

While looking on during one Kickapoo ceremony that was held under a large, open reed-thatched structure, Charles Murray also noted that the “meeting was conducted with the greatest decorum.” The Indian men removed their hats before entering the hut, just as Catholics did at Mass. After a sermon by one of Kenekuk’s assistants, the ardent congregation sang a hymn. “It was [of] a low, melancholy, and not unmusical air,” wrote Murray, “and was rendered wild and peculiar by the closing of each verse in the minor key.” Spellbound by the fascinating religious rite, the white visitor allowed himself to “entertain hopes, though but faint ones, that this twilight may be the forerunner of the sunrise of the Gospel” among these people.
Men such as Murray found encouragement in the fact that like a Protestant evangelist, the Kickapoo Prophet spoke out against sin and employed the threat of hell in his sermons. “The Great Father gave you a good book filled with commands,” Kenekuk reminded his listeners: “If you follow the commands, you will go into a good place and be happy forever; but if you do not keep them, you will go into a place prepared for the wicked and suffer endless days and nights of grief,” He was convinced that alcoholism threatened the very existence of his people, and he railed against that evil. Those “with bloated faces and swelled eyes occasioned by drunkenness,” he warned, must either find the good road or face eternal damnation. The Son of the Great Spirit “is to come once more, when the wicked will not be noticed by Him—a great many hundreds will be lost; then we will see who has obeyed His book and kept His commands.” Kenekuk predicted that God would soon destroy the evil world: “No supplication will then avail—you will have no opportunity to kneel to Him—the time is past, He will not allow it; your friends cannot intercede—fear will overwhelm you—you will wish to make new resolutions to obey Him, but you cannot, you will go to the burning pits.”

Kenekuk’s adherents could avoid hell fire and brimstone only by renouncing their sins at public confessions on Fridays. But unlike Catholics who earned absolution from a priest by reciting silent prayers, the Indian penitents demanded physical evidence that God had cleansed their souls; therefore, after admitting their wrongful acts, they eagerly submitted to the whip. Illinois settler Patrick Hopkins witnessed one ceremony at which, after a sermon by the prophet and several hymns by the congregation, an Indian stood up and calmly pulled off his shirt, asking to be whipped for his disobedience to the Great Spirit’s commands during the past week. “Fourteen stripes were given him by three Indians near by,” Hopkins recalled, “with smooth hickory rods about three feet long.” The Indian’s face was as expressionless as the bravest of warriors, and he withstood the ordeal “without a movement to indicate pain.” Fifty other Indians then stepped forward to accept the same punishment, each bearing fourteen or twenty-eight lashes “laid on with such force that any one of them left a mark.” After the ceremony the penitents shook hands with their flagellators and returned contentedly to their lodges.

Forgiveness of sin was not the only reason for which Kenekuk appointed men to inflict corporal punishment on wrongdoers. The prophet understood that tribal solidarity was the best insurance against white assaults on his people’s lands, possessions, and culture. Faced in the 1820s with the constant threat of expulsion from the Wabash area, Kenekuk and the other leaders employed the whippings to maintain discipline and as an effective means of strengthening tribal unity. They also knew that the violent anti-American policies of Tecumseh and the Shawnee Prophet had been disastrous, and the chiefs were determined that the Vermillion Kickapoos would avoid similar confrontations in the future. Kenekuk hoped that frontier settlers would accept peaceful and sober Indians as neighbors, and he therefore condemned violence and alcoholism. He commanded his followers to turn the other cheek when they were wronged, and he warned drunkards that they would go to hell if they failed to reform. These admonitions proved remarkably effective. During a time when large numbers of Americans, regardless of race, were suffering from the effects of alcoholism, Kenekuk’s
followers abstained. Their temperance helped to prevent incidents that whites could use as an excuse or justification for attacking or expelling the Indians.

Kenekuk also knew that whites would be more sympathetic if the Indians’ religious practices appeared to be like those of other Americans. Because his disciples were not able to read the Bible, the prophet consecrated and sold each of them a “prayer stick”—a narrow twelve-inch walnut or maple board on which three sets of five traditional Kickapoo figures were carved. These represented the owner’s heart, life, name, friends, and flesh; above these figures was drawn a picture of an Indian church, standing at the edge of a cornfield. Charles Murray noticed that during a Kickapoo ceremony, each worshiper held “a flat board, on which were carved symbols, which answered the purpose of letters, and enabled them to chime in with the prayer or hymn of the preacher.” An Illinois settler recalled that the “boards were uniform in size and appearance, and were held very sacred. No Indian thought of retiring for the night without first consulting his board.” When an adherent of the prophet died, furthermore, his prayer stick was buried with him.\textsuperscript{13}

\textit{Drawing of a Kickapoo prayer stick showing the markings the Indians “used in prayer like Roman beads.” Courtesy of the Kansas State Historical Society.}

Outsiders thought that the prayer sticks bore some resemblance to the rosary; indeed, although the Kickapoos and most American Indians considered four their sacred number, the markings on the boards were arranged like the rosary’s fifteen mysteries, in three groups of five each.\textsuperscript{14} The Indians even manipulated the devices while chanting like Catholics at prayer. The Presbyterian William Smith was fascinated by the “hyeroglyphic characters used in prayer like Roman beads.” Isaac McCoy also wondered about the “arbitrary characters, which they followed up with their finger until the last character admonished them that they had completed the prayer.” McCoy noticed that the Indians went over each figure several times during a service, all the while chanting “in a monotonous sing-song tone.” To him, “the repetitions were exceedingly frequent, almost the same words of a short sentence being repeated many times, and all apparently unmeaning.”\textsuperscript{15}
While meaningless to outsiders such as McCoy, the prayers held deep significance for the Indians, and the similarities between the teachings of Christianity and Kenekuk’s religion should have been evident. But under Kenekuk’s astute guidance, the Kickapoos applied their own interpretations to Christian religious practices; they modified and adopted Catholic and Protestant ideas and symbols to form a theology that was distinctly Indian in character. “They are moral in their deportment and seem very sincere in their religion,” William Smith said.
his Presbyterian superiors. “They have heard that a person called Christ lived and died and is now in heaven, but when I inquired the reason of his death, I could discover nothing more than that they had seen a silver cross, which they had been taught to venerate.” In Smith’s eyes, Kenekuk’s followers were definitely not Christians.16

Although the Kickapoos had put aside the Algonquin medicine bundles that had formerly protected them in their daily lives, had stopped painting their bodies and going to war, and had abandoned many other traditional practices, their religion remained thoroughly in harmony with Indian beliefs. They steadfastly refused to speak English, and they always performed their traditional music and dancing at religious ceremonies. At prayer meetings, moreover, menstruating women were not allowed to participate or go near the place where the “medicine” was kept, indicating that the menstrual taboo was still rigorously enforced. Such practices disturbed many whites, and the Indians’ reverence of Kenekuk, instead of a priest or minister, rankled and frustrated the missionaries. William Smith, for one, realized that although the Kickapoo Prophet ruled “in a manner which would reflect honor on an enlightened statesman,” his “wholly heathen” teachings “would be impossible to break down.”17

Smith’s analysis was correct, for whites found it difficult if not impossible to counter Kenekuk’s teachings, which gave his people the strength and courage to struggle for their rights, as part of the growing nation, and the wisdom to avoid violence against the more powerful Americans. Kenekuk astutely protected the Indians by helping to revitalize their culture and ways. Throughout his life, he effectively resisted efforts by federal officials and missionaries to force his people to profess Christianity or to abandon their lands. His word was not one of rebellion against the United States; his message was peaceful. Despite a hostile and changing environment, his religion kept Indian culture viable. During the first half of the nineteenth century, when many Indians lost their tribal identities, their possessions, and their lands, the Vermillion bands prospered. They owed their survival to Kenekuk, especially to his religious tenets stressing peace, temperance, and land retention, as well as his insistence that men farm the fields—a radical departure from the Indian custom that assigned farming to women. Kenekuk knew why his people endured: “The most of those of my color are foolish and wicked. I have had the good fortune to be instructed by the Great Spirit in a good and correct course.”18 That course proved to be a practical accommodation to white society.