PEYOTISM

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July 13, 1966
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By

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INTRODUCTION

Since the last half of the nineteenth century, the use of Peyote among the North American Indians has been rapidly spreading (1, 3, 7) and may be expected to spread for some time in the future (3). As examples of the widespread use of Peyote, by 1916 an estimated fifty per cent of the Northern Utes were involved in peyotism (1); Navaho Peyote users numbered between 12,000 and 14,000 out of a population of about 70,000 by 1951, and in some northern communities such as Aneth and Teec Nos Pos, an estimated three-fourths of the population were involved (1); by 1960 about one-third of the Indians at Taos were peyotist among whom were some of the most important religious and civic officials of the pueblo, including that of governor (3); approximately one-half of the Indians on the Crow reservation used Peyote to some extent by 1962 (3). Peyotism is now considered the major religious cult of the Indians in parts of southern Canada, the Great Basin, east-central California, and between the Rocky Mountains and the Mississippi (3). Most of the peyotists have associated themselves with the so-called Native American Church which in 1960 claimed approximately 225,000 members in North America (3).

Because of the evident wide and spreading use of Peyote among the North American Indians, the author feels it is important for LDS Indian workers and especially the Seminary teachers to be aware of the Peyote problem and of some of the teaching and beliefs of the North American Church. By being aware of this problem, these workers hopefully will be better prepared to teach their Indian students the truths of the Gospel in such a way that their students will be able to resist the teaching of the Indian Peyotists.
THE PEYOTE PLANT

Peyote (*Lophophora williamsii*) is a small, spineless, carrot-shaped cactus which is mostly subterranean with only the grayish-green pincushion-like top appearing above ground (3, 6). This cactus grows in northern Mexico and southern Texas on both sides of the Rio Grande in the vicinity of Laredo, Texas (6).

The so-called "Peyote button" is the top of the plant which is cut off horizontally about ground level and then dried into a hard woody disc (3). The button may also be eaten fresh and is sometimes made into an infusion and drunk as tea (2). Peyote is unpleasant (bitter) to the taste of most people and is usually considered unpalatable; however, it is sometimes reported to taste sweet to those who are "spiritually and physically clean" (5).

Nine alkaloids are found in Peyote. These are mescaline, anhaline, anhalamine, anhalonidine, anhalonine, lophophorine, pellotine (peyotline), anholinine and anhalidine. It is these alkaloids that give Peyote its exceptional properties, the most characteristic of which are a peculiar sensation of levitation, a vision of brilliant colored images, and an inordinately sharp perception of sounds and shapes. Peyote produces visual and auditory hallucinations but no worse effect than occasional nausea. It is not habit-forming or deleterious. (2)

The physiological effects of the individual alkaloids are as follows: Mescaline causes a slowing of the pulse, slight headache, a feeling of heaviness in the limbs lasting one to several hours. Heavier doses cause a feeling of discomfort and fullness of stomach, while still heavier doses cause an accentuation of symptoms and appearance of color-visions. (3)

Peyotline after about an hour reduces the pulse by about one-fourth the normal rate; after two hours it causes heaviness of the eyelids, a sensation of fatigue, and an aversion to all physical or mental effort. It has no marked analgesic action but is a fairly good sedative and has appreciable hypnotic action. (3)

Anhaline exercises a paralyzing effect on the central nervous system.

Anhalamine, anhalinine and anhalidine have not yet been adequately studied physiologically.

Anhalonidine causes slight sleepiness and a dull sensation in the head.

Anhalonine produces no sensible effort, except perhaps a slight sleepiness.

Lophophorine is the most toxic but has no narcotic action. About fifteen minutes after ingestion, it causes an accentuated sickening feeling in the back of
the head, with hotness and blushing of face. The pulse is slightly reduced. Its symptoms disappear after forty minutes. (3)

THE RISE, PURPOSE AND GOAL OF PEYOTISM

Peyotism, as a religious cult, is pre-Columbian in Mexico. It spread toward the end of the nineteenth century via the Texan and southwestern tribes to the Indians in the rest of the United States. Peyotism mostly followed the subsidence of the Ghost Dance, for which it was largely substituted as a peaceful, inter-tribal, nativistic religion which in some places has become somewhat acculturated to Christianity. (3)

Throughout the history of Indian-white contact, the white officials have usually tried to suppress the use of Peyote (5). This started as early as June 29, 1620, when the Inquisitors in Mexico announced a prohibition against the use of Peyote (6). So far, these attempts at controlling the use of Peyote have failed, and this is cited by the Peyotists as evidence for the power of Peyote (5).

Because the legality of the use of Peyote has so often been in question, Dr. James Mooney, an anthropologist of the Bureau of American Ethnology, suggested that the Peyotists incorporate in order that they might better protect their freedom to practice the Peyote religion (6). Thus, with Mooney's advice and assistance, the Native American Church was incorporated in Oklahoma on October 10, 1918. In 1944 the association became a national organization with the name, "The Native American Church of the United States". When peyotism spread into Canada in 1955 the name was changed again to "The Native American Church of North America" by which it is known today. (3)

In article IV in the papers of the incorporation of the Native American Church, the purpose of the corporation was stated as follows:

The purpose for which this corporation is formed is to foster and promote the religious belief of the several tribes of Indians in the State of Oklahoma, in the Christian religion with the practice of the Peyote sacrament as commonly understood and used among the adherents of this religion in several tribes of Indians in the State of Oklahoma, and to teach the Christian religion with morality, sobriety, industry, kindly charity and right living, and cultivate the spirit of self respect, brotherly union among the members of the native race of Indians, including therein the various tribes in the State of Oklahoma, with the right to own and hold property for the purpose of conducting its business and services (6).

According to Lanternari (2) the long-range goal of Peyotism is collective
salvation for the Indians as well as collective protection from the ever-present
danger of tribal disintegration, which has threatened Indian society since the ar-
ival of Columbus.

Peyotism is thus considered a pan-Indian, semi-Christian, nativistic move-
ment by Aberle and Stewart (1) who stated:

The cult is pan-Indian in that it stresses the common bond among Indians
rather than the local cultural differences which characterize various tribes.
It is Christian in that Christian symbolism appears in ritual, and Christian
supernatural beings are worshipped (God, Jesus, Mary, etc.). It is only
semi-Christian, however, in that most of the ritual would not be recog-
nized as familiar by members of any orthodox Christian sect in the United
States and is clearly Indian in origin, and in that the attitude toward peyote
as a supernatural power has no parallel in any orthodox Christian group.
It is nativistic in the sense that cult leaders tend to contrast favorably the
Indian way of reaching God with the white man's way, and the Indian's
orientation with that of the white man, and to stress the Indian elements
in the ritual as a cultural possession of members of the cult. In this
sense the cult can be seen as attempting to preserve what are seen as
distinctively Indian elements against the efforts of the dominant whites
to make the Indians over into standard Americans. (p. 1-2)

**THE PEYOTE SHRINE AND RITUAL**

Petrullo (4) described a Peyote shrine as follows:

The Peyote shrine in its simplest form consists of a mound in the shape of
a crescent located a little to the west of the center of the tipi [sic] with the
horns pointing to the east. This is called the Moon. A fire is built in the
center floor of the tipi, and the worshippers sit in a circle with their gaze
on a large Peyote button placed on top of the crescent. The entrance to the
tipi is on the east side and directly opposite to it behind the shrine site the
road-chief. A line, sometimes drawn on the ground, leads from the door
to the Peyote on the crescent, and the road-chief is said to sit on this road,
along which the thoughts of the worshipper must travel to reach the Peyote.
The road-chief is merely a master of ceremonies rather than a priest. His
assistants are a drum-chief, whose duties are to tie the drum and beat it
when the road-chief sings; and a fire-chief, who is the guardian of the door
and keeper of the fire (p. 87).

Describing a Peyote ritual, Lanternari (2) stated:

The faithful sing prayers to the accompaniment of drums, of rattles made
from gourds, of flutes, and of whistles made from the bones of eagles,
and finally they eat the Peyote; the sacramental meal is shared with the
sick who have come to be cured. Before long, the worshippers go into
trance and see visions, which often last through the night. In the morn-
ing they eat a ritual breakfast, which consists of parched corn, sweetened
water, fruit, and other native food.

Prayers and singing are led by one of the faithful who is regarded as
the leader, assisted by four others; the ceremony is conducted with great
dignity and solemnity in an atmosphere of ever-rising exaltation until
hallucinations and visions are produced. The singing alternates with
prayer, rising and falling with the mood of the participants; at times it
reaches a high triumphant note, or, again, it becomes a dolorous lament,
and the words seem to be comprehensible only to those who are in a state
of ecstasy (p. 85-86).

Professor J. S. Slotkin, a social anthropologist from the University of
Chicago, studied Peyotism among the Menomini Indians. During the course of the
study he and his wife participated in several Peyote rites. His wife recorded the
following impression she had of the rites in her field diary (5):

It is remarkable how all the other components cooperate in heightening
the effect of the Peyote. The shape of the tipi; the perspective presented
by the tipi ridgepoles, the acoustics of the tipi, the flickering fire which
burns low and then becomes bright as more wood is added by the fire
chief, the sparks flying upward and dying out as they reach the top of the
tipi, the shadows cast by the people against the tipi wall, the odor of
cedar from the cedar boughs and incense, the softness and quality of the
singing, the character of the songs, the rhythm and timbre of the gourd
and water drum, the position in which the people sit—all harmonize with
the effects produced by the Peyote (p. 569).

SOME TEACHINGS AND BELIEFS OF PEYOTISTS

John Wilson, a mixture of Delaware, Caddo, and French and a native of
Anadarko, Oklahoma, was one of the founders of the current Peyote cult and was
its chief promoter. In 1890 he attended a great Ghost Dance meeting at Darlington,
Oklahoma and during the course of the celebration he was invited to eat
Peyote. After considerable reflection he decided to try it and went into seclusion
with his wife in order to study its effects undisturbed. The following account of
Wilson's experience was given by his nephew, Anderson:

Peyote took pity on him and guided him into the heavenly kingdom, where,
in a great vision, he saw signs and images representing events in the life
of Christ, and was also shown the abode of the moon, the Sun, the Fire and
the Spirit Forces traditionally regarded as the ancestors and elders of the
Delawares. He also saw the 'road' which Jesus had taken in His ascent
from the grave to the Moon in the sky and was told to remain on this road
for the rest of his life, so that he might be taken into the presence of Christ
and of Peyote. He received precise instructions for setting up a sacred
area in the peyote tent, was taught chants to be sung during the rituals and
shown all the particulars of the ceremonial to be followed in the new cult. (2)

Wilson rejected the Bible as a necessary means of communication with God.
He said, "The Bible was given to the white man because he had been guilty of
crucifying Jesus. The Indian had no responsibility in this act and therefore the Bible was not intended for them. The Indians knew God's truth from the Peyote Spirit but the white man needed Christ's word in order to learn it." (2)

Jonathan Koshiway, an Oto, and who, according to Le Barre (3), had been an Indian evangelist for the Church of the Latter-day Saints, was one of the major Peyote prophets who came after Wilson. Koshiway promoted a highly Christianized version of Peyotism and his followers became known as the Church of the First-Born. This church was later incorporated into the Native American Church. Koshiway claimed to have discovered identity between Christianity and the native beliefs. He felt the bread and wine of the Eucharist were the equivalent of Peyote and identified the canonical virtues of Christianity with those held in high regard in the Indian religions. He also made great use of the Bible in teaching and in worship. (2)

Christian element became more and more numerous in the Peyote cult as time passed on. An example of the fusion of Christian ideas with Peyotism is the use of the Bible by Peyotist prophets to promote their cults. Any mention of an herb in the Bible is interpreted to mean Peyote. An example of this is the following passage from Romans 14:1-3 in which Paul says, "Him that is weak in the faith receive ye, but not to doubtful disputations. For one believeth that he may eat all things; another, who is weak, eateth herbs. Let not him that eateth despise him that eateth not, and let not him which eateth not judge him that eateth; for God hath received him." "The one who believeth that he may eat all things" is explained by the Peyotist prophet to mean the white man while "the one who is weak" is the Indian and the "herbs" are Peyote buttons. Peyote leaders constantly cite this passage in defending their cult against the white man's efforts to destroy it. (2)

Hensley, also an early Peyote prophet, established a link between Jesus and Peyote when he said, "We read in the Bible that Christ spoke of a Comforter who was to come (John 14:16, 26). Long ago this Comforter came to the white man, but it never came to the Indians, until it was sent by God in the form of this holy medicine (Peyote). ... It was given exclusively to the Indians and God never intended that white men should understand it." (2)

One older Peyotist once told Slotkin (5):

In the first creation God himself used to talk to the people and tell them what to do. Way after, Christ came among the white people, and Christ told the people what to do. And he gave power to his disciples; they had the right to preach, and they tell them (white people) what to do. Indians,
they ain't got nothing from God. But you white people, you got everything; you got a Book (the Bible). Christ tells you what to do, you got power. But the Indian got nothing. In a little while, towards the last, God give us Peyote; that's how we happen to find him (i.e. God) (p. 580).

Slotkin (5) believes that Peyotism is Christianity adapted to traditional Indian beliefs and practices. He reported (5) that the basic beliefs of the Peyotists are:

a) A Great Spirit exists who created the universe and controls the destiny of everything in it including man. The Great Spirit put some of this supernatural power (mana) into Peyote, which he gave to the Indians to help them in their present lowly circumstances.

b) By eating Peyote under the proper ritual conditions, a person can incorporate some of the Great Spirit's power, in the same way as the white Christian absorbs that power by means of the sacramental bread and wine. The preconditions are physical and spiritual purification. Physical purification is achieved by bathing and dressing in clean clothes; spiritual, by putting aside all evil thoughts and adopting a humble and receptive attitude toward the Great Spirit.

c) The power absorbed from Peyote has spiritual effects. The traditional Indian practice of many tribes was to go off in isolation and fast until a vision or a supernatural revelation was obtained. In Peyotism this is replaced by a collective all-night vigil in which, through prayer, contemplation, and eating Peyote, the Peyotist receives a revelation from the Great Spirit or one of his spirit representatives. For the Peyotist, this occurs because he has put himself in a receptive spiritual mood and has absorbed enough of the Great Spirit's power in Peyote to make him able to reach that Spirit. This revelation often takes the form of a mystical rapture, the unification of all one's immediate experience with the Great Spirit himself. At other times the Great Spirit or one of his spirit representatives reveals some religious or ethical dogma to the Peyotist; it 'teaches' him how to live right.

d) Peyote is also used medically. The traditional Indian belief is that disease is supernaturally caused. Therefore if a sick person is spiritually purified, incorporates some of the Great Spirit's power by eating Peyote, and the other Peyotists present at the rite pray fervently enough on the sick person's behalf, the latter will become well.... Peyote also has a physical effect in illness. After eating Peyote, a sick person usually vomits, and the sickness may be vomited up along with the Peyote, thus cleansing the body of the physical aspects of the illness. When the person has been thus cleansed, he should eat more Peyote in order to gain strengthening power.

e) The Peyotists are supposed to have a feeling of brotherly love for one another. This is expressed during the rite by means of elaborate forms of courtesy, respect, and honoring, as well as gift giving. Such brotherhood is also extended to Peyotists of other tribes.

f) The doctrine and rites of Peyotism can be learned only through taking Peyote oneself. Much emphasis is placed upon the necessity of direct revelation. What one learns from others is but second hand knowledge about the subject, rather than actual acquaintance with it; a matter of
great importance because it is one's inner experiences which are believed to be fundamental. (p. 568-571)

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints should be in a very strong philosophical position to combat Peyotism because it teaches the universal brotherhood of man and that the various Indians are indeed brothers, being descendants principally of the Israelite Prophet Lehi. Contrary to the Peyotists' belief, God has given them a book also--the Book of Mormon which tells of their forefathers and of Christ's teachings and ministry among them in this land. Also since the Indians are descendents of the Israelites of the Old Testament, the Holy Bible is their book as much as it is the white people's. The Peyotists and all other American Indians must be brought to realize that the true religion of their forefathers--the one which will renew their power and bring them salvation and exaltation if they will but accept and prepare for it--has indeed been restored to the earth. It is known as 'The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints'.
REFERENCES


