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PEYOTISM AMONG THE KIOWA-APACHE
AND NEIGHBORING TRIBES

CHARLES S. BRANT

DURING THE SUMMER of 1948, and again in the late winter and spring of 1949, I had occasion to obtain data, through informants and by observation, concerning the peyote cult among the Kiowa-Apache Indians and neighboring peoples who live in southwestern Oklahoma. Although the major problems with which my research was concerned were much broader in scope, and while the peyote cult was not singled out as a specific subject for intensive study, these data may have the virtue of throwing some light upon the nature and function of Kiowa-Apache peyotism today.¹ Also, because of possible renewed legal threats to the existence of the peyote religion, of which the Kiowa-Apache and their neighbors are aware, certain interesting developments are occurring in what might be termed the "sociology of peyotism."

In the area in which the research took place (in administrative terms the Kiowa, Apache, and Comanche Agency) peyotism is today an extremely live and vital force in the affairs of the Indians. Peyote meetings, usually held on Saturday nights and on holiday occasions, are numerous and inter-tribal in attendance. The meetings I attended were sponsored by Kiowa-Apache hosts, but they were attended also by their co-religionists from such groups as the Kiowa, Comanche, Delaware, and Cheyenne. Informants stated that inter-tribal participation is the rule rather than the exception. In this connection the view is frequently expressed that peyote's power has brought all the tribes into friendly association and has mitigated old hostilities and hatreds.

The peyote cult in this region, among such groups as the Kiowa-Apache and their neighbors, is relatively old. La Barre credits the Kiowa with having first used peyote about 1880.² Presumably the Kiowa-Apache began the use of peyote about the same time as the Kiowa, since the two groups have been rather closely associated. The Kiowa-Apache say that an individual called Nayokogał brought the knowledge of peyote to them. An informant stated:

Nayokogał was either a Mescalero or a Lipan. He said his people did not know

1 For the field research opportunity I am indebted to the Viking Fund for its grant of a pre-doctoral fellowship. Thanks are due Professor Morris E. Opler and Dr. John Adair, both of whom read the present manuscript and made valuable suggestions for its improvement.

2 Weston La Barre, *The Peyote Cult* (Yale University Publications in Anthropology, no. 19, 1938), p. 111.

how to use peyote right. He said it was a church. He showed his people how to use it right. Then he came up here and told us how to use it. I guess this was about 1875. He said peyote was a worship.

But the origin of the peyote cult is the subject of a tale presumed to extend farther back historically. I present the story in full as related by an elderly Kiowa-Apache man and translated for me by an interpreter:

There is a story from long ago about the origin of peyote. It goes back to the times the Indians were fighting each other. On the other side of New Mexico a group of Indians was camped, and they were attacked by other bands. The mountains there were very high. The tribe that was attacked got scattered. There was just one woman and her boy left. They were Lipan Apache. It was very hot and dry there. All the water had dried up. They had no food or water and there was none around them.

The woman told her boy, "I am tired and hungry and thirsty. We will rest here. Maybe I will die here. You go on. If you can't find anything maybe you will die somewhere."

It was early in the morning. The boy went out in the mountains. His mother had told him to look around to see if he could see anyone. He walked around. Then something above spoke to him. It said, "I know you are hungry. Look down ahead of you. You will see something green. Eat it." He saw a green plant and dug it up and began to eat it. He looked around and saw many more. He ate some. Soon his hunger was gone, as if he had eaten a lot of meat. He dug some more of the plants up and took them to his mother. He told her of the voice that had spoken to him. She ate some of the plants, and felt as if she had eaten a big meal of meat. Her hunger was gone.

In the middle of the afternoon it was very hot. She said, "I do not know who gave us this, but I am going to pray to him." She prayed for water and to find their people again. Later on a cloud began to darken the sky and there was thunder. Rain fell and water was running through the mountains. They drank and rested there that night.

During the night the woman dreamed. Someone came to her and said, "Look over there and you will see a certain mountain." She looked and saw people moving along the hills. There was a creek nearby. It was east of where she and her boy were lying. In the dream she was told to go up on a high mountain in the morning and look out, and she would see her own people. She was told to take peyote to her people and a way would be made for it.

In the morning they washed and ate some peyote. She told her son of her dream. They went to the mountain and looked out, as she had been told in her dream. She saw people settling down and camping. She knew from her dream that they would be Indians. She and her boy started toward them. One man met them. He recognized them as the lost ones. They were glad to see each other. When they reached the camp he told all the people about them.

The boy had peyote with him. After they got settled the boy asked his mother

to fix him a tipi, off by himself. He said he would go in that night and eat the peyote, and after that he would go into the mountains and lie down. He sat down inside the tipi and put the peyote on the ground, just as it looked when he first saw it. He prayed to the spirit that had shown him the peyote, "You have helped me. When I eat peyote tonight I want you to help me to find a way for it." He had a bow and arrow, and he drummed on the bow-string with the arrow. He sang two songs. He smoked a pipe made of bone from a deer's leg. He drummed and sang all night long. Early in the morning he went to the mountains and stayed there all day and all night. The following morning he came back.

He did this several times. He put up a tipi and sang and drummed all night, and then went to the mountains.

Soon the men began to talk among themselves. They said, "That boy knows something." One time one old man went over to the boy's tipi. He called him and asked, "Are you afraid to let me come in? I want to come in." The boy told him to enter, and the old man sat down beside him. The boy gave him the pipe and he lit it from the fire. Then the boy gave him peyote to eat. Early in the morning they went to the mountains and returned to camp just before dark. The boy's mother had taken the tipi down in the meantime.

After that, people asked the old man what had happened. They said they were all going into the tipi next time.

Not long afterward the boy put up the tipi again. The old man came. Another man came by and asked if he could enter. He was told to enter clockwise and to attend to the fire. The next morning the three of them went to the mountains and stayed until sundown. The boy's mother took the tipi down.

The next day the boy told them he was running short of peyote and would go for more. He went where it was growing and brought back more of it.

The next time they put up a tipi and had a meeting, a fourth man came. They told him to sit on the north side. The next day they all went to the mountains as before. That man asked if others could come, and he was told they were welcome.

When there was a meeting again, all those men came and seated themselves, beginning on the south side and on around the tipi. As meeting after meeting took place, more men came, until the tipi was full.

All the time the boy wondered about improving the sound of his bow and arrow. He cut a long stick and thought, "I'll use this to pray with, so that when I grow old I can use it to walk with." He took a horn and put stones in it to make a rattle. At the next meeting he used those things. As he held the staff and shook the horn, he sang some songs he had composed.

Then he found a container made of wood, already formed. He put water in it and tied a hide over it. He made a drumstick from a yucca stalk. At the next meeting he gave the drum to the man next to him, to drum for him while he sang. In the morning he told the man next to him to untie the drum. He said, "Maybe because of this horn we will get meat. The sound of this drum reminds me of the thunder I heard, and the water in it reminds me of the rain that came. Think of things that will be good to have here." The others learned songs of their own, and soon everything began to fit right in the meetings. Different persons added new things.

The rocks on the drum were to represent tipi poles; the rope represented the rope that holds the tipi poles at the top.

Later, Nayokogał learned of peyote and brought it to us. In time it went north into the Dakotas.

To this day it is our religion. Even today different men add things to make it better. The boy told them long ago to think of things to add to make it better. Nowadays meetings are held on holidays like Thanksgiving and Easter, and the feast has been added to it.³

To provide the reader with a picture of the actual performance of the peyote rite and its psychological atmosphere as practised today among the Kiowa-Apache, I shall present a description of a meeting observed in early March, 1949, near Apache, Oklahoma. On the basis of my observations at a subsequent meeting and many discussions with informants, I believe the following is fairly typical.

The tipi was made of Sherman duck canvas, several strips being sewn together. It was placed with the door facing eastward. On the inside, buffalo grass was placed around the outer edges and covered with canvas for the participants to sit on. In the center there was placed the peyote altar, a representation of a quarter moon, made of earth, about six inches high and tapering off at the sides. These physical arrangements were made during the two days preceding the evening of the meeting.

Prior to the beginning of the meeting the drum was assembled and tested in the house of the peyote chief's stepfather. A heavy iron kettle, about ten to twelve inches in diameter was used. The kettle was filled about half full of water, small bits of charcoal were added, and a small piece of buckskin, which had been soaked in water, was stretched over the top of it. Along the sides of the kettle, under the overlapping buckskin, marbles were placed, and the buckskin was tied tightly in place by twisting a rope over and under each of the marbles. The drum was then shaken up and down to wet the buckskin thoroughly, and this was repeated at intervals throughout the entire meeting. The buckskin must be kept wet to maintain a good tone, I was told.

About 8:25 PM the participants entered the tipi to begin the meeting. The peyote chief (a young man of about thirty-five) entered first, carrying a handbag containing the paraphernalia to be used. He was followed by the drum chief and then by various participants. Entry was made clockwise. The chief and drum

³ A comparable tale among the Mescalero Apache has been recorded by Opler (see Morris E. Opler, *A Mescalero Apache Account of the Origin of the Peyote Ceremony*, El Palacio, vol. 52, no. 10, pp. 210-212, 1945). The theme of a person discovering peyote and its powers in a situation of stress is common to both Kiowa-Apache and Mescalero versions, though the details differ.

chief seated themselves on the west side of the tipi, directly opposite the door. The fire chief seated himself just to the left of the door after entering. Prior to this, he had kindled the fire inside the bend of the quarter moon, placing the wood in a V-shape, with the open end toward the door.

As soon as everyone was seated and quiet, the chief said an opening prayer, speaking Kiowa-Apache. The drum chief placed the "Father Peyote," a large button, on the altar directly in front of him, on a piece of sage. As he did so he said a prayer. For the benefit of the non-Apache participants—several Comanche, a Cheyenne, and the observer—the chief spoke in English. He said that the peyote rite was the Indian way of worshipping, and that although he was just a poor man without education, he intended to do his best to conduct the meeting properly. He said that the peyote meeting is open to all and that he welcomed the white visitor. Then he translated his opening prayer: "My father practised this way before me, and before his time, the old men followed it. It is a good road. He has given it to me, and he told me to preserve it and pass it on to the others. It is our way of praying to the man up there who is the master of all of us. Through this herb our prayers reach him, to heal the sick people and look out for our relatives who are away and for the boys in the service still overseas. This meeting tonight is for B. B., my stepfather, and also for my sister, both of whom have been sick recently."

Then the chief opened his handbag and removed the ritual objects. He passed a cloth bag containing corn shucks and Bull Durham tobacco counterclockwise. When it reached the fire chief he rolled a cigarette and passed the bag clockwise, each person rolling a cigarette as the materials reached him. Then a glowing stick from the fire was passed around with which to light the cigarettes. All smoking must be of these materials and so lighted. Smoking is supposed to be an accompaniment to prayer. After each one had finished smoking his cigarette, he placed the butt near the end of the altar closest to him.

At this point the chief passed a small bag containing sage counterclockwise to the fire chief, who took a small amount of it, rolled it between his palms, smelled it, and rubbed himself with it. The sage was passed around clockwise, each person doing the same.

A prayer was uttered by the chief, after which he passed a small paper sack containing peyote buttons, both green and dried, counterclockwise. When it reached the fire chief, it was passed around clockwise, each person taking two buttons and eating them.

After this the singing and drumming began. The drum chief began to drum and the chief sang. As he sang, he shook a gourd rattle in his right hand and

held his staff and a large feather in his left hand. After singing four songs, the chief passed the gourd and staff clockwise to the next man, and the drum was passed by the drum chief clockwise to the chief. After this pair finished four songs, the drum, gourd, and staff again moved clockwise in a similar manner, and so on around the entire circle. A few individuals had feathers of their own which they held as they sang, but most of them held a piece of sage at a slight angle to the staff.

This continued until nearly midnight. The drum and gourd stopped going around when they reached the door and were returned to the chief. The fire chief entered with a bucket of water and placed it just inside the door. At this point the water song was sung by the chief. A cigarette was rolled and lighted by the drum chief and given to the fire chief, who said a prayer. At the conclusion of his prayer, the cigarette was returned to the drum chief, who smoked the remainder of it as he prayed. After spilling a small amount of water on the ground and taking a drink, the fire chief passed the water bucket around, clockwise, each person drinking from it. When it returned to the fire chief, he placed it on the ground, circled the inside of the tipi clockwise, picked up the bucket and took it outside.

At this point, B. B. gave a speech. The substance of it, as translated for me, was that he expressed thanks to those who gave the meeting for him. He said that he had followed the peyote religion for sixty years and that was the reason he had lived to be eighty-four years old. He voiced the hope that he would live to be one hundred years old and that all those present would have long lives. He said that he welcomed the white visitor, and that long ago he had had a vision of the white man coming to learn the Indian peyote religion.

The drumming and singing took up where it had left off and continued until nearly 4:00 AM. During this period, individual participants frequently requested peyote by motioning to the chief, who then passed the bag of peyote buttons in their direction. Several individuals had their eyes closed and made a compulsive drumming motion as the singing and drumming went on. At various times persons would spontaneously mumble prayers. There was one woman present, accompanied by a small child who slept beside her. At about 2:00 AM, during a brief silence as the drum was being passed, she asked the chief if she might have permission to speak. In an hysterical, weeping voice, with tears streaming down her face, she said that she had come to the peyote meeting because her sister and her sister's children, as well as she herself, were ill, and that she was praying for their recovery and her own.

Just before 4:00 AM the chief picked up a small wooden whistle, which had

been placed in a leaning position against the altar at the beginning, and blew it four times. I was told later that this whistling is supposed to wake up "all the living things of the world that are sleeping."

The drumming and singing continued. About 7:00 AM it was daylight. The woman participant was sent out to obtain water. When she entered she placed the water bucket on the ground before her and kneeled, facing the fire. The drum chief prayed. Then he handed her a cigarette that he had rolled and lighted. As the woman smoked the cigarette and prayed, she wept profusely. The cigarette was returned to the drum chief, who smoked the rest of it as he prayed. The woman spilled a little water on the ground and took a drink from the bucket. The water was passed and removed by her in the same manner as at midnight. She was then sent out to get the "breakfast." She entered the tipi with four buckets: one of water, one of corn, one of pemmican, and one of corn gruel. A song was sung by the chief just prior to her entry and three additional songs sung by him immediately following.

The drum was then taken apart by the drum chief and the drumstick placed inside the kettle. The drum was passed around clockwise, each person taking the drumstick and putting the wet end of it in his mouth four times. Some individuals simply rubbed the wet end on their hands and rubbed their heads with their wet hands. The marbles to which the buckskin was tied were passed, each person tapping his body in various places with his fists full of the marbles. The gourd and staff likewise were passed, each one shaking the gourd and uttering a wish for long life and good health, and holding the staff extended along his legs and arms, to make him strong and sound of limb. When the drum returned to the drum chief he slowly poured the water in it over the altar, from end to end.

The containers of food were passed around, each participant eating a spoonful or two from each bucket. When this was completed, the participants began leaving the tipi clockwise, following the man nearest the door. The meeting was over.

In eating peyote, the ritual manner is to hold the peyote button in one hand, usually the right, and motion four times toward the fire, putting the peyote button into the mouth on the fourth motion, and then rubbing the hands over the head, legs, arms, and especially any places where there is sickness or pain. Several people also spit on their hands after chewing the peyote and rubbed the saliva over themselves. Sometimes, upon returning to the tipi after temporarily absenting himself, a person would stand momentarily before the fire and make motions of scooping up the smoke, four times, and inhale deeply from his hand. Periodically throughout the meeting, the chief or drum chief would drop ground cedar needles into the fire.

During the course of the night, participants were free to leave and re-enter the tipi, except at times when the fire chief was fixing the fire, it not being permissible to pass behind him, and during prayers.

The period between the end of the meeting and noon was spent in and around the tipi, smoking, gossiping, and telling stories.

At noon a dinner was served inside B. B.'s house, consisting of boiled beef, canned fruits and vegetables, fried bread, and coffee.

The entire emphasis of the meeting—the reason for calling it, the prayers and speeches—related to sickness and dangers. The behavior and expressed ideology indicated a strong belief in the curative and protective powers of peyote.

The peyotists believe that there is no conflict between their religion and the Bible. An informant stated:

They tell about peyote in the 14th chapter of Romans in the Bible.⁴

There is a supreme being. God put peyote on earth for the illiterate Indian so he could get the religion of the Bible. God comes to the Indian through peyote.

Peyote is to cure and to bring peace, in the family, among neighbors, and all of mankind.

The peyote religion says there is no end to life. The body decays but the soul has everlasting life. Peyote believers must live cleanly and love their neighbors. They must help the poor and the needy. They must pray and think of God daily.

Peyote believers must not touch liquor or even look at another man's wife.

There is an implicit, deep-rooted faith in the curative powers of peyote. The same informant stated, "Peyote saved me when I had ulcers." Another Kiowa-Apache, who has practised the peyote religion for more than half a century, claimed he was cured during the World War I influenza epidemic by drinking "peyote tea." Following the peyote meeting described above, a Cheyenne participant told me that he had been given up by white doctors thirty years earlier when he had tuberculosis. When he was offered peyote and told that the peyote religion could cure him, he was extremely skeptical, and only with reluctance did he try it. To his surprise it resulted in his cure after a while, and today, he testified, his faith in the peyote religion is unshakeable.

Many peyotists are very explicit in making the frequently heard statement that it is not peyote itself that is the object of worship in their religion. Peyote is conceived of as a medium through which the believer can reach a state of communion with God. Strong objection is voiced to the idea that peyote is an intoxicant or that its effects are in any way like those of alcohol. Peyote has "power"; it "works inside of you"; it gives you a "good feeling, a religious feel-

⁴ The reference apparently is to Romans, 14:2, which speaks of the eating of herbs.

ing." Quite often the peyote enthusiast will answer inquiries regarding the feeling induced by eating peyote with the advice that the questioner can learn the answer only by trying peyote himself.

Among the Kiowa-Apache today shamanism is no longer practised. In many respects the peyote rite appears to be the contemporary native method of curing. Among the Kiowa, so far as my knowledge goes, there are today but two practising shamans. Interestingly enough, these men are ardent peyotists, and, I am informed, often carry out their curing ceremonies during the course of, or immediately following, peyote meetings.

Having described the peyote rite as practised today and the associated ideology, some remarks may be in order concerning the sociological aspects of it.

In 1918, in response to suggestions made by James Mooney, an early student of the peyote cult, the Indians of this area formed the "Native American Church," together with other Indian groups in Oklahoma, and obtained a charter under Oklahoma state laws.⁵ Though the use of peyote and the ritual surrounding it have been under periodic attack from missionary quarters since that time, the legal status of the organization and its activities has been unshaken, and the devotees have felt relatively secure.

Today, however, the picture seems to be changing. While the Methodist churches in the region have been tolerant, or at least indifferent, toward the peyote religion, with the result that many Indians participate in both religions, the attitude of the Baptist church is quite different. The peyote rite is looked upon by the Baptists as idolatrous, and the effects of peyote are alleged by them to be distinctly deleterious, physically, mentally, and morally. During the second period of my fieldwork, for example, a group of students from the Oklahoma Baptist University participated in a radio broadcast over the University of Oklahoma station in which, among other "evils" and "vices" constituting "obstacles to the Indian's progress" they listed peyote. This evoked a great deal of ill feeling among peyotists, and two weeks later, the peyote followers obtained radio time to answer the allegations of the Baptist group. Among the Kiowa-Apache, the peyote believers regard the members of the tribe who attend the Baptist church as opponents of the peyote religion. One informant characterized them as "too much Christian people." Apart from such mutual recriminations, however, the Baptists and peyotists go their separate ways, and I found no evidence of any overt actions on the part of either group to interfere with the practice of the religion of the other.

⁵ La Barre, *op. cit.*, pp. 170-171.

More serious from the standpoint of Indian feeling and action is the belief that a recent investigation of peyote has been made by the American Medical Association and the fear that legislation may be introduced to classify peyote as a habit-forming drug and bring it under control of narcotics laws. Some of the Kiowa-Apache and associated groups speak, in specific terms, of such an investigation and the threat it may pose; most individuals, however, feel simply that some kind of trouble is in the offing.⁶ All of the peyotists feel acutely a need to act in order to fortify the position of the Native American Church against impending threats. But the question of what to do and how to proceed has stimulated the growth of factional differences and individual striving for positions of power and prestige.

An opportunity to gain some insight into the current situation in regard to this was afforded by attendance at a meeting of one group of peyotists, mostly Kiowa, in which the matter was fully aired. The major question was whether an effort should be made to reinstate the state charter of the Native American Church of Oklahoma and thus protect the rights of the peyote religionists of the state, or whether a joint effort should be made with Indians living in other states to obtain a national charter in Washington, D. C. The feeling of the entire group at this particular meeting favored the first alternative. The grounds for the preference are interesting: Indian groups in other states, it was said, are guilty in some instances of the misuse of peyote in two respects—some use liquor while still under the influence of peyote; some commercialize the use of peyote by charging a small amount of money for each peyote button consumed at meetings. Should the Indians of Oklahoma become identified with such misuse of peyote, the argument goes, as they would under a national charter, it would make the peyote religion everywhere vulnerable to attack. So runs the viewpoint in favor of a state charter only. There was some comment at the meeting to the effect that when an understanding could be reached with the groups who allegedly misuse peyote, and the ritual unified and standardized, then and only then would it be

6 The belief on the part of some of the Indians that the American Medical Association has made an investigation of peyote and taken a stand on its usage is apparently incorrect, for in a personal communication to the present writer, Austin Smith, M.D., Secretary to the Council on Pharmacy and Chemistry of the American Medical Association states: "We can find no record of any study by the American Medical Association of the uses and properties of peyote." The Indians' notion that the A.M.A. has made such an investigation may be related to the fact that an article by Drs W. F. Braasch, B. J. Branton, and A. J. Chesley entitled *Survey of Medical Care Among the Upper Midwest Indians* appeared in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* for January 22, 1949, in which the use of peyote by Indians is discussed from these writers' viewpoint.

wise to seek a charter from the federal government for a Native American Church of the United States.⁷

The leaders of the opposition faction, seeking a national charter, seem to be two prominent individuals, one Cheyenne, the other Kiowa-Apache. The latter, a self-styled chief when outside his community, was, at the time I left the field, considering an automobile trip to Washington to prevail upon the federal government for a national peyote charter. This group appears to constitute a small minority among peyotists in the area, and to its leaders are ascribed the not-unlikely motives of seeking high offices in a nationally organized Native American Church.

The intensity of the feelings and actions of peyote adherents and their social division in the face of potential threats from outside sources is understandable in the context of the socio-cultural conditions prevailing in the area and in terms of the past. The peyote religion functions as an emotional outlet and partial integrating force in a situation which is generally characterized by extreme individualism, economic insecurity, and marked health anxieties. The absence of anything resembling an integrated tribal or inter-tribal community; the individualism, jealousies, and resentments engendered by the system of individual land allotments; the feeling of dependency fostered by paternalistic government control over social and economic matters—all these provide fertile ground for the growth of mutual suspicion and distrust between individuals and between groups. It is in this context that the peyote cult constitutes the religious symbol of what might be called a "Pan Indian" movement, asserting minority group solidarity within the larger cultural framework.

It is safe to predict that the peyote cult will continue, under these circumstances, to constitute a major form of emotional outlet and that these people will struggle with great tenacity, if not unanimity, against any efforts of outside forces to end it.

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⁷ The considerable concern about, and implied disapproval of ritualistic differences, suggests the question whether we might not have here the inception of a process akin to denominational splitting.