

A description of a Tonkawa peyote meeting held in 1902

Morris Edward Opler

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In the years 1932-34, during the course of ethnological investigations among the Chiricahua Apache Indians living on the Mescalero Indian Reservation of New Mexico,¹ the writer was fortunate enough to obtain a lengthy autobiographical account from Samuel F. Kenoi, a prominent member of the tribe. Mr. Kenoi had been a victim of the forced exodus of his people from Arizona following the Geronimo outbreak of 1886 and had been removed with other Chiricahua, first to Florida, then to Alabama, later to Ft. Sill, Oklahoma, and at length, in 1913, was permitted to take up residence at Mescalero. At various times during his childhood and youth he attended government schools, and this excerpt from the autobiography is his description of a Tonkawa peyote rite which he attended in 1902 while on a visit to former classmates of Chilocco school days, of some seven years before. The Chiricahua Apache never used peyote and there is no reason to believe that Apache notions have been injected into this account. Because of the present keen interest in the history and growth of the peyote cult and the paucity of information concerning the Tonkawa Indians and their peyote rite, the publication of this section has been thought desirable. According to Lipan Apache informants, the Tonkawa were among the first of the tribes north of Mexico to accept peyote, having been taught its use by the Carrizo Indians of the Texas Gulf region.² While the informant's words have not been changed, this section has been greatly condensed, for aspects of the account irrelevant to the ethnology of the Tonkawa or to their peyote rite have been deleted.

A Tonkawa peyote ceremony

There was a bunch of them at the depot waiting for the train to arrive, to take me back to the agency which was about a mile or two out of town.

They were well-dressed, but as I looked at them they seemed altogether different than when I was a student with them at Chilocco. They wore their hair long with beaver hide wrapped around it. They had those beaded things that the hair goes through on either side. Most of them didn't wear hats. Some had a little eagle feather flying around there at the top of the head. They had their faces painted in different colors, [434] green, yellow, red. Some of them wore beads around their necks, so many beads that it was like a collar. . . . Each of them had a nice clean white sheet, two yards long, tied around the waist, tied at the side. . . They looked a great deal darker than when I was in school with them. They were all short and chunky. They had been just little boys when I had seen them last. Some of them, the older ones, wore moustaches; all the hair was pulled out in front and just some very black ones left at the sides.

They all came around and hugged me. They smelled of paint and grease. They had greased their hair. But they were fat, well-dressed, well-fed.

Those boys were peyote eaters. . . . By the next day they said they were going to have a medicine ceremony over at Corporal Jesse's, an old Tonkawa man. So David invited me to go with him. He said all the Tonkawa were going over there.

The following morning we got ready. Before we got in the buggy, I put on my serge suit, my white hat, and some perfume on my handkerchief. I am sorry to say that that perfume prohibited me from entering their ceremonial tipi.

When we got there we had our camp, just a shade. The ceremony was already going on.

They had a tipi. No women were allowed in there. The only way you could get in that ceremonial tent was to have long hair, your face painted to suit them, and an Indian shirt made of any colors you liked. And you had to have buckskin leggings or some kind of leggings such as the Indians used to wear. You had to have a long loin-cloth and you had to wear a sheet wrapped around you. You had to have different kinds of odorous herbs; you had to have osha.³ You couldn't have any perfume or powder used by white people. That paint they used, they made themselves.

The first day I didn't make any attempt to get in. I thought a little about it. I was afraid of making some mistake about it. I watched those people. As soon as they arrived they pitched camp. Then they began to dress up, according to their custom. The wives unhitched the horses pitched camp, and did things like that while the men were dressing up to go in that tipi. As soon as the men were ready, they went in there. Singing was going on inside. All sat in a ring. David dressed up and went in. I heard a little drum go, "Um, um, um, um," and someone singing. I heard something rattling. Afterward I found out what it was. The drum was made of a five or ten gallon lard can, and it was covered with buckskin, pretty well made, tight. When everything was still you could hear it for about five miles. [435]

The first day I didn't go in. I don't know how they did start it. But I knew they were singing. So I thought I would wait until I asked David when he came back.... So I said, "Can I go in as I am?"

He said, "Sure, Sam, we'll go in. I'll go in first; you follow me. You can go in all right."

So I followed him. He opened that door. He went in. He looked back. I was holding that door still. He said, "Come in."

I no more than stepped one foot in and tried to shut the door with one hand behind me, than a whole bunch of them said, "Hey, stop! You go outside!"

Then I went back out. I walked a little way from the tipi. Then David and the chief man of the peyote rite came out. ... Corporal Jesse told me, "We did not want to hurt your feelings when we did not allow you to go in, but we have to carry this out according to the way it has been handed down to us. So I beg your pardon for not letting you go in the tipi this time. You have too much white man's perfume on. If you could change your clothes to some not smelling of any perfume and come into our tipi without any hat, we could let you in." . . . He said, "You go on and change your clothes, if you have any other clothes."

Then come over dressed as I have told you and you can see what we are doing."

I started back to David's buggy.... David dug around in his pile. He threw me out a nice pair of black pants and said, "Wear those." He threw me out a white shirt. He went over and got a cup and dipped it in a bucket of water. He poured some in my hand, and I washed my hair. He gave me a comb. "Comb your hair straight down," he said. I did, and he threw me a fine Indian blanket which smelled of different herbs, the ones they wanted me to have. While I was standing there he threw it right around my neck and told me to hold it crossed in front of me. So there I was with my hair all combed down and with a blanket.

He said, "Let's go over there now."

We started for the tipi. He went in first again. I followed behind him. They were all glad to receive me this time. The door should be toward the east. The fellow who goes in has to go around the circle clockwise, even if his seat is at the north side. I went in and sat just about due west. While I was sitting there I was watching. I couldn't ask any questions for fear that I would make a mistake on something else. But I watched what they were doing. I sat down with my blanket wrapped around me. They make it beautiful inside with baskets and rugs, Navaho rugs, on the floor.

I sat there, silent. When we went in five men had already sung. All [436] those men have to sing that are sitting in a row. Each man sings four songs. When he gets through with that drum he takes the gourd that has some rattles inside and passes the drum on; he shakes the gourd for the man he gives the drum to. Then he passes the gourd on. They have the peyotes in a flat Indian basket, in the middle where it can be passed around. Anyone who wants some can ask for it while the singing is going on. They have one big peyote, about two inches in diameter, the biggest one they can find. It is on a beautiful piece of buckskin, and there are rugs under the buckskin. It is in the middle. It has a little red paint on top. Then there are little peyotes around in a circle. They sing. Every now and then someone asks for the basket of peyotes that they eat. And a man takes out five or ten, counts them out. These peyotes are dry and are all sorts of shapes. The men take one in the mouth and crack it. It sounds just like cracking a nut. Then they chew until it is soft. Meanwhile the singing is going on. Nearly everyone is doing it. You can't go to sleep when you are doing it. You don't get tired, and it seems as if the singing and ceremony are holding you there. Everybody is singing. And when you first take these things you are praying in your own heart or secretly if you want to, they said.

David told me, "Take some," when he had his. He asked me if I had ever taken any before.

I said, "I never did in my life anywhere."

Peyote is plentiful at Ft. Sill among the Comanche, here and there, but I never wanted to take any of it.

He whispered, "All right, you take three of them for a start."

It is so bitter and strong that you can't swallow it; it makes you feel as if you are going to vomit, but you don't vomit. "They call that big one 'leader'," he said. "Pray to that. Whatever you wish, ask him when you eat this first one, and it will happen that way. And

every time you eat one, even after the first one, pray to it. If you want to, you can ask to have long life, no sickness. If you want to, you can ask to have every good-looking girl fond of you. But you can't ask for two things at a time, only one. So there it is. You can do your own praying and selecting."

I had two in one hand, and I held one up, praying.

He said, "You can call God, just as you pray to this one."

So I sat there and prayed before I ate this one. I said, "I never use you, but I am one of the Indians. This is my first experience. I have been advised that there is good in it. I'm praying for it. I ask you to let me live long in this world without any sickness. After I eat you I ask this all in the name [437]

of Yusa and Child-of-the-Water."5 I sat there praying in my own language, and then I began to eat it. I nearly threw up that first one, it was so bitter and strong, but I managed to swallow it just the same. And I took my others, one after another, while the singing was going on.

I sat there all day long with them without any dinner. Still I didn't feel hungry; I didn't feel tired. The singing sounded good to me after I got the effect of the peyote. I prayed once in a while. Then they handed the peyote basket to us again. It was towards evening then. I ate three more, that made six altogether. That was a little more than a new fellow like me, who never knew anything about it, ever took. I was very much affected after I took the second three.

At evening the ceremony was over. It was about sundown. They began again after a little lunch and sang all night long until sunrise. They sing every day and every night for four days and nights.

We went to our camp that evening. Dave asked me how I felt.

I said, "The world looks very pretty to me."

It affected me all night. The singing sounds very, very lovely. You can't get enough of it. You want more and more. I didn't have any vision, but it seemed that I saw everything in a heat wave. It appeared and disappeared. Everything sounded lovely. The Indians' dresses looked beautiful.

David went back. He told me before I went to bed, "You'll never sleep tonight, Sam."

So I thought, "I'm going to try to sleep anyhow."

Just before he went back over there he said, "Don't forget-in the morning let the sun see you and look at the sun just as it is coming over those hills."

It was impossible for me to miss that sun, for I sat up all night. I tried to sleep, but I couldn't. I almost saw visions. Dave said, "When you see that sun, you're going to see it come out on the best world you ever saw. It's going to make you feel young and good in every way."

That night it was dark. It was just getting daylight when I shut my eyelids, but the eyelids wanted to open.

Dave stayed there the next morning for a little to eat. I got up early and looked at the sun. It was very, very beautiful! The sun was coming out just as if it was before my face, the rays spreading out every way. My [438] heart surely felt good to see it, so good, such a beautiful world! I can't tell you how good I felt.

The peyote tipi was quite a distance away. It seemed as though the tipi was right near me. I learned three songs that night. I couldn't help it. I had to sing. It's queer! I sat there singing and keeping time, though I tried not to. In the morning I learned the morning song, just while I was outside there. It seems you could learn the songs quickly. I've never forgotten those songs.

I asked them what it meant. They told me it was a morning song to the sun. Then they told me I could sing one or two of these songs all night some time if I got hold of that peyote and prayed to my maker and Peyote at the same time, and it would give me the same blessing.

The third day I didn't go in. I stayed near the buggy and rested. I visited around among the people who were there.

The fourth day I didn't go in, but I went in at night. I sat over in the same place. I didn't eat any. I just watched for about three hours, and everyone was affected. Corporal Jesse was going, "Ho, ho!" Corporal Jesse ate forty peyotes that night. He was making all kinds of animal sounds. Once in a while he fell over. He was seeing visions. Before I left he went out of his mind. He just lay there. And the rest were praying and singing. None ate as many as he did. Some ate fifteen or twenty. Jesse was the only one who made noises. He was the chief. He was supposed to know the vision. They said, "He's up somewhere talking with visions."

After a while I went out and went to bed. In the morning David came back early, before sunrise.

At that time they surely had big feasts! Those Tonkawa Indians certainly had good things. Suppose tomorrow was the final day. Today they would go to town and get three hind quarters, bananas, apples, all sorts of things, and bring them over here. Before sunrise everybody brought the food, well-cooked, before this tipi. They ate and ate. That ended their ceremony. Peyote is brownish-grey with white on top. It has fine fuzz, cotton, on top. It is like velvet.

David didn't tell me what he saw, but he said, "There's a vision in it if you eat enough and believe in it."

I think I could have seen something if I had eaten ten peyotes.

The ceremonial tipi was a regular tipi. No one could sit in front of the door. The peyotes could only be passed in one direction, clockwise. Jesse sat facing the door. He sang more than just his turn. Jesse never beat the drum. He had a gourd all the time which he rattled. The peyote was picked [439] up with the hand. You had to pick it up very carefully. They didn't pass me the drum when I was there. Jesse had some assistants. When he was tired the assistant would take his place.

They had these sings any time they wanted to. I don't know why the Tonkawa do it, but some of the Indians do it to keep from getting witched.

They claim they can see clear over here to Mescalero or to other states and see what the people are doing and who's witching when they get like Jesse.

By the next morning the effect wore off. I didn't have a headache afterward or feel sick. In fact, I didn't notice any after effects at all.

Claremont Colleges
Claremont, California

Notes

1) For the field-work opportunity the writer is indebted to the Social Science Research Council, the National Research Council, and the University of Chicago.

2) Opler, Morris E., The Use of Peyote by the Carrizo and the Lipan Apache Tribes (American Anthropologist, Vol. 40, No. 2, 1938), PP. 271-85.

3) *Ligusticum porteri* Coult. & Rose.

4) From the Spanish Dios. The Chiricahua have a nebulous conception of a supreme diety, borrowed perhaps from Mexican sources. 5) The principal culture hero and an important diety of the Chiricahua.