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# The 1918 U.S. Congressional Hearings on Peyote

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## THE 1918 U.S. CONGRESSIONAL HEARINGS ON PEYOTE

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During the winter of 1918, the United States was mired in the war to end all wars, but the tide was slowly turning to favor the Allies. While most citizens were considering President Woodrow Wilson's plans for peace, outlined in his famous "Fourteen Points" speech, certain politicians, anthropologists, and American Indian intellectuals were focused on the Congressional Hearings on Peyote. This debate provides one of the most dramatic examples of clashing political interests concerning the expression of American Indian culture during the first part of the twentieth century. The hearings were convened by the House Committee on Indian Affairs on February 21, 1918, and were widely publicized and reported. The committee's transcripts remain an important part of anthropology's historical record.

Freedom, justice, liberty, and equality—the ostensive virtues of democracy—are powerful goals set by scholars, activists, lawyers, and politicians to make the United States a more perfect union. Unlike equality or justice, religious freedom is such an unambiguous and fundamental value for so many Americans that it has rarely been evoked in struggles for equality. Even though bitter anti-Catholic and anti-Semitic movements have plagued the United States, the federal government never considered abrogating the First Amendment for Catholics and Jews. But Indians were treated differently. The First Amendment states that, "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof," but in 1883, Congress passed the "Indian Religious Crimes Code," which virtually outlawed all customary dances, ceremonies, and religious rites. Part of the government's efforts to promote Indian assimilation, the code called for the imprisonment of practitioners and instructed bureau agents to focus their efforts on the "medicine men." (Irwin 1997:35) Not least because the peyote cactus can induce hallucinations or visions, the so-called peyote cult was a religious practice that generated a particularly high-level of controversy, persecution, and suspicion.

There are several reasons why the peyote hearings of 1918 are a fecund site to analyze the early-twentieth century controversy over American Indian culture and policy in the United States. First, the most important players involved in these issues testified at the hearings. Zitkala-Sa (also known as Gertrude Bonnin), Charles Eastman, Francis La Flesche, James Mooney, and the august General Richard H. Pratt each articulated his or her own particular views; in testifying, each both responded to questions posed by members of the congressional committee and tried to discredit the other witnesses. The hearings also marked an important turning point in the overall shift in policy from assimilation to conservation, and many of the so-called Indian progressives were split over the issue, revealing important fault lines and competing visions for the future. Finally, mudslinging and name-calling revealed the role ethnology played in the high-stakes game of ethnographic authentication.

James Mooney (1861-1921) was a white Smithsonian ethnologist who was deeply committed to the rights and well-being of the Kiowa, Comanche, and Apache groups he studied. He argued at the hearings "that the use of this plant is not an ordinary habit, but that it is confined almost entirely and strictly to the religious ceremony, excepting that it is

frequently employed also for medicinal purposes.” (Peyote Hearings 1918:69)<sup>1</sup> In making this argument, Mooney challenged the authority of Zitkala-Sa (1876-1938), a Yankton Lakota and secretary-treasurer of the Society of American Indians (SAI). She provided compelling testimony at the hearings against any use of peyote. Mooney, who supported the ceremonial and medicinal uses of peyote, went on the offensive, attacking her credibility by challenging her authenticity.

Zitkala-Sa launched a media campaign to coincide with the hearings, and it worked. The Washington Times gave the hearings front-page coverage and ran a story that was essentially an interview of Zitkala-Sa detailing the ill “effects of mind poison.” Accompanying the story was an image of Zitkala-Sa. Holding up a copy of the paper, Mooney explained to members of Congress that Zitkala-Sa “claims to be a Sioux woman,” but she was wearing “a woman’s dress from a southern tribe, as shown by the long fringes; the belt is a Navajo man’s belt; the fan is a peyote man’s fan carried only by men usually in the peyote ceremony.” (PH 1918:63) Ostensibly, her gender bending and mixing of different tribal elements in her clothing undermined her credibility and thus her claim to speak in the best interests of her people. As Mooney reminded the members of Congress, “an Indian delegate from a sectarian body or alleged uplift organization is not a delegate for his tribe.” (PH 1918:149) Mooney implied that only the scientific eye of a seasoned ethnologist could identify improper claims.

For his part, Richard Pratt argued that Mooney was wrong to promote “these nightly orgies that have been described so graphically by the Bureau of Ethnology itself.” (PH 1918:144) He challenged the scientific authority of ethnographic inquiry and implied that it was not the Indians but white anthropologists who were responsible for the growing use of Peyote. In a heated exchange between Pratt and Mooney, Pratt addressed Mooney directly: “You ethnologists egg on, frequent, illustrate, and exaggerate at the public expense, and so give the Indian race and their civilization a black eye in the public esteem. It was well established at the time of the ghost-dance craze among the Indians that white men were its promoters if not its originators. That this peyote craze is under the same impulse is evident from what appears in this evidence.” (PH 1918:147)

Zitkala-Sa did not address Pratt or Mooney directly, but chose to appeal to the conscience of committee members. Calling “peyote, [the] twin brother of alcohol, and first cousin to habit forming drugs,” she pleaded, “Mr. Chairman, were the life of your loved one threatened by a pernicious drug, would you care a straw what the ethnologists had written about the drug; how many years they had studied the drug? No; because the civilized man has studied for centuries other habit-forming drugs; but that study does not warrant anyone giving it to another in the name of religion today.” (PH 1918:164, 165)

The esteemed physician and Dartmouth graduate, Charles Eastman, took a different approach. He explained that the use of peyote “is not an Indian idea nor is it an Indian practice. It is more like what happened a few years ago during the ghost-dance craze, which, as we all know, was gotten up by irresponsible, reckless, and unprincipled people who thought that under the conditions the Indians were suffering from something like that would go, and they would get some personal benefit out of it.” (PH 1918:139) For Eastman, the use of peyote should be banned because it was not an Indian practice, but Francis La Flesche

supported its use as a sacrament. La Flesche was Omaha and an anthropologist who was elected in 1912 as Vice-president of the American Anthropological Association (Hoxie 2001:180). Like Eastman and Zitkala-Sa, La Flesche was a member of the SAI at the time of the peyote hearings, but the three disagreed. According to La Flesche, the use of peyote was part of a new accommodating religion that helped Indians to avoid liquor and uplifted the race. La Flesche argued, "the Indians who have taken the new religion strive to live upright, moral lives, and I think their morality can be favorably compared with that of any community of a like number in this country." (PH 1918:114).

At first blush, the arguments for and against the use of peyote may seem like a dizzying array of contradictory statements and rhetorical jockeying. Upon closer inspection, one can identify the logic that bolstered each participant's political position. Several issues came up repeatedly: regional specificity, gender, the ghost-dance, ethnology, civilization, sex, and morality. Each participant in these hearings had his or her own history and political commitments born out of, and in response to, the assimilation policies promulgated by state and federal governments. The peyote hearings demonstrate that the history of anthropology is a discourse that is inextricable from American-Indian intellectual history as well as the history of progressive-era reformers.

#### NOTES

1. U. S. Congress. House Committee on Indian Affairs. 1918. Peyote Hearings Before a Subcommittee of the Committee on Indian Affairs of the House of Representatives on H.R. 2614 to Amend Sections 2139 and 2140 of the Revised Statutes and the Acts Amendatory Thereof, and for Other Purposes. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office. Hereafter cited as PH.

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Irwin, Lee. 1997. "Freedom, Law, and Prophecy: A Brief History of Native American Religious Resistance." American Indian Quarterly 21(1): 35-56.

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#### PITH HELMET CORNER: AN OCCASIONAL COLUMN ON EPHEMERA RELATED TO THE HISTORY OF ANTHROPOLOGY

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One of the unintended consequences of anthropology has been the way it has stimulated the creativity of a wide variety of poets ranging from established ones like W. H. Auden to lowly villagers. Not only are they sometimes amusing and entertaining, but they also offer insight into relationships between anthropologists and the wider community.