

THE NATIVE AMERICAN CHURCH

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1880 The use of peyote in organized formal religious settings among American Indians began in Western OK.

1880s Quanah Parker, a Comanche chief, took Peyote and became a leading advocate of both peyote use and Indian-white cooperation, as well as fighting for the legal status of peyote.

1911 Quanah Parker passed away.

1918 The Native American Church was formally incorporated (with its name later changing to The Native American Church of North America), and Frank Eagle became its first president

1918-present Approximately a quarter of the American Indian population participates in the Native American Church of North America.

FOUNDER/GROUP HISTORY

The central and distinctive practice of the Native American Church is the ceremonial and sacramental use of peyote, a psychoactive or entheogenic cactus (*lophophora williamsii*), and that practice among the Huichol and other tribes goes back thousands of years in Mexico. Peyote use was first documented among the Aztecs some 400 years ago, and reports of it were made by many early Christian missionaries in Mexico. Its history in the United States beyond its native range (restricted to the Rio Grande valley), however, is much more recent.

American Peyote religion as an organized, relatively formal phenomenon can be traced to western Oklahoma circa 1880. By then such Southern Plains tribes as the Comanche and Kiowa had been placed on reservations, where once free Indians had to live under burdensome restrictions in conditions of poverty. Under such conditions new religious movements that addressed the terrible decline in fortune Indians had suffered and that promised relief from oppression spread quickly throughout Indian America. One such movement was the Ghost Dance, which had its most prominent phase in 1890 but largely collapsed with the Wounded Knee Massacre at the end of that year. Peyote religion, on the other hand, spread rapidly far beyond the area to which the plant is indigenous, eventually finding adherents in hundreds of tribes.

Although the pattern of the dispersion of peyote religion was complex and remains not fully documented, several individuals and tribes are

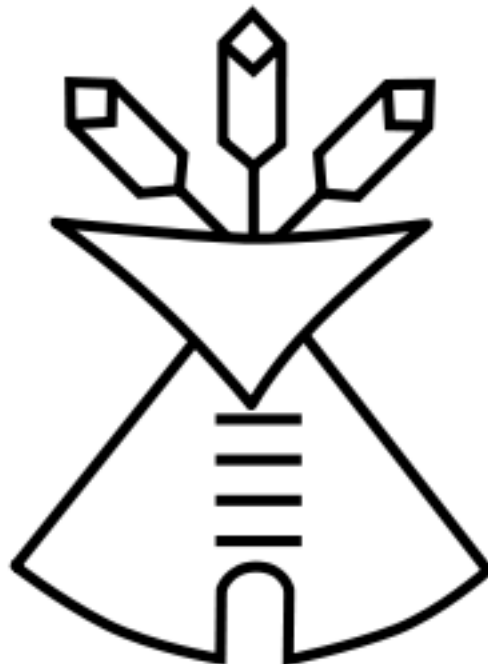


generally acknowledged as crucial to the process. Especially important was Quanah Parker, a Comanche chief who is said to have first taken peyote in Mexico in the 1880s as medicine for a difficult illness, or perhaps a serious injury. Quanah (as he is usually referred to), whose mother was white and who was a leading advocate of white-Indian cooperation, became a leading advocate of peyote and was instrumental in turning back laws that would have forbidden its use. By the time of his death in 1911, peyote was being used by several tribes in Oklahoma. Second only to Quanah in influence was John Wilson, a Caddo Indian by affiliation (actually of mixed Caddo, Delaware, and French blood). In 1880 Wilson became a peyote roadman, as the ceremonial leader is known, and began to attract a substantial following. His version of the Peyote ceremony had more explicitly Christian elements than Quanah's, reflecting, probably, Wilson's own Catholicism. However, both versions reflect a thorough mixing of traditional Indian and Christian themes.

Gradually the ceremonial use of peyote spread to other tribes. Several missionaries for the new faith carried its message to tribes who had not yet heard of it. Although sometimes routine contact between tribes living in proximity led to the dissemination of peyotism, one key agent of the dispersal was the existence of institutions that served multiple tribes. The Carlisle Indian School at Carlisle, Pennsylvania, was a major point of intertribal contact, as was the Haskell Institute (now known as Haskell Indian Nations University) in Lawrence, Kansas. Indians from peyote-using areas taught the peyote way to their peers from other parts of the United States, and in relatively short order the new religion reached much of Indian America.

The formal establishment of peyotist churches came largely in response to controversies over the use of the cactus that threatened to make its use criminal. Two small early organizations, the Peyote Society (or Union Church Society), and the First Born Church of Christ, had been established by 1914. Then in 1918 the U.S. Congress made its most aggressive attempt to date to outlaw peyote use. In response, in large part at the instigation of Smithsonian Institution anthropologist James Mooney, peyote-religion leaders from several tribes gathered at El Reno, Oklahoma, to establish the Native American Church as a legally incorporated entity and to protect what had become a cherished and sacred Indian tradition. Eventually the organization's name was changed to Native American Church of North America, to reflect the fact that some members lived in Canada.

Today Native American Church participation is widespread among American Indians, attracting perhaps one-



fourth of the total Indian population. Thus it is one of the strongest unifying influences in Indian life today. Continued controversies over the use of peyote, provoking vigorous defensive responses from Indians, have had the effect of making it a central point of American Indian identity.

DOCTRINE/BELIEFS

The Native American Church represents a fusion of Christianity with traditional American Indian religions. The specific beliefs involved vary substantially from tribe to tribe. Generally, in the Half Moon peyote way (begun by Quanah Parker) Christianity, although present, is not greatly emphasized; in the Big Moon (or Cross Fire) tradition (begun by John Wilson), Christianity is more explicitly present.

Peyote itself is regarded as a sacramental substance that has divine powers. It is often called “medicine,” and it is believed to have powerful healing ability. When someone who has taken peyote vomits in reaction to the substance, peyote is understood to be cleansing the impurities that were present in the person’s mind and body. It has powers that enhance one’s thinking and behavior. It deters desire for liquor and thus is a cure for alcoholism. It is a teacher.

RITUALS

The principal ritual of the Native American Church is the peyote ceremony. In many tribes such ceremonies are held approximately once a month, although the frequency varies and special meetings may be held for specific purposes.

Quanah Parker’s version of peyote ceremonies became known as Half Moon ceremony, so called because of the crescent shape of the altar used in it (now often called the Tipi way, because ceremonies are



held in tipis); the basic elements of the ceremony were well established before it arrived in Oklahoma. Of the two main variants of peyote ritual it is the less explicitly Christian, with frequent references to Indian spirits and Mother Earth. The Bible is not present at the ceremonies, and although Christianity is generally understood to be the foundation of the faith, it tends not to be emphasized. Wilson's ceremony is known as the Big Moon, or more recently the Cross Fire, ritual; it is more Christian in emphasis than the Half Moon, with invocations of Jesus, use of the Bible, baptism, and, sometimes, use of crucifixes. Today several distinct peyotist rituals, with differing levels of Christian influence, exist in various locations, although the differences among them are not large, and the general outline of the ceremony has remained essentially unchanged for a century.

Ceremonies most frequently begin in midevening on Saturdays. Men are traditionally the leaders of the ceremonies, although women attend and participate fully. Worshipers sit on the ground in a circle. The roadman, who presides, faces east. Various ceremonial artifacts are present, usually including an eagle-feather fan, a carved staff, a whistle, a gourd rattle, and drums. The cedarman throws cedar on the fire, producing a ceremonially cleansing smoke. Peyote cactus and peyote tea are then passed around; participants eat or drink one or the other. Going around the circle, participants sing traditional songs for some hours, occasionally stopping when peyote is again passed around the circle. At midnight water is passed around, and then there is a break in the ceremony. When participants are back inside, the singing resumes, and various individuals offer prayers as they feel moved. Special ceremonies for healing are then sometimes conducted. At dawn the roadman sings the Dawn Song; then the water woman comes in with water to drink. She also presents the simple ceremonial breakfast that signals the impending end of the ceremony. The roadman may provide a homily, and the last songs are sung. The ceremonial objects are put away and participants go outdoors. An ample and leisurely meal follows, and slowly the gathering breaks up.



Native American Church membership does not exclude other religious affiliation. Members may freely participate in various traditional Indian religious ceremonies, in other Christian churches, or in any other religious activities they choose.

ORGANIZATION/LEADERSHIP

The Native American Church has an estimated membership of 250,000 adherents. Local churches are found among a great many of the hundreds of Indian tribes in the United States.

ISSUES/CHALLENGES

Peyote is a psychoactive plant whose use is generally proscribed by federal and state drug laws. Repeated conflicts have pitted American Indian users of peyote against governmental authorities. State legislatures and the United States Congress have considered legislation outlawing all use of peyote, even in traditional Indian rituals. At the federal level such efforts have not succeeded, but several states began outlawing peyote use as early as 1917. The laws, however, did little to stop the spread of peyote religion, and in fact may have abetted it by causing committed peyotists to feel a need to defend their faith in the face of persecution—from a Indian point of view, just one more case of Euro-American oppression of Indian people. Generally, laws forbidding the possession and use of peyote are not enforceable on Indian reservations, and most law enforcement agencies have not attempted to stop peyote-related activities, including transportation of the cactus from Texas, where it grows, to the reservations and other Native American Church locations.

The most notable court case involving peyote use was *Employment Division v. Smith* (494 U.S. 872), which was decided by the U.S Supreme Court in 1990. Two Native American Church members were fired from their jobs as drug rehabilitation counselors for their use of peyote. They filed claims for unemployment compensation, but were turned down because they had been dismissed for “misconduct.” Dozens of religious organizations supported their claim that their free exercise of religion should allow their religious use of peyote, despite the fact that for their jobs they were required to remain drug-free. The case was finally decided against the peyotists; the Supreme Court held that they had no right to free exercise of religion that transcended otherwise valid laws. The Congress responded by passing the Religious Freedom Restoration Act in 1993, which sought to extend free-exercise rights, but that was overturned by the Supreme Court in 1997 on grounds similar to those originally cited in the Smith case.

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