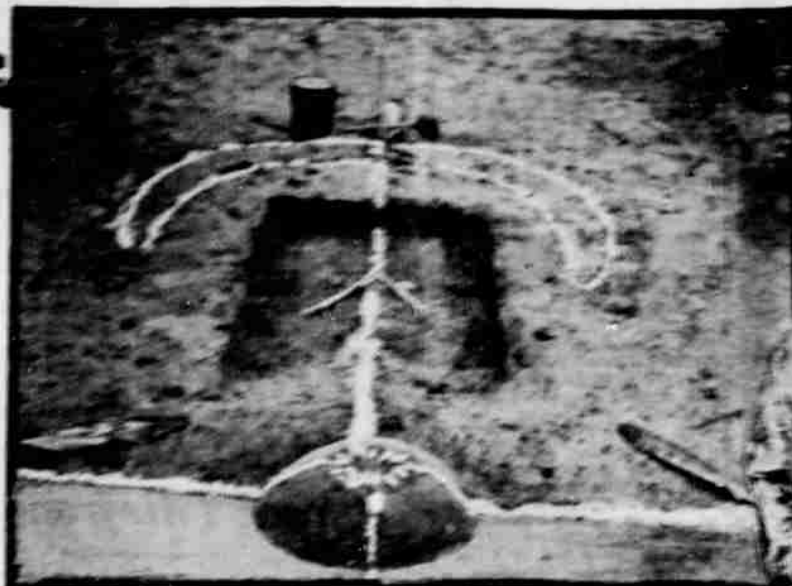


# America's STRANGEST Religion— For RED MEN Only



"The Asped to the Great Spirit," a statue by Cyrus E. Dallin in front of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.



The altar arranged for a peyote church meeting. . . . The leader will sit in the center of the half moon by the drum and rattle, with the altar first in front of him. . . . The round mound in the foreground represents the sun.



The late Chief Bacon Rind of the Osages, who was a member of the peyote church, a Mason and a Roman Catholic.

By EMILY C. DAVIS

**T**HE strangest religion in America—  
Ten to one you have never heard of it. Yet it is spreading, dividing into sects as neatly pigeonholed as Methodism, Baptism, Episcopalianism. It is a growing religion. One ethnologist who is studying it declares that it cannot be dismissed as a minor cult. It is an important force. This Native American Church, as it is called, is a startling, yet understandable, blend of paganism and Christianity. It holds services with a religious look and solemnity. There are prayers and hymns. Now and again, the name "Jesus" may be made out in the songs. There is a crucifix beside the altar. But the music is the dash of the water drum and the light, steady beat of a gourd rattle. And the altar burns with a fire on which lie the dried flower tops of a sacred cactus plant, the peyote.

Around the gathering are placed these tops, or buttons, of the peyote plant and in sacramental spirit the hot, mushroom-like morsels are taken and chewed.

The peyote-chewer fixes his mind on religious things. He sits meditating on the problems of the world, of brotherhood, of religion in his own life. In all these matters he aims to gain new light through peyote—the teacher.

So runs the service in a peyote church, all night.

**T**HE peyote church is an Indian affair. That is why its progress has gone unnoticed by the general public in America. But this peyote church is much more than the religion of some small Indian group.

For the first time, an Indian religion has crashed through the barriers that tribes raise to set apart their own rites and ceremonies. In tribe after tribe, red men have listened to the testimony of visiting Indians—exiled missionaries—telling what the peyote plant has done for them.

The peyote church counts its converts today among 40-odd tribes. They are scattered as far as the Kiowas and Delawares in Oklahoma, the Chayennes in Montana, the Winnebago of the Great Lakes region, one Pueblo group in the southwest, various tribes in Mexico.

At American museums, where the doings of the Indian are a subject of keen scientific in-

**An amazing blend of paganism and Christianity, centering its rites around the peyote cactus, has spread among the Indians till it now has a firm foothold in more than forty tribes**



Two of the "buttons" of the sacred cactus, the peyote. . . . The Indians consume quantities of these dried flower tops as an aid to religious meditation.

terest, peyote-eating is an old story, but a story that is still not clearly understood. The growing influence of the Native American Church has given science a new incentive to try to understand what the Indian sees in peyote, and what peyote does to the Indian. All of which is far harder to find out than it sounds.

At the University of Pennsylvania Museum, Vincenzo Petrucci, young explorer and ethnologist, is completing an intensive study of the

distinct but deeply interesting peyote cult. Mixing friends with Delawares in Oklahoma, where the Native American Church got its first state charter and where the cult is strongest, Mr. Petrucci has talked with leading theologians of the church. They have expounded to him its doctrines. He also interviewed Indian converts, and other skeptical or disbelieving Indians who told how they tried peyote and found it no good.

**T**HE religious wave sweeping across Indian America recalls the rise of Mormonism with its spirit of revelation. Brigham Young, famous prophet of the Mormon faith, might be matched in the peyote religion by John Wilson of the Delawares, who is already a legendary figure.

One day, an Indian of the peyote church announces that new truth has been revealed to him. He recites

a new creed. He describes a new kind of altar to be made. He lays down the ritual to be followed. So, another sect of the peyote church is born.

"I know of nine forms of peyote ceremony among the Delawares," said Mr. Petrucci. "Eight are still practiced and have some hold on these Indians. Once a form is revealed, the Indians feel that it must not be tampered with. But any individual may have a new type revealed to him."

All these forms of the peyote religion are strange mixtures, containing three ingredients.

First, there are ideas from the old peyote cult, which was originally a local religious ceremony of the Aztecs and some other Mexican tribes.

Then, ideas are taken from the old religion of the Indian's own tribe.

And lastly, some of the thought and symbolism of Christianity are blended in.

Christianity, it develops, is not much more than a seasoning in the mixture. It is conspicuous, but superficial, Mr. Petrucci finds. For example, a crucifix is placed by the peyote altar as a gesture of courtesy to the white man's church.

**I**NDIANS see no incongruity in mixing religious ideas. One Osage Indian, Chief Bacon Rind, was a member of the Catholic Church, a Mason, and a member of the peyote church. At his death, not long ago, he bequeathed his peyote to the U. S. National Museum—the first Indian ever to will his belongings to the federal government.

Most peyote church Indians, however, feel that the white man's religion is for the white man, and that the Indian has his own revealed truth.

Peyote church leaders may talk freely about their religion to a friendly white man. They may permit him to attend their Saturday all-night meetings. But they do not invite him to join their church. The Native American Church is for red men only.

To Mr. Petrucci, one Indian explained it this way: "This ceremony is for the Indian. The Great Spirit sent peyote to take care of the Indians who are His children. So, the white people cannot understand it. The Great Spirit sent Jesus to the white people."

**H**ERE is the theology of one Delaware Indian:

"Somewhere back east a child was born. They named Him Jesus. The whites killed Him. He was sent by God our Father to take care of His children.

"When Jesus departed from this world, He took seven steps to reach our Father. With each step that He took He left words with Earth our Mother to take care of her children and God's—that is, the Indian people.

"The first step to reach our Father is peyote, the second is fire, the third is water, the fourth is clouds and rain, the fifth the moon, sixth the sun, and last our Father."

Another Indian theologian explains carefully: "God puts power in peyote. You talk to the peyote and eat it. It does not help you to go to heaven. It does not put goodness into you. Goodness is in you. God put it there. You pray to God to be healthy."

Whether peyote is the good teacher that its Indian disciples claim, or whether it is an insidious intoxicant with bad influence on the Indian, is something the white man has never settled.

**D**ELVE into the literature on the subject, and you find it seething with strong statements and violent contradictions. Plenty has been written about peyote, but it still remains for scientific investigations to produce enough real facts to settle the arguments.

Objection to the Indian's use of peyote began almost as soon as the Spaniards landed in Mexico and set out to convert the aborigines to Christianity. Spanish priests soon came upon a small but vital cult among the Aztecs.

These Aztecs got religious inspiration from a plant they called the "Flesh of God." They drank its juices and drifted off into intoxication lasting sometimes two days, the Spaniards reported.

In an ecstatic state, some of the Indians danced and sang. Others sat stolidly alone and saw visions which they later described to the others. Some were inspired to prophecy about wars or the weather.

Horried by these superstitious rites, the Spanish missionaries pronounced peyote-eating

almost as grave a sin as cannibalism. In a little manual published for use of missionaries in Texas in 1760 may be read these questions for the confessional:

"Has comido carne de gente?" (Hast thou eaten the flesh of man?)

"Has comido el peyote?" (Hast thou eaten the peyote?)

**B**UT horrified as the Spanish fathers were, the peyote rites of Mexico got little notice for a long time. The peyote cactus was not known far beyond its home grounds, along the Rio Grande River in Mexico and what is now Texas.

Not until about 1850 did the old Mexican peyote rites begin to forge their powerful link with Christianity and to spread to distant tribes. The Native American Church got its state charter in Oklahoma in 1918.

Ten years ago, Dr. Paul Radin studied the peyote societies of the Winnebago Indians of Wisconsin and expressed the view that the cult was waning. Now, Mr. Petrucci finds it flourishing, growing. Some tribes are even cultivating the small spineless cactus, the peyote.

Efforts of missionaries and others to stamp out peyote have met with little success.

The Office of Indian Affairs once gathered an array of opinions from its doctors and superintendents at the Indian reservations. A typical verdict, from an Oklahoma agency physician, said:

"The effect on those who attend the peyote feasts is that of general depression followed by idleness and laziness."

On the opposite side of the ledger are such reports as that of the French pharmacist, Alexander Rouhier. He has written a 350-page work on peyote, which arrives at the conclusion that the cactus is weakly poisonous, only when taken in large doses. He also disagrees with those who have called it habit-forming.

Mr. Petrucci, from his investigations among the Indians, believes that the harmful effects of the peyote cactus have been stressed without real proof that the plant was harmful.