Kenekuk the Kickapoo Prophet

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The precise date of the Kickapoo Prophet’s death remains a mystery, for governmental officials and other whites initially paid little attention to the event. Agent William Richardson’s September 1852 report to the superintendent of Indian Affairs in St. Louis stated merely that the Vermillion people had “lost Keu-e-kuck, their principal chief.” The agent’s apparent lack of interest was not really surprising; a year earlier, jurisdiction over the Kickapoos had been transferred from the Fort Leavenworth Agency to the Great Nemaha Agency, near the eastern border of present-day Kansas and Nebraska. The agents in charge at Great Nemaha—Richardson and his successor, David Vanderslice—knew little about the history or background of the Kickapoos. The agency was a considerable distance from Kenekuk’s village, and neither agent had much contact with the Kickapoos and Potawatomis. Neither apparently had ever met Kenekuk.

Six years elapsed before another federal official mentioned Kenekuk’s passing. In September 1859, Agent W. P. Badger, attempting to explain the failure of Christian missions to the Kickapoos, informed his superiors that Kenekuk’s religion still held a powerful sway over the Indians. The greatest hindrance to the conversion of the Indians, Badger asserted, had been Kenekuk, “who for many years had been their prophet and leader, and who would not allow any innovation upon their original belief.” The agent’s account of the time and circumstances surrounding the prophet’s death, however, was based on secondhand information: “Two or three years since, the small-pox terminated his existence with that of thirty or forty of his infatuated followers, who, remaining with his body after death, were desirous of witnessing his last prophecy, that ‘in three days he would rise again.’”

The most detailed account of Kenekuk’s last hours was written by the Presbyterian missionary William Honnell, years after he had first visited the Kickapoos and Potawatomis in May 1857. Kenekuk and Mecina had been “conspicuous names among the Indians,” Honnell recalled.

The first had been a prophet and the second was a living chief of great influence among them. Kennekuk had died a few years before in style and grandeur, as become a prophet of the Great Spirit of the Indian race. He had become a half convert from his heathen incantations and exhorted his people to embrace the religion of Christ. He would relapse into heathenism again, and under censure of his Christian teachers would weep in such seeming penitence that he was restored to his office of Christian teacher to his tribe. His death in the log church on the Kickapoo village site near Fort Leavenworth was weird and strange. He felt that death was near as he lay writhing and swollen with smallpox, the Indians’ king of terrors. He had his followers to lay him out in the lone, silent church, that he might feel the presence of the great spirit in his dying hour. He muttered incantations and exhortations in turn, and told his deluded people that if he died, he would rise again, as Christ did, on the third day. He died, they waited to see him rise, and

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after three days, amid the wildest dismay, he was left and the infected tribe scattered into the ravines and along the streams of water until one fourth of the nation died. Like some ancient king, he went to the spirit land accompanied or followed by an escort of warriors [and] women and children, composing a vast throng. Their bones, as left to bleach in the woods and in cabins, were often found after months had passed away. Thus died Kennekuk, the Prophet of the Kickapoos.

Later accounts also mentioned that the Indians believed that Kenekuk, like Jesus Christ, would rise again after three days. In the late 1850s a seventeen-year-old girl named Hortense Kookken arrived in Kansas to serve as a teacher in a new Presbyterian school for the Kickapoos. Years later, Kookken told her daughter stories about the Indians, including one about the prophet’s funeral, which she undoubtedly learned from Reverend Honnell. She too mentioned that the tribal members keeping vigil over Kenekuk’s body had become “infested with smallpox [and] scattered up and down the valleys and ravines to their various villages. Many of them, not able to reach their homes, left their bones to bleach along the trails. Hundreds of Kickapoos died.”

Because there were only about four hundred and fifty Vermillion Kickapoos and Potawatomis, a catastrophe of such magnitude would have devastated the band. Official records, however, raise serious doubts as to the accuracy of such stories. Agent Richardson made no mention of smallpox in his 1852 report of Kenekuk’s death; indeed, he thought the Indians were doing rather well and indicated no special concern about their health. “The past year [1852] may well be distinguished as one of remarkable quiet and repose among the Indians embraced within my jurisdiction,” he wrote to his superiors.

Like many whites who were acquainted with Kenekuk, Richardson had mixed feelings about the Kickapoo leader. The agent’s brief eulogy praised the Indian for having commanded “a beneficial influence over a great portion of that tribe for some years before his death, in restraining, by all the means in his power, the introduction and use of spirits.” Richardson also mentioned, however, that the prophet “was notorious for his superstitious quackery—a conjurer of the first water—and regarded by most of his people as possessing supernatural powers.”

Although ethnocentric and condescending, this view of the Kickapoo Prophet was partially accurate. The Vermillion people did believe that the Great Spirit spoke through Kenekuk and had given him special powers. These powers, however, were employed, not for personal gain, but to benefit the entire band. As a charismatic leader, Kenekuk had played a vital role in his followers’ long quest to survive and prosper; his religion had cemented a firm community bond between the Kickapoos and the Potawatomis. Even his death did not disturb their work to ensure a secure future; they built cabins, planted crops, raised livestock, and sold surpluses for profit. They abstained from drinking, gambling, carousing, and other behavior that could not only have eroded their solidarity but also have brought disfavor from the white settlers who flooded into Kansas during the 1850s.

Their religious unity proved invaluable in their subsequent struggle against white encroachment on their lands and possessions. The prophet’s adherents were ever willing to make diplomatic accommodation to the dominant American culture, but they never entirely
capitulated to white pressure. They skillfully used their flexibility to defend against outside threats, and they maintained a separate Indian way of life within a white community.

They faced a difficult time after the loss of Kenekuk, who had been the heart and soul of their courageous stand to survive as a people. By the 1850s whites, who had once referred to lands beyond the Missouri River as the Great American Desert, realized that the region was well suited for farming. With citizens demanding that the federal government open the area for settlement, the commissioner of Indian Affairs obligingly negotiated new treaties with the Vermillion Kickapoos and other bands. In 1854 Kenekuk’s people agreed to sell much of their reservation in exchange for governmental guarantees of protection on their reduced holdings. But almost immediately after they had agreed to the treaty, Congress passed the Kansas-Nebraska Act, and settlers, businessmen, and land speculators poured into the new Kansas Territory.

Thousands of settlers arrived during the 1850s and 1860s, and pressures increased on the Vermillion Band, as well as on the Prairie Potawatomis, Delawares, Osages, Shawnees, Sacs, Foxes, and others to move to Indian Territory (presentday Oklahoma). Successive administrations in Washington, preoccupied first with slavery and then with the Civil War and Reconstruction, showed little concern for a few thousand Indians in Kansas. Left to fend for themselves, most of the bands succumbed to the pressures and moved to Indian Territory. But Kenekuk’s religion had given the Vermillion Kickapoos and Potawatomis the strength to resist, and by the early 1870s they were among the few Indians left in Kansas.

Throughout the history of Indian-white relations in North America, there have been attempts by individual Indians to adapt their tribal cultures to meet the challenges of a changing world. In 1680 the prophet of the Pueblos, Popé, led a revolt that temporarily expelled the Spanish from New Mexico. Eighty-two years later, in Michigan, a Delaware prophet helped to instigate a holy war against Anglo-Americans. An Indian named Pontiac took over that movement and led a massive intertribal rebellion against the British and the American colonists. In the War of 1812 the Shawnee Prophet and Tecumseh forged a similar intertribal attack on the Americans. In the late nineteenth century, a Paiute named Wovoka reported that the Great Spirit had prescribed a new dance—the Ghost Dance—that would reunite Indians with their ancestors; the great tribes were to rise again to reclaim their lost traditions, cultures, and lands from the whites. Unlike Kenekuk’s peaceful efforts, these and most of the many other Indian revitalization movements met with disaster. Violence against the powerful whites rarely proved to be a viable undertaking. The Spaniards reconquered the Pueblos in 1692, British troops eventually crushed Pontiac’s rebellion, the Americans defeated the Indians and killed Tecumseh at the Battle of the Thames in 1813, and the United States Army massacred over one hundred Sioux ghost dancers in 1890.

Kenekuk’s followers never resorted to violence to achieve their goals. The Kickapoo Prophet’s religious tenets prohibited that course of action, and the peaceful ways of the Vermillion Kickapoos and Potawatomis benefited those Indians greatly. During the remaining years of the nineteenth century and to the present day, they have labored to win the respect and acceptance of their Kansas neighbors. Unified by the Kickapoo Prophet’s
teachings, however, they have never forgotten their tribal heritage, and their acceptance of white culture has always stopped short of assimilation. They had followed the path to success blazed by Kenekuk; they heeded his advice and obeyed the commands of the Great Spirit. “One step a day in the narrow path, is better than fifteen steps a day in the road to ruin,” Kenekuk had once told them. Because they listened to their religious leader, the Kickapoos and Potawatomis avoided the ruinous road.

Today the small Kickapoo reservation, one of only three Indian reservations remaining in the state of Kansas, suggests that Kenekuk’s religion was proof against all white men’s schemes to assimilate or to dispossess the Vermillion people. Although his triumphs did not come on the warpath, the Kickapoo Prophet’s life and achievements should not be forgotten. Kenekuk, the messenger of the Great Spirit, was truly an American Indian patriot.