Peyotism Essay, Research Paper

?The white man?s reality are his streets with their banks, shops, neon lights and traffic, streets full of policemen, whores, and sad-faced people in a hurry to punch a time clock.

But this is unreal. The real reality is underneath all this. Grandfather Peyote helps you find it.?

- Crow Dog

Peyote, a hallucinogenic plant that is commonly used as a recreational drug, has a much greater meaning for members of the peyote religion. By examining the effects of peyote along with its role in the rituals and beliefs of the Native American Church it becomes apparent why it is such an integral part of the religion.

The trade and knowledge of this sacred plant was already well defined in regions of Mexico well before European conquest and its ceremonial use was already underway in the tribes of the area in which it grew. This religious use eventually spread through North American regions. Along with its migration, the basic rituals and ceremonies changed along the way. The organization of religion involving peyote and the principle rituals had become commonly practiced among the Comanche and Kiowa tribes by the mid-eighteen hundreds. The Native American Church formed in 1921, beginning in Oklahoma. Soon after this initial formation, state and local incorporation followed in many places and continue to do so to this day. (Aberle, 19) Now, some form of peyote religion is common to most tribes of the North American continent.

Peyote (Lophophora williamsii) is a very small, low growing, fuzzy type of cactus. Most of the cactus is actually underground in a long root. Both the flesh and roots can be eaten. When dried the flesh resembles brown overcoat buttons, which is where the term peyote ?buttons? came from. Peyote isn?t found just anywhere. It grows in the wild over only a small portion of the Southwestern United States known as the Peyote Garden. Precisely, Corpus Christi, Texas, Deming, New Mexico, Durango, Mexico and Puebla , Mexico bind the area in which this plant can be found and harvested. (Aberle, 5)

Containing eight different alkaloids, the most important being mescaline, peyote causes a number of effects. The experience begins with an euphoric quality. It heightens the sensations to sound, color, form and texture. Further into the experience, ?visions? begin to occur. These visions can include detailed, realistic pictures and sounds. The interpretation of these visions rather than the visions themselves are what peyotists consider most important.

The peyote experience is characterized by a strong feeling of personal significance of the internal and external stimuli encountered during the experience. Many find themselves asking, ?What does this mean to me??

The Native American Church came to the Indians during their darkest hour. It was around the time when the last of the buffalo had disappeared from the plains. They were left starving, helpless and with little of their old lives remaining to cling to. In the words of a member of the NAC, Mary Crow Dog, ?The Native American Church became the religion of the poorest of the poor, the conquered, the despoiled. Peyote made them understand what was happening and made them endure. It was the only thing that gave them strength in those, our darkest days.?

It was obvious that a militant religion could not have survived under white dominance. The formation of this religion was a response to the degraded status on Native Americans. It?s goal- internal peace and harmony rather than competition. This idea was highly relevant to the socio-economic situation that these indigenous people were being faced with. For many, this was exactly what they needed to continue on.

Since the beginning, there has been strong opposition to the Native American Church by several groups. The traditionalist Indians opposed it believing that it was a threat to traditional tribal culture. Modernist Indians as well as whites opposed the religion also saying that it was heathenistic and backward. In the early stages, peyote meetings were illegal not for the use of peyote, but because Native American rituals in general were outlawed. But, in 1934, under John Collier, the Bureau of Indian Affairs enacted a policy of non-interference with peyotism. There have been state laws prohibiting the ?sale, use or possession of peyote?, but all such laws have been repealed since the sixties (Aberle, 18).At the present, it is legal for those acting on behalf of the Native American Church to buy or harvest peyote for their religious needs.

Most peyotism that is practiced today is identified with the Native American Church (NAC). It is a loosely organized group with numerous divisions. Within each division are many local chapters, more commonly called moons. Attendance to meetings is dependent on local and kinship ties. The local road chief can deal with all functions of the religion, so no formal organization is necessary. In his book, David Aberle noted that ?peyotism has not been marked by numerous schisms; if ?we all worship the same God and all eat peyote,? this is sufficient.?

The use of peyote for members of NAC is not simply for the pleasure of doing so. It is taken as a religious adjunct, aiding in heightening the level of this special experience. It supplies a feeling of personal significance, which is central to reflecting on one?s self, relationships, ethics and in bringing new meaning to these things. There is also believed to be medicinal benefits to peyote. Many Indians claim that it has powers to heal the mind and body.

Peyote gives the ability to ?get into the power? to the peyotist. Mary Crow Dog wrote about ?feeling the strength surging through your body?. The fact that no two peyote experiences are the same and the fact that you can never predict how a particular experience will turn out make this power all the more real. This concept of power is common to all Native Americans. It has to do with feeling close to God, or the Great Spirit.

This sacred plant also serves as a unifier for the Native Americans. For generations the differences among tribes have kept them from uniting to achieve progress in gaining rights. In the peyote meetings, tribal differences are forgotten. ?No longer are we Navajos, Poncas, Apaches or Sioux, but just Indians.? (Crow Dog, 101) The fact that peyote unified native people attracted more and more members during the Indian Civil Rights Movement during the sixties because unity was a major goal of the movement that the NAC helped to promote.

Although loosely organized, all members of the NAC had a basic system of beliefs and an ethical code that they hold as a guide on how to live their lives. First of all, peyote is believed to be the immaterial personification of power, often referred to as the ?Peyote Spirit?. The Great Spirit is the ultimate source of this power. By taking peyote it is thought that one can communicate with the Great Spirit through visions. The ethical code, commonly referred to as the Peyote Road, consists of four main parts: brotherly love, care of family, self-reliance and avoidance of alcohol. It is believed that if a person follows the Peyote Road faithfully it will lead them to ?tranquility in this life as well as bliss in the next world?. On the other hand, those who lapse morally in these regards will pay during the peyote meeting, both physically and spiritually (Aberle, 13).

The rituals of the Native American Church vary greatly in specifics from tribe to tribe. The Navajo prefer shaping their altar like a half moon, while other tribe may shape their altars differently. Some tribes conduct the peyote meetings in a tipi used especially for that purpose, while other tribes opt to use a regular room in a house.

However, there is a set of basic rituals that are common to all tribes in the United States. Peyote meetings are always held for a purpose, commonly to cure, thank the Great Spirit for past blessings, to deter evil and promote good. It is hoped that the prayers of the participants will accomplish the given purpose.

The participants gather at sundown for the ceremony that will last until dawn. There are generally four officiates required for the ceremony to take place. There is the road chief, who leads the meeting, a drummer chief, who does most of the drumming, a fire chief, who is in charge of tending to the fire and a cedar chief, who creates the cedar smoke throughout the night.

The use of prayer, song, drumming and the joint eating of the peyote at various times throughout the night as well as the drinking of cold water at midnight and early morning are all key elements to the ritual. These practices are all believe to be forms of communication with the Great Spirit. During prayer, there is a staff passed around the meeting to all male participants. The staff is considered male, so females are not allowed to pray with the staff. It is believed that when you pray with the staff, your thoughts travel up it and messages from the Great Spirit travel back down. The drums also aid in the communication. It is said that when a man drums, you can ?read his mind?.

Everyone also takes part in the peyote songs. Typically, the songs do not contain words, but whether or not to add words is up to the singer. The Church members believe that with peyote to guide you, the meanings of these songs can be deciphered. The drum itself is symbolic of the Indians? heartbeats.

The Fire Chief starts a fire in the center of the gathering. It is said to represent the eternal life that passes from one generation to the next. The smoke from the cedar incense is then sprinkled over the fire at various times during the night. It is believed to represent all green, living things and to purify everything that the smoke touches.

The feather fan and the gourd are also integral parts of the ceremony. The gourd is representative of the Spirit Voice. While the songs are going on, the feather fan is waved in the air to catch the songs. These fans can be made of different types of feathers, all of which symbolize something different. For example, the Water Bird Feather Fan is a chief symbol of the peyote religion and is used to bless the water before drinking it, while the Hawk Feather Fan is a symbol of understanding. All of the materials used during the ceremony are considered to be sacred and symbolic of something the Indians consider important. These materials help in the communication with the Great Spirit, which is the ultimate goal of the meeting.

Peyotism is, indeed, a unique religion. The members of the Native American Church take this ?powerful medicine? in order to communicate directly with the Great Spirit. They follow a strict ethical code and believe that peyote will help them understand their lives more fully. I greatly admire the idea of reflecting on one?s own situation in order to live a tranquil, honest life. The religion was formed as a way of unifying Native Americans and helping them accept and deal with the situation they are faced with. Peyotism has proven largely successful in achieving these goals, making it a wonderful thing for the indigenous people of this country.

Works Cited

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