

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Cross-Cultural Perceptions of Technology and Magic in the Ghost Dance, Boxer Uprising, and Maji Maji Rebellion

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Abstract

This article explores the widespread phenomenon of anti-colonial movements that relied on magical rituals for protection against European weapons. It examines both the beliefs of the magical practitioners themselves, and those of colonizing observers whose fascination with stories of “primitive magic” contributed to their contrasting self-representations as superior beings in possession of technological wonders. North America’s Ghost Dance movement, China’s Boxer Rebellion, and East Africa’s Maji Maji uprising took place on three different continents but occurred almost simultaneously. The cases come from a narrow period of time, roughly 1890 to 1910, during a peak of colonial violence all over the world.

Keywords: Ghost Dance; Wounded Knee massacre; Boxer Rebellion; Maji Maji Rebellion; sympathetic magic; apotropaic magic; firearms; frontiers; New Imperialism

This article explores the widespread phenomenon of anti-colonial movements that relied on magical rituals for protection against modern firearms. It examines both the beliefs of the magical practitioners themselves, and those of colonizing observers whose fascination with stories of “primitive magic” contributed to their contrasting self-representation as superior beings in possession of technological wonders. The cases come from a narrow period of time, roughly 1890 to 1910, during a peak of colonial violence all over the world. North America’s Ghost Dance movement, China’s Boxer uprising, and East Africa’s Maji Maji rebellion took place on three different continents but occurred almost simultaneously. All three movements offered their followers magical defenses against the otherwise unstoppable power of industrial arms.¹

The firearms manufactured in the late nineteenth century were not just terrifying, but also seemingly supernatural in their ability to project the users’ destructive will through space. The concept of “action at a distance” is a common feature of magic as

¹Heather Streets-Salter and Trevor R. Getz, *Empires and Colonies in the Modern World: A Global Perspective* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 301–28.

understood across cultures. It is thus unsurprising that people on violent colonial frontiers would turn to spiritual defenses against modern repeating firearms that killed from afar and at lightning speed. Scholars of anthropology, history, and religious studies have explored popular reactions to unfamiliar technologies by building on concepts like “millennial movements,” “cargo cults,” and “fetishes.” They also point toward reciprocal encounters in which industrialized and non-industrialized societies have constructed new traditions through the exchange of ideas about menacing and miraculous objects.²

Outside of these academic discussions, the stories of the Ghost Dancers, Boxers, and Maji Maji rebels are often retold as tragedies in which colonized peoples clung to premodern superstitions and thus doomed themselves to defeat. Typically, the foreign conquerors are remembered as immoral but rational, and the indigenous victims as noble but irrational. And yet, many common distinctions between rational and irrational, foreign and indigenous, do not fit the historical record. A closer look at the three events addressed here reveals the following: (1) Most defensive spiritual practices were not premodern or entirely traditional, but rather syncretic, improvisational, and informed by previous encounters with European science and technology. (2) Self-proclaimed European rationalists were themselves deeply engrossed in magical practices; they observed no hard boundary between science and magic, they imported and exported magical ideas from the rest of the world, and they routinely considered the possibility that various kinds of “primitive” magic worked. And (3) mesmerist and spiritualist concepts of magnetism and invisible fluids permitted self-styled rationalists in Europe and North America to develop similar beliefs about unseen forces, and even to accept “primitive” magic as real (though they generally insisted that it was misunderstood by the practitioners themselves).

Colonial Fantasies and Myths of White Gods

In 1888, on the eve of the events described in this article, Rudyard Kipling published a curious and prescient story, *The Man Who Would be King*. In it a pair of European troublemakers sets out on a self-serving expedition to the Afghan region of Kafiristan. They succeed for a time in impersonating kings and incarnate gods before being unmasked by the locals and cast down.³ The story reads like a prophetic allegory for the century of colonization and decolonization that would follow—an era in which

²Peter Worsley, *The Trumpet Shall Sound: A Study of ‘Cargo’ Cults in Melanesia* (London: MacGibbon and Kee, 1957); Eric Hobsbawm, *Primitive Rebels: Studies in Archaic forms of Social Movements in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (New York: Praeger, 1963); David Ownby, “Chinese Millenarian Traditions: The Formative Age,” *American Historical Review* 104, 5 (1999): 1513–30; Mark Elvin, “Mandarins and Millenarians: Reflections on the Boxer Uprising of 1899–1900,” *Journal of the Anthropological Society of Oxford* 10, 3 (1979): 115–38; Charles de Brosses, Rosalind C. Morris, and Daniel H. Leonard, *The Returns of Fetishism: Charles Brosses and the Afterlives of an Idea; with a New Translation of On the Worship of Fetish Gods* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017); J. Lorand Matory, *The Fetish Revisited: Marx, Freud, and the Gods Black People Make* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018); William Mazzarella, *The Mana of Mass Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017).

³Rudyard Kipling, “The Man Who Would Be King,” in *The Phantom Rickshaw and other Tales* (London: Sampson Low, Marston, Searle, and Rivington, 1888), 66–104.

Europeans' scientific and military capabilities first exceeded that of all past generations and peoples, followed by one in which their pretensions of benevolent superiority were thoroughly discredited. Kipling's picaresque tale reflects an almost Nietzschean yearning in the minds of countless Europeans and Americans: the desire to tell and retell a story in which their technological prowess gets them mistaken for sorcerers and gods.⁴ This is, of course, the central theme of Mark Twain's *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*, published just one year after Kipling's story (though in this case, the protagonist is a time-traveling American who dazzles his own European ancestors with scientific wonders). These tales were overwhelmingly popular in the same decade that Nietzsche first asked his readers to consider one of the traumatic questions of modernity: how should humans understand themselves after attaining the powers once ascribed to the gods? Again and again, writers returned to this theme, sometimes with humor and wit, at other times with cultural arrogance and inspiration, but also with dread. Beneath these narratives of Europeans' new and transcendent power—real or imagined—lay true ambivalence about technology, magic, religion, and secularization.⁵

The widespread and only half-concealed fantasy of European apotheosis may have first entered the culture through tales of Spanish conquest in Mexico. For centuries, European readers have been captivated by the story of Aztecs mistaking steel-clad, gunpowder-wielding Spanish invaders for foreign gods, or even for their own returning Quetzalcoatl. But whose story is this? Camilla Townsend explored this question systematically in a 2003 article for the *American Historical Review*—and her answer was not a simple one. Townsend found little evidence to support the familiar story that Nahuas, upon first beholding the Spanish, perceived them to be gods. The bearded invaders were clearly men, but men with extraordinary tools—real technologies with almost magical properties. A few decades after the events in question, however, a mix of native and European writers (it is hard to disentangle the two sets of voices in sixteenth-century hybrid texts) were telling this tale of mistaken identity. Townsend offers a compelling argument that the notion of Cortés as the returning Quetzalcoatl is an amalgamation of different myths and events that only came together years after the conquest. But just how did native Mexicans view the Spanish? Perhaps not as familiar gods, but not as normal men either. Townsend suggests that in order to determine what native Mexicans “were actually thinking, we must put technology in all of its forms—beyond mere weaponry—front and center in the story.” In the Kipling story, it was the Martini-Henry rifles more than anything that elevated the reputation of the English freebooters among the Afghans; and in the Mexican conquest, it was the Spaniards' arms that most impressed the Nahuas. Townsend suggests that the European invaders—with their horses, steel blades, armor, and thundering firearms—must have struck native observers as fitting somewhere on the cosmological spectrum between humans, demons, and gods. Similar issues arose in the Spanish mind: who were the priests and sorcerers of Mexico? Were they tricksters and charlatans or something more dangerous? Perhaps

⁴Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science* (Leipzig: E. W. Fritzsche, 1887 [1st German ed. 1882]), 167–68; Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, James Strachey, trans. (New York: W. W. Norton, 1961 [1st German ed. 1930]), 37–52.

⁵Mark Twain, *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* (New York: Charles L. Webster, 1889). On the celebration of European technology and deceptive stage magic abroad, see Graham M. Jones, *Magic's Reason: An Anthropology of Analogy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 27–43.

they communicated with invisible beings and harnessed magical forces just as real and as menacing as their own.⁶

The classic debate over myths of European divinity arose among historians and anthropologists studying early colonial encounters in the Pacific. The widely repeated story that Captain Cook was embraced as a god upon arrival in Hawaii was the subject of heated debate in the early 1990s. Did local people for a time embrace Cook as the god Lono before killing him, or is this just a European fable? Once again, the fable works as a satisfying parable of colonialization and decolonization—and perhaps that is why readers have been drawn to it.⁷ The critics of these myth-of-the-white-gods stories usually point out the ways that they reinforce the notion of Europeans as rational actors, and of non-Europeans as irrational beings and captives of magical thinking. In truth, though, the whole dichotomy is anachronistic. Records from colonial frontiers reveal not a sharp contrast between European and indigenous conceptions of magic and divinity, but instead shocking similarities.⁸ At the heart of Townsend's inquiry into the Cortés myth is the issue of whether our current categorization of phenomena as technological, magical, or religious applies to the sixteenth century. This article pursues the same question with respect to the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries across several distinct cultural frontiers.⁹

Rituals of Regeneration and Invulnerability: The Ghost Dance

The sixteenth-century encounter with Europeans was a cataclysm for native Mesoamerica; the same could be said of the nineteenth century for native North America. It was an era of violence, dispossession, and demographic collapse for the peoples of the Great Lakes and Great Plains. The story of the Lakota has a special place in national memory, but their experiences were shared by countless other ethnic communities throughout the American West. Victimized by irregular land seizures, defeated in the Great Sioux War of 1876, and pushed onto ever smaller and less desirable tracts of land, the shrinking native population of the Great Plains and Rockies faced an existential threat from Anglo America. In 1889, North and South Dakota were admitted to the United States as states, and the conquered lands carved

⁶Camilla Townsend, "Burying the White Gods: New Perspectives on the Conquest of Mexico," *American Historical Review* 108, 3 (2003): 659–87.

⁷Serge Tcherkézoff, *First Contacts in Polynesia: The Samoan Case (1722–1848)*, *Western Misunderstandings about Sexuality and Divinity* (Canberra: Australian National University Press, 2008), 113–58; Debbie Bird Rose, "Worshipping Captain Cook," *Social Analysis* 34 (1993): 43–49; Gananath Obeyesekere, *The Apotheosis of Captain Cook: European Mythmaking in the Pacific* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992); Marshall Sahlins, *How "Natives" Think: About Captain Cook, For Example* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995). In the twentieth century, European and Americans' outsized representations of Melanesian cargo cults seem rooted in the same colonial psychology; David W. Akin, *Colonialism, Maasina Rule, and the Origins of Malaitan Kastom* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2013), 290–99.

⁸On self-styled European rationalism, see Jones, *Magic's Reason*, 115–37; Peter van der Veer, *The Modern Spirit of Asia: The Spiritual and the Secular in China and India* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013); and Paul A. Cohen, "Time, Culture, and Christian Eschatology: The Year 2000 in the West and the World," *American Historical Review* 104, 5 (1999): 1615–28, 1625–26.

⁹For an earlier cross-cultural study, see John S. Galbraith, "Appeals to the Supernatural: African and New Zealand Comparisons with the Ghost Dance," *Pacific Historical Review* 51, 2 (1982): 115–33.

out of the Great Sioux reservation were swiftly surveyed and homesteaded by outsiders. The Sioux, now confined to five smaller reservations, survived on provisions distributed by the U.S. Government—provisions that often failed to arrive. It was hard to imagine any grounds for hope.¹⁰

But hope did arrive. Not on the wind, but on the railroad; and not from the government, but in the form of a new circle dance.¹¹ From hundreds of miles to the west, in the Walker River Basin of California, a prophetic message arrived that would soon sweep across native America. On the first day of 1889, a solar eclipse had plunged the valley into darkness and launched the career of a Paiute man named Wovoka. As the moon passed between the sun and his face, Wovoka fell into a trance, and his soul ascended to the heavens. Afterwards, he told his story to many people in many ways, and with it his prophecies. For tribes facing the desperate conditions of that era, two elements of his message must have been especially welcome: he predicted that the grasses would grow green again, and that the dead would rise from the grave. Wovoka told his students that they need not wait long: Jesus was already walking among them.¹²

Wovoka preached a simple moral code and instructed his followers to dance. He claimed the power to control the weather and to fend off natural disasters. Somewhere between a preacher, a prophet, and a performer, Wovoka left his identity shrouded in mystery. He was widely believed to be the Messiah, though he sometimes denied it (perhaps intentionally echoing the enigmatic answers that Jesus gave to the same question). He performed a variety of magic tricks or miracles (the difference, of course, is in the eye of the beholder). Using his black hat and eagle feather, he drew people into trances, and made objects appear and disappear before their eyes. On more than one occasion, Wovoka impressed observers by magically repelling shotgun pellets (or perhaps dust) fired from his brother's gun. Among his followers and imitators, the protective spells were soon augmented by "ghost shirts" that promised invulnerability to bullets.¹³

¹⁰Pekka Hämäläinen, *Lakota America: A New History of Indigenous Power* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019), chs. 8, 9.

¹¹All subsequent scholarship on the Ghost Dance is informed by ethnographic work carried out by James Mooney from 1890 to 1894. Much of his documentation is held by the Smithsonian Institution and the Library of Congress. His findings were first published as *The Ghost Dance Religion and the Sioux Outbreak of 1890*, *14th Annual Report of the Bureau of Ethnology, Smithsonian Institution* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1896). In 1932, John Neihardt published a mediated autobiography of Wounded Knee survivor Black Elk, a work that continued to shape debates on the subject after a revival of interest in the 1960s; *Black Elk Speaks* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 2004). Since the 1980s, the Ghost Dance has been the subject of sustained academic research by both native and non-native scholars: Raymond J. De Maille, "The Lakota Ghost Dance: An Ethnohistorical Account," *Pacific Historical Review* 51, 4 (1982): 385–405; Galbraith, "Appeals," 115–33; Gregory E. Smoak, *Ghosts Dances and Identity: Prophetic Religion and American Indian Ethnogenesis in the Nineteenth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006); Rani-Henrik Andersson, *The Lakota Ghost Dance of 1890* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2008); Benjamin R. Kracht, *Religious Revitalization among the Kiowas: The Ghost Dance, Peyote, and Christianity* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2018).

¹²Three versions of "Messiah Letter," in Mooney, *Ghost Dance*, 780–81. Arnold Krupat, "Patterson's Life; Black Hawk's Story; Native American Elegy," *American Literary History* 22, 3, (2010): 527–52, 541–42.

¹³Alice Beck Kehoe, *The Ghost Dance: Ethnohistory and Revitalization* (New York: Holt Rhinehart and Winston, 1989), 35–38; Smoak, *Ghost Dances*, chs. 4–5.

In the early 1890s, anthropologist James Mooney crisscrossed the American West, interviewing Ghost Dance participants about their experiences. He interviewed Wovoka, took his picture, and traveled from tribe to tribe in order to learn how the prophet's message was received. The movement was so complex, so endlessly fascinating, that Mooney was frustrated by the broader public's narrow obsession with one thing: the magic shirts. They were not, he maintained, a central part of the movement among the Paiutes; but as the Ghost Dance made its way from Nevada to the Dakotas, the shirts grew more important to the dancers. And this should come as no surprise. Destitute, starved, pushed into reservations, and guarded by armed men, what person would not dream of some special weapon or magical shield? If the ghost shirts did not come from Wovoka himself, perhaps they emerged from the dynamic amalgam of religious practices at the crossroads of Mormonism and traditional religion. The images of sun, moon, and stars that decorate surviving ghost shirts do look strikingly like masonic or Mormon iconography, leaving many (including Mooney) to speculate about a direct connection. He suggested that some version of the Mormon endowment robe may have been spread by missionaries to the Shoshone and finally to the Arapaho and Sioux in the form of protective ghost shirts, now further adorned with eagle feathers.¹⁴

In the fall and early winter of 1890, Ghost Dancers gathered together on the remaining Sioux reservation lands. They danced relentlessly in the desperate hope that when the green prairie grass of spring emerged from the frozen turf, their lost loved ones would return, their herds would return, and their land would be healed. Hopes seemed to rise even as conditions worsened. No one's faith was stronger than that of Kicking Bear. He and Short Bull had traveled to Nevada with a delegation of plains leaders, met Wovoka in person, and returned convinced that his prophecies were true. Kicking Bear believed fervently in the power of the ghost shirts, and he was not alone. At the end of October, Short Bull preached to his people a sermon of deliverance that recalled the Exodus story: "If the soldiers surround you four deep, three of you, on whom I have put holy shirts, will sing a song, which I have taught you ... some of them will drop dead. Then the rest will start to run, but their horses will sink into the earth also." The Lakota soaked their shirts in potions, sang incantations over them, and wore them to dance the circle. When the crisis came, they donned their shirts like armor. But the shirts did not work.¹⁵

If the Ghost Dance filled the Lakota with confidence, it filled white settlers with irrational fear. Panicked locals and ill-prepared government administrators called for reinforcements. The reinforcements arrived in November in the form of the Seventh Cavalry. Convinced, probably erroneously, that Sitting Bull led the forces of subversion, U.S. officials sought to arrest him on the Standing Rock Reservation. In the ensuing shootout, Sitting Bull was killed, and the conflict snowballed. Lakota from Standing Rock fled the reservation to join Ghost Dancers and refugees who had already left camps in Rosebud and Pine Ridge. What followed was hardly a war, a campaign, or even a battle. On 28 December, the Seventh Cavalry under Colonel

¹⁴Mooney, *Ghost Dance*, 764–76, 789–90; *Ghosts Shirts* [physical artifacts], Yellowstone County Museum, Billings Montana and Glasgow Museums, UK (latter now returned to Lakota descendants); Sam Madra, "The Wounded Knee Ghost Dance Shirt," *Journal of Museum Ethnology* 8 (1996): 41–58; Smoak, *Ghost Dances*, 72–79; and William G. McLoughlin, "Ghost Dance Movements: Some Thoughts on Definition Based on Cherokee History," *Ethnohistory* 37, 1 (1990): 25–44.

¹⁵Mooney, *Ghost Dance*, 894; "Shortbull's Sermon," in *ibid.*, 789.

Forsyth reached a camp of fleeing Lakota on the banks of Wounded Knee Creek. Negotiations for surrender began immediately. But the next day, peace was not at hand. The Ghost Dancers began their ritual even as the army set its artillery in place. Not all the Lakota were of one mind, and not all were Ghost Dancers. But Yellow Bird, a true believer, attempted to rally his people. They were surrounded by better armed and equipped U.S. soldiers, but he urged them to resist. The shirts, he claimed, would protect them.

Then a small mistake became a grave misfortune. As the army moved in to disarm the Lakota, one man was confused. The details are unclear: he struggled, resisted, or refused to surrender his rifle. One way or another, the gun went off. Then all hell broke loose. The cavalry fired relentlessly into the Lakota camp—not an army encampment, but a camp filled with families. More than two hundred people were killed. One woman shot that day was treated in a nearby church. Her ghost shirt had yielded to the bullet. In apparent despair she told her caregivers “Take it off. They told me a bullet would not go through. Now I don’t want it anymore.”¹⁶

It is tempting to think of the Ghost Dancers as premodern people, caught suddenly in the jaws of modernity. This could not be farther from the truth. Among the most ardent believers were those with great experience in the larger world. Wovoka’s teachings did not diffuse slowly across North America. The movement spread like wildfire through modern transit and modern communication networks among Indians who had traveled extensively in Anglo-America and beyond. Western tribes sought out the prophet’s guidance in cross-country missions that read more like Victorian travelogues than old winter-count tales. The Cheyenne Ghost Dance leader Porcupine described his travels in the fall of 1889 thus: “I left the reservation with two other Cheyennes through Washakie and took the Union Pacific railroad at Rawlins. We got on early in the morning about breakfast, rode all day on the railroad.” They rode the train to Fort Hall and met with members of other tribes. He stayed for ten days, discussing regional and national politics, then made a series of connections by rail and road through Idaho, Utah, and into Nevada where he met with Wovoka.¹⁷ Sitting Bull, Short Bull, and Kicking Bear (each of whom played central roles in the Dakota Ghost Dance movement) also undertook this journey, crossing the Rockies by rail to meet Wovoka. They returned to the Dakota reservations to report on their discoveries in April of 1890.¹⁸ And they were not the only ones riding the rails with tidings of the new revelations. Young students and recent graduates of Pennsylvania’s Carlisle Indian School, whose social connections crossed virtually all tribal boundaries, were instrumental in spreading Wovoka’s message.¹⁹ They were literate, well-traveled, and often inspired by the good news. Some of the best extant written sources on the Ghost Dance are sermons taken as dictation by Carlisle-educated converts.²⁰ Ghost Dance enthusiasts made good use

¹⁶Quoted in *ibid.*, 790; Robert M. Utley, *Last Days of the Sioux Nation*, 2d ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), ch. 12.

¹⁷Porcupine’s account in Mooney, *Ghost Dance*, 793–96.

¹⁸Mooney, *Ghost Dance*, 820–21; James Overholt, “The Ghost Dance of 1890 and the Nature of the Prophetic Process,” *Ethnohistory* 21, 1 (1974): 37–53.

¹⁹Mooney, *Ghost Dance*, 820.

²⁰Letters dictated by Casper Edson and the daughter of Short Black Nose, in Mooney, *Ghost Dance*, 780, 900.

not just of railways but also of post offices, which now existed on reservation lands and could be used to exchange the latest news.

The people shot down at Wounded Knee were no strangers to modern industrial technology. Among the survivors was Black Elk, who had only recently returned from his global travels as part of the Buffalo Bill Wild West Show. In 1886, he had departed on a series of tours by train and steamship that took him across the country and across the Atlantic. He performed in London for Queen Victoria and for the assembled multitudes at New York's Madison Square Garden. He returned to the Dakotas in 1889 and soon encountered the inspiring new Ghost Dance. Black Elk had fought the U.S. Cavalry in 1876, he had traveled the world in 1886, and he had met people from many nations along the way. When he saw field guns pointed at Wounded Knee camp, he knew exactly what they were and where they came from.²¹

If the whole idea of ghost shirts seems improbable, perhaps we should recall the wide range of magical beliefs that existed throughout Indigenous and Anglo-America at the time. The "Messiah Craze" was neither ancient nor insular. For quite some time, improbable beliefs had been moving back and forth between Native and Anglo-American communities through both social contact and print culture.²² By the 1880s, a good number of Indians were reading newspapers, writing for them, and seeing themselves reflected on the printed page. They had long encountered ideas disseminated by Catholic and Protestant missionaries, and now messages from telegraph newsfeeds, traveling wonderworkers, and Mormon neighbors. We should also consider this process in reverse. What messages from native America reached Anglo-America, and how did they shape the recipients' worldviews?

In the fall of 1890, the Ghost Dance was a favorite topic for writers of all sorts, generating a rich but confusing record. Missionaries worried about spiritual contagion, military commanders fretted over the danger of rebellion, anthropologists mused over the meaning of the ritual, and a wide array of observers (Indian and non-Indian) provided descriptions of the Ghost Dancers for eager newspaper editors. The subject was not just a favorite in western states where the events touched the readers' lives directly; the Ghost Dance was big news everywhere. These were the waning days of frontier life when all things Western captivated Easterners and urbanites. Wild West shows toured the United States and Europe, reenacting events from the recent past. In spectacles that blurred the line between reality and performance, surviving participants from the wars of the 1870s and 1880s—Sitting Bull, Red Cloud, and later Geronimo and Chief Joseph—portrayed themselves in theatrical battles against their erstwhile enemies. Paradoxically, even as the last Indian tribes were confined to reservations, American print culture flooded readers' imaginations with galloping horsemen, Indian warriors, and charging buffalo. Sketches by Frederick Remington and prints from Currier and Ives spread romantic and tragic images of the native West. The violence and desperation of the final phase of conquest held a tragic appeal for white audiences—but there was more to it than that. The Ghost Dance also spoke to other familiar obsessions of nineteenth-century America: prophecy, the spirit world, and forays into the land of the dead.²³

²¹Neihardt, *Black Elk*, chs. 21–24; Kehoe, *Ghost Dance*, ch. 5.

²²Anthony F. C. Wallace, *The Death and Rebirth of the Seneca* (New York: Random House, 1992), 239–54.

²³De Maille, "Lakota," 385–405; Andersson, *Lakota*, ch. 5; Linda Scarangelli McNenly, *Native Performers in Wild West Shows* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2015), ch. 3.

For some, the news from Nevada and the Dakotas must have sounded like the miraculous phenomena that swept through Upstate New York half a century before. When describing the Ghost Dancers, some journalists wrote with condescension about magical practices that they viewed as symptoms of ignorance or fraud. Others were more cautious, recounting events with a wary sense of possibility. Could the stories be true? The *Washington Post* printed a report from a Pawnee informant who had traveled four hundred miles to witness the Ghost Dance and answer this very question. He recounted his own skeptical attitude upon first witnessing the ritual. Initially, the whole event seemed staged: the dancers' trance, the magic feather that made them fall to the ground, the visions of resurrected relatives and earthly regeneration—it looked ridiculous. But then he tried the dance himself, and he felt the magic. A “queer feeling like a prickling sensation” came over him. Sensing that the ritual would soon “have complete control,” he pulled his hands away from the other dancers and leapt from the circle.

For most readers, huge outdoor meetings with ecstatic dancing and singing were a familiar aspect of American life. Equally familiar were séance circles in which entranced spiritualists clasped hands and listened for the faint voices of the dead. The letter to the *Post* describes a mix of the two. Seeking to explain the circle in terms that echoed Mesmer, the writer concluded that the dancers were sincere: “Those who fell down did not make believe or do it for fun. I think it is like electricity worked up in the human body, and by clasping hands in a circle the weakest or most sensitive ones are influenced first.” Just in case the obvious parallel was lost on anyone, he observed that the whole thing is “something like what white people call spiritualism.” One imagines the *Post* reader nodding his head over the morning paper and thinking “perhaps such a thing is possible.” Then the article shifts course one final time. The author reconsiders whether this Ghost Dance is truly a kind of spiritualism—a consequence of electricity or physics—or whether it is something even more familiar to American religious life. After all, he remarks, “Even educated white people believe in the coming of a Messiah and the end of the world.” The Ghost Dance could be viewed as something novel, threatening, and barbaric, or it could be viewed as something quite ordinary in a land where séances, tent revivals, and millenarian visions abounded.²⁴

Some reporters favored empirical investigations into this new Indian magic. Did the spiritual defenses offered by the Ghost Dance ritual actually work against modern weapons? In the weeks leading up to the Wounded Knee Massacre, the *Omaha Bee* took great interest in this question. Its journalists explained that since the time of Little Bighorn, Indian warriors had been soaking their shirts in a potion that reputedly warded off bullets. In a grisly experiment, a ghost dancer protected by this “charmed raiment” stood before his peers and urged them to take a shot. They did as they were told, and “at the first shot that was fired the brave, who had on the bullet proof shirt, fell to the ground, mortally wounded.”²⁵ Versions of this story, in which the Ghost-Dance magic failed, circulated widely in the national press. The *New York Times* offered some reassurance to its white readership. As the conflict at Pine Ridge

²⁴“What Is the Ghost Dance? Its Theory Expounded by an Indian Who Has Been There,” *Washington Post*, 15 May 1891: 8; Whitney R. Cross, *The Burned-over District: The Social and Intellectual History of Enthusiastic Religion in Western New York, 1800–1850* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982).

²⁵“Great Military Move ... Pine Ridge Agency (Via Rushville, Neb.), Nov. 29” *Omaha Sunday Bee*, 30 Nov. 1890: 1.

came to a head, it reported, “In the war dance to-day one of the Indians who thought himself invulnerable to bullets was shot in the thigh.”²⁶

The shirts provoked the interest of many observers. An Episcopal priest at Pine Ridge and Standing Rock seemed fascinated by the fact that the “mysterious” bulletproof garment was really nothing more than a “calico shirt and worn like a blouse.”²⁷ Some attempted a kind of academic inquiry into the shirts. E. N. Yates, writing for magazines and newspapers, took an evenhanded anthropological approach. Sidestepping supernatural explanations, he still saw the shirts as a key to the great political mobilization of Indians. The Sioux were drawn into the movement because they were “assured of the invulnerability of the Ghost Dance Shirt.”²⁸

White observers puzzled over the beliefs of Native Americans as the “Messiah Craze” spread across the country. Were these ideas old or new? And which Indians believed in them? Whites who worked most closely with the western tribes did their best to distinguish between two groups of Indians: those whom they saw as acculturated modernizers, and those who clung to traditional beliefs. But these categories fall apart in the face of overwhelming evidence that the Ghost Dance was spreading rapidly among all sorts of native communities. At Rosebud Agency, Major Wright thought that the new religious fanaticism had spread among “non-progressive” Indians. But General Miles, trying desperately to quarantine the transmission of the “Messiah Craze,” found that it was spreading not so much by foot and horseback as along the lines of the Union Pacific Railway.²⁹ If this was so, then it was Indians with cash in their pockets and tickets in their hands who were spreading word of the coming millennium.

In the late nineteenth century, the center of America’s project to acculturate the next generation of native elites was the Carlisle Indian School. Its founding leader, Richard Pratt was proud of the institution’s accomplishments. The school celebrated its ability to purge students of their traditional culture and instill the values and virtues of Anglo-American society. But in 1890, Pratt knew something was wrong. He sent out a questionnaire to the military and the Bureau of Indian Affairs officers to learn more about the “Messiah Craze.”³⁰ Among other things, he asked, “Do the educated Indians believe in it?” The word from Pine Ridge was that the dancers believed the returning messiah would “come to save the Indians with the long hair first.”³¹ BIA officials routinely categorized Indian men by the length of their hair. Short hair signified civilization and progress in their eyes. It was among the long-haired Indians that they expected outbreaks of Ghost Dance beliefs. Indeed, as

²⁶“To Disarm the Hostiles ... Pine Ridge, Agency, S.D., Nov. 28,” *New York Times*, 29 Nov. 1890: 1; Jerome Ch’en, “The Nature and Characteristics of the Boxer Movement,” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 23, 2 (1960): 287–308.

²⁷“Bishop Hare’s Views. Sioux Falls, S.D., Nov. 19,” *Omaha Daily Bee*, 20 Nov. 1890.

²⁸“That Strange Craze: First Authentic Story of the Ghost Dance Mania ... Guthrie, O.K. Jan. 12,” *Wichita Daily Eagle*, 14 Jan. 1900.

²⁹Wright and Miles quoted in “Situation Serious ... Washington, Nov. 21”; and “Views of Army Officers ... Chicago, Nov. 21,” *Indianapolis Journal*, 22 Nov. 1890.

³⁰“The Messiah Craze: Interesting Facts about Its Origin and Extent. Carlisle, Penn., Nov. 23,” *New York Times*, 24 Nov. 1890.

³¹Crooked Nose, “Dear Brother...,” *New York Times*, 24 Nov. 1890.

General Miles and others noted, virtually all of the “non-progressive Indians believe it”—but then again, many others did as well.³²

Wovoka (also known by the Anglo-American name, Jack Wilson) hardly fit their expectations for a culturally benighted, long-haired traditionalist. Surviving photos of Wilson show a neatly dressed man in a felt hat and three-piece suit. The hunt for long-haired external agitators turned out to be a red herring. Even as the Wounded Knee tragedy was unfolding in the Dakotas, scholars at the American Folklore Society were meeting at Columbia University to make sense of the messianic movement. The anthropologists were not drawn into the panic over long-haired subversives, and they were far less likely to make simple distinctions between the acculturated and “superstitious.” Daniel S. Martin, who spoke at the event, struck closer to the truth: “There seems to be a strong impulse ... to excitements like this Indian craze among all oppressed races. A short time previous to the beginning of the Civil War, a great craze took possession of all the negroes in one part of Kentucky.”³³ What long-haired and short-haired Indians shared was their membership in an oppressed group. Martin might well have added that the suffering of the Civil War had spread new mystical beliefs amongst whites with equal speed.³⁴ Is this not the essence of a millennial movement: amidst great suffering in the present, a divine force returns from the past to save the future.

In the fall of 1890, some of the manifestations of the “messiah craze” were in the form of traditional Native American dances; at other times, Ghost Dance prophecies were communicated in a medium most familiar to American Protestants: the sermon. An official at Rosebud, alarmed by Short Bull’s sermon at Red Leaf Camp, wired its contents to the papers. Today, the words sound less like a voice from the deep Indigenous past and more like a Passover Seder recalling the Exodus. In it, Short Bull rallied his followers to don their “holy shirts” and face the enemy without fear. He foretold that their opponents’ “horses will sink into the earth. The riders will jump from their horses, but they will sink into the earth” and their guns, which “belong to our Father in heaven. He will see that they do no harm.”³⁵

One wonders how all of this sounded to those reading the newspapers—frightening? Yes, but also familiar. These Indian “fanatics” went to church, attended revivals, saw the world from the windows of train cars, and even organized themselves in fraternal lodges like so many of the white men of late nineteenth-century America. They awaited the return of the messiah, divine justice in the land, and a reunion with the dead. Millions of people across North America believed more or less the same thing.³⁶

³²“The Messiah Craze: Interesting Facts,” *New York Times*, 24 Nov. 1890.

³³“Weird Things in Dreams: The Indian Messiah and other Superstitions,” *New York Times*, 29 Nov. 1890: 8.

³⁴Owen Davies, *A Supernatural War: Magic, Divination and Faith during the First World War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019); Mark A. Lause, *Free Spirits: Spiritualism, Republicanism and Radicalism in the Civil War Era* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2016).

³⁵“Short Bull’s Sermon ... Chicago, Nov. 21,” *Indianapolis Journal*, 22 Nov. 1890.

³⁶“The Story of Two Reliable Scouts. Omaha, Neb., Nov. 22,” *Sunday Herald* (Salt Lake City), 23 Nov. 1890, reports the existence of “150 Lodges of Wounded Knee Fanatics.” Kehoe, *Ghost Dance*, 68–69; L. G. Moses, “‘The Father Tells Me So!’ Wovoka: The Ghost Dance Prophet,” *American Indian Quarterly* 9, 3 (1985): 335–51.

The Boxer Uprising: A Study in Transpacific Cultural Representations

At the dawn of the twentieth century, the world was becoming a more intimate place, as new patterns of communication and migration accelerated contacts among distant peoples. Sped by wire services and stream-driven printing presses, news of foreign conflicts and foreign magic mingled in the minds of American and European readers.³⁷ U.S. Soldiers who had waged war against native tribes in the American West soon found themselves fighting other colonial wars, first in the Philippines in 1898, and then in China in 1900—the latter as part of the China Relief Expedition to put down the Boxer Uprising.³⁸ The circulation of ideas and images was so rapid that, by 1901, American audiences at Bill Cody's Wild West shows were already watching Native American actors (themselves survivors of western wars) performing the roles of Chinese Boxers in an elaborately staged reenactment of the siege of Beijing. The actors stormed the walls of the stage-set city less than one year after the real events in China.³⁹

The Boxer Uprising was provoked by a century of foreign intrusions into Chinese society, but it was also triggered by a series of more immediate emergencies. In the winter of 1898 and 1899, the Huang He River overflowed its banks and jumped its course, destroying fields, homes, and entire towns. Too much water was followed by too little. The next year brought devastating drought, scarcity, and hunger. But for many, hope came in an unexpected form. Handbills appeared in public places with the message "Support the Qing, destroy the foreigners." Some placards promised that rain would fall once cultural outsiders were expelled. Other messages were more menacing. Little cards were slipped into houses, alerting the servants that their foreign masters would soon be slain, and warning them to flee or face the same fate.⁴⁰

New shrines to the war god Guandi sprung up everywhere, and the streets and public squares filled with crowds of religious enthusiasts engaged in complex exercises and rituals. They wrote spells on scrolls, burned the paper, ground the ash to dust, sprinkled it into water, and drank the magical solution. They practiced martial arts, struck themselves with sticks and stones, recited incantations, and fell into trances that made them appear like drunks or sleepwalkers to uninitiated observers. Most importantly, they assumed the roles of gods and heroes through quasi-shamanistic trances of possession. All of this may have looked comic or deranged to foreign eyes, but it was experienced very differently by the Boxers themselves. These rituals purified the individual, transforming his fragile flesh and blood into an invulnerable "golden bell." The members of his movement wore iron-

³⁷Pamela E. Klassen, *The Story of Radio Mind: A Missionary's Journey on Indigenous Lands* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018).

³⁸Throughout this article, I use "Boxer Uprising" in preference to the "Boxer Rebellion," to recognize that the Boxers are not easily categorized as a rebellion against existing Manchu authorities or against a stable colonial order.

³⁹John R. Haddad, "The Wild West Turns East: Audience, Ritual and Regeneration in Buffalo Bill's Boxer Uprising," *American Studies* 4, 3/4 (Winter 2008): 5–38; Jeffrey Wasserstrom, "'Never Was History so Interesting': Reading, Writing, and Confinement in 1900," *American Scholar*, 25 July 2020, <https://theamericanscholar.org/never-was-history-so-interesting/>.

⁴⁰Paul Cohen, *History in Three Keys: The Boxers as Event, Experience, and Myth* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 25–34.

cloth shirts (the *tiebu shan*), as part of a magical discipline to defend them from blows and make bullets fall to the ground.⁴¹

Surviving photos of the Boxers make them appear ordinary, poor, and ill-equipped. Often barefoot and clothed in tattered garments, they armed themselves with whatever was available (spears, swords, improvised weapons) or fought with their hands and feet.⁴² But their confidence and aspirations were boundless. Though adult men predominated, women, boys, and girls also joined the movement, pinning their hopes on the promise of spiritual strength to defend themselves against better armed and equipped adversaries. Han Guniang, “the Holy Mother of the Yellow Lotus,” mobilized bands of young girls as the Red Lantern Society, a legion of disciplined followers who believed they could control the weather, call down fire, and repel bullets with fans and baskets. Their leader could reputedly transform logs into horses and ropes into dragons. Some believed she could raise the dead.⁴³

The Boxers’ beliefs were rooted in longstanding magical traditions, and their process of political mobilization was rooted in China’s long history of armed secret societies. They were also the product of an ongoing encounter with foreign cultures. Like the earlier Taiping Rebellion, with its blend of traditional Chinese and Christian millenarian beliefs, the Boxer Uprising emerged from an environment where the interactions between Asian and European religions were common and complex.⁴⁴ The movement began in Shandong, a province on the Pacific whose peninsula juts out into the East China Sea between the Huang He and Yangzi rivers. Shandong was a culturally contested region. German missionaries and foreign merchants had long been active there, and the position of its ports made the city an attractive prize for maritime empires.⁴⁵

It was the Japanese invasion of 1895, at the peak of the Sino-Japanese war, that first sparked the region’s nativist awakening. The Big Sword Society emerged in Southwest Shandong, functioning much like a local militia, but one infused with powerful political and religious impulses. Its members suppressed banditry, preached an

⁴¹Ibid., 96–99, 139; Joseph W. Esherick, *The Origins of the Boxer Uprising* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 216–22. For translated spells, see Ch’en, “Nature,” 298–302; and Esherick, *Origins*, 230–35, 54–63, 96–97. On their appearance to observers, see Elvin, “Mandarins,” 123.

⁴²“Boxer Rebellion, 1900,” Library of Congress, Photo, Print, Drawing Collection, Lot 12070; Peter C. Perdue and Ellen Sebring, *The Boxer Rebellion: The Gathering Storm in North China* (1860–1900), MIT Visualizing World Cultures project (Boston, MIT), <https://visualizingcultures.mit.edu/home/index.html>; Esherick, *Origins*, 201, 292.

⁴³Cohen, *History in Three Keys* 101, 127, 79; Henrietta Harrison, “Village Politics and National Politics: The Boxer Movement in Central Shanxi,” in Robert Bickers and R. G. Tiedemann, eds., *The Boxers, China, and the World* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007), ch. 1.

⁴⁴Esherick, *Origins*, 236; Jerome Ch’en, “Nature,” 287–308; Michael H. Hunt, “The Forgotten Occupation: Beijing: Peking, 1900–1901,” *Pacific Historical Review* 48, 4 (1979): 501–29; Cohen, *History in Three Keys*, 75–95; Robert Bickers and R. G. Tiedemann, eds., *The Boxers, China, and the World* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007); Anthony E. Clark, *Heaven in Conflict: Franciscans and the Boxer Uprising in Shanxi* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2015), ch. 2. On previous history of secret societies, magic, and syncretism, see David Ownby, “The Heaven and Earth Society as Popular Religion,” *Journal of Asian Studies* 54, 4 (Nov 1995): 1023–46; Henrietta Harrison, *The Missionary’s Curse and other Tales from a Chinese Catholic Village* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013), 120–34.

⁴⁵Susanne Kuss, *German Colonial Wars and the Context of Military Violence*, Andrew Smith, trans. (Cambridge: Harvard, 2017), 15–18; David J. Silbey, *The Boxer Rebellion and the Great Game in China* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2012), 37–50.

austere message of personal and civic virtue, and generally identified with property holders.⁴⁶ In northwest Shandong, a parallel movement, the Boxers United in Righteousness, spread swiftly. This movement was not so much a formal organization as a constellation of local movements connected by shared practices, slogans, and sentiments.⁴⁷ Both were initially opposed by the provincial governor and the empress, but their popularity became irresistible. The imperial court soon realized that the Boxer militias might prove a powerful source of leverage against encroaching European empires. For a time, Empress Cixi's support for the Boxers was covert. Then, in the summer of 1900, she declared a general war against all foreign powers in China. Boxer mystics, local militias, and imperial troops now joined together, turning their wrath against foreigners.⁴⁸

Sometimes the Boxers attacked foreigners and foreign collaborators directly, but they also vented their anger on the infrastructure of industrial modernity. Attacks on foreign missionaries, businessmen, and diplomats intensified as houses, churches, and train stations were engulfed in flames.⁴⁹ Empress Cixi ordered all foreigners expelled from China; but for many, it was difficult to leave. In Beijing, European expatriates huddled for safety in the diplomatic quarter, attacked on all sides by a variety of irregular forces. There was a train line from Beijing to Baoding and another from Beijing to Tianjin—both of which were convenient routes of escape—but the Boxers began dismantling them. They were not just purging the cities of foreign influence; they were also restoring the countryside. The Boxers tore down telegraph lines, pried up railroad tracks, and burned down depots. Soldiers representing eight foreign nations (Austria-Hungary, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States) rushed to the aid of expats in the Chinese interior, but the railroads—what remained of them—were impassible.⁵⁰

To European soldiers, sent to protect expatriate property and prop up colonial structures, the China expedition was like so many other episodes of imperial policing and expansion. To the Americans (a mix of professional soldiers and volunteers) it seemed like the extension of an endless frontier war, as they pushed ever farther to the west, crossing the Pacific and confronting enemies whom they only dimly understood. At times the Americans, so shaped by their own frontier psychology, scarcely distinguished between the natives of the Great Plains and those of the Pacific Islands or Asia. To the Boxers, the Americans were just one more group of Europeans throwing themselves against their shores and sapping the strength of Chinese civilization. The invaders were better armed, organized, and equipped, but the Boxers' confidence was unshakeable—at least at first. They were inspired, devoted to their cause, and protected by an arsenal of spiritual weapons.⁵¹

⁴⁶Esherick, *Origins*, 96–122.

⁴⁷*Ibid.*, 136–66.

⁴⁸Cohen, *History in Three Keys*, ch. 1; Esherick, *Origins*, 210; R. G. Tiedemann, "The Church Militant: Armed Conflicts Between Christians and Boxers in North China," in Robert Bickers and R. G. Tiedemann, eds., *The Boxers, China, and the World* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007), ch. 2; Kuss, *German Colonial Wars*, 15–18.

⁴⁹Cohen, *History in Three Keys*, 162–72.

⁵⁰*Ibid.*, 46–50; Silbey, *Boxer Rebellion*, 35–52.

⁵¹Brian McAllister Linn, "The Long Twilight of the Frontier Army," *Western Historical Quarterly* 27, 2 (1996): 141–67; Sean F. McEnroe, "Painting the Philippines with an American Brush: Visions of Race and National Mission among the Oregon Volunteers in the Philippine Wars of 1898 and

The American war in the Philippines continued even as the invasion of China began. Anglophone readers at home received a muddled torrent of images as tales of foreign magic crowded the newspaper pages beside stories of ordinary domestic occurrences. News from the Philippine and Chinese wars spread through a variety of formal and informal channels.⁵² In 1898, a combination of state volunteers and professional soldiers (including the 6th Cavalry that had fought against the Lakota) were hastily assembled and shipped to the Philippines, first to defeat the Spanish and later to conquer the islands for the United States; but before the war was concluded, many were shipped out again, this time from Manila to Tianjin. It was not just soldiers who moved between the American West, the Philippines, and China. Religious organizations, both Catholic and Protestant, maintained simultaneous missions among Western tribes and the Chinese. In both places, the speed of syncretic improvisation left missionaries struggling to make sense of the new amalgamations of Christian and non-Christian religions that confronted them.⁵³

Back in South Dakota, in the shadow of the Ghost Dance and the Wounded Knee Massacre, the local press reported on the Boxer Uprising during the war itself and in the years that followed, mulling over the meaning of these strange parallel events. The Boxers' claims of supernatural invulnerability to European weapons echoed those of Ghost Dancers. Their other magical and millennial beliefs sometimes resembled those of white society in the United States and Europe. These were peak years for new apocalyptic faiths in the English-speaking world. So, when journalists at South Dakota's *Mitchell Capital* told of Chinese Boxers who preached that "the millennium is at a hand," readers knew just what they meant. In America, these were years of explosive growth in Adventist beliefs—the period in which Charles Russell (whose movement would soon mature into the Jehovah's Witnesses) popularized new prophetic readings of the Bible. Among millions of Americans and Europeans, the most important debate of the day was not over *whether* Christ would return, but the exact date. The much-anticipated year of 1874 having come and gone uneventfully, many pinned their hopes on 1914. Writers for the *Mitchell Capital* held themselves aloof from the "holy rollers," as they did from a variety of other movements that paralleled those in China. The paper noted that the Empress Cixi (like so many American spiritualists of the day) used a magical planchette to make her decisions. The use of a planchette and letterboard to contact spirits had become so

1899," *Oregon Historical Quarterly* 104, 1 (2003): 24–61; Paul A. Kramer, *The Blood of Government: Race, Empire, the United States, and the Philippines* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006); George Newell Correspondence, 13 Mar. 1900 and 12 July 1900, Oregon Historical Society, MSS 2550. On the spiritual defenses of the Boxers, see Esherick, *Origins*, 216–26.

⁵²Jane E. Elliott, *Some Did It for Civilization; Some Did It for Their Country: A Revised View of the Boxer War* (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 2002), ch. 1.

⁵³War Department, "Extract from Report of the Secretary of War," 30 June 1900, pp. 5–9; and Lt. Col. Theo. J. Wint. Sixth Cavalry, "Report of Reconnaissance [sic] and Engagement in the Vicinity of Tientsin China, Aug 19, 1900," in *Annual Reports of the War Department for the Fiscal Year Ending June 30, 1900* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1900), 98–100; James Bevan, "From Filipinos to Boxers in 1900," *Leatherneck* 18, 4 (1935): 65–66; David Lidenfeld, "Indigenous Encounters with China and West Africa, 1800–1920: A Comparative Study," *Journal of World History* 16, 3 (2005): 327–69; Carol L. Higham, "Christian Mission to American Indians," *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of American History*, 9 May 2016, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780199329175.013.323>.

popular in the United States that by the end of the nineteenth century the devices were manufactured, and mass marketed in the form of Ouija boards.⁵⁴

Still, some mainline Protestant denominations viewed the Boxers with a suspicion normally reserved for domestic occultists and charlatans. The Unitarian press, fond of its own scientific rationalism, noted that the “chinaman lives in the past.” It ridiculed the Boxers for believing themselves “immune from physical danger” and protected by “unseen spiritual hosts.”⁵⁵ A Methodist correspondent agreed that there was something premodern about the Boxers, who were “opposed to everything that smacks of new ideas.” Of course, during these same years, occultist secret societies that fetishized the past were overwhelmingly popular in the United States and Europe. The similarity was not lost on a group of Philadelphia missionaries who observed in China “more kinds of secret societies than in all other countries combined.” Despite a smug sense of superiority, some doubt and confusion persisted in their minds: was the Chinese magic a ruse or a reality? Perhaps the Boxers’ power to repel bullets was farfetched, but their other mesmeric techniques were more plausible. The foreigners believed that the Boxers’ “odd motions” had the power to “thoroughly confound the enemy, [and] hypnotize them.”⁵⁶

Anglo-Americans drew parallels between fringe religious movements in the United States, the Ghost Dance in native America, and the Boxer Uprising in China. The inescapable similarities provided plenty of food for thought. A habit of condescension toward the cultural *other* (whether at home or abroad) was sometimes mingled with doubt: could foreign magic be real? Were domestic fanatics as mad as foreign ones?⁵⁷ The Chinese had been mulling over similar questions for a long time as they considered the merits of European claims about the supernatural.⁵⁸ By the era of the Boxer Uprising, Christianity was nothing new in China, nor were exchanges of technology, though the acceleration of Western discoveries had recently made China a net importer rather than exporter of innovations. For some time, Chinese people had considered both the remarkable power of European inventions and the relative merits of European religious beliefs. They wondered whether European religion and magic might be real, and to what extent they might be turned to Chinese advantage?⁵⁹

Herbert Hoover, the future president of the United States, saw the Boxers up close—much closer than he wished. In the summer of 1900, he and his wife were living in

⁵⁴Mitchell *Capital* (Mitchell, S.D.), 19 Apr. 1901; Jeffrey Rosario, “Protestant Anti-Imperialism and the Vindication of the Boxer Rebellion, 1899–1901,” *Diplomatic History* 46, 2 (2022): 350–74; Ch’en, “Nature,” 292; Michael Barkun, *Crucible of the Millennium: The Burned-Over District of New York in the 1840s* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1986); Laurie Maffly-Kipp, *American Scriptures: Anthology of Sacred Writings* (New York: Penguin, 2010); Timothy Miller, ed., *America’s Alternative Religions* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1995); Esherick, *Origins*, 61–62.

⁵⁵“Rev. M. Bilkovsky on the Tragedy in China,” *Sun*, 9 July 1900.

⁵⁶The previous three quotations are from, “The Boxers of China: Missionaries from Philadelphia Tell of the Fanatics,” *Argus* (Rock Island, Ill.), 21 June 1900.

⁵⁷Jeffrey Wasserstrom, “How Local Meanings Mattered in 1900 and Still Matter Now,” *Public Seminar*, New School for Social Research, 22 Feb. 2021.

⁵⁸On Chinese elite deliberations over Boxer magic, see Elvin, “Mandarins,” 125.

⁵⁹Clark, *Heaven in Conflict*, 52, 55; Peter Zarrow, “Felling a Dynasty, Founding a Republic,” in Jeffrey N. Wasserstrom, ed., *The Oxford Illustrated History of Modern China* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 92. Albert Monshan Wu, *From Christ to Confucius: German Missionaries, Chinese Christians, and the Globalization of Christianity, 1860–1950* (New Haven, Yale University Press 2016), 78–81.

an expatriate compound in Tianjin when the Boxers besieged the city.⁶⁰ Even in the midst of the war, and stuck in this insular foreign business community, Hoover's understanding of the uprising was not far from the truth. He believed the goals of the Boxers were "to expel all foreigners from China, to root out every foreign thing—houses, railways, telegraphs, mines—and they included all Christian Chinese and all Chinese who had been associated with foreign things."⁶¹ He was in Tianjin when the Empress Dowager ended all diplomatic ambiguity by deploying her imperial troops *not* against the Boxers, but against the Europeans, and by joining the erstwhile rebels in common cause against foreign treaty ports and expatriate enclaves.⁶²

At times, the Hoovers were terrified, and they were right to be. Herbert Hoover was in China representing international mining interests and working with the Chinese Engineering and Mining Company; he was precisely the kind of foreigner the Boxers were keen to destroy. As the Boxers moved in, foreigners of all kinds clustered for safety in urban neighborhoods that also sheltered hundreds of Chinese colleagues and "foreign-educated Chinese."⁶³ He and other foreigners only dimly understood the social origins of the many and varied attackers whom they habitually lumped together as Boxers. This army of adversaries blended together professional soldiers, informal militias, impoverished young "Spirit Boxers," and the Big-Sword warriors who originally arose as a law-and-order defense of rural landlords.⁶⁴ Hoover knew the attackers claimed "supernatural protection from foreign bullets" as well as other magical powers, but he also puzzled over their strange combination of traditional sorcery with modern pragmatism.⁶⁵ He considered the irregular army that encircled Tianjin to be "a horde of fanatics with modern weapons."⁶⁶ They may well have been casting spells and summoning spirit warriors, but they were also bombarding the foreign canton with what Hoover estimated to be sixty thousand artillery shells.⁶⁷

Six decades after the Boxer Uprising, researchers from Shandong University went back to the places that had been hotbeds of the movement.⁶⁸ Over sixty researchers worked their way through the cities and towns in Shandong, trying to recover local memories by conducting interviews with elderly survivors. Most rank-and-file Boxers could neither read nor write, so there was scant documentary material to collect, but traumatic events leave long-lasting memories, and the scholars recovered plenty of oral testimony.⁶⁹ The researchers set out on the eve of the Cultural Revolution, so, as one might expect, they were intensely interested in the Boxers' class identity and their inchoate sense of Chinese nationalism. And yet, much of the oral testimony did not fit into a tidy Marxist narrative. Magic, religion, and Chinese

⁶⁰Herbert Hoover, *The Memoirs of Herbert Hoover: Years of Adventure, 1874–1920* (New York: MacMillan, 1951), 47–56.

⁶¹*Ibid.*, 49.

⁶²Esherick, *Origins*, 302–6.

⁶³Hoover, *Memoirs*, 50.

⁶⁴Esherick, *Origins*, 235–40; Kuss, *German Colonial Wars*, 18; Elliott, *Some Did It*, 381–474; Silbey, *Boxer Rebellion*, 72–73, 88, 102–4.

⁶⁵Hoover, *Memoirs*, 47.

⁶⁶*Ibid.*, 52; Ch'en, "Nature," 292–93.

⁶⁷Hoover, *Memoirs*, 49.

⁶⁸This revisiting of the past at the sixty-year mark reflects the cycles of the traditional Chinese calendar; see Wasserstrom, "Never"; and Cohen, "Time," 1625–26.

⁶⁹Esherick, *Origins*, 208.

identity were at the center of the Boxer experience. And while the movement lashed out against foreigners and missionary churches, it also had elements that were similar to, if not imitative of, missionary Christianity.⁷⁰ Boxers embraced traditional martial arts and magical defenses, and they attacked railroads and machines that symbolized foreign industrialism, but they were also quick to appropriate modern weapons whenever they were available. The Boxer Uprising was an improvisational rebellion that both rejected and incorporated elements of foreign culture. This Chinese uprising, like so many anti-colonial uprisings around the world, grasped at any technique that promised some hope against the armies of industrialized European societies. It sought spiritual weapons and physical ones, both foreign and domestic, to prevail in this struggle for survival.⁷¹

Guns and Magical Defenses in the Age of New Imperialism: The Maji Maji Rebellion

At the dawn of the twentieth century, Germany was already one of the richest and most powerful nations on earth, and its growing industrial productivity created both the motive and the means for imperial expansion. Like its European competitors, Germany manufactured powerful weapons and modes of transport; it was also hungry for the raw materials needed to fuel production and feed and clothe its workers. In the 1880s and 1890s, German diplomatic pressure led to the hasty partition of Africa among European empires—at least on paper—and to the rapid expansion of German commercial and military activity into the interior.⁷² Despite all these advantages, Germany's colonial project in East Africa ground to a halt in 1905 when a vast multi-ethnic rebellion swept through Tanganyika, baffling the colonists and confounding their plans.⁷³ The rebels' origins and grievances were many and varied, but one feature bound them together: a conviction that a new set of rituals and disciplines could protect them from European arms. For many decades, the story of this failed rebellion was only retold in print through the eyes of the colonizers. Then, in the 1960s, a remarkable oral history project gathered together community memories across a broad swath of what was by then independent Tanzania. These accounts became a key element in the nation's story of rebellion, independence, and national identity.⁷⁴ The near simultaneous outbreaks of the Boxer and Maji Maji

⁷⁰Clark, *Heaven in Conflict*, 47, 50, 55.

⁷¹Luke S. K. Kwong, "Oral History in China: A Preliminary Review," *Oral History Review* 20, 1/2 (1992): 23–50, describes the project published in Lu Yao, ed., *Shan-tung 1-ho-t'uan tiao-ch'a tsu-liao hsuan-pien* [Selected materials from investigations into the Boxers in Shantung] (Tsi-nan, 1980).

⁷²Toni Pierenkemper and Richard Tilly, *The German Economy during the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2004), 13–22; Thaddeus Sunseri, "The Baumwollfrage: Cotton Colonialism in German East Africa," *Central European Studies* 34, 1 (2001): 31–55; Isaria N. Kimambo, Gregory H. Maddox, and Salvatory Nyanto, "Imperialism and Colonialism: The Scramble and Partition of Africa," in *A New History of Tanzania* (Dar es Salaam: Mkuki na Nyota, 2017).

⁷³Kuss, *German Colonial Wars*, chs. 1, 3.

⁷⁴All later scholarship relies on G.C.K. Gwassa and John Iliffe's project. Bertram B. B. Mapunda, "Reexamining the Maji Maji War in Ungoni with a Blend of Archaeology and Oral History," in Leonard Giblin and Jamie Monson, eds., *Maji Maji: Lifting the Fog of War* (Boston: Brill, 2010), ch. 6. For pre-independence historiography, see A.R.W. Crosse-Upcott, "The Origin of the Majimaji Revolt," *Man* 60 (1960): 71–73; Michael Adas, *Prophets of Rebellion: Millenarian Protest Movements against the European Colonial Order* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1979), chs. 4, 6; Marcia Wright, "Maji Maji Prophecy and Historiography," in David M. Anderson and Douglas H. Johnson,

uprisings (1899 and 1905), and the nearly simultaneous oral history projects of the 1960s (by the universities of Shandong and Dar es Salaam) offer an unusual opportunity to compare how national memories and mythologies were constructed over time.⁷⁵

In the summer of 1968, students and faculty members from the University of Dar es Salaam fanned out across the countryside, asking questions about the Maji Maji Rebellion. It was a long journey from the capital to the towns, villages, and fields to meet their informants, but the students and professors made it, nonetheless. The locals might have ignored other nosy visitors from the capital or from abroad, but these earnest students were a bit different. They asked their questions in Swahili or—even better—in Kihehe, and some were actually locals themselves, returning from their studies in the big city. Still, the topic of the Maji Maji movement was an uncomfortable one, and some people were slow to answer the visitors' inquiries. In 1968, Tanzania, as an independent nation, was less than a decade old. The traumas of colonialism and the complexities of inter-ethnic politics were as much a part of the present as the past.⁷⁶

It was late in the morning when researcher Carlo J. Ngalalekumtwa approached a man working the potato patch near his home and began asking questions about the Maji Maji. If Mwaligombwike Mwakihongosi set down his hoe, it was not for long. He must have turned this soil over many times in the six decades since the rebellion. How much could he recall about the events that took place in his earliest childhood, and how much should he reveal? The interviewer “did not find him very useful.”⁷⁷ As Ngalalekumtwa mentioned elsewhere, many old people were “very senile indeed.”⁷⁸ But perhaps it was more than that. When Ngalalekumtwa bothered another farmer with questions, he was at first rebuffed. It was a simple question: “What is this hongga that I once heard the old men talking about?” But the answer seemed tinged with fear: “you young man, don't mention hongga.”⁷⁹ And yet, given more time to chat and reflect, this man and many others slowly unburdened themselves of the region's

eds., *Revealing Prophets: Prophecy in East African History* (London: James Currey, 1995), 124–42; Thaddeus Sunseri, “The Majimaji and the Millennium: Abrahamic Sources and the Creation of a Tanzanian Resistance Tradition,” *History in Africa* 26 (1999): 365–78; Felicitas Becker, “Traders, ‘Big Men’ and Prophets: Political Continuity and Crisis in the Maji Maji Rebellion in Southeast Tanzania,” *Journal of African History* 45, 1 (2004): 1–22; Heike Schmidt, “(Re)Negotiating Marginality: The Maji Maji War and Its Aftermath in Southwestern Tanzania, ca. 1905–1916,” *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 43, 1 (2010): 27–62; Dominik J. Schaller, “From Conquest to Genocide: Colonial Rule in Southwest Africa and German East Africa,” in A. Dirk Moses, ed., *Empire, Colony, Genocide: Conquest, Occupation and Subaltern Resistance* (New York, Berghahn, 2008).

⁷⁵Monson, “War of Words,” 33–35; Thaddeus Sunseri, “Statist Narratives and Maji Maji,” *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 33, 3 (2000): 567–84; Cohen, *History in Three Keys*, 211–97.

⁷⁶*Maji Maji Research Project, Collected Papers*, John Iliffe, ed. (Dar Es Salaam, Tanzania: University College, 1969). Elijah Greenstein, “Making History: Historical Narratives of the Maji Maji,” *Penn History Review* 17, 2 (2010): 60–74.

⁷⁷*Records of the Maji Maji Rising*, G.C.K. Gwassa and John Iliffe, eds. (Historical Association of Tanzania: University of Dar Es Salaam, East Africa Publishing House, 1975), interview of Mwaligombwike Mwakihongosi by Carlo J. Ngalalekumtwa, Kihemi village, near Kilolo, 27 Apr. 1968.

⁷⁸Carlo J. Ngalalekumtwa, “The Maji Maji in Uzungwa,” *Maji Maji Research Project*, no. 3/68/2/1 (1968), p. 1.

⁷⁹Interview of Segedalila Mwakihanz at Kihemi village near Kilolo, 27 Apr. 1968; interview of Mwaligombwike Mwakihongosi; interview with men drinking in Idete, 23 Apr. 1968.

secrets. Some old men and women were helpful from the start. They sat in the fields to talk, took the students into their homes, and even lingered over bamboo juice or something stronger.⁸⁰

What was this “Hongo” that the old men talked about? Some described Hongo (or Honga) as a person, others as a spirit or a magical essence contained in water.⁸¹ They told stories about a man named Kinjikitile, who was dragged into the depths of a river and possessed by the water spirit Hongo, only to emerge a day later with magical powers and the gift of prophecy.⁸² Sometime in 1905, Kinjikitile’s story began to spread outward from his home in Ngarambe throughout the region called “German East Africa” on European maps.⁸³ The old people who recalled this tale to the students from Dar es Salaam had never seen Kinjikitile with their own eyes, but they had heard all about him. At first, the same was true of the Germans. Many country people had not seen the German soldiers, settlers, and missionaries face-to-face, but stories about them were shared far and wide. Soon the mysterious foreigners and the mysterious new prophet would collide. The prophet’s emissaries appeared in towns and villages, speaking first to the local *jumbes*—tribal leaders who represented the community in negotiations with outsiders. These messengers told a fuller story of Kinjikitile’s ministry; it went something like this. One day, not so long beforehand, Kinjikitile was resting beside a pool in the Rufiji River near his home in Ngarambe when his life was suddenly changed forever. The spirit Hongo snatched him from the bank and held him in the watery depths for hour after hour as his family held vigil on the shore. But the next morning, Kinjikitile reemerged unscathed, his clothing dry to the touch, his spirit imbued with magical powers and the gift of prophecy. He was no longer the same man. To many, he became synonymous with the spirit Hongo itself. He and his followers launched an ambitious effort across regions, ethnicities, and language groups to attack and expel the Germans. Kinjikitile won an important ally in the person of Chitalika, a regional strongman and slave dealer from the Ruaha River region. It was Chitalika’s branch of the movement that reached the towns most closely studied by the students from Dar es Salaam.⁸⁴

Chitalika’s messengers were hard to miss. They wore millet stalks, castor leaves, and turbans on their heads; they chanted in unison and marched in military drills. They carried with them a powerful potion called *maji* (“water”) with which they anointed converts. Some said they drank the water, others that they bathed in it; many recalled that the Maji Maji (for this is how the members of the movement were known) sprinkled the potion on each other with a severed animal tail—a kind of traditional aspergillum called a *wusiho*. The recipe was a secret, though several informants believed it included a boiled human heart.⁸⁵

⁸⁰ *Maji Maji Research Project*, interview with Wupete Mwamagoda at Mtitu, 3 Apr. 1968; interview with men in Idete by J. R. Mlahagwa, Ukaguru, 23 Apr. 1968.

⁸¹ The words “*hongo*” and “*honga*” appear both capitalized and uncapitalized in the researchers’ transcripts. It is not always clear when the word(s) signify the person, the spirit, or the ritual drink.

⁸² *Records of the Maji Maji Rising*, 11.

⁸³ Sunseri, “Statist Narratives,” 577–79.

⁸⁴ John Iliffe, *A Modern History of Tanganyika* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 181–82; Adas, *Prophets*, 107–9; Kuss, *German Colonial Wars*, 58–60.

⁸⁵ Mzee Ibrahim Uzengo interviewed by I.A.S. Mananga, Msongozi, 16 Apr. 1968; I.A.S. Mananga, “The Maji Maji Rising”; Mzee John Yogelo interviewed by I.A.S. Mananga, 29 Mar. 1968, Msongozi; Carlo J. Ngalalekumtwa, “Maji Maji in Uzungwa,” *Maji Maji Research Project* no. 3, p. 2.

The Maji Maji demanded strict discipline. Their leaders told them to throw their traditional charms and talismans into the fire, and they forbade alcoholic drinks and often demanded celibacy. Even the male animals of their flocks had to be killed lest their sexual behavior pollute the community. In exchange for these austerities, the Maji missionaries offered miracles. As sacred warriors, they would drive out the Europeans, restore the land, and summon back from the dead their beloved family members and revered ancestors. Most important of all, the *maji* water would make them strong, fierce in battle, and immune to bullets. German guns that once inspired terror would soon be useless: bullets would drop to the ground, and water would gush from their barrels.⁸⁶

The message of the *maji* magic must not have sounded too farfetched as word spread from village to village. Some of the particulars were new, and the messengers were often strangers from distant places, but the ideas were familiar.⁸⁷ The people of Msongozi already had some experience with things like this. They took a medicine called *taga* to predict invasions, and one called *nduga* to fend off bullets and arrows. In times of emergency, they placed a piece of wood called *mbale* on paths and roads to make their homes invisible to enemy eyes.⁸⁸ There was no question about whether things like the *maji* water *could* exist. It was just a matter of determining whether this particular magic worked. And at first, it seemed to. When Chitalika's followers came to Msongozi offering the magic water, they warned "he who does not take it will be affected by bullets when Europeans enter this country." And so, many took the water. In this town and scores of other ones, the visitors sprinkled a potion from the hairy *wushiho*, and the people were transformed. Some old men drinking at a bar in Idete told the researchers how it worked: the movement arrived with men from Ulanga, and "people who took their medicine became their friends."⁸⁹ The medicine made the men feel "cruel and strong."⁹⁰ They gathered up anything that could be used as weapons—spears, knives, axes, and hoes—and prepared to do battle. But not everyone was convinced by the Maji Maji. Many viewed these rituals with suspicion and refused to join. A small-town folklorist named Yehoswa Mwakikoti told the Dar es Salaam researchers that the converts "were almost mad with their medicine. They would move very quickly from place to place and utter hongaa! hongaa! maji!"⁹¹

Though some received the Maji Maji missionaries with skepticism, many took them at face value. We might ask why anyone would *not* have believed them. In 1905, East Africa was full of magical practices that were deeply embedded in daily life, but it had also begun to see strange new marvels from abroad.⁹² Shortly before the

⁸⁶Mlachuma binti Simbo interviewed by I.A.S. Mananga, 12 Apr. 1968, *Maji Maji Research Project*; Adas, *Prophets*, 25–28; Harrison, *Missionary's Curse*, ch. 1; James Giblin, "Taking Oral Sources beyond the Documentary Record of Maji Maji: The Example of the 'War of Korosani' at Yakobi, Nojombe," in Leonard Giblin and Jamie Monson, eds., *Maji Maji: Lifting the Fog of War* (Boston: Brill, 2010), ch. 8.

⁸⁷Jamie Monson "War of Words," in Leonard Giblin and Jamie Monson, eds., *Maji Maji: Lifting the Fog of War* (Boston: Brill, 2010), 36–38.

⁸⁸I.A.S. Mananga, "Conditions Before the Coming of the Maji Maji," *Maji Maji Research Project*, No. 1/68/2/1, 1968.

⁸⁹*Maji Maji Research Project*, interview of men in Idete by J. R. Mlahagwa, Ukaguru, 23 Apr. 1968.

⁹⁰Bangimilimo Mwawubamba, son of Jume, interviewed by C. J. Ngalekumtwa, 11 Apr. 1968, Kibenga, Southern Uzungwa.

⁹¹Yehoswa Mwakikoti, Kimala, near Idete, interviewed by C. J. Ngalekumtwam, 24 Apr. 1968.

⁹²Adas, *Prophets*, 32.

excitement over *maji* water, parts of the East African interior had been spellbound by the prophecies of a man named Mbago. His main line of work was slave dealing, but Mbago also did side work as a rain conjurer. Soon his magical gifts proliferated. He predicted the arrival of new and mysterious things: railroads, automobiles, and strange clothes and goods. Sure enough, his prophecies came to pass. I.A.S. Mananga, one of the researchers from Dar es Salaam, had a simple explanation: Mbago had probably traveled to places where these European technologies were known—most likely Zanzibar. Anyone who traveled from rural Tanganyika to Zanzibar in 1900 would have been exposed to a dizzying array of European goods, technologies, and practices. That his prophecies would have fixated on technological marvels is unsurprising. New industrial inventions from Europe were just as powerful and as inexplicable as anything East Africans had encountered before.⁹³

Firearms themselves were not new to Tanganyika, even far from the coast in the pastures and highlands of the interior. East Africa's trade networks had extended over land and sea for centuries, bringing all kinds of goods and technologies from distant places. The Swahili tongue, a Bantu language that has integrated words from Arabic, Portuguese, and Persian, testifies to these longstanding exchanges. East Africa was already tied to Oman, Persia, and India by trade when Vasco de Gama's Portuguese fleet landed on the coast in 1498, establishing direct contact with Europe.⁹⁴ Firearms of one kind or another had been distributed widely enough over the following centuries by Portuguese, Dutch, and Swahili middlemen. By the early twentieth century, some of the Maji Maji rebels themselves carried muzzle-loading rifles. But weapons technology was evolving swiftly in industrialized nations. New repeating guns from Europe and North America were fundamentally different from anything seen before in East Africa.⁹⁵

German soldiers, during the 1880s, moved farther into the interior of East Africa. In the two decades that followed, they employed industrial weapons that had no precedent in African warfare. Under the right circumstances, a spear, an arrow, or even a farming tool could defeat an enemy who was forced to constantly reload his muzzleloader by adding powder, wadding, bullet, and primer before each shot. It does not take long to demystify the muzzleloader to unfamiliar eyes: it is effectively an old-fashioned cannon mounted on a wooden stock. But the Germans who came to attack the Maji Maji rebels did not bring muzzleloaders. They came with highly accurate breach-loading rifles and Maxim guns that fired hundreds of rounds per minute. This is what the rebels faced, protected only by water.⁹⁶

The Germans came from the coast; the Maji Maji were scattered across the countryside. The two armies met near the town of Morogoro, more than a

⁹³I.A.S. Mananga, "The Maji Maji Rising at Msongozi," *Maji Maji Research Project*; Andrew Lattas, "Telephones, Cameras and Technology in West New Britain Cargo Cults," *Oceania* 70, 4 (2000): 325–44.

⁹⁴On language and trade, see Thomas Spear, "Early Swahili History Reconsidered," *International Journal of African Studies* 33, 2 (2000): 257–90.

⁹⁵David Northrup, "Vasco de Gama and Africa: An Era of Mutual Discovery, 1497–1800," *Journal of World History* 9, 2 (1998): 189–211, 197–99; Kuss, *German*, 61, 102–7. I.A.A. Mananga, "The Maji Maji Rising at Msongozi," *Maji Maji Research Project* no. 1/68/2/1; interview with Mzee Ibrahim Uzengo in Msongozi, 16 Apr. 1968.

⁹⁶Kuss, *German*, 110–18; Mzee Ibrahim Uzengo interviewed by I.A.S. Mananga, Msongozi, 16 Apr. 1968; *Records of the Maji Maji Rising*, 13.

hundred miles west of Dar es Salaam, at the Valley of Mzee. These were irregular armies. The nominally German one was composed of Germans and African soldiers called *askaris*, many of whom were thought to be Nubians by their opponents. The Maji Maji were led by Chitalika. Up until this point, the rebels had had fortune on their side. Inspired by his prophetic words, and protected by the magical water, their numbers swelled as they moved from town to town, gathering supplies and attacking every outpost of European missionary, economic, or administrative power they encountered. But this run of good fortune ended abruptly at the Battle of Mzee. It was anything but the miraculous triumph predicted by their leaders.⁹⁷

Several African accounts of the battle have survived as oral history. Among the most vivid is an interview given to the Dar es Salaam researchers by an elderly woman named Mlachuma binti Simbo. As a young woman, she had seen the terrors of the war from all sides and was just as frightened by the Maji Maji as she was by the Germans. Fleeing first from the European invaders, she later suffered the arrogance and abuses of the Maji Maji. Many of her fellow Kiluguru speakers had joined the movement with enthusiasm, but for her, the chaos of the period meant only flight, deprivation, and the loss of a child. At first, she watched the Maji prophets recruit among the men of her village. Warning that German greed and power must be nipped in the bud, they urged the men to take the magic water and rise to fight. The Maji leaders said the water would give the rebels great strength. There was no need to fear the Europeans, once “you take this ‘medicine,’ just knock them down when they appear, because their guns will be harmless.... You women may knock [down] Europeans with your pestles.” Her husband was so caught up in the movement that he rushed off to sack a neighboring town, but to Mlachuma binti Simbo, the Maji Maji seemed arrogant fools. Still, her tone turned to pity as she described their defeat at Mzee.⁹⁸

As the battle approached, the two sides had time to regard each other from a distance. The Maji Maji engaged in their ritual preparations; the Germans mounted a machine-gun on a tree. The Maji Maji were first to fire, but with little effect. As Mlachuma binti Simbo put it many years later, the “Hongo started firing the guns, but none was affected on the European side.” The prophets had told them that they were safe from European bullets, and that only water would pour from the barrels of the German guns. Their leader invoked his magical powers once more and shouted, “All right Dikere [Europeans], bring your water now; I want to bathe,” but the Germans opened fire with their Maxim gun, and no magic in the world could save the Maji Maji. Some fled crying “oh, mother!” but of the others, she could only say “the people were knocked down as if they were burning ants.”⁹⁹

For the Maji Maji rebels, like the Ghost Dancers and the Boxers, magical protections were not enough. Bullets pierced ghost shirts, they cut down men anointed with *maji* water, and they slew Boxers whose bellies still held the ashes of magical scrolls. Some lost faith in particular leaders or particular rituals—but few, if any, shed their belief in the supernatural. And this should not surprise us; the same

⁹⁷Schmidt, “(Re) Negotiating,” 27–62; Becker, “Traders,” 1–22; Sunseri, “Majimaji and the Millennium,” 365–78, 64–71.

⁹⁸Mlachuma binti Simbo interviewed by I.A.S. Mananga, 12 Apr. 1968.

⁹⁹Ibid.

was true on the other side. The men who fired the guns against them were just as likely to believe in magic.¹⁰⁰

Of Idols, Firearms, and Fetishes

Much of what humans call magic captivates the mind because it involves action at a distance. Curses and hexes, telekinesis, and sympathetic magic of all kinds permit the sorcerer to impose his will on a far-away object.¹⁰¹ Magic is a dream or desire made manifest across space and time. Perhaps no technology so fully realizes the experience of hostile wish fulfillment and “action at a distance” as the gun. One man stares intently at another across an open field. He wills his enemy’s death, he twitches his finger, and his adversary falls. The dawn of the twentieth century was a time when new and more deadly firearms were brought to bear on the world’s colonial frontiers. Faced with this threat, people all over the world grasped at magical defenses, sought spiritual healing, and gave voice to humanity’s greatest desires: to protect the living and bring back the dead. Meanwhile industrialized colonizers, intoxicated by their scientific prowess but unsettled by their own crisis of secularization, vacillated between a mood of triumphalism and doubt. They reveled in condescending accounts of “primitive” peoples who clung to futile superstitions and viewed invaders as magicians and gods. Still, some misgivings nagged the European and American mind. In the age of séances, mesmerism, and psychic research, they feared that some primitive foreign magic might prove real.¹⁰²

Anthropologists and intellectual historians have come to see magical thinking and scientific rationalization not so much as clear evolutionary phases or categorically opposed ideologies, but as ongoing activities both central to the experience of modernity. The three colonial encounters explored in this article offer a powerful lens for examining this phenomenon during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. They suggest that the technological violence of late-stage colonialism was bound up with a multi-directional encounter among cultures, all engaged in the restless activities of enchantment, disenchantment, and self-fashioning. Colonial intrusions forced all parties into creative forms of cultural improvisation. To borrow from anthropology, one might say that the guns functioned as idols, as fetishes, or as loose signifiers to which multiple cultures might attach meaning. Humans fashioned these objects, but also feared them. The modern firearm was a distinctly European invention, and in the hands of the colonizer, it was a symbol of intellectual superiority and dominion over the material world—a triumph of rational disenchantment. The rifle fulfilled the sorcerer’s dream of action over distance but did so through the mastery of known material phenomena. At the same time, firearms were recontextualized by many non-Europeans. Magical practices that repelled bullets and turned powder to water offered a perfect inversion of

¹⁰⁰ Adas, *Prophets*, ch. 6.

¹⁰¹ Jones, *Magic’s Reason*, 136.

¹⁰² Wu, *Christ to Confucius*, 89; Emily Ogden, *Credulity: A Cultural History of US Mesmerism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018); Efram Sera-Shriar, *Psychic Investigators: Anthropology, Modern Spiritualism, and Credible Witnessing in the Late Victorian Age* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2022).

European disenchantment. Whereas the latter reduced magical effects to material causes, the former reduced technology to magic, taming and defeating it.¹⁰³

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¹⁰³Edward Burnett Tylor's writing typifies nineteenth-century notions of evolutionary disenchantment; *Primitive Cultures* (New York: Harpers, 1958[1871]). Twentieth-century deconstructions of the concept have their origin in Max Weber, "Science as Vocation," in *Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills, trans. and ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1946[1917]), 129–56; Richard Jenkins, "Disenchantment, Enchantment and Re-Enchantment: Max Weber at the Millennium," *Max Weber Studies* 1, 1 (2000):11–32.

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