

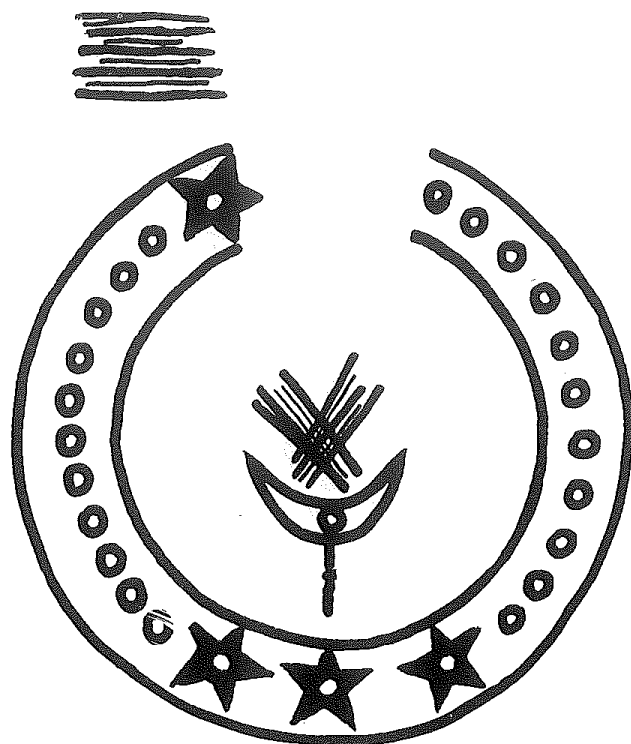
# DENVER ART MUSEUM

1300 LOGAN STREET, DENVER, COLORADO

## DEPARTMENT OF INDIAN ART

WILLENA D. CARTWRIGHT, CURATOR

FREDERIC H. DOUGLAS, EDITOR



Floor plan of a peyote meeting in a tipi. The stars are officials. The wood pile lies outside. From an engraving on a Cheyenne silver cup.

### THE PEYOTE CULT

LEAFLET 105

DECEMBER, 1950

**1. INTRODUCTION.** This leaflet is about the beliefs and ceremonies of the Peyote (pay-yó-te) cult, an Indian religion which in recent times has spread very widely in the Middle West and West. Objects used by individuals in the ceremonies are outlined in Leaflet 106.

**2. HISTORY OF THE CULT.** Peyote was used in religious ceremonies by Mexican Indians long before the coming of the Spaniards with Christianity about 1525-30. Indians of the United States have used peyote widely for only the past fifty years, though it was used earlier by a few tribes, notably the Lipan Apache, the Kiowa and Comanche. From these southern tribes the rite in various forms gradually traveled north and west. As it spread, many pagan forms were dropped and certain characteristics of Christianity were added from both Catholic and Protestant sources. Now it claims to be a Christian religion, and in some sections has been incorporated as "The Native American Church". Its native priests claim the right to administer the sacraments, some even to celebrate the marriage ceremony. However, both Roman Catholics and Protestants have worked against peyotism since it was first encountered. Despite this and other opposition the cult is today very active and continually growing.

**3. BELIEFS OF THE CULT.** Only the most general statement can be made because of the wide variation among individuals and various regional divisions. A very high code of moral teaching is presented. There is a strong racial trend stressing the Indian as a being apart from the White man, and serving as a medium uniting all Indians. The cult has a wide appeal because of the sense of well-being and happiness induced by the use of the peyote. To a defeated and broken minority people these qualities offer a welcome relief from the difficulty and poverty of their lives. Their own great past is relived in romantic dreams, and there is a suggestion of promise that through peyotism this past may return. Tales of wild orgies are in absolute contradiction to the facts.

**4. THE PEYOTE PLANT.** Peyote is a spineless cactus, *Lophophora williamsii*, shaped like a turnip with a flower that grows in the center of its globular head. The part used, called the button, is the dried flowering top, averaging about  $1\frac{1}{2}$  inches in diameter and  $\frac{1}{4}$  inch in thickness. The plant grows wild in the southern part of Texas along the Rio Grande and in the adjoining section of northern Mexico as far south as Querétaro.

**5. METHODS OF USE.** The peyote is taken in three different ways: 1, by chewing and swallowing the dried or green buttons; 2, as "tea" derived from boiling in water; 3, as a powder made by grinding up the buttons. The most usual method is that of chewing and swallowing the buttons.

In addition to its use in cult rites the plant is employed as a medicine for many ailments.

**6. CHEMISTRY.** The complex chemistry is discussed at length in reference 1. The plant contains 9 alkaloids. Part of these, notably mescaline, are, generally speaking, sedative in effect. The rest produce effects of reflex-irritability and excitement.

Peyote is not considered to be a habit-forming drug by impartial scientific observers. But the whole subject is so involved in emotion and controversy that to many the question has not been definitely settled.

**7. EFFECT.** The main effect is excitement quickly followed by a feeling of contentment, well-being and friendly attitude toward the world in general. A secondary effect, not always felt, is a stimulation of the optic

nerve which may, under favorable circumstances, produce color visions. Worshippers tend to lose track of time and find it difficult to gauge distances.

**8. THE CULT SERVICE.** The usual form of ceremony is the regular "church" service held once a week if convenient. The rite varies by tribes and individual leaders. Some sponsor a meeting, as was once done for the Sun Dance. The rites may be held to cure illnesses, in gratitude for recovery from illness, on a child's first four birthdays, to pray for the successful delivery of a child, for a dead person, or for the health of the participants. In recent years "holiday meetings" have been introduced to celebrate Easter, New Year's Day, Thanksgiving, etc. Dancing has no part in the services.

A condensation of the Ute rite as witnessed by Omer C. Stewart on the Ute reservation in southwest Colorado follows. See reference 4.

The meeting may be held in a large tipi, but often a house, or sometimes a hogan (Navaho home) is used. Because cleanliness is a definite principle of the religion, the participants usually bathe or take a sweatbath before the services. Among many tribes a day-long fast is also observed. The officials are chief or leader, drummer, firechief, cedarman and doorman. The leader supervises setting up the tipi and making the altar. He also furnishes all the ritual equipment (see Leaflet 106) necessary for the meeting: drum, drumstick, staff, rattle, fan, dried juniper or cedar leaf incense, peyote buttons, the large chief peyote for the altar, an eagle bone whistle, a small bunch of sage sprigs, 2 sacks of Bull Durham tobacco with papers, and a small scarf or rug about 2' by 4'. He carries this equipment in a small satchel or suitcase. However, if individual members wish to use personal fans, rattles, drumsticks, or peyote they may do so after midnight. The drummer prepares the drum (see Leaflet 106) and beats it to accompany the leader's songs. At specified times during the service the cedarman throws juniper leaves on the fire to make incense to purify the paraphernalia. The firechief tends the fire and passes the firestick to light cigarettes, brings in the midnight water, keeps watch over those who leave the meeting and directs all their re-entrances.

Participants contribute what they can afford to the cost of the ceremony and also bring food for the after-ceremony breakfast the next morning.

The day of the service preparations are made for the night meeting. Leading members erect the tipi, if one is to be used and is not already standing. The entrance is always to the east. A low altar is made on the floor just west of the center of the room. It is shaped like a crescent moon with horns facing east. A shallow groove along the top represents the "peyote road" over which thoughts or visions pass to and from God. The fire is built directly east of the altar. Straw, blankets or canvas for seats are spread around the edge of the tipi.

The leader, carrying his equipment, begins the meeting, which will last all night. He heads a single file line which forms outside the tipi any time between 7 and 10 p. m. The drummer comes next, carrying the iron drum, the cedarman next, then the participants and the firechief last. Before the procession enters the leader prays. He tells what the meeting is for and prays for all the people there and others outside the meeting. Through the words of the leader all the members are praying to nature, to God and to Jesus.

All file in, passing to the left. The leader sits directly west of the altar's center, the drummer on his right, the cedarman on his left, then the men next to these on either side, the women and children on both sides near the entrance, and the fire chief on the north side just inside the entrance. The leader places the large chief peyote on the sage sprigs which are then laid on the moon altar. He prays for 5 or 10 minutes. Tobacco is passed and everyone lights a cigarette, not for pleasure but as part of the rite. Then the sagebrush sprigs are passed and the leaves are brushed over the body for purification. The leader passes the bag of peyote buttons and everyone takes four. The leader takes four himself

and when the buttons have been eaten lays out the rest of his paraphernalia. The taste of the peyote is very bitter and frequently causes vomiting.

The leader then sings the Opening Song and three other songs while the drummer at his right drums for him. This is the first of four songs which have to be sung at fixed times—the Opening Song, the Midnight Water Call, the Morning Water Call, and the Quitting Song. Following the opening the drum is passed to the leader who hands his staff, rattle and fan to the drummer. The drummer sings four songs while the leader drums for him. Then the cedarman sings four songs while the leader drums for him also. After that the drum and the equipment are passed around clockwise and each participant sings four songs in turn, the man to the right of the singer drumming for him while he sings. The singer holds the gourd rattle in his right hand and shakes it in time to the music. The staff and fan are held in his left hand. When the drum comes back to the leader he may pass out more buttons. Again the drum is passed around as before. Participants sing and eat this way till midnight. Women do not sing.

At midnight the leader sings the Midnight Water Call. The firechief brings in a bucket of water and puts it east of the altar. The cedarman prays at length while a cigarette is smoked by the officials who pass it from one to the other. The bucket is then passed to the man on the left of the firechief; he drinks and passes on the bucket clockwise.

The leader leaves the meeting to pray outside. When he returns, singing is resumed with renewed vigor and increased variation. The devotees may now use their own equipment if they wish. Until just before sunrise the drum makes the clockwise rounds with each person singing four songs in turn. When the staff, fan and rattle finally come back to the leader at this time, he sings the Morning Water Call. In response a woman, usually the leader's wife, places the water east of the firestick, and the features of the Midnight Water Ceremony are repeated, with the leader praying.

Breakfast is then brought in. The leader sings three songs and finally the Quitting Song, the last of the meeting. The leader then prays, all equipment is put away, all cigarette butts are burned, another prayer is said and blessings of the breakfast are recited. The food (corn, fruit and meat) is passed by the firechief to the first person south of the door. The food circulates but once and what remains is taken out by the firechief as he leads the general exit. The leader is second, followed by his assistants, then the other participants. Outside, informality prevails, the remaining food is eaten, the Indians stretch to relieve their muscles from ten to twelve hours of cross-legged sitting and talk of their experiences of the night, or of other meetings, of their faith, and seek to exhort and encourage one another.

**Compiled from the following and other sources by Willena D. Cartwright.**

Thanks are due for help to Dr. Omer C. Stewart and Alice L. Marriott.

The literature on peyote is very large. References 1 and 6 list hundreds of additional titles.

**YALE UNIVERSITY**

1. The Peyote Cult—Weston La Barre. Publications in Anthropology 19, 1938. The major study of the subject.

**AMERICAN ANTHROPOLOGIST**

2. Peyote, the Giver of Visions—Ruth Shonle. New Series, vol. 27, no. 1, January-March, 1925. Good for history, distribution and ritual differences.
3. The Appeal of Peyote as a Medicine—Richard E. Schultes. New Series, vol. 40, no. 4, October-December, 1938.

**UNIVERSITY OF COLORADO**

4. Ute Peyotism: a Study of a Cultural Complex—Omer C. Stewart. Studies, Series in Anthropology 1, 1948. Based on personal experience. Good for tables showing tribal distribution of ritual variations.

**UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA**

5. The Diabolic Root—Vincenzo Petruccio. Philadelphia, 1934. Beliefs, procedures and variants among the Delaware.

**VIKING FUND**

6. Peyote Music—David P. McAllester. Publications in Anthropology 13, New York, 1949.

Drawing by Dorothy Field.