

AN OTO-OMAHA PEYOTE RITUAL

JAMES H. HOWARD

A PEYOTE RITUAL of particular interest to the student of culture change in the Plains area is the ceremonial founded by the Oto chief Charles White-horn. White-horn introduced the peyote cult among the Oto, having learned of it from the Tonkawa before 1896.¹ He was also a prominent figure in the diffusion of the peyote "way" among other Plains tribes. His personal "fireplace" or ritual he secured in the old Plains manner, via the vision quest, rather than through the usual method of purchasing it from some Southern Plains tribe. Because of this, certain very interesting differences are found between his rite and the "standard" Kiowa-Comanche ceremonial.

Whitman makes the following reference to White-horn's ceremonial:

Only one Oto, White Horn, a member of the Eagle gens, obtained a peyote fireplace by personal vision. This was about the year 1908. I was told that White Horn's meetings were very similar to the Kiowa, but that there were a few minor differences in the ritual. Exactly what these differences were I could not discover.²

White-horn's fireplace is, at present, in the keeping of George Phillips, an Omaha Indian living in Lincoln, Nebraska. In 1949 Phillips stated that before he had come to be in charge of it, three years previously, the ritual was kept by James Wolfe, also of the Omaha tribe. Wolfe secured the fireplace from Cyrus Phillips who had originally obtained it from Charles White-horn by ceremonial transfer.

Among the patrilineal Omaha, it is the custom for the fireplace of a deceased peyote leader to be given to the eldest son. According to this George Phillips, as the eldest son of Cyrus, should have received the fireplace upon his father's death. George, however, was away at school, and, at that time not much interested in the peyote way. Therefore the ritual equipment and the authority to conduct meetings was given to James Wolfe, a nephew of Cyrus.

George Phillips agreed to this arrangement at the time, but he later grew to resent it, and when James Wolfe had the audacity to set up a "branch" fireplace for Clifford Wolfe, George predicted that "trouble" of a supernatural origin might ensue. Later, when James Wolfe was killed in an automobile accident,

1 Weston La Barre, *The Peyote Cult* (Yale University Publications in Anthropology, no. 19, 1938), p. 167.

2 William Whitman, *The Oto* (Columbia University Contributions to Anthropology, vol. 28, 1937), p. 127.

Phillips and other Omaha attributed this to his creation of the branch fireplace. Upon Wolfe's death the fireplace was kept for a time by an old Omaha named Paul Lovejoy, but was soon transferred to George Phillips, now older and an ardent peyotist.

George Phillips was present, as a child, at the ceremonial transfer of the fireplace to Cyrus Phillips, his father. George thinks this was about 1904 or 1905, but this date does not tally with Whitman's statement that White-horn received the vision upon which the fireplace was founded in 1908.³ At the transfer ceremony, which was attended by large numbers of both Omaha and Oto peyotists, White-horn recounted his vision.⁴ Phillips described the event as follows:

White-horn was a real old-time Oto. He didn't even know how to talk English. His companion [wife] was quite well educated though, and she would interpret for him at meetings. White-horn said that when he was younger he had been a cowboy, and that one night when he was rolled up in his blanket on the prairie he heard a voice speaking to him. It told him that if his people ever wanted to talk with God, they had the privilege to do so. God would listen to whatever they had to say if they talked to him at the sacred altar. He might not see fit to do as they wished, but he would consider it. This was White-horn's vision, the way he told it and the way it was interpreted by his companion at the meeting when the fireplace was transferred to my dad.

The altar used in White-horn's ritual and the positions of the various officers during the rite were diagrammed as shown in Figure 1. The crescent of earth, according to Phillips, represents "the flesh of our grandfathers and grandmothers." The two intersecting lines, one bisecting the crescent, the other cutting its tips, represent the "four winds" or the "four roads." At the point where the two lines intersect, between the tips of the crescent, the sacred fire is built. Sometimes a "sacred heart" is drawn here, as indicated, but this is optional with the leader. A similar altar is found in other peyote rituals.⁵

White-horn's ceremonial differs from the "standard" Plains rite in having, in addition to the four regular officers (road chief, drum chief, fire chief, and cedar chief), a "north road chief" and a "south road chief" who sit at the ends of the north-south altar line, as well as a "door man," who sits on the south side of the entrance to the peyote tipi. This makes a total of seven officers in White-horn's ceremonial.

The ceremony should be held, if possible, in a specially decorated tipi (Fig-

3 *Idem*, p. 127.

4 This was, incidentally, the last personal vision secured by an Oto (Whitman, *op. cit.*, p. 82, footnote).

5 Compare the following altars figured in La Barre, *op. cit.*, fig. 4, b, p. 75 (Caddo); fig. 6, p. 154 (Osage); fig. 7, p. 155 (Osage).

ure 2). This is brown or gray, and has a green band around the bottom which rises to form a "hill" in the rear. Upon this hill a white cross is painted. The hill represents Calvary and the cross that upon which Christ was crucified.

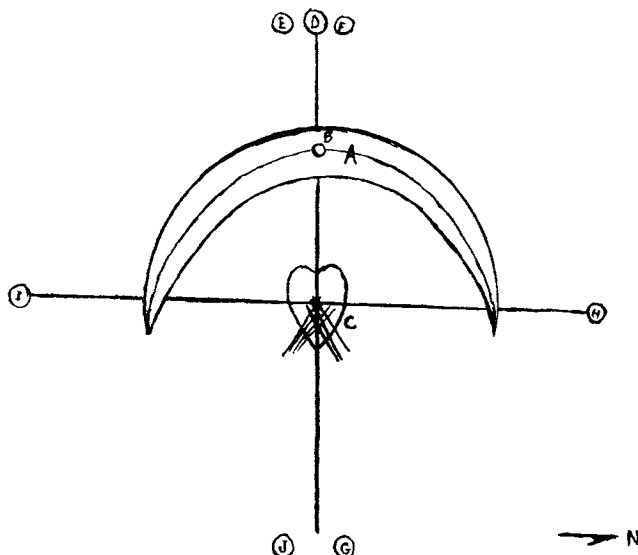


FIG. 1. Altar arrangement of White-horn's ritual: A, Crescent-shaped altar of earth; B, "Grandfather peyote"; C, Sacred fire; D, Road chief or leader; E, Drum chief; F, Cedar chief; G, Fire chief; H, North road man; I, South road man; J, Door man. (After a sketch by George Phillips.)

The ceremony has the usual features found in Plains peyotism: the ceremonial eating of peyote tops or "buttons"; individual singing to the accompaniment of a gourd rattle and a water drum; a midnight water drinking ritual; and a ceremonial breakfast, representing Christ's last supper, at dawn.

Special prayers are offered throughout the ceremony, with long prayer cigarettes rolled in cornhusks. The prescribed number of prayer cigarettes smoked in White-horn's ceremony is seven, another departure from the standard Plains rite, where the number is four.⁶ The first cigarette is smoked by the leader before the meeting proper begins. At this time he announces the purpose of the meeting, stating whether it is for the benefit of someone who is ill, a prayer for the continued good health of the group, or whatever. He then sings the opening songs, which start the drum and staff on their clockwise circuit of the tipi.

⁶ The ritual number seven is, of course, the alternate to four as a ritual number in many Plains tribes. It is, however, not common in peyote rituals.

When the staff and drum have passed the "north road man," the leader rolls and smokes a second prayer cigarette for him. A third cigarette is smoked by the fire chief just after that official has finished singing and fixed the fire by banking

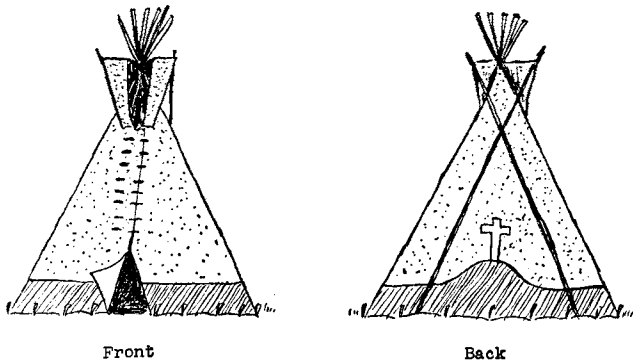


FIG. 2. Decorated tipi used in White-horn's peyote ceremony.

the ashes inside the crescent altar. A fourth is smoked by the leader for the "south road man" when the staff and drum have passed that official.

The fifth cigarette is shared by the leader and the fire chief just prior to the midnight water ritual. The leader prepares the cigarette and has it passed to the fire chief, who smokes and prays with it a while and then returns it to the leader. The sixth cigarette is smoked by the man who has "put up" the meeting, that is, the one who has supplied the food and purchased the necessary peyote. This smoke is offered sometime near dawn, when the effect of the peyote has reached its maximum. The seventh cigarette, which completes the ceremonial round, is shared by all of those who have smoked during the night. In special instances other persons may ask for the privilege and be permitted to smoke. Phillips pointed out, however, that not everyone should do this, only those who have a special prayer to offer. Others may pray by sprinkling cedar incense on the fire.

The number seven seems to be particularly important in White-horn's ritual. It occurs in the number of ritual officials and the number of prayer smokes, and is also the number of feathers in the fan or wand which accompanies the staff on its rounds before midnight. Here the seven feathers are said to represent the Old Testament, referring specifically to the earth's having been created in seven days. After midnight a fan containing twelve feathers is used. This represents the New Testament, with particular reference to the twelve apostles.

The staff of White-horn's fireplace is also quite unusual, and its decorations seem to be derived more from old Oto ceremonial paraphernalia than from South-

ern Plains sources. Its characteristic feature is a ground and polished conch shell disk, of the type commonly seen on Plains "choker" necklaces. This is attached near the top of the staff by a buckskin thong when the staff is in use. Other ritual objects are: the feather fans or wands mentioned above; a stiff fan used by the fire chief, which is beaded in old-style Oto stylized floral motifs and is almost certainly an old-time Oto chief's fan rather than a piece of equipment made for use in the peyote ritual; a very small "grandfather" peyote button which is either beaded or tightly enclosed in a beaded buckskin case so that only the top shows; a decorated gourd rattle; a carved drumstick; and a beaded bandolier with a heart-shaped pocket at the bottom to hold extra peyote buttons. The last object was worn by White-horn when he led the ceremony.

In addition to these articles, which are of Oto manufacture and accompanied the fireplace when it was transferred to Cyrus Phillips, there are now seven commercial neckties, with silver tiepins in the shape of peyote buttons, and a small Japanese flag. These pieces were added to the fireplace paraphernalia by James Wolfe when he was keeper of the ritual. The neckties and tiepins are to be worn by the officers during the ritual and the Japanese flag serves as an altar cloth upon which the leader places his ritual equipment when it is not in use. The flag, which was added before World War II, was selected because it depicts the rising sun, a concept important to peyotists.

All of the ritual paraphernalia except the staff is kept in a large fisherman's tackle box. The staff has a special blue cloth case. Both staff and box are usually hung from nails on the wall of Mr Phillips' living room, safely out of reach of the horde of small children which roams those precincts.

Phillips has not conducted any peyote meetings since he inherited the fireplace, though he frequently attends those conducted by others, and is quite active in local peyote affairs. The reason he gives for letting his ritual lie dormant is that he does not consider himself worthy to lead the ceremony, having been an immoderate drinker for a number of years. He is much concerned about the future of the ritual, however, and, since none of his own children was interested, once made arrangements to transfer the fireplace to the writer in order that knowledge of it would not be lost with his death. On the evening before the ritual transfer was to take place, however, one of Phillip's children suddenly became ill and died, and this was interpreted as a bad omen. Now, though Phillips remains friendly and willing to discuss the ritual with the author, and is anxious that a description of the procedure be published for the benefit of future generations, he no longer considers its transfer out of his own family.