

A FUNCTIONAL VIEW OF PEYOTISM IN OMAHA CULTURE

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Exactly when and under what circumstances peyote first was introduced into Omaha culture is not established although there is general agreement that it was about 1906-07. Likewise there is general consensus that the acquisition came via the Winnebago and/or the Otoe. During December 1955, the author was informed that the Omaha received peyote from the Winnebago on April 18, 1907. This information was conveyed during a business meeting of the Native American Church, and an elderly Omaha man at the meeting was identified as the sole survivor of the initial group that received it. A 50th anniversary celebration of this event, held on April 18, 1956, further substantiates the field report. In any event, the literature establishes that peyotism among the Omaha has been widespread for many years. Gilmore (1912, p. 104) reports that by 1911 peyote had been adopted by half the tribe. Shonle (1925) places the incidence of Omaha peyotism in 1912 at 75 to 100%. In 1932 (p.95) Margaret Mead writes that the "... Peyote cult represent most closely the present-day religious faith of the majority of people." As recently as 1950 the Superintendent of the Indian agency for the Omaha estimated that at that time 90% of the on-reservation Omaha were consumers (mimeographed statement.) Field work by the author during the winter of 1955 revealed that peyote in the form of Native American Church meetings was still a vital force in the reservation area.¹

The aspects of Omaha peyotism discussed below are concerned with the questions of why the Omaha initially accepted peyote and particularly why its use persisted. The manifest functions of the peyote religion are extremely important. The religion is first and foremost an expression of the spiritual and aesthetic needs of many of the people, and moreover it has ascribed to it strong curative powers. Curing currently plays a major role in Omaha peyotism, and informants have expressed strong beliefs in its power to cure a variety of disorders ranging from a sore throat to tuberculosis. The literature substantiates this as a pattern in Omaha peyotism for at least several decades. If one accepts LaBarre's (1947) view that the main anxiety of the Plains peoples was centered on the question of survival, then one might ascribe acceptance of peyote to the fact that it functioned to alleviate this anxiety. Schultes (1938) maintains this position in explaining the relatively sudden acceptance of peyote by many Plains cultures. The current health level among the Omaha is extremely poor, there being a high rate of active tuberculosis, and this factor may be of extreme importance in explaining perpetuation as well as acceptance of peyote.

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1. Field work was sponsored by the Laboratory of Anthropology, University of Nebraska, and was directed by Professors John M. Roberts and John. L. Champe.

The highly elaborated vision-seeking pattern in Plains cultures may have predisposed many Plains peoples to acceptance of a vision-producing religion. This explanation is one of the best known and most widely voiced, hence is not elaborated here (see Shonle, 1925). One might argue then that the Omaha, a culture with such a predisposition, accepted peyote because of it. However, if the meetings in which the author participated were typical, it would not appear to be of prime importance for the Omaha today. At least it is not manifest. It may be that the element of vision-seeking was more important at the time of the adoption of peyote than it is in the current period of perpetuation.

The use of peyote is and has been opposed by most of the officials with whom the Omaha have dealings, and by many of the non-Indian residents of the Omaha community. The Omaha are not unaware of this anti-peyote feeling. Indeed, their defensiveness about its use indicates that they are acutely aware of it. Examples are found in stories told to the author about whites who have attended meetings and later ridiculed them, and frank statements by some Indians who oppose White attendance on general principle. By clinging to peyote in the face of such opposition, the Omaha are indirectly expressing aggression against its opponents. This is a latent function, and no doubt informants would deny vehemently that they either take peyote or attend peyote meetings because it is opposed by such groups. Nevertheless, the view here is that such expression of hostility is both a part of the motivation for attending and a part of the satisfaction derived from attendance. There is almost a viciously circular element in this situation, for as LaBarre (1938, pp. 93 ff.) has pointed out, the opposition by the non-Indian groups tends to create anti-White feelings among the Indians.

Another latent function is concerned with the generally "Indian" nature of the peyote religion. Although it is not a true nativistic movement in Linton's (1943) sense of the word (it lacks a manifestly anti-dominant-group theme), it is nevertheless a reaffirmation of in-group feelings and represents in part an attempt to recapture or to maintain the old way of life. In spite of the Christian elements in Omaha peyotism,¹ the fundamental value of the religion resides in its "Indian" nature. Informants feel, for example, it is better to hold meetings in the summer when a tipi can be used rather than in the winter when a frame building is necessary. The fire, the drum, the songs, sitting on the floor, and smoking -- all demonstrate strong ties with the past.

Another aspect deriving from the nature of the meeting is the cathartic effect of open confession of sin. LaBarre (1947)

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1. Examples are the crucifixes attached to peyote fans, and the figure of Jesus holding a peyote plant embroidered on the altar cloth. Prayers in the Omaha language are directed to the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

has called attention to this facet of peyotism and how it functions to alleviate individual anxiety. For certain individuals among the Omaha this may be the most crucial element and for others it may be of minimal concern. To what extent this is true, for this and each of the other functions discussed, should be studied.

A factor mentioned in passing by some writers, but seldom elaborated upon, is the recreational function of the peyote religion. To a community in which one must travel ten miles or more to see a motion picture, where television or even radio are rarities, where leisure time is often spent in looking for something to do, peyote meetings offer a partial solution. The familiar sight of men loafing about the town center mutely attests to the absence of leisure-time facilities. A peyote meeting at least offers an opportunity for friends and neighbors to gather under the same roof, and though the night meeting is extremely staid, the morning and afternoon following are filled with light conversation, tension-relieving jokes, food, and stories. The meeting provides the individual with a place to go, with something to do, and affords the satisfactions to be derived from participation in any group ritual.

A final consideration notes the relative importance of the peyote religion for the Omaha man. Mead (1932, pp. 133-134) calls attention to the fact that the role of the male suffered greatly in the process of acculturation:

"The breakdown of culture is almost always of more vital concern to the men than to the women. The old religion, the old social values, the old braveries, and the old vanities may be taken away from the men, leaving them empty-brained and idle-handed, but the women must continue to bear and nurture children, to cook the dinner, sweep the house, and wash the clothes."

The Omaha male role, then lost both in power and in prestige under the impact of acculturation. It is suggested here that the peyote religion gives new psychological meaning, or more correctly perhaps, restores lost meaning, to the Omaha male role. Recall that almost all the major functionaries in a peyote service are men: the leader, the cedar-burner, the fireman, the policeman. Note how few women participate directly in meetings. In the Omaha meetings attended by the author, women were outnumbered eight to one and even when present they did not sing the peyote songs nor did they beat the drum.

The fact that women play a less important role in the peyote religion is not peculiar to the Omaha. Many other tribes restrict the degree to which women may actively participate. (See Malouf, 1942; Opler, 1938, and 1939). This is not to say, however, that in other tribes where this is so that the function is necessarily the same although it may well be in some cases.

Further evidence of the particular importance of the religion for Omaha men is illustrated in circumstances surrounding the author's establishment of rapport with the community. During the first weeks of field work, female-sponsored social gatherings were found to be relatively frequent. By attending such functions the author encountered many of the women in the community, as well as some of the men, and on the street had a nodding familiarity with these people. It was only after word got around that the author was to attend a peyote meeting that men in the community spoke spontaneously or talked over coffee in the town's store-cafe. The difference in rapport before and after actual participation in a meeting was equally striking, once again particularly with the men.

The several functions discussed probably do not have equal relevance for all age levels in Omaha culture. The vision-quest or prestige factors, for example, may have more pertinence for the older group whereas the recreational factor may have more significance for the younger. Certainly the several factors are not isolated within the culture. Each acts to reinforce the other, and it is this solidly reinforcing combination of functions that insures the position of peyotism and maintains it. Likewise, for a variety of individuals peyotism may satisfy a variety of individual needs. The peyote meeting offers the Omaha prayer for his soul, food for his stomach, health for his body, prestige, and self-expression. It allows for the venting of certain aggressive feelings and, to a degree, soothes the ever-present sense of cultural loss. Rather than asking the question why peyotism has persisted in Omaha culture, it would seem more pertinent to ask how it could possibly do otherwise.

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