

Recollections of the Peyote Road

Written by George Morgan

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My thoughts about Peyote are closely interwoven with the religious context of the Native American Church, the Peyote religion of the American Indian. In my experiences with this sacred plant, Indian Peyotists have been my companions. I am grateful to them for their patience and understanding, and their willingness to adopt me into their church. Peyote is considered a holy medicine among members of the church; and it is used with the utmost respect. The teachings of Peyote go beyond the confines of the tipi; my experiences sitting by the sacred fireplace have helped guide my daily life. Peyote ceremonies have also allowed me the opportunity of being closely associated with the Sioux, who are quite remote psychically and geographically from the mainstream of American life—far more remote than many of us realize.

Most Sioux Peyotists are full-bloods and traditionalists; their great-grandfathers were buffalo hunters and warriors. They live in the spacious beauty of a pine and prairie landscape, but by our economic standards they are distressingly poor. As late as the early 1970s many Indians in the Pine Ridge country were still using kerosene lamps. They have retained their native language, Lakota, and their knowledge of English is limited. Lakota is spoken throughout the Peyote ceremony. At ceremonies someone has often interpreted in English for me, but through the years I have come to understand much of what is said; and much requires no words.

I attended my first Peyote ceremony in 1964. That eventful night in a tipi at Wounded Knee was the first of many meetings and the beginning of my acculturation to the Indian way of life.

Although I was thirty-one in 1964, I was a child in the Peyote religion. The Sioux have patiently watched me grow up in the Peyote way, and in their eyes I am now a teenager of sixteen. They liken their religion to a school; one peyotist has said: "You learn in here just like at school; it is graded and becomes easier the farther along you go." In reference to my learning, the same man said: "It is good that you are starting now; you can always learn more from Peyote, but you will never learn it all."

Peyotists at Pine Ridge constitute less than 2 percent of the population (about 15,000 in 1980). The church membership is growing from within because of an increase of children in Peyote families, but the number of new members from outside these families is negligible. The Peyote religion at Pine Ridge is like a large family: almost everyone knows everyone else. Other reservations have a much higher percentage of Peyotists: among the Navajo of the Southwest, about 50 percent. Despite the Sioux Peyotists' small numbers, they are famous among Peyotists of other tribes, especially for their songs. Since the Peyote religion is pan-Indian, members often attend meetings with other tribes. At one meeting I attended, seven tribes were represented. Thus for an Indian visiting the reservation of a tribe not his own, the Native American Church is a home away from home.

Although the Peyote religion is definitely Indian, it includes some vital Christian elements. Christianity has influenced the pre-Columbian Peyote religion since the early sixteenth century,

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when Spanish friars came to the New World. Peyotists know and accept the Ten Commandments and the teachings of Jesus; at Peyote meetings participants often recite the Lord's Prayer, sometimes in English. Considerable time during ceremonies is devoted to prayers. Indians are an intensely religious people; their prayers to God and Jesus come to them easily and naturally. My prayers are still a little awkward, although as a member of the Native American Church I have had ample practice.

Next to the prayers, Peyote songs are the most important part of the ceremony. As each person receives the prayer staff and musical gourd (rattle), he holds the staff in his left hand and shakes the gourd with his right. The drummer and other participants often sing along. These chants, sung with compassion, create a marvelous world of sound and meaning for Peyotists like myself, engendering visions, hope, and peace. Some peyote songs are prayer chants which praise the name of Jesus. Peyote is often referred to as a sacrament; it is considered a mediator between God-Jesus and Man.

At Pine Ridge there are two contrasting ceremonial rituals and organizations of the Native American Church: the traditional Half-moon ritual and a more Christian version known as the Cross-fire. The Half-moon ritual is much older and commonly occurs inter-tribally in the United States; the Cross-fire occurs chiefly among the Sioux of South Dakota and the Winnebago of Nebraska and Wisconsin. The leaders (roadmen) of the Cross-fire group are bona fide ordained clergy who have been appointed by the High Priest of the organization in the State of South Dakota. As ordained clergy they are qualified to perform baptisms and marriages.

In the Half-moon ceremony each participant rolls a prayer cigarette, which is a surrogate for the peace pipe; sometimes the Bull Durham tobacco is rolled in a corn shuck. In the Cross-fire ritual prayer cigarettes are not used; the Bible, which is set next to the Peyote sacrament and holy altar, replaces the smoke. At certain times during the Cross-fire ceremony the roadman reads aloud from the Bible and interprets readings to the congregation.

Another difference between the two fireplaces is that, at Half-moon meetings, each participant is allowed to help himself to the sacrament (generally four spoons of Peyote) each time it is passed clockwise around the tipi; at Cross-fire meetings a man stands in front of the participants and hands each of them four spoons at least the first time the sacrament is sent around. The roadman decides how many times Peyote should be passed around, usually three or four. It is sometimes used in powdered form, but more often as a gravy; an infusion of Peyote tea is also passed. Although individual members usually attend meetings (ceremonies) with their own group, they also freely attend the other group's meetings. Each group has its own cemetery. I like both rituals, but I have been raised in the Half-moon and prefer it.

The Native American Church is decidedly nationalistic. Military veterans are granted special honor. Since I am a veteran, I have the privilege of folding the flag at ceremonies. The official colors of the church are red, white, and blue, colors which also appear in the beadwork of religious paraphernalia; veterans have beadwork designs of the national flag. At almost all locations where meetings take place there is a flagpole; the flag is raised on Veterans Day and Memorial Day and for the funeral or memorial of a member who was a veteran. The nationalism of the church is partly attributable to its pan-Indian organization; it also reflects the fact that the government recognizes the Peyote religion and allows the Indians to practice it freely. But the military character of the Native American Church may also be a continuation of the old warrior society, which retains high prestige among the Indians.

Women were formerly excluded from the ceremony, except for Peyote Woman, the roadman's wife. She came into the tipi in the morning, bringing morning food and water over which she

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prayed as a symbol of Mother Earth. It was not until the 1950s that women in general started attending Peyote ceremonies at Pine Ridge. One reason for their original exclusion was the Indian taboo against allowing women near any medicine during their menses. It is still considered dangerous to the health and life of anyone taking Indian medicine, such as Peyote, to be in proximity to a woman who is menstruating or has just given birth; thus, women during these times respectfully stay away from meetings. Recently, a woman who had just had a child ignored warnings and entered a Peyote meeting; all the men at the meeting became violently ill, and many of them vomited.

Aside from these two prohibitions, Sioux women today not only freely attend meetings, but sit next to their spouses and sometimes even sing Peyote songs. Indian women of other tribes also attend meetings, but they tend to sit together, and they do not sing. Sioux women are liberated women compared with their sisters of other tribes. Yet the Peyote ceremony still remains a man's world; the political organization and the ceremonial are run by men, and men predominate in numbers. Children accompany their parents to Peyote ceremonies; the family worship is healthy. Children begin to take medicine ritually when they become teenagers.

There is no single reason that a person is drawn to the Peyote religion. Some take refuge in the church as a last resort to cure a sickness after the white man's medicine fails. Some start attending meetings out of sheer curiosity, and some want to escape the monotony of reservation life. Many come because they have heard that the Native American Church is a place where one can talk to God and feel His presence. They have heard that Peyote can change minds, habits, and lives for the better, or that Peyote can bring happiness to man in this life. The actions, words, and morals of Peyotists themselves have been positive living examples to the Indian people. Another attraction is the close fellowship of Peyote meetings.

Members of the Native American Church do not proselytize, nor do they criticize other churches or beliefs; they prefer to live unnoticed. But some Indians object to Peyote, the ceremony, and the people connected with it. A few of these critics are traditionalists who follow the old peace pipe religion of their grandfathers and see the Peyote religion as a foreign intrusion from Mexico. The major diffusion center of the Peyote religion was Oklahoma, and tribes such as the Kiowa and Comanche were its major disseminators. It did not arrive at Pine Ridge until some time between 1904 and 1912.

Some Sioux Peyotists participate in ancestral rituals with the peace pipe, such as the vision quest and sun dance, but I know of no traditional medicine man who has become a Peyotist. Indian alcoholics are especially fearful and critical of Peyote. They sneeringly refer to Peyotists as "cactus eaters." One alcoholic told me, in a malignant tone of voice, that Peyote was "snake juice." One reason alcoholics tend to fear Peyote is their knowledge that Peyote conquers the alcohol in a person's body and pushes that poison out of his system; he would thus suffer physically and mentally through an all-night ceremony. But the alcoholic generally refuses to admit that his recovery to sobriety and awareness may be the beginning of a new life.

The Peyote road is the path chosen by members of the church. In the imagery of some Peyotists, two roads diverge at a junction. The profane road, paved and wide, with its worldly passions and temptations, is considered to be an unholy road which leads to trouble. The alternative is the Peyote road, a narrow unpaved path surrounded by a wilderness of pristine beauty. All Peyotists travel this way, but each must journey alone, for it is the road of one's own life and wisdom. In the Christian sense, it is the road to salvation. Ethically, it is a path of sobriety (a major step for most Indians), industry, care of the family, and brotherly love. Its symbol is a narrow groove on top of a crescent-shaped earthen altar that encircles the west end

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of the fireplace. Rather than a straight and narrow path, it is a curved path all the way, but the curve on the crescent altar is constant, never-varying, and so in a sense straight. The road has not been easy for me, nor was it meant to be. Peyotists say that up to the mid-mark of human life the Peyote road is uphill. This is indicated by the earthen altar, which slopes up to the center of the crescent, where the Peyote chief which is a specially shaped Peyote plant placed on the altar by the leader of the ceremony is set. To reach the downhill side of the Peyote chief one has to go through (accept) Peyote, for it is considered impossible to go around or over the sacred plant placed on top of the altar. The downhill road symbolizes the latter half of one's life, the easier half.

Those early years of my uphill journey were difficult because of my preoccupation with death. This morbid obsession began when I attended my third Peyote meeting. Several people present were ill, and I feared the spread of disease by the communal sharing of the spoon to eat Peyote and the cup to drink Peyote tea. Two voices within me began to talk about my death, one stressing its reality and the other constantly agreeing; the voice-exchange continued until my awareness of death became intense. I had been asleep to my death for thirty-one years; it now became an intimate reality. At a meeting that I attended, a wise elderly Peyotist said, "You can see yourself in this fireplace; you can see what kind of man you are. If you accept what you see, you will be all right and stay in this religion; if you don't accept what you see, you will never come back. " More than one man attending a meeting has thought himself attending his own funeral; he believed that he saw his own body being brought into the tipi instead of the morning food—the church became for him a funeral parlor. After such an experience, he may or may not want to return to the Peyote religion. That night I arrived at the junction and chose the Peyote road, which included the risk of sickness and the anguish of mental torment. Yet, in the sense that "many are called, but few are chosen," Peyotists say that "Peyote chooses you, you don't choose it."

After that traumatic night I was aware of death every day for a period of about 3 years. It was not an absorbing fixation, but it was a daily reminder, my Dark Night of the Soul. I was often awakened to the image of a black whiplash across my back and the words resounding in my ears: "You are some day going to die." At a Peyote meeting, when I told the members of my concern about death, one of the leaders stood up and said that I was off to a good beginning in the Peyote way. During a meeting 3 years later I simply became aware that it was useless worrying about the inevitable. To be uneasy is the original derivation of the word disease; my anxiety and worry (uncertainty) about my certain death was a disease. Perhaps there is in each of us a level where the knowledge of our own death is so strange that it comes as a shock.

The ceremonies not only exposed me to the unknown, but allowed me an insight into Sioux psychology and culture, which is so different from ours in many ways. Thanks to Peyote I have become acquainted with the genius of the Sioux mind; it has been a powerful catalyst in overcoming ethnocentric barriers. Peyote magnified individual personalities and cultural differences in a complementary manner, and showed what we all had in common as human beings. During their meetings, which lasted from 12 to 15 hours, I respectfully followed the ceremonial rules of conduct—the Indian way. The ingestion of Peyote helped us to endure the all-night ceremony and the socializing during the following day. Alone and decidedly outnumbered, I absorbed their culture under the aegis and power of Peyote. Although each meeting was a culture-shock to my nervous system, my acculturation was gradual rather than abrupt; it was a slow blood-transfusion of cultural transformation.

After attending several Peyote ceremonies I started noticing a change in my mannerisms.

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Especially noticeable was a change in my body movements and gestures; my way of speaking and voice quality also altered. My sense of humor and values became more recognizable among the Sioux than among people of my own culture. Sometimes I found myself willingly imitating the Sioux men I most admired; at other times I passively observed those same strong personalities controlling my actions and mannerisms. More than once during a ceremony I suddenly felt as though I had left my body, passing into a person sitting across from me and looking through his eyes at me. I have often wondered whether that person simultaneously had the same experience, but Peyotists rarely comment on their visions and appear uninterested when I tell them of mine. They generally refrain from telling anyone what they have learned, especially their deepest mystical experiences; they say that Peyote teaches each person differently.

As the Peyote religion and the Sioux became more important in my life, I began feeling more distant from my own culture, which appeared increasingly shallow, meaningless, aggressively acquisitive, and boastfully noisy. I was more comfortable with the Indians, who are a quiet, refined, and soft-spoken people; their slower pace of life was more restful to my mind, and their subtle sense of humor, especially Peyote humor, was a joy. Indians love to joke even when the joke is on them, but there is no scorn in their joking. Peyote humor is partly a play on words, especially English words which are relatively new to the Indian; they enjoy the fact that many different English words have the same sound, and that different-sounding words have the same meaning.

At the close of a Peyote ceremony, an elderly Indian was explaining the difference between the southern and northern Arapahoe language. He used English words for his example: "Where the southern Arapahoe would say 'match,' the northern Arapahoe would say. . . ?" He couldn't think of the cognate word, so a member looked up and said "lighter." Such humor and laughter is encouraged after the ordeal of an all-night ceremony. Often their humorous stories have a sober message; an example is the tale of the "monkey in the fireplace," which warns against treating the ceremony as play. The story is as follows: "No monkey business allowed in this fireplace, but everything is in this fireplace, so the monkey must be in there too. This engineer on the railroad had a monkey who watched everything he did. The engineer stopped the train and went in the depot to get a cup of coffee. When he heard the toot-toot outside, he ran out and saw the monkey taking this train down the track. Hey, this monkey was really having fun. He was driving the train just like a man. He was really driving that train fast. He missed the curve and the train went off the track, but the monkey, he jumped out of the window and grabbed hold of a tree and was saved. He watched the train go into the ditch."

We both laughed; then he became serious and said: "But all the people and children on the train were killed. That's the way the monkey is: if the man don't watch close, he will miss the curve; the monkey, he's a monkey." Then this Indian Peyotist slowly pointed to the fireplace and said: "That monkey will kill you if you don't watch him; no monkey business allowed in this fireplace." Symbolically, this story indicates that if you are careless on the curve of the Peyote road, you will fall from the altar and burn up in the fireplace.

Through Peyote I have acquired many Indian friends and adopted relatives. In particular, I became quite close to my adopted brother, Silas, an Omaha-Ponca Indian who lived among the Sioux for many years. He was a leader of the Peyote ceremony, an official of the church, and a man of great charm and spiritual power. He was about 20 years older than I, a wiser brother. Together, we spent much time visiting and attending Peyote meetings. He had been raised in the Peyote tradition, and he taught me much about that tradition and about the good life. For

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instance, he taught me the need for humility before entering the tipi to pray. To attend a meeting with a know-it-all attitude, that of a "big shot," will usually cause suffering throughout the night. He said: "Over there are some tall weeds that are now bent by the cold. That's what Peyote can do to a man who thinks he knows everything. Peyote will bend him down and turn him inside out." I have seen that happen since and I know that his analogy was accurate.

Because of his vast experience and clear, quick mind, he was always several steps ahead of me. I shall never forget that when I told him I thought Peyote was good, his answer was: "You say that Peyote is good; what's good about it?" No one has satisfactorily answered his question. Once when Silas had a ruptured hernia, a few Peyote boys helped him through to health. They prayed, drummed, and sang through the night, and they spoon-fed Silas about 150 Peyote. He was well by morning; the ambulance returned to the hospital without him.

Silas told me of his vision when he ate that large amount of Peyote: "Brother George, I had so much Peyote in me that when I raised up from the bed the Peyote would come up my throat to my mouth. While the boys were drumming and singing I suddenly got out of bed opened the door and went outside; a short distance from the house was a large hill. I walked to the hill and saw a shiny new ladder going all the way to the top. I climbed the ladder to the top of the hill. I looked around, everything up there was so beautiful. The air was clean and fresh; there were all kinds of pretty colored flowers. When I looked back to the ladder it was old and broken; many rungs were missing. Since I had no way of getting back down, I decided to enjoy where I was; later I looked back at the ladder and it was once again a shiny new ladder. I finally climbed down the ladder and walked back to the house. The people in the house looked very sad. I walked up to the bed and looked down at the man lying on the bed; he had his eyes closed and looked rested. I saw that the man on the bed was myself. I then lay down to rest. When I awoke my sickness was gone. The large hill was a hill of Peyote, all those Peyote represented my sins. The top of the hill was paradise." Although Silas often ate large amounts of Peyote, he told me that if a person is in the right spirit "just a taste of Peyote on the tip of your tongue is enough."

At meetings, Silas was a strict disciplinarian. At a house meeting in winter I fell unconscious from the lack of oxygen. The one-room log house was sealed airtight; it was crowded and stuffy. There was no air circulation; the fireman had brought in a large pan filled with live coals which further heated an already hot room. Silas was sitting next to me. When I fell unconscious, I dropped my pheasant-feathered fan on the floor. I was revived about 10 minutes later. The first thing Silas said to me was, "Pick up your fan!" A few minutes later I told Silas that I believed the reason for my passing out was that the live coals were eating up the oxygen. He agreed, but nothing was done about it. Under the influence of Peyote, the loss of consciousness was especially meaningful. I felt as though I had died; the darkness of unconsciousness came before I realized what was about to happen. I wondered whether death would be like that, quicker than conscious thought. A tall, quiet Arapahoe man revived me; I saw him clearly before I could hear any sound, and it was about a minute before I could hear. I went outside in the bitter cold to get some fresh air. The Arapahoe man walked up to me and said: "You are doing all right in this Peyote way, but don't be in a hurry; take your time." Several days later, a leader in the Peyote religion who had heard about my fainting said: "I heard that Peyote finally caught up with you."

I write of Silas in the past tense because he died in 1973. Visiting his blood relations, the Omahas of eastern Nebraska, is the closest I can come to being with him. In their eyes I am a welcomed relative who has come home. Whenever I attend a Peyote meeting, especially among his own people, he is close to me. Although all tribes have essentially the same Peyote

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ritual, there are variations which are highly important in the minds of the Indians. Each tribe has its language and culture; each has its own style; each has its own genius. At my first birthday meeting among the Omahas, I said that since I was familiar with the Sioux way, they could continue singing while I prayed with a prayer cigarette during the main smoke. The Omahas looked startled; the air seemed electrified by the cultural transgression. After a silence which seemed to last an eternity, Henry, the leader and my adopted nephew through Silas, said: "Uncle George, we will pick up these instruments (musical instruments) again when you are finished with your prayer; that's the way we do it here, so that's the way it is going to be, Uncle George."

Although I continued to live and work within my own culture, my heart, spirit, and mind resided with the Peyote religion and the Indians. Thus, I lived in two worlds—physically among my own people, emotionally among the Indians. Living within an hour's drive from the reservation allowed me easy access to the source of my emotional life. Because of the increasing ease and frequency with which I went back and forth, my image of the reservation's entrance and exit was that of a swinging door. As I felt an increasing need to be on the reservation, I began attending more meetings and visiting more often. All of us Peyotists needed emotional support as an integral part of group solidarity and the fellowship of a community of seekers. The social group using Peyote became as important to me as the plant and its powers. Whatever their age, Peyotists are endearingly called "Peyote boys." They are a brotherhood of seekers who are youthful in spirit and attitudes, in their curiosity and willingness to learn.

As my cultural metamorphosis became less detectable to myself, it became more obvious among friends and relatives of my own culture. Yet I could never become fully Indian. A Peyotist made this clear to me by saying: "This way helps us to become more Indian and it helps you to be more like George Morgan." At first Peyote enabled me to see the Indians as I wanted to see them: in an idealizing light. But eventually I learned from Peyote that their culture had its own snags and contradictions, and my view became more balanced. In time, Peyote aided me in understanding and respecting my own culture. For instance, Indians have a sharing culture; we do not. Peyote helped me to understand the advantages and pitfalls of sharing. Of course, any discerning mind might in time come to the same understandings; one does become wiser with age. With Peyote too it takes time to learn about life and cultural differences; wisdom cannot be hurried.

By reconciling the opposed cultural values in my mind, I diminished their hypnotic influence and escaped the clutching grip of ethnicity. An identity crisis ended: the tenuous swinging door vanished; I stepped out of both cultures and took a deep breath of fresh air in a cultural void. I could now enjoy both cultures, and I could move freely and safely through them. To arrive at this point along the Peyote road took me years of relentless effort.

The Peyote religion also advanced my formal education. One morning as I sat by the sacred fireplace I felt an urgent desire to journey to the land where Peyote grows and study the plant's environment and trade channels. That impulse was prompted by substantial price increases for the plant and occasional supply shortages which troubled the Indians. My university training in geography and plant ecology had prepared me to study the biogeography and economic history of Peyote. As there was a gap in the literature, I decided that this study would become my doctoral dissertation, and I felt that the knowledge gained from it would help Peyotists to secure a dependable supply in the future. I spent several months over a period of 2 years in the Texas brush country studying Peyote. I learned about the plant's life cycle, habitat, growth rates, and geographic range past and present. I also studied the history of Peyote trade between the *Peyot*

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eros

(a group of Spanish-American Peyote traders) and the Indians.

I sincerely believe that Peyote guided me in this study, for I met no obstacles in seeking information about a delicate and somewhat secretive subject. I also believe that Peyote protected me from harm in the rattlesnake-infested thorn brushes. The details of my study are too complicated to relate here, but the thesis is of value in understanding the present problems of Peyote supply and how they arose. If Indians make the effort, as they surely will, there should be a dependable supply for their needs in the future. In a strange way I feel as if Peyote selected me to do that study, for other Peyotists with artistic talent have been inspired through Peyote to paint religious paintings connected with the ceremony; others have done beautiful beadwork.

I would not casually suggest to anyone that he attend a Peyote ceremony. It is difficult to sit through an all-night ceremony. And Peyote is not easy to swallow: it is extremely bitter, even to experienced Peyotists, and occasionally nauseating, especially for beginners. A person of sincere intent would be welcome: it is a church. He would find hospitality: Peyotists are courteous and respectful. But it is well to remember that Peyote is not a plaything; Peyotists say that "if you play around with Peyote, it will turn around and start playing with you." The Native American Church is not for the curiosity seeker: it is a serious religion.

The Peyote road has shown me many wonders, and I believe it is the same for other Peyotists. I shall continue to follow that adventurous path, that sublime way of life.