

BRIEF COMMUNICATIONS

A SOCIO-CULTURAL INTERPRETATION OF THE PEYOTE CULT

Nativistic movements among the North American Indians have emerged from the cultural disorganization which the aboriginal groups experienced under the impact of the white culture. They were attempts, in the face of pervasive cultural disorganization, to restore to their adherents a stable orientation, a sense of satisfaction and meaningfulness in life. The Ghost Dance Movements of 1870 and 1890, for example, sought to do so by messianic prophecy of a millennium where the aboriginal way of life would again prevail. They furnished an escape from the cultural impasse that the tribes faced. In 1870, the Ghost Dance diffused from the North Paiute of Nevada to California, where disorganization prevailed; it did not spread among the Plains Indians. In 1890, when the Plains Indian culture was crumbling, the Ghost Dance spread again, and again from the Paiute, but this time it was taken up only on the Plains. Among the Klamath, Nash has shown, the Ghost Dance of 1870 was adopted in different degrees, its acceptance being directly correlated with what he calls the degree of "deprivation," i.e., the amount of cultural disorganization.¹ It is my present aim to point out the significance of this variable for comprehension of the diffusion of the Peyote cult and to show the connection between the Peyote cult and the collapse of the Ghost Dance.

Use of peyote among the natives of Mexico was reported as early as 1569.² Among the Mexicans, peyotism centered around the tribal shaman: it was considered a potent ally in his pursuit of the tribal welfare.³ Not until the nineteenth century, however, did peyote diffuse northward. About 1870, the Mescalero were using it, in a manner which was "truly transitional"³ between the Mexican and the Plains Indian. In the eighties, the Kiowa and Comanche initiated the tribal and ceremonial use of peyote; and they were the chief sources for its dissemination in the Plains area. After 1890, its spread was extensive and rapid: whereas previously it had been limited to five or six tribes north of the Rio Grande, in the following thirty-four years it was carried to some thirty additional tribes.⁴

Thus, the Peyote cult as a significant nativistic movement came in approximate temporal succession to the Ghost Dance of 1890. The Ghost Dance movement col-

¹ Factual substantiation for the analysis which is advanced in this synoptic statement may be found in Kroeber, Lesser, Mooney (1), and Nash. Detailed corroboration is contained in the author's study of messianic movements forthcoming in the *American Sociological Review*.

² Macleod, pp. 528 ff. Mooney (2), in the earliest report of the ceremonial use of peyote by the Plains Indians, asserted that peyote had probably always been used by the inhabitants of the region where it grows, that is, northern Mexico and southern Texas.

My concern with peyote is, for present purposes, highly selective. An inclusive discussion may be found in LaBarre. ³ LaBarre, p. 39, p. 42.

⁴ Shonle. As LaBarre points out, peyote was introduced in the eighties but became vigorous enough to attract attention only after 1890. Therefore, his data and Shonle's supplement each other, despite the apparent time-difference.

lapsed because its prophecies had not been fulfilled and because, its doctrine being passively anti-white, it was construed as a threat to white supremacy. Indeed, it had even become adventitiously connected with the "Sioux outbreak" of 1890, and the government agents on the reservations were ordered to exterminate it.⁵ The cultural disorganization of the Plains groups still existed, however; and it was this which facilitated the acceptance of the Peyote cult. The doctrine of the Peyote cult was peaceful, in no way did it threaten the white culture. The essential orientation crystallized around passive acceptance, resignation, around conciliation and compromise with the existing world. It called for renunciation of mundane aspirations and for maintenance of "a loftier spiritual realm which it is beyond the reach of the whites to destroy."⁶ Peyote, like the Ghost Dance, transcended tribal boundaries.⁷ It took advantage of the new sympathetic attitudes among the tribal units, attitudes stemming from the destruction of the old tribal animosities by the reservation system. Peyote is spoken of as "the Indian Religion." The Ghost Dance had also stimulated friendly inter-tribal contacts; it had created channels along which the Peyote cult could flow all over the Plains.

Connections between the Ghost Dance and the Peyote cult, mediated through particular individuals, in some cases were quite direct. Frank White, the Pawnee Ghost Dance prophet, became an ardent devotee of the new cult.⁸ John Wilson, perhaps the most important figure in the Peyote cult, was a leader of the Ghost Dance among the Caddo.⁹ A Kiowa named Baigya had a revelation in 1888 on the authority of which he predicted that a great whirlwind would come in the Spring, followed by a four-day prairie fire that would destroy all the whites and restore the buffalo and the old Indian life. When the catastrophe was not realized, his adherents lost faith and turned to Peyote. He and his disciples, of course, strongly opposed the innovation.

The Ghost Dance and the Peyote cult, then, may in part be understood as alternative responses to a similar socio-cultural constellation. As such a response, the Peyote cult performs certain important adaptive functions. On those whom it honors with leadership, it bestows prestige and status, serving as a path to social advancement. Public confession of sins in Peyote ceremonies is at once a mechanism for the dissolution of individual anxieties and a mode of social control. Like the old buffalo societies of the Teton Sioux, the cult can become a focus of tribal ceremonial and social activity. This interpretation, however, does not pretend to exhaust the possible understanding of these phenomena. It does not preclude the necessity for understanding the particular cultural patterns to which peyotism diffused and trac-

⁵ Mooney (1), p. 888.

⁶ Petrullo, p. 1. Thus, the Peyote cult is even more "autistic" than the Ghost Dance. See, Lasswell.

⁷ Both Petrullo and LaBarre have pointed out that *any* Indian is welcome to *any* meeting of the Peyote Cult. See LaBarre, p. 60, for a description of the diverse tribal origins of the Indians attending meetings for which he has accurate information. ⁸ Lesser, p. 118.

⁹ LaBarre, Appendix 7, pp. 161 ff. Wilson's tribal origin is uncertain; Petrullo "attributes" him to the Delaware.

ing their influence in the process of its assimilation.¹⁰ It does indicate the socio-cultural situation from which the Peyote cult was precipitated.

An opportunity for the further testing of this hypothesis exists among the Navaho. Although they have known about it for at least two generations, the Navaho have had recourse to Peyote only recently, under the impulsion of the incipient cultural disorganization that is now affecting them. Further research should seek to answer the following questions, among others: Do the leaders of the new cult come from among the old elite? What satisfactions accrue to its adherents? In what ways does the cult help the group adjust, contribute to its stability?

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¹⁰ See Opler, for a detailed study of this kind. To take another specific example, there may or may not be some relation between the importance of the vision in Plains culture and the Peyote cult. Shonle, for example, thinks there is. Petrullo criticizes the theory that Peyote is a substitute for the fasting and self-torture employed by the Plains Indian seeking a vision. I should say that the vision is an important element in the culture to which Peyote was assimilated, and, as such, exerted its influence, but that this cannot explain the particular occasion of the widespread diffusion of Peyote.