

Peyote on the Prairies: Religion, Scientists, and Native-Newcomer Relations in Western Canada

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In October 1956, a peyote ceremony took place at the Red Pheasant reserve in Saskatchewan. Organized by the Native American Church, the ceremony featured the use of peyote, a psychedelic substance from a cactus traditionally found in Mexico. Its use among Canadian Native peoples in the first half of the twentieth century had signalled concerns about American influences, but by the 1950s the issue escalated into a debate about spirituality, medicine, and Native-newcomer relations. The federal government by this time had embraced an ethos of multiculturalism, which meant that some officials tolerated the peyote ceremony as a legitimate Indigenous ritual. Local authorities, however, regarded peyotism as an abusive and dangerous ceremony and sought to criminalize its practice. The ensuing conflicts over how to handle the rise of peyotism on the Prairies forms the basis of this study. This essay unpacks this complex set of debates by explaining how various players—scientists, journalists, Native participants, police, and government officials—interpreted peyotism. The authors suggest that the peyote ceremony tested the limits of the federal government's shift towards treating Aboriginal Canadians as immigrants.

En octobre 1956, un rituel du peyotl a été pratiqué dans la réserve du Red Pheasant, en Saskatchewan. Organisée par l'Église des Amérindiens (Native American Church), la cérémonie a utilisé le peyotl, une substance psychédélique que l'on trouve dans un cactus originaire du Mexique. Certains s'inquiétaient que son utilisation parmi les Amérindiens canadiens au cours de la première moitié du XX^e siècle était un signe d'influence américaine. Mais à partir des années 1950, la controverse s'est transformée en débat sur la spiritualité, la médecine et les relations interculturelles entre les Autochtones et les nouveaux arrivants. À ce moment-là, le gouvernement fédéral avait déjà adopté une démarche préconisant le multiculturalisme, ce qui signifie que certains membres du gouvernement considéraient les cérémonies du peyotl comme légitimes et relevant de rituels indigènes. Les autorités locales, en revanche, voyaient le peyotisme comme une cérémonie dangereuse et licencieuse, et ont cherché à criminaliser cette pratique. Les conflits qui en ont découlé ont porté sur le contrôle de la pratique croissante du peyotisme dans les Prairies et constituent la base de la présente étude. Notre article dévoile au grand jour ces débats complexes en expliquant comment les nombreux acteurs (scientifiques, journalistes, participants autochtones, forces de l'ordre et fonctionnaires) ont interprété le peyotisme. Nous postulons que la cérémonie du peyotl a testé les limites du gouvernement fédéral qui tendait à considérer les Autochtones canadiens comme des immigrants.

On 13 October 1956 the *Saskatoon Star Phoenix* featured a four-page article with a rather alarming title: “White Men Witness Indian Peyote Rites.” In a graphic yet sympathetic article, journalist Doug Sagi recounted a peyote ceremony from a week earlier, when he and photographer Gordon Skogland had accompanied four medical scientists to northern Saskatchewan in an effort to shed light on a brewing controversy surrounding peyotism. In an all-night ceremony near the Western Development Museum in North Battleford, the non-Native men joined 15 members of the Native American Church (NAC), including Frank Takes Gun, president of the international branch of the church, who had travelled from Montana, and William Russell, the president of the Montana branch of the church. The remaining 13 people were men and women from the Stoney Reserve in Alberta and the Red Pheasant band in Saskatchewan. Together this collection of worshippers and observers participated in an intense ceremony, in which the intended peak of the event was a connection with “the Almighty God,” a feat achieved through a combination of smoking tobacco, chewing peyote buttons, drumming, singing, and meditating throughout the night. One of the White observers later remarked that the peyote ceremony “offers the possibility of a tremendous religious experience, that intense and vivid awareness of the omnipresence of God.... It is an enormous cohesive force among the American Indians who have so long been without any unifying agency or purpose” (Kahan 1963, 9).

The ceremony near the Red Pheasant reserve embroiled the participants in a complex debate about Native religious and political rights, the state’s authority to interfere in these ceremonies, racialized discourses about health, medicine, and addiction, and wider concerns about hallucinogenic substances as agents of moral decay. Our essay begins unpacking this debate by explaining how various players—scientists, NAC members, Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) officers, and government officials—understood peyote use and its cultural implications in the 1950s. Ultimately, we argue that the peyote debate challenged the attempts of policy-makers to uphold the *Indian Act* of 1951, an act that promised to respect cultural rites of Aboriginal communities. We suggest, furthermore, that the use of peyote, a hallucinogenic substance, raised suspicions about the genuine goals of the NAC and distracted most officials from acknowledging the broader political implications of peyote use within Prairie Aboriginal communities.

There is surprisingly little written about peyote use or the NAC in Canada. What has been written about peyotism tends to focus on activities in the western United States, where the church was first established. This scholarship is diverse and extensive. While anthropologists have focussed on the legitimacy of the peyote ceremony as authentic expression of Christianity or of Indigenous beliefs

(Slotkin 1979; Stewart 1979; Calabrese 1994) legal scholars have interrogated the regulatory conditions for controlling an organic substance using a combination of border controls and *Food and Drug Act* amendments (Lawson and Scholes 1986).¹ More recently, scholars of peyotism have begun untangling the complicated historical threads of postcolonialism, the rise of new religions, and the connections between spiritualism and healing in an attempt to make sense of the plight of the twentieth-century Native Americans (Calabrese 1994; P.N. Jones 2007).

Despite these different perspectives and approaches, most American scholars agree that the modern use of peyote only developed after the 1850s when peyote was incorporated as a central element in a highly ritualized religious practice. Described as the “peyote religion” by one anthropologist, this mid-nineteenth-century use of peyote was not simply a way for individuals to access visions, but rather a way to create community cohesiveness through a shared religious experience at a time when the loss of territory and lifestyle undermined Native American communities (Slotkin 1975). This religion was formalized and institutionalized with the establishment of the NAC in 1918 (Slotkin 1975; Dittman and Moore 1957). All scholars likewise explain that the rise of peyote in the nineteenth century was accompanied by ongoing conflict between supporters of the peyote religion and American government officials. While the former argued that peyote is not only safe but religiously important, and should be protected under the government’s constitutional obligation to uphold religious freedom, federal and state authorities consistently sought ways to outlaw or restrict what they believed to be a dangerous substance and a cult-like set of rituals (Slotkin 1975). As we show here, the events in the United States foreshadowed what later occurred in Canada during the 1950s. Distinguishing the Canadian experience was the fact that the tension between peyote supporters and government officials came to a head during a period when an amendment to the *Indian Act* and Canada’s growing commitment to multiculturalism made it increasingly difficult for the state to intervene directly in the cultural affairs of Aboriginal communities.

Our argument relies on a combination of federal records from the Indian Affairs branch, along with newspaper articles, correspondence records from medical authorities, and an unpublished manuscript on peyote, inspired by the event at North Battleford. Together, these records help to provide insights into the various perspectives in the debates that later shaped the laws on peyote use and its associated cultural expression. Oral histories would undoubtedly improve the article and provide a fuller depiction of the various players in this debate; we encourage others to follow this path. We looked to proclaimed experts and authorities in this debate in an effort to shed light on the way in which the legislators responded to what many believed was a looming problem. These documents suggest that

although changes in federal legislation ostensibly enshrined cultural rites within the revised *Indian Act* of 1951, the inclusion of worship augmented by peyote use challenged officials in their tolerance of this imported custom. Rather than ban the NAC in Canada, however, Canadian officials, including RCMP and government representatives, seized upon the use of the hallucinogenic substance as a reason to clamp down on communities engaged in peyotism. Conceptualizing the issue as a narcotics problem ultimately allowed local officials to intervene in the issue without claiming that peyotism was prohibited on the basis of culture.

The Origins of Peyotism

According to an article published in *Nature* in 1937,

peyote contains from four to seven remarkable alkaloids, one of which is capable of causing colored hallucinations. With eyes closed, the fortunate worshipper may, for hours, enjoy a kaleidoscopic play of the most indescribably beautiful visions of geometric figures and familiar things on a background of constantly changing colors so exquisitely rich as to seem supernatural. It is easy to understand, then, how such a powerful plant could be regarded as a "messenger" capable of putting the individual in communication with the gods without the medium of a priest, for peyote is believed by members of the cult to form such a function. (Schultes 1937, 155)

The peyote cactus grows south of the Rio Grande, and anthropologists have claimed that its documented use traces back to the 1500s in Mexico. After 1850, peyote reappeared in a new form amongst Native communities in the southwestern United States. This time, peyote became part of an elaborate ceremony that combined aspects of Christian and Native spirituality and ritual. Lasting from evening to early morning, the peyote ceremony had proscribed tasks for men and women, priests and practitioners. Reminiscent of a thirst or sun dance, the ceremony started with the erection of a tipi, the lighting of the fire, and the entry of the priest into the tipi. The remainder of the ceremony progressed through a series of stages. First, worshippers ingested a peyote button, then engaged in singing and prayer, took more peyote, and, at midnight, broke for water. Throughout the early morning, participants expected, and hoped, to have visions. These visions were expected to offer instruction, give participants a heightened sense of self-awareness, and sometimes offer a glimpse of Jesus Christ. As one participant remarked, peyote, when used in this ceremony, was like the Bible in its ability to teach and reveal truth (Catches 1991). At first light, there was more singing before food was brought into the tipi. The ceremony ended as participants exited the tipi and partook in a large feast.²

In 1918, the NAC became the institutional embodiment of the peyote religion. The church had two main purposes: lobbying federal and state governments for the protection of peyote as a religious practice, and expanding the use of peyote to other Native communities. By the 1940s, the NAC had become an American-wide pan-tribal organization that lobbied for the protection of peyote and outlined a sophisticated series of doctrinal, ethical, and ritual practices associated with its use. While many non-Native observers perceived the NAC as a cult trying to seduce unsuspecting Native Americans into its religion, the church maintained that it was creating a cultural and spiritual rebirth of Native peoples in North America. What is clear is that the NAC was spreading more than simply the ritual use of peyote. As Katherine Pettipas has argued, the NAC was also demanding that its followers embrace a new lifestyle devoted to “brotherly love, honesty, self-reliance and avoidance of alcohol” (1994, 267 n114). Far from engaging in cultural demise and moral decay, as some government officials assumed, the NAC and the peyote religion promoted the rebirth of Indigenous North America.

An American Problem: Peyote in Canada before 1950

As peyote use began spreading north in the United States following the establishment of the NAC, Canadian officials first became aware of its use in Canada (Taylor 1932). By the late 1920s, police reports indicated that peyote was being used in small amounts at the Piapot reserve in Saskatchewan, allegedly brought into Canada by Cree, Dakota/Lakota, Nakoda, and Siksika (usually men, almost certainly members of the NAC) who had visited relatives in Montana or Dakota (Davis 1954). As peyote reportedly migrated north into Canada, Canadian authorities slowly became acquainted with both peyote and the NAC; yet, for most of the 1920s, 1930s, and even into the 1940s, Canadian officials remained convinced that this activity was a product of American-specific conditions. Reports suggested that incidences involving peyote were isolated events that occurred only when American relatives visited Canada. In 1932, when rumours surfaced about peyote use in Canada, RCMP investigations into the allegations revealed widespread ignorance about the drug, the ceremonies, and any harmful after-effects of either (Coleman 1932).

In 1932, an Australian anthropologist who had become fascinated with peyote and the NAC contacted the Department of Indian Affairs in Ottawa seeking information about its alleged use in British Columbia (Parmalee 1932). His enquiry raised questions about its use that seemed to surprise the local agents. Federal bureaucrats immediately sent letters to Indian agents in British Columbia to interrogate the truth of his information. Agents responded with confidence

that peyote was not being used on their watch. One agent, writing from Lytton, British Columbia, stated that he had “never heard of it being used by these Indians,... it is used in the southern states and Mexico, but I never heard of it in these parts” (Strang 1932). H.E. Taylor, Indian agent for Williams Lake, British Columbia, similarly stated that “as a result of enquiries and extensive travel amongst the outlying Indians in this district I am safe in asserting that so far this drug has not made appearance in this district” (Taylor 1932). Other agents agreed and confidently asserted that peyote was not being used on any of the reserves in the province. The department was reasonably satisfied that Canadian Aboriginal peoples were not using peyote, and the issue disappeared for a few years.

RCMP files from the 1940s, however, indicated rising levels of surveillance over reserve populations in the Prairie West that went hand-in-hand with concerns about peyote use. Although peyote may have served as an excuse for monitoring compliance with the *Indian Act*, RCMP officers worked closely with local Indian agents to forge an association between peyote consumption and non-conformity (RCMP 1941). Meanwhile, it became clear that these authorities still had very little knowledge of peyote or its effects. In an RCMP memo from Manitoba, an officer reported that he had identified two potential informants who had agreed to help police keep tabs on the peyote situation. One of these informants was the Indian agent in the Fort Qu'appelle region and the other was Reverend C. Laviolette. After interviewing Laviolette, the medical superintendent for the Indian Affairs Branch, and the chief of the Narcotic Division, along with the local RCMP in Lebreton (Fort Qu'appelle), the police uncovered no use of peyote in the district. In spite of a lack of evidence, the RCMP continued to monitor the activities of the local Aboriginal peoples on the suspicion that peyote might eventually come into the community (RCMP 1941).

Although local proof of peyote use seemed difficult to confirm, anthropologists and clinicians continued to press Canadian authorities for information about its use in the Canadian West. In 1942, an American physician, Charles Trantor from Reno, Nevada, took it upon himself to warn the Canadian authorities that peyote use south of the border was on the rise, with serious consequences for the medical and social health of communities. Writing to the Canadian superintendent of medical services for Indian Affairs, he equated peyote use with inefficiency, intoxication, and cult-like behaviour. He wrote that “Indian peddlers bring the narcotic from Mexico, and it is used in all-night meetings. It has cut down the efficiency of our Indians approximately fifty percent in this region, and several deaths have occurred in the all-night meetings” (Trantor 1942).

On the whole, despite the warnings from RCMP officers, Canadian medical officials remained convinced that peyote use in Canada was limited to a few

“Sioux” bands who travelled “back and forth to some of the reserves in Dakota.” Besides, noted the medical authorities, “the Sioux Indians who are using the peyote are really American Indians who were chased across the border after the Custer massacre” (Moore 1942). Taking a patriotic tone with an American doctor, the Canadian medical officer was almost sympathetic in his portrayal of the displaced people who he believed were the only ones using peyote. Throughout the 1940s, concerns about peyote use in Canada remained relatively minor and focussed on the use of peyote as a drug, not its use as part of a cultural rite.

“Bad Medicine”: Peyote in Canada during the 1950s

By the mid-1950s, the use of peyote in Canada gained more serious attention. This time it was not British Columbia or Manitoba, where its use had initially been suspected, but on the Sunchild Cree Reserve in Alberta and later among the Red Pheasant band in Saskatchewan. By this time, the tenor of discussions over peyote and the NAC had also changed. Instead of dismissing the issue as a product of American influences or as a set of isolated incidents, the increase in peyote use on the Canadian Prairies brought more sustained attention to the connection between peyotism and cultural nationalism among North American Aboriginal communities. Authorities now felt that peyote use was an integral part of the increasingly pan-Indian NAC that had expanded into Canada. In particular, they believed that Cree, Nakoda, and other Aboriginal adherents were claiming its use for medicinal purposes, while somewhat subversively using peyote ceremonies to raise spiritual and cultural consciousness among Aboriginal communities.

In this context, the politicization of peyote assumed new dimensions. While its presence in the early 1950s remained limited to a few bands and even then to only a few people within those communities, its use none the less sent ripples across Native communities and revealed significant debates within mainstream Canada about the rights and/or responsibilities of the state to intervene in the spread of peyotism. Peyotism now embodied a more complicated set of cultural implications that surpassed a more simplistic concern for the use of a substance that produced intoxicating effects. The use of the drug in combination with a set of cultural or spiritual rituals, according to officials, now seemed linked to a consciousness-raising movement.

Louis Sunchild emerged in the Indian Affairs files as a key individual in the escalation of peyote use. Sunchild had already arisen as a leader among his community when he signed treaty with the Canadian government in 1944 to establish the Sunchild First Nation. He later captured RCMP attention when a public health nurse from the Stoney-Sarcee Agency wrote to the National Department

of Health and Welfare with concerns about the actions of Sunchild as a medicine man. Drawing on testimony from a young girl on the reserve, nurse Brandon claimed that Sunchild had been administering “bad medicine” to members of the reserve, who subsequently died. The apparent victims included a young infant, an elderly woman with a heart condition, and perhaps other children. According to the police reports, Sunchild acted as a medicine man who used peyote to heal. According to one girl who witnessed one of the ceremonies, Sunchild’s peyote ritual was also dangerous. According to this witness, at one point in the ceremony Sunchild took on the form of “the devil.” On another occasion, Regional Supervisor of Indian Agencies G.H. Gooderham complained that “recently a girl is alleged to have been criminally assaulted and the three accused are members of the cult and are reported to have been under the influence the day the offence occurred” (Gooderham 1953a). As a result of these claims, several people on the reserve moved away and grew concerned about their health (Brandon [c1951]). In contrast, Sunchild maintained that peyote and the NAC empowered the NAC’s followers to embrace modern “Western” society.

In January 1952, Sunchild was stopped at the Montana-Alberta border where the customs officer seized five pounds of peyote from him. In Sunchild’s statement to the RCMP, which he relayed through a translator, he carefully articulated his involvement with the NAC. In an almost scripted response, possibly following instructions from NAC authorities in the United States, he acknowledged a number of issues that might have troubled officials, including religion, medicine, education, and personal industry. He unflinchingly defended the use of peyote with the church as a mechanism for bridging the apparent cultural divide. In this lengthy statement, he reported,

I am like a missionary of the Native American Church on the Sunchild Reserve. For the past four or five years I have been studying about the Native American Church at Rocky Boy, Montana, and for the past two years I have understood the religion sufficiently to act as a missionary and teach it to others on the Sunchild Reserve. I have been teaching this religion on the Sunchild Reserve for the last four months. The Native American Church is based on the use of “peyote” and “peyote” is used solely for religious purposes to worship Almighty God, the son and the Virgin Mary through peyote. The peyote is used in the meetings by chewing two pieces of it at each ceremony.... Sometimes when I don’t feel just right I take one piece of peyote, but I don’t use medicines of any kind, nor any alcohol. I believe in the use of hospitals and [medicine] for my people and I don’t try to stop them from going to hospital or seeking a doctor. I have no intention of doing anything wrong and did not try to hide the peyote when I came across the border into Canada. Before

using peyote I drank and gambled, but since using it I have stopped all this and worship God. (Sunchild 1952)

Since peyote was not yet illegal and Sunchild had done nothing wrong except in failing to declare it at the point of crossing, he was released from custody. At the end of the interrogation, Sunchild invited the RCMP officers and any others to see for themselves the way a peyote ceremony functioned. Unfortunately, he added, he would not be able to perform a true ceremony in the near future, since he no longer had any peyote supplies; but, if the officers wished to participate, perhaps they could bring their newly acquired stores of peyote with them to the ceremony.

The attending officers were unconvinced by Sunchild's statement. The reporting officer stated that Sunchild "is not above lying if it will do him any good and is not to be trusted. He [has a] vile temper and has most of the Indians ... scared of him" (RCMP 1952b). The Indian agent kept a close watch on the Sunchild community for further evidence of peyote use. Although a number of deaths were investigated on suspicion of peyote use, the agent ultimately reported that there was no further evidence of the drug in the region (RCMP 1952a). Although this Alberta-based incident suggested that peyote consumption may have already been part of the emergence of a Canadian chapter of the NAC, authorities in this case concentrated on the drug itself and failed to recognize the ways in which peyote played a role in a broader cultural movement.

Public Responses: "Devil's Brew—or Sacred Potion?"

In 1954 Louis Sunchild again captured attention as he was considered instrumental in bringing peyote to Saskatchewan, where he helped members of the Red Pheasant band earn the legal right to worship with the drug. A *Winnipeg Tribune* article reported that Sunchild and local band members used the *Saskatchewan Benevolent Societies Act* to establish the first Canadian branch of the NAC (Bryant 1954, 34). In response to this expanding legal measure, a number of newspapers across the Prairies began investigating the appearance of this imported church with its contested embrace of a hallucinogenic substance. The coverage of this new development did not seize upon the establishment of a new church, but instead continued to focus on the drug itself as the offensive element.

At the crux of the articles and editorials published between 1954 and 1956 lay the question of whether peyote was part of a legitimate religious ceremony. As a headline from a December 1954 *Winnipeg Tribune* article asked, was peyote a "Devil's Brew—or Sacred Potion?" (Bryant 1954). For the *Tribune* journalist, Clell

Bryant, it was the former. Bryant reported that those who used the drug in Manitoba did it in secrecy and often in the form of “tea parties,” imbibing in the privacy of one’s home. He lamented that “the Protestant Church is powerless to stop them” (Bryant 1954, 34). Bryant found that the Indian agent knew nothing about this drug or its use among the people of Long Plains, but felt certain that they would “do anything for a sensation” (34). The superintendent of Indian Health similarly pled ignorance on the subject. The article continued by investigating the potential dangers of the drug, based largely on hearsay and anecdotal evidence, and concluded, “until Ottawa decides, the Salteaux Indians at Long Plains are finding the peyote ‘drunk’ colourful and exhilarating” (34).

In contrast with the *Tribune* report, an article in the *Regina Leader Post* published within days of Bryant’s piece opened with a fairly positive, if even defensive, perspective on the use of peyote in Western Canada. Relying heavily on evidence supplied by the clinical director of psychiatric research at the University of Saskatchewan, Abram Hoffer, the article explained that peyote was not a narcotic, was not harmful, was not addictive, and, according to Hoffer, was unlikely to appeal to “white Canadians” because “we have alcohol so we don’t need peyote” (quoted in *Regina Leader Post* 1954, 3). In fact, he suggested that alcohol was more likely to produce violent reactions, implying a racialized conceptualization of metabolism that perceived differences in reaction according to racial categories. This biological essentialism was consistent with Hoffer’s contemporary psychiatric research, which posited that psychiatric illnesses were also products of problems in brain physiology. In other words, that mental illnesses might be better understood by focussing research efforts on how the brain metabolized organic and inorganic chemicals. This medical perspective, however, was not the one that excited other journalists and officials. As newspaper reports increased on this topic, they tended to skim over the biological and research implications of peyote and instead concentrated on assessing the legitimate aims of the peyote ceremonies. By the mid-1950s, the coverage gradually began to discuss peyote use as part of a ritualized performance, but continued to single out the inclusion of the drug itself as problematic.

An article, for example, in the *Calgary Herald*, reported that “Cree Indians of the Red Feather Reserve [*sic*] near North Battleford have set up Canada’s first Church dedicated to use of hallucination-producing peyote buttons” (*Calgary Herald* 1954, 10). It explained that the church boasted membership of 40 to 50 adults, and claimed to model its organization on its American counterpart, which had been incorporated in the 1880s.³ According to the newspaper report, individuals belonging to this church gathered around an altar, sang hymns, and then took two to four peyote buttons, which altered brain activity such that they could have

“direct relations from God” and further that the drug allowed users to “talk from the heart” (10). Like the wider debate about peyote, the article vacillated between curiosity and condemnation as it reported on the ritualistic nature of the ceremony and the scientific merits of peyote-based healing, but it ultimately closed with a more suspicious suggestion that “some Indians in Manitoba have been reported to be using the buttons as a liquor substitute” (10).

Bureaucratic and Scientific Responses

The separation of the drug from the cultural movement proved critical in the ensuing political and scientific debates. Authorities in these arenas sought mechanisms to preserve Aboriginal rites but at the same time remained sceptical about the use of a hallucinogenic substance to augment a religious ceremony. The handling of the peyote question exposed some of the challenges with the new *Indian Act* (1951) and encouraged officials to distinguish between legitimate cultural events and criminal behaviour.

The tenor of the debate within the federal government had changed significantly since the 1930s and 1940s. Gone was the blatant paternalism and scepticism about the legitimacy of the peyote religion, whether imported or organic. Gone too was the assumption that this was an “American problem” and that Indian Affairs officials could, if needed, lean on the RCMP to put pressure on border control. The new act further stipulated that the RCMP could not suppress any Aboriginal cultural event—including peyotism—simply because they found it offensive or dangerous (Pettipas 1994). In its place was a policy that, on the surface at least, promised *not* to interfere with peyotism because through the legal establishment of the NAC in Canada, its use formed part of a legitimate religious and cultural ceremony. In subsequent attempts to regulate or criminalize peyote, this meant two things: first, that legislators required scientific proof that peyote was in fact a narcotic before proceeding with its ban, and second, that any action taken to ban peyote could not directly discriminate against either a reserve community or the religious and cultural practices of that community.

The transfer of Indian Affairs to the Department of Citizenship and Immigration (DCI) in 1950 in combination with an amendment to the *Indian Act* in 1951 gave rise to this altered approach. In this new era of Indian Affairs, the federal Liberal government was intent on treating Indians like other “new Canadians” (Pettipas 1994; Miller 2000; Bohaker and Iacovetta 2009). While this meant that Status Indians, like postwar immigrants from the Caribbean and across Europe, would be subject to assimilation through “Canadianization” projects operating in schools and other state-run initiatives, it also meant that Indians were allowed by

law to practise their own cultural, and especially religious, traditions. Thus, by the 1950s, in the rhetoric of government policy at least, the “Indian” was one more feature of a large multi-ethnic Canadian nation in which citizenship was based not on ethnicity but on shared values of democracy, freedom, and liberalism.⁴ As H.M. Jones, director of Indian Affairs throughout the mid-1950s, told a colleague who wanted to ban the peyote ceremony on reserves, the Indian must be placed “in the same position as other members of the [Canadian] community in every respect” (Moore 1953b). Of course, a new *Indian Act* passed by parliamentarians did not erase the persistent paternalism of Indian Affairs officials in Ottawa or on reserves. Indeed, many officials felt strongly that, despite the 1951 act, Indians still needed “protection” from things like peyote and the NAC.

Because of this ongoing paternalistic outlook, from 1952 to 1956 many of Jones’s colleagues at other departments in Ottawa, and many more Indian agents, missionaries, and Indian Affairs officials outside Ottawa, pressured Jones to find a way to intervene directly on reserves and criminalize peyote. In 1952, on the heels of Louis Sunchild’s interview by the RCMP, Indian agents and RCMP officials alike rushed to make Jones and others aware of the arrival of peyote in Canada and its long and dangerous history in the United States.

R.F. Battle, superintendent of the Stoney/Sarcee agency in Alberta, was one of the first people to call attention to peyote use in Canada in 1952. Using information he had gathered from Indian agents in Montana, Battle wrote a two-page letter to his superior in Calgary arguing that peyote and the “nefarious cult” that preached the use of peyote had caused significant problems in the United States, that peyote was now entering Canada, and that its presence in southern Alberta should be “viewed with alarm” (Battle 1952a). Passing on this information to Indian Affairs in Ottawa, Battle’s superior, G.H. Gooderham, amplified Battle’s concerns. He explained that peyote as used by the Indians was like heroin and marijuana, and had very “bad effects on the health and morale” of users (Gooderham 1952).

A few months later, an RCMP report about the Sunchild incident echoed Battle and Gooderham’s warnings. Recounting the interrogation of Louis Sunchild, the report explained that although police had released Sunchild, they had retained his peyote supplies. They photographed the “beans” and distributed the images to Indian agents on reserves across the region with hopes that this network of Indian agents and police would help identify the substance and ultimately control the spread of peyotism (RCMP 1952a).

P.E. Moore, director of Health Services at Indian Affairs, was one official in Ottawa who joined the RCMP, Battle, and Gooderham in lamenting the entry of peyote into Canada. Moore also realized, however, that in the new post-1951

era of Indian Affairs, it was unlikely that existing laws and public opinion would allow any direct intervention by the state against peyotism. Moore noted that in the United States, “a group of long haired ‘do-gooders’ managed to bring pressure on Congress so that the practice could not be interfered with on the ground that it was a part of a Native religion” (Moore 1952). Based on this erroneous comparison, he feared that permitting its use as part of a legitimate Aboriginal ceremony in Canada would make the drug accessible to others, with the implication that a hallucinogenic substance would inevitably lead to abuse. Moore then spent much of his energy trying to get Ottawa to criminalize the drug and to act directly to suppress what he called “this so-called religious orgy” (Moore 1953a).

Most alarming to Battle was the fact that peyote “priests,” like Sunchild, were also becoming radical political dissidents on reserves. The Indian Affairs agent claimed that Sunchild

became at once very active as the spokesman for his Band. Then he gradually became less industrious and in fact, drew into the background until now he does not even attend important meetings ... his actions in many ways parallel those of a number of cases carefully observed by Mr. Bruce [an American scientist] during his prolonged study of this nefarious cult. (Battle 1952a)

Local officials now readily linked peyotism with bad medicine, cult-like behaviour, political radicalism, and a lack of industriousness. For these Indian agents and police, peyote was a drug and any rituals associated with this drug threatened to unravel the threads of progress that had been sown by the reserve system. In short, in the eyes of these officials peyote use seemed poised to challenge civilizing strategies.

By 1953, the warnings from Battle, Gooderham, and the RCMP in Alberta turned into demands for action. Battle and Gooderham directly asked that peyote be listed as a “narcotic.” This designation would give the RCMP the right to seize peyote on or off reserves or when it was entering Canada (Gooderham 1953a). Jones forwarded this request to the RCMP headquarters in Ottawa. Although the police understood the situation and were eager to intervene in peyote trafficking, the commissioner explained that peyote did not qualify as a narcotic. It is not “habit-forming” he reported, and scientific studies from the 1940s, when the issue was last dealt with, had concluded that it was not the same as other listed narcotics. The only legal way to control peyote at the moment, the commissioner noted, involved seizing any improperly labelled peyote that entered Canada, under the *Food and Drugs Act* (RCMP 1953).

Four deaths at the Big Horn reserve in September 1953 escalated the debate about peyote to a new height, yet Ottawa maintained its position and upheld the

legal right to worship with peyote. Battle explained that the deaths at Big Horn were almost certainly the result of peyotism and not, as many reserve residents believed, caused by bad meat left in the area by forestry officials (Battle 1953). Gooderham, relaying Battle's concerns to Ottawa, again suggested handling the issue by amending the *Narcotics Act* to include peyote. Alberta's deputy attorney general agreed and demanded that the alkaloids contained in peyote be placed on the narcotics list (Gooderham 1953b).

These demands for action did not go unheeded. Deaths associated with peyote use provided anti-peyote officials locally and in Ottawa with the necessary fodder to proceed with plans to control its use by separating peyote the substance from peyotism the ceremony. Picking up speed after the Big Horn deaths, the bureaucratic machinery in Ottawa considered long-term solutions for controlling peyote by looking to the *Narcotics Act*. Jones replied to the Battle-Gooderham recommendations by reasserting that peyote did not—and would not—qualify for inclusion as a narcotic due to a lack of conclusive scientific evidence. Instead, Jones recommended the launch of an education campaign on reserves to draw attention to the dangers of peyote use and to highlight the fact that peyote, not bad meat, had caused the deaths. P.E. Moore made a different suggestion. Contrary to the new perspectives on Indian policy, Moore suggested that the *Indian Act*, or an amendment to the act, could address the problem of peyote. Specifically, Moore proposed that the RCMP be granted legal authority to arrest or detain peyote users and traffickers (Moore 1953a). Moore's request for a revision to the *Indian Act* was quickly quashed. Departmental lawyers explained that no existing part of the *Indian Act* applied to peyote, and any revision or amendment to the act to deal with peyote specifically would be "discriminatory legislation" (Legal Advisors 1953).

Jones agreed with the lawyers' findings. Responding to Moore, he explained that the act did not apply to peyote, and that the department would "be loathe" to make any amendment to the act given the isolated nature of peyote use, which ran the risk of singling out a cultural act associated with specific Aboriginal communities, particularly at a time when the actual number of users was not known. Moreover, insisted Jones, any amendment would be "discriminatory" and "would not be in keeping with the avowed policy of placing the Indians in the same position as other members of the community in every respect" (H.M. Jones 1953a). Instead, Jones suggested that the best approach for dealing with peyote was to educate band members and keep an eye on the importation of peyote from the United States (H.M. Jones 1953b). Jones, to the frustration of his colleagues in both Ottawa and the field, tried to craft a response to peyote that recognized the dangers of peyote but respected the new Indian policy, which meant not

discriminating against the religious practices of communities in Canada whether Native or newcomer (Moore 1953b).

By the following year, frustration amongst Indian agents towards Jones's refusal to clamp down on peyote use boiled over. Battle replaced Gooderham as regional supervisor of southern Alberta Indian agencies and throughout 1954 and 1955 used his new position to lobby Jones directly for more aggressive changes. He referred to the newly established NAC branch in Saskatchewan as evidence that the problem was in fact spreading and becoming more difficult to control. He disagreed with Jones's recommendation to use an educational campaign to curb its spread and feared that newspaper coverage of peyote did not sufficiently outline the real dangers of peyote or recognize that, in Battle's opinion, "most of the Indians will be inclined to use it to excess" (Battle 1955a, 1955b). Indian agents throughout Saskatchewan began responding to Battle's anxious calls for action by confronting the NAC on the Red Pheasant reserve (Cockburn 1954).

The local officials needed to adjust their tactics, however, to convince Jones of the pressing need to outlaw peyote use. They began by making a closer examination of the users and looked for fissures within the communities that could help draw distinctions between peyote abuse and legitimate cultural performances. For the most part, the Indian agents and on-reserve missionaries suggested that it was the "heavy drinkers" on reserves that were the main proponents of peyote, while non-users were the ones who felt threatened by the peyote movement (Cockburn 1954). By painting a picture of disharmony and even danger, Battle returned to Ottawa with renewed hope that officials might revisit the peyote question.

Battle explained that a former chief of the Sunchild reserve, Jim Yelloweyes, and 14 other families were planning to leave the reserve because of the rising and "wild" uses of peyote. Arguing that it was the "members of the peyote cult" not the "progressive Indians" like Yelloweyes who should move, Battle suggested that by using an existing provision in the *Indian Act* the band council might pass a bylaw that would prohibit the use of peyote on that reserve. This bylaw would, Battle hoped, also permit the RCMP and off-reserve authorities to apprehend peyote users. After failing to have it declared a narcotic and/or a banned substance under the *Indian Act*, this was Battle's final attempt at using existing legal statutes to convince his superiors in Ottawa to take direct action on peyote. To Battle's ongoing frustration, the director of Indian Affairs remained reluctant to intervene. Jones seemed to accept that peyotism was a culturally legitimate activity that, according to Canada's new policy of multiculturalism, must not be discriminated against (H.M. Jones 1953a, 1953b).

Frustrated by the lack of legal action, anti-peyote proponents turned to experts in the scientific community, hoping to find irrevocable proof that the

drug itself was harmful to the health of its consumers. Moore and Battle often referred to the inability of Indians to use peyote in moderation, and they adopted the language of intoxication and addiction to describe peyote users. For example, while Battle admitted that there “seems to be an impression abroad” that peyote is “not harmful” and is even considered by some to be a “relaxing drug to treat mental disability,” it is, he argued, dangerous when used by Indians (Battle 1955b). As historian Maureen Lux later argued, assumptions like Battle’s sprang from a growing belief in 1950s Canada that the Indian was “racially careless” and needed the intervention of the state to care properly for their physical selves (Lux 2010). Adopting this discourse, Moore and Battle returned to the tragic events at the Big Horn reserve as evidence that peyote damaged the physical and moral health of the Native peoples.

In 1956 Moore sought to bolster this line of reasoning, but the results undermined his efforts. He wrote to Abram Hoffer, director of Psychiatric Services Research at the University of Saskatchewan, and explained that “We are anxious to control the use of this substance among Indians. I do not believe that if any thinking man had direct knowledge of the disgusting orgies that occur when these peyote sprees are indulged in by groups of Indians, he would hesitate to take drastic steps to curtail its use” (Moore 1956). Unfortunately for Moore, even the science was not clear-cut. A few months after receiving the request from Moore, Hoffer received another letter with conflicting advice from a pharmacologist in Michigan. Dr. M.H. Seevers contradicted the message from Ottawa, supplying Hoffer with pharmacological advice regarding the toxicity of peyote. He claimed that

based upon studies of toxicity in dogs the level required for killing must be pretty high.... If I recall correctly he [his colleague who investigated peyote use among Navajos] was never able to find actual hospital records in which the cause of death was ascribed to Peyote.... Reports are that the priests may take as high as a hundred buttons during a night’s meeting but this fact if true is complicated by the continuous emesis which occurs so that one has no concept as to how much of the material is retained. (Seevers 1956)

For his part, Hoffer remained sceptical that peyote could or should be classified as a narcotic alongside opium and cocaine, as local officials had recommended. Moreover, his own extensive studies of hallucinogenic drugs and their effects on alcoholism convinced him that peyote use might in fact function as a prophylactic against alcohol abuse (Dyck 2006). Ultimately, Hoffer saw little harm in consuming peyote and went so far as to suggest that peyote ceremonies should continue. To that end Hoffer wrote to English professor and socialist intellectual

Carlyle King, imploring him to reason with the political authorities. He stated that “It appears to me that we ought to observe this religion very carefully as it may be a most interesting socialized experiment in the making. I would be quite content to see all the Indians in Saskatchewan adopt this religion since it means that they will not consume any alcohol” (Hoffer 1956). For Hoffer, peyote was neither a spiritual saviour nor a potent poison; it was an effective medicine, albeit one that fit within a racialized view of bodies.

Throughout the spring of 1956 Hoffer and his colleagues made several media appearances in an effort to combat the negative image associated with peyote. They used the language of science to authenticate what they believed was the benign status of the drug. In a statement on CFQC TV, Hoffer reported that “Scientists are now using these drugs to facilitate abreactions in their analytic sessions. Furthermore, sociologists have evidence that the followers of the peyote religion are as a rule better members of society” (quoted in Huxley 1955). Hoffer’s colleague, an international expert on hallucinogenic drugs, Humphry Osmond, shared these views, adding that “peyote, like anything else that contains a powerful chemical substance, should be handled with respect.... In the hands of a foolish, cruel or malignant person it could be harmful, but is there anything so good that the fool, the brute, or the wicked cannot pervert it? Even the Christian Eucharist was used for the devil’s worship in the Black Mass” (Osmond 1955, 5-6). Similar to the debate within reserve communities, in the print media, and in bureaucratic circles, amongst scientists the question of whether peyote was a “Devil’s Brew—or Sacred Potion” remained contested, but the local scientific authorities supported the legal status of the drug and its associated rituals.

White Men Witness Peyote Rites

Caught in a cacophony of discordant perspectives on the status of peyote, the voice of the NAC remained silent in the mainstream discussions. Local Saskatchewan medicine man and NAC priest, Ernest Nicotine,⁵ entered these discussions in the spring of 1956, first by writing a letter to Humphry Osmond seeking his advice on the medicinal properties of peyote. Nicotine indicated that he had been corresponding with some of the American scientists, and now sought Osmond’s expertise on the situation. His letter was blunt: “Some people call it [an] intoxicant. Narcot[ic]. Habit forming, etc.... You have studied peyote. And you had done more work on this subject than anyone else in Canada. If you could get me expert advice on peyote it would help our Church” (Nicotine 1956). Osmond responded in a lengthy letter, concluding with the suggestion that, although he was familiar

with the academic research on the topic, he relished the idea of learning about its use from religious participants themselves:

All the evidence that has reached me is that members of this Church conduct themselves well and act with dignity and good sense.... If what I have read is correct, this [use of peyote in religious rites] must be considered a very extraordinary religious invention. It is clearly likely to be misunderstood by those who do not know about these matters. Things that are misunderstood commonly lead to suspicion and sometimes even persecution, and naturally I would like to have a first hand acquaintance with members of the Native American Church. (Osmond 1956)

This correspondence led to an invitation from Nicotine to attend a church ceremony where peyote was an integral part of the service. The occasion appealed to many players in the debate as an effective solution to an ongoing problem. Representatives from the United States joined with others from Alberta's Stoney and Saskatchewan's Red Pheasant bands to host an official peyote ceremony, which was hailed as an opportunity to reveal the truth about peyote and the NAC.

The results of this meeting were first published in the *Star Phoenix* article, but a fuller account later appeared in a manuscript written by Abram Hoffer's sister, Fannie Kahan. Despite repeated attempts, the manuscript was never accepted for publication, but the discarded draft remains intact in the Saskatchewan Archives. Over the course of nearly 200 pages, Kahan provides a very sympathetic account, including a long history of the migration of peyote use from Central America through to Saskatchewan. She identified the rise of peyote ceremonies with the hangover produced by colonialism, stating that "the Peyote religion has grown out of the Indians' pain and eternal mysticism ... the white man has heard it [peyote philosophy] and seeks to silence it, as he has sought to silence every Indian philosophy and creation except those he could utilize for his own advancement" (Kahan 1963, 6). Her identification of the NAC as a vehicle for cultural emancipation is clear:

In the cloud of oppression, frustration, humiliation and death which darkened the Indian world, new religions bobbed up like luminous flares, guiding the persecuted Natives back to self-pride, hope and long-awaited deliverance. Arising within the heart of squalor and poverty, the religions invariably offered them a comforting reunion with one another with the cosmic forces of the universe, with their infinite past where there was no beginning and the future where there is no end; on a mystical plane which White Man has rarely achieved. (Kahan 1963, 10)

Praising the church as a political and social instrument against oppression, Kahan's book, had it been published, may have further fuelled the deepening divide between the opposing perspectives on peyote.

In her attempt to capture observations from some of the Indian participants, Kahan's unpublished description is one of the few sources to include the perspectives of NAC members in Canada, beyond their appearances in police reports. In this way, Kahan also tapped into descriptions that bore out the political significance of the church for contributing to a pan-Indian movement. For example, she drew upon a speech from Alfred Wilson, a Cheyenne of Oklahoma and former head of the Native American Church, wherein he stated that "Indians say this: that men must follow the right path of living. They must live according to the laws of nature, which are moral laws. If they fail to do that, they hurt themselves and this is all the punishment there is.... So speaks the indestructible Indian" (quoted in Kahan 1963, 9-10). Later, she included statements from Frank Takes Gun, who was present at the ceremony in October 1956. He had lamented the role played by his relatives who were drafted in the United States and who volunteered in Canada to serve their countries during the Second World War: "They fought to help preserve for all peoples of the American continent the religious and political freedoms guaranteed by our form of Government. All that any of us ask is to be left alone in our search to worship our God as our conscience dictates" (quoted in Kahan 1963, 108).

Included in the manuscript is an essay from Humphry Osmond, the only non-Native participant who fully partook in the ceremony. He attempted to relay the experience through a combination of notes and reflections on both the effects of the drug and the cultural setting. His notes revealed a mixture of sensations, from fear to humiliation, to feelings of being out of place to those of being united with the others involved in the ceremony. He wrote that: "by 9:45 [pm] there was a ghost of brilliant colour in my eye grounds when I closed my lids. I felt remote and slightly depressed. The roof flap fluttered like a lost soul. The tipi is a microcosm, a tiny mirror for the universe" (quoted in Kahan 1963, 122). Later he reflected openly about the meaning of the peyote ceremony for Native and non-Native relations: "It struck me that with another turn of the wheel of history we Caucasians who, by means of gunpowder and printing have gained so much authority in the world, might find ourselves subject to peoples who possess skills which we do not have. No one who had been with the Indians as I had been could feel superior to them" (quoted in Kahan 1963, 139). Taken in its entirety, Osmond's essay functioned as a treatise in support of the NAC as a significant political and religious force with tremendous capacity to balance Native and non-Native power relations.

While the local scientific community generated sympathy and even empathy for the peyotists, local politicians grew ever more concerned about the dangers associated with this development. On the surface at least, the discussions from officials still foundered on the use of peyote as a mind-altering substance and therefore failed to come to grips with the deeper cultural implications being articulated by members of the NAC. Member of Parliament for the Battleford district Max Campbell responded to the increased pressure in his riding about peyote by requesting a formal inquiry into the situation from federal Health minister, Paul Martin (House of Commons 1956, 3163). Martin's response to Campbell and a further memo to the minister of the National Revenue Department reflected the measured tone of the federal position on the debate. Martin suggested that the government should seek to control the importation of peyote but that it would not intervene in cultural practices (Martin 1955; House of Commons 1956, 3163-64).

Ultimately, the Liberal government made no formal laws on peyote. John Diefenbaker's Progressive Conservative government followed the same approach. Despite bringing in significant reform to drug legislation in 1961, Diefenbaker's government did not list peyote as an illegal or controlled substance (*Narcotic Control Act 1961; Act to Amend the Food and Drugs Act 1961*). Perhaps federal leaders had bowed to the pressures from Aboriginal communities, which argued that peyote was used in a legitimate and meaningful way to enhance or protect their culture. Peyote's exemption from Canadian law was made explicit in the revised 1996 *Controlled Drugs and Substances Act*. That legislation stated that mescaline (one of the active agents within the peyote cactus), "but not peyote," is a controlled substance in Canada (*Controlled Drugs and Substances Act, 1996*). After the tense debates of the 1950s, it seems that the culture of 1960s gave way to a new era in which Aboriginal rights, backed by the rhetoric of religious freedom and the input of scientific experts, trumped the fears and anxieties of Indian agents and federal health officials.

Conclusion

The appearance of peyote on the Canadian Prairies exposed a variety of underlying tensions within Native-newcomer relations, particularly given the changes effected by the 1951 *Indian Act*, which, in theory, embraced Aboriginal residents as "new immigrants" with associated rights to cultural worship and expression. This shift in policy orientation represented a new direction in Canadian Indian policy. The NAC with its associated peyote use created an awkward situation for bureaucrats charged with upholding this new policy. While federal bureaucrats

felt obliged to allow peyote when used in the context of the NAC ritual, they were constantly challenged by police and Indian agents who retained their paternalistic tendencies and sought to restrict peyote use on reserves. In an effort to disentangle peyote use from this broader cultural phenomenon, these same RCMP officers and local Indian Affairs officials concentrated their efforts on criminalizing the drug itself. As the debate donned a new veneer of criminality associated with drugs and vice, the NAC acquired a crew of rather unlikely supporters from medical scientists who had been studying the effects of hallucinogenic drugs. In the end, officials in Ottawa deferred the issue to a federal inquiry that obfuscated the issue of peyote and did not address the core question of the peyote debate: namely, did the state, having adopted an Indian policy shaped by multiculturalism, have the right to interfere in a culturally legitimate use of a hallucinogenic substance?

Peyotism in some ways tested the *Indian Act* of 1951, by raising the issue of an imported cultural performance that involved the use of a mind-altering substance. The combination of features complicated its reception for non-Native observers and policy-makers. When teased apart, particularly as anti-peyote proponents did, the use of peyote appeared separate from the emergence of a pan-Indian movement. Rather than focus on curbing such a movement, many local officials concentrated instead on the movement's embrace of peyote as an offending feature. Federal bureaucrats, further away from the local action, preferred to uphold the new legislation by insisting that peyote remained part of an associated set of rituals, and therefore could not be tampered with out of fear that it would contradict the new *Indian Act*. The political debates, at least on the surface, missed the deeper implications of peyotism on the Prairies. According to members of the church as their voices were recorded and amplified through the medical observers, peyote played a comparatively minor role in stimulating a healing process that began addressing the wounds caused by colonialism. The failure of officials to recognize this feature, at either the local or federal level, is perhaps the real legacy of peyote on the Prairies.

Notes

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1. For example, see *Arizona v. Mary Attakai* (1960).
2. Details of the ceremony differ. In one record (Slotkin 1975), women were not involved in the ceremony, except to erect the tipi and serve the food; however, in the description of the Red Pheasant ceremony, women seemed to be equal participants with men (Sagi 1956). There are also differences in when songs are sung and how fires are constructed (Catches 1991; P.N. Jones 2007).
3. The newspaper was incorrect. The Native American Church was not formally incorporated until 1918.
4. See Bohaker and Iacovetta (2009, 432). This perception that the Status Indian needed to be made (and taught to be) a Canadian citizen was not new. As Miller observes, since the mid-nineteenth century, early versions of the *Indian Act*—including the 1857 *Gradual Civilizing Act*—were designed to both explain who an “Indian” was, and how an “Indian” could become a Canadian citizen. A hallmark of the early *Indian Acts* were that the Indian was a ward of the state and thus not treated or governed under the same laws as other people in Canada. This latter provision was changed somewhat with the 1951 act (Miller 2000, 221-22).
5. The spelling of “Nicotine” ranged from Nicoline to Nicole in some of the records.

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