

ETHNOLOGY

For Red Men Only

The Strangest Religion in America, the Peyote Church, Claims Converts in Over 40 Tribes and is Still Growing

THE STRANGEST religion in America—

Ten to one you have never heard of it. Yet, it is spreading, dividing into sects as neatly pigeonholed as Methodists, Baptists, Episcopalians. It is a growing religion. One ethnologist who is studying it declares that it cannot be dismissed as a minor cult. It is an important force.

This Native American Church, as it is called, is a startling, yet understandable blend of paganism and Christianity. It holds services with a religious hush and solemnity. There are prayers and hymns. Now and again, the name "Jesus" may be made out in the songs. There is a crucifix beside the altar. But the music is the throb of the water drum, and the light, thready beat of a gourd rattle. And the altar burns with a fire on which lie the dried flower tops of a sacred cactus plant, the peyote.

Around the gathering are passed these tops, or buttons, of the peyote plant and in sacramental quiet the bitter, mushroom-like morsels are taken and chewed. The peyote-chewer fixes his mind on religious things. He sits meditating on the problems of the world, of brotherhood, of religion in his own life. In all these matters he gains new light through peyote—the teacher.

So runs the service in a peyote church, all night.

The peyote church is an Indian affair. That is why its progress has gone unnoticed by the general public in America. But this peyote church is much more than the religion of some small Indian group. For the first time, an Indian religion has crashed through the barriers that tribes raise to set apart their own rites and ceremonies. In tribe after tribe, red men have listened to the testimony of visiting Indians—casual missionaries—telling what the peyote plant has done for them.

The peyote church counts its converts today among forty-odd tribes. They are scattered as far as the Kiowas and Delawares in Oklahoma, the Cheyennes in Montana, the Winnebagos of the Great

Lakes region, one Pueblo group in the Southwest, various tribes in Mexico.

At American museums, where the doings of the Indian are a subject of keen scientific interest, peyote-eating is an old story, but a story that is still not clearly understood. The growing influence of the Native American Church has given science a new incentive to try to understand what the Indian sees in peyote, and what peyote does to the Indian. All of which is far harder to find out than it sounds.

At the University of Pennsylvania Museum, Vincent M. Petrullo, young explorer and ethnologist, is completing an intensive study of the elusive peyote cult. Making friends with Delawares in Oklahoma, where the Native American Church got its first state charter and where the cult is strongest, Mr. Petrullo has talked with leading theologians of the church. They have expounded to him its doctrines and its benefits. He also interviewed Indian converts, and other skeptical or disbelieving Indians who told how they tried peyote and found it no good.

The religious wave sweeping across Indian America recalls the rise of Mormonism with its spirit of revelation. Brigham Young, famous prophet of the Mormon faith, might be matched in the peyote religion by John Wilson of the Delawares, who is already a legendary figure.

"Another Sect is Born"

One day, an Indian of the peyote church announces that new truth has been revealed to him. He recites a new creed. He describes a new kind of altar to be made. He lays down the ritual to be followed. So, another sect of the peyote church is born.

"I know of nine forms of peyote ceremony among the Delawares," said Mr. Petrullo. "Eight are still practiced and have some hold on these Indians. Once a form is revealed, the Indians feel that it must not be tampered with. But any individual may have a new type revealed to him."

All these forms of the peyote religion



CHIEF BACON RIND

—Osage Indian, was a joiner. He was a Catholic, a Mason and member of the peyote church.

are strange mixtures, containing three ingredients.

First, there are ideas from the old peyote cult, which was originally a local religious ceremony of the Aztecs and some other Mexican tribes.

Then, ideas are taken from the old religion of the Indian's own tribe.

And, lastly, some of the thought and symbolism of Christianity are added.

Christianity is not much more than a seasoning in the mixture. It is conspicuous, but superficial, Mr. Petrullo finds. For example, a crucifix is placed by the peyote altar as a gesture of courtesy to the white man's church. The Indian sees no incongruity in mixing religious ideas. One Osage Indian, Chief Bacon Rind, was a member of the Catholic Church, a Mason, and a member of the peyote church. At his death, not long ago, he bequeathed his regalia to the U. S. National Museum—the first Indian ever to will his belongings to the federal government.

Most peyote church Indians, however, feel that the white man's religion is for the white man, and that the Indian has his own revealed truth.

To Mr. Petrullo, one Indian explained

it this way: "This ceremony is for the Indian. The Great Spirit sent peyote to take care of the Indians who are His children. So, the white people cannot understand it. The Great Spirit sent Jesus to the white people."

Here is the theology of one Delaware Indian: "Somewhere back east a child was born. They named Him Jesus. The whites killed Him. He was sent by God our Father to take care of His children. When Jesus departed from this world, He took seven steps to reach our Father. With each step that He took He left words with Earth our Mother to take care of her children and God's—that is, the Indian people.

"The first step to reach our Father is peyote, the second is fire, the third is water, the fourth is clouds and rain, the fifth the moon, sixth the sun, and last our Father."

Another Indian theologian explains carefully: "God puts power in peyote. You talk to the peyote and eat it. It does not help you to go to heaven. It does not put goodness into you. Goodness is in you. God put it there. You pray to God to be healthy."

Whether peyote is the good teacher that its Indian disciples claim, or whether it is an insidious intoxicant with bad influence on the Indian, is something the white man has never settled. Delve into the literature on the subject, and you find it seething with strong statements and violent contradictions. Plenty has been written about peyote, but it still remains for scientific investigations to produce enough real facts to settle the arguments.

Spanish Priests Horrified

Objection to the Indian's use of peyote began almost as soon as the Spaniards landed in Mexico and set out to convert the aborigines to Christianity. Spanish priests soon came upon a small but vital cult among the Aztecs.

These Aztecs got religious inspiration from a plant they called the "flesh of God." They drank its juices and drifted off into intoxication lasting sometimes two days, the Spaniards reported. In an ecstatic state, some of the Indians danced and sang. Others sat stolidly alone and saw visions which they later described to the others. Some were inspired to prophesy about wars or the weather.

Horrified by these superstitious rites, the Spanish missionaries pronounced peyote-eating almost as grave a sin as cannibalism. In a little manual published for use of missionaries in Texas in

1760 may be read these questions for the confessional:

"Has comido carne de gente?" (Hast thou eaten the flesh of man?)

"Has comido el peyote?" (Hast thou eaten the peyote?)

But horrified as the Spanish fathers were, the peyote rites of Mexico got little notice for a long time. Not until the eighteen nineties did the rites begin to forge their powerful link with Christianity and to spread to distant tribes. The Native American Church got its state charter in Oklahoma in 1918.

Ten years ago, Dr. Paul Radin studied the peyote societies of the Winnebago Indians of Wisconsin and expressed the view that the cult was waning. Now, Mr. Petrullo finds it flourishing, growing. Some tribes are even cultivating the small spineless cactus, the peyote, not trusting the parcel post or Indian traders to bring their supply of the sacred plant.

Efforts of missionaries and others to stamp out peyote have met with little success.

The Office of Indian Affairs once gathered an array of opinions from its doctors and superintendents at the Indian reservations. A typical verdict, from an Oklahoma agency physician, said:

"The effect on those who attend the peyote feasts is that of general depression followed by idleness and laziness."

The Office of Indian Affairs summed up the views of its agents, saying, "Peyote contains dangerous drugs which have a deleterious effect upon the human system."

On the opposite side of the ledger are such reports as that of the French pharmacist, Alexander Rouhier. He has

written a 350-page work on peyote, which arrives at the conclusion that the cactus is weakly poisonous, only when taken in large doses. He also disagrees with those who have called it habit-forming.

Mr. Petrullo, from his investigations among the Indians, believes that the harmful effects of the peyote cactus have been stressed without real proof that the plant was harmful.

"Peyote to the Indian," he finds, "is not a drug that causes its consumer to 'see things.' It is a spiritual guide subservient to the Great Spirit and appointed by Him to take care of the Indian. Thus, the ceremonies are not 'dope' consuming meetings, but intensely religious performances.

Best Men Often Peyotists

"There is no evidence that peyote is habit forming, and no evidence that it is detrimental to health. On the contrary, the peyotists are often the leaders and the best men of the tribe."

Mr. Petrullo declares that, with all the investigations and experiments, no white man has ever really entered the peyote world of the Indian.

Any number of psychologists, doctors, and curiosity seekers have had their adventure with a dose of the Indian cactus. Havelock Ellis was one of these, and he induced two poets to try it, just to find out how colorful the peyote vision of a poet might be. Weir Mitchell, Philadelphia doctor and well-known novelist, took six peyote buttons and described his sensations to a British medical journal.

But all these experimenters had mild doses of five or ten buttons or thereabouts. An Indian (*Turn to Page 382*)



"BUTTONS" OF THE SACRED CACTUS, THE PEYOTE

These dried flower tops are bitter stuff to chew, but Indians consume quantities of them as an aid to religious meditation.

PUBLIC HEALTH

Seasons Affect Birth Rate and Infant Health

BOTH the birth rate and the health of newborn babies was affected by the season of the year, Dr. Lee Bivings of Atlanta, Ga., found from a study of negro infants in his city.

The diet of the prospective mother and the amount of sunshine also apparently influence the birth rate and infant health, he reported to the American Medical Association meeting in Milwaukee.

The birth rate for 1930, 1931 and 1932 was consistently higher in the winter quarter, he found. This fact suggests that the mothers who had the benefit of spring and summer sunshine in the period before the babies were born were more likely to give birth to healthy children.

The average weight of babies born in 1931 was higher than that of babies born in 1932. While many factors were involved, Dr. Bivings believes the greater amount of sunshine in 1931 had some influence. This opinion was borne out by the fact that babies born in Los Angeles, St. Petersburg and Atlanta, Ga., weighed more than those born in Iowa City and New Haven, Conn.

The studies showed that the health of the babies was not as good when their prenatal life began in the winter. Dr. Bivings explained this on the ground that it is during the winter months that the prospective mother's diet lacks sufficient vitamin B which is believed to have an important effect on the prenatal development of a child. These are likewise the months of least sunshine.

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LIBRARY SCIENCE

Library Show Windows Attract Many Readers

SHOP windows in front of a public library, with attractive displays to lure the "window shopper" inside to read a book, are a tremendous popular success in Baltimore.

This report from six months' experience with window displays at the Enoch Pratt Free Library was announced at the meeting of the American Association of Museums.

Gretta Smith, director of the exhibits, reported that the library's twelve great display windows are filled with new exhibits every two or three weeks. Book

exhibits are obtained from the library itself. Societies and museums lend material to illustrate the subjects.

The library tries to keep up with the times and popular thought, Miss Smith explained. It fits its exhibits to holidays, current events, and subjects of general interest. Whatever the subject of a window, the thought always leads to appropriate books on the subject, available inside.

"Tremendous popular success of the street window displays of the new Enoch Pratt Free Library building in Baltimore is a matter of astonishment to everyone in the library," said Miss Smith's report. "School classes have had the library windows assigned as projects. Clergymen have mentioned them in sermons. The public has rushed to borrow the books displayed or to correct misspellings or to offer more and better material for display."

The windows are a favorite project of the librarian, Joseph L. Wheeler.

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at a peyote meeting may take into his system sixty or even seventy-five buttons, Mr. Petrullo reports.

Moreover, the visions that the amateur peyote-eater describes so brightly are dismissed by the Indian theologian as not religiously important. The experimenters tell of seeing brilliant flashes of color that change in infinite variety. They feel that time flows by endlessly, and walls of a room recede to magnificent distances. All their senses are keyed to a high pitch of receptiveness. A redbird on a fence becomes a dazzling splotch of color. And as he looks wonderingly on the curious world about him, the peyote-eater also tells of feeling great muscular weakness, sometimes nausea. His mind remains clear.

And so on in endless detail, the experimenters tell of their sensations.

But, Mr. Petrullo points out that the Indian probably does not see all these fantastic sights. Peyote sharpens the senses, unquestionably. In that acutely sensitive condition, the experimenters have let their minds play over their surroundings. But Indians tell Mr. Petrullo that they can control peyote visions. They can direct the effects of the drug on mind and body. The Indian's religious purpose is to concentrate on God and to use the peyote to get into communication with the Great Spirit and learn what is right for him to do.

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NOMENCLATURE



Not All Jawbreakers

MANY persons are prone to say, whenever botany or zoology is mentioned, "I'd really like to study them, but I couldn't ever get those awful long names through my head!" And then they begin straightway to enthuse fluently over their success with beds of chrysanthemums, gladioli, narcissi, gaillardias, heleniums, delphiniums, asters, irises, hyacinths and what not; or they will tell you what lovely hepaticas and trilliums they saw in the woods last spring—all in blissful unconsciousness that they are reeling out a whole string of the same dreaded jawbreaking Latin names!

For many of our common garden and wildflowers, many of our familiar animals and birds, are known to our common everyday conversation by exactly the same names they bore in ancient Greece and Latium, or by very slight variations from their classic titles. The rose for example was "rosa" to the Romans, and the violet was "viola." And the splendid rhododendron bush: the Greeks had a name for it—they called it rhododendron.

When you go to the zoo you will find that the ancients have been there ahead of you, naming the beasts like Adam in the garden. Elephant is Greek "elephas," and camel is Latin "camelus." Lion is "leo" and leopard is a spotted lion: "leopardus." But for animals which the ancients did not know well or at all, modern scientists have often made pseudo-Latin names out of their native originals. Thus the gorilla is *Gorilla* still when he appears in the zoology books, while the chimpanzee, which we abbreviate in English as "chimp" parades under a different single syllable for his scientific title: the professors call him *Pan*.

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