The Peyote Ceremony Among the American Indians[1]

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RELIGION has played an important role in the life of man since the earliest dawn of civilization. It was simultaneous with the appearance of man-like creatures upon the face of the earth, and it has varied in its numerous cults, serving as a defense against many evil forces. Religion supplied ancient warriors with strong and strange weapons to combat other tribes, and it exerted an influence against adversaries.

It appeared in a new form among the Plains Indians under the term of "Peyotism" in 1870. The Spaniards, who conquered Mexico in 1560, found the natives eating a "diabolic root." This was used by a cult which spread to the Indians of the South and Southwest. Missionaries opposed its use and branded it as an evil, blasphemous rite, for the drug produced illusions in the form of visions, taking the person into a spiritual realm beyond the world of reality, into a heaven independent of a materialistic existence. In the use of the drug there seems to be an intimate association with the spiritual forces. It has been claimed that this was a Christian religion, and it was incorporated under the name of "The Native American Church." Both Protestants and Catholics have bitterly opposed the Peyote cult, but its members have increased from year to year.

The mescal button of the peyote plant has the botanical name of *Anhalonium Williamsii*, *Lopohophora Williamsii*, and *Anhalonium Lewinii;* the local Mexican name along the Rio Grande is *peyote* or *pellote* from the old Aztec name *peyotl*. It is a strange, mysterious, and powerful drug which produces visions and delusions beyond the realm of a normal life. The Indians see it as a spirit; the white man, as an evil power.

The use of the plant for medical and religious purposes is very ancient. There is evidence that this ceremonial rite was known to all the tribes from the Arkansas River to the valley of Mexico, and from the Sierra Madre to the coast, although the Navajo and Moki Indians seem to have no knowledge of it. The Indians looked upon the plant as being sacred in their religious ceremonies. The Mescalero Apaches take their name from it.

James Mooney, of the United States Bureau of Ethnology, first brought

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the mescal ceremony to public notice in a lecture he delivered before the Anthropological Society of Washington, on November 3, 1891. He writes: "I know from experience that the mescal is a powerful stimulant and enables one to endure great physical strains without injurious reaction; in which respect it seems to differ from all other known stimulants."

The Indians regard the mescal as a source of inspiration and as a key to the glories of another world. They also consider it as a panacea in medicine, being particularly effective in hemorrhage and pulmonary diseases. They frequently use the mescal in decoction, without any ritual, for fevers and headaches.

The habit of eating mescal never develops into a mania. The drug has no serious or lasting effects upon the young or aged, and the habitual use of the plant does not affect the mental faculties. The taste of the mescal is extremely disagreeable and nauseating. Excessive eating of the button for the first time usually causes vomiting. The Indians say that no mental effect is produced by fewer than ten mescal buttons. The usual number for one person in the course of the night is from twelve to twenty.

Botanically it is a species of cactus, a small spineless, turnip-shaped plant with a dried flower growing in the center, which is the only part used. Its habitat is in northern Mexico and southern Texas. The plant has been considered a god—cures are performed through its use, and the mind cleared of worry.

Eating the drug, according to the Indian ritual, reveals the happy hunting ground through the Great Spirit. Peyotism is popular among some of the Indian tribes because of the happiness and exalted mental state it produces, which afford them an escape mechanism from their active mode of existence. The cult prescribes the use of the drug in the form of sacraments in the ceremonies which require certain paraphernalia.

The equipment has not been standardized, for the ritual varies with different tribes. New objects for the services are introduced by certain members. Highly decorative fans, a part of the rites, are symbolic in design and use, representing birds which serve as messengers between the spirit god and man. The size and shape of the fans vary, and feathers from many fowl are utilized, either in a single group or in combinations. The handles usually are covered with fine beadwork designs which are symbolic of the color visions seen by those under the influence of the drug. A tassel hangs from the handle of the fan. The leader carries a slim wooden staff about three feet long, carved with symbols and trimmed with beads. The designs vary in shape depending on the tribe or the leader of the cult. The Peyote rattles are ordinarily made of gourds upon which designs are often painted. These gourds are fastened to bead-covered wooden handles which pass through the gourd and have at the top a tuft of horse hair which is often dyed. A tassel is attached to the lower part of the handle. The rattle is held in a vertical position and shaken with an up-and-down motion.

Drums, important in the ritual of the cult, are made of three-legged cast

iron kettles from which the handles have been removed. A water-soaked buckskin, which tightens as it dries, is stretched over the top. The sides are laced with rope, which when completed outlines a seven-point star. Seven marbles, representing the points of the star, are placed under the skin along the side and serve as lugs on which the rope is caught, which in turn holds the head tight. It could be regarded in design as resembling the peyote button or the Morning Star. The cords are tightened by the prongs of a deer horn. The kettle is half filled with water, and live coals are thrown in it. Herbs or perfume are put in depending on the service—if it is one for the cure of a disease. Only one drumstick is used; this is carved and varies in length. It is a rod without a padded head. The drum represents thunder; the water, rain; and the coals, lightning, according to the Kiowa cult.

Many members of the cult carry their own equipment in a box which varies in design but which is large enough to hold the fans, rattles, etc. Carved designs, symbolic of Peyotism, are usually placed on the sides and top of the box.

No special dress is worn, although the tendency is toward tribal costume. Some of the chiefs wear an elaborate apron, blankets, and feathers. The cult members are not permitted to wear clothing made by the white man. A mescal bean necklace is worn, made from the brown seeds of the plant. Attached to the center of the necklace is a round, beaded bag for carrying a peyote button. These are worn by the chiefs and individual members during the ceremony.

Services are held at regular intervals among some of the Indians; the method of carrying out the ritual varies with different leaders of the cult, depending on the occasion. The services may be held for curative purposes; for appreciation; for a child's fourth birthday; or for the promotion of the health of members of the cult.

The average Indian attributes wonderful mystic powers to the peyote and pays divine honor to the plant by making prayers to it, or in connection with it, and by eating or drinking a decoction of it in order to appropriate the Divine Spirit. The use of peyote by the Indian has been compared to the Christian use of bread and wine—symbols of a deity.

Melvin Gilmore describes the ceremony among the Omaha Indians as follows:

> In the meeting places the worshipers gather in a circle about a fireplace in the center of the lodge or tent. A fire is kept up throughout the meeting. At the west side of the fire sits the leader. In front of him is spread a cloth like an altar cloth; on this lies a peyote top, and at the edge nearest to the leader an open Bible. At his right hand stands a staff symbolically decorated with feather ornamentation. In his hand he carries a fan made of 12 eagle feathers symbolizing the 12 Christian apostles. A water drum is beaten with a low insistent thrumming sound, accompanied by a gourd rattle, while songs are chanted, and the people gaze into the fire or sit with bowed head. Owing to the hypnotic effect of the firelight, the community of thought, abstraction from all extraneous affairs, the droning chant, the thrumming of the drum, and the mental attitude of expectancy induced by the words of the speakers, who

discourse on the visions which shall be seen, combined with the physiological effect of the drug, which stimulates the optic center, the people fancy they really see most wonderful visions of spirits.

The ceremony, similar to a regular church service, is held once a week and varies with each tribe. The Delaware Indians of Oklahoma conduct their meetings in a tepee built with twenty-one poles, with an entrance to the east. This is done so that the rising sun can look in and see the moon, which is a crescent-shaped low altar on the floor west of the center of the tepee with the ends toward the east. A groove along the top of the altar is the Peyote road over which all the visions pass to the spirit. East of the altar is the fire. Straw or blankets are used for seats.

The person who conducts the ceremony is known as the Road Chief, whose duties are to supervise the construction of the tepee, to carry out the rituals, and to appoint three other chiefs—Fire Chief, Cedar Chief, and Drum Chief—making four chiefs in all.[2] The Fire Chief builds and tends the fire, which must be started with a Stone-Age flint. There must be twelve cedar fagots spread in groups of four to form a crescent, with plenty of seeds from a cedar to sprinkle on. All the fuel is furnished by the Cedar Chief.

The ceremony, which starts with a procession of the chiefs, begins after sunset and ends with the rising sun. The Road Chief goes into the tepee, followed by the three other chiefs, to make sure all is in readiness for the ceremony. Men and women enter next and all are seated on the ground. The Road Chief places a large peyote button on the moon mound and recites the following: "After I have placed this 'Father Peyote' here, all this dry peyote and the peyote tea is for your use."

The Road Chief rolls a cigarette made from tobacco and sage, wrapped in a thin corn husk. He then passes the tobacco mixture to the Cedar Chief, who passes it on to his left to other members until it reaches the Fire Chief, who takes a light stick from "Grandfather Fire," and lights the cigarette of each one, lighting his own last. They all take four puffs of the tobacco. A prayer is given by the Road Chief, followed by anyone wishing to make a prayer.

The peyote is passed around the center in the form of tea or dry buttons. The entire evening is devoted to songs and prayers, accompanied by the beating of the drum. Everyone can recite four prayers or sing four songs. There are specific songs to be sung: the Opening Song, the Midnight Water Call, the Morning Water Call, and the Quitting Song.

At midnight the Road Chief sings the Midnight Water Call. The water is brought in by the Fire Chief and blessed by the Road Chief, who goes outside the tepee, faces east, blows one long blast, four short blasts, and another long blast on his whistle. Then he prays, facing the east, south, west, and north. The Cedar Chief sings a song for each prayer, facing in the same directions.

[2] The number "four" is sacred to the Indians, for animals have four limbs and four senses.

The Road Chief again enters the tepee and addresses the members. At five o'clock the Road Chief sings the Morning Water Call, and the Fire Chief states: "A messenger has arrived with the water."

A woman who has not attended the ceremony, and who is either the wife, sister, or daughter of the Road Chief, enters with a pail of water. At dawn the sun looks into the tepee and sees the moon altar which is his woman.

The Peyote breakfast, which has been especially prepared, is brought in by another woman messenger. It is hominy, jerked or dried venison, and raw ground beef. Everyone eats and spends the day sleeping off the effect of the drug.

The visit to the happy hunting grounds, with all its beautiful colors, is intoxicating in character, and the many visions of a fairyland keep the user of the peyote in an exotic state.

In 1936 and 1937 Marvin K. Opler visited the Southern Ute Indians of Colorado on the Consolidated (or Southern) Ute Reservation. In Towaoc, Colorado, he found in nearly every tent peyote gourd rattles of Kiowa type, canes, and peyote drumsticks. The Indians there held weekly meetings—on Saturday nights—and ate the peyote buttons. The practice at Towaoc started about 1931. One Indian told about using the drug for five years, but he had never craved it. Peyote has often been used as a cure for alcoholism.

The primary purpose of this cult on the Reservation is to combat illness; secondary functions are to look ahead into the future by inducing dreams and visions of power, and to prohibit the use of alcohol. The women and girls of this tribe are allowed to attend the ceremonies, which custom critics have condemned because they say it encourages a form of intoxication which is degrading. There is a definite Christian influence in the ceremonies held at Towaoc, Colorado, for the symbols represent the twelve disciples, and the Bible is displayed.

Peyote has a mild non-specific therapeutic effect and some analgesic action, followed by a feeling of contentment and peace with all the world. There is some stimulation of the optic nerve, producing variations in color perception of a secondary nature. The drug is used in treating such diseases as diabetes and cancer, and in fractures.

The chemistry of peyote is rather interesting. Nine alkaloids have been isolated from it. The color visions that appear during the intoxication are due to the alkaloid, mescaline. The intoxication causes a disturbance producing visions of beauty in color and in form, often followed by the appearances of different figures grotesque in size and shape. The pupils become dilated, the pulse slow, the heart action is weakened, there is a sense of loss of time with partial anesthesia and muscular relaxation, and a feeling of religion and of being in another world. Attention is diminished, but intellectual judgment remains unimpaired.

The pleasure of mescal intoxication lies primarily in the enjoyment of the color visions produced, which range from ill-defined flashes of color to beautiful figures, landscapes, forms, and dances. There is very little effect on the reason or will-power of an individual, but the dilatation of the pupils, which always occurs, lasts from twelve to twenty-four hours. The person taking the drug is unable to sleep for nearly twelve hours.

Loss of sense of time exists in all people who use mescal buttons until they reach a state of intoxication, but does not occur in a normal therapeutic dose. There is a feeling of well-being, mental exhilaration, and happy contentment which follows the use of the drug, even in small doses. The Indians, in their religious ceremony, strive for the feeling of contentment which the drug produces. Two different reactions are apt to occur: one, nausea anxiety with the appearance of frightening visions; the other, one of peace, contentment, a state of euphoria.

There seems to be a close relation in effect with the smoking of marihuana. There is a marked change in the body image. If any part of our body is damaged or diseased, we do not feel well; this produces anxiety and discomfort which brings on fear. The peyote intoxication puts the body in a perfect state of fitness. The use of peyote produces physiological changes, accompanied by dramatized images. There is a similarity to the hallucinations of alcoholism. There appears to be a distortion of space and time; also a "restful insomnia."

The color visions produced by the drug seem to be in movement and change constantly. The manifestations are sometimes in the form of known objects and sometimes of abstract, geometrical shapes. Most white men who have experimented with the drug have claimed that the visions are obtained only with the eyes closed—that they disappear when the eyes are opened, even in a darkened room. However, a few have said the visions continued with the eyes open—if in a darkened room.

On Good Friday of 1897 Havelock Ellis took three of the mescal buttons, cut them into small fragments and poured on boiling water twice. He then took it in three portions, by infusion, at hour intervals. He began to experience color visions with purple and green the predominating colors; his skin appeared to be bronze, and his pen and paper took on a golden hue. Visions, which were beautiful and agreeable, passed in front of him. He saw them with his eyes opened or closed and in a light or dark room. The shadows were mostly violet. The effect of the dose taken lasted about twelve hours.

The Peyote religion is based on the power of Father Peyote to cure illness, idleness, and bad habits—a power which is derived from nature, the giver of all things. Peyote lends power to the individual when he is under its influence. It is a defense against a known fear of destruction. The Peyote religion serves to hide inferiority complexes and all anxieties from others. The Indian under its influence has established some harmony between himself and the spirit

world. The drug enters into the religious rite because it produces changes in the body, promotes a feeling of well-being on the user, and its sedative effect allays restlessness and anxieties. Many psychological changes are introduced or projected into the personality of the individual, putting him into another world beyond the realm of fear and anxiety, fusing the ancient spirit religion with a counterpart of modern Christianity.

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