

THE NATIVE AMERICAN CHURCH IN OKLAHOMA

By Carol K. Rachlin*

The Native American Church of North America is an American Indian Christian nativistic religion. The Church is Chartered in twelve states and in Canada, and is the largest intertribal organization of American Indians in existence. No exact figures for church membership can be obtained. Its national President, Mr. Frank Takes Gun, gives the practicing membership as 225,000 Indians in 1962.¹

Today in Oklahoma, where the church was first chartered on October 10, 1918, the membership is composed of persons belonging to most of the fifty-seven tribes in the state. A conservative estimate would be that this membership represents one-third of the Indian population of Oklahoma, or approximately 22,000 persons.² An amendment to the Incorporation papers of the Native American Indian Church in 1944 reads:³

The purpose for which this corporation is formed is to foster and promote religious believers in Almighty God and the customs of several tribes of Indians throughout the United States in the worship of a Heavenly Father, and to promote morality, sobriety, industry, charity and right living and cultivate a spirit of brotherly love and union among the members of the several tribes of Indians throughout the United States, with the right to own and hold property for the purpose of conducting its business or service.

The modern philosophy of the Native American Church is best expressed in the words of James Auchiah, a Kiowa:⁴

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¹ *Hearings Before the Subcommittee on Constitutional Rights of the Committee on the Judiciary, United States Senate, 87th Congress Second Session, Pursuant to S. Res. 340, Part 3, June 1, 2, and 8th, p. 527. (Washington D. C. 1963).*

² Estimate based on U. S. Bureau of Census figures, 1960. By these figures there are 68,000 persons of Indian descent in Oklahoma.

³ Amended Incorporation Papers of the Native American Church of Oklahoma, 1944, Article II.

⁴ Words of James Auchiah, Kiowa. Representative of the Native American Church of Oklahoma at the Oklahoma Intertribal Indian Center's Interfaith Day, Oklahoma City Y.W.C.A., 15th March, 1964. Kiowa translated by Mrs. Berdine Kodaseet and the Rev. Spencer Akpeahstone.

From the very beginning of time, the Indian has been a religious man. He sees beauty in all the world around him, and things are beautiful to him because they are works of God.

The Indian looks everywhere, and wherever he looks he sees God's hand. Oh, how beautiful are the skies! How majestic are the hills! How artistic are the valleys! And we look at them all, and know God made them all.

[In Kiowa] I am happy to be with you all today. I am happy that you are singing. When we sing together, God knows we are in harmony with each other and with Him. Now our old people are gone. We have no one to teach us the old ways, or to lead us along the old trails. That is why we must make a new trail, going forward together along life's road. The right way is the Christian way. Now I will speak in English:

We believe in many things. We believe in the goodness of God and the brotherhood of man, and the union of all Indians, with themselves and with their white brothers. We believe we pray better inside the tipi—both sides of the tipi—because that is the Indian's natural home.

We believe that in Indian ceremonies, we should eat only the old Indian foods: meat, corn, beans, and fruit. We should drink clean fresh water. We should eat the herb that God has given us.

All these men who have spoken today have told us how God loves us. That is the old Indian belief, too. That is the Indian way today. It's real. It's true. Aho!

This philosophy is implicit in all Native American Church ceremonies. The interpretation and the ritualistic elements of the service varies from tribe to tribe within a formalized pattern. The nativistic portions of the service are determined by the amount of aboriginal religion which a particular group possesses. The emphasis given to various parts of the service will depend on whether the tribe was traditionally a hunting or an agricultural people. The Christian elements in the ceremony are determined by the orthodox religious bodies who influenced a particular Indian group. All Indian groups believe in Jesus Christ the Son of God.

A Native American Church service is always preformed for a special reason: prayers for healing the sick, prayers for thanksgiving, prayers to protect the young people who are going into service, etc.

The ceremony is usually held in a tipi which serves as the church. Feathers, fire, smoke, the sound of the drum—all carry man's prayers to God. Man may sing his prayers, or speak them out loud, or word them privately to himself. Each man communes with God in his own words. There are a few standard prayer songs which are used in various sections of the service, in keeping with the formalized pattern of the ceremony.

The formalized pattern of the Native American Church service provides that a chief or priest conduct the ceremony or "meeting". The priest is assisted by his drummer and the Fire Chief or Road Man. The Road Man's duties are to keep the tipi clean, tend the fire, and generally aid the priest during the service.

The service begins about 8:00 p.m. and continues until 7:00 a.m. The ceremony is divided into four parts, with each part of the service having a special meaning:

1. *The Entrance Ceremony*: The priest, followed by his drummer, leads the congregation into the tipi. The priest tells the group the reason for holding this service. He then passes the holy peyote cactus for each person to eat. The peyote cactus is the sacrament, and can be equated with the bread and wine of the communion service of the Christian Church. A person who eats the sacrament has received God within himself, and thus he can commune with God.

It is from this peyote cactus sacrament that the religious belief of the Native American Church has received its colloquial name, "Peyote Religion." It is also because of the peyote cactus that the members of the Native American Church have been the recipient of abuse and attack from their own tribesmen as well as from the non-Indian community.

2. *The Midnight Water Ceremony*: At midnight the Fire Chief (Road Man) brings in a pail of water, from which each member of the congregation will drink. This ceremony symbolizes the fertilizing of all life. The holding of this ceremony at the beginning of a new day represents the conception of life.

3. *The Morning Water Ceremony*: This ceremony is held about dawn and symbolizes birth. A woman brings life from her body into the world; thus she brings the new day to man. A mature woman carries in a pail of water from which the congregation drinks. All life needs water to flourish.

4. *The Ceremonial Breakfast*: Man receives his strength from food, which is God's blessing. The ceremonial breakfast, composed of Indian foods; corn, meat, fruit, and water, gives the worshipers God's blessings and sends them forth strengthened to meet the new day. This ceremony closes the Native American Church service.

The philosophy of the Native American Church is not understood by its critics, most of whom seize upon the eating of the peyote sacrament as their point of attack. These critics claim that the sacramental peyote is a narcotic,

and is habit-forming, dangerous, harmful and deleterious to the users.

The sacramental peyote is a little spineless cactus which grows in the southern Rio Grande valley. It is botanically known as *Lophophora Williamsii*, Lemaire. This cactus has been confused with many other plants. Explorers, missionaries, early travelers, and even scientists have identified it with everything from mescal beans to poisonous mushrooms.³

Four tops of the cactus *Lophophora Williamsii*, Lemaire, usually called "Peyote Buttons", are eaten during the religious service. Four is a sacred number of most American Indians, symbolizing the four directions: east, south, west, and north.

The effects of peyote upon an individual vary with his physical health and psychological attitude. An average person will develop acute sensitivity to color and sound. He may have some hallucinatory experiences. Hallucinations will exist within the environment, and will usually be visions seen in the flames of the holy fire which burns throughout the meeting. Visual hallucinations in a peyote meeting may be equated with seeing designs or figures in cloud formations.

The services of the Native American Church in Oklahoma are always quiet and dignified, with no outbreaks of uncontrolled emotion or obscene performances.

The general health of persons who eat peyote ceremonially once a week or less appears to be about the same as that of nonpeyote eating Indians. A review of four or five generations of Kiowa and Sauk peyote adherents does not indicate that any inheritable effects result from eating peyote.⁴

Members of the Native American Church in Oklahoma do not usually use peyote in contemporary curing ceremonies. A person with a bad cold may drink peyote tea, but for any more serious condition he will see a medical doctor. More often individuals go to peyote ceremonies to thank God for having been cured, or to ask God's help for recovery from sickness.

³Richard Evans Schultes, *Peyote (Lophophora Williamsii) and Confused with It*. Botanical Museum Leaflets, (Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass. University Press, 19th Nov. 1937), Vol. 5, No. 5, pp. 61-66. See references in Appendix A.

⁴Alice Marriott to C. K. Rachlin, *Personal Communication*. Field Notes and Observations.

One Sauk priest expressed his attitude towards healing in this way, "That woman has cancer and the doctors can't cure her. We will hold four meetings (Native American Church services) for her. She will not get well, but her mind will feel better."⁷

The legal status of the use of peyote as a sacrament is as difficult to define as the sacramental use of wine was under national prohibition. Some states have outlawed the use of peyote under any circumstances, while others have refused to pass such laws. The Federal position is even more complex.

Peyote (*Lophophora Williamsii, Lemaire*) is not included in the current United States Narcotics Law. Recently (in 1964) a joint resolution was introduced in the 88th Congress, Second Session, to add peyote to the Federal Narcotics list. As of July, 1964, The Native American Church of North America is actively lobbying against this resolution.

Two Federal Laws specifically mention the word peyote, (*Lophophora Williamsii Lemaire*). The first is the Narcotics Addict Farm Act, passed in the 1930's. This law enables the courts to enforce cures, through hospitalization, on narcotics addicts. The United States Bureau of Public Health maintains two hospitals for this purpose.

A letter to Commissioner of Indian Affairs John Collier from United States Public Health Service states: "To the best of our knowledge, there has never been a patient admitted to either of the U. S. Public Health Service hospitals at Lexington, Kentucky, or at Ft. Worth, Texas, for treatment for addiction to peyote."⁸

The second Federal law to refer specifically to peyote is the Federal Food, Drug, and Cosmetic Act. A note on the subject of peyote written in 1955, states:⁹

A letter from Mr. M. R. Stephens, Associate Commissioner of Food and Drugs, to Mr. James S. Slotkin, University of Chicago, dated 18th January, 1956. Mr. Stephens states that at the request of the Indian Bureau, the Department of Agriculture attempted to prevent the introduction of peyote for a while.

About fifteen years ago, however, at the request of the Indian Bureau, we discontinued taking actions against importations of this

⁷ Personal correspondence between Isador Neal, Sauk, Cushing, Okla. and C. X. Rachlin, Winter, 1959.

⁸ J. S. Slotkin, *The Peyote Religion* (Glencoe, Ill. The Free Press, 1958), p. 124. Letter to Dr. John Collier from U. S. Public Health Service.

⁹ Hearing of the Subcommittee on Constitutional Rights of the Committee on Judiciary, *op. cit.*, p. 827.

substance (peyote). This was partly due to the fact that we had never encountered peyote in any product intended for medicinal use, and according to all available information its use has been confined to Indians and it was claimed that the article is used by them principally in religious or ceremonial rites.

The Peyote religion was first reported in western Oklahoma by Dr. James Mooney, as a result of his study of Kiowa history, in 1891.¹⁰ Mr. Mooney found the religion fully developed at that time.

In 1891 Baptist and Methodist missionaries were already well established in the jurisdiction of the Kiowa, Comanche, Wichita and Caddo Agency in western Oklahoma, and the Indians were acquainted with several forms of Christianity. The acceptance of the Peyote Religion by a suppressed people was a natural process when one considers both its nativistic and Christian elements.

All the Christian groups and the employees of the Bureau of Indian Affairs were anxious to suppress the Peyote Religion because they believed that the eating of peyote caused moral breakdown and corruption among the Indian people. They were joined in their fight against the Peyote Religion by Indian believers in the older native religions and by Christian converts, who kept the officials informed of the times and places of the peyote meetings.

The action of the missionaries and the employees of the Bureau of Indian Affairs and of the Indians should be viewed in terms of conditions on the Plains and the country at large at that time. This was the period of Indian history in which occurred the Ghost Dance uprising among the Plains Indians, the Crazy Snake rebellion in the Creek Nation, and the introduction of the "Forty-nine" protest dances in the northern Plains.

It was also a period of general unrest throughout the United States. The depression of the 1890's began in the banking centers of the east and spread westward. Crop failures and grasshopper plagues impoverished the agricultural Plains states. A demand for free land was raised by the unemployed and displaced elements of the population.

The center of the Indian Territory, later (1890) "Oklahoma Territory," was first opened to white settlement in 1889. In 1907, Oklahoma Territory was symbolically married to Indian Territory, and the State of Oklahoma was admitted to the Union.¹¹ Change was everywhere, and the unrest of the nation at large was felt by the Indian

¹⁰James Mooney, *The Kiowa Colonizers: 17th Annual Report of the Bureau of American Ethnology (1892-93)* (Washington, D. C. 1896)

¹¹Edwin C. McReynolds, Alice Marriott, Estelle Paulson, *Oklahoma the Story of Its Past and Present*. (University of Oklahoma Press, Norman, Oklahoma. 1961.)

peoples. The tribes expressed their unhappiness in a desperate search for spiritual reassurance—something to lead them from the frantic confusion and bewilderment they felt into the sanity of a knowledge of spiritual life.

The Oklahoma land openings brought in fresh floods of missionaries, who taught their different brands of Christianity to the Indians. Some Indians found the European-based teachings of Christianity compatible to their own ways of thinking and living. Other Indians, however, had deeply rooted beliefs in their old religions, and some Indians found logic in both. These turned to a blend of the two—the Peyote Religion.

The Session Laws of 1899, passed at the 6th regular session of the Legislative Assembly of the Territory of Oklahoma, April 10th, 1897, outlawed the mescal bean in Article II: Medicine Men and Mescal Beans.

At that time there was great confusion between the cactus *Lophophora Williamsii*, *Lemaire* (peyote) and the red mescal bean, *Sophora Secundiflora* (*orteg.*) *Lag. ex. D C 13*, in the minds of employees of the United States Bureau of Indian Affairs, the missionaries, and the lay population.¹²

Sophora Secundiflora (*orteg.*) *Lag. ex. DC 13*, the mescal bean, grows on a bush which is about three feet high. The bean is poisonous, and is never eaten. Indian men, particularly in western Oklahoma, wear necklaces of these red beans as part of their ceremonial dress. This is because where *Sophora Secundiflora* (*orteg.*) *ex. DC.* is found, the cactus *Lophophora Williamsii*, *Lemaire* is also found. The Indians say that the mescal bean leads them to the peyote, and they honor the bean by wearing it.

The confusion of the two plants led to the repeal of the Session Law by omission from the General Statutes of Oklahoma, in 1908. Ever since then there have been attempts to stop the use of a peyote sacrament in Oklahoma, but all of them have failed.¹³

With the omission of "Article II: Medicine Men and Mescal Beans" of the Session Laws for 1899 in the General Statutes of Oklahoma, the Bureau of Indian Affairs had no legal means, after 1908, of suppressing the Peyote Religion.

¹²Richard Evans Schultes, *op. cit.*

¹³Oklahoma Historical Society, Oklahoma City, Okla. Indian Archives. *Cherokee-Arapaho Peyote File*.

J. S. Slotkin, *op. cit.* p. 56 and Table 4.

The first decades of the Twentieth Century were not only periods of growth and expansion, they were periods of organized public virtue. They were the years of the Anti-Saloon League, of the Women's Christian Temperance Union, and the Temperance Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church.¹⁴ These organizations, joined with other similar groups, brought about the passing of the 18th Amendment to the Constitution of the United States.

In Oklahoma, these national movements received strong support from the white Christian population. The local representatives of the Bureau of Indian Affairs pressed their fight against the Peyote Religion under the guise of the peyote's being intoxicant. There were no national laws or state laws which specifically gave the Bureau of Indian Affairs legal authority to prosecute the Peyote Religion. The administrators of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, both in Washington and in Oklahoma, interpreted the laws to fit their own moral standards. They found their justification in the Act of 1897, prohibiting the sale of intoxicating drinks to Indians.

The interpretation of this law by the Bureau of Indian Affairs is clearly illustrated in the following letter, written by its Chief Special Officer, William E. Johnson. The confusion by Government officials between the peyote cactus, *Lophophora Williamsii*, *Lemaire*, and the red mescal bean, *Sophora Secundiflora* (*orteg. Lag. ex. DC. 13*), can also be clearly noted:¹⁵

Department of the Interior, United States Indian Service,
Salt Lake City, Utah. En route Banning, California. August 3, 1909.
From: William E. Johnson

To: Mr. Frank Thackery, Superintendent, Indian Agency, Shawnee, Oklahoma.

My Dear Sir:—

I have to acknowledge receipt of your letter of July 27, 1909, enclosing a written statement made to you by Henry Murdock, George Kiahketon, Fah-Pe-Ah-Thick, Oh-Pe-The-Nime and Roy Kickapoo. You enclosed a sample of the plant which has been used by your Indians.

The sample of the plant which you enclosed is the Peyote, the use of which the Government is trying to break up among the Indians. The Mescal Bean is a term frequently applied to this same article. The word "Mescal", however, is a Spanish term which

¹⁴Richard Hofstadter; William Miller; Daniel Aron *The American Republic* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey. Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1959), Vol. 2, pp. 374-75.

¹⁵Oklahoma Historical Society, Oklahoma City, Okla. Indian Archives, *Sac-Fox Vice File*. —Quoted in *Appendix B*.

corresponds very nearly to our English word "dope", and is applied rather indiscriminately to any article which will make a man drunk or "loco". The Peyote was commonly known as the Mescal Bean among the Oklahoma Indians until a few years ago when I attempted some prosecutions in the Oklahoma Territorial Courts against introducing this upon an Indian allotment. Under the advice of a smart lawyer named Cunningham the Oklahoma Indians suddenly forgot all about the Mescal Bean and insisted that they were using the Peyote plant. They dug up then a red bean of which little is known and which they claimed to be the Mescal Bean. This was purely subterfuge invented by a smart lawyer to evade the enforcement of the law, and it is unworthy of the Oklahoma Indians to attempt such a subterfuge as this.

I will file away the statement of these Indians for reference in this matter. The leader of the Mescal Sect among the Saw and Fox Indians, Harry Davenport, recently committed suicide while crazed with this narcotic drug. The furnishing of the Peyote plant to an Indian is a violation of the Act of 1897 which forbids the furnishing to an Indian of any article whatsoever which produces intoxication. The Peyote is such an article.

Yours, very truly,
(Signed) William E. Johnson,
Special Officer.

The pressure on the adherents of the Peyote Religion grew stronger as the drive for prohibition grew in popularity among the white population:¹⁶

The most determined effort of the Bureau of Indian Affairs to have an anti-peyote law passed took place in 1918, when H. R. 2814 was submitted to the 65th Congress, Second Session. The House Committee on Indian Affairs held hearings on the bill in February and March of that year. As a result, intertribal conferences were held in Oklahoma during the summer, at which the delegates discussed incorporating a Pan-Indian Peyotist Association as a defense measure. They knew about Koshiway's (Ota Indian) earlier use of this device (a charter), and if they hadn't known of the Indian Shaker Church incorporation before, some of them were informed by Mooney. (Dr. James Mooney of the Bureau of American Ethnology, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D. C.). There is reason to believe that it was on Mooney's initiative that the "Native American Church" was incorporated in Oklahoma on October 10, 1918.

Fifty-six years have passed since the Charter of the Native American Church of Oklahoma was granted. Two generations have grown up, to carry on the ideals of the Church and to make it a united intertribal socio-religious organization.

The philosophy of the Native American Church has been reinterpreted, as happens in all religions, so the belief will continue to be acceptable to each new generation. The Native American Church, while still continuing many native traditions, has moved into the Christian world of the late Twentieth Century.

¹⁶ J. S. Slotkin, *op. cit.*, pp. 58-59.

The Native American Church is still being condemned by many orthodox Christian faiths, and by many Indian people who do not understand the beliefs of the Church or the meaning of the peyote sacrament. Both groups tend to emphasize the elements which they consider to be spectacular or bizarre, forgetting the high moral teachings and spiritual guidance in daily living which the Church preaches.

The adherents of the Native American Church are legally practising their religious belief. They are Christian citizens of the United States and of the State of Oklahoma, and by virtue of the religious freedom embodied in the Bill of Rights of the United States Constitution are free to carry on with their own interpretation of Christianity, in the worship of God and the Son of God, Jesus Christ.

APPENDIX A

Johnathan Koshiway, Oto, received a charter for the First-born Church of Christ. Present at the meeting held in Cheyenne, Oklahoma, were members of the Southern Cheyenne, Oto, Ponca, Comanche, Kiowa, and Kiowa Apache tribes.

LaBarre, Weston, *The Peyote Cult*. (Yale University Publications in Anthropology, No. 19. New Haven, Conn. Yale University Press, 1938)

F. E. Kelsey, Ph. D. *The Pharmacology of Peyote* (Dept. of Physiology and Pharmacology, State University of South Dakota, Vermillion, S. D. 1932)

"Peyote (*Lophophora Williamsii*) contains as the principal active ingredient the alkaloid mescaline. Other active chemicals have been isolated in pure form from peyote. These include lophophorine, which produce strychnine like convulsions in rabbits in doses of 12 milligrams per kilogram; pelletine, a centrally acting sedative, and anahalonidine, a central stimulant. Mescaline, however, remains the drug found in largest amounts and is completely responsible for the extraordinary visions of the peyotist. Since the concentration of mescaline in dried cactus is about 0.3 percent, 1 ounce of the crude drug would contain 270 milligrams of mescaline, an amount adequate for profound effects in most individuals.

"In summary, the most important effects of peyote, or mescaline, on the human subject are on the integrative or interpolative functions of the central nervous system and manifest themselves as bizarre symptoms and signs. Peripheral effects are usually minor; other than the after depression which is always to be expected with such a powerful drug, there is no evidence of drug tolerance or withdrawal symptoms characteristic of the true narcotics. Overall, the drug appears to be very similar to marijuana in physiologic as well as in the psychologic sense."

Louis S. Goodman and Alfred Gilman. *The Pharmacological Basis of Therapeutics*. (New York, Macmillan, 1958.)

"*Lophophora Williamsii*. Lemaire (peyote) is not a narcotic because there is "no valid evidence that abstinence symptoms occur when the drug is not available."

D. W. Maurer and V. H. Vogel, *Narcotics and Addiction*. (Springfield, Ill. Chas. C. Thomas, 1954).

"There is no authentic record to show that the habitual or addictive use of peyote occurs either by Indians or others who use it periodically or experimentally."

APPENDIX B

Sac-Fox Vice File, Oklahoma Historical Society, Indian Archives, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.

PUBLIC LAW NO. 33

An Act to prohibit the sale of intoxicating drinks to Indians, providing penalties therefor and for other purposes.

Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America in Congress assembled, that any person who shall sell, give away, dispose of, exchange, or barter any malt, spirituous, or vinous liquor of any kind whatsoever, or any essence, extract, bitter, preparation, compound, or any article whatsoever, under any name, label, or brand, which produces intoxication, to any Indian to whom allotment of land has been made while the title to the same shall be held in trust by Government or to any Indian a ward of the Government including mixed bloods, over whom the Government, through its departments, exercises guardianship, any person who shall introduce or attempt to introduce any malt spirituous, or vinous liquor of any kind whatsoever into the Indian country, which term shall include any Indian allotment while the title to the same shall be held in trust by the Government, or while the same shall remain inalienable by the allottee without the consent of the United States, shall be punished by imprisonment for not less than sixty days and by a fine of not less than \$100.00 for the first offense, and not less than 200.00 for each offense thereafter.
Approved January 30, 1897.