

PRIMITIVE PSYCHOTHERAPY IN NATIVE AMERICAN CULTURES: PEYOTISM AND CONFESSION

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WITHOUT a doubt the most widely prevalent present-day religion among the Indians of the United States and Mexico is the peyote cult. Peyote is a small, spineless, carrot-shaped cactus, which grows in the Rio Grande valley and southward. Its botanical name, *Lophophora* ("I bear crests") *williamsii*, as well as its Aztec name, *peyotl*, derive from the presence of little brushes of flocculent grayish white fuzz borne on the radial ribs of the pincushion-like top. Peyote contains nine narcotic alkaloids of the isoquiniline series, some of them like strychnine in their physiological action, others like morphine. In pre-Columbian times the Aztec, Huichol, Cora, and other Mexican tribes ate the dried "button" sliced horizontally from the top of the plant. In Mexico, the Indians ate this button and danced all night around a ritual fire in their agricultural and hunting religious ceremonies.

Since about 1870 the peyote cult has spread, with modifications, to the Indians of the United States, particularly to those of the Great Plains and the Great Basin. With the dying-out of the Ghost Dance revivalistic cult associated with the Sioux uprisings in the 1890's the use of peyote has spread from group to group until today it has assumed the proportions of a great intertribal religion.¹

Physiologically, the salient characteristic of peyote is its production of visual, olfactory, and auditory hallucinations, as well as kinaesthetic and synaesthetic

derangements. First in acting, the strychnine-like alkaloids produce exhilaration and a heightening of reflex activity, the endpoint of which may be muscular tetanus and opisthotonus. Somewhat later there is a profound depression, nausea and wakefulness. Finally, with the action of the morphine-like alkaloids, brilliant and luxurious color visions are produced which last for several hours. Both its aphrodisiac and anaphrodisiac virtues have been alleged and stoutly argued by opposing schools of thought, but peyote is probably specifically neither. There are no ill after-effects, other than those incident to loss of sleep, and it is not known to be habit forming.

The spectacular physiological properties of the plant have led to its being used by natives in Mexico to prophesy, to produce clairvoyance, as of an enemy approaching from a great distance, for the exposure of witchcraft, to find lost objects, and the like. It was also used as a pain-killer in a knife-gashing religious ritual in Tamaulipas, and it was given sometimes to the Aztec sacrificial victim. In the United States it is a panacea in native Indian "doctoring."

Of greater psychological significance is its religious use. The "psychic authority" of American Plains Indians, in aboriginal times, consisted in the supernatural visions obtained through fasting and praying, in which an animal or spirit, "taking pity" on the supplicant's weakness and suffering, vouchsafed supernatural "power" to him. The power of the great warrior and

¹ For a summary of peyotism, see La Barre (26).

chief and the power of the medicine man were alike in having this source. Thus, precisely as the pragmatic laboratory method is, putatively, the authority for the beliefs of western man, and the touchstone of authority for his actions, so too the supernatural vision was the criterion of values for all the life activities of the Plains Indians. It is probably because of this prior cultural set that peyotism has spread so swiftly among them. Nearly all Indian tribes still surviving which sought the vision in aboriginal times now have peyotism. The visionary, "mystic" habit of thought, in which direct contact with the supernatural sources of power and instruction by them is accomplished, is far from being moribund among the remaining bearers of these aboriginal American cultures. Therefore, in a group which values visions, such a shortcut as the use of peyote, which obviates long fasting and praying and which moreover may be used in a group ritual, is correspondingly valued and used.²

The ritual of the peyote cult in the Plains and Great Basin, briefly, is as follows. Some time after complete darkness has fallen the Indians enter the meeting tipi, in the center of which is an earthen crescent-shaped altar or "moon," between the horns of which a fire built of sticks laced like a worm fence is burning. The meeting begins when the leader or "Road Chief" takes an unusually large and regular fetish button or "Father Peyote" from his satchel and places it in the center of the groove or "Peyote Road" along the crest of the altar crescent. Dried and

cut cornshucks and loose tobacco are then passed around clockwise, and each member, male and female, makes a cigarette which is then smoked in a group prayer ritual. Following this, the leader, who sits at the west of the tipi, places dried cedar incense on the fire, and all present hold out their palms to the smoke and "bless" themselves in it, rubbing its medicine virtues over the head, chest, and thighs. (Some tribes, like the Delaware and the Osage, perform this cedar blessing ceremony for each individual as he re-enters from an after-midnight recess and fan him with eagle feathers to remove all possible evil spirits or influences which he may have brought in from the outer night.) Then all "purify" themselves by rubbing bruised sagebrush plumes over their bodies, after which peyote is passed around and eaten, in quantities varying from four to thirty buttons each per person during the night.

The rest of the night is largely devoted to passing around clockwise to each man in turn a drum,³ and then a carved staff and a beaded, carved and painted "peyote rattle" made of a gourd. Each man sings four special peyote songs, often dictated by visions, as he holds the staff in his left hand, and rattles with the gourd in the other, to the accompaniment of the drumming of the man to his right. An elaborate water-bringing ceremony interrupts this singing at midnight, when the leader leaves the tipi and whistles symbolically at the four corners of the compass on an eagle wingbone whistle, when the

²The valuing of psychically deranged states may partly account for the notorious helplessness of Indians when addicted to alcoholic liquors. Indeed, alcoholism in Central America is a ritual parallel to peyotism in the Plains; see the excellent study by Bunzel (10). For further information, see La Barre (24, 25).

³This drum has seven pebbles between the drumhead and the old iron trade-kettle which forms its body; the lacing around these bosses and under the bottom of the kettle forms a "Morning Star," symbolizing the "Elder Brother" war-protector god of northern Mexico and the Southwest. The water in the drum represents "rain," several live coals dropped into it, "lightning," and the drumming itself, "thunder."

"Fire Chief" to the north of the door brings in a bucket of water from which all drink in clockwise order. About four o'clock in the morning the singing is again interrupted by similar water-bringing ceremonies, this time by a woman who symbolizes "Peyote Woman" of the origin legend for peyote.⁴ Singing is again resumed until the day-break ceremonies of public confession of sins and "baptism" are performed. In the baptism, the water drum with the drumhead removed is passed around to the members, who rub themselves with some of the water in it, or drink a little of it, or touch a drumstick dampened in it to various parts of the body. Sometimes, too, doctoring is performed at this time, when all the prayers of the preceding night may be expected to have reached the best cumulative effect. At sunrise other special ceremonies occur, culminating in a ritual breakfast which always consists of parched corn in sugar water, fruit, and boneless meat.⁵ Still wakeful from the effects of the drug, in spite of the night spent sitting crosslegged, the men lounge around under willow "shades" the forenoon of the following day and tell about the visions and other experiences obtained in the meeting, until noon when a secular meal is served and the gathering disperses. Saturday night is a favorite time for a peyote meeting, for the following Sunday forenoon is free for lounging and talk.

The bare bones of this ethnographic account, which holds, roughly speaking,

⁴ Peyote Woman obtained peyote in a stress-situation, when she had been abandoned with her child by a war party, on a crescent-shaped hill. Habitues say that sometimes in meetings, under the influence of the drug, one can hear her high clear voice accompanying the men's songs.

⁵ The Cracker Jack, canned peaches, and corned beef breakfast of peripheral tribes in Utah and California still obeys the cultural compulsives of far-off pre-Columbian tribes of Mexico.

for over fifty Indian tribes, fall far short of psychological reality, however, until clothed with the motivations, affects, and meanings of the communicants. Life-history materials and discussions in the mornings after meetings are rich in psychiatric meanings. These matters may be described under the heads of doctoring, the Father Peyote, and the public confession of sins.

DOCTORING

The typical anxiety of the Plains Indians is less the sexual one—a derivative of our peculiar patriarchal socio-economic system and the antisexual Hellenistic-Christian tradition of West European culture—than *the anxiety for life itself*. The possible reasons for this are long familiar to ethnographers: the constant warfare in the Plains and the consequent insecurity of life; competition for the symbols of war prestige, the central value of Plains culture; and in later times the strange and terrible new diseases of the whites, their superior weapons and economic techniques; and the calamitous disappearance of the buffalo, mainstay of Plains life. It is possible perhaps to view this anxiety as ultimately sexual, e.g., oral deprivation, or castration anxiety, and the like; and, in fact, among acculturated tribes in the Plains, as we shall see later, there are considerable sexual anxieties. But as expressed in the language itself of ritual and prayer, over and over again, the major fear of the Plains Indian is the fear of death, and his chief prayer, correspondingly, is for the gray hairs of long life, for grandchildren, and the other perquisites of old age.

The widespread use of peyote in curing and "doctoring" is not unexpected. Curing, prevalent in Mexico, is a predominantly tribal and mainly prophylactic ritual performed to *protect from* sickness, which is largely due to the

witchcraft of the enemy. It consists in the anointing of all participants with tesvino, a native beer, or with a peyote and mescal mixture, by the tribal shaman or priest. "Doctoring," common in the Plains, is the doctoring of the individual patient after sickness has supervened. The techniques in peyote doctoring closely follow those of early native doctoring.⁶

There is nothing for which peyote is not the specific cure. The following diseases have been instanced to me as being cured or alleviated by peyote: wounds, snakebite, goiter, pneumonia, syphilis, tuberculosis, malnutrition, childbirth, cancer, bruises, skin disease, drunkenness, insanity, and indeed any ill that flesh is heir to. Thus the power of peyote protects from almost any conceivable disease or disablement.

For example, an Oto informant told of four successive meetings held for a man who had "gone crazy" when his wife left him: whether cause or result is not clear. Under observation for a time at Norman, Oklahoma, the patient even during the meeting was afraid that people were "coming after" him. He could hardly talk, and wanted to rush out into the night, so that people had to wrestle with him to keep him in the meeting. Finally the "Road Chief" gave him a peyote button and

⁶ Since this doctoring is not based on any demonstrable physical science reality, one is forced to conclude that the real source of doctoring techniques—the cutting and the sucking, the "X-ray" clairvoyance of the "causes" of the disease—is in the affects of the doctor himself. A Lipa Apache informant of Opler's remarked once, "It's nasty work right there: it might be dirty and full of pus, but the medicine man doesn't think of it that way; to them it is just as if they were sucking nice juice out of something, yet it would look terrible to others." More accurately, perhaps, native doctoring achieves what cures it does, through the satisfaction of the affects of both doctor and patient. The doctor can prove that he is not hostile and aggressive, and the patient can learn that his punishment is not fatal.

told him that this would protect him, and the man subsequently "came to" in the third meeting and was cured. This double reassurance of a human authority figure, in a public meeting, and that of the superhuman father fetish, together evidently modified the man's persecutory trend, so that symptomatic cure was at least temporarily obtained. The psychodynamics of paranoia may indicate to the psychiatrist why this was the case.

Again, there was an Oto man who chopped wood incessantly, rolled and unrolled strings, and performed other useless compulsive activities. He used to have "meetings" by himself, drumming and singing and eating peyote all alone. Another informant told me of a Taos "peyote boy" who had "gone crazy," some said from eating too much peyote, for peyotism is a highly controversial subject at Taos. However, a doctor from west of Albuquerque came and pulled a snake and a dead waterdog out of him, which proved that a different cause had been at work. These had been his "medicines," given and taught him by his father, and it was decided that he had clearly broken some taboo surrounding his father's medicine.

A Sioux doctor got his power from a vision in which Peyote turned into a man; but a Taos Indian, on the other hand, imputed his case of trachoma to witchcraft on the part of "foreigners" who came to large peyote meetings.⁷ Thus peyote was the power in both "white" and "black" magic. A Taos doctor, using a peyote button, drew out a large quill which some "witch" had shot into a woman's nose unbeknownst to her. A crippled boy's leg in the same pueblo was "all gone, rotten" and emaciated. Peyote doctors

⁷ Parsons (37, pp. 60, 67-68).

prayed over him for a month, whereupon he became well and fat, though the leg remained drawn up because he had taken too much white man's medicine.

Opler has comprehensively shown the psychic climate of aggression and counteraggression by witchcraft through the use of peyote among the Mescalero Apache.⁸ This was also the case with such tribes as the Tonkawa, Kiowa, Comanche, and Caddo, all of whom early had the cult. But the physiological state of euphoria which peyote commonly produces has so far dissolved intertribal rivalries and fears—once warfare had been forcibly suppressed by the whites—that peyotism has become an intertribal religion, formally incorporated under the laws of Oklahoma and Montana as the "Native American Church." On the other side, the removal of the dangers of war accounts considerably for the disappearance of this particular anxiety of witchcraft. In a more positive way, intertribal doctoring has been similarly important. Jim Aton, a famous Kiowa peyote doctor, for example, has practiced in meetings of the Yuchi, Shawnee, Kickapoo, Creek, Caddo, Osage, Comanche, Kiowa, Kiowa Apache, and Quapaw tribes. Indeed, the major vehicle of the spread of the cult in the United States has been such intertribal doctoring.

"FATHER PEYOTE"

The focal center of the entire ritual is the "Father Peyote" or fetish button resting on top of the crescent altar. Many former attitudes toward tribal palladiums, such as the Blackfoot medicine bundles, the Northern Cheyenne Sacred Hat, the Kiowa Sundance Doll or *taimé* and Ten Medicine bundles,

have been carried over to this fetish plant. The "Road Chief," who has complete authority as to how his meeting shall be run, exhorts communicants to keep their eyes continuously on the Father Peyote—much as in the case of the oldtime sundance centerpole fetish—so that they may receive a vision. It is possible that this concentration of attention upon this spot on the altar, together with the flickering of the fire which is the sole light of the interior of the tipi, may encourage an autohypnosis which partly conditions the "visions."

The Father Peyote button is always handled with great reverence and certain ones have been handed down from such famous leaders as the great Comanche chief, Quanah Parker, almost as heirlooms. An Osage once gave me a chipped but ancient fetish button, whereupon his part-white wife sought to obtain a large sum of money from me, at which I promptly returned this unexpectedly expensive object to its owner. One Wichita leader, several of whose meetings I attended, had a sizeable collection of Father Peyotes. He kept them carefully wrapped in silk handkerchiefs in such convenient small containers as a lady's vanity case. He could recount the history of each one in detail, whom it had cured in what meeting, and the like. One, for example, he carried throughout World War I. Through its own power it miraculously escaped detection and confiscation during a steam disinfection of clothes. Besides bringing him unharmed through the war, this plant is credited with influencing federal legislation. He "vowed" or promised a meeting for this Father Peyote, with much singing and good food, if the then pending Soldiers' Bonus Bill should pass; and in the summer of 1936 he had held a meeting in per-

⁸ Pages 191-192 in Opler (36).

formance of this vow. The Cheyenne and other tribes are convinced that peyote has prevented the passage to date of all the dozen or so federal bills which would have prohibited its cult use, and most of the relevant state legislation as well. Truly a formidable lobbyist! In the old days, under aboriginal conditions, peyote fetishes were carried as protectors in war against wounds and death, as protectors against witches and robbers when in encampment with the tribe, and as a prophylaxis against the witchcraft of rivals in the ritual races and ball games of northern Mexico. Peyote, as is well known, would also prevent bears from attacking a hunter. I have no doubt that during World War II peyote buttons were carried as protective fetishes all over the world by soldiers, sailors, and marines of American Indian extraction.

The protective function of the Father Peyote is most highly patterned, perhaps, among the Mescalero Apache. In this culture the aggressions arising from the peculiar socio-economic system of marriage find expression in intense witchcraft activity. But for the typical anxieties which a culture engenders, a culture often has a patterned technique for the liquidation of those anxieties, for too tightly corseted human nature must always and everywhere bulge out in some other spot. Although the means used were wholly magical, the aggressions and the counteraggressions were *real* in the psychological sense, and peyote had a genuine function in witch prophylaxis. Peyote meetings were the forum for the display of power of rival shamans; but here the Road Chief, charged with preservation of peace in meetings, had an advantage. Attempted witchcraft was said to "show" on the Father Peyote, which advised him when a shaman was shooting water

beetles or feathers or the like into a rival. Shamanistic rivalry among the Mescalero was most virulent, and witchcraft anxiety was as correspondingly intense as the projected hatreds and aggressions. One never knew what dangerous and powerful supernatural possessions a hatred and feared rival possessed, so this protective adjunct in Mescalero peyote meetings had a supreme importance. Yet, characteristically, in this uncomfortable culture, the power of peyote itself is dangerous, and elaborate care must be exercised in removing the fuzz from the top of the buttons before eating. For should it touch the eyes, it would cause blindness!

If peyote protects, it also punishes as well. One occasional result of the physiological action of the antagonistic alkaloids in peyote is the production of intense fear states. The well-known Winnebago leader, John Rave, for example, during a period of mental stress, once experienced this fear:

Suddenly I saw a snake. I was very much frightened. Then another one came crawling over me. "My God! Where are these snakes coming from?" There at my back there seemed to be something also.⁹ So I looked around and saw a snake about ready to swallow me entirely. It had arms and legs and a long tail. The end of its tail was like a spear. "Oh God! I am surely going to die now," I thought. Then I turned in another direction and I saw a man with horns and long claws and with a spear in his hand. He jumped for me and I threw myself on the ground. He missed me. Then I looked back. This time he started back but it seemed to me that he was directing his spear at me. Again I threw myself on the

⁹ A rule in peyote meetings is that no one may pass behind the "Fire Chief" as he mends the fire. It is also intensely bad manners to pass between a smoker and the fire, thus interrupting his vector of rapport with the Father Peyote. Therefore, in most meetings, one must ask permission of the Road Chief before leaving the meeting, in the prescribed clockwise path.

ground and he missed me. There seemed to be no escape for me.¹⁰

A similar experience occurred to Crashing Thunder, a fervent Winnebago peyotist. A dramatic solution of a lifelong problem was offered him in peyotism. In his youth he had lied about having received "power" from a vision experience in terms of the old tribal religion. This experience was so important for personal prestige that his ambition betrayed him into a fabrication to obtain it. But he never lied to himself. All his life he was aware of the deception, and, being a man of marked fundamental honesty, he keenly felt the fraud. Finally, at the age of forty-five, he did achieve through peyote and the authentic effect of its alkaloids the experience which he had missed in his youth. His conversion to the peyote religion was consequently most profound. "It is the only holy thing that I have become aware of in all my life," he said simply, after this experience.

The power and the authority of peyote are relied upon in other ways too. In a number of tribes, dry peyote or peyote "tea" is used whenever a person finds himself confronted with any important problems. To be sure, it is the individual's *total wishes* which ultimately find expression in the course of action followed. But the consultation with peyote composes conflicts, eases rationalization, and gives an authority to the decision which the "unaided" individual might not have been able to summon. In one instance, a Delaware solved a problem of major importance to himself through peyote. He had been appointed a Government policeman, and found considerable conflict between his duty and his sympathies. Finally he became gravely ill,

and a meeting was put on by his brother and another relative to pray for his recovery. In this meeting the answer came to him:

The others in the tipi did not like me. Peyote told me this. I had been a man-catcher. That was the reason. The two persons that loved me prayed for me and I got well. I did not go back to my job of man-catcher. Peyote showed me that it is wrong.¹¹

The mechanisms for social control afforded by the public and communal nature of the cult, as opposed to the individualism of the older solitary vision quest, are marked, and on the whole most effective. The speeches of the Road Chiefs and of the old men give ample opportunity for the expression of opinion concerning the conduct of younger members in peyote meetings and out. In one case I knew, a Kiowa marriage was saved from shipwreck by timely advice and reprimand addressed to the husband during a peyote meeting. The prayers, also, which almost any person may make by calling for a "smoke" from the Road Chief, are further vehicles for quite various psychological transactions.

Peyotism functions in many other ways as a living religion. In the Oto peyote church, the "Church of the Firstborn," the visionary teacher Jonathan Koshiway christens the newborn, baptizes new members, marries communicants, doctors them to the accompaniment of "hollering" like his animal source of power, and even conducts services for the dead. At Tarahumari feasts of the dead in Mexico, peyote protects the living from the ghosts of the dead, and a button is placed with the corpse. Throughout life, peyote offers consolation for troubles, chastens for bad deeds or thoughts, advises and directs behavior

¹⁰ Radin (41, pp. 180, 193-194, 198-199).

¹¹ Petruccio (38, p. 111).

through the drug-induced "vision," and serves as the focus nowadays for both tribal and intertribal life, thus preserving and reinforcing many of the old cultural and religious values. In the Plains the old tribal religions are largely gone, the Sundance is rarely danced and the Ghost Dance is past history. About all that is left is the character and cast of thinking common to the tribes of the region in general. Since visions in peyote intoxication take naturally the mold of the individual's own general culture, the spectacular "authority" of the drug ends by reinforcing these cultural values. In this, too, one tribe reinforces another against encroaching white culture. Thus peyote makes a major contribution toward the preservation of morale of the present day generation, torn as it is between loyalty to two cultures, the native and the white. Indeed, among the Oto-influenced Siouxan tribes, there is a syncretism of native and white religious values. "Russellite" influences in the Plains and Mormon ones in the Great Basin have contributed a veneer of Christianity to the basically aboriginal cult of peyotism, and biblical texts are quoted in justification of the religion:

And they shall eat the flesh in that night, roast with fire, and unleavened bread; and with bitter herbs they shall eat it. (Exodus xii, 8)

And this day shall be unto you for a memorial; and ye shall keep it as a feast by an ordinance forever. (Exodus xii, 14)

For if the firstfruit be holy, the lump is also holy: and if the root be holy, so are the branches. . . . Boast not against the branches. But if thou boast thou bearest not the root, but the root thee. (Romans xi, 16 and 18)

And, as Quanah Parker put it, "The White man goes into his church house and talks *about* Jesus, but the Indian goes into his tipi and talks *to* Jesus."

PUBLIC CONFESSION OF SINS

The peyote meeting of many groups has incorporated in it another powerful mechanism for the liquidation of individual anxieties, in the practice of public confession of sins.¹² It is difficult to overestimate the importance of this feature. Some time before dawn, when the effect of the morphine-like alkaloids of peyote is at its height, many members rise, on the exhortation of the Road Chief, and accuse themselves publicly of misdemeanors or offenses, asking pardon of any persons who might have been injured by them. The action of peyote as a primitive scopalamine or sodium amytal is questionable, for the pattern of public confession was widespread in the New World in aboriginal times. But that confession in the presence of the Father Peyote and repentance before the group is of profound significance cannot be doubted. More than ritual tears stream down the confessant's cheeks as he acknowledges his faults and asks aid to keep his promise to mend his ways. I have seen grown men in their forties sob with the abandon of small children in peyote meetings.

Cleansing from sin is sometimes more literal and less symbolic than this. The vomiting of peyote, which indeed does have a weedy, nauseating taste, is considered a punishment for one's sins, but rids the body of its impurities in the process. On an Arapaho fetish pouch, part of the symbolism in the beadwork is the "vomittings" deposited in a ring around the inside of the peyote meeting tipi.¹⁴ The Osage, who

¹² Skinner (48, p. 725); Radin (41, p. 177; 42, pp. 5-6; 43, p. 395).

¹³ Kroeber (23, pp. 401-406).

¹⁴ For the concept that sin is physical filth, compare the *Ilex cassine* "black drink" of the Indians of the Southeast United States, who use this emetic before nearly all ceremonies. In the Sundance of the Arapaho, Kiowa, and Southern

run their peyote meetings, like everything else, with a certain ostentation, provide spittoons in their peyote churches. Other tribes have attempted to emulate them by providing individual tin cans for participants to use.

Some students have thought that the American Indian practice of confession was the possible result of influence by early Jesuit missionaries. The evidence, however, is that the practice was genuinely pre-Columbian. Inasmuch as much of it is of psychological and psychiatric interest, and since the data on this subject are somewhat inaccessible even to anthropological students, I shall cite the sources at some length.

Among the Aurohuaca Indians of the Colombian Sierra Nevada, all sickness is believed to be punishment for sin. The medicine men when summoned will refuse to treat the patient unless he confesses his sins, for only then may these be transferred to bits of shell or stone and exposed to the radiant influence of the sun on the mountain tops.¹⁵

The Inca of Peru, after confession of guilt, bathed in a nearby river and repeated the formula, "O thou River, receive the sins I have this day confessed unto the Sun, carry them down to the sea, and let them never more appear." The *willac uma*, "head which counsels," high priest of the empire and usually a brother of the Inca, appointed the *ichuri* or confessors, who received confessions and assigned penances. This conventional confession of sins to

a priest appears to be one of the major principles upon which the public morality of the Inca Empire was founded. The political value of the institution is obvious.¹⁶

Many of the ceremonies of the Inca are introduced by a confession, after some days of abstention from salt and alcohol. The confessant visits the *mama*, or priest, carrying a mnemonic device made of corn shucks and a knotted string of tree-wool, which are to help him remember all his defections. The *mama* prompts the confessant also if he is disposed to leave anything out of his recital of sins.¹⁷

Confession was a recognized practice in Nicaragua also.

Andagoya says that it was made in the presence of a priest, but an assembly of chiefs of the Nicarao told Francisco de Bobadilla (Oviedo, lib. xlii, cap. iii) that "an old man is appointed for the purpose, in token of which he wears a gourd attached to his neck; and when he dies, we assemble in the council house, and appoint in his place the one who seems the most worthy; thus the succession is kept up, and we regard the office as one of great dignity. And this old man may have no wife, and lives in his own house and not in any temple or oratory. . . . We tell him when we have broken any of our feast days, and have not kept them, or when we have spoken ill of our gods for not sending rain, and when we have said that they are not good; and the old men impose a penance upon us for the temple, and when we have confessed it, we depart, feeling much relieved and pleased at having told them, and

¹⁶ Sir E. B. Tylor in Westermarck (52, vol. 1, p. 54); Sir Clements Markham (32, p. 106); Wissler (53, p. 248); Prescott (40, pp. 786-787); Karsten (21, p. 497); Pettazzoni (39, pp. 294-295). Of the modern Aymara of Peru, Tschopik writes, that "On ceremonial and festive occasion, people beg one another's pardon, because it is believed that ill-feeling destroys the efficacy of the ceremony."

¹⁷ Bolinder (7, pp. 139-140). For this and the following Nicaraguan reference I am indebted to Dr. Clyde Kluckhohn of Harvard University. For similar Guatemalan practices, see Bancroft (3, vol. 2, p. 678); also Crawley (12, p. 393).

Cheyenne, vomiting was induced by a prepared drink; see Spier (49), p. 473. The Lipan and Mescalero Apache, Arapaho, Osage, and other Plains tribes often prescribe a sweatbath or other baths before a peyote meeting; see La Barre (26), p. 61. Other tribes take Epsom salts as well.

¹⁵ Nicholas (35). The notion that the sun sees all sins is widespread; compare the Osiris legend, the Finnish national epic (Kalevala, runes xiv-xv), Hindu beliefs. The sun is, often, symbolically, the paternal eye, the eye of God.

as though we had not done wrong. . . . And the old men say to us: 'Go; and do not do this again.' We follow this custom because we know it to be good, and we believe that in this way we shall not fall into more evil, and will feel free from that which we have already committed."¹⁸

The testimony of the natives themselves is clear in indicating that confession is for them an emotional catharsis. The choice of an old man for the function is interesting also. Confession was not permitted until the age of puberty, and customarily one confessed within a day of the fault. As with the modern psychiatrist, the old man was not permitted to disclose what was told him.

In time of calamity, Guatemalan tribes made a confession of sins. Similarly, in a personal crisis such as childbirth, the midwife ordered the woman in difficult labor to confess her sins.¹⁹ Aguilar writes of the Maya of

¹⁸ Page 35, in Lothrop (29).

¹⁹ Herrera (18, vol. 4, pp. 148, 173, 190); also vol. 4, p. 265 in Waitz (51). The significance of masochistic behavior in the solution of anxieties must not be overlooked either. As in Yucatan, the Nicarao "pierce their tongues from beneath . . . and some of them scarify the genital member"; see p. 38 in Lothrop (29). The Chorotegan (*idem*, pp. 82-83) "mutilate and scarify with small knives or flint their tongues, and ears, or genitals," and spill this blood on corn which is afterward eaten as a sacred food. In Yucatan, natives "made sacrifices of their own blood, sometimes cutting their ears all around with rags which they had attached to them in sign of penitance; other times they made holes in their cheeks or the lower lip. Some cut pieces of flesh from certain parts of the body, or pierced the tongue slantingly, passing a wisp of straw through it with cruel suffering; others cut the upper part of the virile member, in such fashion as to leave it with two hanging ears" [Diego de Landa, *Relation des Choses de Yucatan*, in Waitz (51, vol. 4, p. 265)]. While genital and other mutilations are without doubt multiply motivated, the Central American examples cited are done in penance. In the exorcism of life anxieties, compare the tying of buffalo skulls to skewers in the shoulder muscles of sun dancers in the Plains, which they drag around till the flesh is torn; or the tying of such dancers in this fashion to the center pole of the sundance lodge. The sacrifice of pain

Yucatan that

They also call old Indian shamans when a woman is in labor, and, with the words of their former idolatry, he will enchant her and hear her confession. They do the same with some other patients.²⁰

Death and sickness in Yucatan was believed to be punishment for evil-doing, hence when ill they confessed their sins to the priest, or, in his absence, to a parent or spouse. Friends and relatives would attend and jog the memory of the sufferer in case he omitted any; and sometimes, if the patient recovered, quarrels might arise over confessed derelictions, whence it is clear that public confession is not without its drawbacks.²¹

In Mexico the confession of sins, particularly sexual ones, was a prominent feature. The practice was even used by the Spanish missionaries to root out peyotism. The confessional of Padre Nicholas de Leon contains the following questions for the priest to ask the penitent:

Dost thou suck the blood of others? Dost thou wander about at night, calling upon demons to help thee? Hast thou drunk peyotl, or given it to others to drink?²²

Indeed, among the Chichimeca confession was part of the peyote ritual itself. Sahagun writes that

they gather on a level spot, where they dance and sing all during the day and night is here intended to insure success in war and hunting.

²⁰ Aguilar (2, p. 205). The Guatemalan and Maya references strongly indicate the aboriginality of the practice of confession in the very language used by the early Spanish explorers.

²¹ Landa, p. 155, in Waitz (51, vol. 4, pp. 306-307); see also Brasseur de Bourbourg (9, vol. 2, pp. 114 ff., 567; vol. 3, pp. 567-569).

²² Nicholas de Leon, *Camino del Cielo*, in Lewin (28, p. 96) and Safford (44, p. 295). In Fray Bartholomé's *Manual* of 1760 (p. 15) for the confessional of Indians of San Antonio, Texas, the questions are asked "Hast thou eaten human flesh? Hast thou eaten the peyote?"—neither of them idle questions among the cannibalistic peyotists of Texas.

to their fullest pleasure, and this is on the first day because the following one all of them used to cry a great deal and they used to say that they were cleaning and washing their eyes and their faces with their tears.²³

He adds further details of the Aztec confessional, whose patron was a three-named tutelary goddess:

[One] name of the goddess is Tlacüani, which means eater of filthy things. This signifies that, according to their sayings, all such carnal men and women confessed their sins to these goddesses, no matter how uncouth and filthy they might have been, and they were forgiven. It is also said that this goddess or these goddesses had the power to produce lust; that they could provoke carnal intercourse and favored illicit love affairs, and that after such sins had been committed, they also held the power or pardoning and cleansing them of sin, forgiving them to the Sâtrapas (priests).²⁴

The Aztec confessional complex recalls a number of common layman's misconceptions about psychoanalysis. When the communicant is prepared to confess, he consults a priest (who chooses a favorable day for him from astrological tables), and brings a new mat and *copalli* incense.

After this he at once begins to tell his sins in the order that he has committed them, with entire calmness and distinctness, like a person who recites a poem or legend, very slowly and well enunciated, or like one who goes on a very straight road without deviating to one side or the other.

According to the gravity of the offense, penances of fasting, or piercing the tongue with a *maguey* thorn and lacerating it, or the like²⁵ are prescribed.

²³ Bustamente edition, vol. 4, p. 3, of Sahagun (46).

²⁴ Bandelier translation, vol. 1, pp. 29-33, of Sahagun (45), from which also are taken the two subsequent quotations.

²⁵ "Or he may say: 'You offended god by getting drunk, so you must appease the god of wine, called Totochi, and when you go to comply with your penance you are to go at night, naked with only a paper in front and one at the back to cover your privy parts; and when you

However,

Confession of great sins, such as adultery, were only made by old men, and this for the simple reason to escape worldly punishment meted out for such sins; to escape from being condemned to death, which was either having their head crushed or ground to powder between two stones.

From this it would appear that the aboriginal Mexican confessional grievously breaks down at some points for the liquidation of the gravest anxieties of all.

The Huichol of southern Mexico confess their sexual sins at the time of the pilgrimage to the north to obtain *hikuli* or peyote. The women, at home, each prepare a string of palm leaf strips, with a knot for each lover, omitting none. She brings this to the temple, and, standing before Grandfather Fire, mentions their names one by one, then throws the cord on the fire to be consumed. It is said that no hard feelings result from this, because otherwise the men would not find a single *hikuli* plant. The men similarly knotted strings as they went along recalling their sins, and at a certain camp they "talk to all the five winds" and deliver their "roll call" to the leader to be burned by Grandfather Fire.²⁶ As the quest for peyote is assimilated to the hunt in Huichol thought, the belief that confession is necessary recalls the ritual salt journeys of Mexico, and the war parties of the Southwest and Great Plains Indians.

Indeed, in the modern Western Apache cult of Silas John Edwards, confession in public may be made to the doctor, who may ask "Have you done bad?" if the patient fails to

are ready to return after your prayers are offered, you are to throw the papers that have covered your front and back at the feet of the gods that are there." (Sahagun (45, p. 32)

²⁶ Lumholtz (31, vol. 2, p. 129).

volunteer the information.²⁷ If the illnesses involved are even partly psychogenic, the therapeutic effect of such unburdening is evident. The related northern Athapascan tribes likewise have the pattern of confession; among the Tahltan of western Canada, the ritually secluded adolescent girls confessed their sins into little sacks.²⁸ Confession here is associated with puberty rituals: the exacerbated adolescent sense of sin may well be associated with the threat to "sphincter morality" in the first menses, or the reactivation of castration fantasies. Among the Carrier, a very sick person must confess every single secret sin if he hopes to recover.²⁹ Among the Slave,

If death seemed imminent, the patient confessed all his wrong-doings in the hope of delaying the fatal hour, a custom that prevailed perhaps among most of the northern tribes, since it has been reported also from the Dogrib and Yellowknife. . . . In northern and eastern Canada many natives believe that public confession would blot out the offence.³⁰

The Algonquian-speaking groups also had the custom of confession. Among the Plains Cree

the following peculiar sexual confession was sometimes held. A man would erect his tent over a spirit stone or a buffalo skull, and, calling the men together would order them to recount their illicit sexual relations. This they were obliged to do, and truthfully, otherwise ill luck would overtake them.³¹

²⁷ Henry (17) is in error in considering the origin to be the Catholic confession, for Sahagun (45) says "The Indians of New Spain considered it their obligation to go to confession at least once in their lifetime, and . . . they did this even long before they had any knowledge of the Christian faith."

²⁸ Jenness (20, pp. 373-374).

²⁹ D. W. Harmon, p. 345 in Morse (34).

³⁰ Jenness (20), p. 391, citing Keith and Petitot.

³¹ Skinner (47); the quotation continues (p. 540); "Those who had unnatural intercourse with their spouses were obliged to confess it.

There is some interest in the use of the buffalo skull, which recalls the fetishistic attitude toward "Father Peyote." In either case, the psychological function of the fetish is to give physical form and locus to the projected "spiritual" entities, through which men disclaim responsibility for their own emotions, wishes, and acts. The fetish may then serve as an externalized superego or conscience, "projected" outside the individual. There is a suggestion that confession was an old pattern among the Shawnee, too, for in a letter of Thomas Forsyth to General William Clark, the sixth "law" of Tecumseh's brother, the famous "Shawnee Prophet" Tensquatawa, is quoted: all the medicine bags were to be collected and destroyed in a public convocation, at which each owner was to confess his sins in a loud voice to the Great Spirit.³² Among the Plains Ojibway, a dream conferred the right to call a special assembly where the elders, youths, and then the women all were obliged to make public confession of illicit sexual intercourse to a large painted "spirit rock" in the center of the lodge.³³ Liars among the men would certainly be killed on the next war party, and the dream host quizzed them one after another. This institution, as the Ojibway phrased it, had all the advantages of a Buchmanite house party, giving satisfaction to the voyeur, the exhibitionist, and the sinner alike. The Salteaux, among other Algonquians, believed that sickness was the result of sins, particularly sexual ones, to be cured only by confession.³⁴

Once . . . a girl refused to speak, and her father was sent for, who ordered her to make a clean breast of her sin, whereupon she confessed that she had transgressed with him."

³² Forsyth in Blair (6, vol. 2, p. 277); the letter is dated 1812.

³³ Skinner (47, pp. 506-507).

³⁴ Hallowell (16).

The Blackfoot also had the public confessional.³⁵

The Siouan-speaking peoples appear to have shared the wide-spread custom of confession also. A formal part of the Iowa peyote meeting is the command of the leader at midnight for each

³⁵ Skinner (48, p. 726). Perhaps the reverse or positive side of confession was the avowal of innocence. In the Blackfoot "All Smoking Ceremony" (Wissler, 55, pp. 445-447) is a rite involving the cooking of buffalo tongues as the occasion for the avowal of female virtue. Compare Spier (49, p. 464), who notes its connection with the Sarsi sundance as well as the Blackfoot. The Cheyenne (Dorsey, 15, p. 158) practiced public assertion of sexual matters. Several Arikara ceremonies involved the avowal or assertion of sexual purity; Curtis (13, vol. 5, p. 79), tells of an Arikara ceremony in which a girl is given a rattle; this she holds up in challenge to the men in the audience, who are bound to speak if any can dispute her purity. In the Plains, it should be mentioned, there is a fetishistic attitude toward the rattle, a quality "emphasized in the sign language of the plains, where the sign for rattle is the basis of all signs indicating that which is sacred"—Handbook (19, vol. 3, p. 355). Clark (11, p. 45) lists the Arikara "Test Dance, which was for the purpose of asserting the virtue of the females, either married or unmarried. If slanderous tongues had falsely accused a wife or daughter, the injured one went to her father or husband, asked him to give a feast and made a dance. When everything was in readiness she took an arrow, and, touching a painted buffalo skull, made a solemn oath of chastity. These dances were to test the virtue of females, and those who could not pass through the ordeal were for the time abandoned to the lusts of whoever might desire them." Brackenridge's Journal (50, pp. 131-132) describes an Arikara ceremony: a girl touches a cedar bough at the top of a tipi if she is a virgin and gains "prizes" of cloth, vermilion, and beads; if any know aught contrary to her avowal, the men challenge her and she is publicly shamed. The Dakota (5, p. 251) build a "virgin's lodge" if derogatory remarks have been circulated; at the feast which is arranged the girl touches a knife blade, a stone and the earth symbolically to evoke their revenge if she lies, and her accuser does likewise, but if the accusation is not substantiated, he leaves amid jeers. The Oglala (54) make an avowal of chastity at a special feast to confront a slanderer, with a similar ceremony for virgins, male and female (55, pp. 445-447). All these ceremonies have the character either of the ordeal or the law-suit for slander, but they likewise with the confession ease the mind of the person vindicated.

participant to rise and confess his sins, and to testify that he has given up drinking (peyote is said to cure alcoholism), smoking, chewing, or adultery.³⁶ The Crow, even before peyotism, had a similar confession meeting; one recalls too the recitation of sexual exploits among the Crow when embarking on the warpath. This appears to be an expression of the same culture pattern, shaded by the markedly "double standard" morality of this group: the phrasing has appeared to some observers as boasting, though the element of confessing before leaving on a dangerous mission may also be present.³⁷ Confession is part of Winnebago doctoring, and the sick person confesses and asks forgiveness of those praying for his recovery.³⁸ The "testimony" in Oto peyote meetings may be influenced by practices of the Church of Latter Day Saints and the Russellites of Kansas, through the prophet Jonathan Koshiway, but Winnebago confession is amply documented:

At about twelve the peyote begins to affect some people. These generally rise and deliver self-accusatory speeches, and make more or less formal confessions, after which they go around shaking hands with everyone, asking for forgiveness.³⁹

The Muskogean language family of the southeastern United States may have had a similar practice. Adair, writing of an unspecified tribe, notes an annual atonement of sins, at which all sins except murder are forgiven; and

³⁶ Skinner (48, p. 726).

³⁷ The woman chosen as a tree-notcher in the Crow sundance must be absolutely virtuous. The ceremonial leaders approach her with a buffalo tongue, but if she is not worthy, she must openly confess, "My moccasin has a hole in it"—Lowie (30, p. 31). The Blackfoot women confess to the Sun when they skin the tongues in the sundance (Wissler, 56, pp. 236, 256).

³⁸ Densmore (14, p. 4); see also mss. No. 3205.

³⁹ Radin (41, p. 177); also (42, p. 3).

Bartram tells of a general amnesty at the annual "busk" of the Creek, when purgation by means of the "black drink" (*Ilex cassine*) is added, to give both spiritual and physical purging.⁴⁰

Still another linguistic group in native America, the Iroquoian, had the pattern of confession. Before the "Maple Dance," the first in the spring, the people assembled for mutual confession of sins, as a religious duty in preparation for the council. In this "meeting for repentance," as it was literally called, one of the Keepers of the Faith took a white wampum string in his hand as he confessed his faults, then passed it around to old and young, men, women, and even children. The wampum was believed to record their words. Preparatory confession preceded all Iroquoian festivals, but three in particular.⁴¹ Such universal confession on these solemn tribal occasions must have had considerable psychotherapeutic effect for the highly socialized Iroquois.

The aboriginality of confession is finally demonstrated by its presence among the Eskimo of Baffin Land and Hudson Bay. Nearly all Eskimo anxiety centers about transgression of taboos, a matter distasteful to Sedna, the mother goddess of the sea and provider of all food. Bad weather, poor hunting, and consequent starvation are always ascribed to the unconfessed sin of someone. Among the Eskimo, therefore, the wages of sin is starvation. If the guilty one confesses, all is well: the weather improves, and seals allow themselves to be caught; but sometimes the *angakok*, or shaman, has to discover the sinner to protect the community, and only prompt confession of some in-

fraction of the rules can purchase immunity.⁴²

The nearly pan-American distribution of the trait of confession leaves little doubt that it is a genuinely aboriginal psychotherapeutic technique. Indeed, we are probably dealing with a custom already old in Asia, for the Palaeo-Siberian Kamchadal of Kamchatka had a similar conception of sin.⁴³ In any case, the great importance of public confession of sins in the liquidation of anxiety is obvious to the psychologist and the psychiatrist. The focusing upon some concrete fetish or symbol of cultural authority—the "Father Peyote," buffalo skull, spirit stone, or wampum—is another valuable aspect of the practice. The significance of a group ritual, as in the peyote cult (aided here by the awesome pharmacodynamic "authority" of a powerful narcotic), may serve to explain the age-long survival of this kind of primitive psychotherapy, and its re-emergence and spread in the modern religion of the Plains, the peyote cult.

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⁴⁰ Adair (1, p. 150); Bartram (4, p. 507).

⁴¹ Morgan (33, pp. 170, 187-188), had mistaken apprehensions in believing this of Jesuit origin.

⁴² Boas (7, pp. 120-124); Handbook (19, vol. 2, p. 406).

⁴³ Krashenninnikoff (22, p. 178).

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