

PEYOTE WORSHIP AMONG THE OSAGES

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Peyote Worship Among the Osages

Peyote worship (so-called) is much the same among all tribes of Indians. The following account of an Osage Indian Peyote Meeting was written by Clark Brown and published in *Friends' Missionary Advocate* of May 1918. For several years before his death in 1920, Clark Brown was Superintendent of Friends Indian Missions in Oklahoma. Arthur Hadley, now our missionary among the Osages, says that this account still gives a true picture of peyote worship among the Osages with one or two possible exceptions. He adds that he thinks the Osages do not worship peyote any more than other people worship baptism, bread and wine in communion or other outward observances. Indians have their peculiar customs bequeathed from generation to generation and we cannot expect sudden changes from them any more easily than from ourselves. Arthur Hadley writes: You just have to work with them and show them the way of Jesus. The children are our greatest hope. I believe in another generation or two this custom of peyote worship will be pretty well gone.

"The use of peyote, or mescal, has become one of the most serious menaces to the progress of the Indian race in the United States.....The permanent effects of the drug are a weakening of the power of resistance and particularly of the heart action....In one United States agency the records show that peyote is responsible for 100 per cent of the recent cases of insanity. The dullness of children of peyote users, entering school in the fall, is very apparent. After the drug has been eliminated from their systems, they gradually become more normal, but according to many teachers are always lacking in dependability."

"Peyote is a species of cactus grown in Northern Mexico. It is in the form of a prickly pear. The top, about one and one-half inches in diameter, very soft and green, is cut off and dried until it becomes brittle and hard. It has a bitter taste. It is

generally eaten in this dry, brittle state, or made into a tea. In late years it has also been powdered and put in capsule form. More recently it has been used in peyote balls, made by an unpleasing process by which one person chews up a number of peyote buttons, rolls them into balls while moist, and in that form passes them to others.

"From time immemorial, peyote has been used by certain tribes in Mexico for the purpose of producing intoxication at religious ceremonies.

"From there it has spread until in late years, it has gradually reached to an alarming extent among many of the tribes of the United States, beginning in the South and spreading to the northern tribes as far as the Dakotas, Minnesota and Wisconsin. Thousands of Indians are now peyote users.

"The peyote habit is bound to be one of the greatest hindrances to the industrial progress of the Indian. If this habit continues and increases, our industrial hopes for those Indians among whom it is used must vanish. Not only does it ruin the physical but it also ruins the intellectual development. Peyote destroys the power of concentration, logical thinking, strength of will and balanced judgment. It is fruitful of false notions in the minds of its users, and gives them a wrong conception of life. Superintendents, teachers and matrons of the Government Schools, agency physicians and mission workers are all practically unanimous in their verdict concerning the mental depression, stupidity and destroyed aspirations peculiar to its victims."*

Not all the tribes build a special peyote "Medicine House" or meeting house such as Clark Brown describes among the Osages. Others often use ordinary wicki-ups or round huts of various kinds.

But now let us go to meeting with the Osages.



A Peyote Meeting

Their grounds are alongside the road in a very convenient place to reach with vehicles. They have what they call a "Medicine House" built by putting ten solid posts into the ground in a circle equally distant from each other, and weatherboarding up to the rafters which stand on plates some 12 feet from the ground. These rafters point to the center and hold a kind of latticed cupola on top through which the smoke and foul air pass out. This circular building is about 20 feet across, with windows in each panel rather high up (above the heads) and a small door one foot square even with the floor in each panel. These are screened in and are very nice for fresh air, but can be closed tight in cold weather. There is only one entrance door, in one of the panels, the door-sill being about one foot higher than the cement floor. The floor is level all around the walls but makes a drop east of the center of the room in a form of a half moon and gradually slopes to the door. This is for fire which they keep burning at all their meetings, winter and summer. They used to keep up a hot fire but the younger ones objected to it and our missionaries persuaded them that it was not necessary nor well pleasing to the Great Spirit to have an uncomfortable fire and so they now only have a small fire unless it is cold.

We went in and found about 35 Indians resting on rugs, pillows, blankets and the

like around the walls. They had been there all night without supper or breakfast and it was now about 10:00 a. m. A man with a tom tom, or kettle drum, was making music at a lively rate (240 strokes per minute by our watch) and was singing a kind of song which all sounded alike to me. We-no-ah-no-ah-no-ah with very little change of tone, pitch, compass, quality, or anything else that sounded like music. Along side of this musician at the right of the door sat the fire-tender on a stool, the only one who did not have a place on the floor with the rest. He keeps close watch on the fire and sees that it is kept burning properly, the ashes swept up every little while and placed in equal piles on each side of the fire.

We crossed the room going to the chief, who sat facing the door and near the wall. He appeared to sit on a stool or something which raised him above those on the floor. Whatever it was it was well covered with blankets. Daniel Williams introduced me as the Missionary Superintendent and he gave me his hand in token of a welcome. If he had not done so we might as well have gone out at once. We dropped down on the mat at his right hand and he explained who we were to his visiting chiefs who were present from other camps and tribes.

The musician kept his tom-tom going most of the time unless someone was speaking to the audience. Quite a number,

men and women, gave short talks, while others talked among themselves, some smoked, some slept, but all seemed to be having a good time.

Just in front of the chief and between him and the fire was the peyote cup or box about the size of a tea-cup. This was covered with fancy bead work and on top of it was the peyote bean which they worship. They claim that it knows everything that is going on in the tent during the meeting. The chief has a large eagle wing fan in his right hand and also holds a long staff decorated with eagle feathers, and a rattler like a long handled gourd ornamented with bead work on the outside. When an Indian comes in to the service for the first time, he approaches the fire, reaching out his hand toward it as if warming, then touches his head and heart with his right hand. He then goes round and stands before his chief, who touches the peyote with his fan and fans the Indian from head to foot thus driving away the evil spirits. With all this performance, public speaking, sociable chat and smoking were going on at the same time, (and while I am a detester of smoking, this smoke never annoyed me as it seemed to be drawn up and out at the high cupola). I wondered what they were talking about, as one man burst out in a sorrowful wail and I supposed that he must be under deep conviction, but I learned that the chief's wife in her talk had referred to his aunt who had lately died and had left her estate to him. She had reminded him of how good she was and begged to take her place as aunt. (This is common among the Indians when one dies, some one kindly asks to let them take the place of the deceased.) The chief and others made long talks. He came and had the chief fan him and talk to him when he seemed to be consoled and took his place again on the rugs.

It was now nearing noon and a man came in and was fanned by the chief and after touching the peyote with a long eagle wing, went out to fan the victuals and get ready the dinner. They soon adjourned and all went out to wash. This they did by pouring water on each other's hands. They dried their hands and faces

just the best way they could, some standing round till their faces dried. A few we noticed had their faces painted. One had his hair shaved with a pompadore ridge left in the center.

Dinner was now ready in the "eat-house," and though we heard nothing that we could recognize as the "first call" they all began to move that way. This dining-hall is a wooden building 20 x 40 feet and one would suppose that it was supplied with tables and chairs but it is not. Instead it has on the floor two strips of oil cloth running the whole length of the room about three feet from each wall. Upon this they place the victuals and along the walls and between these two strips, or tables, Indians sit on the floor and eat. The walls are only about two feet high and from there on up is wire screen which makes a fine eating place in pleasant weather.

They had some extra guests from other tribes visiting them but we noticed that they paid no more attention to them than to us or to any one else. When an Indian dinner is ready there seem to be no special places. Every one is supposed to get to the table and be ready to help himself. This building stands north and south and we went in and around to the southwest corner, I being at the south end of the west table. When all were seated, the chief who stood at the north end between the tables, asked a blessing, and it took him fifteen minutes. We learned afterwards that it is the custom to pray a blessing on each one at the table and so it took him quite a while. An Indian then brought a full bucket of water and the chief took a drink out of a large tin cup and poured back what he did not drink. The water was then passed along the lines like old fashioned "passing the water bucket" in school. When it came to me, I drank a little sup but Daniel Williams poured his out in his porcelain cup and drank from that. After the water was passed and every one had a sip to show his appreciation and friendship to the chief, the word *winom-bra* was pronounced by the chief. This means "eat" and many were the soft and smiling ho-ho's that came from the hungry Indians. Each one is supplied with a cup

*Quoted from *The Red Man in the United States* by G. E. E. Lindquist.

and spoon and sometimes a small plate or saucer.

About this time an Indian woman just north of us wanted to stow her baby board (to which her baby had been tied) in the corner of the room behind me so she just got up and walked right in front of us over the table and between us and victuals, put away the board and trudged back the same way. Just in front of us were Indian cakes, made by taking dough in the hands and tossing it back and forth till it is thin as desired, then a hole is punched in the middle and this is dropped into a skillet of hot lard and fried. No shortening used in the dough but plenty by the time it is ready to eat. Good? To be sure it is good to a hungry fellow. We laid in a supply and also took out a whole "turnover" pie (yes, if we got any we had to lay claim very soon.) This however, turned out to be a meat pie and it was good. We had done

justice to half of it when we happened to think what one of our misisonaries had told us a few days before—that their wealthiest Indians instead of buying good meat would beg the entrails of animals and eat them in preference to getting good meat. The other half of the pie was left. They had chicken and turkey, apricot pies and fine banana cake, and I learned afterwards that the dinner was gotten up by a white woman whom they had paid, so that everything was first class. They had corn cooked in three ways, dried corn, hominy and mush. One fine rule among the Indians is, that if you get something in your cup you do not like or more than you want, "when you have had enough," you can dump the rest back into the large pan or kettle from whence it came and no one tells you of your improper etiquette. You are at liberty, also, if there is something you like, to lay in a good supply as long



PEYOTE WORSHIPERS AND THE WICKIUP IN WHICH MEETING WAS HELD.

as it lasts. We saw a number wrapping up such as they liked, to eat later on in the day. Then too if you are invited to dinner at an Indian's home and he happens to be invited somewhere else at the same time,

he tells you to stay and eat with the children and cook and he goes on and eats at the place where he was invited. Missionaries get that kind of an invitation occasionally.



A PEYOTE WORSHIPER OUTSIDE THE WICKIUP